

The Next Dimension in Public Relations Campaigns:

A Case Study of the *It Gets Better Project*

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By Jamie A. Ward¹

University of Michigan, Dearborn

Abstract

This study examines the ways in which a campaign that is completely reliant on user-generated content (UGC) can not only successfully engage a diverse public but also maintain value and legitimacy while serving as the basis for motivating individuals to take action. Guided in part by the theory of network-enabled commons-based peer production, this study posits that by crafting a public relations campaign using authentic voice in conjunction with YouTube, public relations practitioners can empower individuals to become active participants in advocacy campaigns for social justice or the common good of society, thus creating unique, individual connections with their publics and essentially empowering others to use their voices to help these campaigns reach critical mass. To illustrate the success of such a campaign, an in-depth, critical case study of the *It Gets Better Project*, is conducted.

¹ Address correspondence to Jamie Ward, University of Michigan – Dearborn, 4901 Evergreen Rd., Dearborn, Michigan 48128; Email: jamiward@umich.edu.

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A Case Study of the *It Gets Better Project***

The decline of traditional media outlets coupled with the advent of social media has forced public relations practitioners to continually search for innovative ways to connect with various publics. Since the field is service oriented, public relations practitioners need to remain keenly aware of public interests in order to successfully target key audiences and garner public support. With the global and multicultural reach of the Internet, diversity is a key component in the construction of community partnerships. The public relations industry reflects the importance of diversity in its rhetoric. For example, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has a blog dedicated to diversity, and the Council of Public Relations Firms in association with *PRWeek* offers the Diversity Distinction in PR Award. Yet the field of public relations remains behind many other industries in terms of multidimensional diversity (Tsetsura, 2011). When diversity is embraced, it is traditionally targeted toward gender or racial diversity (Aldoory, 2007; Cherenson, 2009; Grunig et al., 2001; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Pompper, 2005). A 2010 study by Austin, analyzing how diversity was framed in public relations industry publications, confirms the industry focus on a narrow one-dimensional perspective of diversity.

Diversity related to lifestyle or sexual orientation is almost completely absent from the discussion. While advertisers and marketers have recognized the significance of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community (“Reaching Out,” 2006), little research has been conducted focusing solely on the significance of campaigns specifically targeted toward this community. For example, Gratees (1993) recognized the need for public relations practitioners to be knowledgeable about the needs of LGBT groups, and Hallahan (2004) acknowledged that it would benefit public relations practitioners to engage same-sex households, yet the industry is continually struggling to remain inclusive to this community and to eliminate social stigmas.

Within the public relations industry and society alike, historically, the voices of those in power have virtually silenced those of marginalized groups. This continues to happen today. The silence or erasure of voice is as much a part of a constructed reality as an expressed voice. Silencing members of the LGBT community assists in upholding what has previously been viewed as mainstream ideologies regarding sexuality. While there is a body of research on the lack of diversity in advertising and public relations (Aldoory, 2005; Tindall, 2009), very little has been published about LGBT publics.

According to Butler (1997), this collapse seeks to “silence a discussion of the broader institutional conditions” (p. 23). When voices are silenced a hierarchy is created. Those with no voice are left with little support.

This absence of voice is especially troubling within the field of public relations. As Mereday (2010) states, “Because of the vital role public relations plays in the design of the fabric of American society, the line up of the players involved with the placements and messages is crucial” (para 1). Public relations practitioners need to be consciously aware that the field itself is not overtly diverse. Anne Gregory, past president of the Chartered Institute for Public Relations (CIPR) details why it is crucial that that public relations industry be reflective of the populations it serves:

If we are going to make some genuine strides in diversity our industry needs to ask itself some hard questions. How can we hope to be genuinely knowledgeable of and gain the respect of the various stakeholder groups we purport to work with on behalf of organisations and clients if we don’t recruit from them? Are they good enough to talk to, but not good enough to work with? (2006, as cited in Waters & Tindall, 2008, p. 7)

Without diverse industry experts, the majority of campaign messages are presented based on dominant cultural perspectives. Public relations campaigns need to represent alternatives to these viewpoints. A multitude of voices and perspectives need to be presented. In a culture that tends to lean toward a heterosexualized voice, 2011 showed the beginnings of offering insight and reflection to the homosexual voice. This was evidenced through marriage equality in New York, the repeal of the

military's "don't ask don't tell" policy, and the political support behind repealing the Defense of Marriage Act. However, the field of public relations is still behind in producing targeted LGBT campaigns. Giving voice to those who are underrepresented increases understanding by challenging stigma and marginalization while helping to reconstruct a shared community narrative.

