

BOOK REVIEW

Powers, M. (2018) NGOs as Newsmakers: The Changing Landscape of International News, New York: Columbia University Press

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ABSTRACT: *For decades, it has become a common trend for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to raise social justice issues and to present their views and positions for them. Their role as international “newsmakers” (=producer of news) has been in the centre of scholars’, journalists’, governmental officers’ and businesses’ interest and has been an area of great debate*

KEYWORDS: NGOs, newsmakers, changing landscape, international news, New York, Columbia University press

INTRODUCTION

For decades, it has become a common trend for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to raise social justice issues and to present their views and positions for them. Their role as international “newsmakers” (=producer of news) has been in the centre of scholars’, journalists’, governmental officers’ and businesses’ interest and has been an area of great debate.

NGOs international news making is caused by a number of key factors. The most significant one include the public awareness increase in the referred issues, the lobbying to political and business players so that they alter their positions about particular themes, funding and better brand awareness achievement. In this context, Power’s book (2018) investigates in detail the communication endeavours and role regarding social justice issues of the leading humanitarian and human rights NGOs, mainly of the NGOs Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

CONTENT

This book is structured in 7 chapters with different themes that are interconnected. More specifically, after presenting the basic theories and methods used by the author for the analysis of the NGOs communication efforts, it refers to the significant increase of

NGOs communication attempts for decades and evaluate whether these tries enable the leading NGOs to garner news coverage. In addition, it provides an examination of the role of digital technologies in forming NGOs publicity strategies and focus on understanding the reasons for NGOs chosen communication strategies, which do not take advantage of new digital opportunities in a high level. It also analyses the causes for the durability of journalistic norms and practices at NGOs communication efforts in spite of the tremendous decrease in international news coverage. After, it explains how leading NGOs communication efforts are received by news media. Eventually, this book finishes with the opportunities and limitations of the leading NGOs communication.

CONCEPTS

Power (2018) presents a variety of ideas concerning why, how and with what consequences leading NGOs act as international “newscomers”. In particular, after the comprehensive review of a plethora of views about NGOs communication role, the author concludes that his “double-edged sword” viewpoint reflects the reality and he explains it. According to this concept (explanation), the leading NGOs increase the news cover and they are seen more usually in the news than in the 20th century. With the support of digital media, these NGOs can progressively influence more the news media agenda in regard to advocacy issues and as a consequence, the public view for humanitarian and human rights issues. On the other hand, the fact that these NGOs use journalistic news norms, leads journalists and government officials to determine which themes are newsworthy. On other words, a “voice” is given to NGOs and this is correlated with the news media interest. Additionally, although NGOs could use digital opportunities to eliminate the control relationships between news media and NGOs, they mainly use digital technologies in order to come in contact with journalists and to secure their trustworthiness-reputation.

With reference to the “double-edged” view, the author attempts to reveal the continuation and shift at both advocacy and journalism field. Analytically, the transitions in the institutional environments of NGOs have partially affected the growth and diversification of NGOs communication the last decades. Donations are given to NGOs because of their ability to attract public attention regarding humanitarian and human rights issues. Similarly, governments allow these groups to participate in their debates because they (=governments) seen them as public proxy who can increase the institutional voice diversity. Also, the downsizing news organizations do not hesitate to ask for the support of the leading NGOs for the coverage of humanitarian and human rights issues. In parallel, the leading NGOs remain to depend significantly on journalistic media for publicity –continuity- and keep using digital tools for strategic reasons and with focus on possible negative results.

It seems that these continuities are caused by the institutional environments of NGOs. Particularly, donors and government officials concentrate on and support the leading NGOs because these NGOs have a voice in the news media. Lastly but not least, journalists characterize NGOs as advocates and journalist’s work positions seem to share common social grounds with NGOs professionals.

METHODOLOGY

The referred views, including author's individual viewpoint, are based on literature review and implementation of a plethora of theories and qualitative methodological tools.

First, these include mainly interviews with NGO professionals and following interviews in specific issues when there is a need according to the analysis of the collected data that is under the principles of grounded theory. It is worth mentioning that the author uses mostly open questions at interviews which aim to explore real observations, the leading NGOs communication concepts/practices and explain the casual relations with other factors, such as the external environment. The author interviewed more than seventy professionals – experienced employees and recently hired, both junior and senior personnel- from different professional backgrounds, such as researchers, advocacy officers, and public-relations professionals and used the method of snowball sampling in order to reach more people for interviews. Additionally, reporters and editors at influential international news outlets were interviewed concerning their reports on humanitarian and human rights issues for Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Second, the book uses a significant amount of empirical findings from prominent advocacy NGOs and a primary twenty-year content analysis of humanitarian and human rights news cover in influential US news outlets. Concrete examples of these organizations are Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, World Vision, Save the Children, Concern, Oxfam, CARE, International Medical Corps, Médecins Sans Frontières, Mercy Corps, and the International Crisis Group. The basic aim of the content analysis is to examine how the leading organizations development endeavours are explained by the theories of news access. For this reason, primary and secondary sources, such as annual reports, media accounts, memoirs by key participants and 2,077 articles were analyzed to find the increasing NGOs communication efforts in relation to personnel size, amount of research reports, press releases, advocacy campaigns, total number of countries and issues of their reporting covers, and the diversification of information formats because of digital technologies.

Finally, the author uses the ethnography research method and the institutional theory. This has to do with in real time observation of journalists during their work – reporting of humanitarian and human rights news cover- and interactions with NGOs professionals and the explanation of the NGOs communication role.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

As it was mentioned before the book's scope is to investigate in detail the communication attempts and role concerning social justice issues of the leading humanitarian and human rights NGOs, mainly of the NGOs Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Through the use of interesting extensive literature and mix of theories and qualitative research methods the book achieves its aim satisfactory. It succeeds to answer why, how and with what consequences leading NGOs act as

international “newscomers”, referring also to the majority of current issues of NGOs news coverage and presenting and explaining the complexity of the issue.

It is worth notable that there are also other points that add value, credibility, and balance to the book’s analysis. In particular, the book’s chosen data are various, reflect many views of the reality, adding a holistic perspective to the analysis of the topic, and detailed, facilitating the reader to understand easier the topic through real cases –NGOs communication attempts of many NGOs-, narratives and observations. Furthermore, the author’s style –usage of I persona- adds a personal and reflective tone to the exploration of the topic, while the usage of metaphors and questions at chapter’s titles, except of indicating the chapters’ contents, increase the imagination of readers.

On the other hand, Power’s book (2018) has some significant weaknesses and limitations. Specifically, the book is overanalytical regarding the sections of selected methodology and is repetitive concerning main concepts eg. the “double-edged sword” view and some parts of the book -whole paragraphs are repeated without changes in the first chapter and in parallel, in the separate introductions of the chapters. The structure of the paragraphs seems to also to be repeated and for this reason, to be uninteresting. Finally, the emphasis of the analysis on these leading NGOs allow the book to come to a general but not so stable conclusion for NGOs communication role. This is because this conclusion is based mainly on these NGOs cases and not to a more extensive sample of leading NGOs.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, this book succeeded its basic aim although there are important strengths and limitations. A diversified target group including students, editors, journalists, NGO practitioners, and policy experts could find interesting insights and ideas about NGOs communication endeavours, practices, role and positions. Lastly, there is a need for further research in this topic and possibly researchers who emphasize only in one NGO case could add interesting value to the research of this topic.