Adding the Public Sphere to Perspectives of Communication in Nonprofit Organizations

Ashley Hinck
Department of Communications Arts
University of Wisconsin-Madison

aahinck@wisc.edu

Submission to the Organizational Communication Preconference on Nonprofit Organizations
2010 Meeting of the National Communication Association Conference
San Francisco, CA
Sociologists have come to view the sociology of social capital and the sociology of the public sphere as inseparable from one another - both key components to understanding civil society, a realm of free and private association. Yet, the public sphere has been notably absent from nonprofit scholarship in organizational communication. Lewis (2005) focuses on social capital as one of the four central issues in nonprofit organizational communication research, leaving out discussion of the public sphere completely, and Van Til (2000) conceptualizes nonprofits as the third sector without considering a placement for the public sphere at all. In this paper, I hope to complicate our present conceptualization of nonprofit organizations by considering their relationship to the public sphere, social movements, and counterpublics.

Understanding Nonprofit Organizations in Relation to the Public Sphere

Understanding nonprofits as service providers allows us to maintain neater distinctions between various sectors of society. Nonprofits operate as private organizations apart from the state, providing services not provided by the state. Nonprofits then are also distinct from private market businesses. Nonprofits provide services free of charge, thus choosing not to retain profits. Lastly nonprofits become distinct from private individuals. Nonprofits are organized and somewhat public as they are open to the community. Indeed, viewing nonprofits as primarily service providers allows us to view societal sectors as distinct, though not isolated, as individuals cross between sectors and as services require coordination.

Yet, conceptual confusion regarding nonprofits arises when we consider the advocacy and agitation function of nonprofit organizations. Thus far, there has been a kind of confounding of the purposes or goals of nonprofit organizations, sometimes merging servicing-providing and agitating functions while at other times overemphasizing one function while eliding the other.

---

1 See for example, the work of Lew Friedland.
Some scholars, like Van Til, discuss nonprofits as primarily service providers. In his illustration of the four sector choices facing a parent with a sick child, Van Til (2000, p. xi-xii) articulates the nonprofit sector choice as a church or university-related nonprofit clinic which could provide medical care, contrasting it with the for-profit hospital, the government funded public hospital, or the personal friends and family in the private sector. Similarly Eisenberg & Eschenfelder (2009) frame Lune’s 2002 study of syringe exchange programs (SEPs) as implicitly assuming that nonprofits are expected to serve both the function of social movements and community service providers. Eisenberg and Eschenfelder (2009) say, “although SEPs were once a ‘a kind of social movement,’ they now rarely advocate for social change.” (p. 925). By providing a service which the government does not, the SEP nonprofit critiques government action. The SEPs fail to provide the radical critique they once did because they provide a new kind of service, one which is increasingly hidden from public view. Such a criticism might be warranted; however, a different question then comes to the surface. If Eisenber & Eschenfelder (2009) and Lune (2002) are correct in their characterization of nonprofits, then how does advocacy engage the state sector at all? How does the SEP advocacy move from the local context to Congressional representatives that make up the State? Where does SEP advocacy begin to contest other discourses and how? This is the place of the public sphere, a discursive place that links the private sector with the state. Nonprofits that assume the function of agitation, circulating and disseminating messages about an issue, require us to engage public sphere theory. By doing so, we can understand how staff and volunteers communicate within nonprofits whose purpose is to create change through the circulation of messages within the public sphere.

In the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1989) advances a notion of the public sphere as a discursive arena in which all citizens were free to rationally
discuss public issues. This is where private people come together as addressees of the public authority of the state. Fraser (1990) argues that Habermas’ conception of the public sphere is a useful concept because it gives us a name for a discursive arena in modern society where political participation is achieved through communication and where individuals discuss and deliberate issues of common concern. Fraser points out that the concept of the public sphere is too useful to abandon. Rather than reject Habermas’ conception of the public sphere because of its reliance on gender and class exclusion, bracketing of difference, and rejection of private issues, scholars ought to articulate a new kind of public sphere. Fraser begins that articulation by conceptualizing the public sphere as composed of multiple publics. Since Fraser’s initial critique, scholarship on the multiplicity of the public sphere through consideration of counter-publics has exploded. Particularly relevant to our theorizing of nonprofit organizations is the dual-function of counter-publics. Felski (1989) and Fraser (1990) explain that counter-publics offer non-dominant groups opportunities to regroup and consider their identities in a safer place farther from dominant ideologies and criticism. This becomes a place of invention, a place to consider needs, interests, and identities as a non-dominant group. Second, counter-publics function as training grounds for outward political action. They are the bases from which messages are disseminated to broader publics. Counter-publics engage broader publics within the public sphere, contesting accepted notions and attempting to achieve wider circulation. Asen (2000) explains that counterpublics are generated through recognition and resolve. Publics recognize their own exclusion from the broader public sphere, and then resolve to engage in oppositional discourse in an attempt to correct that exclusion. It is through this recognition and resolve that counter-publics emerge.