A way to combat this lack of diversity in the field of public relations is to alter the way traditional campaigns are constructed and to think more in terms of a peer-produced or user-generated system. Traditionally, public relations practitioners have crafted campaigns to persuade their publics to view a social problem in a particular way. With the popularity of digital media, these traditional, one-dimensional campaigns will soon be ignored by their intended publics. Through social media, campaigns are able to become almost living, breathing, and changing beings. With commons-based peer production (see Benkler, 2002), the public controls the campaign, and through the use of storytelling provides an authentic voice and unique relationship with both the social problem and the publicity related to its solution. By creating a campaign that grows with its audience, user involvement and engagement are in their most authentic forms, creating content that a wider subsection of the public can identify with. According to Solis (2009), in this new era of public relations, "monologue has changed to dialogue" (p. 2). Commons-based peer production offers the platform for this type of authentic, audience-centered connection. Combine this with a system designed specifically to harness the power of social media, and public relations practitioners have a way of reaching out to the public that is not only diverse, but also multifaceted and engaged. The audience now becomes stakeholders in the campaign in a way that traditional campaigns don't allow for.

This study examines the role of authentic voice in digital advocacy campaigns. Guided in part by the theory of network-enabled commons-based peer production, this study posits that by crafting a public relations campaign using authentic voice in conjunction with YouTube, public relations practitioners can empower individuals to become active participants in advocacy campaigns for social

justice or the common good of society, thus creating unique, individual connections with their publics and essentially empowering others to use their voices to help these campaigns reach critical mass.

To illustrate the success of such a campaign, an in-depth, critical case study of the *It Gets Better Project* is conducted. Based on data collected through a conceptual analysis of the existence of seven key themes (i.e., use of the “it gets better” tagline, suicide, bullying, finding love, finding peace, coming out, and commonality), this campaign illustrates that through the use of digital storytelling, the authenticity coming from the voices of those telling their stories make for a stronger, more effective public relations campaign than a traditional program. This model not only offers a remarkable medium for social change and support of humanitarian causes, but also serves as a roadmap for public relations practitioners looking to integrate social media strategies to enhance their participation in grassroots campaigns. To further substantiate this case study and the advent of future research, this study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ 1: How can a campaign that is completely reliant on user-generated content (UGC) not only successfully engage a diverse public, but also maintain value and legitimacy while serving as the basis for motivating individuals to take action?

RQ 2: How does the utilization of YouTube, as a platform for user-generated content in advocacy campaigns, facilitate the use of authentic voice to challenge the dominant ideologies promoted by American culture?

Literature Review

The definition of diversity is as varied as the term itself. The PRSA National Diversity Committee (2007) has defined its role and diversity as follows:

To advance the objectives of and develop an inclusive Society by reaching and involving members who represent a broad spectrum of ethnic, racial and sexual-orientation groups, and by providing professional development, knowledge and support to professionals of diverse race, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity to help them succeed in public relations. (p. 7)

Eric Peterson, a diversity researcher for the Society of Human Resource Management, defines diversity as “any way any group of people can differ significantly from another group of people – appearance, sexual orientation, veteran status, your level in the organization. It has moved far beyond the legally protected categories that we've always looked at” (as cited in Whitelaw, 2010, para. 5). To advance the field and to connect with key audiences, public relations practitioners must understand and appeal to diverse audiences (Allen, 1995; Banks, 1995; Walmsley, 1998, Waters & Tindall, 2008). To appeal to audiences, a dialogue must take place and relationships must develop that foster communication and expression to allow an environment that privileges authentic voice. Much of this dialogue can be created through the use of social media.

Relationships are key to successful public relations campaigns. Therefore, much research has been conducted on how organizations utilize social media and digital communication to enhance relationships with key publics (e.g., Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Rubel, 2009; Teich, 2008; Waters et al., 2009). Despite a survey conducted by the Council of Public Relations Firms (2009) that highlights the fact that out of the 285 public relations practitioners surveyed, 79% believe social media will become a staple in future public relations campaigns, nearly 59% believe that technology is still not currently used enough. Additional studies have also echoed that practitioners are not using digital media to its fullest capacity (see Eyrych, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Kent, 2008; Xifra & Huertas, 2008). The new era of public relations has begun. As time passes, top public relations practitioners will alter the way they communicate with target audiences. Those that fail to do so will be left behind. As Shirky (2008) states, “When we change the way we communicate, we change society. The tools that a society uses to create and maintain itself are as central to human life as a hive is to bee life” (p. 17). The emphasis of digital media on public relations campaigns represents a seismic shift in the way these campaigns are orchestrated. Therefore, providing practitioners with the tools to create a campaign that revolves around UGC would provide a targeted and practical solution to the digital divide currently present in public relations.

