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## Towards a theory of rent-seeking in activist public relations

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### Introduction

This interdisciplinary paper is an exploratory attempt to apply the theoretical lens of public choice economics to activist public relations (PR). The work considers the potential of public choice as a tool that can bring a fresh perspective on activist PR, which has been presented as having different qualities to corporate PR and as an ideal of balanced dialogic communication that delivers more value to society than corporate promotion. The paper adopts a questioning perspective to the assumption of benign activism and advances an alternative view in the form of three theoretical counter narratives supported and illustrated by examples of recent activist campaigning by environmental groups.

The author acknowledges at the outset that the paper is based on sources in English from economics, political science and public relations literature primarily from the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA). This narrow set of material means the theoretical proposition put forward excludes perspectives from non-English sources which could have given the work more international validity. Moreover, much of the literature on public choice – and particularly on the aspects of voting systems – studies the two-party simple majority electoral system systems of the USA and the UK, which is an additional limiting factor on the applicability of any conclusions.

### Public relations activism moves to the mainstream

In the last decade, the inclusion of social theory in public relations studies has accelerated and in their book that followed a 2007 special edition of *Public Relations Review* on the theme, Ihlen et al. (2009) provided an authoritative guide to the possibilities of understanding public relations at a societal level. In 2013, a special section of *Public Relations Inquiry* related the sociological aspects of neo-constitutional theory to PR (Fredriksson, Pallas and Wehmeier, 2013; Frandsen and Johansen, 2013) a topic that has roots in economics and the governance of common pool resources that are owned neither by the state nor private interests.

Over same period, activism became a significant influence upon the direction of travel in PR scholarship and a welcome broadening of scope. Writers responded swiftly to the stimulus of refreshing early papers and embraced a non-corporate perspective on PR that appeared to offer a more socially acceptable face of a trade described as ‘monstrous’ by Noam Chomsky (Chomsky, 2005). The theoretical foundations of the explorations of activist public relations include Heath’s

(1992) work on rhetoric and the fully-functioning society (Heath, 2006) which also provided a welcome escape from a period of Grunigian capture in which a four-part typology for public relations dominated academic research (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). In considering the historical development of activism, Heath and Waymer (2009: 195) argued that the nineteenth century abolition movement was ‘organized activism engaging in what can be seen as constructive public relations.’ Three years later, Coombs and Holladay (2012) could justifiably claim that activism had become not only a legitimate concern for research, but was also moving critical PR from the fringes to mainstream orthodoxy.

Several prominent writers on activism have been open about the personal motives that led them to explore the topic. David McKie (McKie and Munshi, 2007: 6) referred to his own experience as an activist as motivation along with a belief that ‘activist PR is not only vital PR but has repeatedly shown itself to be innovative PR’ and goes on to eloquently make the case for an international vision of ‘PR with a conscience’. For Coombs and Holladay (2007: 3) an important motive for writing was to ‘help readers understand why society benefits from the practice....the role of power in public relations and the use of public relations by non-corporate entities.’ The book titles in this area share a theme of reinvention, a desire to extend the scope of PR and a sense that PR can solve problems in society as a benign influence: *It's not just PR: public relations in society* (Coombs and Holladay, 2007); *Reconfiguring Public Relations* (McKie and Munshi, 2007); *Public Relations Activism and Social Change* (Demetrious, 2013). This recurring combination of societal generality and personal specificity features in the writing of Holtzhausen (2013: xiii), who spends several pages recording her personal history growing up in apartheid South Africa, before declaring that while working as head of corporate communication at the South African Tourist Board, she realised that ‘communication workers were uniquely positioned to become activists in organizations and in societies and were able to facilitate change by bringing together people who have very opposing views and worldviews to at least discuss their different positions.’ Dutta (2009: 293) has suggested that rather than the accepted norm of public relations people seeing activists as a group to be managed, activists can be seen as ‘practitioners of public relations activities that seek to represent images and issues in contested terrains.’

These views on public relations as activism contrast starkly with the tone of a book from the UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), which focussed on ‘dealing with’ activists as another set of audiences to be controlled and in which there is no discussion of the possibilities of public relations as activism (Deegan, 2001: 4). The focus on dealing with activists is derived from what Dozier and Lauzen (2000: 8) described as ‘the perspective of organizations with pockets deep enough to hire professional public relations practitioners’ to handle the challenges activists present.

