

Corporate activism trends and public relations strategies for the UN Sustainable Development goals

Engagement Between Private Companies and Human Rights Activists

Naíde Müller

Faculty of Human Sciences // Universidade Católica Portuguesa // naide.muller@fch.lisboa.ucp.pt

Abstract

This article is based on the case study of a non-profit NGO, GAT–Portuguese Activist Group for HIV/AIDS, that advocates for legal and political changes within the scope of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Through an ethnographic approach to GAT, a “hybrid multifunctional voluntary organization” that shows the territories where third-sector organizations mix with social movements, and the consultation of 12 communication and public relations experts, the purpose of this research is to understand better the factors surrounding the engagement between private companies and human rights activists. A literature review addresses the significance of activism and social change to public relations theory and practice, exploring the concept of corporate political advocacy (CPA) or corporate activism, meaning companies that become actively engaged with public action on a controversial socio-political issue. Findings suggest that, beyond the strong cultural resistance that still exists about this kind of partnership in Portugal, this is a future communication trend that can be an opportunity for activists to advance causes within the scope of the 2030 Agenda and for companies if they know how to position wisely on these issues.

Keywords: public relations, advocacy, activism, organizations, human rights

1. Introduction

According to the UN SDG Progress Report 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) social indicators by reversing several positive trends and increasing several inequalities within and between countries. The pandemic challenge reinforced the reality that a global collaborative response from governments, the private sector, civil society, and the general public is needed to achieve the goals.

Several contextual conditions have led to the emergence of “hybrid multifunctional voluntary organizations” with an activist culture that can mobilize resources and obtain commitments (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005), like GAT–Portuguese Activist Group for HIV/AIDS, which is the object of this study.

The engagement between private institutions and non-profit associations to advance specific causes is well known, mainly in terms of corporate social responsibility (CSR). However, cases of corporate

political advocacy (CPA), such as the support of Ben & Jerry's for the Black Lives Matter movement (Ciszek & Logan, 2018), the support of Starbucks, Google, Microsoft, and Ben & Jerry's for the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US (Wettstein & Baur, 2016), and Gillette's videos about toxic masculinity in response to the #MeToo movement (DiRusso, 2021), are not so common.

This form of CPA or corporate activism is one new dimension of influence management, with all the ingredients to become a relevant area for demonstrating companies' CSR and reputation (Monaghan & Monaghan, 2014; Peterson & Pfitzer, 2009). These trends present an organizational reality that public relations practitioners may eventually have to deal with (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 118).

Through an ethnographic approach to GAT organizational dynamics and the consultation of 12 communication and public relations experts, this research analyses the engagement between private companies and human rights activists. It begins with a literature review that addresses activism's significance to public relations theory and practice in different organizational contexts. Next the methodology is described, followed by the findings that suggest that, beyond the strong cultural resistance that still exists about this kind of partnership in Portugal, this is a future trend that can be an opportunity for activists to advance causes within the scope of human rights and the 2030 Agenda and for companies, if they know how to position wisely on these issues.

Public Relations and Activism in Different Organizational Contexts

Because strategic communication is fundamental to promote social change, its applicability in an organizational context is relevant for activist movements. It facilitates the organization of collective action, the call for civic participation, and the relations with other social actors. Ciszek (2017) analysed a transnational activist network for LGBT rights in 15 regions, concluding that activists are producers of strategic communication for social change and that activism and public relations are not antagonistic but occupy a fluid space influenced by cultural and economic forces.

Various forms of activism through history have contributed to the appearance of "hybrid multifunctional voluntary organizations" (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005) that fought for social change, challenging dictatorships, protecting workers from exploitation, protecting the environment, promoting equality for women, opposing racism, helping vulnerable communities, and being actively involved with many other issues. Depending on their legal nature and the causes they advocate, interest groups within the third sector¹ and the organizations they establish to achieve their objectives can vary

¹ The "third sector" is a field of study that is difficult to define. The term refers to very different types of organizations that are designated as non-profit, voluntary, intermediary, non-governmental (NGOs), social economy, civil society, etc., and that do not fall under the first sector (public / State) or in the second sector (private / market) (Corry, 2010: 11-20; Ferreira, 2004).

substantially, showing territories where third-sector organizations mix with social movements (Ferreira, 2004; Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005; Martins, 2003).

Just as private organizations cocreate relationships with each other and their surroundings to achieve their business goals, activists' organizations also do that to achieve their advocated social change (Taylor & Botan, 2006). Holtzhausen (2000, 2012) and Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) have claimed that although public relations can create, maintain, and reproduce powerful, dominant discourses, they can also resist and disrupt such discourses. Assuming that advocacy² is a central function of public relations that involves several practices, most practitioners know this function, in itself, is neither good nor bad. Instead, it is how the function is performed that makes the difference (Edgett, 2002).

