

Competing for global attention: a case study into how a collective of largely unknown activist groups managed to shift the focus from one of the biggest international events to a minority cause

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Abstract

This case study retraces the steps of the David vs. Goliath battle between the Beijing Olympic Organising Committee and the Free Tibet Movement, in the lead up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. While the Chinese government struggled to maintain message control in a bid to secure consistent, positive media coverage, the Free Tibet Movement has provided insight into an alternative approach to communicating with a truly global audience through engagement, participation and the strategic use of new media. This paper is neither anti-Chinese nor pro-Tibetan, however, it highlights that large organisations and governments can learn from activist and pressure groups, which have become increasingly successful in engaging globally dispersed audiences in a cost effective way. The author argues that Olympic programs have focused too much on traditional marketing tools, such as sponsorship and sales, whilst ignoring the importance of strategic public relations programs and audience engagement.

Scholarly research into activism spans over more than thirty years and represents one of the largest bodies of knowledge in public relations literature. However, its focus has been largely on damage limitation and issue management. The author calls for greater recognition of activists as public relations professionals in their own right, who are becoming increasingly sophisticated and innovative to maximise their limited funds and resources. The Free Tibet Movement's Olympic Campaign provides an insightful example of how an until recently largely unknown collective of activist groups managed to seriously overshadow the lead up to the 2008 Olympic Games, effectively damaging one of the best known global brands. As scholars our focus should arguably not be on how to limit the scope and power of these PR professionals, but on what we can learn from their expertise, experience and knowledge.

Introduction

The Olympic Games are one of the biggest events on the global sport and entertainment calendar, mesmerising athletes and couch potatoes alike. As far as brands are concerned, there is hardly any bigger and more recognisable than the Olympic Brand. However, in the lead up to the 2008 Olympic Games activist and human rights groups effectively managed to use the global attention and focus on China to raise awareness of their own cause and humanitarian issues in Taiwan, Darfur and Tibet. Whilst the Beijing Organising Committee (BOCOG) was preoccupied with promoting the “Torch of Freedom’s” longest ever journey around the globe, the David vs. Goliath battle for media attention was arguably won by the Free Tibet Movement (FTM), depicting the torch relay’s climb to Mount Everest as a symbol of China’s suppression of minority groups. This case study highlights how the Internet and new technologies have arguably levelled the playing field between activist and pressure groups on one hand, and large organisations and governments on the other. Like many *old school* management teams, the BOCOG overestimated their control over desired messages and predominantly relied on large marketing budgets and propaganda, assuming that these would secure their dominance over largely underfunded and predominantly volunteer-based activist groups. While large organisations and governments have largely failed to embrace new media, true two-way symmetrical communication and audience engagement, pressure groups’ innovative tools and techniques may provide new insights into how to communicate effectively with increasingly global audiences.

Activism | Literature Review

Public relations literature refers to activists as “collections of individuals organised to exert pressure on an organisation on behalf of a cause” (Grunig 1992, p. 504). This definition arguably includes governments, their agencies and departments, as in the case of the Chinese Government and the Beijing Olympic Organising Committee, which will be the focus throughout this case study. The issue of activism has been considered to be of critical importance to public relations scholars and practitioners since at least the late 19th century (Smith and Ferguson 2001). Scholarly research into activism spans over three decades and represents one of the largest bodies of knowledge in public relations literature. However, the vast majority of studies are based on Grunig’s (1992) Excellence Theory (e.g. Holtzhausen

