Engaged and/or enraged: The perils of 'innovative' digital engagement around health issues

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Abstract

On May 21, 2015, The Guardian newspaper reported that TEDxSydney had designed a new national campaign to change social attitudes towards people living with disabilities (Davey, 2015). The campaign, announced at the Sydney Opera House, was due to be launched in December 2015 to coincide with the United Nations International Day of People with Disability and was framed as being in memory of Stella Young, a writer, comedian and disability advocate, who died in December 2014. Arguably it was an innovative campaign, with the potential to put disabilities on the social media map.

As with many social campaigns at the time, the initiative was primarily built around a hashtag (#StellasChallenge) and sought to engage with both the disabled and the non-disabled. While the objective of the exercise was framed as "changing social attitudes", the subsequent engagement between the organisation, TEDxSydney, and representatives of the disabled community was arguably not what TEDxSydney had intended. Ironically, the campaign was said to be inspired by Stella, who had proclaimed that she despised "inspiration porn" related to those with disabilities (Davey, 2015).

Using a case study approach methodology, this paper provides an analysis of #StellasChallenge to develop an in-depth understanding of what innovative engagement does - and importantly does not - mean in the digital public sphere, through the broad lens of health at the community, organisational and individual levels of society. The paper highlights the challenges inherent in the digital world when attempting to innovatively engage with publics on sensitive, complex and deeply personal issues, such as disability and more broadly health. It draws on theory and practice in digital advocacy, public relations, web communication, health communication, issues management and stakeholder and community engagement. In the spirit of innovation (the theme of the 2016 PRIA national conference and research symposium where an early version of this paper was presented), this paper includes first-hand insights and critical reflections by one of the activists who campaigned against the #StellasChallenge initiative.

Keywords: social media, innovative digital engagement, disability, health

Introduction

The emergence of online communication has been referred to as a *revolution*, facilitating two-way communication between an organisation and its various stakeholders (Macnamara, 2010). However, there remains a lack of empirical data confirming these much-hailed benefits. To date, research into online communication appears to have largely concentrated on what the #SMMStandards (2012) coalition defines to be activities at the low engagement end of the spectrum, as communicators fail to (fully) embrace dialogical opportunities. Whilst educational and awareness raising campaigns unquestionably have a place in the communication mix (Galer-Unti, 2010), advocacy and attitudinal change are arguably particularly crucial within the context of health communication. Neiger, et. al. (2013) contend that for health communication purposes, engagement must not only provide mutual benefits for organisations and audiences, but should also aim for meaningful online and/or offline participation of target audiences as the culminating outcome. Based on a case study approach, this paper discusses the outcomes of a communication awareness campaign initiated by TEDxSydney, titled #StellasChallenge, which essentially alienated and enraged - rather than positively engaged - the people it was purporting to assist.

There is a notable absence of scholarly work that highlights benefits associated with the meaningful engagement between commercial entities and advocacy groups or individual activists, beyond the normative emphasis on two-way symmetrical communication representing best practice (see most notably Grunig, 1997; Smith, 2001). This paper highlights the challenges inherent in the digital world when attempting to innovatively engage with publics on sensitive, complex and deeply personal issues, such as disability and more broadly health. In the spirit of innovation (the theme of the 2016 PRIA National Conference and Research Symposium, where an early earlier version of this paper was first presented), the authors collaborated with El Gibbs, a disability advocate and communication professional, to provide a first-hand insight into the disability community's response to and interaction with the #StellasChallenge campaign, highlighting the need for greater corporate listening skills to ensure truly engaging and meaningful initiatives. The overarching research question for the paper is, therefore: How can the #StellasChallenge case study inform engagement practice in the digital age?

