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# A Greater Means to the Greater Good: Ethical Guidelines to Meet Social Movement Organization Advocacy Challenges

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**A GREATER MEANS TO THE GREATER GOOD:  
ETHICAL GUIDELINES TO MEET SOCIAL MOVEMENT ORGANIZATION  
ADVOCACY CHALLENGES**

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**A GREATER MEANS TO THE GREATER GOOD:  
ETHICAL GUIDELINES TO MEET SOCIAL MOVEMENT ORGANIZATION  
ADVOCACY CHALLENGES**

**ABSTRACT:** Existing public relations ethics literature often proves inadequate when applied to social movement campaigns, considering the special communication challenges activists face as marginalized moral visionaries in a commercial public sphere. The communications of counter-hegemonic movements is distinct enough from corporate, nonprofit, and governmental organizations to warrant its own ethical guidelines. The unique communication guidelines most relevant to social movement organizations include promoting asymmetrical advocacy to a greater extent than is required for more powerful organizations and building flexibility into the TARES principles to privilege social responsibility over respect for audience values in activist campaigns serving as ideological critique.

**Keywords:** social movement organization, ethics, public relations, activist, advocacy, campaign

The outspoken and media-savvy animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) launched its controversial “Holocaust on Your Plate” campaign in 2003. To promote vegetarianism and attack agribusiness, the campaign made striking visual and verbal comparisons between the mistreatment and industrialized mass killing of humans in the holocaust and of farmed animals in factory farms. PETA showcased the public exhibit across North America and Europe, garnering media attention and strong reactions, including boycotts, along the way.

As both a media scholar and animal rights activist, I was interested in the controversy surrounding this cause campaign and wondered about its utility and ethicality as a communications tool for social change. But in using the public relations ethics literature as an

analytical guide, I found the current scholarship often lacking context and applicability to the special challenges PETA faced. This led me to a central question: are the ethical principles of persuasion and public relations universally relevant to *all* organizations, or are some caveats warranted based on the different motivations, goals, and challenges that distinguish organizations?

While most communication literature focuses on corporate, nonprofit, government, or otherwise *mainstream* organizations, there has been little academic research on the special ethical challenges most applicable to *social movement* organizations (SMOs), in particular, as they struggle to use persuasive communication campaigns to redefine accepted social practices into social problems. As counter-hegemonic organizations, how can SMOs best deal with the clash of values that occurs when their utilitarian version of the “common good” is not commonly accepted? As SMOs struggle for a voice in the commercial public sphere, sometimes using forceful appeals to gain attention or even purposely cause contention, it can be difficult to show respect for the public’s entrenched values and beliefs while attempting to critique and transform them.

This essay seeks to build a case for distinguishing the ethical communication principles most relevant for social movement communicators, specifically building some utilitarian considerations into the TARES deontological guidelines and promoting asymmetrical advocacy to a greater extent. I begin with an overview of PR ethics, SMO communication challenges, and morally relevant distinctions between organizations. The next section discusses how PR ethics guidelines could better fit SMOs, particularly around issues of symmetry, authenticity, and respect. I also question whether or not SMOs are actually practicing public relations, as in relationship-building, or whether their practices could be defined as persuasion and social

marketing on the moderate end, and artistic moral protest on the radical end. The conclusion includes ethical recommendations for SMOs that take into account how organizational characteristics and goals should be considered in conjunction with the communication means when assessing the ethicality of more contentious campaigns.

## BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW

### Persuasive Communication Ethics

Several scholars provide useful guidelines for evaluating the ethics of persuasive communication. Baker and Martinson (2001) designed their TARES test as a way to encapsulate the most common ethical principles of persuasive communications into one model. The five principles represented in the TARES acronym are: Truthfulness of the message, Authenticity of the persuader, Respect for the audience, Equity/fairness of the appeal to the audience, and Social responsibility for the common good. Sproule (1980) also provided a useful checklist for ethical communication, focusing on Kantian concepts like selfless motives, universal application, right means, and proper fit with social values.

Advocacy communication is sometimes derided as manipulative “propaganda,” particularly the communication materials of activist groups who are passionate about their cause and may appear close-minded or one-sided. On the other hand, critical theorists such as Herman & Chomsky (1988) critique all PR as synonymous with propaganda, especially since corporations dominate the mass media ownership and content (Weaver, Motion & Roper, 2006). However, propaganda has some distinctive, and largely negative, characteristics that distinguish it from mere persuasive speech. Jowett and O’Donnell (1999) described propagandists as highly utilitarian in putting their own interests above the audience’s. They may purposely distort or

misrepresent information, sometimes even concealing the source of the message from the audience. Therefore, to be considered ethical, advocacy communicators must avoid the kind of manipulative, misleading, and reductionist message constructions that are characteristic of propaganda, such as: reliance on authority figures; use of unverifiable abstractions; belief in a fixed, polarized world; reduction of complex issues into simplified cause and effect; and emphasis on conflict over cooperation (Black, 2001).

