

# **Improvisation Takes a Lot of Planification**

Strategic Communication and  
Sociopolitical Contemporary  
Activism

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## Abstract

Activists are producers of strategic communication for social change and play a mediating role regarding (re)producing and challenging established cultural meanings. In a global context of high volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, contemporary activism needs to introduce significant innovations in current mass mobilizations. Otherwise, it falls into the risk of becoming irrelevant. Within this context, new forms of creative activism are arising, which are linked to the contextual strategic approach to the *repertoire* of disruptive tactics and techniques. Strategic communication, or the intentional use of communication by organizations to promote their mission, is inevitably associated with the exercise of power in negotiations among different social actors. In this essay, we argue that the strategic communication approaches that have successfully established mass consumption as a way of life can be used to give public voice to sociopolitical contemporary activists and to increase shared global views for social change, such as the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. We do it so through a literature review on this topic, followed by a description of practical examples. Strategic communication plays a crucial role when it comes to inducing social change. Its applicability in an organizational context is relevant for activist movements as it facilitates the organization of collective action, the call for civic participation and interaction with other social and political institutions. The use of strategic approaches to communication in an organizational context, such as the management of identity, image and reputation, and the approach to political power through *citizen lobby*, can be ways for contemporary activist groups to better mobilize, communicate with their supporters, and seek to influence political decisions. Reflecting and planning before acting or reacting can contribute to the achievement of a voice and legitimacy to operate in the public sphere.

## Keywords

strategic communication, activism, mobilization, social change

## Introduction

The environmental crisis, human rights challenges across the world, and the spread of COVID-19 and its social and economic consequences are leading to pessimistic predictions about the future in a global context of high volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Krugman, 2020;

Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Democracies are shrinking worldwide, restrictions on freedom of expression are increasing with the growth of autocratization and populist movements, giving rise to the emergency of pro-democratic protest movements, such as the Hong Kong protests, also known as “Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement” (Lührmann et al., 2020). Periods of crisis are opportunities for change. Though industries are aware of this fact, activists of the future still need to know about it (Lisi, 2019).

Contemporary social movements have spread by contagion in a world virtually connected and characterized by the fast and viral dissemination of images and ideas. This multifaceted rebellion is not only caused due to poverty, the economic crisis, corruption, and a lack of democracy. At its origin lays the “humiliation caused by the cynicism and arrogance of people in power” (political, financial or cultural) that unite “those who transformed fear into indignation, and indignation into hope for a better humanity” (Castells, 2013, pp. 10–11). The new powers of the media, the culture of networks, and fluidity and horizontality are increasingly influencing the constitution and functioning of social movements (Castells, 1997/2007).

Several authors have researched the impact of strategic communication on social mobilization, which is a determining factor in achieving legitimacy and democratic participation (Kunsch & Kunsch, 2007; Negri & Hardt, 2005; Norris, 2002; Toro & Werneck, 2004). Evidence indicates that activist networks are getting involved transnationally due to a growing coordination of communication and action based on the proliferation of the internet and digital cultures (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Gerlach, 2001; Rheingold, 2002).

In this essay, we argue that the strategical communication approaches that have successfully established mass consumption as a way of life can be used to give public voice to sociopolitical activists (Tafrá-Vlahović, 2012) and to increase shared global views for social change, such as the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. I do it so through a literature review on this topic and the presentation of practical examples.

## **Activism and Social Change: New Circumstances and Old Dilemmas**

The establishment of firm boundaries between cultural/social and political activism is complex. These two forms of civic engagement share social change objectives and groups can act differently at different times (Baptista et al., 2006; Pointer et al., 2016).

Political activism is usually associated with party-driven politics, that is, with civil society groups aligned with political parties or political causes, such as challenging government policies. On the other hand, cultural or social activism focuses on supporting a variety of specific causes (Yang, 2009). Their most prominent distinction is commonly based on the target of activism: while political activism is theorized as political reform and a state-oriented activity (Yang, 2009), cultural or social activism seeks to transform society through art, education and other ways of influencing public opinion (Pointer et al., 2016).