Engagement using social media

Engagement is frequently used, even arguably over-used, as a buzzword by organisations, particularly within the context of the online marketing sphere (Macnamara, 2014). Originating in the psychology and organisation literature, engagement has traditionally been employed as a concept with regards to education and employment (see, for example, Bakker et. al, 2008; Saks, 2006; Shernoff et al., 2003; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). However, the engagement concept has now been embraced in the marketing and public relations literature with terms such as 'digital engagement' (Bowen, 2013) and 'customer brand engagement' entering the communication lexicon (see, for example, Hollebeek, 2011a; Hollebeek, 2011b; Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014). By definition, engagement challenges traditional organisation-centric perspectives by enabling organisations to move away from agenda setting and one-way communication to what Johnston (2014) refers to as "authentic stakeholder involvement" (p. 381). Stakeholder engagement has been inextricably linked to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), with Hughes and Demetrious (2006) suggesting that: "stakeholder 'engagement' means creating new relationships, using the principles underpinning CSR, with the individuals, groups and organisations that have a stake in one or more of its projects" (p. 95). However, Greenwood (2007) argued that stakeholder engagement is, for the most part, a morally neutral practice and not necessarily always linked to CSR.

Taylor and Kent's (2014) attempt to synthesise and clarify key concepts around engagement related to public relations, positioning it within dialogue theory. They

conceptualise engagement as "part of dialogue and through engagement, organizations can make decisions that create social capital. Engagement is both an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions among groups" (2014, p. 384). They suggest that public relations scholars should actively look for areas where engagement is occurring and where it breaks down, "to better understand obstacles" (2014, p. 396). With this current case study and paper the authors respond to Taylor and Kent's call. If, as they suggest, engagement allows organisations to explore new opportunities and gain insight into alternative perspectives, then TEDxSydney could have used disability advocates' vocal response as a learning and listening exercise to shape the current campaign and influence future initiatives. This case study investigates if TEDxSydney did embrace these new perspectives. Willis (2015a; 2015b) asserts that aspects of public relations scholarship and practice indulge in the Orwellian concept of 'double think', which could also be phrased as saying one thing while meaning another and effectively, as Willis terms it, "preaching wine and serving vinegar". He suggested that organisations may often be, as he called it, 'passive aggressive', not using social media for true engagement and listening, but often for surveillance and one-way messaging instead. A contemporary case study such as this, played out in the digital space, could shed light on Willis's assertions.

Neiger et al. (2013) define social media engagement as "establishing a connection with others to contribute to a common good", such that "both the health promotion organization and its audience members receive a benefit" (p. 158). Focusing their research specifically on health organisations, they advise a focus on four strategic considerations:

a. "Decide what the organization is trying to accomplish with social media (e.g., goals and objectives),

b. Identify specific audiences of interest to the organization and its programs and tailor strategies to invite them into the social media conversation,

c. Identify benefits the organization can offer audience members within the context of predetermined goals and objectives, and

d. Identify what the organization wants audiences to do (e.g., create or promote content, respond to messages, share experiences, participate with the organization off-line)." (Neiger et al., 2013, p. 158)

Neiger et al., (2013) further highlight three levels of engagement, ranging from low to high:

- Low: the beginning stage where the organisation is attempting to establish a presence and build an audience. Primarily consists of a one-way flow of information, focusing on providing the information rather than seeking responses. Neiger et al. (2013) suggest that "this is the stage of engagement where most social media efforts in public health and health promotion languish or terminate" (p. 159).

- Medium: the organisation begins to establish a dialogic relationship with its followers. They actively seek out responses from followers by posing questions and inviting responses, and in turn, promptly respond to questions posed by followers. By nurturing such conversations, the organisation broadens its audience as it not only raises its profile among its immediate followers but also increases their visibility among their followers' followers in turn.

- High: the audience/followers are actively involved with the health promotion (or organisation) as either partner or participant and actively participate in any services offered (Neiger et al., 2013)

Community advocacy and activist communication represent a prominent body of knowledge in public relations scholarship and practice to date. However, despite the strong interest, the public relations research agenda has traditionally been largely limited to the corporate perspective, motivated by a focus on issues management and damage limitation (e.g. Bunting & Lipski, 2001; Grunig, 1992; John & Thomson, 2003; Turner, 2007; Werder, 2006). From this perspective, the key motivator for ongoing environmental scanning is early 'detection' and consequent 'elimination' of potential opposition to corporate goals. Hence, 'outrage' and opposition are framed as emotional phenomena that can be 'managed' in a presumed rational manner, but furthermore, should be identified early and ultimately controlled (e.g. Deegan, 2001).