As is evidenced in the above guidelines, the basic principles of truth, justice, and minimization of harm are perhaps the most fundamental and overarching values associated with ethical persuasion today (Bivins, 2004; Day, 2006). To prevent harm to publics, Steiner (1989) suggested an ethic of care should inform persuasion. Care is achieved by communicators showing respect for the dignity and integrity of the audience members, a motivation absent in propaganda. To show respect and minimize harm also requires truthfulness, as Bok (1982) noted falsehoods can harm publics by restricting their ability to make intelligent, informed life decisions.

There are various definitions of truth, however. A post-positivist view defines it as an accurate reflection of a reality found in the material world. A poststructuralist notion describes truth as a viewpoint that is dependent on perspective, culture, and ideology, as it is an accepted version of reality that is constructed through discourse, based on ideological power struggles (Foucault, 1980; Hall, 1997). This critical perspective destabilizes the notion of a positivist version of reality and views all communication as ultimately persuasive in some sense.

When it comes to what constitutes truthfulness in PR and mass communication literature, based largely on a post-positivist viewpoint, honest persuasive messages must provide both factual accuracy and adequate context or completeness to avoid being misleading (Bivins, 2004).

But, unlike journalists, advocacy communicators are not obligated to present all sides.

Proponents of the advocacy perspective in PR argue that advocacy communicators are allowed to be subjective and one-sided (asymmetrical), as their role is more analogous to legal counsel than journalism (Barney & Black, 1994; Edgett, 2002). As such, advocates are ethically permitted selectivity in what facts they choose to reveal publicly, as would an attorney representing clients in the court system. However, restrictions on the freedom of advocacy communicators suggest they avoid creating messages that are erroneous, misleading, or incomplete in ways that prevent the public from knowing details necessary for informed decision-making (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Persuaders are not required to provide a full summation of all the facts on an issue to meet completeness requirements, but they should seek to “genuinely inform” others instead of creating “false impressions” in support of truth (Martinson, 1996-1997, p. 44).

#### Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

In contrast to an advocacy perspective favoring one-way (asymmetrical) communication in PR, other scholars place an emphasis on the value of two-way (symmetrical) communication as a way to build a healthy public dialogue and democratic community (Grunig, 2001; Wilkins & Christians, 2001). Grunig proposed that the symmetrical model of PR was both most efficacious and ethical, encouraging organizations and their publics to fully understand each other’s concerns and mutually adapt to accommodate some of the other’s needs.

However, this perspective has been critiqued for being idealistic in overlooking power differentials preventing equal compromise or fair dealings between powerful organizations and less powerful publics (Holtzhausen, 2000; Roper, 2005). Holtzhausen argued that the two-way symmetrical model is too narrowly defined as an organizational meta-narrative and does not

fully take into account the broader socio-political context in which PR operates. Because PR scholarship often ignores activist organizations, Holtzhausen (2000) alleged that PR theory largely exists to support the maintenance of hegemonic power structures. While activists are often portrayed as trouble-makers, as “the real voices of democracy” (p. 100), they do not deserve for scholars to portray them as the enemies of social institutions.

### Role of an Organization’s Motives and Goals in Selecting Ethical Guidelines

For corporate PR practitioners working in an agency, a major conflict of interest that threatens ethical communications is the direct need to serve their *client’s* interests versus their indirect responsibilities to serve the *public’s* interest (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). To counterbalance this client-bias and the corresponding utilitarian profit-motive that accompanies commercial communications, many PR ethical theories favor duty-based or deontological ethics instead of consequential/utilitarian ethics (Baker & Martinson, 2001; Wilkins & Christians, 2001; PRSA, 2000; Sproule, 1980). However, when the communicators are charities and are, in theory or intent, promoting the greater good instead of their own self-interested ends, one might wonder if they are equally obliged to favor deontological ethics over consequential ethics.

While simply having altruistic goals does not justify using any means to achieve them, one could make a case that the challenges SMOs face, such as marginalization, lack of resources, and restricted choices, should factor more specifically into PR theories to provide more guidance for SMOs in a corporate-dominated media environment (Bronstein, 2006). Public relations literature provides only limited guidance to social movement practitioners, as it mainly advises corporate or mainstream organization on how to deal with activist groups as a stakeholder rather than coming from the SMO’s perspective (Holtzhausen, 2000; Smith & Ferguson, 2001). On the



other hand, while Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (1971) did address the real communications challenges and balance of power issues faced by SMOs, many might critique the author's brand of situational ethics as weighing too heavily on utilitarianism.

