

The Influence of Radical Environmentalists on Reputation and Communication Practices of Advocacy / Collaborative Nonprofits

M. Zhigalina

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
New Jersey, New Brunswick USA

Abstract: The article focuses on features, activities and communication practices of environmental nonprofits / groups to demonstrate the importance of studying how negative reputation of the environmental sub-sector created by radical environmentalists can influence advocacy / collaborative environmental nonprofits. First, it reviews some relevant literature related to environmental organizations / groups and their external communication. Additionally, it provides some examples of radical environmentalism that have been recently discussed in the news. Finally, it describes directions for future research. It is important to understand the influence of the actions of radical environmentalists on advocacy / collaborative nonprofit organizations because it might impact the success of such nonprofits.

Keywords — Advocacy Nonprofits, Collaborative Nonprofits, Crisis Communication, Environmental Activists, Radical Environmentalists

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INTRODUCTION

Extreme environmentalists can influence the reputation and success of non-violent environmental nonprofits by generating negative publicity and discussions in society. Such events can be viewed as crises. If the image of the sub-sector where nonprofit organizations (NPOs) operate is tarnished, that can bring negative consequences for nonprofits: donors might be reluctant to donate, volunteers might be discouraged from joining, and organizations might have issues receiving funds from the government. As a result, communication practices and other NPOs' activities can change when reputation of the environmental sub-sector where nonprofits operate is damaged due to actions of radicals.

Focusing on a related issue, Grant and Potoski [1] argue that nonprofits that work in the same policy area and in the same state can have a collective reputation that influences the received donations. The authors demonstrated that by identifying a nonprofit's peers and providing information about their quality, Charity Navigator creates the conditions for collective reputation; they found that collective reputation effect occurs because rated nonprofits change their fundraising in response to information about rated peers, which, as a result, affects donors' giving [1].

This article focuses on features, activities, and communication practices of environmental NPOs and groups to demonstrate the importance of studying how negative reputation of the environmental sub-sector created by radical environmentalists can influence advocacy / collaborative environmental NPOs. The first part of the article discusses environmental organizations / groups whose common goal is to save environment. Two types of environmental organizations / groups are considered: advocacy / collaborative NPOs that use conventional and collaborative methods to achieve their goals, and radical groups that engage in radical (sometimes violent and illegal) activities to achieve similar environmental goals. Additionally, the first part of the article discusses some features of external communication of environmental nonprofits. In the second part of the article, some popular cases of radical environmentalism that were covered in the news are provided. The nature of these cases is negative and they are considered as violent and/or illegal actions. In the third part of the article, directions for future research are discussed. Finally, conclusion that summarizes main ideas is provided at the end of the article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section briefly reviews two types of environmental organizations / groups: advocacy / collaborative organizations and radical environmental groups. Additionally, it describes how external communication is practiced in environmental

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non-profit organizations.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS

Environmental organizations and groups can be divided into two major types: advocacy / collaborative organizations and radical environmental groups. Advocacy / collaborative organizations usually accommodate and cooperate with government agencies and politicians; they participate in policy intervention, political action, strategic research and information provision [2]. As for radical environmental groups, they sometimes engage in ecotage: disabling machinery by cutting electrical wires or major vandalism such as arson and the sinking of whaling ships and other actions [3].

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL NONPROFITS

Nonprofits still rely on their websites as the primary online communication platform; social media play a secondary role by serving as a supplement that provides dialogic features that can be limited on websites [4]. Some environmental nonprofits (e.g., WMEAC), in addition to e-newsletters, use traditional methods, such as sending quarterly hard-copy newsletter to their members [5]. Social media provide new opportunities for advocacy campaigns; it can help to reduce NGOs' dependency on mass media, enable them to reach broader audiences, and facilitate participation in advocacy campaigns [6]. Environmental advocacy organizations can use dialogic strategies to create two-way communication in social media [6] & [7]. That can produce positive outcomes such as increasing the number of stakeholders who interact with the organization by growing the social network [7].

EXAMPLES OF RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM IN THE NEWS

We often hear different cases when various activist groups, movements, or separate people engage in protest and violent behavior. Many examples can be found on popular news sources where groups and people who have the purpose to protect environment are portrayed in a negative way.

