

Advocacy and Amplification:

Nonprofit Outreach and Empowerment Through Participatory Media

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Abstract

This exploratory qualitative case study examines the role of participatory media in nonprofit public relations. Through a case study of the It Gets Better Project, this research examines how nonprofit organizations can provide a platform for publics to amplify their voices and in turn how publics can work to carry forth the message of a movement. This research seeks to contribute to academic and practical understandings of online strategies used to promote advocacy and outreach for social change. The main inquiry guiding this research is an exploration of how nonprofits are using digital media strategically in ways that facilitate engagement with constituents and which empower publics to carry forth the work of an organization. This article argues that participatory media, particularly YouTube, are powerful platforms for nonprofit organizations that can function as a tool of empowerment and amplification when working with marginalized publics.

Keywords: advocacy, nonprofit, participatory media, LGBT

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Social, cultural, political and technological landscapes are constantly in flux, and public relations theory and practice need new ways to conceptualize the relationship between organizations and publics. These new landscapes have given way to what media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) calls participatory culture. Participatory culture is characterized by low barriers to civic engagement and artistic expression, support for creating and sharing content with others, and the feeling of social connection with one another. The participatory culture is the site of convergence of production, consumption, and content. Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture sheds light on the ways the discipline of public relations can make sense of the changing landscapes.

This study is particularly focused on the use of participatory media, which includes but is not limited to blogs, wikis, RSS, tagging and social bookmarking, music-photo-video sharing, mashups, podcasts, digital storytelling, virtual communities, social network services, virtual environments, and videoblogs. A participatory medium is a platform where the audience can play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating content (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Central to participatory media is that end-users are “active participants in value creation” (European Institute for Participatory Media, 2009, para. 12). Participatory media is a form of social media whose power and worth “derives from the active participation of many people” and is implicated in larger political, economic, social and cultural institutions (Rheingold, 2008, p. 100). Such value is determined, not simply by the size of the audience, but rather from the power to connect with other users, producers, and consumers of this media, to form a public. Participatory media can be particularly empowering for marginalized populations and disenfranchised groups, such as communities of color (e.g., African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Native Americans), religious groups,

economically impoverished communities, women and children, immigrant and migrant populations, and sexual minorities.

Diversity & Public Relations

Within public relations, scholars and practitioners continue to call for further examination of diversity and its effects on the field (e.g., L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001). This present research embraces findings from the Public Relations Coalition (2005) Diversity Summit that notes, “Diversity is not about exclusion, but about inclusion in all respects” (preface). As scholars and practitioners, we need to expand our notion of diversity and move beyond what public relations scholar Natalie Tindall (2012) identifies as the “big three”: race, ethnicity and gender. The present study adopts Bhawuk and Triandis’ (1996) definition of diversity as the “difference in ethnicity, race, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, veteran status, age, national origin, and cultural and personal perspectives” (p. 85).

This research adds to the body of literature on diversity and pushes the field of public relations to further explore issues of sexual orientation². This study addresses the need for more research on diversity in public relations, particularly as it pertains to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) publics³ and nonprofit organizations. Media scholar Suzanna Danuta Walters (2001) notes,

Most of the time, difference is not marked on our bodies . . . for lesbians and gays, issues of visibility and ‘coming out’ are centrally and inextricably linked to the process of acquiring civil rights, in a way I think quite different from other minority groups for whom *misrepresentation* has often been a more driving concern than simple *representation*” (italics in original, p. 10).

This present research brings visibility to LGBT issues and adds to the literature by broadening the scope of cases, organizations, and publics addressed under the umbrella of diversity.

² Sexual orientation refers to sexual attraction (NLGJA, 2012).

³ Lesbian refers to women who are sexually and affectionally attracted to other women. Gay refers to men who are sexually and affectionally attracted to other men. Bisexual refers to an individual attracted to both sexes. Transgender is an umbrella term that refers to people whose physical, sexual characteristics may not match their gender identity (NLGJA, 2012).

As a field, public relations is slowly beginning to diversify with regards to LGBT issues through, for example, LGBT-specific consulting firms (e.g., OutNow Global, Popular Publicity, Renna Communications) and divisions of international public relations firms devoted to LGBT publics (e.g., FleishmanHillard's Out Front). Issues of sexual orientation are fairly new to the scholarship of public relations (e.g., Ciszek & Gallicano, 2013; Phillips & Brabham, 2012; Tindall & Waters, 2012). In other applied communication disciplines such as advertising, research on sexual orientation is gaining traction (e.g., Griffin, Lambiase, & Pashupati, 2009; Hester & Gibson, 2007; Tsai, 2010, 2012).

