Shopping For Change – Commodifying Practices And Individual Responsibility In Non-Profit Fundraising Discourse

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Moving away from traditional grassroots structures many modern NGOs can be characterized by professionalization and medialization, managed by top executives seeking the advice of consultancy, advertising and communication agencies (Vestergaard, 2008). The growing presence of commercial actors within the non-profit sphere also affects the area of fundraising.

An example of this is what Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) calls marketized philanthropy, i.e. consumption as a charitable act in combination with celebrity centred fundraising campaigns. The connection between charity and consumption is also present in the way issues are being constructed around a discourse of consumer power and influencing policy through the market. In contemporary societies audiences are increasingly being constructed as consumers – with leisure, art, and public service as a form of consumption – rather than as citizens (Fairclough, 1995). This includes making choices on the market, and through those choices statements about who we are and how we want society to function. By engaging in collaborations with for-profit stakeholders NGOs risk obscuring the connection between market-driven politics and inequality, disguising the fact that the ‘giving back’ through consumption is often based on taking away (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009). Normalizing the engagements with market logics also establishes roles and representations of both donors and ‘those in need’ within this discourse. This includes aspects of gendered generosity (Mostafanezhad, 2013), the commodification of ‘the Other’ (Forstorp, 2007), the branding work of ‘aid celebrities’ (Richey & Ponte, 2008), the spectatorship of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013), and the ‘Politics of Pity’ (Naylor, 2011) within non-profit marketing.

Drawing on previous research on politics in the market-place (Littler, 2009; Micheletti, 2003; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012), and also theories on subpolitics (Beck & Ritter, 1992) and individualization (Bauman, 2001), this paper strives towards a qualitative understanding of non-profit fundraising as a discursive practice connected to social and cultural processes of individualization and marketization. It does so by using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) to examine online fundraising texts from six Swedish aid organisations, focusing on commodifying practices when it comes to the identity, agency and subjectivity of organisations, donors, and recipients. The main research question to be answered is; how are the representations of participants being constructed in these texts?

The study shows that market logics and language is prominent in the organizational communication both as discourse of efficiency, self-sustainability and individual responsibility and as a technique for fundraising. Fundraising messages are mainly configured around the act of donating as a form of transaction, where the donor buys a commodified version of the idea or efforts of the organization. In this way the donation becomes a form of commodity activism that situates the donor in the position of customer rather than ally. Freedom of choice and simplicity are traits that are highlighted and promoted in this context.

I argue that this development, even though it entails positive re-thinking about agency and power of ‘those in need’, contains problematic aspects when it comes to the way global power relations are constructed. Where individualization serves as a detaching force between participants, and political participation is constructed in such a way that it takes the form of ‘shopping for change’, it is hard to find room for perspectives and voices that question the structural problems of capitalist society.

References
Cambridge: Polity.