The definition of activism in the *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*<sup>1</sup> tells us that “activism is an action in the name of a cause, an action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine” (Martin, 2007, p. 19). From a historical point of view, activism played an important role in ending slavery, challenging dictatorships, protecting workers from exploitation, protecting the environment, promoting equality for women, opposing racism, and many other important issues. Activism, however, can also be used for other purposes, such as attacking minorities or promoting war. Activism is thus not necessarily a good or bad thing. It depends on the cause, actions, and the reflection of each individual on what is “worth” defending (Martin, 2007).

Activists are the main actors in social movements. Despite the different theoretical perspectives explaining the development of social movements, the analytical construction of the concept allows the identification of converging elements. The concept represents a specific social dynamic that produces meanings through informal interaction networks between different actors who share a collective identity (beliefs and orientations) and get involved in cultural and/or political conflicts (Millward & Takhar, 2019).

In the history of liberal democracy and, therefore, of the democratic state, social movements have been considered as the fundamental channels for civic participation. In European history, they are directly related to the emergence of an open and active public sphere<sup>2</sup>. It has been under pressure from social movements of various kinds that the representation system has been constituted. Free association, such as freedom of conscience, speech,

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<sup>1</sup> Social justice is based on values that aim to minimize social inequality and create an environment of equal opportunities for all, allowing all human beings to live with dignity (Rawls, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Concept that encompasses several extensions of definition and analysis and that refers to the dimension where public affairs are debated by public and private actors, representing, in contemporary democratic societies, an intermediate structure that mediates between the state and civil society (Habermas et al., 1974).

industry, religious belief, and the press, have emerged as an invention that, between continuities and discontinuities with the previous order, began to build institutions and practices for the recognition of collective identity actions (Della Porta & Diani, 2015).

The concept of social movement presupposes an explicit identification of opponents and an uninterrupted collective action process that seeks to achieve political consequences for a certain period. For this to happen, social movements resort to the combination of several actions that distinguish them from occasional protests: (a) “sustained campaigns of demands”; (b) “a set of public performances that include demonstrations, rallies, creation of specialized associations, public meetings, petitions, propaganda and lobbying”; (c) “concerted public representations of respectability, unity, number and commitment” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 45). There are considerable differences between the approach of some third sector<sup>3</sup> organizations and social movements in terms of how to achieve social change. But there are also several contextual conditions that lead to the emergence of hybrid multi-functional voluntary organizations with the capacity to mobilize resources and obtain commitments (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005).

Based on the “Occupy Wall Street” movement experience, “the strongest, most sophisticated and broadest” in the past 50 years in the USA, White (2016, p. 35) says that activism is in crisis. The author characterizes this movement as a constructive failure that made it possible to draw deep learning. The defeat of “Occupy Wall Street” has made it clear, in a democratic context, that governments currently use military equipment to suppress non-violent democratic protests. It served to demonstrate that the protests of millions of citizens, even with wide international media coverage, have no political consequences and that current activism that seeks to replicate successful formulas of the past, are merely an illusion (White, 2016).

Crowd psychology, this is, the study of how individual behavior is impacted when large crowds group together, is a “blind force” that can be amplified to create incredible forces of power through the media (new and old) and innovative communication approaches. The challenge is how to target this “explosive potential” for positive purposes (White, 2016, p. 57). White (2016) assumes that strategic techniques of collective thinking, which do not yet exist, are needed to transform activism and achieve effective social changes.

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<sup>3</sup> 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, social economy, civil society, and so forth, and that do not fall under the first sector (public/state) or in the second sector (private/market; Corry, 2010).

## Strategic Communication and Creative Activism

Most protests remain “an unconscious collective response, an act of collective anger, rather than a strategy rationally designed to transform political reality, ( ... ) which tend to dissipate as soon as the moment of anger passes” (White, 2016, pp. 63–64). As White (2016) argues, the “future of activism is a struggle to capture the imagination of humanity” (p. 173).

Since strategic communication is the intentional use of communication by organizations to promote their mission, the contribution of this field of research and practice to the mobilization and participation of citizens is essential (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Hallahan et al., 2007; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014).

The focus of strategic communication is on analyzing how the organization presents itself and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication professionals. The organization is broadly understood here as referring to associations, activist groups, (non-) profit and (non-)governmental organizations, and those that promote various forms of social change, political parties or movements (Hallahan et al., 2007).