Refocusing on Publics

In the ever-changing landscape of participatory culture, a focus on publics must propel issues of diversity in public relations. While valuing and building from insights from organizational-centric work, as scholars and practitioners, we must remember “the public in public relations research” (Karlberg, 1996). Publics are identified by their relationships to an organization and arise in response to what an organization does or says (J. E. Grunig & Repper, 1992; Rawlins, 2006).

Thus, when considering nonprofit advocacy work, we must identify the various publics that engage with, are affected by, and affect the organization. In practice, nonprofit organizations have various publics that they engage with and respond to, including clients, volunteers, donors, and the community at large (Waters & Jones, 2011). In theory, Wilson (2000) identifies three conceptual types of publics involved in communication strategies: key publics, intervening publics, and influentials. Key publics are those whose participation and cooperation are fundamental to accomplishing an organization's goals (Wilson, 2000). Intervening publics pass information along and function as opinion leaders and disseminators of content. The success of many campaigns is “determined by the strength of relationships with intervening publics” (Rawlins, 2006, p. 13). Influentials impact the success of communication efforts and can either support the efforts of the organization or work against them.

Activism and the Internet

Public relations of activist and advocacy organizations are rising interests in research (e.g., Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2007; Smith, 2005; Smith & Ferguson, 2001; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). Some of the tactics that fall under the umbrella of advocacy include mobilization of volunteers, media relations, lobbying, and fundraising (Wallack et al., 1993). Social movement scholar Jo Freeman (1979) argues that activist and advocacy organizations rely on both tangible and intangible resources. Tangible resources include money, space, and a means of publicizing the movement's existence and ideas. Intangible resources include supporters of the organization's cause. Supporters are central to the success of activist and advocacy work. Much of the literature on nonprofits in public relations focuses on mobilization of tangible resources (e.g., Waters, 2008, 2009). There is a lack of literature in public relations that explores the mobilization of intangible resources. This present research addresses this gap by examining how an organization and its public utilize participatory media to bring issues to the forefront of public consciousness.

As Coombs and Holladay (2012) note, research and consideration of activism and advocacy efforts is central to advancing the study and practice of public relations. Extant research on activism has focused on the use of the websites for advocacy efforts (e.g., Coombs, 1998; Kang & Norton, 2004; Kent et al., 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006; Taylor & Sen Das, 2010; Taylor et al., 2001; Yang & Taylor, 2010). Nonprofits rely on online communication channels to engage with donors, volunteers, policy leaders and other publics to achieve organizational goals of social change. The Internet provides activist organizations a “low cost, direct, controllable communication channel” that provides channels for connection with stakeholders (Coombs, 1998, p. 299).

Digital media are valuable resources for nonprofit organizations that provide platforms for exchanging information with a variety of publics and that link different groups together. The 2012 Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report by Blackbaud, Common Knowledge, and the Nonprofit

Technology Network (2012), found that 98% of nonprofits have a presence on Facebook, 72% of nonprofits use Twitter, and 44% of nonprofits use LinkedIn. Nonprofits are also using YouTube (47%), Flickr (19%), FourSquare (8%), and others (Blackbaud et al., 2011). While the literature suggests that organizations are not effectively utilizing Facebook (Waters et al., 2009) or websites as tools for dialogue (McAllister-Spooner, 2009), Waters and Jones (2011) found that organizations are increasingly using YouTube videos to educate and inform audiences about their mission, programs and services. Brown (2005) suggests that organizational videos may be the most powerful methods of creating a strong mental impression of the organization in the public's mind, for organizations engaged in social change work. This study adds to the literature on nonprofit and advocacy organizations and the implementation of participatory media, particularly YouTube.

Dialogue, Public Relations and Stepping Back

As we continue to see, the power of the Internet makes possible the maximization of information sharing, collaboration, meaning making, and dialogue (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic theory of public relations is a guide for scholars and practitioners interested in facilitating organization-public relations. This theory and set of principles has been applied to examine blogs (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007), Facebook pages (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009), Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), and Wikipedia sites (Hickerson & Thompson, 2009). Despite the seemingly immense potential for relationship building and recommendations by scholars to incorporate two-way dialogic channels, findings suggest that organizations are not effectively capitalizing on the potential of the Internet to connect with publics (McAllister-Spooner, 2009).