Additionally, the PRSA code of ethics (PRSA, 2000) does not adequately address the special needs of in-house SMO communicators. While PRSA principles such as advocacy, honesty, and disclosure of information do apply to SMOs and all nonprofits, other principles seem most applicable to practitioners who work in a firm serving multiple clients of a business nature. The conflict of interest between serving the self-interests of a commercial client and the need to be socially responsible does not apply as directly to SMO and charitable organizations. Therefore the ethical issues that apply to nonprofits are more likely based on the ethicality of the communication *act/means* itself not going too far in utilitarian rationales rather than concern over nonprofits being motivated to seek selfish *ends*. Related specifically to SMOs more so than mainstream nonprofits, the conflicts that are most likely to arise regard value clashes and potential disconnects between the public's definition of the "greater good" versus the SMO's. This is evidenced in the public backlash against campaigns using shocking images, such as PETA's Holocaust on Your Plate vegetarian campaign displaying holocaust imagery and Operation Rescue's anti-abortion "Truth Truck" displaying images of aborted fetuses. The SMO's use of potentially offensive communication means may not be perceived as defensible if the audience does not believe the ends justify the means because they are not convinced that outlawing meat-eating or abortions is in society's best interest.

## Social Movement Communication Challenges

A major communications challenge unique to SMOs is their battle to transform a hegemonic view of reality in the dominant discourse. Stewart, Smith and Denton (2001) explained that SMOs must convince the public that not only is the public's accepted view of reality based on a faulty premise but the situation deserves to be defined as a "problem" that warrants their immediate attention. DeLuca & Peeples (2002) refer to this aspiration as "making the mundane malevolent" (p. 145). SMOs must enable target audiences to perceive problems as severe and unresolved by authorities, creating a sense of urgency that motivates social intervention. SMO tactics include the use of persuasive words, stories, gory pictures, and revelations of inconsistencies in institutional practices (Stewart et al., 2001).

To gain support, SMOs face pressure to use socially acceptable language to be heard as credible and reasonable, but it is hard to appeal to values that are part of the very system the SMOs are challenging (Cox, 2006). In deciding how critical to be of the status quo, Gitlin (2003) noted that SMOs must walk a line between extremes; if they are too moderate, they risk being assimilated and "blunted" (p. 290), yet if they are too critical, they risk being marginalized and trivialized. Cox (2006) explained that radical SMOs are often constrained to use less critical discourse that appears "reasonable" and stays within "symbolic legitimacy boundaries" (pg. 61) as determined by the hegemony of mainstream discourse, making it hard to achieve ideological transformations of the status quo discourse. Yet, Foucault (2000) suggested that discursive transformations necessitate criticism of the status quo:

Criticism (and radical criticism) is utterly indispensable for any transformation. For a transformation that would remain within the same mode of thought, a transformation that

would only be a certain way of better adjusting the same thought to the reality of things, would only be a superficial transformation. (p. 457)

Tempering these framing decisions is the SMO's frequent need to meet newsworthiness criteria, as its lack of financial resources often precludes much use of paid advertising and creates an increased reliance on news media as a vehicle for widespread dissemination of messages (McAdam, 1996). While the internet offers inexpensive vehicles for nonprofits to directly disseminate messages, this information supply needs a demand, which can be created by news coverage that leads the public to seek out SMO websites (Owens & Palmer, 2003). Additionally, the news media's agenda-setting power in influencing public policy and prioritizing social issues continues to make it an advantageous venue for any organization to utilize (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Yet when it comes to news framing of social issues, scholars have demonstrated that the news tends to support dominant organizations and the status quo while marginalizing or criticizing less powerful or minority groups, often focusing on protest actions more than the issues (Gitlin, 2003; Fishman, 1980; Ryan, 1991; Ryan et al, 1998; Smith et al, 2001; Tuchman, 1978). It is more challenging for less powerful groups to gain access to media coverage than it is for mainstream, official sources with more resources, so activists often have to escalate their protest activities to retain attention (Danielian, 1992; Gamson, 1988).

Eley (1992) warned SMOs that the "public sphere" in which they are forced to operate is not to be optimistically defined as a civic forum for public consensus but as a corporate-owned site of structured ideological negotiation, a definition in line with political economy perspectives (Chomsky & Herman, 1988; McChesney, 1999). Gamson (1975) critiqued the notion of a pluralistic public sphere because it assumes a level playing field where all grievances can be

fairly addressed through institutional channels, which works better for insiders than for activist groups who challenge institutions. Brulle (2000) argued for a reinvigorated public sphere that includes increased public participation, artistic expression, and moral debates as opposed to the dominance of bureaucrat-driven instrumental reason, which has reduced the public sphere to a mere media campaign by the government and the market for mass loyalty and consumerism.