Peer Production

The concept of peer production was first introduced by John Dewey in 1927. Dewey states that a public arises “when a group of people: (1) face a similar indeterminant situation; (2) recognize what is problematic in the situation; (3) organize to do something about the problem” (p. 109). While the definition has shifted within discourses over time to include the utilization of advanced digital technologies, Dewey highlights the act of publics working together to solve a communal problem. Modern day references to peer production are generally divided into two categories; crowdsourcing and commons-based peer production. The distinction between the two is significant due to the way the latter is utilized throughout this manuscript.

Crowdsourcing is a term that was first introduced by Jeff Howe in the June 2006 issue of *Wired* magazine:

Simply defined, crowdsourcing represents the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call. This can take the form of peer-production (when the job is performed collaboratively), but is also often undertaken by sole individuals. The crucial prerequisite is the use of the open call format and the large network of potential laborers.

(Howe, 2006, p. 5)

Howe views crowdsourcing as a type of directed labor where laborers try to complete tasks with a specific set of solution parameters. Businesses solicit peer produced ideas or solutions for the purposes of eventually taking control of those ideas and utilizing them to propel the business. “It’s only crowdsourcing once a company takes that design, fabricates [it] in mass quantity and sell[s] it” (Howe, as cited in Brabham, 2008). A company solicits ideas or solutions to a problem from the general public via some type of online medium. The call is answered with varying responses. The company ultimately selects the idea that best fits their ideology and pays a typically modest sum to the producer. The company then utilizes the idea for its own monetary gain. Motivations for

crowdsourcing are wide ranging and reasons for participation including everything from developing creative skills to building a portfolio, benefiting the common good, and simply alleviating boredom (Brabham, 2011).

While crowdsourcing has proven to be effective in commercial arenas such as software design, Web 2.0 technologies and even social media, and has launched several thriving business models utilized by the likes of eBay and Facebook, it has not been used effectively in advocacy work. Practitioners designing advocacy campaigns are typically not in positions to extend monetary compensation. Therefore, participants need to be motivated by alternate desires such as social-psychological rewards, i.e., a desire for cultural change. Research suggests that individuals are more successful when working to solve problems for others versus solving problems for themselves (Polman & Emich, 2011).

Commons-based peer production, a term first elucidated by Benkler in 2002, was originally applied to peer production of free software projects. Benkler discusses the proliferation of communal collaborations taking place in the absence of traditional hierarchies. The most notable example of this type of online collaboration in use today is Wikipedia. According to Benkler (2002), the advantages of peer production are “improved identification and allocation of human creativity” (p. 377). Commons-based peer production systems are not monetarily based. Participation in such systems provides other intrinsic rewards such as the ability to contribute to social change.

Benkler highlights three characteristics necessary for peer production to thrive. The first characteristic is that the project needs to be “modular” (Benkler, 2002, p. 378). Individuals need to be able to contribute independently produced components based on their own timetables. The second characteristic is that “the modules should be predominantly fine-grained, or small in size” (p. 379). In other words, participants will have varying interests and ways of augmenting content. Contributions will come in various sizes, and the system needs to be designed to support this variety. “This allows the project to capture contributions from large numbers of contributors whose motivation levels will

not sustain anything more than small efforts toward the project” (p. 379). The third characteristic is “a successful peer production enterprise must have low-cost integration, which includes both quality control over the modules and a mechanism for integrating the contributions into the finished product” (p. 379). Participants must be able to add to the project without significant effort or expense. They also must be able to maintain ownership of their contribution and be able to actually see how their contribution fits into the overall project. The Internet allows such a system to thrive. Without the use of digital technologies or the advent of social media platforms, commons-based peer production could not successfully exist.

YouTube

YouTube, a website designed to simplify the process of video sharing, was launched in June 2005. The site, founded by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley and Jawed Karim, was purchased by Google in October 2006 and by 2008, was touted as one of the top websites viewed globally (Nielson, 2008, para 5). It is safe to say that YouTube is more than a passing fad. It has created a fundamental shift in the way individuals consume and share video content. YouTube is one of the most prominent sites for user-generated video. “More video is uploaded to YouTube in 60 days than the three major U.S. networks created in 60 years” (YouTube, 2011, para 1). According to Amy-Mae Elliott of Mashable.com, “as of February 2011, YouTube has 490 million unique users worldwide per month, who rack up an estimated 92 billion page views each month” (2011, para. 10). Additionally, according to YouTube, “more than 13 million hours of video were uploaded during 2010 and more than 35 hours of video are uploaded every minute. This is the equivalent of 150,000 + full length movies in theaters each week” (YouTube, 2011, para 1). YouTube is unique from a humanitarian standpoint because it puts a face to each statistic. It is easy to ignore numbers. It is much harder to ignore stories that resonate and stick with the viewer. When you put a face to a cause, it becomes real. Reality is difficult to ignore.