This article argues that before the dialogic potential of digital media channels can be fully realized, as scholars and practitioners of public relations, we have to step back and consider the prerequisites to dialogue. While social media increasingly makes possible two-way communication between organizations and publics, when working with marginalized populations, groups that have been (or continue to be) silenced, we must recognize that before dialogue can occur with these

publics, there first needs to be a space for individuals and communities to express themselves. Particularly as scholars and practitioners interested in nonprofits and social change work, we have to consider whose voices are being heard and whose are silenced. If we are truly going to achieve the dialogic potential of digital communication, this research argues that scholars and practitioners of public relations need to take a step back. Thus, this study takes a step back and examines how, through participatory media, a grassroots organization establishes a platform to empower publics to share their stories and amplify their voices.

Populations like LGBT publics have a long history of being silenced. For much of the history of mainstream media, the LGBT community has largely been ignored and what little representation it has had in the media has often been stigmatized and stereotyped (e.g., Gamson, 2009; Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001). Even when LGBT issues appear in mainstream media, it's often only the most sanitized, privileged, and apolitical aspects of gay existence that are made visible (Sender, 2004). Such limited visibility has implications for the real diversity of lived experiences of LGBT people (Walters, 2000; Clarke, 2000). However, changing social and political landscapes as well as new technologies give marginalized populations tools and platforms to share their stories and have their voices heard. Therefore, based on the literature, the following research questions guided this study.

RQ1: How does an advocacy organization utilize participatory media?

RQ2: What do publics do on organizationally created participatory media sites?

Case Study: It Gets Better Project

“In the YouTube era, I was waiting for permission I no longer required.”

- Dan Savage

Since fall 2010, in the United States, teen suicide and bullying have come to the forefront of public awareness. A number of gay teens and young adults, who were believed to have been victims of

anti-gay bullying, took their own lives during this time period⁴. Internationally syndicated columnist Dan Savage was particularly moved by the death of Billy Lucas on September 9, 2010, and on September 21, 2010, created the first “It Gets Better” YouTube video with his partner Terry Miller. In an interview Savage noted, “And it occurred to me, when I was really turning over the Billy Lucas case in my mind, that I *could* talk to these kids. . . . I could use social media, I could go on YouTube, I could make a digital video and I could post it, and I could directly address them and tell them, 'It gets better’” (Montgomery, 2010, para. 4). Within 24 hours of posting the original video, Savage received 3,000 emails from teenagers (Parker-Pope, 2010). In the first week, users inspired by Savage and Miller uploaded more than 200 videos, and in the following week the Project’s YouTube channel reached the 650-video limit (Hartlaub, 2010).

Due to the tremendous community response to the original video, Savage and Miller started a nonprofit organization, the It Get Better Project, in October 2010. The organization developed the official website www.itgetsbetter.org, where visitors could “take action” and get involved by making a donation, recording and sharing a video, taking a pledge, purchasing items (e.g., clothing and books) and connecting to the organization’s other social media sites (i.e., Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). The project provides a forum for LGBT individuals and allies to share their personal stories, experiences, and struggles with an audience of LGBT youth. As of February 2013, the organization has more than 50,000 user-created video contributions that have been viewed more than 50 million times.

The case of the It Gets Better Project was chosen for this study because the project and the organization emerged from grassroots efforts and mobilization of publics on the Internet, particularly

⁴ Justin Aaberg (15), July 9, 2010, Andover, Minnesota; Billy Lucas (15), September 9, 2010, Greensburg, Indiana; Cody J. Barker (17), September 13, 2010, Shiocton, Wisconsin; Seth Walsh (13), September 19, 2010, Tehachapi, California; Tyler Clementi (18), September 22, 2010, Newark, New Jersey; Asher Brown (13), September 23, 2010, Houston, Texas; Raymond Chase (19), September 29, 2010, Providence, Rhode Island; Jamey Rodemeyer (14), September 18, 2011, Williamsville, New York; Phillip Parker (14), January 20, 2012, Carthage, Tennessee; Rafael Morelos (14), January 29, 2012, Wenatchee, Washington; Jadin Bell (15), February 3, 2013, La Grande, Oregon.

through participatory media. The project has received attention from national and international media outlets as well as from scholars in various disciplines.

Method

Through qualitative inquiry of the *It Gets Better Project*, this study explores and documents the utilization of participatory media in nonprofit public relations. To examine the campaign, data were gathered from the It Gets Better Project's online platforms, national media sources, and user-generated video contributions. Materials were gathered from September 21, 2010 (the creation date of the original video), until January 31, 2013. Media coverage was collected from major newspapers, newswires and press releases using the search terms "It Gets Better Project" through the same date range. Using the Lexis-Nexis database, search results yielded 84 relevant news articles and 20 relevant newswires and press releases. Each publication was examined for specifics pertaining to the case.