2006; Grunig 1992; Grunig and Grunig 1997; Grunig 1986; Reber and Kim 2006) and thereby provide only a limited insight into the organisation-activist relationship (Dozier and Lauzen 2000). The scope of scholarly research into activism has furthermore been largely restricted to the corporate perspective (e.g. John and Thomson 2003; Reber and Kim 2006; Grunig 1992; Illia 2003; Turner 2007; Bunting and Lipski 2001; Werder 2006), with a focus on issue management and damage limitation (e.g. Holtz 2002; Heath 1998; Smith and Ferguson 2001; Karagianni and Cornelissen 2006; Grunig 1992; Guiniven 2002; Deegan 2001). Scholars have highlighted the need to monitor activist behaviour in order to respond to potential problems early (Anderson 1992; Coombs 1998) and protect the reputation of the organisation involved (Beder 2002). However, from the corporate PR manager perspective active stakeholders may even provide a range of benefits, as the threat they pose to an organisation's prosperity and survival increases the pressure to establish "excellent and effective" communication departments (Grunig 1992; Heath 1998). This in turn enables practitioners to gain legitimacy and increase their utility to the organisation (Smith and Ferguson 2001).

Whilst the majority of activism literature heavily relies on Grunig's (1992) Excellent Theory's advocacy for symmetrical communication, the research agenda itself has been largely asymmetrical, thereby arguably subsidising commercial and government communication efforts "at the expense of other segments of the population" (Karlberg 1996, p. 263). With the exception of in-class (Werder 2006) and self-administered, practitioner focused questionnaires (Grunig and Grunig 1997) there is a noticeable shortage of primary research into the organisation-activist relationship, as well as an apparent lack of a public-centred research agenda (Leitch and Neilson 2001).

More recently, scholars have started to recognise activists as PR practitioners in their own right, whose objectives, tools and strategies are becoming increasingly sophisticated (e.g. Karagianni and Cornelissen 2006; Smith and Ferguson 2001; Smith 2004; Reber and Berger 2005). However, from the activists' perspective, public relations appears to have a largely negative connotation as self-serving capitalist activity (Demetrious 2006), which arguably emphasises the need to broaden the research agenda to include the activist practitioner's perspective. Critics of public relations (Stauber 1995; Beder 2002a; 2002b) equally argue that PR provides an unfair advantage, by over-emphasising the view and standpoint of the already powerful that have the capabilities to employ communications professionals; as did the Chinese Government in this case study, with a seemingly endless amount of funds made

available to secure the success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The German philosopher and sociologist Juergen Habermas (1989) has heavily criticised the public relations function for distorting the 'public sphere', as an arena in which issues can be freely debated (L'Etang 2008). However, recently it has been suggested that activists' increasingly sophisticated public relations efforts may have a pro-social effect (Demetrious 2008; Kovacs 2006), democratise decision making and public policy (Heath 1998). As a result, there has been increased pressure on scholars to move beyond the prevailing focus on service to the profession, towards the development of the discipline, by exploring the activist-organisation relationship from the activists' point of view (Dozier and Lauzen 2000; Leitch and Neilson 2001).

Activism & Power

Ultimately, any activist group's success depends on their ability to access power resources, such as followers, funding, public support, media coverage and political champions (Heath 1997). However, Leitch and Neilson (2001) assert that due to its failure to acknowledge the resources inequality between organisations and their publics, the public relations research agenda into the organisation-publics relationships is inherently flawed. They argue that PR research to date has not only widely ignored other disciplines' research into social relations (e.g. political science, psychology, media studies), but furthermore failed to recognise *power* as a crucial element. Looking at alternatives, stakeholder theory underlies much of the current thinking and research in management and consequently public relations. Accordingly, an organisation's success depends on its ability to manage the often conflicting demands of its various stakeholder groups. However, based on classification systems such as Mitchell, Agle and Wood's (1997) tri-dimensional approach (power, legitimacy, urgency), or Johnson, Scholes and Whittington's (2006) Power/Interest Matrix, activist groups have traditionally been placed in the less powerful – and therefore less important - stakeholder categories.

Traditional stakeholder maps have been organisation-centric, often failing to acknowledge increased engagement and exchange between different stakeholders. This view is largely reflected in PR theory, which frequently assumes that publics only come into existence as they are identified as such (Leitch and Neilson 2001). PR professionals and scholars have thereby effectively ignored a vast array of interest and pressure groups that have failed to register on an organisation's radar due to the perceived limited threat they represent.