According to Brabham (2010), “vernacular video and collaborative online projects like the *It Gets Better Project* hold enormous potential to intervene in oppressive cultural arrangements and to actively replace those oppressive situations with visions of possibility” (para. 10). We as individuals are a culmination of our performative interpretations. The verbal and nonverbal actions that we display reflect our identities and the meaning we have constructed. Therefore, the meanings constructed from each of the user-generated videos have an impact on the perceived identities of those in the LGBT community. Each video provides an opportunity to engage in a conversation about sexual orientation from both a dominant and marginalized perspective so that both viewpoints may be better understood. These videos can serve as a bridge rather than a divide emphasizing that there is diversity even within the marginalized group – and that there is not one monolithic body.

Authentic Voice

Digital media has forever altered the communication landscape. Social media platforms have given rise to marginalized voices that would otherwise never have been heard. These voices, sharing struggles and triumphs, are unique in every way. Authentic voice allows speakers to vocalize their stories without boundaries. They allow for a dialogue between oppressors and oppressed. Scholar and activist Paulo Freire (1986) explains that in order to truly give voice to those who are voiceless, an individual has to understand his or her role in perpetuating this marginalization: “How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere ‘its’ in whom I cannot recognize other ‘I’s?’” (p. 71).

In traditional campaigns, speakers say what they believe the audience wants to hear. Public relations practitioners spend copious amounts of time editing and reshaping language so that the audience remains comfortable with the presented vernacular. Authentic voice is natural and unedited. It places a high level of vulnerability on the speaker because the discourse, more often than not, addresses those topics that make the audience uncomfortable. Giroux and McLaren (1986) view voice as a way of engaging one’s culture. They speak specifically of the need and value of encouraging

diverse youth voices: “The term “voice” refers to the principles of dialogue as they are enunciated and enacted within particular social settings...A student's voice is necessarily shaped by personal history and distinctive lived engagement with the surrounding culture” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 235).

Speakers can capture a significant moment or a series of events with vernacular that is exclusively theirs. “Authentic voice is that authorial voice, which sets you apart from every living human being despite the number of common or shared experiences you have with many others; it is not a copy of someone else’s way of speaking or of perceiving the world, it is your way” (Stewart, 1972, p. 2-3). In the words of Romano (2004), “Voice does not arise from nothing. It’s influenced by much. Our voices are shaped by the places where we learned language—in our parents’ arms, at our school desks, in the neighborhood, on playgrounds and streets” (p.6). An authentic voice encompasses the soul of an individual. Reality is a social construction because the words we choose to formulate our realities can be linked to the performances of our bodies. “Put simply, through language an entire world can be actualized at any moment” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 39).

The *It Gets Better Project* takes this idea of actualizing the world through language and asks individuals to recount their stories of adversity in an attempt to transform the perceived realities of LGBT youth. The *It Gets Better Project* seeks to replace the perception of hopelessness and despair common in the language and realities of bullied queer youth with expressions of hope and a brighter future. “People act in self-directed and intentional ways, and yet the patterns that inform their actions – how they think, what they see, what they desire – are already aspects of social being” (Donald, 1991, p. 2). Authentic, diverse voices expand the reach of a public relations campaign and enhance the credibility of the message by increasing the commitment of both active and passive participants and maintaining accountability for personal narratives.

Case Study Context: The *It Gets Better Project*

During September 2010 alone, eleven teenagers, who all were victims of LGBT bullying, committed suicide (Badash, 2010). This brought to light some truly sobering statistics. According to

the Trevor Project, LGBT youth are up to four times as likely to attempt suicide as are straight teens, and 9 out of 10 LGBT students have experienced some sort of harassment in their school (The Trevor Project, 2010). Many across the country felt that this signaled an epidemic and saw this as a call to action. Dan Savage, a relationship and sex columnist well established in the LGBT community, was moved to action and created one of the first and most significant viral campaigns of the twenty-first century.

The *It Gets Better Project* began with a simple idea. According to the *It Gets Better Project* website, Savage wished he had had the opportunity to speak with those teens that had committed suicide when they were in their darkest moments in order to reach out and tell them that life really does get better. According to Savage, many school administrators do not permit members of the LGBT community to speak at schools. So there is truly no outreach to young teens struggling with their identities. Savage then realized, with the advent of social media, he was waiting for permission he no longer required (Savage Love, 2010). In an interview on NPR, Savage elaborates:

In the era of social media — in a world with YouTube and Twitter and Facebook — I could speak directly to LGBT kids right now. I didn't need permission from parents or an invitation from a school. I could look into a camera, share my story, and let LGBT kids know that it got better for me and it would get better for them too. I could give 'em hope. (Gross, 2010)

The *It Gets Better Project* began in September 2010 with the first video message created by Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller. His message was clear. He asked the community to take a few moments to craft a video and tell LGBT youth that, in time, their lives would get better. The focus of this YouTube testimonial campaign was to remind LGBT teens struggling with bullying and harassment that life does get better after high school.