The foundations of this approach were laid by Grunigian excellence theory (Grunig and Hunt, 1984: 22), which included a suggestion that when symmetric communication has failed to 'bring peace' to activist campaigns, asymmetric communication should be adopted (1984: 312). Drawing on excellence theory, Larissa Grunig (1992: 503) wrote a guide for PR professionals on how to 'deal in more than an ad hoc way with the opposition their organizations face from activist groups,' whom she regarded as a most strategic public to be carefully managed because of their often underestimated potential to disrupt corporate interests in public policy debates.

### **Public Relations and the Public Sphere**

Public relations exists because organisations desire a voice in commercial and political marketplaces yet the role PR plays in the discourses of the public sphere is contested and also encounters the principal/agent problem. In Bourdieuan terms, the discursive struggle that underpins this cultural intermediary role is inextricably linked to the acquisition of symbolic power (and also, this author suggests, economic power) on behalf of the organizations or principals for which practitioners work (Edwards, 2006: 230). Heath and Waymer (2009: 195) recognised that in fulfilling this intermediary role, while activist communications can contribute to democratic exchange, we should not ignore the 'promotional efforts by activists to call attention to, frame and advocate one or many issue positions.' Writing from that same issues management perspective (but in a chapter focussed on a crisis case), Heath, Palenchar and O'Hair (2009: 482) saw activists as one audience on a continuum that ranged from 'unattached critics to well co-ordinated activists.'

In Coombs and Holladay's (2007: 77) metaphor of the public area for debate as a marketplace of ideas, society is changed if people accept new ideas and in this 'contentious venue.....social activism is one of the areas with the potential for conflict'. Heath (1992) was among the first to present public relations as contributing to the rhetorical dialogue over contested matters in society and ensuring involvement in a fully functioning society. Yet 'what remains of the Habermasian public sphere' (Moloney, 2006: 31) has been further undermined by accelerated pluralism in which the notion of a single public interest is contested as a veritable vortex of civic commercialism has led to the formation of tens of thousands of primary and secondary pressure groups in the UK alone. In her book considering the inter relationship of public relations and social change, Demetrious (2013: i) was concerned how these competing interests resolve, framing the problem in communications rather than economic terms when asking: 'Why are some voices louder in public debates than others. And why can't all voices be equally heard?'

For communicators, this question is central to the notion of rhetoric, dialogue and a fully functioning society. In political science, the same question is relevant to the functioning of democracy, how policy options are made available to populations and the choices they make. The sphere of public decision making in public life, the dilemmas and incentives of decision makers and the information they depend upon to make choices has been the subject of study beyond public relations, in the field of public choice economics, which this paper uses as a theoretical base and will seek to relate to activist public relations. The application of economic ideas to public relations has been limited largely to questions of evaluation (Kim, 2001; Watson, 2012), but Ehling (1992: 617) did provide a comprehensive foundation for the use of cost-benefit analysis in estimating the value to an organisation of excellent Grunigian public relations, although this work but did not consider the wider potential value of public relations in society. In an article considering the relationship between public relations and economic sciences, McKie (2010: 85) wrote of reducing ‘insularity in public relations,’ and it is with this motivation that public choice economics is explored here as a potentially useful theoretical perspective in clarifying the role and potential effect of activist public relations.

## **Public Choice**

### ***An Introduction to Public Choice Theory***

Public choice is sometimes described as a school of economics and has certainly produced an important school in the form of the Public Choice Society in the USA, whose list of past presidents includes the Nobel Prize Winners, James Buchanan and Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2009. The central innovation of public choice is the way it applies the methods and concepts of economics to public policy. While the concepts of benefit, demand, opportunity costs and rational action are relevant, the benefits in public choice are not always financial, but may include a sense of contentment, a fine view, clean air or other non-fiscal rewards. The basis for public choice theory is that the assumptions economists make in analysing markets apply with equal weight to the sphere of politics and public policy. So the same individuals who display some degree of self-interest (but not necessarily selfishness) in their purchasing and commercial life are likely to bring the same self-interest to their engagement with public policy. If this economically-based assumption is accepted, then all participants in the public policy arena, whether they are politicians, voters, lobby groups or activists, will display economic self-interest as they try to maximise their returns from the political system. With that assumption in mind, public choice applies analytical tools such as rationality and trade-offs to governance as well as considering the effect of lobbyists and activists on public choice.

