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The Brand Behind the Activism: Patagonia's *DamNation* Campaign and the Evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

Patagonia's 2014 documentary *DamNation* marks a compelling and unconventional milestone in the evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as public relations practice. The company drew from commercial acumen but also grassroots organizing, moving its CSR initiative closer to a form of social and environmental activism. This study, especially relevant for strategic communicators focused on CSR and sustainability issues, assesses *DamNation*'s impact upon Patagonia's audience in terms of message effectiveness, company reputation, and willingness to act on Patagonia's behalf in addressing the issue of dams. An online survey with experimental conditions was used to measure audience views on Patagonia's campaign, as well as differences between those exposed to such company-sponsored activism and those who are not. Findings from the study shed light on both emerging CSR practices and integration of grassroots activism approaches.

Keywords: communication; documentary; environment; dams; activism; Patagonia; CSR; media; public relations; advocacy; social movements

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and social activism have enjoyed markedly different trajectories over the past decade. CSR has emerged as a vital business activity for many firms, especially for those whose success is directly contingent upon the health of communities and environments in

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which they preside or conduct operations. Companies on the front lines of CSR have emerged as international leaders in a new business environment marked by revised business priorities and unprecedented stakeholder dialogue (Dawkins & Lewis, 2003). Global companies with offshore operations, for example, are increasingly aware of their obligation to those jurisdictions they operate in—which may take the form of good-paying jobs for the local citizenry, improved infrastructure, educational and recreational amenities, and long-term environmental commitments. Consumer retailers may similarly integrate the social, economic, and environmental welfare of their stakeholders and communities with their business objectives. For public relations practitioners specifically, CSR is an increasingly crucial dimension within their profession. It is also an important route to a greater management role for the PR function, given its role in elevating a corporation's societal impact (Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

Social or environmental activism, meanwhile, has often come to be affiliated with action directed by social movements or advocacy organizations toward institutions, including government bodies but also corporations. Social movement activism that works *with* or *within* institutions is sometimes argued to be co-opted and therefore less effective, although such institutionalization does not always entail the curtailing of depoliticization or demobilization of collective action (Suh, 2011). The global public's growing concern over social and environmental issues means that *both* CSR and activism are prominent in the spheres of commerce and communication. What is less likely, however, is to see the two activities conflated. This study looks at one unconventional case—a prominent U.S. outdoor gear company's campaign to eradicate the damming of American watersheds through activist documentary production—to assess the roles of both CSR and activism. An online survey with experimental conditions was used to measure differences between those exposed to such company-sponsored activism and those who are not. Findings from the Patagonia study shed light on both emerging CSR practices and integration of grassroots activism approaches.

The Case of Patagonia and *DamNation*

In March of 2014, Patagonia premiered its *DamNation* documentary at the South by Southwest festival held in Austin, Texas, winning an audience

choice award and putting the environmental spotlight on the damming of rivers and other watersheds in the United States. Produced by the popular outdoor apparel designer, the film was positioned as an "odyssey across America that explores the sea change in our national attitude from pride in big dams as engineering wonders to the growing awareness that our own future is bound to the life and health of our rivers" ("The Film," n.d., para. 1). The documentary marks a compelling development in the evolution of CSR as public relations practice. CSR suffers from competing definitions in both professional and academic circles (Dahlsrud, 2008). Often, it refers to the confluence of social or environmental responsibility *within* business operations or economic models. Patagonia's *DamNation* campaign, drawing from a mix of commercial acumen and grassroots organizing, is markedly different in that it moved CSR closer to a form of activism, defined as the act of campaigning for change on political or social issues (Council on Europe, 2015). The *DamNation* campaign at once integrated an environmental cause into its retailing and product business model (showing the documentary at its retail stores, for example, or making the DVD available for purchase on the Patagonia.com website) while at the same time challenging the government and industry both in the film and in media interviews and related publicity. At one point during the film, a proponent for the removal of dams calls for sabotage if necessary.