The campaign, which presents a modest message, was transformed into a worldwide movement. The majority of the videos follow a similar format. The stories are generally first person accounts, and the amateur videos are primarily low budget and shot with webcams. Celebrity

participation and videos created by universities or organizations bring a higher level of video sophistication but maintain the same first-person story-telling platform.

A preliminary search on the *It Gets Better Project* YouTube channel shows more than 20,000 videos. As of November 1, 2011, the channel boasted 2,251 comments, 4,638 friends, and 39,170 subscribers. According to Dan Savage, after posting his initial video on September 21, 2010, and essentially kicking off the *It Gets Better Project* with a call to action, it only took 36 hours to receive more than 100 additional user-created videos. Within four days, the *It Gets Better Project* YouTube channel had reached YouTube's video posting limit of 650 videos. At that point, YouTube provided the campaign with greater video capacity by backdating the date the channel was actually assigned. As of June 1, 2011, the videos in total had received more than 40 million views (Savage, 2011). The views are a culmination of hits to the YouTube channel and views on the *It Gets Better Project's* website. By providing a platform for individuals to express support for LGBT youth, the *It Gets Better Project* opens up a dialogue with the community and offers a way to ultimately change people's perceptions of reality.

This campaign is unique in that it harnesses the ideas of typical public relations campaigns (clearly defined message and objectives, target audience, method of evaluation), but the control of the campaign remains in the hands of a community rather than a bureaucracy. Thus, some control over the overall message is relinquished in order to increase the authenticity of the campaign.

Several public relations practitioners are advocates of relinquishing message control. They view the absence of control linked inexplicably to an increase in trust. Social media campaigns looking at issues of diversity rely on trust and empathy in order to garner public support. For example, Jeff Jarvis, journalist and founder of the popular media blog [BuzzMachine.com](http://www.buzzmachine.com), stated at an Edelman Executive Meeting, "If you give people control, they will use it--if not, you will lose them. . . . Trust is the organizing principle, utilizing the wisdom of crowds. This new world is not isolating, in fact it relies on community and craves validation" (Edelman, 2010). Richard Edelman echoes this

sentiment: “We need to persuade our clients that less control, of the message and the messenger, means enhanced trust” (Edelman, 2010). Brian Solis adds a humanitarian element: “Virtual control migrates to the actual control of the shaping and protection of our story as it migrates from consumer to consumer. This chain forms a powerful connection that reveals true reactions, perception, and perspectives. The conversations that bind us form a Human Algorithm that serves as the pulse of awareness, trustworthiness, and emotion” (Solis, 2010).

Traditional outreach efforts to the LGBT community fail to portray a variety of experiences. This one-size-fits-all approach is not effective. Through vernacular videos posted to YouTube, the *It Gets Better Project* effectively utilizes commons-based peer production to combat social isolation and adversity. Essentially, this is done by transforming an individual public relations campaign targeting the LGBT community into a collective campaign, forging a community for LGBT members, especially those who may not have previously had a community or allies around them. The *It Gets Better Project* also effectively identifies its audiences, targeting a primary audience of LGBT youth and larger society secondarily.

The videos posted by everyone from celebrities, to LGBT advocates, to members of the LGBT community, to heterosexual allies, demonstrate the power that a compelling story told through an honest, authentic voice has on community motivation. “Over time, conventions of performance of testimonial narrative have emerged, and they hinge on the presentations of victim’s bodies, which elicits sympathy from the audience. When they are successful, testimonials are not simply forms of witnessing. Instead, they produce a community conducive to listening and responding” (Torchin, 2008). By showing society what is happening in high schools and what LGBT teens are actually dealing with, the *It Gets Better Project* encourages society to intervene and pressure those in power to support individuals in the LGBT community.

Method

Data was collected from a total of 200 videos out of more than 20,000 posted to the *It Gets Better Project* YouTube channel. Videos appeared in a grid format. The order of the videos appears randomly assigned by the *It Gets Better Project*, as videos are not categorized by popularity (number of views), date, or length. Two coders selected and analyzed the first 200 videos that appeared on the channel; each coder watched every video. Videos were coded based on the existence of seven key themes: use of the “it gets better” tagline, suicide, bullying, finding love, finding peace, coming out, and commonality. All videos were coded over a 3-month period from April through June 2011. To compute the coefficient of reliability (Holsti, 1969, p. 140), the following formula was used:

$$CR = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

M equals the number of times the two coders agree and N₁ and N₂ equal the number of coding decisions each coder made. M equals 168 and N₁ and N₂ each equal 200 as each coder coded every video. The percentage of observed agreement between the coders was .84 or 84%.