To explore how the project is engaging publics through participatory media, the author examined the organization's presence and activity on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and YouTube. Content appearing on these sites was analyzed from when the organization began using the platform to January 31, 2013. In addition, 140 video contributions to the project were analyzed. The videos selected for examination were sorted by the organization into playlists on the project's YouTube channel. The videos categorized by the organization included the following playlists: schools and colleges, employees, international, political leaders, straight allies, sign language, theater, bisexual, transgender, lesbian, gay, faith, and sports. Ten videos with the most views were selected for analysis from each playlist. Videos with the most views are featured first on the channel, and therefore have the highest likelihood to be seen by viewers.

Through analysis of organizational participatory media sites, news coverage, and video contributions to the project, this exploratory study begins to build an understanding of the changing landscape of nonprofit organizations, advocacy work and public relations.

Findings

The organization and its various publics utilize participatory media platforms to carry forth the mission of the It Gets Better Project movement. Each platform is a space for individuals to engage with others and with the organization to serve as a reminder that “they are not alone” (It Gets Better Project Facebook, n.d.). Through images, videos, and text, the organization posts thematically consistent content that reflects the organization’s mission to “show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach” (It Gets Better Project YouTube, n.d.). Importantly, the publics fuel the momentum of the movement through the content that they post. In these spaces, publics participate by contributing their stories (through videos, pictures, and text) to the overarching narrative of the “it gets better” movement.

RQ1: How does an advocacy organization utilize participatory media?

This question explores the organization’s activity on participatory media platforms. The organization has a presence on several digital platforms where publics can interact and engage with the organization and with other publics. The organization utilizes the following platforms: Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Each platform has a unique architecture that guides communication activity and content best suited for each particular space. The following sections provide overviews of organizational activity on each of the aforementioned media platforms.

Tumblr. Tumblr is a microblogging platform where users post text, images, videos, links, quotes, and audio files. The tagline “Follow the world’s creators” characterizes the type of activity that occurs on this platform. As of February 2013, Tumblr has more than 93 million blogs and 42 million posts (About, 2013). Some professionals argue Tumblr “just might be the best blogging platform ever made” (Hamburger, 2011, para. 6). The It Gets Better Project’s first entry on Tumblr was on March 30, 2012, and as of February 2013, the page has more than 40 pages of content.

Analysis of the organization’s page suggests that the platform is visually oriented and is predominantly used to share images and videos. While there is some original content created by the

organization, the page is mostly a space for curation of content gathered from the web. Followers of the project's Tumblr site post "notes," which means content has either been reposted or liked by other users. Images are the most popular forms of content on the project's page, while videos and text based posts have the least amount of engagement. Original content posted on behalf of the project (such as an image with the organization's logo) does not have as many "notes" as reposted and curated content (such as an image with a quote by a celebrity). As of February 2013, the most popular post (with 240,189 notes) was a multi-paneled cartoon image addressing issues of gender identity⁵ noting, "But people are people whatever their parts" (It Gets Better Project Tumblr, 2013).

Overall, the platform is a space for curation of content. Communication on Tumblr is primarily one-way. It is not a dialogic space for engagement; rather, activity is based on one-directional following. Users can decide who or what page to follow and that entity does not have to follow back.

Facebook. The It Gets Better Project joined Facebook on September 30, 2010, and as of February 2013, the page has over 294,000 likes and over 10,000 are talking about the project. According to Facebook Insights, as of February 2013, the most popular week for engagement by users on the organization's Facebook was June 24, 2012, which coincided with the 42nd annual San Francisco Gay Pride⁶ celebration. Posts during this time featured individuals and groups marching with the It Gets Better Project in the pride parade in San Francisco. The most popular post at this time was an image of an Oreo advertisement, on June 26, 2012, featuring a cookie with rainbow colored frosting and the tagline: "Oreo supports gay pride." As of February 2013, this post received 7,497 likes, 192 comments, and 1,501 shares.

The organization posts content such as videos, images, news stories, and quotations to the page. Followers engage by commenting, "liking" content posted by the organization, and creating and posting their own content to the organization's page. Individual followers post news stories, petitions,

⁵ Gender identity refers to an individual's emotional and psychological sense of being male or female.

⁶ Gay pride is a parade and festival for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. San Francisco Gay Pride is a world-renowned LGBT pride parade consisting of hundreds of constituents from various groups or organizations.

videos, inspirational images, as well as comments critiquing the project. Overall, content that is posted by the organization receives substantially more engagement (such as comments and likes), while content posted to the page by individual users receives little to no engagement. While both the organization and its publics post content to the page, there is little organization-public conversation, thus suggesting that Facebook is not a platform for dialogue.