Patagonia, long admired for its social accountability, has increasingly become more of an outspoken advocate for environmental and corporate responsibility (Horn, 2014). The business publication *FastCoCreate* describes the company's "compelling stories to inspire people to not only buy its products, but also (to) buy into its philosophy and take action" (Beer, 2015, para. 6). Founder and owner Yvon Chouinard would be unlikely to argue with this assessment; his company has long been able to engage activists connected to the company's causes. For example, it established the Tools for Grassroots Activists Conference in 1994, where seasoned activists train members of environmental groups who are supported by the outdoor clothing company. More recently Patagonia has sought to discourage the kind of unbridled consumerism that takes place on the Friday after the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday—the so-called Black Friday shopping event—by funding advertisements proclaiming "don't buy our products" (Sacks, 2015). *DamNation* is just the latest and perhaps

most visible step in Patagonia's evolution from corporate social responsibility to a direct advocacy or activism.

After its South by Southwest launch, *DamNation* had its U.S. theatrical release in New York City, coupled with a nine-city tour of regional film premieres and 23 free screenings across the U.S. These screenings were often organized with grassroots organizations. For example, in Eugene, Oregon, the film was hosted by the Western Environmental Law Center and the environmental group Save Our Wild Salmon, and the event was sponsored by a salmon-safe certified local business. This rollout was followed in the fall by a tour of the film to Patagonia retail stores. Shortly after, the documentary reached a much wider audience on Netflix and other streaming video platforms. Despite its mobility and early accolades, the film was not universally acclaimed. Taking aim at Patagonia's subjective approach, the *Hollywood Reporter* argued that the filmmakers "assume viewers already lean toward their side of the argument…they don't make much effort to pit conflicting values against each other with statistics or a devil's-advocate argument" (DeFore, 2014, para. 3). *The New York Times* chimed in that Patagonia's documentary "lumps together its grievances and interviews in a way that feels scattered and geared toward those inclined to agree" (Rapold, 2014, para. 1).

Yet other observers have equated Patagonia's campaign as proof that business ethics—a driver of CSR—can bear out new business ideas: "High moral values can provide a source for innovation. They can give a clear point of differentiation, a better image and a business advantage" ("Moral Values," 2015, para. 6). Further on-the-ground results show that the *DamNation* documentary has found strongly sympathetic audiences willing to parlay their sentiment into real action on behalf of the cause or the company. For example, university students at Whitman College in Washington State, in a bid to remove four dams along the lower Snake River, have started a student advocacy group inspired by the documentary called Rethink Dams. In their bid to decommission the dams in the state's southeast corner, the group is reaching out to students on campus, as well as citizens of the city of Walla Walla and its outlying region (Johnson, 2015.) Patagonia's role in launching a grassroots initiative like Rethink Dams, among other localized dam removal projects, begs the question: Is their role a manifestation of corporate social responsibility or, given its

opposition to governmental policy and resource infrastructure, does it more accurately reflect a form of activism?

From CSR to Activism

Corporate social responsibility is defined by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2009) as a "commitment by business to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the community and society at large" (p. 3). This can involve community engagement, volunteerism, environmentalism, and philanthropy. The cultivating of engaged and loyal customers can lead to improved market share, profitability, and other financial incentives. While CSR has a long and varied history that goes back centuries, formal articulations of the responsibility of business to stakeholders in the public have arisen primarily over the past half-century (Carroll, 1999). Management positions such as that of the chief sustainability officer address the demand for CSR initiatives and solutions within organizations (Hopp, 2014). The rise of CSR has occurred during a time when increased emphasis has been placed on organizational public relations. CSR's rise in the late 1970s and early 1980s coincided with the growing importance of corporate image management and a higher demand from the public for corporate transparency and information (Clark, 2000). This emphasis on public and stakeholder engagement is reflected in a more recently suggested typology for CSR that replaces the categories of economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic with instead environment, diversity, community, and employee relations (Hou & Reber, 2011). Similarly, in an examination of a New Zealand entertainment company with a CSR focus, the fostering of cultural connectedness, local relations, and community inclusiveness helped the organization reach its CSR goals in the realms of environment, diversity, equity, and enterprise (Schoenberger-Orgad & McKie, 2005). A study of the Australian banking industry reveals that public relations practices have laid down the foundation for CSR as a legitimate and growing business practice in that country, mirroring an increasing focus on social responsibility that has occurred at global, national and industry levels and is seen in the development of reporting guidelines, industry codes, and international standards (Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007).