In the corporate, private organizational context, while some corporations are engaging in socially responsible initiatives related to their businesses or benefiting their communities, other companies have advanced further in this area, supporting controversial causes related, or not, to their core business. Researchers Florian Wettstein and Dorothea Baur from the University of St. Gallen's Institute for Business Ethics label this activism "corporate political advocacy" (CPA). This perspective argues that businesses should publicly communicate their positions on socio-political issues and try to engage different public types on complex subjects (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). CPA is a public relations initiative and implies the acceptance that not all stakeholders will agree with the ideologies and values advocated by an organization (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; DiRusso, 2021).

Although it is not an easy decision for companies, CPA is emerging as a new and dynamic communication trend. It suggests that implied political values on behalf of companies are likely to precipitate divergent consumer reactions. This practice causes simultaneously "disapproval and boycotts from those that oppose the company's position, but approval and buycotts from those that support the company's position" (Hydock et al., 2019, p. 76).

This type of advocacy requires that companies are not just concerned about doing no harm but speak out publicly, which can be critical to advancing human rights and the 2030 Agenda. However, a company must be careful about the choices of issues to advocate. The criteria to make this selection are (a) consistency—the issue must be consistent with the values of the company; (b) plausibility—the topic chosen must be part of a long-term commitment to specific causes or issues; and (c) authenticity—supporting a cause implies more concrete actions than words. Only within these criteria will a company's cause's advocacy be credible (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 211). Furthermore, an experiment by DiRusso (2021) provided several key takeaways for companies planning CSA communication, pointing to the utility of negatively toned CSA communication about highly salient social issues.

² Advocacy is defined as "the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the objective of persuading targeted audiences to look favourably on—or accept the point of view of—the individual, the organization, or the idea" (Edgett, 2002, p. 1).

This communication landscape addresses significant change confronting public relations with corporate activism, that is, corporations taking public stances on political (Wettstein & Baur, 2016) and social (Dodd & Supa, 2014) issues.

2. Methods

Public Relations Ethnographic Approach

Ethnography has been presented as a methodology that brings relevant developments to public relations research, namely within the scope of sociocultural traditions (Everett & Johnston, 2012; L’Etang et al., 2012; Xifra, 2012). L’Etang (2006) argued that placing research in public relations more broadly as “cultural and ideological practice involved in complex intercultural processes and away from technocratic concerns can help in developing an understanding of public relations work in international society and its relations with the world of life and the public sphere” (p. 393). Although it is not yet a frequently used methodology, when investigators are looking for descriptive inferences to identify the interactions between an organization’s culture and its social environment, ethnography has been identified as a methodological imperative in public relations (Everett & Johnston, 2012). In public relations research, ethnography will examine how a group understands and experiences its environment and how it seeks to adapt to that environment (Sutton & Anderson, 2004; Winthrop, 1991).

Research Design

In this investigation, we intended to articulate the data transmitted to us with the existing theories about the phenomena under observation. Following the methodological imperative in public relations ethnographic research proposed by Everett and Johnston (2012), the study’s analytical approach was based on two data collection stages and analysis. In the first moment, we resorted to an ethnographic immersion in the organizational dynamics of GAT using participant observation, interviews, informal conversations with the different members of the team, social media monitoring, and analysis of documents, compiled in a field diary (a document in which all the interactions and information are noted daily).

In a second stage, we consulted experts from 12 communication and public relations agencies associated with APECOM—Portuguese Association of Council Companies in Communication and Public Relations—to understand their position on the topic under study. We focused on the interviewees’ designated “expert position” (Demo, 1995), and we asked all 12 experts the same question:

Some authors talk about a new type of corporate activism that presupposes that companies take a public stand in defence of specific causes (for example, the support of Starbucks, Google, Microsoft, and Ben & Jerry’s for the legalization of marriage between people of the same sex in the US in 2015). What is your perspective on associations of this type between private companies and human rights activist

organizations/2030 Agenda in Portugal, mainly concerning the so-called controversial socio-political issues?

Through these two moments of data collection and analysis, we intended to answer the following research question: Can the public endorsement by private companies of human rights activist groups on controversial socio-political issues (like homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and women's rights (Guterres, 2021)) be seen as a communication trend in Portugal?