The introduction of digital and social media resulted in further attention on activist communication, prompting the theory that these relatively new 'electronic' communication channels may address and potentially even equalise existing power inequalities between traditionally well-resourced corporations and traditionally resource-poor activist groups (e.g. Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998; Jaques, 2006; Mazzini, 2004). However, critical scholars such as Demetrious (2011) have since argued that this comparison between advocacy groups' communication efforts, driven by a desire to provide an alternative voice, and well-funded communication departments representing corporate interests is inherently flawed, failing to recognise resource inequalities.

Gladwell (2010) asserts that the 'weak ties' of social media are a benefit when it comes to the activist space, as they facilitate the rapid dissemination of information through multiple, and sometimes loosely connected networks. This potential for near instantaneous circulation of information, opposition and public protest via social media thus further emphasises the need for organisations to think ahead and prepare their campaigns carefully – as well as to be prepared to engage with audiences and sometimes opposing views in a meaningful way. Undoubtedly, the internet and social media, in particular, have provided traditionally dispersed audiences with similar interests and passions with platforms to exchange ideas, network and collaborate. Their voices may not be as visible as carefully crafted corporate communication messages; however, this should not limit their value or potential.

For the purpose of this study, activism is being defined as follows:

> Activism involves individuals, groups, and movements, often loosely and fluidly connected, who undertake a range of planned and spontaneous communication activities with the aim of raising citizens' awareness of, providing information about, and confronting, challenging or reinforcing the existing distribution of power in society. Individual activists seek to motivate citizens to critically evaluate their existing knowledge, priorities and values related to one or more causes or issues, thereby encouraging and facilitating civic engagement in the democratic process, which they position not as a right, but a responsibility (Wolf, 2013, p.282).

Online community advocacy groups are "often built around issues for which there is no widespread consensus or sympathy" (Hirsch, 2011, p.135). Desai and Wolf (2014) note that members of these communities "are aligned to a cause or an issue they are passionate about, and not a particular organisation or service" (p. 82). Hence, they are enthusiastic about and loyal to their particular cause, but not the (commercial) entity that may aim to engage them as part of their own communication efforts. Online communities, such as the disability advocacy community that formed in response to the TEDxSydney campaign, focus "on individuals, information sharing and empowerment, instead of reputation management and organisational goals" (Desai & Wolf, 2014, p.84). Hence, "social media may become counter-public spaces where activists challenge dominant

discourses and provide a platform for multiple competing, and often conflicting, perspectives to emerge" (Ciszek, 2016, p. 315). An issue-specific focus and in-depth (often first-hand) knowledge of activist groups may arguably make communities like this extremely valuable during campaign planning and testing phases. They consist of experts clustered around a particular issue; in this case of people who have first-hand experience of living with disabilities, as well as the associated communication challenges.

Methodology

This paper uses a case study approach to examine how the concept of engagement is enacted within a real world setting. The overarching research question is: How can the #StellasChallenge case study inform engagement practice in the digital age? Within this frame, this paper seeks to investigate: What lessons can be learned from the social media reaction of disabled activists to the #StellasChallenge initiative? Further: What approaches should organisations be aware of when formulating campaigns on social and health issues?

Within the qualitative domain, case study research provides the researcher with an input of real-world data from which concepts can be formed and propositions and theories can be developed (Eisenhardt, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The purpose of case study research is usually systematic and holistic, to provide a full and rich account of a network of relationships between a host of events and factors (Gummesson, 2003). Case study enquiries enable the collection of rich, detailed information across a wide range of dimensions about one particular case (Yin, 2003), which may explain its relative popularity within the activism PR research context (e.g. Demetrious, 2013; Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Weaver, 2013). Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that case studies are powerful as the narrative unfolds from the "diverse, complex and sometimes conflicting stories" (p.86) as told by people and documents, allowing readers to actively participate in creating the ultimate meaning of a particular case. He further argues that when researchers practise Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (wisdom or judgement), the results of the case study can be illuminating. Hence 'good' case studies in social science are required to improve both practice and theory (Flyvbjerg 2001). Indeed Willis (2015) argues that due to the depth of insight provided, case study research should be at the centre of studies in organisation-public relationships.