These global perspectives have revealed the role of country and cultural context in deploying CSR. A comparison of CSR reporting in Australia and Slovenia find financial and management considerations to be more important in Australia than in Slovenia, where reporting is shaped by employee, community, and cultural concerns (Golob & Bartlett, 2007). However, organizations operating beyond their local or national market should be wary of positioning CSR efforts exclusively within local or national contexts. In several areas, particularly the environment and labor, activists interrogate and challenge organizations across geographic boundaries, creating issues for companies operating in areas where social expectations or standards are different (Golob & Bartlett, 2007). In the United Kingdom, Kovacs' (2006) study of interdisciplinary CSR literatures and the organizations Global Compact, Global Alliance, and Business for Social Responsibility, found an explication of the themes of diversity, community, environment, and employment practices. Such a confluence of CSR practice with multiple aspects of an organization's operations has resulted in real consequences for public relations practitioners tasked with oversight of CSR. Increased knowledge of a company's CSR activities on the part of consumers can impact purchase decisions and lead to more positive attitudes of a company (Wigley, 2008). This focus on awareness and interactivity has positioned the activities of public relations practitioners as strikingly similar to topics within CSR (Clark, 2000). For example, the activity of media relations and obtaining accurate media coverage, which can be a necessary ingredient for CSR approaches, necessarily involves the expertise from public relations professionals (Zhang & Swanson, 2006). A necessary embrace of successful CSR by PR practitioners has been addressed as one route to a greater management role for the PR function within organizations, in great part because CSR addresses a corporation's societal impact (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). This assertion builds upon the findings of a 2008 survey of more than 1,800 members of the Public Relations Society of America, pointing to public relations' significant management role in the context of CSR (Kim & Reber, 2008). The same survey, however, noted the importance of CEOs, with the support of executive leadership or dominant coalitions a crucial element to the success of practitioners' individual CSR efforts. Professional communicators within CSR-focused organizations are thus empowered to interact with stakeholders about these issues. The presentation of informational CSR content has become standard for many companies, although much of this content delivered via interactive media

such as websites has yet to realize its full dialogic potential (Capriotti & Morenno, 2007). For publicly-traded companies, CSR also needs to be viewed in the context of the rise of shareholder activism, particularly over the past decade. An expanded role for investor relations, predicated on corporate commitment to action serving society, can help organizations meet or exceed societal expectations (Uysal, 2014). The concurrent role of social shareholder activists in influencing corporate societal action underscores the increasingly fluid relationship between activism and CSR, and hints at their potential conflation.

In conceptualizing corporate social advocacy, previous research posits that companies who weigh into polarizing socio-political issues or communicate for public policy change—whether intentionally or not—are engaging in a form of advocacy, one that in turn can have an impact on organizational goals such as consumer perception and financial performance. While consumer agreement with a company's stance in the "public sphere" results in greater purchase intention, the opposite is also true—disagreement lessens the same intention (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Wigley (2008), notes that many companies have done a poor job of communicating their CSR activities historically, and that the impact of message source—whether a sponsor company or the media—could play as strong or greater a role in audience embrace of CSR efforts than cognition of the activity itself.

This study seeks to assess whether corporate social responsibility that takes on the attributes of activism can dispose audiences to be more partial to an organization's message or point of view. It also examines how such activism—in this case through the acts of documentary film production and distribution—impacts audience perceptions and attitudes towards the organization itself. This study then asks two primary questions: Are audiences inclined to agree with Patagonia's views on dam removals in the United States; and are audiences more likely to be disposed toward an organization through exposure to a company's activist media production?