Case Study

Ethnographic Immersion GAT and Expert Consultation

GAT is a non-profit NGO based in Portugal and founded in 2001. This organization works with groups of people infected by HIV or at risk (migrants, prisoners, sex workers, drug users, gay men, and others). GAT advocates for legal and political changes within the scope of human rights and the 2030 Agenda, namely the third objective of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. GAT activity highlights the territories where third-sector organizations mix with social movements (Ferreira, 2004). GAT's mission is to advocate and work with other stakeholders for social changes that positively affect the health, rights, and quality of life of people living with HIV-associated diseases, especially those from the most vulnerable groups.

Data Sampling and Sources

Within ethnography, the amount of time the researcher should spend in the field has not been established, but some authors have defined a period from 3 months to 2 years depending on the research design (Fetterman, 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Johnston & Everett, 2012). This study's data were collected over 3 months—January to March 2021—by the author as part of her doctoral study. The methods used for data collection were adapted to the organization's reality and the interviewees, considering the confinement and restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic during the observation period. GAT's teams and the interviewees worked from home, communicating through videoconferences on platforms like Zoom. GAT does not have a formal communication team. People who currently do some communication tasks are scattered throughout project coordination.

In this sense, the field diary was fed through online meetings and conversations (Zoom platform) with these persons, and the monitoring of GAT actions was done via Facebook (the only social media platform where the organization is currently active) and through attending their online events, like live talks and conferences on different topics. We also analysed GAT's 2021 activity plan and other documents. As in the study of Johnston and Everett (2012), we used a qualitative method for data collection based on "participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring) and studying

materials prepared by others (examining)” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10), paying attention to the details in the expressions of culture, framed in their context (Ybema et al., 2009).

Ethical considerations, mainly related to managing the observer–participant relationship, need to be addressed during all the ethnographic research stages (Fetterman, 1998). We addressed this issue by making my role explicit through all the interactions and asking for permission to record the conversations and quote the people involved. The researcher’s role and the investigation’s objectives were explained in the document of informed, clarified, and free consent to participate in the study signed by the executive director of GAT.

Data Analysis and Reduction

Through ethnographic immersion and interviews, we obtained a very high volume of data that required a careful selection process of meaning units. Converting data through description, analysis, and interpretation is not a linear process in ethnographic approaches (Wolcott, 1994). In the first stage of description, fieldwork observation data were documented in the field diary, and all recorded interviews were transcribed as they were undertaken (Baszanger & Dodier, 2004).

To select the relevant information from the ethnographic approach to GAT, we used two main selection criteria/categories (obtained from the literature review): (a) type of activism, according to the typology of activism proposed by Harrebye (2016, p. 3), and (b) position on private-sector companies’ support for activist causes (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

To analyse the responses of the communication experts, we used Nvivo software (12)³. The analysis started by reading, identifying, and classifying codes suggested by the data rather than collected from the literature (Lansisalmi et al., 2004). Coding was operationalized as nodes (meaning structures) and managed by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

Ethnographic Immersion GAT

Type of Activism

According to the typology of activism proposed by Harrebye (2016, p. 83), GAT presents a type of “professional” activism whose “fundamental logic” is based on “lobbying,” this is, on the pressure and influence of decision makers to adopt measures that benefit the communities with which they work. Their most “typical activities” are “campaigns and meetings,” and their “intended objectives” are the “reform” of the system. The “types of slogan” that these activist groups use most are “we are going to

³ QSR International. (1999). NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software. <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home>

commit ourselves all in writing to the real reduction of carbon emissions.” The case of a similar slogan used in a campaign during the period of observation is “to end the HIV and AIDS epidemic as a public health problem in the city of Lisbon by 2030, by improving access to the various responses available” (Campaign #ZERODISCRIMINATION, Lisbon Without AIDS), in partnership with the Lisbon City Council⁴. Concerning the “dominant perception of institutional agents (police, politicians, media),” these types of activists are considered “impertinent specialists (the relationship is appreciated, but often ignored).”

Position on the Support of Private-Sector Companies for Activist Causes

On partnerships with the private sector to advance activist causes, GAT Executive Director Ricardo Fernandes said that “it is a complex issue since many activism movements in Portugal (which is not the case with GAT) have strong links to leftist movements and there is an ideology related to what a company stands for—capitalism—that does not welcome sponsorships by companies and brands for activist events. In some cases, in which these sponsorships occur, namely within the scope of the LGBTI+ community, there are even strong internal divisions between activists since some consider that the communication strategies oriented to the promotion of institutions, countries, people, products, or companies, invoking their sympathy for gay-friendly territories are a form of ‘pink washing’ [appropriation of causes to improve public image].”

