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Sam Puleston

A Public Relations Approach to Social Communications that Aims to Give Authentic Voice to Sex Workers

“83% of adults now go online using any type of device in any location” (Ofcom 2014, p. 1). The rise of digital technologies has revolutionised the way we communicate with each other. Technology has provided a two-way communication tool, which gives a source of power to the powerless and allows them to be heard by the rest of society. However, whilst the modern communication culture we live in allows this, many groups are rarely heard and many individuals feel mute. Sex workers are anyone who works in the sex industry (International Union of Sex Workers 2015) and are a particular group who suffer from little or no voice. Therefore, this paper will assess the process of voicelessness within sex workers as well as the communicative culture we live in today. Using contemporary examples, I then aim to show how the use of PR and specifically blogs can be used within social communications in order to help give sex workers a much needed voice.

Keywords: Voicelessness, sex workers, authentic voice, sex workers



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I

INTRODUCTION

To address the situation of voice within sex workers, it is important to first understand the theoretical process that leads to voicelessness. The term voicelessness can be used when addressing a group, which suffer from little voice or may feel mute. Typically, individuals that suffer from voicelessness are part of groups that are outside the mainstream productive activity and/or social reproductive activity and are therefore marginalised from mainstream society (Leonard 1984). Social marginality is heart of exclusion from fulfilling social lives at individual, interpersonal and societal levels

(Burton and Kagan 2003). As well as being marginalised from mainstream society, many groups such as sex workers become stigmatised. Stigma occurs when individuals “possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic that is devalued in a particular social context” (Crocker et al 1998, p. 505). This stigma often derives from mainstream society and is usually amplified by the media; for example, prostitution is represented as dirty and is associated with danger, crime/drugs, exploitative and socially disruptive (Armstrong et al 2011). As a result, sex workers have limited opportunities to speak out and make a social contribution, as mainstream society do not want to listen and depict them as ‘other’ (Armstrong et al 2011), thus consequently affecting their self-esteem and willingness to try to be heard. As Noelle-Neumann (1974, cited by Lee et al. 2014) argues, “[p]eople’s willingness to express their opinions is determined by their perceptions of the public opinion climate” (p. 186). The stigma attached to sex workers can lead them to a spiral of silence as the stigma makes them feel even more marginalised and so they are even less willing to speak out, which, in turn, further marginalises them and makes them even more voiceless. Underpinning this paper’s argument is a position based loosely on the Declaration of Human Rights (1948), where all individuals, regardless of their occupation, should be treated with respect and dignity. Before understanding how sex workers can gain a voice, it is also important to acknowledge their current social capital, as some sex workers may be willing to speak out but simply do not have the resources to do so. An individual’s voice can be measured in relation to their social capital. Social capital can be decomposed into two elements: first, the social relationship that allows individuals to gain access to resources possessed by their associates, and the second, the amount and quality of those resources (Bourdieu 1984, as cited by Lesser 2000). This is of crucial importance, as social factors beyond a sex workers’ assessment of public opinion could affect their willingness to express opinions (Dalisy et al. 2012).

Social communications must therefore seek to help sex workers use their current social capital and also help them increase their existing social capital in order to make them feel less marginalised and confident to speak. Practical measures to achieve this will be addressed later in this paper. As well as assessing the process of voicelessness, it is also important to assess the nature of contemporary communicative culture, as it will help find a solution that will increase sex workers’ social capital and thus their voice. It is clear that with the rise of technology and social media, society has become more communicative than ever. Statistics show that 83% of adults go online using any type of device in any location with 66% of which saying they currently have a social networking profile (Ofcom 2014). Technology has transformed the way society communicates as two-way communication has become possible in any time or location. Nowadays, people can communicate with each other and organisations at any time by messaging, liking and sharing. Using PR within social communications can utilise this growing communicative culture and consequently tackle voicelessness within marginalised groups. However, a communicative culture is not just a culture that communicates, nor one that regulates communicative behaviour. It is a culture whereby members believe it is ‘good to talk’, but also normatively make judgements on which talks are good and which are less good (Cameron 2000). It is therefore important that social communications, addressing voicelessness within sex workers, must first address social stigma derived from wider society, as sex workers are

currently believed to possess attributes and characteristics that are devalued by individuals and therefore not worth listening to (Crocker et al. 1998).

“In February 2008 Suffolk forklift truck driver Steve Wright was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of five women who were working as prostitutes in the Ipswich area. The murders, between October and December 2006, resulted in a wave of public and media sympathy that was unusual for killings involving sex workers. The women were presented as daughters, mothers, friends and colleagues. There was a sense of shared grief and collective responsibility for these wasted lives, already half-destroyed by the drug addiction that led them into prostitution” (Jackson 2014, P.1).