The notion of strategic communication presents communication as deliberate, planned, goal-oriented, and performed by a specialized professional. It also emphasizes that, although strategy and planning take place behind the scenes, the ultimate goal is to communicate in the public sphere (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014). Strategic communication is inevitably associated with the exercise of power in negotiations between different social actors and the influence of this power in “contemporary society is an indisputable reality” (Kunsch, 2018, p. 14). In this regard, it is worth recalling the perspective of Bloom (1991) that the appeal of communication, when compared to strength, is in the “lethality and sophistication of weapons” (p. 708).

Within the scope of communicative efforts involving organizations, there is no comprehensive conceptual framework on the work of the various disciplines related to the area of strategic communication. Instead, the focus of the various communication activities has been on specific management problems, such as improving performance, selling more products, motivating donors or building relationships (Hallahan et al., 2007). Strategic communication has aggregated all types of communication that are used to pursue predetermined objectives with the most diverse audiences, introducing multifaceted concepts related to different areas and activities such

as marketing, public relations, advertising, political communication, and information/social marketing campaigns (Zerfass et al., 2018).

In the last 10 years, much has been discussed about the need to create a rigorous and unifying body of knowledge oriented towards specificities that go beyond the use of communication to serve the interests of an organization (Hallahan et al., 2007; Nothhaft, 2016; Nothhaft et al., 2018; Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018; van Ruler, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). However, it continues to coexist within the scope of the investigation and practice different understandings about strategic communication. One of the causes of the problem surrounding the term “strategic” is that it has been strongly associated with a modernist approach to management, commonly used as a synonym for a “successful” tactical or operational action plan, or even as something of high importance (Hallahan et al., 2007; van Ruler, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018).

In the transition from conservative and rational views (which are focused on results) to complex interactive perspectives (which consider uncertainties), it is argued that strategic communication is likely to be more successful if fundamental human psychological motivations and mechanisms are taken into account (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018). The call for consistency in the field of strategic communication aims at a vertical integration of interdisciplinarity (Nothhaft, 2016) that can pass through the reconciliation of the understanding of the human mind and values with theories of strategic communication (Fawkes, 2015; Seiffert-Brockmann & Thummes, 2017; Trayner, 2017). In order to achieve predetermined and planned goals, strategic communication appeals to human nature, triggering fundamental motives that are linked to certain modules in the brain, which can, in turn, trigger different modes of communication, stimulating, for example, “dialogue or a bunker [closed] mentality” (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018, p. 429).

These considerations become particularly relevant when analyzing activist strategic communication for social change as social roles, which imply status and power, influence subjective well-being (Yu & Blader, 2019). Theory and preliminary evidence suggest that the stress associated with the identity of minorities results in negative emotions and attempts to suppression that can contribute to the depletion of the capacities of executive functions (McGarrity et al., 2019). In addition, the dynamics of construction and deconstruction of meanings related to strategic communication impact the increase or decrease in the activation of stereotypes influencing judgments and social perception in different ways (Rivers et al., 2019).



Since strategic communication is fundamental to influencing social change, its applicability in an organizational context is relevant for activist movements as it facilitates the organization of collective action, the call for civic participation, and interaction with other social institutions (Ciszek, 2017). Ciszek (2017) analyzed a transnational activist network for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights in 15 countries/regions, concluding that activists are producers of strategic communication for social change. Likewise, she concluded that activism and public relations, for instance, are not antagonistic, but occupy a fluid space which is influenced by cultural and economic forces. The research demonstrates how activists' function as cultural intermediaries, playing a mediating role in regard to (re)producing and challenging established cultural meanings.

Harrebye's (2016) work deals with the new forms of non-violent activism that have emerged in recent decades, which is defined by the author as "creative activism". It is a form of activism that creates and explores spaces for a "revitalization of the political imagination" and does that by using innovative tactics (Harrebye, 2016, p. 14).