Nevertheless, recent research has suggested that activist groups are becoming increasingly sophisticated (Jaques 2006), media savvy and may even benefit from the limited resources available to them, which in turn increases the need to become more strategic and focused (Kovacs 2004). According to Olson's theory of collective action (Olson 1965), small interest groups can be more effective than larger and more established groups, due to the recognition that every individual's support and action is crucial for the survival of the group and its cause. This may be partly due to the flatter structures within activist organisations, which tend to have only two types of members: a steering group or leader, that make the day to day decisions, and 'general members', who predominantly provide financial support (Grunig 1992). Additionally, new communication technologies, such as the Internet, have arguably helped level the power imbalance between activists and large organisations (Bunting and Lipski 2001; Jaques 2006; Coombs 1998; Heath 1998; Bray 1998) and have thereby enabled activist groups to become more effective and powerful than ever before (Blood 2001). Therefore, arguably not surprisingly, the largest body of knowledge in activism related literature investigates the emergence of new media (e.g. Denning 1999; Elliot 1997; Kozinets 1999; Bennett 2003) and "cyberactivism" (e.g. Illia 2003; McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Pickerill 2003). Issue and pressure groups have been faster than corporate communicators to adopt online opportunities (Bunting and Lipski 2001). The reduction in constraints on geography, access, time and resources have effectively reduced the significance of corporate assets and made it easier for all stakeholders to communicate independently (Bunting and Lipski 2001). Previously, the fundraising and recruitment process was a time and resources consuming exercise, including the tedious job of handing out leaflets on street corners and waiting for a handful of sympathetic individuals to respond. The online environment has changed the process, allowing to recruit support within a matter of hours, beyond traditional boundaries and restrictions (Holtz 2002). Furthermore, the Internet provides pressure groups with a low cost tool, enabling direct contact with other stakeholders without relying on (media) gatekeepers (Bray 1998; Holtz 2002; Blood 2001; Kozinets 1999). Thereby, it arguably enables activist organisations to effectively turn the traditional, organisation-centric stakeholder map on its head, by re-designing their own map, in which corporate and government entities feature as only potential stakeholders, alongside supporters, sponsors and other (competing) activist organisations.

For example, the Internet played a central role in the campaign by the Free Burma Coalition during 1993 to 1997, which eventually pressured PepsiCo into leaving Burma, "thereby

reducing the foreign investment capital used to help support the highly repressive SLORC dictatorship in Myanmar” (Coombs 1998, p. 296). Whilst their efforts were traditionally restricted to discussion groups and emails, activist campaigns are becoming more creative, endorsing interactive communication channels provided by Web2.0 technology, as demonstrated in Greenpeace’s 2008 "Dove Onslaught(er)" campaign against deforestation in Indonesia. With the help of strong visuals and the extensive use of social media the campaign team managed to recruit tens of thousands of protest emails from around the world over a two week period, which resulted in Dove’s parent company Unilever’s support for an immediate moratorium on deforestation for palm oil in South East Asia (see <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/forests/asia-pacific/dove-palmoil-action>). Rutherford’s (2000) case study about the International Mine Ban Treaty furthermore showcases how the Internet can help pressure groups to increase their capabilities by forming international coalitions.

This case study analyses the activities by the Free Tibet Movement (FTM) in the lead up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, highlighting how a collective of activist organisations effectively managed to use the global spotlight on China to raise awareness of their own cause. The focus will be particularly on Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), a New York based organisation with 650 chapters worldwide, which was one of the most visible and outspoken groups during this period. Activists’ PR efforts have long been underestimated and overlooked. However, this case study calls for a change in attitude, away from the traditional focus on limiting activists’ scope and power towards recognition of activists unique expertise, experience and knowledge.