Twitter. On Twitter, as of February 2013, @ItGetsBetter has more than 75,000 followers and has tweeted over 2,400 times. Based on analysis with the tool Twitalyzer, key topics that the organization tweets about include LGBT issues, education in the United States, history, marriage and civil unions, bullying, ethics, helplines, and The Trevor Project. The organization uses several key hashtags (the symbol # before a relevant keyword or phrase) in tweets, such as: #gsaday, #itgetsbetter, #youth, #lgbt, #support, and #proudally. The site operates as a platform of exploration where publics can spectate and curate with varying levels of engagement and commitment. Twitter is a content-driven social media platform and functions as a site for independent researching and discovery. Thus, through Twitter, the organization disseminates content through links to news stories, videos, and websites, but overall does not engage in dialogue with publics.

YouTube. As of February 2013, the It Gets Better Project channel on YouTube has received more than 47,000 subscribers and over 3.8 million views. The organization's channel features various segmented playlists including schools and colleges (66 videos), employees (44 videos), international (38 videos), political leaders (45 videos), military service members and veterans (7 videos), straight allies (8 videos), sign language (13 videos), theater (25 videos), bisexual (8 videos), transgender (31 videos), lesbian (11 videos), gay (29 videos), faith (58 videos), and sports (33 videos).

While the project utilizes and is active on multiple social and participatory media sites, YouTube is the central platform that started the project and continues to fuel the momentum of the movement. Therefore, the second research question examines this space in more depth and explores what various publics are doing in these spaces.

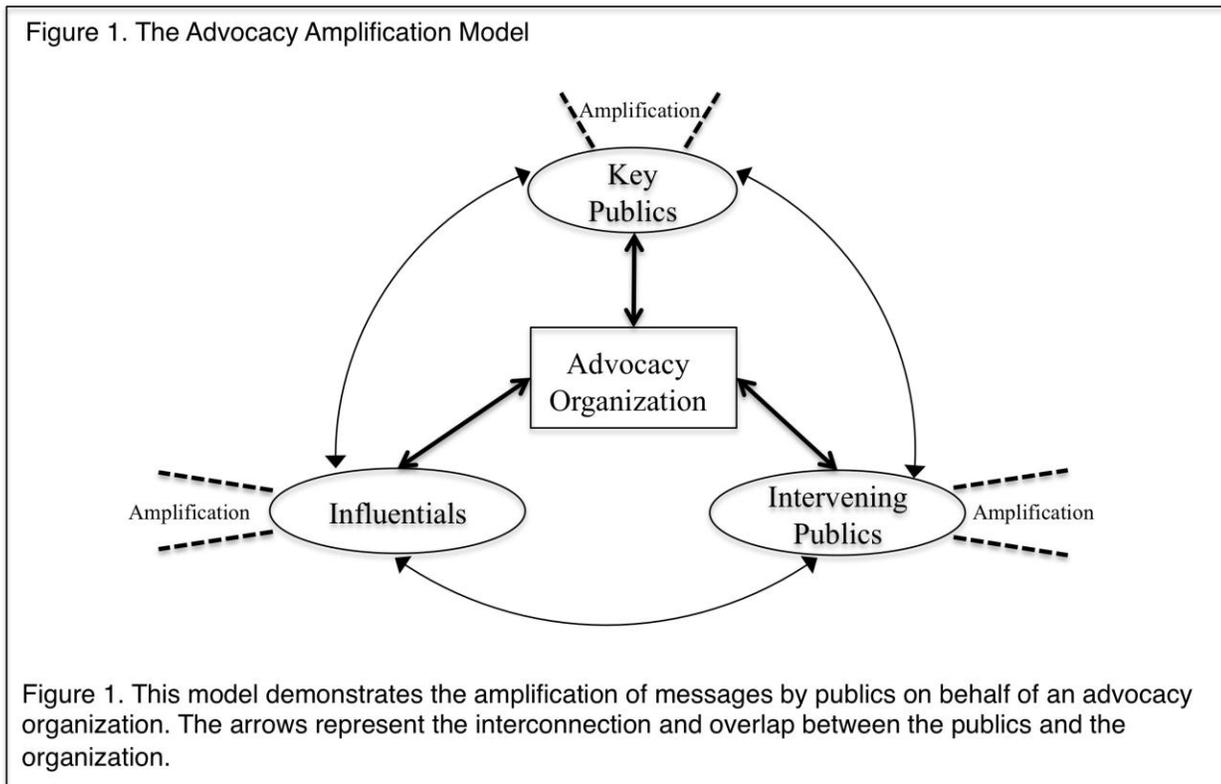
RQ2: What do publics do on organizationally created participatory media sites?