It took almost 2,000 years after Plato addressed political philosophy in *The Republic*, with his suggestion that an ideal model of government would be benign philosopher kings, for a critical book on government to appear. Machiavelli's *The Prince* was published in 1532 and became a founding pillar of political science, ethics and public policy, as well as stimulating a series of articles from public relations scholars. Robert Brown (2014) considered Machiavelli's consideration of reputation and the relationship between power and politics, for example, while others have cited his Prince character as the archetypal political consultant (Lloyd and Toogood, 2014). Concerns over vested interests influencing the political system in order to extract favourable legislation or monopolies were raised by Adam Smith (1977) in his 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations*. Fellow Scot, David Hume (1758), had earlier recorded his warning about the self-interest of politicians and civil servants, urging citizens to be wary of such 'knaves.' These dual themes of self-interest in the political sphere along with the incentives for vested interests to lobby in order to extract economic rents are recurring topics in public choice economics and were explained most fully over 200 years later by Gordon Tullock (2005) in *The Rent-Seeking Society*.

### ***The Calculus of Consent***

Public choice economics was popularised by Buchanan and Tullock's (2004) book, *The Calculus of Consent: Logical foundations of constitutional democracy*, which was first published in 1962. At the time of its publication, the book was said to contain 'intellectual hand grenades' (Rowley, 2004: xi) which could blow apart the received economic and political wisdom of the time. James Buchanan was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for his subsequent work explaining the self-interest of politicians and civil servants and the need for rules to limit the potentially malign effect of activists and pressure groups on policy decisions. The calculus in the 1967 book's title is the judgement a citizen makes about whether to join or initiate collective action, typically through a pressure group. In Buchanan and Tullock's terms, citizens balance off their share of the pro rata benefits of a political decision with their share of pro rata costs in deciding whether not to take collective action. This trade off – or individual calculus - resolves the way individuals elect to absorb the costs of the actions of others before a decision is taken on behalf of the interest of the group which is defined in the following function (Buchanan and Tullock (2004: 61):

$$C_i = f(N_a), i = 1, 2, \dots, N$$

$$N_a \leq N$$

$C_i$  is the expected costs imposed on the  $i$ th individual by the actions of the other individuals and  $N_a$  is the number of individuals (from the group  $N$ ) whose agreement is needed before the

resulting group activity. This is essentially individuals trading off individual utility (normally in the form of a benefit) against the net costs of organising as a group. In these conditions, if the benefits and costs of all collective action could be shared equally across all citizens, the conflicts associated with interest groups and government would not arise. In this view, the vehicle for promotion of economic interests in political systems is the pressure group, which is focussed on functional interest, with a warning that despite empirical work to the contrary, scholars continue to tend to believe interest groups are inherently benign:

The reason for the very existence of such groups lies in their ability to promote and to further, through the political choice process, the particular functional interest represented. Empirical reality must have its ultimate effect on analytical models, even if this reality contains implications about human behaviour that scholars with strongly-held ethical ideals find difficult to accept. (Buchanan and Tullock, 2004: 269)

### ***Mancur Olson and the Tyranny of Minorities***

Mancur Olson's (1968) built on the insights of Buchanan and Tullock with a theory of group action and its effects on public policy. This work was deployed in the public relations excellence literature by Larissa Grunig (1992: 503) as an explanation of the efficacy of relatively small activist campaign groups, that appear to exert influence that is disproportionate to their size. Olson described the dynamics of groups and the personal incentives needed to give rise to collective action, observing 50 years ago, the tendency of scholars to view campaigners and pressure groups as a positive force, despite no empirical evidence to that effect:

Many well-known scholars enthusiastically endorse or contentedly accept the results of pressure group activity and scoff at the journalists and casual observers who worry about the power of pressure groups. It would be difficult to trace exactly the development of the view that pressure groups are generally beneficial or at least benign. (Olson, 1968: 111)

Olson contended that the often opaque nature of political persuasion (conducted largely behind closed doors in and around legislatures) works to the advantages of lobbyists and politicians who trade mutual support, sometimes in ways that work against the wider interests of voters. An obituary of Olson provided a succinct summary of this insight:

Before Olson, political scientists had assumed the interplay of pressure groups was the essence of democracy. Some got their way, others didn't. This "pluralism" both described and celebrated lobbying in a democracy. Olson pointed out the fatal flaw in this

complacent argument. Some lobbies (e.g. consumers) are dispersed. Others (e.g. producers) are concentrated. (McLean, 1998).

One of Olson's key propositions was that the existence of a large common interest group (such as taxpayers or consumers) does not always lead to a formation of a large campaign or activist group and the resulting collective action. The costs of free-riders in campaigns for consumer choice, for example, contrast with the concentrated benefits that accrue to 'closed shop' campaigns undertaken by doctors, lawyers and other groups where the results of collective action accrue to just that interest group. So a small number of vocal activists can affect decisions that harm the (often silent) majority while the self-interest of policy makers combines with the concerns of activists in ways that allow representative systems to be dominated by relatively small groups representing those interests, subjecting democracies to what Staub and Zohn (1980) described as the 'tyranny of the minorities.'