---

2 See for example, the work of Nancy Fraser, Rob Asen, and Daniel Brouwer.
If organizational communication scholars wish to study nonprofit organizations which engage in activism, advocacy, and agitation, we must engage the concept of the public sphere. The public sphere provides us with a term for the discursive arena in which nonprofits engage in a circulation of messages. The concept of the public sphere and its counter-publics allows us to contextualize the activism of nonprofits. First, it allows us to better understand how the communication within nonprofit organizations may serve a regrouping purpose and to understand that communication as a response to dominant discourses within the public sphere. Second, the notion of the public sphere also allows us to contextualize the externally directed messages that nonprofits circulate. The concept of the public sphere can help contextualize issues that organizational communication scholars have already pointed as critical to nonprofit organizations, including mission statements, organizational identity, volunteer recruitment. The agitational function of nonprofits must be understood as occurring within the public sphere. Discursive engagement with the public sphere is often contested and hostile to nonprofit organizations’ expressions of interests, objections, and identities. Third, the concept of the counter-public is a useful concept for understanding the relationship between nonprofits. We can imagine how nonprofits may have to distinguish themselves from similar nonprofits within the same public or counterpublic, how nonprofits can connect themselves to discourses of other nonprofits within the same counterpublic to advance their own cause, or how nonprofits may defend their positions against opposing counterpublics. In this way, the public sphere becomes an important concept helping us to consider how nonprofits engage in advocacy and how nonprofits might interact with one another.

Towards Three Distinct Terms: Nonprofit, Social Movement, and Counterpublic
As the last point might suggest, counter-public becomes a useful term for considering nonprofit communication because it offers conceptual precision and clarity in nonprofit communication theorizing. The nonprofit sector consists of nonprofit organizations, social movements, and counterpublics, and the relationship between the three becomes easily confounded because everyday speech often lumps the three together. When we talk about Planned Parenthood, we assume we are also talking about the reproductive rights social movement, but also about the broader counterpublic formed by women. The notion of nonprofits gets confounded with the notion of social movements, and similarly social movements can be confounded with counterpublics. This assumption, the blurring of categories, and the interchangeable use of these terms prevents scholars from achieving conceptual clarity for nonprofit communication theorizing.

Here, I argue that the three terms ought to be kept distinct because they help us understand various levels of action (macro as well as micro) in relation to broader discourses (nonprofit local discourses occurring within the context of broader counterpublic discourses). Counterpublics can be conceptualized as the broadest term within this group. Social movements in communication research have been defined as a collective of people outside of the established order with the goal of creating social and political change from the bottom up, from the outside in (Simons, 1970). For example, the LGBTQ counterpublic might encompass many social movements, including LGBTQ student movements or transgender activism social movements. Nonprofit organizations then would operate as a sub-category of social movements, in which many nonprofit organizations could make up a social movement. Felski (1989) notes that counterpublics operate at a variety of levels (the grass-roots level, within existing state institutions, and as part of existing social welfare bureaucracies), and I would add that
counterpublics achieve this by operating through informal groups and nonprofit organizations. It is possible too for some nonprofit organizations to be so large that they dominate a social movement, and perhaps even a counterpublic. Planned-Parenthood might be one example. However, even in these cases, it is important to distinguish between a nonprofit that is the biggest actor in a social movement or counterpublic and ignoring the possibility that local nonprofits might exist within that social movement as well. In this way, our research into nonprofit communication demands three distinct terms.

Implications

Daniel C. Brouwer (2006) argues that the notion of counterpublics is particularly well-suited to interdisciplinary inquiry and communication sub-discipline conversation; yet, that potential remains latent. Integration of the public sphere and counterpublics along with organizational communication into theorizing nonprofit communication offers the opportunity for significant sub-discipline conversation, much needed on both sides. In the present paper, I have considered how organizational communication investigations of nonprofits necessitate the theoretical concept of the public sphere. However, rhetorical studies may require more detailed explorations into organizational communication in nonprofits as well. Brouwer (2006) notes counter-public scholars continue to struggle with the distinction between counter-publics and social movements, and now I would offer the additional problematic of the nonprofit organization. Rhetorical studies confounds these terms in problematic ways, taking the rhetoric of a nonprofit organization like GreenPeace as representative of the environmental social movement. Here, organizational communication scholars have something very unique to contribute. Investigations of how nonprofit organizations relate to society and how volunteers and staff communicate within organizations can help contextualize and perhaps problematize the
rhetorical strategies used to engage the public sphere. This may help rhetorical scholars develop rhetorical theories that take account of the unique constraints that nonprofit organizations experience. By arguing for the incorporation of the public sphere and counterpublics into nonprofit communication theorizing and research, I hope to demonstrate that such sub-disciplinary conversation is possible, and wonderfully productive.
References