The Olympic Spirit

Despite earlier struggles, the Olympic Games have developed into one of the world’s most recognisable global brands, and a key event on the international sporting and events calendar (Amis and Cornwell 2005), anticipated by athletes, sport enthusiasts and coach potatoes alike. Olympic Games programs are highly marketing focused and sophisticated, rising billions of dollars from international sponsorship deals, broadcasting partners, licensing and ticket sales (International Olympic Committee 2001). Benefits for local host are also apparent, with a significant impact on tourism (International Olympic Committee 2001). For example, the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games’ local marketing programs generated nearly US\$1.1 billion

(International Olympic Committee 2001), resulted in and estimated 1.74million additional visitors and effectively advanced the Brand Australia by ten years (Australian Tourist Commission 2001). Attributes most closely associated with the Olympic image are positive, emotional and aspirational; such as *being the best, trustworthy, inspirational, peaceful, honourable, participation and striving* (International Olympic Committee 2001, p. 9). One of the most powerful symbols for the Olympic spirit is the Olympic torch, representing freedom, a lack of cultural barriers and harmony. The symbol of the torch arguably highlights one of the key reasons why China was eager to host the 2008 Olympic Games, not motivated by financial gain, but by the opportunity to showcase the “new China”, aligned with the Olympic attributes (Clifford 2008). However, instead of celebrating China’s year in the spotlight, the lead up to the Olympics was overshadowed by growing calls for boycotts of the 2008 games, in protest against China’s alleged poor human rights record and in response to recent disturbances in Tibet, Darfur and Taiwan, going as far as calling for a complete boycott of Chinese goods (*Friends of Tibet India*). Pressure also increased on politicians, presidents and heads of state around the world, with many vowing to stay away from the opening ceremony.

The Olympic Games are not new to criticism, controversy and negative connotations, most commonly relating to perceived commercialism and the politicising of the event itself (Roche 2002; Lenskyj 2000). Politics have frequently played a major part in Olympic Games, most notoriously during the 1936 summer Olympics in Berlin, which were used as a propaganda tool by the German Nazi Party. The Olympic Games are equally not new to activist involvement and pressure groups. During the 1972 Munich games - intended to present a new, democratic and optimistic Germany to the world - 11 Israeli athletes were killed by Palestinian terrorists. Eight years later, 65 athletes refused to compete at the Moscow Olympics, countered by further boycotts of the 1984 Olympic Games (Senn 1999). As a result, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been working hard to establish the Olympic Games as a neutral event, celebrating unity, peace and inspiration. The torch continues to be upheld as symbol of freedom and the Olympic spirit.

2008 Beijing Olympics | A showcase for the ‘New China’

On 13th July 2001, Beijing was awarded the right to host the 2008 Olympic Games, as only the third Asian summer location after Tokyo in 1964 and Seoul in 1988 (Pollock, Kreuer, and Ouano 1997). However, this was not China’s first attempt at becoming an Olympic host. Its

1991 application to sponsor the 27th Olympics failed, amid concerns by the Olympic committee that China would not be able to guarantee uncensored media access, the right to protest and general freedom of expression. For its second attempt Beijing recruited professional advice in the form of Weber Shandwick, a leading global public relations firm (Clifford 2008), which claims winning the bid for the 2008 games by separating China's "human rights record from its Olympic bid" (David Liu, Managing Director for Weber Shandwick China, quoted in: Clifford 2008). The key rationale was that by being thrust it into the International spotlight, China would be forced to engage with the rest of the world. Secretary-general of the Beijing bid organizing committee, Wang Wei, stated at the announcement in Moscow that a "nod for Beijing would mean enhancement [in China] in education, medical benefits, as well as human rights"(quoted in: Lam 2001). He furthermore pledged there would be no restrictions on foreign press, covering the event, a commitment that would later on create major headaches for both the protective Chinese government and the International Olympic Committee.