Ricardo Fernandes explained that “GAT has several donors, including the pharmaceutical industry, who have a vested interest in having us testing for HIV; the more we test, the more people consume their products.” Margarida Santos, one of the coordinators of the “MORE PARTICIPATION, better health⁵” project (in partnership with GAT), with whom we had an informal conversation via Zoom, explained that “GAT is certainly critical of the pharmaceutical industry, but it knows that it depends partly on its funding.” She clarified that there must be a shared interest and responsibility between the government and private entities in funding activism.

In the most relevant communication moments, companies from the pharmaceutical industry with which GAT collaborates provide their communication and public relations agencies’ services. Ricardo Fernandes explained that “the main difficulty in these partnerships with the private sector is that it is not systematic, there is no continuity. It is when the organization has availability, but this does not always coincide with our communication needs. I think that if an organization wants to move forward, it must have a mixed regime. We have to use what is in the community, but we need to find internal resources to do things for us.”

⁴ Campaign #ZERODISCRIMINATION. <https://www.lisboa.pt/lisboasemside>

⁵ <https://www.participacaoaosaude.com>

Expert Consultation

Regarding the consultation of communication experts from APECOM-associated agencies, as seen in Figure 1, the categories for this type of consultation are the following (by order of highest frequency with which they were mentioned):

Companies and Brands Public Positioning. All experts agreed that this kind of public positioning is not “innocent.” Despite the differences of views on whether they advised their clients or not to engage in this type of more ideological involvement, the majority of the participants agreed that if it happens, “this positioning must already be part of an organization’s DNA” and “what is essential is that it is something genuine, transparent; otherwise, it is a very dangerous path.”

Future Trends. Nine of the 12 experts believed that the organizations’ purposes are being redefined, and the involvement of companies in social issues, considered controversial, has been growing globally. They agreed that this is a communication trend that will also reach Portugal, although later than in other cultures.

Business Interest and Objectives. Seven of the consulted experts agreed that this type of positioning is a marketing and communication strategy. These companies said that they agree with specific causes because most people are also in agreement, which serves their business interests. One of the respondents said that if activist groups “explain and show Portuguese companies that their market segment, their audience has a high percentage of people who belong to or defend certain causes, they may be interested in these causes and even finance them.”

Culture. Six experts reported that the Portuguese business culture is not yet prepared for this type of positioning. One respondent highlighted that “I think that in Portugal we do not have the business maturity for this path. Our leadership and CEOs do not get involved at this level. We do not have that kind of strength, neither in large companies nor in smaller ones.” Another explained that “Portuguese companies do not want to get involved in controversies” ... “there is a big difference in how we walk the talk here compared with Anglo Saxon companies.”

Causes. Six experts agreed that this kind of endorsement in Portugal depends on the causes. Within the scope of their social responsibility actions, Portuguese companies are more oriented toward solidarity on universally accepted values such as charity.

Kind of Activism. The experts’ responses also showed that very aggressive and unreasonable communication styles do not work well in the context of business partnerships. One of the interviewees highlighted that “activisms often have to use the classic tools of capitalism to achieve their goals.”

Social Change. On current social changes, it was mentioned that “societies are changing, young people ask for another type of communication and this activist communication, more interventional, reaches both young people and older people.”

Financing Strategies for Activists. One of the interviewees analysed this issue from an interesting perspective for activists: “I think it is a smart choice and one that should be sought. For all of what we are talking about, it does take some money, even if some work can be offered, some things will always need money and companies have money, and therefore, it is a source that must be explored.”