For example, Noack's [8] article states that as part of an environmentally influenced protest of Christmas consumerism, eco-terrorists threatened to contaminate products with hydrochloric acid in a Greek supermarket. Residents in Athens and the city of Thessaloniki were urged not to consume some types of Coca-Cola, a Greek milk brand and packages of meat; 1 million residents were affected by the precautionary measures [8]. A case of a radical environmental group (Earth Liberation Front) that was responsible for eco-terrorism arson several years ago causing an estimated \$50 million in damage, has recently been discussed in the news; seeking to find out who set a San Diego housing project ablaze, FBI is offering a reward of up to \$25,000 [9]. In another case related to Dakota Access Pipeline, Blackmon [10] mentioned that even when the illegal protest site was cleaned out, the Dakota Access Pipeline was the target of vandalism and efforts to damage its equipment; acts to damage the high-pressure line could lead to fires or explosions that could result in dramatic consequences.

Hundreds of other stories can be found in the news in which people and groups who fight for saving the environment are portrayed in a negative way. Such stories can influence peoples' attitudes toward organizations that have the goal to save environment. Nonprofits can face negative consequences when the image of their sub-sector is tarnished: donors might be reluctant to donate, volunteers might be discouraged from joining, and such NPOs can have issues receiving funds from the government. It is especially harmful for innocent environmental NPOs that do not use any violent methods to achieve their goals. The next part of the article will discuss the importance of research in this area in detail.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Extreme environmentalists can influence the reputation and success of non-violent and collaborative environmental NPOs when their radical and dangerous acts are actively discussed in the news. Even though advocacy / collaborative NPOs usually do not perform such radical acts, people might still have negative associations and attitudes (sometimes unconsciously) toward environmental organizations. Therefore, in general, future research should focus on such negative events discussed in media to understand their influence on work and communication processes of advocacy / collaborative NPOs. For example, in a related context, focusing on a collective reputation among nonprofits in particular, Grant and Potoski [1] in their study mentioned that future research should focus on the efficacy of strategies for mitigating collective reputations' downside and when nonprofits should differentiate themselves from peers; nonprofits might decide to differentiate themselves from peers by marketing their products and services.

In this article it is argued that first, future research should look at consequences that the damaged reputation of the environmental sub-sector brings in terms of volunteer attraction and retention, relationships with government, and collaborative initiatives with business. Some nonprofits depend on volunteers and donors and/or engage in various collaborative activities, and it is important to be aware of the dangers that tarnished image of the sub-sector might bring to the work of such organizations.

Additionally, scholars should look at whether advocacy / collaborative environmental NPOs change their communication behavior with external audiences and how they do that. Because of violent activities performed by radicals, advocacy / collaborative nonprofits might decide to temporarily reduce their presence in social media to avoid

unnecessary attention of the audience and as a result, negative associations and malevolent comments. Some people might not remember the details of a negative event and as a result, might have negative thoughts in relation to other environmental organizations. In contrast, another option that environmental nonprofits might have is to actively engage in crisis communication. They can design strategies to respond to a crisis event in order to disassociate themselves from radical environmentalists and persuade people in their peaceful and non-radical environmental attitudes and practices. They might actively use all sorts of media and generate two-way communication in social media. In this case, advocacy / collaborative environmental NPOs might even see radical events as a way to promote their peaceful environmental initiatives. Thus, future research should explore what communication strategies advocacy / collaborative nonprofits choose, what types of media they prefer, and what media and strategies are more appropriate and effective as a response to situations when radical activists engage in violent, illegal, and other types of negative activities.

Finally, it is important to study how people respond to events performed by environmental activists and to possible crisis communication strategies employed by non-violent nonprofits. One of the most promising research areas is social media. Scholars can look at comments made by stakeholders in different social media in relation to radicals' environmental efforts and advocacy / collaborative environmental nonprofits. Studying such comments is valuable for understanding the appropriateness and effectiveness of NPOs' communication strategies designed in response to negative actions performed by activists.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the importance of studying how extreme environmentalists might influence the image of the sub-sector where advocacy / collaborative nonprofits operate, which, as a result, might impact their work and communication practices. Some examples of radical environmentalism provided in the article demonstrate what kind of information is discussed in popular media sources in relation to environmental initiatives. Such cases catch audience's attention and as a result, have many chances to be noticed by a large number of people. If people realize that actions of environmentalists can threaten their lives, they might develop negative attitudes toward them and other organizations that have the purpose to save environment. Even if they realize that not all organizations engage in such dangerous activities, they might still be suspicious about actions of environmental organizations, especially those organizations that are unfamiliar to them. As a result, they might choose to donate their time or money to other types of nonprofit organizations. This means that environmental nonprofit organizations might face many difficulties. Thus, it is crucial to understand what advocacy / collaborative nonprofits do and how they should act when dangerous actions of radical environmental groups are actively discussed in media.

Author Biography

M. Zhigalina earned her master's degree at Monmouth University. She is currently a Ph.D. student and Teaching and Research Assistant at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She can be reached at mmk1541@rutgers.edu.

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