Rather than being results-oriented, creative activism focuses on the process. It merges provocative artistic performances with utopian elements using flash mobs, human sculptures, interactive virtual games about the climate, documentaries, thematic festivals, and so forth. Through artistic and creative provocation, creative activists stretch the limits of civil disobedience. The case of North American activists Yes Men is an example that takes advantage of moments of political opportunity through caricatures and the practice of what they call "identity correction" when posing as powerful people and spokespersons for prominent organizations. Another example of this form of activism happened in February 2012 when five members of the Russian feminist punk rock collective Pussy Riot enacted a guerilla performance of "Punk Prayer – Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!" in Moscow's biggest Orthodox Church. Three of them were arrested and charged with hooliganism. This was a protest action against the Russian Orthodox Church's support for the regime of the Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who had just been re-elected. They also contested the passivity and retrograde view of the Russian people about the role of women in society. They became the center of attention in their country and in the world, gaining the support of several celebrities like Madonna, Bjork, Paul McCartney, and Sting (Harrebye, 2016, pp. 97–100).

Creative activism can also rely on mirror techniques to create alternative reflections on a given reality through immanent criticism and utopian

imagery. One of the tactics used by students during the 1996–97 protests against Milošević’s regime in Serbia, for instance, was to hold huge mirrors in front of police chains blocking their passage. The police were thus confronted with themselves and not with the students. Innovation on the margins of containment repertoires can break vicious cycles in cultures of power (Harrebye, 2016, p. 119).

This type of activism is concerned with the contextual strategic approach to the *repertoire* of disruptive tactics and techniques. The attribution of subversive meanings to pre-existing messages, the use of humor to highlight the absurdities opposed by activists, and the use of parables and narratives to capture public attention are some examples of these tactics. In Portugal, an instance of this approach occurred in April 2019 with the intervention of young environmentalists from the movement “Extinction Rebellion”. They protested against the potential location of a new airport in Lisbon. They entered the Socialist Party’s birthday dinner and interrupted Prime Minister António Costa’s speech by taking the microphone he was using away as to convey their message while trying to escape security. They got wide media coverage with this action.

Twenty-first century activism seems determined not only to stand against the status quo, but also to demonstrate how the world can be different, using the “power of intelligent action” (Harrebye, 2016, p. 217). These connections reinforce the idea that a strategic approach to activist communication dynamics presupposes coordination between organizational communication strategies aimed at different audiences and communication strategies aimed at communicating and establishing relationships with other social structures, such as political and/or economic power.

### **Strategic Does Not Mean Artificial – Managing Identity, Image, and Reputation**

Since activism is a relational process focused on making connections between economic and cultural components (Ciszek, 2017), the strategic approach to communication in an organizational context is an asset for how activists can refine their social relationships and interactions in order to achieve their goals of social change. In a very critical view of the transfer of social activism to digital environments, White (2016) states that current mass mobilizations are failing to change society, putting contemporary activism at a crossroads: either significant innovations are introduced, or it becomes irrelevant. In his

view, we are in a new era of social change. In this sense, movements will have to become increasingly sophisticated, reaching critical mass to challenge elections, govern cities, and reorient the way we live.

Even though levels of complexity and sophistication can vary widely between a 20-year-old organization that earns billions and an initiative to raise awareness among the population of 6 months, the strategic process at each level can be analytically separated into three distinct phases, according to Zerfass et al. (2018):

1. The *formulation and revision of the strategy* must be understood in the double sense, that is, a strategy is not only a silent allocation of resources, but also a communicative intervention that gives meaning to actions. Its subjective dimension is the most relevant, since, if most people, in a given context, seriously discuss a subject, that subject becomes of strategic significance, creating its own objective meaning.
2. The *strategy presentation* is the stage in which the actors involved become aware of the strategy, its requirements, and opportunities.
3. *Execution, implementation and operationalization of the strategy* implies the decisions to allocate resources to operational processes or tactical dispositions.

In order to convince others to adopt a specific understanding of various “social scenes”, in Goffman’s (1959) sense, certain tools have to be used. A great collaborative effort is needed to achieve a convincing performance with assigned roles, scripts, costumes, and a stage. Only when all these elements are used to create a coherent scenario about reality in time and space can teamwork be considered successful (Goffman, 1959). Goffman’s vision can be applied to strategic communication planning processes, in which it is necessary to learn to “play the game” (Volk et al., 2017). Planning processes are useful to minimize the discrepancies between appearances and reality or between the ideal mission of an organization (and the individuals that integrate it), and the real mission and its results, as perceived by the various publics.