Research

This study conducted an online survey with experimental conditions to assess differences between those exposed to company-produced

documentary film messaging and those who were not. Because this study uses human subjects within the experiment, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained. This study used the Amazon Mechanical Turk service (MTurk)—a "marketplace for work that requires human intelligence" ("Overview," n.d., para. 1)—to randomly recruit more than 230 American adults to complete the Qualtrics-based survey. According to viability studies, MTurk is approximately representative of the population of U.S. Internet users (Ipeirotis, 2010). Of the participants who completed it, 57% of respondents were male, compared to 43% female. Nearly half (45%) of participants were between the age of 25-34, while a further 23% were aged 35-44, and 12% were aged 18-24. Asked about their outdoor recreation preferences, nearly half of all respondents indicated participation in camping (52%), hiking (49%), and fishing (47%). Less popular activities were sailing/boating (16%), canoeing or kayaking (13%), and white water rafting (7%). Asked about membership with an environmental or conservation group, 12% of respondents indicated affiliation with such an organization.

Participants initially visited a website that provided general study information. Informed consent was obtained, with participants clicking an "agree to participate" button at the bottom of the site. Participants were then introduced to a 2014 excerpt from the publication *Earth Island Journal* about the issue of damming in the United States. The excerpt provided a brief explanation of the purpose of dams, their historic importance in securing energy and water as well as providing flood control, and environmental and economic explanations for recent dam removals. From here, participants were randomly directed to two versions of the study corresponding with two experimental conditions (one with exposure to a documentary clip, and another without). Participants in the treatment group were directed to a three-minute trailer/short video from the Patagonia-produced *DamNation* documentary (see Figure 1). This particular clip was chosen for both its summation and reflection of the documentary's nature, as well as its relative brevity compared to the entire production. The second group for control was not exposed to Patagonia's documentary clip, but was made aware of the documentary's existence and Patagonia's environmental goals for the production. All participants completed a scaled questionnaire, asking for their opinions

Figure 1. DamNation documentary trailer. Click the screen shot to view the video on YouTube.

about the following: the importance of the cause, the participant's personal views and knowledge about the topic, and his or her willingness to act based on the documentary's message. They were also asked about their affinity for Patagonia and like-minded organizations engaged in environmental activism. All participants also responded to a questionnaire about their demographic background, as well as affiliations with environmental organizations and/or hydroelectric dams.

Likert scale responses were used to gauge audience reaction to the issue of dams, articulated through a series of statements. To measure salience of the issue, survey participants were asked to respond to the statement that "Government and industry should reduce the damming of watersheds in the United States" on a five-point scale (from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".) A second statement asserted that U.S. citizens should be made better aware of the environmental consequences of dams. Again, participants were asked to respond based on the five-point scale. Respondents were then asked, again using a Likert scale response set, whether they were more likely to: contact a politician or government official about the issue of dams; donate to an environmental organization

as a means to expressing concerns over dams; and sign a petition to express concerns over the issue. Respondents were also asked if "they were troubled by the environmental impacts of damming" and whether they were "concerned about future dams being built in the United States." To assess company support, respondents were asked if they were more likely to favor the pro-environmental messages of companies like Patagonia; be in support of companies engaging in environmental activism; be more likely to buy Patagonia products as a result of such advocacy; and support Patagonia as an organization as a result of their interest in dams. More generally, respondents were asked if they were more or less likely to support the decommissioning of dams; if they would talk to their family or friends about this issue; and if they perceived whether they were more knowledgeable about the topic.

Pre-testing was conducted with graduate students to garner feedback on optimal articulation for the questions and ensure maximum reliability and validity of responses. Feedback indicated that language specific to the issue but not known to the general public—so-called "environmental jargon"—should be avoided. It also showed that some more complex questions should be simplified whenever possible, even if this meant creating a larger number of simpler questions. Based on this information, revisions were made to the question set.

Evaluation

RQ1: Are audiences inclined to agree with Patagonia's views on dam removals in the U.S.?