And in today's globalized media environment, Jamieson (1988) argued that *visual* rhetoric plays an essential role in creating presence for one's issues through the eyes of global audiences who do not all speak the same languages. DeLuca & Peeples (2002) concluded that the Habermasian notion of the dialogue-driven public sphere is now more akin to a "public screen" (p. 127), where media spectacle and image events constitute a visual version of discourse and sense-making that construct our reality, as images themselves *are* "a central mode of public discourse" (p. 144). The public screen constitutes "critique through spectacle, not critique versus spectacle" (p. 134), as we have taken a turn toward a "culture of spectatorship" (Mitchell, 1995, p. 3). Jasper (1997) also noted the usefulness of shocking images in the recruitment of activists to both the animal rights and anti-abortion movements. Therefore, image events, such as the use of graphic visuals, are now a standard strategy of political action within public discourse (for both grass-roots and mainstream groups) and should not be interpreted merely as desperate stunts but more as a communicative and democratic necessity (DeLuca, 1999; Gronbeck, 1995; Jamieson, 1988).

SMOs often successfully gain leverage through disruptive action (Gamson, 1975; Tarrow, 1998). Citing Greenpeace, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (Act Up), and the most unruly aspects of the WTO protests as examples of successful visual communication, DeLuca and Peeples (2002) contended that to end real violence against victims of oppression, activist

communicators must work the media system by constructing newsworthy acts of “symbolic violence” (p. 138) such as unruly protests or even property destruction, to be able to fully participate in the public screen and compete with the daily media spectacles offered by corporations and the state (via advertising and photo ops). More playfully, protestors may use carnivalesque street performance to perform drama or irony, both humorous and sardonic, to invert social roles and subvert power structures through highlighting the system’s contradictions, absurdity, and hypocrisy (Moser, 2003; Tabako, 2007).

#### Relevance of Differences Between SMOs and other Organizations

While SMOs do face special challenges, are they unique enough to warrant their own set of ethical communication guidelines? One must determine who counts as an SMO and what points of difference are relevant enough to potentially justify special consideration. One major difference between corporations and SMOs is the lack of profit motivation, as the goals are non-commercial and more altruistic. Legally, the speech of SMOs is considered ideological/political, with fewer restrictions than commercial speech (Fitzpatrick, 2006). Grunig (2001) stated that communication ethics consists of balancing the organization’s interests with that of the public, and SMOs would lean more toward public interest than self-interest. A caveat is that SMOs are not completely devoid of self-interest, as they must fundraise to survive, and the activists themselves may seek rewards that are more personal or ego-driven rather than monetary.

Should SMOs then be categorized under the broad umbrella with all non-profit organizations (NPOs)? Holtzhausen (2000) noted the need to distinguish activist groups from NPOs that are frequently discussed in PR literature, as the latter are more closely aligned with dominant power structures, such as the corporations who largely fund them. While SMOs and

NPOs both share in struggling for financial resources, the more mainstream an organization is and the less it challenges the status quo power structures, the easier it is to obtain funding and widespread support. Therefore, there is a difference in levels of social, political, and financial support for popular NPOs such as Habitat for Humanity or the American Cancer Society versus more radical SMOs such as Greenpeace and Act Up. However, even within the spectrum of a social movement, there are more mainstream or moderate organizations, such as the National Audubon Society and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, whose communication issues are likely to be closer to a standard NPO, as they pose less of a challenge to current worldviews than more radical SMOs such as Earth First! and PETA. For example, any group that does rescue or aid work would tend to garner more public support than a group who is fighting for political and economic change. So, to qualify as having more unique communication challenges, perhaps the distinction is not just a status of being an NPO or even an SMO, but it is the degree to which the organization challenges the status quo worldviews and power structures and therefore faces greater opposition and marginalization.

The notion of challenging power to seek change defines a social movement. In fact, sociologists sometimes refer to SMOs as “challenging movements” (Gamson, 1975), as the little guy harnesses power through collective action to fight the big guy. For example, Tarrow (1994) defined social movements as people coming together in solidarity to pose a collective challenge to “elites, opponents, and authorities” (p. 4). Tilly (2004) emphasized that SMO collective actors are ordinary people whose tactics include campaigns and contentious performances toward target authorities. Jasper (1997) also clarified that SMOs are comprised of “ordinary people (as opposed to, say, political parties, the military, or industrial trade groups)” who seek change through “extrainstitutional means” (p. 5), whether through building alternatives or, more often,

through protest and criticism. The highlighting of power inequity in these definitions emphasizes the difference between SMOs and government organizations, as the latter possess more authority and comprise the institutional system.

SMO goals can vary from reformist to more revolutionary, and tactics can vary from institutional to non-institutional (McAdam, 1996). Rucht (1996) differentiated SMOs from interest groups and political parties by saying that the former is usually more protest-oriented, less formally organized, less internally-regulated, and more reliant on committed adherents rather than voters, expertise, money, and access to decision-makers. Major social movements work on behalf of: human rights, civil rights, feminism, gay rights, the human fetus, reproductive rights, peace and disarmament, labor rights, nonhuman animal rights, environmentalism, and anti-globalization or anti-capitalism, among others.