As a creator of symbolic narratives that facilitate interaction between organizations and society, the strategic approach to communication will look at the need for understanding who the organization is, its essential aspects (identity study), what is its relationship with others over time,

and how others see the organization and relate to it (study of publics, including the study of image and reputation; Spínola, 2014). A social group has distinct characteristics from those of an organization. In certain contexts, however, it is possible to find similarities in processes, behaviors, and actions between a group called organization or company and social groups or movements such as those formed by activists. Issues related to collective identity refer to the new social movements that emerged in the 80s of the 20th century in Europe (Spínola, 2014). Empirical studies, in a corporate or organizational functionalist approach, have identified a relationship between better organizational performance and intangible factors such as identity, culture, image and brand (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1990).

Based on the literature analysis, Ruão (2015) defines organizational identity as:

the set of central, distinctive and relatively long-lasting attributes of an institution/company, which emerge from the vestiges of a historical heritage, such as myths and traditions; a shared culture, its beliefs and values; personality traits, expressed in philosophy, mission and business vision; a distinctive name, visual symbols and other forms of communication; but that also arise from the patterns of organizational behavior. (p. 119)

Organizational culture is defined as “tacit organizational understandings (e.g. assumptions, beliefs and values) that contextualize efforts to create meaning, including internal self-definition” (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 996). The organizational image is the “set of views on the organization held by those who act like the ‘others’ in the organization” (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 996).

Participation in a particular activist group is a rational attempt to obtain the benefits from those who share a collective identity (Friedman & McAdam, 1992; Pizzorno, 1986). The management of the collective identities of activist groups needs to articulate the framework of social injustices and the structures of action in order to clearly distinguish “us” from opponents, using several strategic and tactical decisions (Horowitz, 2017; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). This happens within a “multi-organizational field” that includes organizations, authorities, media, allied financiers, competitors and opposition (Bernstein, 2008).

Activists can define their identities in very different ways depending on each situation and their strategic objectives, whereas the activist identity and collective identity are not the same. The better they define and structure their identities, the greater the capacity of groups to impact strategically the recruitment of members and supporters, obtain public support, form alliances with other groups, and weaken opposition (Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Collective identities are in constant interaction with personal identities but are never simply the aggregate of individuals' identities. Culture has an independent role in the constitution of collective identities around which people are mobilized. Collective identity is not the same as common ideological commitment. People can participate in a movement because they share goals without identifying with their colleagues (they can even despise them). The collective identity describes "imagined and concrete communities, involves an act of perception and construction, as well as the discovery of pre-existing bonds, interests and limits" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 298).

In turn, reputation results from the coherence between identity and image, from the alignment between what is communicated/said and effective actions. As an intangible management asset that is built over time, reputation is conditioned to a context and includes an evaluative dimension, of outside judgment. In a global, competitive world with limited resources, identity and reputation can represent the "only distinctive element of the organization that determines the public's choices" (Raposo, 2010, p. 70). This asset is so valuable for a profit-oriented organization as well as for an activist group that seeks to implement social change. In the case of activist groups, they want to be perceived, most of the time, as agents of concrete social changes.

The creative approach to contemporary activism uses temporal interventions, such as strategic events, transformative actions, and production of spectacles with content characterized by a cynical approach, an ironic attitude and/or an intentional imaginary questioning, with the aim of provoking the reflection of the individual viewer and the public sphere. In this case, the identity of activist groups and individuals is not only created based on opposition, but also seeks possible gaps for consensus and dialogue (Harrebye, 2016).