As noted above, the most robust activity on behalf of the organization and its publics is happening on YouTube; therefore, this research question focuses on that platform to explore what publics are doing in this space. Findings suggest that publics are creating, disseminating, consuming and sharing content.

The Platform. According to statistics provided by YouTube (2013), more than 800 million unique users visit YouTube each month; more than 4 billion hours of video are watched each month on YouTube; and 72 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute. YouTube is a platform for audience engagement. Regarding social interaction, YouTube (2013) notes that over 700 YouTube videos are shared on Twitter each minute; 100 million people take a social action on YouTube (likes, shares, comments, etc) every week; and more than 50% of videos on YouTube have been rated or include comments from the community. According to the Pew Research Center, 46% of Internet users post original photos and videos online they have created themselves, while 41% curate photos and videos they find elsewhere on the Internet and post on image-sharing sites (Rainie, Brenner, & Purcell, 2012). YouTube is the first mass-popular platform for user-created video and is one of the most well-known and widely discussed participatory media sites (Burgess & Green, 2009).

The It Get Better Project's main focus is user-generated video creation and sharing. YouTube functions as a tool of activism, advocacy, expression and empowerment for publics interested in and involved with the project. A YouTube channel provides a space for creative expression and engagement and provides alternative platforms for publics to engage with one another as well as with the organization. Participatory media by nature is ever changing, thus making the organization-public relationship a kinetic and in-flux bond. Digital spaces provide a rich medium for engagement, expression and exchange between an organization and its publics. In the case of the It Gets Better Project, YouTube is for garnering support from publics, the people who make up what Freeman (1979) identified as the organization's intangible resources.

Amplification. As video submissions illustrate, the project is a space for information dissemination, story sharing and community building. The organization functions as a hub that brings together publics from various social locations. Based on findings from the study, a model of advocacy amplification was developed (see Figure 1). The model borrowed Wilson’s (2000) three types of publics and adapted Kim and Rhee’s (2011) conceptual notion of megaphoning to develop a framework for advocacy communication that accounts for the kinetic relationship between and among the organization and its multiple publics. Megaphoning is the “voluntary efforts to collect and circulate information related to the organization” (Kim & Rhee, 2011 p. 244). The present study identifies this behavior by publics in the case of the It Gets Better Project and, in the case of advocacy work, calls this behavior amplification. Amplification is the voluntary production and dissemination of information related to an organization in ways that can both support and challenge its mission.



The model illustrates the overlap, interconnection and kinetic relationship between publics and organizations. The delineation is often unclear and there is much overlap between key publics,

intervening publics, influentials, and the advocacy organization. Key publics are identified by active involvement in an issue and can be segmented by demographics, lifestyles and values, media preferences, cooperative networks, and self-interests. On the project's YouTube channel, such segmentation is apparent in the playlist classifications. Key public contributors to the project can be conceptualized as non-celebrity, "every day Joe" LGBT individuals that the organization is working on behalf of. Contributions to the project include videos in the "Lesbian," "Gay," "Bisexual," and "Transgender" playlists. Videos in these playlist feature individuals narrating their own stories and not representing groups or organizations. Stories shared in these videos focus on individuals' trials and tribulations. Aesthetically, the videos tend to be amateur in quality and often feature a person sitting at their computer using a webcam to film. They are often unscripted, and the message develops organically through the video.

Influentials can be the force that makes or breaks a campaign. They can either champion an organization's efforts or work against them (Wilson, 2000). Examples of influentials include politicians, celebrities, healthcare professionals, educators, and faith leaders. The success of the It Gets Better Project can largely be attributed to video contributions by such influentials. On October 21, 2010, President Barack Obama produced a video, in which he noted, "I don't know what it's like to be picked up for being gay but I do know what it's like to grow up feeling like you don't belong" (whitehouse, 2010). Other politicians that contributed to the project include Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the White House staff, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and the Democratic National Committee. LGBT and allied celebrities were also among the early producers of videos to the project. In her video, comedian Ellen Degeneres noted, "Things will get easier, people's minds will change, and you should be alive to see it" (Liqitimi, 2010).