The *It Gets Better Project* does not record statistics on the demographics of the participants; therefore, in addition to the content analysis, this researcher extracted a random statistical sample of 522 videos that appeared on the *It Gets Better Project*'s YouTube channel to acquire information regarding the diversity of those posting content.

Results

Research Question One

Research question one asks: How can a campaign that is completely reliant on user-generated content (UGC) not only successfully engage a diverse public, but also maintain value and legitimacy while persuading individuals to take action? The *It Gets Better Project* was effective at not only capturing the attention of the public but also utilizing the stories of members and allies of the LGBT community to give the campaign an authentic voice. This campaign followed a model for driving

social change through social media known as the Dragonfly Effect (see Aaker & Smith, 2010). The dragonfly model, named for the fact that a dragonfly can move in any direction as long as its four wings are working in unison, focuses on four key principles. Those principles are focus, grab attention, engage and take action (Aaker & Smith, 2010). According to Aaker and Smith (2010), if a social media campaign contains these principles, it will work to create positive, social change. In the case of the *It Gets Better Project*, the principles can be easily seen and followed.

The first key principle, focus, relies heavily on presenting a targeted, narrative message. These digital stories contain a beginning, middle and an end. They inevitably involve some type of conflict and/or struggle and occur in a very specific location. Each of the videos that were coded followed this narrative format. The setting in each video varied as did the nature of the conflict, but the overall structure was remarkably similar. An example of a focused digital story can be viewed in the targeted message of the first video post. The *It Gets Better Project* has a clearly defined goal of reaching out to LGBT youth in the hopes of letting them know that despite the bullying they may endure in school, life does get better and there are support systems out there. It presents the message that these individuals are not alone. A call to action is placed on the *It Gets Better Project* YouTube channel. It asks users to post their own videos showing support. By making the goal small and reachable, i.e., post a video and save a life, viewers are not overwhelmed by the ask. While the ultimate goal is to eliminate suicides in the LGBT community, by starting small, the outreach remains targeted and manageable. According to Kleinman and Kleinman (1997), this allows for members of society to “draw upon these images of human suffering in order to identify human needs and to craft humane responses” (pp. 17-18).

In addition to having a clear focus, this first principle also calls for the goal to be testable. The *It Gets Better Project* began with a modest goal: “One hundred videos. That was the goal, and it seemed ambitious: one hundred videos — best-case scenario: two hundred videos — made by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adults for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth” (Savage & Miller,

2011, introduction). The project hit 100 videos in three days. Within one week, there were already 1,000 videos posted. Utilizing commons-based peer production in conjunction with a focused, targeted message allowed the visual images to contextualize the situation currently surrounding LGBT youth and produce a moral obligation to act in a safe space.

The second principle in the Dragonfly Effect is to grab attention (Aaker & Smith, 2010). The *It Gets Better Project* uses powerful peer-created videos to grab attention. Within those videos are detailed accounts of bullying and very vivid discussions of suicide, which are often seen as taboo. Of the videos coded, 112 videos contained accounts of bullying, and 61 detailed either failed suicide attempts or suicidal plans that were never brought to reality.

Celebrities have created a portion of the videos, of those analyzed 37 were created by celebrities or groups such as the Tampa Bay Rays, Phillies and Mariners, while everyday citizens have created others. Joel Madden from the band *Good Charlotte* posted a video in which he states, “I’m not a spokesperson and I’m not a very eloquent speaker but I care and there are thousands of people who care about you...if you need to talk to someone, tweet me” (Madden, 2010). There are also video posts from President Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Justin Beiber, Google employees, Facebook employees and others.

However the most powerful clips are arguably from young people telling their heartfelt, emotional stories in an attempt to connect with other youth going through similar struggles. One of the most touching is a clip from a male in his young twenties named Zac, who details the bullying he encountered throughout his school years and his subsequent suicide attempt. In front of a white backdrop, a tearful Zac states, “I put the revolver in my mouth and I remember it tasting like cold metal. I pulled the trigger. There was one empty round in the gun and it was the one that I pulled...So to anyone watching this anywhere, hang in there. Anything that sucks today will make you stronger tomorrow” (Zac, 2010). Public relations professionals are keenly aware of the power of a narrative. It is often the story that the public remembers long after the campaign has concluded.

Using celebrities to publicize a cause is nothing new. Generating enough buzz to have the public make unique, individual connections with the stories already posted, then adding their own personalized stories is certainly something to write about. This campaign taps all of the public's senses. It is raw, real, emotional and heartfelt. Viewing the multitude of faces and hearing the variety of voices is diversity in and of itself. The campaign is relatable to everyone. The majority of the video clips are within two to eight minutes in length and they all close with the *It Gets Better* tagline. They reinforce the message in a short and simple way.