That the broader themes of Patagonia's environmental activism featured in the documentary *DamNation* resonate with audiences is demonstrated in survey responses about the issue of damming. Responding to the statement "government and industry should reduce the damming of watersheds in the United States," a strong majority of survey participants (67%) indicated agreement or strong agreement. Over 80% of respondents indicated strong agreement or agreement to the statement that "U.S. citizens should be made better aware of the environmental consequences of dams." Other statements related to cognition or support of the topic had similar results. For example, a majority of respondents were troubled by the present environmental impacts of damming (59%)

and were concerned about future dams being built (65%). A further 61% supported decommissioning of dams. Such strong support was not as pronounced, however, when the survey statements turned to personal or political action. For example, only 26% of respondents were willing to contact a politician to express their concerns over the issue; less than half were willing to donate money to an environmental organization based on the issue; while a healthier 58% were prepared to sign a petition.

RQ2: Are audiences more inclined to support a company as a result of activist media production?

Whether exposed to the documentary or not, a majority of participants supported Patagonia's involvement with the issue. Over 67% of respondents supported companies engaging in environmental activism, while 65% agreed with the notion that companies producing pro-environmental messages make for better corporate citizens. Just under 50% of respondents indicated they would be more likely to buy Patagonia products as a result of the company's campaign. Again, this degree of support for the company's environmentalism did not translate into a perception of future environmental action against dams on the part of audiences. Exposure to the anti-damming documentary was not found to be a catalyst for increased affinity for the topic or a greater likelihood to take action. Independent samples t-tests were calculated comparing support for the *DamNation* campaign between exposure and control groups. P-values comparing the means of responses to questions measuring affinity for the cause between the two groups were higher than 0.05 in all instances, thus rendering any differences as non-significant. Individuals who viewed Patagonia's documentary were not more likely to hold the company in a higher (or lesser) regard as a result of its activism. Again, independent samples t-tests were calculated comparing affinity for Patagonia as a company between exposure and control groups. In comparing the means of responses to questions measuring company affinity between the two groups, P-values were higher than 0.05 in all instances, rendering results as non-significant.

Analysis and Discussion

Where does one company's corporate social responsibility stop and social activism start? Patagonia's *DamNation* campaign represents one case

where the demarcation may be more apparent than others. The company has openly publicized its "activist" activities, some of which are less central to its business model as a designer of outdoor clothing and gear than others. As media activism, the *DamNation* documentary and Patagonia's producing role had many of the characteristics that define social movements. The company disseminated an environmental idea by leveraging its considerable economic resources and a network of loyal consumers and retailers. Such an approach to an economic and environmental issue—one with implications for governments and citizens across the United States—is not without risk. In corporate social advocacy, the act of firms taking a public stance on socio-political issues can be controversial—serving to attract like-minded activists while potentially alienating stakeholder groups (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Patagonia certainly went beyond a high-profile position on a contentious issue. It actually financed, distributed, and widely promoted an activist documentary. Notable is that the production celebrated certain forms of civil disobedience, such as trespassing onto government properties and acts of vandalism at dam sites. Patagonia's CEO Rose Marcario noted herself in an interview with *Fast Company* magazine that such alienation was a risk the company was aware of and willing to take, regardless of the financial fallout:

> This documentary took on an issue we didn't feel that anyone else could take on in the way that we could. Any fight worth fighting is the sort of attitude that we take…we don't sit back and go, "Well, what kind of an ROI could we get on a film? (Sacks, 2015, para. 9)

To this end, Patagonia willingly accepted such contention as part of its own strategic communication campaign. Given that its chief stakeholders—its customers—are also enthusiasts of the outdoors, Patagonia was acting from a foundation of corporate social responsibility. The documentary's articulation of the company's environmental ideology, however, transformed this brand-oriented CSR into a real activism that was taken up by customers, environmental activists, and community organizers alike.