Chinese coverage during the lead up to the Olympic Games made it very clear that while China strived to be associated with the Olympic symbolism of unity, freedom and peace, it was not prepared to accept any criticism. Hosting the Games was an issue of national pride. An impressive amount of resources was made available for new infrastructure and the smooth running of the games. The Beijing Government was determined that nobody would be able to threaten its pride nor the Olympic Spirit (Hutzler 2007; The Beijing Organizing Committee 2008). Consequently, any 'politicising' of the 2008 Games was automatically condemned. The Olympics were seen as a showcase for the "new China", characterised by the economic boom and poverty reduction, but they increasingly developed into a magnet for protesters and critics of the Chinese government, which closely controls political organisations and protests in the country (Dyer and McGregor 2008). In the lead up to the Olympics the media largely focused on China's poor human rights track record, particularly in Taiwan, Darfur and mostly in Tibet. This perceived Western media bias was highly criticised by China (Dyer and McGregor 2008) and in return resulted in demonstrations (Bachelor 2008) and even boycotts around the world (Carrefour sees Chinese boycott over Tibet 2008). China was determined to ensure that the 2008 Olympics would be a success, whatever the price tag may be.

The Free Tibet Movement | Sizing the opportunity to create global awareness

In contrast to China's strong position as resources rich Olympic host, the Free Tibet Movement's (FTM) fight was seemingly lost the moment Beijing's endorsement as 2008 Olympic host was announced. After decades of campaigning for Tibet's self-determination (Bob 2005), the announcement came as a big 'blow'. Worldwide there is a large array of organisations supporting Tibet's independence in one form or another. 153 of these are currently listed as members of the London-based International Tibet Support Network. As for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (Rutherford 2000), the coalition provides these groups with a global platform and opportunities that would otherwise not be available due to limited funds, heavy dependency on individual donations and consequently reliance on media coverage to ensure their voice is being heard. The initial focus of the various groups was on preventing the Olympic Games from being awarded to China. However, after an initial period of disbelief and disappointment the movement realised that a unique opportunity was presenting itself as China was being thrust into the global spotlight. "At first there was a profound sense of despair after the Chinese government was awarded the honor," said Kalaya'an Mendoza, a coordinator for Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) (quoted in: Clifford 2008). "But after five minutes passed, we realized this would be a monumental opportunity for the Tibetan people to be put in the international spotlight."

The Chinese government effectively underestimated the FTM's strategic planning capabilities and endurance. No sooner as Beijing was announced as the 2008 Olympic host, Tibet support groups around the world held a series of public relations strategy sessions (Clifford 2008; Saunders 2008). Like other NGOs, pressure and activist groups, the FTM has become increasingly strategic and sophisticated, not just in their techniques but also in their planning capabilities (Guiniven 2002; Bob 2005; Reber and Kim 2006). From the start, the FTM found itself in a weak and disadvantaged position, lacking not only funds, but being furthermore based outside Tibet, with a large following of non-Tibetans, which could have easily undermined their credibility. However, the FTM managed to ensure that their messages were heard, by engaging their global audience with the help of new communication technologies.

The BOCOG also recognised the Internet as a major communications tool, creating sleek, information rich websites with up to date news, a count down to the Games, weather updates, photos, discipline specific information and ticketing details (see <http://en.beijing2008.cn>).