In contemporary life, with an excess of stimuli and noise that make it difficult to perceive what is true or false, "authenticity", this is, when the public appearances reflect the real self, has gained prominence as a new model

of communication (Hardt, 1993; Molleda & Roberts, 2008). The wave of protests against the controversial re-election of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in August 2020 during the COVID-19 global pandemic is an example of how an authentic public stance, which does not attempt to imitate conventional political speeches, based on new alliances and on-line criticism can cause the turmoil needed for political change to happen. The re-election of the one that is considered the last dictator in Europe (Lukashenko was in power for 26 years) was considered fraudulent, bringing thousands of people to the streets in protests. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, a 37-year-old Belarusian who challenged the authoritarian leader at the polls, had no political experience and claimed publicly that she did not like politics. The reason for her to apply for elections was “love”, according to her own statements to the press. When her husband, an influential blogger who denounced abuses of power on social media, was imprisoned by the authorities indefinitely, she partnered with other women in a coordinated challenge (using peaceful protests) against the oppressive and patriarchal culture that still prevails in Belarus. This unprecedented wave of social protest has attracted the attention of the international community and the interest of the United Nations Security Council (Lévy, 2020).

### **Strategic Communication and Power Dynamics**

The basis of the concept of power is defined by the ability to influence others to do what certain groups or individuals want. The notion of “soft power” originally arises in the context of international relations and refers to the ability to get what you want through attraction, rather than coercion or payments. In other words, there is an increase in “soft power” when the ideas or policies of a country, group or person are perceived as legitimate in the eyes of others (Nye & Myers, 2004, as cited in Verčič, 2008).

Social systems are communication systems and the main forms of communication are money in the economic field, power in the political field, influence in the domain of the social community, and attraction in the cultural domain. Despite their differences and specificities, the various areas of knowledge of strategic and applied communication share a common idea: the combination of knowledge of the social sciences and the development of experience through training can generate better results in inducing influence, attraction or commitment. Put it another way, communication management exceeds spontaneous communication (Verčič, 2008).

The power of influence, attraction or commitment within the scope of strategic communication is achieved through symbolic communicative and discursive logics. Power is thus disposed of in the public arena through structures of meaning. Meaning results from the discursive ability and influences the following: (a) mentality, or how the construction of language and vocabulary shapes what and how we think, which in turn shapes the way we speak and act on a subject; (b) the self (identity and identification); and (c) society, which consists of culturally represented relationships based on narratives (Heath et al., 2009).

Access to the political agenda is the most effective way for activists to ensure significant public and media attention to their demands. It is often believed the contrary, that media visibility is the best way to pressure and influence the political agenda, but the temptation to positively equate media attention and power of influence, without deepening the other mechanisms involved, can become a trap (Mongiello, 2016). Media attention generally focuses on activism related to issues that are already on the agenda of major political institutions (Mongiello, 2016).

Using public performances that can give rise to media attention, activists exercise their power by encouraging audiences that probably already sympathize and support the causes they defend. In addition, the protest as a performative rebellious act has been increasingly institutionalized as a commonplace and an orderly form of expression, which is why radical and aggressive protests are increasingly seen by the public as illegitimate (Mongiello, 2016).

Although there is evidence that public attention and the framing of issues are the main drivers of political change, policymaking is generally confined to closed bureaucratic networks that resist changes based on interests and ideologies from outsiders (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). For this reason, it is important to activate other mechanisms of influence, which often occur behind the scenes of power, and which can impact the ability of activist organizations to influence political processes.

Activist groups often represent “public interest lobbyists”. These groups constitute a specific category that seeks to win some public good or resource, whose benefits will impact all citizens, whether or not they are members of that group or organization. Human rights associations, organizations around environmental protection or peace are some examples of such groups (Coroado, 2016; Lisi, 2019). In the perspective of these groups

and causes, lobbying<sup>4</sup> is not only legitimate but necessary for effective participation in the intricacies, often “insidious and oligarchic” of conventional politics (Alemanno, 2017). Bearing in mind that only groups with greater resources have had access to lobbying, the concept of “citizen lobby” seems an oxymoron. However, by providing a counterweight to certain interests, this type of lobby can significantly improve the quality of political decision-making and simultaneously increase citizen participation, improving their perception of the power they have (beyond the vote) to achieve social changes.

Unlike other forms of traditional activism, the citizen lobby reconciles protests and proposals. That is, the participation process does not start from the conflict, but from a legitimate interest presented in a reasoned way to the political power (Alemanno, 2017, p. 69). In addition, the quality and depth with which citizen lobbyists or lobbyists from public interest groups substantiate their arguments will determine how seriously policy makers, the media, and other audiences will publicly welcome and promote their views and proposals (Alemanno, 2017).

