How Nonprofits Encourage Citizen Participation: Comparative Study Of Development Ngos’ Message Framing Behaviors

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Overview: Through efforts such as fundraising, volunteer recruitment, and advocacy campaigns, nonprofits encourage citizens to participate in endeavors to advance particular cause(s). In doing so, nonprofits frame and articulate messages to incentivize and mobilize potential participants. Presumably, nonprofits choose and frame messages that best resonate with the audience, considering the fact that perceptions towards particular issues as well as culture of philanthropy differ among societies. Therefore, one would assume that messages articulated to encourage citizen participation also vary. This paper tests this assumption through cases of NGOs engaged in international development in four donor societies – Japan, United Kingdom, Taiwan, and South Korea – and examine whether messages differ, and if so, how.

Empirical Concern: For every nonprofit, securing resource and public support are the keys to effectively promote its mission and for sustainable management. Applied for this challenge has been to strategically employ marketing perspective in their communication, i.e. to strategically select the target audience, understand incentives that resonate with their minds, and to frame communication messages accordingly. One necessary task for effective implementation of such strategic communication has been to understand messages currently articulated by nonprofits. This paper joins this effort.

Theoretical Framework: Applying framing theory (Entman 1993), this paper understands nonprofits as strategic framing agents with power and the ability to decide what information to present, and more importantly, in what manner.

Location in Wider Literature: The ways in which nonprofits frame communication messages to mobilize citizens towards particular cause(s) have been discussed in studies of nonprofit strategic communication (Bonk et al. 1999) and social marketing (Andreasen and Kotler 2008). These studies examine potential application of business marketing techniques to the nonprofit world, while others conduct experiments to identify effective message components (Chang and Lee 2010). Studies have also analyzed message framing practices empirically in fields such as health and environment. This paper joins this body of literature on empirical analysis of nonprofit strategic communication, particularly those focusing on international development (Okada, 2013; Dogra, 2012; Smillie, 1995), expanding them in two ways. First, I expand the geographical focus from European and North American contexts to non-Western countries. Second, I introduce comparative perspective to better understand the characteristics of message framing behaviors in individual donor countries.

Methodology: I conduct framing analysis using information that development NGOs present on websites. I compare messages of NGOs based in Japan, United Kingdom, Taiwan, and South Korea. Targeted are organizations that have its international partnership branches in these countries, e.g. World Visions, Save the Children, and Oxfam. While Japan is of key interest to the author, I have chosen the UK given a comprehensive study by Dogra (2012) on development NGOs’ message framing behavior. I also chose Taiwan and South Korea because they share similar history of rapidly rising from being a recipient to donor country. For framing analysis, I combine qualitative content analysis, semantic network analysis, and visual image analysis to capture framings both at macro level, broadly examining emergent themes, as well as at micro level, backing up these results with semantic network analysis that looks into words used in texts. I approach visual image analysis from semiotics-stylistics, examining who is captured in the photo, where it was taken, and facial expressions of those who appear in the photo.

Main Argument: This paper argues that messages articulated by development NGOs in Japan, UK, South Korea, and Taiwan differ. Differences stem from varying history on international
development as well as culture of philanthropy. Based on detailed analysis currently underway, the study will identify specific similarities and differences.

Relevance to International Audience: Findings of this study provide new data on practices of how nonprofits encourage citizen participation, focusing on their strategic communication behaviors. According to my knowledge, this research is the first study that compares NGOs’ communication practices in multiple national contexts. The findings of this study provide new insights to both NGO practitioners and academics studying nonprofit strategic communication and social marketing internationally.

References