However, it effectively failed to recognise interactive tools provided by Web2.0 technology and thereby to encourage any engagement with its global audience. In direct contrast to this, the FTM deliberately played out its campaign in the public domain. One of the most visible groups has been the Students for a Free Tibet (SFT). The New York based organisation has 650 chapters worldwide, and a highly visible leadership team, including Lhadon Tethong, its ethnic Tibetan, Canadian born Executive Director. SFT is a perfect example of what Reber and Berger (2005) would describe as a PR savvy activist organisation. As a student focused organisation, SFT is surprisingly sophisticated and strategic. The SFT website itself provides a comprehensive guide to successful campaigning, including advice on creating strategic campaigns, media training and action ideas. The group also offers internships and organises bi-annual, week-long “action camps”, including workshops on grassroots fundraising, media training, political theatre and campaign planning (including site management) (Clifford 2008). Additionally, SFT has fully endorsed the Internet as a low-cost communication channel and has effectively expanded its dialogic features, for both supporters and the media. Its Beijing Campaign designated website (<http://freetibet2008.org>) contains toolkits, downloadable posters, sign up sheets and an array of logos in various formats and sizes. It also provides supporters with access to an online merchandise shop and a global event calendar. Most importantly, the website includes streams from various blog sites and actively encourages feedback. New recruits and first time visitors can join the *Action Network* via email, opt in to receive text message updates or simply gain further information via various videos updates, FAQs and background pages. Journalists can gain easy access to the up to date media centre including press releases and images, or enter their details to subscribe to SFT media updates. International media spokespeople are made easily accessible and even their credentials are available on request. Throughout the campaign, Lhadon was highly visible via her personal blog (<http://beijingwideopen.org/>), phone-in interviews from IOC meetings, YouTube recordings of media conferences and live streaming from important events. Media coverage went beyond online and underground publications to include international names such as the Business Week, The Age, the New York Times and the BBC, to name only a few. Similarly, regular email alerts to SFT supporters were personalised and went beyond plain text, including images, links to past coverage, supporting profiles, video footage and photos of recent campaigns. Alerts also usually contained a call to action, ranging from recruiting an “Olympic Athlete to Stand up for Tibet in Beijing”, to contacting the local IOC representative, or signing a petition aimed at torch relay sponsors. Feedback and interaction have been encouraged and appeared to be left uncensored, apart from peer ratings and

comments on YouTube. SFT have also increasingly been using social networking sites such as Facebook, text messages, emails and bulletins to organise themselves at their various protest locations.

Let the Games being | A David vs. Goliath battle for attention

Unlike many other likeminded groups, SFT have not solely relied on generating media coverage. Instead, the group has effectively used new technologies to devise strategic campaigns, which enable direct engagement with other stakeholders (Holtz 2002), such as key Olympic sponsors and partners (Branigan and Kelso 2008; McDonald to the protester target 2008), as well as IOC officials. For example, a SFT delegation participated in targeting shareholders at the Coca Cola annual general meeting; not to stop the sponsor's longstanding involvement with the Olympic Games, but to encourage the company to use its power as supporting partner of the torch relay to pressurise China and the IOC to reroute the relay, omitting the Tibetan leg (Kemp 2008). SFT supporters also travelled to Athens, both for the start of the torch relay, resulting in powerful media images as protesters were carried away, as well as to publicly confront IOC President Jaques Rogge. By targeting these groups directly, SFT did not only make its voice heard, it effectively turned the traditional, organisation-centric stakeholder map on its head, effectively leaving the largely uncooperative BOCOG aside, whilst opening up alternative, more direct communication channels with other key stakeholders. Coverage of public actions has been made available via social media channels, such as YouTube, in which SFT representatives appear highly focused, media trained, rational and prepared.

From a public relations perspective, SFT and the Free Tibet Movement offered the better, more engaging campaign, whilst the BOCOG relied on traditional marketing tools, large budgets and propaganda. The results were severe. Whilst the Free Tibet Movement enjoyed extensive, global media attention, including full colour front page coverage in the New York Times, it took away some of the carefully manufactured *sparkle* of the Beijing 2008 brand. As China was battling with negative media reports following the attitude of the blue-tracksuit clad 'protectors' of the Olympic Torch (Nicholson 2008) and the reported aggressive stance by individual, emotional China supporters along the torch relay route - arguably standing in direct contrast to the promised "Journey of Harmony" - the FTM appears to have clearly won the battle for positive, emotional coverage in the non-Chinese media. The FTM caused major headaches for a range of longstanding Olympic sponsors, including Coca Cola, Adidas, and

McDonalds. Following national pressure, British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown and German Chancellor Angela Merkel vowed not to attend the Opening Ceremony, with many other leaders at least threatening similar action. In Australia, swimming legend Dawn Fraser publicly announced her decision to boycott the Olympic Games, followed by a wide range of international athletes, who at least made their opinion and support for the FTM heard in the lead up to the games. SFT furthermore received sufficient donations to book two full page ads in the New York Times, with the aim to recruit an athlete as spokesperson, which in turn generated more international media coverage.