The tactics that integrate a lobby strategy presuppose direct contacts with policy makers, elaboration of studies and creation of partnerships and coalitions between interest groups with similar objectives. A first fundamental task is to obtain the maximum amount of information (Coroado, 2016) about: (a) the subject in question: what has already been said and done and by whom and the existence of published scientific studies on the topic; (b) the constitutional and institutional framework, which are the competent entities to act and what national and international laws and recommendations already exist; and (c) who are the interest groups that will win or lose (possible allies or opponents) according to the results of the claims, as well as their degree of influence (Alemanno, 2017).

Democratic tools such as petitions, public consultations and others can also be strategically activated. Public interest groups are increasingly turning to social media to convince public opinion of a particular position and to “pressure the political decision-maker, who in turn seeks to maintain positive approval levels to guarantee votes” (Coroado, 2016, p. 58). To increase their potential for participation in the democratic process, public interest groups can also seek to improve their civic competences such as speaking at public meetings, networking, and teamwork to develop advocacy strategies (Alemanno, 2017). It is

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<sup>4</sup> The definitions of “lobby” tend to converge as to its main objective, which is to influence legislative decisions through legitimate means (Coroado, 2016; Lampreia, 2005).



necessary to choose the battles (to invest in the strategic planning of each subject or topic) and to manage the subjects based on a balance between passion and strategy.

One of the main challenges activist groups face has to do with the limited financial resources available. Unlike the professional lobby, the public interest lobby is dependent on voluntary actions and low-cost solutions. In this context, the strategy requires the detailed identification of costs so that the objectives of fundraising are clear. Maintaining costs may involve identifying *pro-bono* advice. The rapid expansion of this form of collaboration, makes it increasingly easy to identify specialized professionals, namely lawyers and communication consultants, who are available to give their opinion and counselling on various circumstances and procedures (Alemanno, 2017).

The financing of the actions also uses fundraising campaigns online and/or offline through the appeal to philanthropists (on an individual or organizational basis). Communication strategies in this area are essential either for the identification of these potential partners or for the articulation of discourses and arguments based on transparency. They work as a tool to convince them to donate (time and/or money) and advocate for a specific cause. The attraction of financial support depends on being able to transmit a strategic and competent approach to the issues based on evidence and oriented towards the concrete social benefits that the action can achieve. Donors should see their participation as a good investment with a clear social return (Alemanno, 2017).

## Conclusion

Although they may demonstrate the need for deep reforms, the waves of protest alone do not produce significant transformations. They instead need the presence and entrepreneurship of reformers and specialized professionals who can transform the momentum for change into concrete proposals and pilot projects that advance by within the political process. Contentious actors, like activists, are neither outside nor completely within politics – they occupy an uncertain territory between total opposition and integration into politics (Harrebye, 2016, p. 216; Tarrow, 2012, p. 158).

As Hallahan et al. (2007) state, alternative perspectives and new directions are emerging to study the role of communication in the formulation and execution of strategies. The notion of practice as part of the strategic process that influences society while being influenced by it allows researchers,

“instead of studying the practice of communication as a function, to analyze how communication practices transform organizations and societies” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 14). In line with Holtzhausen (2012), Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) and Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2014), we have argued that although various areas related to the strategic use of communication can create, maintain, and reproduce powerful dominant discourses, they can also resist and deconstruct such discourses.

In Europe, the current situation in Hungary and Belarus is an example. Academics and students who seek democratic change have been intimidated by governments, generating an ongoing climate of fear that limits the academic freedoms (European Communication Research and Education Association, n.d.). This shows the need to deepen the analysis of the theoretical and practical contributions of strategic communication in the context of sociopolitical contemporary activist challenges.

The use of strategic approaches to communication in an organizational context, such as the management of identity, image, and reputation and the approach to political power through citizen lobby can be ways for contemporary activist groups to better mobilize, communicate with their supporters, and influence political decisions. The strategic communication planning of activist actions (reflect and plan before acting or reacting) can also contribute to the achievement of a voice and legitimacy to operate in the public sphere.

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