Just as an organization's degree of marginalization and opposition increases the communication challenges it faces, the perceived morality of the values and ideology of the organization are also relevant to communication ethics. While marginalization might serve to justify increased use of confrontational or assertive tactics, might this caveat only apply to organizations whose goals are deemed charitable or socially beneficial? For example, if the SMO's goal is increased fairness, opportunity, respect, emancipation, and equality (for any living being) rather than dominance, harm, or discrimination, does that perceived morality in motivation give the organization increased justification for ethical flexibility in communication tactics? While an organization, such as the Klu Klux Klan, may be marginalized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, its discriminatory goals that fail to promote equality and respect might disqualify it from earning the right to use more utilitarian communication tactics, as its motivations are more self-interested than egalitarian and do not promote the greater good.

A weakness of utilitarianism is that the concept of a greater good is debatable and fluctuates throughout time and place. For example, the abolitionist and women's rights movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were seen by many as counter-productive then, but now are recognized as common-sense struggles that improved society. Similarly, gay rights and nonhuman animal rights are still contested by many as being socially counterproductive, so perhaps they are ideas ahead of their time. So how is the goodness or public interest of a progressive organization supposed to be determined? Is right determined by consensus or by virtue of being an objective moral truth? In the persuasive public sphere, it seems consensus, popularity, and power help determine rightness at a given point in time, but I argue that an objective moral truth would be a fairer criterion when dealing with organizations that are trying to change existing worldviews and cannot gain immediate consensus. Just as communication ethics privileges the principles of truth, justice, and minimization of harm, I argue that these principles can be considered moral truths that serve to privilege SMOs whose goals and ideology coincide with these pro-social aims.

But while the group's broader rationale and purpose may be pro-social or altruistic, the specific campaign goals can vary along a spectrum from cooperative to confrontational (Jasper, 1997; McAdam, 1996). When groups seek cooperation, understanding, sympathy, and support, the means to those ends seem less fraught with ethical dilemmas because the public deems the ends admirable and nonthreatening; so it makes sense for the SMO communication means to be appealing and persuasive (asymmetry) but perhaps also to include relationship-building and dialogue (symmetry). However, when the SMO's goals are criticism, dissonance, agitation, defiance, shock, or attention, with aims to create guilt or outrage or to destabilize the system, then there is less widespread agreement that the ends are for the greater good. And the message



itself, and perhaps the means of delivery, would tend to be more confrontational, critical, and aggressive rather than persuasive.

One could argue that the latter confrontational goals and tactics are less similar to public relations goals and tactics (certainly not relationship-building and maybe not even asymmetrical PR) and sometimes more akin to the promotion of critical thinking. So while some SMOs' agitation goals and tactics may seem more objectionable and less in the public interest, the practice of nonviolently provoking the public to question the system and think critically could be seen as democratic. Instead of seeing radical protestors as PR communicators, Jasper (1997) perceived of them as artists who serve a unique pro-social role as moral visionaries and innovators, opening up mental possibilities for self-reflection and improved ways of being; they balance out the prominent efficiency and profit-oriented discourse of corporations and the state. Similarly, Deluca & Peeples (2002) said that radical activists' image events are "visual philosophical-rhetorical fragments, mind bombs that expand the universe of thinkable thoughts" (p. 144), all of which supports Foucault's (2000) notion of discursive transformation requiring radical criticism. Tarrow (1998) found radical activism facilitated both short and long-term benefits to the movement as a whole:

They create opportunities and provide models of thought and action for others who seek more modest goals in more institutionalized ways and are more effective at advancing them. What remains after the enthusiasm of the cycle is a residue of reform. (p. 175)

Radicals can make moderates seem more reasonable to decision-makers, which supports reforms not revolution. But even if radical ideological rhetoric seems widely rejected at the time, it often successfully achieves the long-term benefit of nudging the movement and society further towards its ideological side of the spectrum (Tarrow, 1998).

## THE APPLICATION OF PR ETHICS TO SMOS

### Symmetry Vs Advocacy

In support of democratic communication, the two-way symmetrical model does seem ideal, as both the organization and its affected publics have their interests met, in theory. While it makes sense for moderate SMOs advocating reform to practice the mutual adaptation of symmetrical PR in certain cases, Roper (2005) cautioned that this cooperative approach may lead to cooptation by more powerful entities, echoing Gitlin's (2003) warning about assimilation. Symmetrical communication might also take more time and resources than some SMOs can afford. Therefore, even when activists have more cooperative and less agitational goals and are not serving as artistic provocateurs, these more cooperative goals are often pursued by practicing something more akin to social marketing and persuasion rather than the preferred normative model of symmetrical PR. Should this asymmetrical communications approach of SMOs be deemed less ethical than symmetry?

One of the reasons the symmetrical model is proposed as ethically ideal is that it seeks to promote justice by redressing power imbalances and giving voice to more parties in the organization's decision-making process. Presumably, this is most necessary when the organization is more powerful than the other parties. So, is two-way communication as ethically obligatory for a marginalized organization that is not as well-resourced or powerful? Seemingly, that organization has a weaker voice in the commercially-dominated marketplace and cannot afford to share time/space with its opponents in its communication materials. Therefore, I propose that symmetry exists on a continuum where the more authority and power an

organization possesses, the more obligated it is to promote a fair exchange with affected parties and be willing to adapt.