The third principle in the Dragonfly Effect is to engage the audience (Aaker & Smith, 2010). “You might have brilliant arguments as to why people should get involved, but if you can't engage them emotionally, they won't be swayed” (Aaker & Smith 2, 2010). Aaker and Smith highlight four specific design principles that engage an audience. Those principles are tell a story, empathize, be authentic, and match the media (2010, p. 101). The *It Gets Better Project* engages the audience on each of these levels. Each vernacular video presents a story entrenched in pain and struggle. The 163 individual videos are first-person narratives. Of those narratives, 84 videos discuss finding love, 91 discuss finding peace with oneself, 57 detail the “coming out” moment, and 163 highlight the community or commonality with phrases like “I've been there” or “there are people who love you and care about you.” The reality of each video is highlighted by the way the video is presented. The participants are in plain clothes, staring into a webcam. The backdrop is often a bedroom, living room or other similarly common location. The speaking is wrought with awkward pauses, swearing and slang. The voices are unique and authentic. The campaign also engages its audience by inviting them to make a video of their own continuing the campaigns outreach.

The fourth principle in the Dragonfly Effect is to develop a call to action that is easy, fun, and open to all. The *It Gets Better Project* asks individuals to post personal videos of themselves telling LGBT teens that life gets better after high school. The format allows for creativity, ingenuity and self-expression. There is very little in terms of specific direction. However, even with this lack of specifics,

all 200 of the videos reviewed contained the tagline, “it gets better.” The campaign is easy to become a part of and easy to share. The message is sharp and strong. “One voice can save a life” is certainly a simple and compelling request.

Ultimately, *The Dragonfly Effect* is an easily, replicable model about embracing disruptive technology to make a difference in the world, and, by extension, in one’s own life (Chernov, 2010). When used correctly, this model can bring about engaging and impactful social campaigns, as evidenced by the *It Gets Better Project*. Successful public relations campaigns are generally gauged in terms of ROI or increased product or organizational awareness. The *It Gets Better Project* accomplished this with user-generated content.

Research Question Two

Research question two asks: How does the utilization of YouTube, as a platform for user-generated content in advocacy campaigns, facilitate the use of authentic voice to challenge the dominant ideologies promoted by American culture? The *It Gets Better Project* utilized YouTube as a tool for postmodern activism. YouTube represents a paradigmatic shift in the way grassroots public relations campaigns are framed in order to increase public attention and support for humanitarian causes. According to Shirky (2008):

We now have communications tools that are flexible enough to match our social capabilities, and we are witnessing the rise of new ways of coordinating action that take advantage of that change. We are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations. (pp. 20-21)

YouTube thus enables users to create social networks and engage in deliberative talk around any number of issues.

Burgess and Green (2009) state that today’s youth can be seen as both agents and victims of YouTube’s content. As agents, young people post much of the content that is on the site. As victims,

they are also the ones exposed to the content that may be deemed inappropriate by some adults. For example, YouTube boasts raw, graphic images of self-injury, bombings, and even death. The *It Gets Better Project* targets today's youth as both agents and victims by encouraging them to post videos and also reaching out to those who have been victimized. By encouraging the use of authentic voice in the repurposing of stories, this campaign also views today's youth as activists and pillars for change. Zhao (2005) sums up this sentiment, stating, "just as we find out how we look from the reflections we see in the mirror, we learn who we are by interpreting how others respond to us" (p. 387).

With this platform, the campaign gets personal. The videos are real testimonials of victimization and statements that life really does improve. The video of KP is an example. KP presents his entire message via note cards. He flashes a series of cards detailing his struggles with bullying as a result of his sexuality. Even though he never utters a word, the emotional weight of the topic can be seen on his face (KP, 2010). Patricia Lange expands on the power of video:

People who are unfamiliar with the diary form of video blogging are often critical of this genre, seeing it as self-centered and obsessed with filming micro-events with no particular point or relevance beyond the videomakers own life . . . many video bloggers argue that it is precisely by putting these intimate moments on the Internet for all to see that a space is created to expose and discuss difficult issues and thereby achieve greater understanding of oneself and others. (2007, para. 1)

This sharing of a constructed reality helps frame how society perceives both dominant cultures and various subcultures.