### **Self-interest in activism**

A distinction has been made by some scholars of politics and sociology between the self-interest motivation of lobby groups and the 'purposive incentives' of activist groups, which often have a humanitarian or political element (Hildreth, 1994). A defining point of difference between interest groups and activists has been suggested:

An interest group approach to politics encourages people to organise groups to promote particular ends....They simply aim to win the most for their group and engage in power politics to do so. To this charge the activist responds that his stance differs from that of simple interest advocacy because he is committed to a universalist rather than partisan cause. (Young, 2001)

But such groups also contain self-interested members and public relations specialists who have interests beyond the cause itself. So in addition to the psychological utility of belonging to and working for a good cause, activist PR operators have other interests such as the growth of the group in order to further their career, gaining large scale donations in order to secure their economic future or other interests in the perpetuation of the group, regardless of it having achieved its campaigning goals. In an extensive study of the political economy of environmental groups, one researcher concluded that:

Their activities can be understood as being identical to those of any other interest group – namely the desire to use the coercive power of government to subsidize their personal desires



for greater environmental protection and to redistribute power and wealth to themselves.  
Zywicki (2002: 316)

Murphy and Dee's (1992) study of the campaigning activities of Greenpeace and Dupont observed that both sides shared a 'strong sense of self-interest.' In a paper considering activists and campaign groups in international development Bob (2002) wrote that 'the groups that reach the global limelight often do so at dear cost - by distorting their principles and alienating their constituencies for the sake of appealing to self-interested donors.' So just as politicians are interested in getting elected and bureaucrats are interested in bigger bureaucracies, interest groups are interested in self-perpetuation at least and expansion if possible. These findings are consistent the assumptions about human behaviour public choice economics asks us to make when considering the sphere of public policy, namely that we use the same rational choice as when making decisions in the commercial sphere. Olson (1968: 126) captured this theoretical stance in his claim that spiritual and philanthropic groups behave in the same way as other economic interest groups and as such are 'interested primarily in their own welfare.' In a book first published in 1952, Latham described this effect in philanthropic and charitable groups:

Even if a group is a benevolent, philanthropic association devoted to the improvement of material and spiritual fortunes....the activity of the organization is a means through which the members explicitly express themselves....The philanthropic organization devoted to good works often regards other agencies in the same field with a venomous eye.  
Latham (1993: 28)

Public choice economists argue that this type of self interest in the political system can have negative effects on the quality of policy choices. In addition, the tyranny of minorities effect means that in the struggle between different interests, the advantages often lie with small groups that are focussed on quite narrow areas, such as carbon credits, hunting with dogs, Scottish independence and so on. These sharply focussed groups tend to be more effective than larger and more diffuse interests, such as consumers and taxpayers – or even English, Northern Irish or Welsh voters in the UK in the case of a Scottish Independence vote. In the case of consumers and taxpayers, for example, there are weak incentives for citizens to become active campaigners if they can free-ride on the efforts of a small minority such as the Consumers' Association and the Taxpayers Alliance in the UK. By contrast, activist groups with special interests, professional bodies, trade unions and others are able to restrict any gains they make from policy changes to their own memberships are thus more incentivised to take collective action. In this way, public choice economics confirms what is readily observed in legislatures and the wider public sphere, when through activist

campaigning, it is possible for the self-interest of a small number of highly vocal activists to produce decisions that are at best disadvantageous to the majority and may disadvantage some sections of society.

### **The Sentient Rewards of Activism**

In addition to the concrete gains of policy changes and expansion (or at least continued existence) of the group, the benefits of supporting an activist group can include more sentient rewards, that may be described as altruistic. Altruism differs from self-interest in that the reward lacks any pecuniary, power or resource gain – either immediate or deferred - and is instead is a positive incentive of the social benefit of “feeling good” from belonging to a group and gaining a sense of personal fulfilment and satisfaction by being involved with a worthwhile or ideologically fashionable cause. So while not measureable in terms of material or power resources, there is clearly value to the holder in the form of an emotional benefit. The sentient rewards of involvement are the opposite of the negative feelings of being excluded from a campaign group or trend that is being widely adopted in a peer group. Olson observed that the rewards of a sense of doing good in society and doing so with like-minded people is a reward in itself, with exclusion acting as a negative incentive.