If SMOs often tend to practice one-way communication, it fits better with an asymmetrical advocacy ethic. This is ironic, perhaps, as the advocacy perspective was created to help ethically justify persuasive communication, especially by corporations and government that tend to dominate the public sphere. The analogy that the marketplace-of-ideas is like a courtroom where everyone gets a fair chance to voice their side has been critiqued as naïve in overlooking the power imbalance that often keeps nonprofits and less powerful groups from having much of a voice (Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). In the “public screen” of the media, compare the miniscule voice an animal rights group would have in promoting vegetarianism against the booming voice of billion dollar industries supporting a meat-based diet in a meat-based culture. So, while I think the advocacy model is less ethically justifiable for powerful groups in a commercially dominated public sphere, it seems to be more useful as an ethical justification for less well-funded and more marginalized groups to be more persuasive and self-promoting than symmetrical.

But marginalization and altruistic motives do not justify SMOs using any means to an altruistic end, so the TARES principles for ethical persuasion (Baker & Martinson, 2001) can serve as a guide. For example, the three TARES principles of truth, equity, and social responsibility seem equally applicable to all communicators, regardless of power. However, caveats for authenticity and respect may be necessary to adapt TARES to fit SMOs.

### Authenticity Principle

Authenticity of the speaker, the second TARES principle, is related to the first principle of truth in messaging. The SMO's message may be truthful if it does not include lies and is openly referenced and identified, but if it is not truly representative of the beliefs and values of the majority of people in the SMO, it could be accused of being inauthentic. This can be a dilemma for SMOs with counter-hegemonic ideologies, as, for pragmatic reasons, SMOs may feel pressured to water down messages to fit within symbolic legitimacy boundaries for broader acceptance (Cox, 2006). McCarthy, Smith, & Zald (1996) said that the communication goal of a social movement is to "frame social problems and injustices in a way that convinces a wide and diverse audience of the necessity for and utility of collective attempts to redress them" (p. 291), which supports the need for messages that resonate.

For example, to increase resonance, some 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionists appealed to a wide audience by asking for reforms to slavery, such as campaigns to allow enslaved people to marry or become literate, when they really stood for abolition (Bormann, 1971). And some suffragists promoted the social benefits of women voting by appealing to sexist stereotypes about women's innate purity rather than using a gender-neutral natural rights argument (Campbell, 1989). Current examples include environmental organizations promoting energy conservation from the standpoint of cost-saving instead of ecology, or animal rights organizations promoting alternatives to animal research based on efficacy and human health benefits rather than morality. Both examples demonstrate how counter-hegemonic movements might use campaigns that fail to challenge the hegemony of anthropocentrism and humanism instead of promoting the ecocentric or post-humanist ideology that serves as their authentic motivation and goals. These SMOs are not lying and are simply trying to be more persuasive by adapting appeals to better fit the

audience's interests and values, even if they are discriminatory or self-interested rather than aligned with the SMO's anti-discriminatory or altruistic guiding values. Since SMOs have limited funds, it makes sense to seek the most "bang for their buck" by designing effective campaigns, even if they are not ideologically-authentic.

However, arguments can be made that this pragmatic inauthenticity in favor of mainstream persuasion or behavioral changes may be less successful at effecting the long-term social transformations SMOs seek (Evernden, 1985; Freeman, 2008), thereby weakening a utilitarian defense. Jasper (1997) argued that most SMO campaigns fail to result in victory, but they still have social value because the protestors' importance "lies more in their moral visions than their practical accomplishments" (p. 379). Deontological defenses for inauthentic messages may also be weak because the message itself could be said to be less truthful, as it fails to provide context in fully representing and explaining the SMO's true agenda and goals; an SMO could rightfully be accused of having a hidden agenda.

Therefore, I conclude that while inauthentic messages are not as unethical as manipulative propaganda, and may be justified teleologically in some cases where they can effect change, they are less ethical than messages that are fully representative of the SMO's values. Authenticity promotes openness, honesty, and more informed decision-making by audiences in assessing speaker credibility and deciding whether to support the SMO and identify with its cause. So while I would take a utilitarian perspective in support of an SMO using deceptive means if that was the only way to *obtain* information in support of their victims/cause (such as activists going undercover in animal laboratories to uncover abuse and violations that government regulators generally ignore), I would take a more deontological perspective when it came to public communication and be less supportive of the SMO than *framing* that information

for the public in a way that is unrepresentative of the SMO's values and political agenda (with the added necessity that the SMO make the audience aware of how the information was obtained, which aligns with ethical guidelines for undercover journalism).