Giving voice to marginalized groups is the most effective way to challenge the dominant ideologies of a culture. Henry Jenkins expands on this:

From an advocacy perspective, we can see how IF a video achieves either prominent placement, or takes off virally on YouTube it can take off in terms of public prominence. Similarly for many nongovernmental advocacy organizations that are trying to engage a

general public either with a single video or via a channel, YouTube is likely to be the first place that public will look. And we also recognize that YouTube is a pushing-out point or footage that finds homes in many other subculture-specific media systems, including rights, where it is embedded and re-contextualized. (2008, para. 5)

YouTube allows viewers to see “realities we might not otherwise have been allowed to visit,” where “nothing is too personal” (Aufderheide, 1995, p. 46). Using videos with authentic voice for purposes of advocacy allows the images to produce a moral obligation to act. “Group action gives human society its particular character, and anything that changes the way groups get things done will affect society as a whole” (Shirky, 2008, p. 23).

Diversity

The diverse outreach of this campaign is also significant when discussing its relevance. Public relations professionals must look at campaigns such as the *It Gets Better Project* to see how the use of digital storytelling with a strong call to action and user-generated content can create a successful, national campaign that highlights areas of diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. The *It Gets Better Project* does not record statistics on the demographics of the participants; therefore, in addition to the content analysis, this researcher extracted a statistically random sample of 522 videos that appeared on the *It Gets Better Project's* YouTube channel for personal information. The first 522 videos that appeared on the channel were analyzed. The order of the videos appears randomly assigned by the *It Gets Better Project*, as videos are not categorized by popularity (number of views), date, or length. This data, coupled with the celebrity statistics supplied by the *It Gets Better Project* website, provide a random sample that is representative of the entire campaign.

Of the 522 videos reviewed, there was significant variation in the number of videos posted by men and women. In total, 344 or 66% were posted by males, 174 or 33.4 % by females, and 4 or .007% by transgendered individuals. These statistics do not appropriately account for transgender individuals because, unless individuals specifically identified themselves as transgender in the actual

recorded content, that information is unattainable based on visual assessment.

Race is a demographic characteristic that is indeterminable based solely on a visual assessment; country of origin is a significant demographic variable when interpreting campaign outreach. Of the 522 videos sampled, 55 (11%) were posted from locations outside of the United States including British Columbia, Taiwan, Australia, Montreal, England, Ukraine, Malaysia and Singapore, indicating the global reach of the campaign. Traditional campaigns have difficulty utilizing a singular message to impact a global response. Often, the message has to be altered due to language or cultural barriers. This did not occur with the *It Gets Better Project*. With a campaign that is solely reliant on user-generated content, the messages remain true to the original concept as the specific vernacular varies through the use of authentic voice. For example, the San Francisco Giants produced a video for the campaign delivering the *It Gets Better* message in English, Spanish and Japanese, reaching multiple societies and cultures.

In terms of age, there is truly no way to track specific demographic data related to age. Based on visual assessment, which has obvious drawbacks, the large majority of the videos are produced by individuals in Generation X and Y. Generation X is roughly defined as those born between 1965 and 1980 (Stephey, 2008, para. 5), while the common date range for Generation Y is typically between 1982 and 2000 (Marino, 2006, p. 1). However, based on visual assessment, the age range spans at least 60 years.

For example, a video of a small child, who estimating by the way she speaks is approximately three to four years old, was posted on September 30, 2010. She appears to be the youngest video contributor. Her video, which is thirteen seconds in length and sports the tagline “It Gets Better,” has received more than 9,000 views. A description beneath the video, posted by maggiesmoms (the channel owner) provides a script for the video, for those unable to decipher the child’s words, and states, “Our daughter is right – we love our lives! This time in your life will be over before you know it. Really” (Maggiesmoms, 2010, para. 1). On the opposite end of the spectrum is a video posted by V.

Gene Robinson, a 63-year-old openly gay priest, who is currently serving as the ninth bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire (Timmins, 2003, para. 3).

Conclusion

“To be successful, you must translate your passion into a powerful story and tell it in a way that generates ‘contagious energy,’ so that your audience reflects on your tweet, blog post, or email, long after they leave their computers” (Aaker & Smith, 2010, p. xiv). By empowering others to use their own voice, the *It Gets Better Project* attempts to challenge social stigmas and limit oppression through the use of technology. “Time and time again, initiatives falter because they’re developed with the brand, organization or cause – rather than individuals’ needs – foremost in mind” (Aaker & Smith, 2010 xxiii).

The *It Gets Better Project* has been successful because individual needs have remained at the forefront of the campaign. From the initial video post to the videos that are still being added today, each entry adds a new voice to the conversation and addresses individual stories. As public relations practitioners are aware, actions speak louder than words. Through vernacular videos posted to YouTube, the *It Gets Better Project* effectively utilizes commons-based peer production to combat social isolation and adversity. This study not only highlights an effective viral strategy for public relations practitioners but also provides insight into trends in promoting advocacy and social change. Future researchers would benefit from a thorough content analysis of videos posted to the project’s YouTube channel and surveys related to reasons for individual participation.

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