COMMUNICATIONS

Briefing Note

The Rebirth of Activism

June 2019
Corporations need to pay attention to new protest movements.

Should organizations worry more about politics or culture?

Today, the two seem to be converging in new ways which requires attention by communications professionals. While most organizations rightfully seek to stay apolitical, there is an emerging cultural shift taking place which makes that no longer possible (depending on your definition of politics).

This shift is changing both politics and the definition of engagement for corporations. And that means engagement both internally and externally. Our view is that understanding this cultural shift has just as much to do with advancing corporate culture as it does with protecting corporate reputation.

Look no further than the Extinction Rebellion, the international environmental activist movement, to grasp this convergence. You might see it as just the latest generational iteration of protest democracy; Occupy Wall Street Redux. But think again.

Some 1.6 million young people participated in their global #SchoolStrike day. Before that it was the UK advertising industry that was under fire and before that the House of Commons, London Fashion Week, and encamping at Marble Arch. The protestors also deftly, in PR terms, teamed up with Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swedish climate activist.

The flashpoint between this movement and its opponents was about credibility. Extinction Rebellion is calling out obfuscators and deniers when it comes to climate change realities. Thunberg, for instance, challenged the UK government for misrepresenting the reduction of the country’s greenhouse gas emissions. It isn’t the first such climate change denial from a government, corporation, or high-profile public figure. What’s clear is that the new generation wants meaningful change. The question is what this new call for change – and the issues that are being raised by this activism – means not just for the communications strategies of organizations but their public “life”?

Which brings us back to this convergence of culture and politics. Predictably, it’s being empowered by social media. This enables not only faster mobilization but also the ability to create a bigger, more global movement that garners a rapid, cross-border response from a wider group of constituents, public and private.

As this digitally-enabled mobilization happens, organizations need to ask themselves if they understand the cultural changes taking place, and this new “polity”, before deciding if the organization agrees with protestor’s views, let alone the protest actions. This understanding needs to precede determining whether this shift will impact their communications and public engagement strategies and programs.

The worse thing an organization can do today is to label Extinction Rebellion as irrelevant. The best thing you can do is grasp the importance, to this generation, of the issues being raised and start to understand their relevance across three areas:

- **First**, from within the organization.
- **Second**, how these issues may touch direct stakeholders.
- **Third**, the relevance to the communities in which it operates.
Corporations can’t avoid protest democracy. Sometimes, variations on it emerge from within. Following the initial wave of complaints from the #MeToo movement in 2017, over 20,000 Google employees around the world staged a walk out to protest the company’s handling of sexual harassment cases.

Of course, there’s nothing new about bad behaviour in a corporate setting. What the spreading protest democracy movement signifies is that there has to be a new vigilance among internal communications and HR executives, and top management, about addressing these behaviours when they’re witnessed – even if they’re not formally reported. Engagement from the C-Suite is key. Just witness the mistakes made by CBS over the termination of Leslie Moonves.

**What Touches Stakeholders**

Top level executives left Uber to protest the company’s toxic “frat-boy” culture. It took pressure from a major investor in Uber to force out CEO Travis Kalanick before that culture began to change. His replacement, Dara Khosrowshahi, refused to stand on the same stage as Kalanick to ring the bell at the New York Stock Exchange, when the company recently went public, which sent a strong message to all the company’s investors about the organization’s value system.

Yes, investors do care about not just what’s happening inside the company but its actions outside its walls. Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) investing is transforming the financial industry. Already, over 1,000 institutions (pension funds and family offices) and counting, representing over $8 trillion in assets under management, have already divested from oil and gas.

We can only expect stakeholders to broaden out their sphere of concerns. Already, film and television production companies are refusing to work in U.S. states with new anti-abortion laws.

What this means for communications professionals is clear: don’t second guess what your stakeholders care about; ask them.
There are significant implications for how companies think about who and how they “touch” the communities in which they operate, and how they may need to engage differently.

As community opposition to the building of Amazon’s offices in New York demonstrated, when a wide variety of grassroots activist groups speak as one voice they can have an impact. Something similar was achieved when citizen groups worked in concert to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota.

In both cases, several large, sophisticated corporations underestimated the opposition: not that there would be opposition, but that so many disparate, small, seemingly, non-associated groups representing “micro-segments” of the overall population could combine and coordinate as effectively as they did. That these groups were able to amplify their messages so persuasively – again, via social media – is the power behind this new breed of protest movement.

The definition of “license to operate” has clearly changed. It’s not just defined in negative terms (“don’t pollute”), and it’s not just defined in positive terms (“we support a fun run to raise money for cancer research”). It’s defined by the quality and the extent of an organization’s understanding of the community – its demographic make-up, needs, and interests – and then its willingness to engage.

The old paradigm, “people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,” has never been more relevant at a time like this. Younger generations take a cynical view toward corporations who don’t put serious thought and action behind their words.

Core Communications Learnings

The traditional source of analysis on political issues is the public affairs consultancy. But this cultural shift is also challenging that model. Today’s protest movements don’t use lobbyists. They don’t just care about legislation. They care about corporate engagement and action.

Is monitoring social channels alone sufficient to understand how digital media is being used by this new form of activism? Or is engagement in the social media “dialogue” also important to grasp what’s at stake and the actions that need to be taken? Clearly, both.

Organizational “purpose” is emerging as a next generation imperative. Defining your purpose, across issues, trends, and geographies, is essential. Living your purpose moreso.
PR TAKEAWAYS + The Rebirth of Activism

Additional Resources


- **The fleeting, unhappy affair of Amazon HQ2 and New York City** (Transnational Legal Theory. Volume 10, Issue 1. May 6, 2019)

- **Protests, Rallies, Marches, and Social Movements as Organizational Change Agents** (Advances in Developing Human Resources, February 22, 2019)


- **Social Action and Advocacy** (The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy, May 9, 2019)

Montieth & Company is a global specialist communications consultancy, dedicated to enabling organizations to seize opportunity and meet their greatest challenges. M&Co operates through six practice groups: Marketing Communications, Corporate and Financial Communications, Litigation Communications, Issues and Crisis Management, Global Content Services, and Public Affairs. Montieth & Company has offices in New York City, Washington D.C., London, Frankfurt, Paris, Madrid, and Hong Kong and projects solutions into multiple money and media center markets throughout North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific.

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Montieth began his career as a journalist and became a PR professional in 1995. He has worked in leadership positions at a variety of global agencies and founded Montieth & Company in 2007. Montieth has advised clients on a wide range of corporate initiatives and special situations. He has expertise counseling leadership and management teams across multiple sectors. Montieth travels frequently throughout the world's key money and media center markets in North America, the U.K. and Europe.

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