Small groups have an additional source of both negative and positive selective incentives. Clearly, most people value the companionship and respect of those with whom they interact. ....the censure or even ostracism of those who fail to bear a share of the burdens of collective action can sometimes be an important selective incentive. An extreme example of this occurs when British unionists refuse to speak to uncooperative colleagues, that is “send them to Coventry.” (Olson, 1982: 23)

Sentient rewards can affect the level of public involvement with campaigns and the core operations of activist groups, some of which pay heed to emotional returns of their supporters as much as their mainstay campaigning. Introducing an interview with Greenpeace, BBC Radio’s Justin Webb (2014) alleged that a ‘Green Blob of environmental activists are more interested in campaigns that make them feel good rather than really caring for the environment.’ For the executive director of Greenpeace, Stephen Tindale, the ideological expectations of its members around areas of science such as genetically modified foods have led to campaign stances that have little basis in scientific or humanitarian terms:

I worry about Greenpeace and the other environmental groups because they could - by taking such a line on GM - be seen to be putting ideology before the need for humanitarian action. (Tindale, 2014)

A focus on the emotional expectations of donors and the ideology they find comforting may seem harmless but for one journalist writing about anti-GM campaigners, the result is damaging to rational public debate based on scientific evidence:

I used to think that nothing rivalled the misinformation spewed by climate change sceptics and spinmeisters. Then I started paying attention to how anti-GMO campaigners have distorted the science on genetically modified foods....In short, I have learned that the emotionally-charged, politicised discourse on GMOs is mired in the kind of fever swamps that have polluted climate science beyond recognition. (Kloor, 2012).

The emotional and feel good motivation for activists also features in mainstream politics. In his maiden speech to the UK's House of Lords, Lord Watts (a retired Labour Member of Parliament who was served as leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party) warned against the risks to the electoral viability of the Labour Party's if it chooses to 'sit around developing ultra-left wing policies which make them feel good' (HL Deb 11 Jan 2016).

### **Public relations and the economics of persuasion in a rent-seeking society**

Groups with concentrated interests have a strong incentive to organise themselves and while their interest may have little political traction with general voting public, they are accommodated by the political system as being in the wider public interest and may even benefit from funding from government. In 1776, Adam Smith (Smith, 1977) warned against these types of arguments, recommending they be carefully examined with scrupulous and suspicious attention. After the initial acceptance of *The Calculus of Consent*, Tullock (2005: 44) followed Adam Smith's lead and examined the combined effect of mass media, interest group campaigning and what he called 'the politics of persuasion and the economics of lying.' Tullock's concern was that as a result of campaigns in the mass media, the rational but casual voter was more likely to be the recipient of dispersed costs than the concentrated benefits as a result of a legislative process if the tyranny of minorities is allowed to prevail on some issues. The risks of citizens being burdened with extra costs as a result of public policy choices willed by the minority arises from a context of value pluralism, in which there is no single public interest. In this atomised ecosystem of public interests and private motives, there is ongoing competition between different persuaders seeking influence, which plays out in the public sphere through lobbying and PR campaigns. Instead of a pluralistic equilibrium of interests in which every functional group has equal power and the cost and benefits of decisions are shared, Buchanan and Tullock, (2004: 274) argued that the opportunity to exert

influence and secure differential benefits ‘attracts the political profit-seeking group’ that seek two types of differential benefits:

1. Decisions taken which deliver benefits to selected individuals and groups but which impose costs on all members of the community. (e.g. green taxes on energy and subsidies for renewables). This is the classic form of rent-seeking campaigning by corporations for legislative advantage and in activism for decisions that meet policy goals, but which may at the same time load costs on to the majority.
2. Decisions taken which deliver benefits to all members of the community - and may especially aid certain groups - but which impose costs on certain individuals or groups (e.g. removal of patent rights on drugs, granting of right to buy to leaseholders).

This tendency to maximizing from the political system could include formalised rent seeking, a concept Tullock identified (1967: 224) although it was Anne Krueger (1974: 291) who coined the phrase first in academic literature. For individuals or corporations, rent seeking typically results in favourable regulations or subsidies. For campaign groups and activists, the aim is to obtain a special regulation that favours their interests, helps achieve campaigning goals, pleases their supporters or leads to their operations being subsidised by public funds. Tullock distinguished between good rents and bad rent seeking (2005: 148), arguing that while innovation generates returns in a market system as a good rent, an activist group lobbying to restrict innovations because they damage existing production is harmful, and leads to lower growth and productivity. It can also prevent citizens benefitting from advances in medicine because of activists campaigning against technologies such as stem cell research, which has been the target of a joint legal challenge by Greenpeace and the Roman Catholic Church, as outlined below by Pete Coffey, Professor of Cellular Therapies, University College London:

I was absolutely astounded why an organisation like Greenpeace was looking at stem cell research without in any way considering the impacts it would have and benefit for those people suffering from absolutely awful diseases...which are untreatable at the moment. (Coffey, 2015)

Writing about the 1995 Brent Spar protest against Shell’s dismantling of a redundant oil storage buoy in the North Sea, Bennie (1998: 90) identified the skilful and persuasive media relations skills of Greenpeace and the orientation of its protests to media friendly happenings: ‘The seizing of the moral high ground and the use of symbolic, emotionally charged moral messages has been a common theme throughout Greenpeace’s campaigning history.’ For De Jong (2005: 120) these

are the tactics of media-based oppositional politics and it was no surprise that pressure groups operate on the ‘moral high ground’ coupled with strategies for ‘alliance with science’ (De Jong, 2005: 113). This annexing of scientific evidence to support their case has been a feature of many environmental campaigns seeking to persuade legislators and public, which include staged media events (such as climbing on oil platforms) and claims based on science to achieve legitimacy. Yet these claims are not always based on facts and all of twelve British journalists interviewed in one study said they had decided not to rely on Greenpeace reports because their PR material was ‘wrong in its science, its evidence or its balance,’ (Anderson, 1991: 47).

## **Towards three theoretical counter narratives for activist public relations**

### ***1. Public relations activism as rent-seeking***

This paper proposes that activist public relations can be theorised as rent-seeking in a political economy of persuasion. While the term is more normally used for individuals or industries seeking a subsidy, tariff or special regulation from the political system that will favour their operations, activist campaigners also seek rents in the form of either regulations that meet their campaign goals or a subsidy of their operations. Both of the resulting benefits deliver value to the interests of the group in terms of fulfilling the objectives for which the collective action was undertaken, funding its operations and recruiting new members, as well as the sentient rewards (the feel good factor) of supporting a worthy cause. Rather than seeing their campaigns in this rent-seeking frame, activist groups more typically argue that they are campaigning in the public interest. But in today’s pluralist society, in which the pre-1950s massification of opinions, media and membership organisations such as the church and political parties of 100 years ago has given way to widespread fragmentation, it is less clear what constitutes a shared public interest.

This evolution of the public sphere means that modern activist groups are operating in a political economy of persuasion in which the benefits accrued from lobbying can include direct funding of their operations by policymakers because of a view that their campaigning is in the public interest. For example, Friends of the Earth Benelux’s accounts confirm that the organisation receives around half its £2.1m funding from EU grants given by seven different European Commission bodies (Mendick and Melnick, 2013). In a circular cash carousel of self-interest that even the most prescient public choice economist may not have been able to predict, this means that the European Union is paying green campaign groups millions of pounds to lobby itself.

Benefits - or rents - may also accrue in the form of decisions or delays on projects as a result of campaigning, which enhance the status of the activist group and can lead in turn to more members

being recruited and more funds raised. But this type of campaigning intervention can be problematic in the case of transnational campaign groups that seek policy change or restrictions in one country, when the benefits from the resource they wish to restrict have already been enjoyed in their more developed home country. In 2015, in a perhaps extreme example of a response to this type of ideological imperialism, the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi froze seven Greenpeace bank accounts. The move was made by the democratically-elected government in response to an intelligence report that accused foreign-funded NGOs and activist groups of stalling major infrastructure projects (Vaughan, 2015). In particular, activists had campaigned to block the expansion of nuclear power plants that the Indian government said were essential to growth and were also fighting the introduction of GM crops, which the government favoured to increase yields and reduce dependence on pesticides. The Indian intelligence report claimed that NGO's tactics included 'people-centric' campaigning (i.e. emotional and not based on science) to undermine projects in a range of sectors including mining, thermal energy and hydroelectric power with the objective of keeping India - in 'a state of underdevelopment' (Rahman, 2014) with the result that India's GDP growth fell by 2-3% because of NGO campaigns between 2011-2013.

## ***2. Well meaning tyrants?***

Politicians are normally reluctant to create and support legislation that will load costs on their constituents. Similarly, campaign groups do not intend to contribute to poverty and hunger in developing countries. Yet the narrow interests of some activist groups does lead to campaigns against innovations – such as stem cell research and GM crops – on which the scientific evidence is positive, as explained below by Dame Anne Glover, who is now Professor of Molecular Biology and Cell Biology at the University of Aberdeen and was previously a highly-regarded scientific adviser to the European Commission from 2011-2014.