The project has given corporations and other organizations a platform to share their commitment to LGBT issues. For example, Apple and Google have made videos featuring LGBT employees and conveying their social responsibility to inclusive workplaces. Higher education

institutions from Ivy League schools (e.g., Harvard University, Princeton University) to local community colleges (e.g., Harrisburg Area Community College) have participated in the project. In addition, other influential publics such as healthcare organizations and faith communities contributed videos to the project.

Intervening publics, such as the media, disseminate content and function as opinion leaders (Rawlins, 2006). Much of the momentum surrounding the project can be attributed to the robust media coverage of the contributions by various individuals and organizations. Often when an organization, sports team, politician, or celebrity creates a video, a press release is issued to local and national outlets. Online news articles about the project often link to videos contributions, most often those created by influentials (e.g., Barack Obama). The stories feature interviews with participants in the project. In the case of sports teams (e.g., Chicago Cubs, Seattle Mariners, Boston Red Sox), interviews with athletes and coaches highlight a team's commitment to anti-bullying efforts.

However, half-hearted participation in advocacy work can also backfire. For example, in the case of the San Francisco 49ers, the first National Football League (NFL) team to create a video, journalists uncovered organizational contradictions in the team's commitment to anti-bullying efforts and LGBT issues. In a radio interview on January 29, 2013, cornerback Chris Culliver stated, "No, we don't got no gay people on the team, they gotta get up out of here if they do" (Rogers, 2013). One week before the Super Bowl, the media propelled this controversy. In addition, two players featured in the 49ers' It Gets Better video (Ahmad Brooks and Isaac Sopoaga), denied being part of the project. When asked about the video, Brooks noted, "Oh, that. It was an anti-bullying video, not a gay (rights) video" (Manahan, 2013). As a result, Savage pulled the video from the organization's website.

The Changing Landscape. As the findings suggest, the dynamic relationship and overlap between and among publics and the organization has fueled the project since its inception in September 2010. As of February 2013, the project continues to receive user-generated video contributions and coverage by the media. The strength of the project comes from interactions,

engagement and empowerment of publics on the organization's other participatory platforms. This study shows how participatory media provide an interconnected digital landscape where publics and organizations can engage in content creation and consumption. Findings from this analysis point to the need to consider the changing relationships between organization and publics. Participatory media blur the boundaries between producers and consumers of content. In this digital organizational arrangement, Phillips and Brabham (2012) note there is "hardly a defined boundary between the It Gets Better Project site (the nuts and bolts of the project), the It Gets Better Project brand (the image and mission of the project), the participants who watch the videos, and the participants who make the videos" (p. 10). Thus, the present research provides a model for conceptualizing these kinetic relationships in the digital landscape.

Discussion and Conclusion

As this case study shows, nonprofit organizations can utilize technology in ways that amplify the voices of people to tell their own stories. In doing so, advocacy organizations can empower individuals and groups to embody and carry the mission of an organization. As seen with the It Gets Better Project, such empowerment can lead to the precipitation of engagement, one that reaches a critical mass. Publics that might not have otherwise participated in LGBT advocacy were activated by the momentum of the project.

This study has several important contributions to practice and theory building in public relations. As digital communication platforms gain prevalence, public relations practitioners need to consider the ways the communication landscape is changing. Recognizing the changing nature of the digital landscape, this research calls for a reconceptualization of organization-public relationships and a refocus on publics. This research aims to propel the field in new directions in theory and practice.

Theoretical Implications and Future Studies

From a theoretical perspective, this study presents implications for nonprofit and advocacy scholarship. It adds depth and breadth to issues faced by nonprofit organizations, such as resource

mobilization, both in terms of monetary as well as human resources. As public relations scholars and professionals, we must consider the changing power dynamics between organizations and publics.

Jenkins and Deuze (2008) highlight the tension between top-down organizationally driven processes and bottom-up consumer-driven process. On the one hand, there is an increase of opportunities for individuals and grassroots communities “to tell stories and access stories others are telling, to present arguments and listen to arguments made elsewhere, to share information and learn more about the world from a multitude of other perspectives” (p. 6). On the other hand, media are “merging, co-opting, converging and synergizing” across channels (p. 6).

As scholars and practitioners, we must engage in theory and practice with these changing landscapes of convergence and participatory culture as they pertain to the field of public relations. The dynamic and power structures are shifting, and as Phillips and Brabham (2012) note, a new kind of public relations work locates power “in the hands of participants in online communities rather than in the organizational hierarchy or the public relations practitioner” (p. 1). The line between organizations and publics is continuously being blurred, and empowering publics removes organizational control of what and how information is shared. The decentralized nature of YouTube, as Xifra and McKie (2012) note, makes control much more difficult, if not practically impossible. We must take into account the ethical implications of empowering publics. From a policy perspective, organizations must consider where they draw the line for content that is affiliated with the organization and what rules are in place for removing content that is posted to the organization’s site. As the San Francisco 49ers situation illustrates, organizations should establish policies and protocols for content sharing, giving the organization jurisdiction to remove content that does not fit the guidelines.