A case study is bound by time and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures (Stake, 2000). Here, the case under review looks at the response following the initial announcement of #StellasChallenge in May 2015 over the following 12 months, as the activist community engaged with the campaign. The most important application for case studies is to explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for survey or experimental strategies (Yin, 2003). Much of the existing body of knowledge in public relations is concerned with how activist groups operate in comparison to corporations, or more specifically, corporations' public relations departments (see e.g. Holtzhausen, 2007; Jaques, 2006; Reber & Kim, 2006; Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2013). Scholars have traditionally been outsiders, examining activist organisations and their communication efforts from the distance, based on media coverage and etic interpretations. This paper provides a unique, first-hand insight into the TEDxSydney campaign from the disability activist perspective, based on multiple conversations and co-authorship by one of the key voices in opposition to the #StellasChallenge initiative. El Gibbs is a writer, communicator and self-proclaimed activist. Her personal experience and reflections provide context and emic insight from the disability advocacy perspective, complementing an in-depth analysis of both on- and offline media coverage. The authors acknowledge that the lack of access to TEDxSydney's internal campaign goals and communication material for #StellasChallenge is a key limitation of the paper, requiring informed assumptions to be made about the focus of the

campaign, including the desired level and type of engagement with the disability advocacy community. Insights gained are based on extensive desktop research and El Gibbs' first hand perspective.

The case – Stella's Challenge and TEDxSydney

When in May 2015 TEDxSydney announced its decision to launch the #StellasChallenge campaign to commemorate disability advocate Stella Young, who passed away in December 2014, they were met with an unexpected backlash from the very people they assumed they were assisting. The campaign intended to build on Young's highly popular "I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much" presentation at TEDxSydney in April 2014 (Tan, 2015), wherein she decried what she called "inspiration porn" and the perception that "to live with a disability makes you exceptional" (Young, 2014). Described as "a major initiative designed to significantly contribute to the social inclusion of people living with disabilities" (Sullivan, 2015), TEDxSydney's campaign set out to encourage able-bodied people to approach people with a disability and ask questions such as "Would you mind if we talked about your disability first, so that I can understand how best to refer to it, and would you mind if we explored how it has impacted your life?" (Maguire-Rosier, 2016). While TEDxSydney presumably assumed that it was initiating a conversation that would enable the organisation "to be actively involved in creating positive change" (Tan, 2015), the organisation was met by an immediate outcry from the disabled community who viewed the campaign as running counter to Young's own views.

Subscribing to the Social Model of Disability, Young believed that she and other disabled people "were not disabled by [their] impairments but by the disabling barriers [they] faced in society" (Oliver, 2013, p. 1024), and argued instead that "I really want to live in a world where disability is not the exception, but the norm" and "a world where we value genuine achievement for disabled people" (Young, 2014). In contrast, #StellasChallenge was perceived to frame disabled people explicitly in terms of their disabilities, while doing little to address the real issues that Young herself highlighted in her 2014 presentation. An online petition launched to protest the campaign illustrates this point:

> There are no jobs being offered, no new funding for Stella's amazing website RampUp - a place where people with disabilities had the capacity to share their own stories on their own terms. Instead, this campaign is asking able-bodied people to speak to, or on behalf of, people with a disability - completely ignoring the fact that people with disability can talk for themselves or start conversations themselves. Like Stella did, every single day. (Maguire-Rosier, 2016)

As the petition, and various social media responses illustrate, those in the disabled community believed that TEDxSydney significantly misunderstood Young's message, and missed the mark in its attempts to commemorate her memory. The intention may have been good, but the execution was perceived as poor, limited only to superficial engagement with Stella's work.