There is a big danger that we inadvertently export our views to other countries who cannot afford the luxury of holding views that we hold. I do not go to bed hungry tonight. The consequences for them quite dire when GM can offer the option of sustainable agriculture. There has never been a technology that has had so much money spent on it in terms of looking at its safety. If politicians had the leadership and bravery to say we have looked at the evidence and we accept that the technology is safe, but if you are citizens do not want it, we will continue to vote against it. Then we might be able to have a decent debate about choices. (Glover, 2015)

In November 2014, after extensive lobbying, Greenpeace welcomed the decision by the new president of the Commission, Jean Claude Juncker, to dismiss Anne Glover. Greenpeace's EU agriculture policy director, Marco Contiero claimed that she had been hindering the provision of 'wide ranging and transparent scientific advice,' (Waterfield and Gosden, 2014) a view not shared by the wider scientific community. World Health Organisation Chief Scientist, Roberto Bertollini said the decision demonstrated Mr Juncker's unwillingness to accept independent scientific opinion and went on to say that 'ideology and vested interests continue to dominate the public debate in Europe and elsewhere irrespective of the attempts to bring knowledge and science-based advice in the picture' (Waterfield and Gosden, 2014). The effect of focussed, ideologically-based campaigns are felt not only in the home country but often go beyond borders. This means that the policy results of persuasive activist campaigns contribute to a globalisation of the tyranny of minorities as Western campaign ideologies are distributed from developed economies in the form of policy decisions that affect developing economies. The resulting restrictions on technologies such as GMO allow activists to export their views to countries at a stage of development and level of income means that means their citizens cannot always afford to conform to Western sensibilities.

One currently contested of this globalisation effect is the campaigning against Golden Rice, a genetically-engineered crop that includes a biosynthesised beta-carotene component aimed at combating vitamin A deficiency (VAD). Golden Rice was developed as a humanitarian project to combat a problem that the World Health Organisation quantified in 2005 as affecting 190 million children and 19 million pregnant women, in 122 countries in the form of VAD which went on to cause 1–2 million deaths and 500,000 cases of irreversible blindness. Greenpeace's campaign against Golden Rice includes destroying the crop in field trials in the Philippines, which prevents scientific verification of its viability and safety, thus preventing or delaying its use, which for the one ex-UK Environment Minister was unacceptable:

The Green Blob is holding the line. Greenpeace skirts around questions on Golden Rice. Since yesterday, 6,000 people have died because of vitamin A deficiency... it was utterly wicked that last year Greenpeace activists trashed trials in the Philippines on Golden Rice.

(Patterson, 2014)

For a founding member of Greenpeace and director of the organisation from 1971-1986, Greenpeace's campaigns against Golden Rice, which have included disrupting field trials in Asia, marked a departure from humanitarian roots for the organisation in the interests of ideology that pleases their supporters:

My problem with Greenpeace is they have lost any humanitarian roots they had. They lost the concern for humans, and their position on Golden Rice is clear evidence of that. They have turned into, basically, an evil organisation. (Moore, 2014)

This paper contends that in cases like the campaign against Golden Rice and others, public relations activists and campaigners are at risk of contributing to the tyranny of minorities effect in the public sphere that disadvantages the silent majority at home and can go on to cause harm to some of the poorest people beyond Western borders. Despite these obvious effects, activist communicators continue to believe they are working for a good cause and that their persuasive role is to win the argument at all costs. In order to avoid the charge that public relations activism can sometimes appear to be the work of well-meaning tyrants bent on ideological imperialism, communicators should confront the risks and impact of their campaigning in a global context, rather than focussing solely on the effect in the home legislatures and their home funding centres.

### ***3. Perceptions of Power***

The normative narrative of the relative power and resources in activist campaigning is summed up well by Holtzhausen (2007; 359) who described an ‘inevitable power imbalance between organizations, which often have unlimited resources, and activist groups.’ This paper challenges this perception in which private power and resources are automatically assumed to be greater than those of activists. While imbalances undoubtedly exist, in an era of professional, well-resourced activist groups, described by Moloney (2006: 33) as ‘closer to protest businesses than protest groups,’ the assumption that the imbalance is always one-sided should at least be questioned and could be explored more fully in future research. In particular, the budget of large activist groups such as Friends of the Earth (UK income of around £12m) and Greenpeace (global budget of \$360m) cannot be meaningfully compared with an organisation such as an energy company for which the core activity is making electricity and whose campaigning is limited to a public affairs and public relations team of, say 10 people and a budget of less than £1m a year. Cases like these suggest that the units of measure – absolute size or organisation, total income and so on - are not accurate in measuring the campaigning power and resulting effect and so contribute to a misperception of the relative power of the activists and the corporates that are the target of their campaigning. As one PR manager (in a team of two) in a UK energy firm commented to the author, ‘the activist groups have a business model. They do not have any other output. Campaigning is all they do. One campaigner described it to me as an endless war’ (Personal Interview, 2015). The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a biotech firm spun out of a UK



University has described how his small firm has been accused by one activist group opposing genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) of interfering with the rigorous approval processes of US Food and Drug Authority (FDA), in an instance of significant error in power perception, in his view:

They say us - a 50 person firm – is subverting the US Government. How a 50-person firm has the power to subvert the US Government is beyond me.