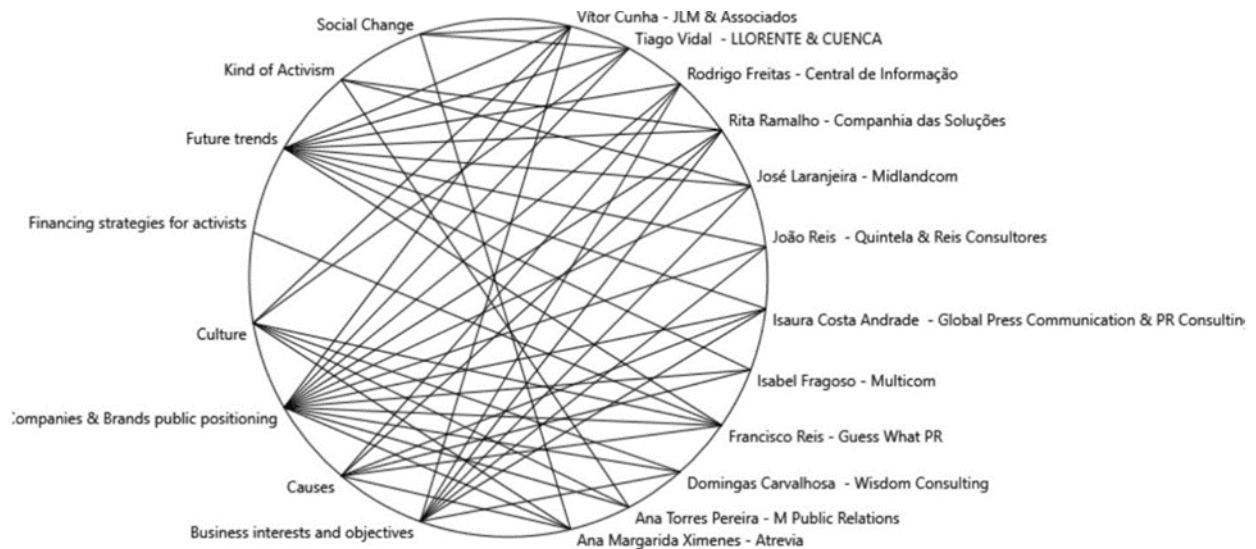


Figure 1. Visual Representation of the Connections Between Respondents and Response Categories (NVivo Software)

4. Conclusions

This study made it possible to analyse private companies and human rights activists’ engagement through two distinct but related organizational perspectives. We observed the relevance of the public relations function within the scope of activities by “hybrid multifunctional voluntary organizations” such as GAT (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005). Through the ethnographic approach, it was possible to observe how activism and social movements can be considered as a form of public relations work concerned with advocacy, promotion, events, public interest, lobbying, and public affairs, communicating with a wide range of audiences, clearly oriented toward social change and for the realization of idealized objectives. In this way, public relations can be understood as an intervention directed toward collective action (L’Etang, 2016).

The observation also allowed to perceive the distrust that some activist groups in Portugal have concerning companies due to political ideologies. Nevertheless, one of the main challenges activist groups face is the scarce financial resources available. As the communication experts mentioned, structured partnerships with the private sector to advance causes can be a strategic option for these

organizations within the framework of human rights and the 2030 Agenda. GAT presents a pragmatic view of its organizational objectives, characteristic of strategic planning in public relations, focusing more on win–win advantages that these partnerships can bring to the causes and less on ideological divisions that may not have concrete consequences for their mission. In this case, the pharmaceutical companies that support GAT do not practice corporate political advocacy. It is recognized that their support for associations such as GAT is fundamentally related to their core business and commercial objectives. Nonetheless, they are important partners in terms of financing GAT’s activity. Furthermore, that support does not prevent GAT from having a critical social voice, if necessary, about the pharmaceutical industry.

However, strategic partnerships between activists and companies are not so common in Portugal. On the one hand, this is due to the suspicions that exist from several activist groups toward companies based on political and cultural oppositional traditions. On the other hand, Portuguese culture, in general, and business culture in particular, and its leaders, do not have the maturity for this positioning in progressive causes such as gay marriage. In answer to this study’s research question, the public endorsement by private companies for human rights activist groups on controversial socio-political issues is not currently a practice that is followed in Portugal. The communication experts consulted expressed doubts about the specific contexts in which this may occur. However, they also agreed that this scenario is changing. Portuguese companies will have to adapt to these new trends and choose wisely what causes and groups to support. This can present an opportunity for activists in the human rights scope and the 2030 Agenda.

Lidl supermarket, for example, recently launched a campaign that quickly went viral on social media. To present its toy suggestions—for the Portuguese Christmas 2020 campaign—the company decided to break gender stereotypes, reversing the roles generally associated with girls and boys (Imagens de Marca, 2020). Several commentators applauded this initiative and underlined the importance of steps like this in breaking stereotypes. Portuguese MEP Maria Manuel Leitão Marques congratulated the company’s decision on Twitter, stressing that any help to dismantle gender stereotypes, as “one of the main barriers to equal opportunities,” is “welcome.”

A recent study from Parcha and Kingsley (2020) revealed that a “corporate statement on a controversial social issue is effective in changing an individual’s attitude toward the issue depending on how much the issue is relevant to the individual’s goals and/or if the corporate statement is supported by other corporations” (p. 350). Apparently “corporations are making conscious efforts to improve their social responsibility by taking stands on controversial social issues,” but “corporate social irresponsibility is still occurring” (Parcha & Kingsley, 2020, p. 377). Regarding future research concerns, authors such as these raise important questions about the balances and imbalances resulting from this attribution and/or appropriation of, even more, powers of social intervention to corporations. In the face of growing social polarization, the tendency is for companies to adopt more explicit positions concerning specific political

or ideological issues. In the context of the struggle for human rights and the 2030 Agenda, these circumstances can represent an opportunity for strategic communication and public relations.

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