The criticism of the campaign was scathing. Jax Jacki Brown, Young's friend, fellow writer and disability advocate, explained that "if you have read Stella's work, or if you had known her as a friend, she made it clear, repeatedly, that she believed we deserved much more than an awareness campaign" (Brown, 2015). She further argued that:

> TEDxSydney's campaign has real reach and substantial funding behind it. It could be an opportunity to really address disability disadvantage, to do more than start a conversation – a conversation that has already been had many times over in the lives of people with disability. We need more than a shift in attitude. We need real change in access to key areas of society for people with disability in the areas of employment, accessible housing, freedom from discrimination and violence and changing infrastructure. (Brown, 2015)

To provide further context and in-depth insight into the disability advocate's perspective, this paper draws on multiple conversations and original contributions by El Gibbs, a writer, professional communicator and (disability) activist, who provides a first-hand insight into the disability community's reaction to the proposed #StellasChallenge initiative as a collaborator on this paper:

> The idea of a campaign where random people would bowl up to people with a disability and ask them questions was our idea of hell. Particularly, [as] we all knew that Stella would be completely horrified by this idea and that TEDxSydney was doing this in her name was particularly offensive. (El Gibbs)

Advocates across the 'network' came together to coordinate a response to the proposed initiative via Facebook messages, emails and phone calls. A key priority was to consult Stella's family, something TEDxSydney had apparently failed to do. The group drafted a letter to TEDxSydney, outlining their concerns and reasons behind their opposition to the campaign. However, when the organisation failed to respond, disability advocates felt the need to use alternative channels to voice their opposition. The group set up a Tumblr site under the pseudonym Crip Army (www.criparmy.tumblr.com), where they outlined their concerns in a more public forum. El Gibb explains:

> We used the Crip Army tag to be a joke because Crip Army was inherently funny. We did contact them [TEDx Sydney] quite privately and directly first to say this is not okay but they did not respond to us. (El Gibbs)

Rather than engage with the disability community, TEDxSydney took further steps to silence any opposition to the #StellasChallenge campaign by deleting comments off their Facebook page and other related websites, which El refers to as "a lot of noise and thunder and lightning", as opposed to any real intend to listen and potentially involve.

As TEDxSydney continued to ignore any attempts to approach them directly, disability advocates across the network became more vocal:

> We did some media, including Crikey; Jax Jacki Brown did Daily Life. It looked more co-ordinated than it was; it was fairly chaotic. There wasn't really any co-ordinated leadership – there were just a few of us who know how to campaign. There's more than one person in the disability sector who knows how to do that. We have run a few campaigns before. I think it surprised the people at TEDx that people with disability had a voice and weren't afraid to use it. (El Gibbs)

> We made fun of them which they really didn't like. People with disability I find generally have a wicked sense of humour and Stella certainly did. (El Gibbs)

If TEDxSydney's intention was to engage stakeholders, then they certainly succeeded. However, it is doubtful that they deliberately set out alienate family, friends and the disability community around the very person in whose memory the campaign had been created. El reflects further:

> I think initially they had the right intentions but intentions aren't magic. You can intend all you like but when you execute something as badly as they did…particularly in Stella's name, so soon after Stella had died. People were very raw and sore. Stella was my editor but she was much better friends with other people in the group and people were incredibly distressed her name was used for something so offensive. Eventually, it emerged that, TEDxSydney was keen on running a "national multimedia campaign", but lacked financial resources hence depended on what activists referred to as "getting their creative types to do something". They did have a whole lot of people who had committed but not money. (El Gibbs)

TEDxSydney did eventually communicate with disability advocates, asking them to cease their very public opposition campaign. In return, activists requested a guarantee that appropriate changes would be made to the #StellasChallenge initiative. The Crip Army consisted of two groups, one in Melbourne and one in Sydney. There was also some limited representation in Perth, Western Australia. Representatives from all three locations met with TEDxSydney to discuss an alternative format for the campaign on two different occasions, but felt that their concerns and suggestions were not heard:

> We tried to communicate with them about where they stuffed up. They didn't really understand…They felt pretty resentful about our campaign. They felt they were doing something nice for us and we should have been grateful. We weren't. I don't think they expected a bunch of angry disabled people to front them about it. I think that's pretty typical for non-disabled people when they do a campaign. […] When you don't design a campaign with people with disability they [the campaigns] tend to look like this. (El Gibbs)

Crip Army representatives committed to working on an advertising brief, based on feedback from across their disability network. However, TEDxSydney responded to the result, which El Gibbs refers to as "a significant piece of work", with silence:

> To say I am disappointed is an understatement. The creative partners – as soon as there were disabled people involved, they ran a mile. […] The idea that you would do a campaign without actually involving the people you're talking about is astonishing. It's a basic principle of research. (El Gibbs)

Discussion

El Gibbs's first-hand account highlights how the accessibility of social media enabled a dispersed collective of disability advocates to rally around a cause to organise in the form of a virtual network of likeminded people, and have their voice heard. TEDxSydney's intention may have been to generate discussion, but arguably not based on a backlash from the disability community. Consequently, they failed to genuinely engage advocates, as well as decided not to use their input for an altered version of #StellasChallenge. However, disability activists nevertheless perceive their involvement as a major success as in their words "It was worthwhile in that it stopped them doing something awful" (El Gibbs).

Evidently, this is not the first such incident of silencing and exclusion - and subsequent backlash - in recent years. In 2009, blogger s. e. smith penned an open letter to feminist website *Feministing*, protesting the site's 'ableist' tone and language:

> You have a pretty poor track record on even covering disability issues, and the casual ableism which I see in your comment threads and sometimes in your very posts is extremely grating. It is especially irritating to see dismissive responses from site administrators when this issue is brought up. (smith, 2009)

While smith's letter opened up a dialogue between disability activists and *Feministings* staff, there was no clear constructive and conclusive resolution to the issue, leaving smith and others dissatisfied with the website's response. A similar and more recent example of such exclusion and marginalisation occurred in an Australian online feminist group, *Destroy the Joint*, when disability activists found their contributions being edited out of the main discussion thread. Instead they were encouraged to post to the dedicated disability activism pages:

> Dozens of messages from disabled women have been directed at *Destroy The Joint* – who have left a single 'visitor' post, neatly in the corner in the back room, mostly untouched. We're allowed to have our space there, you see. Not over there at the desirable 'disability activist' space, but in the equivalent of a special school or a small congregate setting, where disabled women can remain unseen and unheard, excluded from the main conversation. No inclusion, but a respectful heartbeat of silence to allow 'those people' their space before going back to business as usual. (Connor, 2015)

As blogger Sam Connor (2015) points out, the disabled women's attempts to engage with dominant feminist discourse on the basis of their identities as women were instead superseded by their identities as disabled people. These examples of exclusion from dominant discourse highlight what Ellis (2015b) terms "intersectional feminism", where disabled women are doubly marginalised on the basis of gender *and* disability. They also further highlight what Stella Young (2013) herself referred to as the politics of exclusion, where such processes of exclusion, silencing, and marginalisation serve to further compound the difficulties already experienced by the disabled community.

The examples presented here fall within the purview of social media activism, a topic that is prominently discussed in relation to political engagement and activism. Shirky (2011) observes that "as the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more

opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action" (p. 28). However, whilst scholars' focus has been predominantly on resistance to commercial entities and the work of high profile (international) non-government organisations, limited attention has been given to the kind of activism related to marginal representation, such as the disability examples explored here.

As has been seen in the Stella's Challenge case, disability activists are engaging with new media channels to proactively form communities, build stories and generate stronger collective voices around an issue which is frequently overlooked in the public sphere. Fuelled by their own initiative and passion, they do not rely on communication campaigns, forums or opportunities to have their voice heard to be created *for* them. Hence, the traditional public relations advice of managing, sidelining and silencing advocacy groups (see e.g. Deegan, 2001) has become meaningless. In reality, people who are passionate about an issue are never silenced. The conversation has always continued, even if out of reach of corporate monitoring activities. However, digital media enable activists to keep the momentum going, actively build their communities of like-minded people and challenge the status quo.