### Respect Principle

The most problematic TARES principle for SMOs is that of respecting the audience. This does not mean that SMOs should manipulate the audience or fail to respect them as inherently-valuable, rational, free-thinking, morally relevant *beings*, following the intention of the TARES principle. Rather, it means SMOs may criticize and offend (disrespect) some of the audience's discriminatory *values* and causal *behaviors*. So the critique is aimed at the behaviors and beliefs not the beings. Showing respect for social norms and dominant values is especially challenging for counter-hegemonic SMOs whose ideology and goals are to transform dominant worldviews toward greater perceived justice and, therefore, may require criticism.

For example, if many men believed women were frail and inherently less rational, was it not outrageous to suggest women should vote and become politicians and soldiers? If many whites believed people of color were inferior and less civilized, was it not insulting to suggest racial equality and integration? If many humans believe nonhuman animals and plant species are inferior and less morally relevant, is it not insulting to suggest these species' interests deserve equal respect, and killing them might be akin to murder? If many religious fundamentalists believe homosexuality is a sin and is damaging to the family unit, is it not disrespectful to suggest the LGBTQ community deserves equal rights to marriage and adoption? If many Americans believe a capitalistic system and a strong military are essentially bound up with their freedom and economic interests, is it not disrespectful and threatening to suggest the integration

of socialist and pacifist policies? An SMO has a right, and arguably an unavoidable need, to be frank about advocating for its counter-hegemonic viewpoint, even if it can be perceived as disrespectful at the time. But it is more ethically defensible if the SMO attempts to minimize offense or insult, particularly if the goal is to seek cooperation rather than confrontation and dissonance.

Taken from another angle, the TARES respect principle privileges the communicator's respect for the integrity of the *audience members*. However, when considering respect in SMO communication, the guidelines should also recognize the interests and integrity of the SMO's "*victims,*" or *disadvantaged parties*, and how they deserve respect as primary moral claimants. Based on compensatory or distributive justice, when SMOs provide a voice for the voiceless, disadvantaged, or marginalized, it shows respect by finally privileging these overlooked interests, even if the message itself disrespects the hegemonic values of some audience members. So, when duties conflict for SMO communication, I contend that the TARES principle of *social responsibility* should rank higher than the principle of respect (in terms of respecting audience values).

To return to the PETA example regarding the Holocaust on Your Plate campaign, this is an authentic expression of PETA's ideology that nonhuman animal lives also have inherent value, and killing of the innocent is murder, even in agriculture. Yet, many viewers found it disrespectful because hegemonic humanism dictates that the comparison of human and nonhuman animal life is insulting, and they felt the use of Holocaust images was adding insult to injury for the Jewish community. So, a claim could be made that the campaign was authentic, yet disrespectful.

However, if utilitarian calculations were allowed to compare the amount of harm caused to the audience (in this case emotional harm) with the amount of harm animal agribusiness caused to the SMO's primary moral claimants, the farmed animals (in this case emotional and physical harm, resulting in death), it could be seen as justifiable to create some short-term emotional dissonance in viewers while attempting to mitigate the greater harm these viewers cause other animals. Issues of causal harm arise here, as emotional discomfort may be more justifiable if geared toward audience members who play an active role in the discrimination or harm to an SMO's primary moral claimants. Perhaps the more indirect the role the audience member plays in causing harm (always including children as well as people with developmental disabilities), the more respect they deserve from activist messages in terms of minimizing emotional discomfort and offense.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Recommended Communication Guidelines for SMOs

It seems difficult to avoid utilitarianism in discussing communication guidelines for SMOs, as they work for a greater good, are more disadvantaged, and face greater communication challenges than more powerful or mainstream organizations. But what are the boundaries that should restrain SMOs from using their disadvantage or a sense of "righteousness" in purpose to justify any communication means to achieve their goals?

Several factors come into play, considering both the attributes and goals of the organization itself and its level of flexibility in communication to prioritize conflicting duties. Regarding the *organization*, ethicists must consider the following factors: to what extent it is



marginalized (both in terms of lack of power and resources and in terms of posing a challenge to hegemony); to what extent its goals are socially responsible and in the public interest (such as promoting truth, justice, and minimization of harm); to what extent its primary moral claimants (potentially victimized parties) are experiencing harm or disadvantage (this could include the cause's urgency and severity); and to what extent it is targeting its message at parties directly responsible for causing the problem or who have more control in solving it. Based on those calculations, the ethicists should then consider the following factors related to the *communication means/message* itself: to what extent its goals are confrontational and critical of hegemony and social norms; to what extent it uses persuasion (asymmetry) versus dialogue (symmetry); and to what extent it will cause the audience members dissonance or emotional discomfort. I contend that the more an organization fits the former organizational factors, the more ethically justified it is in using the latter, more ethically-contentious means of communication that serve its purposes of challenging power structures in ways that garner attention in the commercial public sphere. While these guidelines are not definitive or quantitative, and the factors themselves can still offer debate, it provides a starting point for discussing the ethicality of SMO campaigns that is currently not provided by PR literature.