Because of emerging new technology and participatory media platforms, publics are becoming more important players and resources in the efforts of nonprofit organizations. This model provides a starting point for refocusing on publics in both the practice and scholarship of public relations. While

this research focused on three theoretical conceptualizations of publics, the model can be tested and expanded to include other categorizations of publics. Waters and Jones (2011) identified publics that nonprofit organizations engage with and respond to, including clients, volunteers, donors, and the community at large. Future studies should explore how these publics engage with an organization through participatory media. This model can be tested through surveys and interviews with public relations practitioners to provide empirical evidence to support or refute this model. In addition, surveys and interviews with individuals and communities belonging to these publics could provide key insights to build best practices for organization-public relations and nonprofit organizations engagement in digital spaces.

The considerations from this study also help advance dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002) and public relations. The term “dialogue” has become pervasive in public relations, particularly in discussions of the Internet and advocacy organizations (e.g., Briones et al., 2011; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Sommerdfelt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012; Taylor et al., 2001). Despite Lattimore, Baskin and Aronoff (2004)’s suggestion that, by promoting dialogue and conversations “these new technologies help organizations create and continuously maintain ties to key publics” (p. 385), the It Gets Better Project case suggests that this relationship is more complicated and needs more exploration in public relations practice and scholarship. As this study reveals, the relationship between participatory media and dialogue is complex, and individuals and groups tend not to engage directly with the organization. Rather, the organization’s sites serve as spaces for individuals and groups to share their experiences and tell their stories. The It Gets Better Project’s success can be attributed to the space it has provided for its various publics to tell their stories, be they individual, organizational or corporate narratives of how things “get better.” By taking a step back and refocusing on the public, this study identifies the need for platforms for dialogue to occur, especially when working with marginalized populations. As illustrated in this case, participatory media are spaces of empowerment.

Areas for future research should include more in-depth analyses of various participatory media platforms as they develop and become implemented by organizations. The National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) identifies seven types of nonprofits: arts; education; environment; health; human services; civil rights, social action, advocacy; and other public benefit. While this study focuses on civil rights, social action, and advocacy nonprofits, future studies should examine the use of participatory media by other types of nonprofit organizations.

Suggestions for Practitioners

As the It Gets Better Project case shows, nonprofits are able to use participatory media to empower constituents to be ambassadors for the organization. The model of amplification provides practitioners working with nonprofits a conceptualization of the interrelationship and overlap of publics when planning and executing advocacy efforts. The amplification concept can help public relations to harness and channel the energy of activist publics in ways that are beneficial for both the organization and the public.

For public relations practitioners working with nonprofit organizations, the author has identified actionable areas for consideration. Practitioners working with nonprofit organizations should consider utilizing YouTube for advocacy campaigns and efforts in ways that activate publics to get involved through user-generated content. Through participatory media, organizations can provide a space for publics to tell their stories and to humanize the work of the organization from the ground up. Nonprofits can establish a presence on YouTube to activate a cause, tell stories, and launch a campaign (YouTube Nonprofits, n.d.). In October 2012, YouTube launched the YouTube Nonprofit Program and “YouTube for Good,” a company-wide initiative for non-profits, educators and activists that gives nonprofit organizations free access to YouTube tools, such as live streaming and fundraising capabilities. Through the program, YouTube allows organizations to “turn their video views into volunteer hours, petitions signed, laws changed and dollars donated” (Petronzio, 2012). By

encouraging constituents to contribute images and videos, an organization can prompt individuals and groups to engage with one another.

Conclusion: Back to Diversity

To fully realize the potential of diversity in public relations, scholars and practitioners must recognize the importance of giving diverse populations the opportunity to share their stories and have their voices heard. As Anderson and Collins (2004) note:

Diversity is about an awareness of and sensitivity to the intersections of race, class and gender, about seeing linkages to other categories of analysis, including sexuality, age, religion, physical disability, national identity and ethnicity, and about appreciating the disparities of power that produce social inequities. (p. 1)

A dedication to diversity in public relations should come from such an awareness and attention to the diversity of issues, organizations, publics, and communities that we address in our scholarship and practice. As such, this study advocates for additional research and practice that engages with diverse populations and highlights voices from the margins.

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