Ellis (2015a) draws upon Henry Jenkins' (2013) concepts of collective intelligence and spreadable media to explain how such online communities constitute a 'former' audience that actively engages with media to generate their own discourses around disability. While TEDxSydney's campaign can be seen to fall within Ellis' observation that "social and cultural critiques of disability often proceed from the notion that popular culture is more interested in making us feel than in making us think, and that stereotypical and limiting discourses of disability are implicated in this process" (Ellis, 2015a, p. 161), the protests and backlash against #StellasChallenge can be recognised as an active community rapidly mobilising to criticise and counter the discourse offered by TEDxSydney about Young's life and legacy.

This case study illustrates that organisations such as TEDxSydney need to pay greater attention to those activists/audiences they are attempting to reach and engage. In this instance, TEDxSydney did not consult the disabled activists as a 'target public' prior to announcing the campaign, which further entrenched this particular community's frustration at being marginalised and ignored. They also initially failed to respond to the disability community's concerns. Instead of working with disability advocates, TEDxSydney managed to alienate those people who understand and support Stella's work, by setting out to create a communication campaign for – as opposed to – *with* them.

Goggin and Ellis (2015), writing in *The Conversation*, argue that "TEDxSydney calls for conversations – but fails to recognise that there are already many conversations, relationships, and media, attitudinal, and social transformations underway. So, rather than speaking, genuine listening is required – often the hardest thing to do". The suggestion that listening is the key for genuine engagement also resonates with Macnamara's (2015; 2016) recent work on the imperative of organisational listening. Macnamara's (2016) international research project illustrates that organisations overwhelmingly create an architecture of speaking, as discovered in this case study. He goes as far as referring to the "lack of listening" as one of two black holes in public communication (Macnamara, 2016). As Macnamara wrote of organisations in an introduction to his report: "Despite their claims for two-way communication, engagement, and dialogue, they [organisations] listen sporadically, selectively, and sometimes not at all" (2015, p.7).

As Macnamara (2016) suggests, genuine "dialogue is more than a single *utterance* and also more than turn-taking at speaking" (p.2). Based on El Gibbs' recollection of events, TEDxSydney failed to engage with one of their key stakeholder groups in a meaningful way, by not taking their concerns and opposition seriously. They put design and convenience choices ahead of the opportunity to create a campaign that would truly result in something in Stella's honour. As a result, they lost the trust of those disability

activists that have worked, lived and laughed with Stella. However, others may argue that activists did engage and the resulting debate and highlighting of Stella's work was a positive outcome (if somewhat unintended by the campaign initiators). The controversy around the campaign gained more attention and crystallised Stella's message in ways unforeseen by TEDxSydney. If they had set out to engage the disability community, they certainly succeeded. However, it is doubtful that their desire to 'engage' involved a level of preparedness to alienate a community representing the core of their campaign.

For public relations to develop as a discipline, it is argued that practitioners need to focus less on 'target publics', and 'engagement' and more on active listening. Organisations such as TEDxSydney, while perhaps well intentioned in the #StellasChallenge initiative, need to question the architecture of speaking they rely on and move to organisational listening. At the very least, for more positive and constructive engagement, greater research and preparation work must be conducted by any organisation prior to attempting to announce any campaign.

Building on Ellis's (2015a; 2015b) work, this also highlights the importance of recognising that even if an organisation does not actively reach out to their publics via social media, audiences can still generate a rapidly evolving conversation that impacts on the organisation itself. Shaw explains that:

> In addition to exposing issues and campaigns, a vast network of activist websites mobilizes progressive support on the major political issues of our time. Often described collectively as the "Netroots," these sites enable activists to bypass corporate media gatekeepers both to expose social and economic injustices and to build public support for solutions. … The Netroots help validate engaging in progressive activism. This applies to the value both of individual participation in social change activities, and of the event itself. (Shaw 2013, n.p.)

