

Title:

“The movement is the message: Building public will for health and climate justice via social movement campaigns”

Author:

Charlotte Ryan, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Sociology Department, University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Co-Director, Movement and Media Research Action Project

Charlotte_Ryan@uml.edu

Anonymized Abstract 951 words

Topic

In recent years, the IPCC, global south and some global north nations, citizens groups, and concerned individuals have pressed for substantive action on climate change. Global north responses have been woefully inadequate especially given that these economies contribute so heavily to the climate crisis. Frustrated activists and analysts blame this inaction both on obfuscation campaigns by extractive industries and tepid engagement by global north publics, particularly in the United States. While mass mobilizations have increased, most notably the 2014 People's Climate March in New York City, U.S. climate justice activists recognize the need to expand the public will for climate justice.

In this paper we argue that climate justice campaigns fail to mobilize publics if they focus on individualized not collective solutions. In this they face a challenge similar to that experienced by public health activists seeking to address environmental health disparities. Strategic communication campaigns in public health have simultaneously flagged health disparities, then, downplayed forms of collective action that could challenge inertia around those disparities.

To draw generalizable lessons for climate campaigns, we analyze news coverage of anti-childhood obesity campaigns conducted between 2010 and 2012. We compare the results of that content analysis with case studies of news generated by ten social movement-based campaigns against childhood obesity.

Our preliminary findings suggest that the vast majority of articles portray government and social service organizations as active change agents challenging food inequality through creative programming while portraying individuals experiencing food inequality appear as passive (albeit grateful) recipients of services. In contrast, news accounts of social movement-based campaigns against childhood obesity in the same 2010-2011 period feature individuals experiencing food inequality as active change agents capable of challenging their circumstances through collective action.

In the discussion, we describe how the three most common approaches to strategic communication campaigns—social marketing, media advocacy, and social movement—represents divergent theories of change, which in turn, promote divergent possibilities for building public will. We discuss implication for climate change organizing noting that communication campaigns too narrowly focused on highlighting programmatic or legislative initiatives can inadvertently obscure how social movement campaign empower formerly marginalized citizens to act. We conclude by noting the rising visibility of movement-centered climate campaigns such as Beautiful Solutions but acknowledge that social movement communication campaigns face significant unaddressed challenges.

Theoretical Framework

“Power,” says Hannah Arendt, “corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert” (Arendt, 1969: 44). Accordingly, in a historic period defined by a media logic (Atheide, 2004: 294), communication power corresponds to the ability not just to express an individual opinion but to organize collective action. For marginalized citizens, the ability to change the world through political praxis requires movement building including communication campaigns.

Social movement communication campaigns acknowledge that individuals marginalized by inequalities of power have little influence over mass communication systems. At best, marginalized individuals can position themselves strategically within existing communication systems. Rarely can an individual

manage to expand communication equity for marginalized groups more broadly.

Building on indigenous and feminist approaches to social movement communication (Frey and Carragee 2007; 2012), social movement communication campaigns restore agency through political engagement. For every practice that reinforces communication inequality, social movement communication campaigns establish communication practices that create a new and more equitable social order. In doing so, these alternative practices shift power toward the marginalized (Couldry, 2003).

Case

Health outcomes are largely determined by social and environmental conditions with the obesity epidemic offering a case in point. Poor communities and particularly communities of color in the United States lack access to fresh food, sports and other play options, walkable landscapes, and/or public transportation. Additionally, sophisticated advertising campaigns promote high calorie foods and drinks. Concomitantly, childhood obesity in poor communities and communities of color has soared.

Despite widespread recognition of social determined health disparities, news accounts typically treated obesity as a failure of individual willpower. Even when environmental causes are noted, solutions are individuated. Reality TV shows, such as *The Greatest Loser*, focus on individual battles to lose weight. Diets, supplements, and exercise machines offer individual consumers assistance—for a price.

In 2007, recognizing the need to build the public will to address childhood obesity systemically, Robert Wood Johnson and others launched a massive campaign to reduce obesity. Government agencies initiated reforms such as weigh-ins, health report cards, soda bans and healthier lunches. We focus here on the question of agency: does news coverage of childhood obesity campaigns show citizens as active agents able to challenge systemic inequalities?

Data source: RWJF News Digests: Childhood Obesity, June 2010 – December 2011.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation sponsored a weekly News Digest on Childhood Obesity featuring news stories published the previous week. To explore whether cited sources were presented as active agents capable of changing social policy, we conduct a content analysis of News Digests (June 2010 through December 2011). The data set consists of 700+ mainstream news articles published in weekly News Digests. We code each source for institutional affiliation (government, non-profit, food industry, etc.) or individual role (service provider, service recipient etc.)

We conduct a second smaller content analysis of 2010-2011 news articles featuring social movement organizations in Robert Wood Johnson's "Communities Creating Healthy Environments" program. We, then, contrast the patterns of agency that emerge in the two data sets.

References:

- Altheide, D. (2004). "Media Logic and Political Communication", *Political Communication*, 21:3, 293-296.
- Arendt, H. (1969). *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World.
- Couldry, N. (2003). "Beyond the Hall of Mirrors? Some Theoretical Reflections on the Global Contestation of Media Power." In Couldry and Curran (Eds.). *Contesting Media Power* (pp. 39-54). Lanham MD: Rowan & Littlefield
- Frey, L. R., & Carragee, K. M. (Eds.) (2007, 2012). *Communication activism* (3 Vols.). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.