(Personal Interview, 2015)

Certainly, the larger groups combine well-structured organisations with political connections and deep funding, some of which comes from governments in the form of grants as a result of rent-seeking activity. Other activist groups are seeking to increase their power and influence by engaging in tactical alliances with corporate lobbyists in cases where they have shared campaign goals. For one observer, the power of environmental activists in particular has increased as a result of their work in coalition with corporate lobbyists (rather than against them) in seeking rents from the political system:

The environmentalists and corporate lobbyists working together are the coalition that drives climate change policy. Activists who claim that they would prevail if it wasn't for corporations and well-funded lobby groups are deluded. Companies are generally lobbying for more climate change regulation not less.....hoping to extract some benefit.

Sinclair (2011: 209-210)

This type of unlikely coalition does not seem to have been anticipated by Grunig and Hunt in their proposal for the use of two-way symmetric communication as a solution to environmental activism, in which they emphatically stated that both parties 'cannot have all of what they want' (1984; 313). In the developing political economy of persuasion, it appears that in some cases at least, power conflicts in activist campaigns are being resolved in ways that allow symmetrical rewards in the form of rents for both the activists and the corporate interests they oppose.

### **Conclusion and limitations**

This essay intended to introduce the concepts and theories of public choice economics to discussions of public relations activism, examine the relevance of the theory to activist campaigning and to offer critical reflection on activism as a domain of public relations. This narrowness of focus on activism was deliberate, as the effect of commercial interests campaigning for rents has been addressed at length in economic literature. This approach does mean that wider

discussion of how ideas from public choice apply to business and government public relations has been excluded from this paper – an exclusion that presents an opportunity for future work.

Public choice concepts mapped with relevance and relative ease on to the practice of persuasive campaigning by activists and offered some powerful if at times provocative insights on the field. Public choice does seem to provide a potentially useful theoretical approach and the hope is that this initial exploratory essay will inspire further work to test the approach. In particular, in depth theoretical and/or empirical work would be welcome on the three theoretical counter narratives put forward. The theory of public relations as rent-seeking could be countered or supported through either theoretical work (particularly addressing the political economy of persuasion), insights from case studies or ethnographic research within the campaign groups themselves. Similarly the effect of the tyranny of the minorities and power imbalances in activist campaigning could be explored further at the theoretical level or a multiple case study approach.

Although a broader survey of public choice writers was included in the paper as background, the theoretical approach adopted was derived from the relatively narrow - but in the writer's view rich and rewarding - public choice literature of the 1960s. The essay had a particular focus on the work on groups by Mancur Olson, alongside the recently republished output from that time of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, which means the paper did not apply a broader set of ideas from public choice economics to activist PR campaigning. While the concept of public choice economics gained an intellectual momentum in the 1960s which continues today, there has been criticism of its theoretical assumptions about human behaviour and particularly the primacy given to personal utility by Sen (1970) and Green and Shapiro (1994). The alleged gap between the theory of rational choice and variances in behaviour between actual voting populations has also been a prominent, recurring and contested theme for critics. Some dimensions of public choice theory have been criticised for a free-market or anti-state ideology but the key writers have diverse political stances. Mancur Olson (1982) was in favour of interventions by a strong state, for example, and the President of the Public Choice Society, Elinor Ostrom won her 2009 Nobel Prize for a lifetime of work on the governance of common pool resources, which are assets owned neither by private interests nor the state.

Scholarly works, news reports and material from different eras on the theme of public choice have used a range of terms to describe what today we might categorise as an interest group, pressure group, campaign group, activist group, lobbyist or NGO. While acknowledging there can be a difference in meaning in some cases – and with the case put forward for both private and not-for-profit groups sharing some degree of self-interest - this paper used the terms interchangeably in

order to span different eras and literature from different perspectives, while trying to achieve a consistency of presentation within a theoretical theme. However, using terms interchangeably is also a potential weakness as it introduced a significant level of subjectivity in the decision-making process, both at the level of deciding which material was included as relevant to activist campaigning and how it was used.

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