Limitations and conclusion

This paper has limitations in that it is case-based, specifically on case in an Australian context. The paper uses publicly available online news articles, blogs and social media posts and first hand insights by one of the key activists involved in the #StellasChallenge protests. However, following Flyvbjerg's (2001) approach, the authors have presented a case study that aims to use *phronesis* to enable readers to make meaning from the case. While only one (the disability activist) perspective is presented, the approach aimed for innovation, with one of the activist proponents behind the case collaborating with the authors to uncover a perspective not commonly presented in public relations research.

The contrast between the normative approach of organisations aiming to exhibit "trust, accountability and transparency" in engagement (Johnston, 2014, p. 382) and the desire to reap rewards through cause marketing via social media, often through covert means and 'dark dialogue' (see Willis 2015a), were explored in this case study. Further, this paper presented findings from a stakeholder/activist rather than organisational perspective, in line with the aim to advance theory and practice in this important area as suggested by Willis (2015a), who notes that "PR research and practice have yet to systematically address the complexities associated with organisational governance in the context of stakeholder engagement" (p. 225). Willis's (2015a) concept of 'passive aggression' also resonates with TEDxSydney's response to disability advocates' criticism and concerns. As Willis puts it, "such sugar-coated hostility can be veiled by actions that appear to be inclusive and empathetic to stakeholders, while at the same time seeking to undermine them" (2015a, p. 15). Willis's use of the Orwellian term 'double think' appears to apply to this case, in that TEDxSydney was publicly aiming for engagement on issues

relative to disability, 'honouring' Stella Young's memory, while simultaneously offending and ignoring people in the disabled activist community. Unfortunately for TEDxSydney, the lack of adequate pre-campaign research, and 'listening' resulted in an inability to engage in a constructive sense. Further, its half-hearted attempts to eventually 'hear' disability activists should be noted. Although #StellasChallenge undoubtedly engaged and mobilised key stakeholders, TEDxSydney alienated the audience at the very core of its campaign. Hence, the question arises if there was ever an intention to genuinely involve the disability community, or if the primary motivation may have been to create a feel-good campaign, as opposed to an invitation to meaningfully engage with sensitive, complex and deeply personal issues, such as disability and more broadly health. Consequently, what was promoted as a thought provoking, educational campaign in Stella Young's honour, ultimately undermined the legacy of Stella's popular talk and engendered a high level of scepticism among disability activists that is likely to hinder future efforts.

By definition, engagement challenges traditional organisation-centric perspectives by enabling organisations to move away from agenda setting and one-way communication to what Johnston (2014) refers to as authentic stakeholder involvement. In this case study TEDxSydney appears to have forgotten one of its key stakeholder groups, by failing to listen to disability advocates' concerns and dismissing the opportunity to utilise advocates' input in order to create a truly meaningful campaign in Stella Young's honour. The #StellasChallenge engagement campaign hence ironically failed to truly engage with and listen to the group that had a key stake in the campaign. Initially ignoring rather than responding to the activists and even attempting to silence the dialogue, meant the 'enragement' on the part of the activists escalated. As a result, TEDxSydney ruptured its connections with those key stakeholders who could have helped in not only shaping the campaign, but also in ensuring is genuineness. Hence, it appears as if creative design, budget constraints and corporate decisions overwrote the commitment for genuine engagement with key stakeholders, i.e. the preparedness to listen, learn and involve.

Based on Neiger et al's (2012, 2013) categorisation, TEDxSydney never moved beyond the basic, low-level engagement classification, as it failed not only to engage in, but to seek out genuine conversations with key stakeholders. As a result, the organisation's campaign gained visibility, but arguably not in the way originally intended. Instead of involving disability advocates as co-creators of their campaign, they ended up alienating them. This was the result of an apparent lack of genuine desire to drive attitudinal change, as campaign design and corporate decisions overwrote content in the case of the #StellasChallenge campaign. Organisations like TEDxSydney appear to underestimate the resources and genuine listening skills required when seeking true engagement – as opposed to a tokenistic invitation to 'have a say'. To say what you mean, and mean what you say, and, in the end, practise what you preach, instead of practising 'doublethink, organisations must be prepared to genuinely listen, be challenged, learn and potentially revise original ideas and concepts.

Acknowledgement

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