While this study did not demonstrate a significant rise in public support for the cause against dams *after* the viewing of documentary highlights, it did show overall support for the issue and Patagonia's actions on the whole. This indicates that Patagonia had launched its documentary from

an initial position of strength—one that would have been assessed based on thousands of customer interactions and public support for its CEO's statements. Such support for Patagonia's overall campaign was likely bolstered by a customer base that would stand to ultimately benefit from the removal of dams, given the barrier such infrastructure represents to enthusiasts of sports such as fly-fishing, kayaking, and white water rafting. Future research should take into account the multiple stakeholder groups within company ecosystems who are in a position to support corporate activism efforts based on group- and individual-level traits.

Such elaborate networks, with their ability to communicate Patagonia's anti-dams message, were elaborated upon in media coverage, for example. Company founder Yvon Chouinard was central to this effort, being himself a focus of press coverage about the documentary and his company's corporate social responsibility efforts. *The Wall Street Journal* described the CEO as being "America's most unlikely business guru" and that he has "never been driven solely by profit." For the *New York Times*, he wrote an op-ed that synched with the launch of the *DamNation* documentary (Chouinard, 2014). To Canada's *Globe and Mail* national newspaper, Chouinard explained that he personally wanted to see the film spread out to countries such as "Korea, China, Europe, Latin America" (Ebner, 2014). Notably, during this timeframe, he also wrote a book called *Simple Fly Fishing*. The same coverage helped to position *DamNation* as an outgrowth of Patagonia's history of social responsibility. In the past, Patagonia has asked its customers to "buy less and think twice" before purchasing a garment; Patagonia Provisions sells "organic, sustainably fished smoked sockeye salmon"; and a Patagonia co-founded program called One Percent for the Planet sees 1,200 companies donating 1% of their sales to environmental causes.

Another key element to *DamNation*'s *success* in the media was that of localization. Local dams were continually cited in media reports devoted to community screenings of the documentary: a project on the Skeena River in British Columbia, the Snake River dams in Washington State, and the damming of the Great Miami River in Ohio. Additionally, the documentary was promoted as a "community event" alongside local arts events, special lectures, and charity concerts. Local organizations promoting the movie were regularly invoked in coverage: the Raincoast Conservation Foundation, Washington State's Coastal Watershed Institute,

the Hoosic River Watershed Association in Massachussetts, M-Earth in California, and both Trout Unlimited and Save Our Wild Salmon in Oregon.

To this end, what Patagonia created with *DamNation* was not a social movement in the classic sense, but a CSR-as-activism campaign that leveraged the loyalty of its stakeholders and the beliefs of its founder and leadership into a genuine opportunity to shift public policy and enact important environmental change. At the same time, Patagonia has continued a long tradition of environmental activists strategically making their voices heard in the public sphere. More than four decades ago, a long-simmering controversy over the expansion of the Ross Dam on the Skagit River in the U.S. Pacific Northwest underscored the crucial role of public opinion in mitigating the growth of such infrastructure. In his 1974 thesis devoted to the Ross Dam controversy, Terry Simmons—himself one of the original members of Vancouver, BC-founded Greenpeace—argued prophetically that there could only be such public debate around the issue of damming when there also existed a mediated public forum:

> There would be no controversy without active support from members of the media. Opponents of the dam have received good press on the whole. Media coverage generally has been carefully orchestrated in order to achieve maximum impact for the mutual advantage of the media and the conservationists. … A public controversy is in large part a media campaign. (Simmons, 1974, p. 176)

By drawing from its acumen in both strategic communication and activism, Patagonia was able to fulfill Simmons' assertion more than 40 years later. *DamNation* is the inevitable creation stemming from a corporate social responsibility that is intent on disrupting predominant political discourse and producing real environmental action.

Discussion Questions

1. Does social or environmental activism that is backed by like-minded corporate interests, such as Patagonia's *DamNation* activism, run the risk of being seen as less legitimate?

2. Should more organizations be inclined to add activism to their repertoire of CSR activities in light of the evolving definition of CSR?

3. Should organizations pursue activism-as-CSR in an area related to their own expertise or business interests (such as Patagonia's issue of dammed rivers), or in non-related or broader areas?

4. How might other firms with an interest in improving their reputation or brand learn from Patagonia's engagement with its network of customers, retailers, employees, and other partners?

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