

CSOs' communication strategies and audience participation

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Introduction

This essay is the result of two interviews with two representatives of the following environmental associations: *Legambiente* (the main Italian environmental association, founded in 1971: www.legambiente.it) and Greenpeace Italy (a leading global NGO (www.greenpeace.org/italy/it/)). The interviewees were asked to explain the relationship between their organisations and new media, the difference between digital and traditional media, as well as the influence that media in general has on their own audience and their own business.

CSOs' structure presentation

Legambiente is pervasively embedded throughout the country. It has a pyramidal management structure (headquarters in Rome and articulated in regional and provincial circles). This allows centralised and delocalised management. One of the association's motto is "*think global and live local.*"

Greenpeace is a global organisation that promotes specific campaigns in order to win them. If they extend the action to the all ecological problematic, then the risk will be to lose energy and resources without reaching the main goals.

Greenpeace's fundraising policy implies that they address exclusively individuals or companies, refusing contributions from governments. This results in reduced budget if compared to other associations. This is the reason why they need to invest resources in campaigns that are most likely to be successful.

Audience participation and feedback

Legambiente

"An important aspect in using new media is not only related to a matter of increasing membership (in that case, the web allows faster proceeding), rather it deals with the opportunity of amplifying the message towards the entire civil society, creating a deeper awareness of issues related to ecology and the environment. Therefore, the more that civil society takes care of certain problems, the greater the possibilities are that they will bring them to the political arena."

The widespread local organisation of *Legambiente* allows a continuous dialogue among members and a deep awareness of local realities and related environmental issues. The web has given unprecedented opportunities to sustain the organisational structure and to make it more effective. Civic initiatives are always declined into the specificities of territorial needs. At the same time, some local initiatives can acquire national meaning or they can be extended to other similar local contexts. The Web has increased opportunities for horizontal collaboration and for easy networking among the circles.

Greenpeace

"The traditional activist of Greenpeace has some distinctive features, if compared to other associations. There are several ways of participating, from a street stand, to chaining oneself in front of the multinational as a sign of dissent, or taking risky actions with high social and media impact like climbing buildings or intervening with inflatable boats.

Greenpeace activists belong to two categories: traditional (they are volunteers acting in the squares or in public demonstrations) and online activists (or cyber-activists). Normally, traditional activists of local groups interact with each other by circulating information and commenting on news; in that case, new media is essential in channeling and sustaining communicational exchange. We leave an open space for online debates, obviously with the exception of impolite comments. We don't want to apply censorship and we encourage debates on several points of view."

For the 40th Anniversary, a commemorative video was produced by an activist of a local group of Greenpeace which was published on Facebook and YouTube. This is an example of grassroots participation.

The introduction of CSOs interactivity in communication strategies

Legambiente

“New media and social media are highly appreciated and extensively used by Legambiente. The starting point has been the website, which continues to be the main tool of communication online. From the birth of Web 2.0, we tried to be present on the major social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, ...). In order to exploit all the potentialities of Web 2.0, we have created a partnership with C6 TV (a Web TV based in Milan) to create a “green TV”; *6PianetaTV* with videos dealing with the environment and ecology” said Mr. Petitto.

“One of the main problems of using social networks is technological backwardness in Italy. In terms of use, social networks continue to be considered primarily as a tool of entertainment. We face a generational divide, with volunteers acting at the local and regional clubs that are not able to use ICT; thus, we have to do some sort of training to overcome our (internal) digital divide.”

Contents posted on the website and on the social networks are scientifically reliable and in tune with *Legambiente's* mission, in being a scientific environmental association. Any aspect or issue that is made public is supported by scientific analysis or accompanied by scientist's contributions.

“Credibility of the *Legambiente's* brand has been translated to the web, making our sources and information highly reliable”. The fundamental purpose is involving people and triggering their engagement. Most of the campaigns are based on this purpose.

Greenpeace

“For many years Greenpeace has been considered an *advocacy hero*. With the web, Greenpeace is considered an *'empowerment hero,'* who seeks to use new media potentialities for empowerment”. They have created a dynamic professional group that tries to follow the rapid evolution of a flexible technology like the web. There are new positions such as webmasters for online campaigns, webmasters for digital fundraising and a coordinator for new media.

The Importance of community networks and social media (Twitter, Facebook, ...)

Legambiente

“The greatest achievement through the web was the referendum on nuclear power and public water in June 2011. Mobilisation took place mainly on the net and then took the form of a very high participation rate to the referendum. This was the Italian version of Obama communication style”.

Greenpeace

“Some people think that online campaigns can change traditional businesses, but I think its role can be better understood as an improvement. We shouldn’t abandon our precedent know-how in communication; the integration is the fundamental solution”, said Andrea Pinchera.

The transformations of communication with new technologies

Legambiente

“Social networks are important amplifiers of the message, but traditional media continue to be a milestone in the communication. Being visible in press, radio and television continues to be crucial, because these media allow the messages to be spread in the whole of society. They are faster and concise.

Despite the importance of communication on new and traditional media, the classic “face to face” marketing is “irreplaceable” said Mario Petitto. A stand in the squares and other forms of direct communication allows a local embedding of *Legambiente*. To manage communication on traditional and new media, *Legambiente* has set up two positions in each circle: the press agent and the communicator. Depending on the size of the circles, often the two roles can be managed by the same person.

Greenpeace

Greenpeace has a strong tradition in using new technologies. Already in 1993, they used email to communicate between offices in the world, in a safe and fast way. The web has not been used exclusively as an informative channel, but as a “space” for main organisational activities.

“An emblematic example was the campaign against Apple, where we asked the company to change the dismissing process for old PCs and make it more environmentally friendly. This campaign was created only through the Web. We continue to invest in old media, which has changed their agenda. The impact of actions is often measured through the presence of related news in the homepages of major newspapers online. A news item from the following days is not very common because newspapers consider only recent events. Since the mid-2000, there has been an increase of news in the traditional media dealing with our campaigns, but the online echo is definitely stronger.”

Changes in audience practices

Legambiente

“Another problem in using social networks is the belief, which is very common in Italy, that putting an “I like it” on Facebook may correspond to genuine participation. We have an

example with our traditional ecological campaigns, which has seen an increase of participants (e.g. Clean up the world) but if we had taken into account all the “I like it” on Facebook, the number should have been higher. The web is used to maintain a relationship with members through newsletters and email; it becomes fundamental in mobilisation and promoting campaigns.

Greenpeace

“I do not know if activism has increased or narrowed in contemporary digital media environment, but we try to integrate the two media worlds, to make sure that the classical model doesn’t get lost but instead continue to grow”, said Mr. Pinchera.

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