Nonprofits and the Politics of Communicative Labor

Prepared for the National Communication Association’s Organizational Communication Pre-conference on Nonprofit Organizations

Sarah E. Dempsey
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Amidst enormous economic uncertainty, rising levels of inequality, and steady declines in funding for social services, there is little doubt that the work done by nonprofit organizations and NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) is incredibly important, and deserving of increased research attention. The centrality of nonprofit labor to our collective wellbeing has long been recognized by communication scholars, as it has by other areas of study in the social sciences and the humanities. However, perhaps because nonprofits are so closely associated with civil society, and bound up in notions of the public good, research tends to minimize their politics, including their potential to reproduce social, political, and economic divides. This oversight is particularly alarming because nonprofit organizations often operate across national, cultural, and economic borders. As we devote our time in this pre-conference to the development of organizational communication theories of nonprofits, there is a need to retain a sustained focus on how both organizing and communicating are inextricably tied to both power and politics. Increased attention to the communicative labor of nonprofits provides a particularly productive entry point for organizational communication scholars.

Defined broadly, and from a U.S.-centric perspective, the nonprofit sector primarily includes non revenue-generating organizations guided by social missions. Nonprofit organizations fulfill multiple, varied roles. They provide a critical check on
corporate power, for example, lobbying shareholders to enact meaningful social and environmental commitments. In this, nonprofits provide an alternative to corporate public relations and marketing; nonprofits design campaigns highlighting labor rights violations and environmental impacts of corporations. Carefully crafted advocacy campaigns publicize harmful practices, shape public opinion, move lawmakers to enact policy changes, and can result in changes in corporate practices. Importantly, each of these potential outcomes hinges upon the strategic and skillful use of communication. As such, nonprofits should be seen as key communicative actors with the ability to meaningfully shape the contemporary discursive landscape within which corporations operate.

However, these very characteristics also introduce complex dilemmas related to representation and voice. In contrast to corporate modes of governance, nonprofits are not beholden to shareholders. In some problematic cases, they function as self-elected representatives for particular issues, groups, and actions. Here, nonprofits produce and circulate images of social problems and their solutions, assign praise and blame, and represent the concerns of groups with limited access to the public sphere. As they become increasingly important places in which critical decisions about social problems are made, the ability of some nonprofits to represent and speak on the behalf of others deserves greater critical attention.

In a recent article, Dana Cloud (2005) warns organizational communication scholars against “discoursism,” or the extreme focus on discourse to the detriment of the material elements and structures of ideology found within organizational
contexts. However, there are aspects of discourse and power that are as yet relatively unexplored within research addressing nonprofits. In particular, there is a need for additional theorizing of the politics surrounding processes of nonprofit advocacy. As they pursue their social change goals, nonprofit organizations engage in significant communicative labor, whereby professionalized members speak and advocate on the behalf of sometimes distant others (Dempsey, 2009). A focus on the production, distribution, and effects of communicative labor places organizational communication processes at the center of nonprofit studies. A communicative labor lens depicts nonprofit participants as being centrally involved in the work of communicating social problems and their solutions. Much research is needed to better understand the politics of their communicative labor, including how nonprofits mobilize discourses, and how these discourses themselves carry with their own sets of politics and forms of power. Further, there remains a need to situate the communicative labor of nonprofits within existing discourses and practices of neoliberalism, development, and colonialism.

Cloud’s (2005) warning remains important to the extent that it reminds us of the crucial need for critical organizational communication research to maintain a tight focus on material conditions and practices. This emphasis is especially important given the often-murky financial interests and incentives at work within the nonprofit sector. At least in the U.S. context, nonprofits are strongly associated with civil society and largely defined as acting in the public good. Although they tend to be thought of as providing a counterbalancing force to the power wielded by corporations, they are not exempt from their own politics and problems of
accountability. Such problems stem in part from the strings attached to various funding sources. The concept of communicative labor brings concerns about funding structures and practices to the fore by highlighting that, in many professionalized nonprofit contexts, personnel collect a wage for speaking and advocating on the behalf of others (Dempsey, 2009). Through their communicative labor, nonprofits help constitute the identities of marginalized groups to broader publics across a variety of scales. Especially in the case of advocacy-based, highly professionalized nonprofits, these representations may be produced without the participation of those who are being represented. Read even more critically, the communicative labor of nonprofits is targeted at the relatively privileged, producing images of the poor and their supposed needs. In turn, these representations are aimed at attracting more funding and legitimization for the organization (Townsend & Townsend, 2005). Despite the best of intentions, and by virtue of their ability to speak on the behalf of others, nonprofit campaigns may contribute to the marginalization of groups without access to the public sphere. Increased attention to communicative labor directs attention to the daily production of these campaigns, from processes of decision-making to mundane organizing practices. A focus on communicative labor also directs attention to the impacts of nonprofit advocacy on the range of groups for whom they speak and represent. Thus, a rich area for future research includes exploring communicative structures and practices that help ensure that nonprofit advocacy is grounded within the concrete analysis and awareness of the potential material and discursive effects of their campaigns.
Professionalized nonprofits often exist in a tension-filled relationship with those they represent. Through their communicative labor, their members craft images of workers and local community members, while also diagnosing and defining social needs. In some cases, the groups being targeted or represented are afforded very little ability to participate in the creation of these campaigns.

Increased critical attention to communicative labor, and to the work involved with communicating on the behalf of others, provides a way to forefront the politics of nonprofit communication. As organizational communication scholars continue to theorize nonprofit organizations, these representational practices – and the material conditions of their production and circulation – deserve greater critical attention.

References