From the BOCOG's perspective, the power of public relations did not go completely unnoticed. Weber Shandwick was partly credited for winning the Olympic bid, but was eventually replaced by another global communications network, Hill and Knowlton, which specifically worked on the games (Clifford 2008; Magee 2008). Instead of celebrating its time in the global spotlight, China found itself increasingly on the defensive, prompting the government to hire additional international public relations expertise in the wake of the Tibet crisis, only months before the opening ceremony (Centre for Media and Democracy 2008; Pickard and McGregor 2008). However, the limited power of the public relations team is best described by the words of James B Heimowitz, Hill and Knowlton's Chief Executive, North Asia Operations, who described their influence on Olympic messages as limited, as "the organising committee [was] not empowered to comment on Chinese government policy (quoted in: Clifford 2008). Operating on a world stage means that the Chinese Government simply could not rely on controlling messages released by government ministries or its Olympic media team. Controlling internal media has been Beijing's strength; however, it has largely failed to understand the challenges and opportunities presented by the rise of the Internet, citizen journalism and increasingly sophisticated activist groups, which are prepared to involve their global audience.

With the aid of new media and stakeholder engagement SFT won not only the battle for media coverage, but also for public sympathy, at the expense of the Olympic Games' historical values. By doing so, they did not only upstage the BOCOG, but also other activist groups concerned with related causes, such as humanitarian issues in Darfur and Taiwan. With the aid of a sophisticated campaign and powerful imagery, the 'Torch of Freedom' was effectively turned into a symbol of suppression.

Conclusion

Activist groups and grassroots movements have traditionally been placed in the less powerful stakeholder categories. However, this case study highlights how with the emergence of the Internet and particularly Web2.0 technology the Free Tibet Movement effectively moved beyond its role as dependent stakeholder. Instead, groups have increasingly shifted their attention towards their own stakeholders and (global) recruitment of supporters. As a result, the traditional organisation-stakeholder relationship has arguably been turned on its head and the BOCOG's stakeholder map re-arranged. Findings of this case study cannot be generalised to other activist groups beyond Students for a Free Tibet. However, this paper aims to provide valuable insights for large organisations and governments in their quest to engage stakeholders and to effectively communicate their vision and values. The FTM have demonstrated how with the aid of new technologies and sophisticated stakeholder communication a resource-poor activist group can effectively shift the focus from a global, mainstream event to a humanitarian cause, which was largely unknown prior to the Olympics.

Further research

Despite representing one of the most extensive bodies of knowledge in public relations literature, scholarly research into activism has been largely focused on damage limitation and issues management. In order to develop as a critical, recognisable discipline in its own right, public relations scholars need to move beyond their focus on service to the discipline, towards genuine recognition of the *public* in public relations (Karlberg 1996). Over the past years scholars have increasingly recognised activists as public relations professionals in their own right. However, overall there is an apparent lack of primary data and actual first hand insights from 'activists'. The majority of literature focuses on case studies based on secondary data analysis (e.g. Coombs 1998; Grunig 1986, 1992; Hearit 1999; Henderson 2005; Karagianni and Cornelissen 2006; Rutherford 2000; Anderson 1992; Demetrious 2008) and conceptual papers (e.g. Dhir 2007; Shenkin and Coulson 2007; Derville 2005; Jones 2002; Demetrious 2006), with a particular focus on media (e.g. Reber and Berger 2005), website (e.g. Reber and Kim 2006; Taylor, Kent, and White 2001) and literature reviews (e.g. Smith 2004; Smith and Ferguson 2001). The author argues that in order to truly grow our understanding of activism, we need to start looking at the activist-organisation relationship from the activist's point of view.

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