for(e)dialogue

Department of Media and Communication

PR, Media and Refugee Community Activism: Reflections on Media, Migration

and Engaging with Local Communities Workshop

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PR, Media and Refugee Community Activism: Reflections on Media, Migration and Engaging with Local Communities Workshop

Introduction

As part of the 'Forced Migration and Media' Series, day 2 was held on 18th of July 2016 and focused on engaging the local communities in Leicester. The purpose of the day was to share with the local community existing departmental knowledge and expertise relating to media and migration. The workshop brought together community leaders and organisations that dealt with migration and refugee matters. Majority of them represented Somali community organisations more broadly working with refugees and migrants. The workshop took a practical approach by combining mini lectures with training sessions, in order to enable community leaders and organisations to use lobbying techniques and media platforms to support and advance their work. As one of the organisers leading this particular day of the series, this article is a personal account of it.

The workshop brought together department staff well-versed in PR, lobbying and online activism. It drew a diverse group of people and participants were excited that the department was engaging them in a manner that they saw as participation in local community development. From their reflections, I gathered they had not earlier engaged with academics before, so I was elated that this not only did not discourage them from attending, but in fact was an encouraging new experience that made them participate keenly.

Lobbying to influence decisions and decision-makers

The workshop began with a lecture by Dr Scott Davidson who explained the process of lobbying as communication aimed at a decision-maker with the hope of influencing their decisions. The lecture highlighted the importance of having specialist knowledge, awareness of the environment one is operating in and delivering strategic advice with regards to the lobbyists. It also focused on the process of supply and demand of information, also known as the information subsidy. This process requires researching and obtaining information on current situation in terms of how certain policies are affecting relevant communities. This is one area

where lobbyists play a role. Furthermore, the lecture illuminated how communities are also experts on the policies that affect them, and can therefore fill this gap by contributing to policymaking as well. For this to be effective, information needs to be delivered in a format that fits the logic of government and politics.

Once an issue is defined and evidence is gathered, community activists need to find useful allies within the relevant government departments and they need to find out who to lobby. They then need to use a range of tactics to influence decisions and policies. The lecture was followed by a practical session which allowed participants to brainstorm how to operationalise some of those tactics on their own campaigns. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that many of the attendees were already engaged in various kinds of lobbying and related some of their experiences of engaging the media, local and national politicians. They were also already participating in stakeholder events organised by government departments. This experience was quite useful as it helped them to apply their own experiences to the different information and tactics discussed in the lecture.

Online activism

The second half of the day concentrated on using online platforms for campaigning purposes. It began with two lectures, with the first one delivered by Dr Athina Karatzogianni. Its focus went out to digital activism, defined as political participation, activities and protests organized in digital networks beyond representational politics. Examples of causes discussed in the first lecture ranged from demanding global justice, countering capitalist crises and austerity to secession, demanding regime change and organising oppositional movements. The lecture related the problem of ideology and consensus in the global public sphere in defining whether digital activist events are legitimate and gave insights on when digital activism can work positively and when it can become counter-productive or even destructive.

I delivered the second lecture, which drew from practical examples of when digital activism changed conditions on the ground. Its focus was on the Somali diaspora to make it relevant to the attendees. It discussed how the internet sometimes empowered ordinary citizens to become amateur reporters. Along with the rise of new and social media, the internet has propagated alternative media as a significant alternative to mainstream media. The potential of alternative media, particularly the internet and social media were probably best

demonstrated in the first half of 2011 when revolutionary uprisings swept North Africa and the Middle East, which quickly came to be known as the Arab Spring. These uprisings saw the exit of two heads of states, Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia, and a political shake-up across the Arab inhabited lands. The Arab Spring was used in the lecture as a case study to indicate the different ways media can be put to use, and the roles it can play in mobilising for political and social change.

The lecture related the research that I did on the Somali diaspora, which showed that they have utilised the improvements in communication technology. The internet in particular presented an opportunity for them to communicate, regroup, share views, help their groups at home and organise activities. But as these products of transnational media dissolve distance and suspend time, they create new and unpredictable forms of connection, identification and cultural affinity. The internet is also an opportunity to promote political identity and their particular points of view through a new medium. Somali websites that have sprung up in various parts of the world depict a deeply divided society, one that is at the same time both integrated and fragmented. The research also highlighted how Somali-European youth are part of a marginalised groups within the Somali diaspora with regards to media engagement. This is predominantly due to the dominance of men in the Somali media and the society being patriarchal. Nevertheless, there is also an exclusion that seems to be the outcome of their western upbringing, which means the majority of them struggle to speak and understand the Somali language. They seem to have responded to this exclusion by creating multilingual platforms online and on social media where they congregate to find a sense of belonging with others who share the same hybridised identity; being European (British, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian etc.) by culture and settlement, Muslim by faith and Somali by heritage. They often use these platforms to garner support or collectively engage with social and political issues occurring in Somalia, Muslim majority countries and their respective European countries.

The lecture finished with a practical session where attendees designed an online activism cause campaigning against a conflict related issue. They could choose to focus on a violent conflicts and issues that arise from that conflict or on non-violent conflicts such as matters related to social or political injustice, inequality and racism and discrimination.
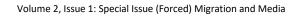
Concluding remarks

The final session allowed attendees to learn how to identify the objective of their campaign, what the most suitable platforms are to address this, the steps need for acting online, to take online to, assessing possible risks and obstacles and finally, how to circumvent them and garnering support for the cause. The attendees expressed how useful the approach of the workshop was and related that the skills they learned would potentially help them to advance the causes of their organisations and the communities they serve. In turn, I have also learned from this workshop and by engaging with practitioners. I witnessed how simple fine-tuning of existing ideas and experience can lift activists that are already doing some remarkable work in their communities to aim for higher grounds. I hope that this workshop signals more engagement from departments like ours to build good relations, transfer knowledge in meaningful ways and help empower local communities in an age where funding is being cut and relevant institutions are being closed down.

Biography

Dr. Idil Osman has worked for over 12 years as a national and international journalist for the BBC, the Guardian and the Voice of America, spending the majority of her career covering stories from the Horn of Africa. Through her work, she has developed a vast network of media contacts including those based in the region and the diaspora. She has authored publications that focus on media, migration, development and conflicts in the Horn of Africa and diaspora communities in Europe. She completed her PhD in Journalism and is an expert on diasporic media and development communications. She currently works as a Senior teaching fellow Department of Development Studies, SOAS University of London and is a former teaching fellow at the School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester.

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