While utilitarian ethics have been embraced, deontological approaches offer some categorical imperatives, of sorts, that ground the guidelines mentioned above. For example, the TARES principles of truth, equity, social responsibility, and, to a large extent, authenticity, remain applicable to SMO persuasion. This would prevent them from including false information, intentionally misleading people, targeting vulnerable groups manipulatively, and communicating socially-irresponsible messages. Under these guidelines, it would be unethical for an SMO to promote racism or sexism in pursuit of its cause, as this causes more harm to

groups who have been historically oppressed. To insult an innocent, disadvantaged party to gain attention, especially in pursuit of an unrelated cause, is unwarranted. In my recommendations, the TARES principle of respect is not eliminated, as SMOs should respect the integrity and humanity of individuals and society as a whole, but SMOs may not be able to demonstrate respect for the values of the audience or behavioral social norms if they are considered unjust and counter-productive to the SMO's altruistic goals. In essence, SMOs need the moral flexibility to be impolite, prioritizing the TARES principle of social responsibility and respect for marginalized moral claimants over the principle of respect for the audience.

While the deontological principles in the PRSA code of ethics are not entirely antithetical to SMO communicators, it requires supplementation. The codes could be more inclusive by acknowledging both the prominent role of PR in SMOs and the morally relevant distinctions among organizations and their communication needs. Code amendments should also counteract the prominence of the code's business rhetoric, as it fails to acknowledge the inequities of the commercial public sphere in favor of neo-liberal, pluralistic market idealism, a viewpoint that that limits the codes' perceived applicability to marginalized, non-commercial organizations.

In summary

SMO communications is distinct enough from corporate, nonprofit, and governmental communications to warrant its own ethical guidelines. This is contingent on the SMO's goals and ideology being socially responsible. Yet, perhaps ironically, it seems the communications principle of minimizing harm is where I make the biggest exception for SMO communications toward allowing an open, and potentially disrespectful, critique of audience values when it conflicts with the duty to promote social justice, in this case privileging overdue respect for

marginalized moral claimants more so than audience feelings. Despite being somewhat utilitarian, this guideline privileges right *intentions* more so than right *results*, as SMOs face significant obstacles to achieving their version of the greater good and cannot be judged on consequences alone.

Additionally, while I contend that truth, a core principle, remains largely applicable to all organizations, its counterpart, authenticity, may require some consideration for SMOs. Counter-hegemonic SMOs are pressured to be less ideological and more moderate to increase resonance and acceptance with mainstream audiences. But I argue that ideologically-authentic communication not only has the ethical advantage of being more open and representative but also may be more effective at building a morally-rational foundation for long-term change.

Not all SMOs' communication goals and tactics will be identical, as they run the gamut from cooperative to confrontational, and this context affects their ethical guidelines. The former approach is more similar to how PR practitioners perceive themselves in terms of practicing symmetrical and asymmetrical communication for purposes of building relationships and support, which is generally perceived as a non-threatening, socially-acceptable approach. The confrontational approach is less representative of traditional PR or social marketing practices and is perhaps more befitting Jasper's (1997) notion of an artistic protestor, serving to promote critical thinking by questioning authority and providing new moral visions, something that generally makes people uncomfortable (by design).

This raises the dilemma that if PR practitioners, or advocacy communicators, do not see themselves as moral visionaries or artistic provocateurs, perhaps their academic literature, favoring symmetry and mainstream organizations, is not an applicable site to house SMO communication ethics scholarship, unless the former is willing to expand its scope and relevance.

I have suggested here that the more an SMO seeks confrontational or critical communication goals, the more ethical flexibility it should be granted toward using a less symmetrical approach and/or a more potentially disrespectful message, especially if aimed at culpable or powerful audiences. This aligns with my contention that the ethical obligation for symmetrical communication exists on a continuum, where the more power an organization possesses, the more obligated it is to be adaptive and dialogic with stakeholders, to counteract inequalities. This positions counter-hegemonic or marginalized SMOs within an advocacy approach that justifies their use of asymmetrical and openly-persuasive or provocative communication in most cases.

Moving forward, future studies should continue to explore the special ethical issues SMO campaigns face in trying to sell a new ideology, as it has complications quite different from a corporate campaign selling a standard product or a charity promoting a commonly accepted social good. While social marketing literature on ethics may serve as a guide (Andreasen, 1995; Smith, 2001), much of this is geared towards promotion of health-related *behavioral* changes rather than enacting radical changes in *worldviews*. So in tackling this latter ideological challenge, SMOs need practical ethical guidance in constructing critical, counter-hegemonic communication campaigns for and with greater truth, justice, and respect – in means and ends – realizing it is hard, especially in a marginalizing commercial sphere, to show sincere respect for your audience’s values when you seek to change them.

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