Stories of marginalised people, in particular young girls, being forced into or turning to prostitution, is familiar to counsellors and psychotherapists who work with sex workers (Jackson 2014). Marginalisation, violence, exploitation and abuse go hand-in-hand with prostitution and yet, for many different reasons, victims still find it difficult to reach out to, or accept, services available to them (Jackson 2014). Pippa Hockton (2014), founder and Director of Street Talk, the London-based counselling service for prostitutes, states that she takes a lot of rejection and is ‘told off’ every day of her working life. So why do sex workers reject existing help available to them?

The first issue is that many sex workers do not see themselves as victims. Often, social communications targeting prostitution assumes that they want to escape, without recognising that it can be a conscious and comfortable choice. Many sex workers do not see themselves as victims and so speaking to sex workers as though they are victims can seem patronising and judgemental and make them feel further marginalised and voiceless as they do not fit the ideology of a prostitute (Campbell, cited by Jackson 2014). Similarly, regardless of why sex workers began their line of work, for many sex workers, prostitution is just part of their everyday life and so it is difficult to envision a life without it. Sex Workers Into Sexual Health (SWISH) councillor Kathy Osbourne (2014) claimed that it is very common that sex workers seek counselling only because they have been attacked in their work and so exiting tactics in this situation may only further destabilise them. The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) also rejects existing tactics within social communications, stating that prostitution can be a positive choice for many and that problems within the industry often derive from social stigma and marginalisation within mainstream society and the Criminal Justice System. Spokeswoman for the ECP, Cari Mitchell, suggests that many social communication plans fail to give sex workers a voice as they focus on exit strategies without campaigning for help once they have exited. She questions: “why aren’t organisations who say that women should leave the industry prioritising opposing benefit cuts and sanctions, which impact women and children most of all?” (Mitchell, cited by Jackson 2014, p. 1).

It is clear that whilst most social communication campaigns focus on helping reform sex workers premised on perpetuating existing perceptions of them as a stigmatised group. These campaigns thus start with a view that sex workers as victims and focus on the consequences of their present actions. This form of communication can portray problematic messages to sex workers as, instead of creating a sense of convergence; they actually further marginalise sex workers, as they are talked at by councillors and feel patronised and judged. By not fitting the presumed characteristics of a ‘typical’ lower-class sex worker, instead of giving them a voice and a sense of power, many campaigns make many sex workers even more voiceless as they are

campaigning for what they believe sex workers need, instead of what will actually practically help them. For these reasons, social communications should listen to sex workers and therefore focus on creating a social communications campaign that aims to help reform governmental policies which are detrimental to sex workers, such as legal, health, housing and childcare benefits. By targeting the causes, many sex workers will gain the resources they need to rehabilitate themselves, giving themselves a sense of power and voice.

The management of the consultative processes between government and society's members are important for democracy; however, expectations about who speaks, who listens and what happens to commentary between parties will differ (Coudry 2010). In order to successfully gain substantial governmental support for sex workers, first, social stigma needs to be addressed. In other words, those with power need to first listen to those without it. Public relations within social communications appears to primarily use the expectancy violation method to create campaigns with an immediate shock and guilt effect in order to try and change its audience's perceptions of sex workers.

STOP THE TRAFFIK's global *SoYouThinkYouWillDance* PR stunt enticed passers-by within Amsterdam's famous Red-light District with a high-energy dance routine performed by dancers who were dressed as sex workers, in brothel windows. At the end of the performance, a message appeared on a projector above: "[e]very year, thousands of women are promised a dance career in Western Europe...Sadly, they end up here", it then goes on to say: "Stop the Traffik" with www.stophetraffik.org below (STOP THE TRAFFIK 2015). This viral video shows a compelling contrast of the crowd's reaction, from whistling and cheering the dancers on during the performance to a sudden change to shock and guilt, as they read the message above. Despite this PR stunt being successful in creating a guilt element, the viral video was released in 2012 and has only received 73,485 views to date, whereas the same video entitled "Amsterdam red light district dance" published by an independent YouTube user, received over 110,000 views (Dre Amsterdam 2012). The problem with this particular campaign and many others that use the expectancy violation method is that it focuses too much on the arousal element, rather than the message itself and its longevity. The *SoYouThinkYouWillDance* PR stunt and its message actually contradicts itself as STOP THE TRAFFIK global defines human trafficking: "to be deceived or taken against your will, bought, sold and exploited" (STOP THE TRAFFIK global, p.1), suggesting that the women in Amsterdam's Red-light District are being illegally trafficked, despite brothels and sex workers in the Netherlands being legal. It also lacks representativeness, portraying all sex workers as attractive women who work in certain areas against their will. The campaign ignores other types of sex workers, such as men or transgender, street sex workers and sex workers that see it as a positive choice, thus, instead of changing public perception, it enhances existing stereotypes by promoting a one-size-fits-all portrayal of sex workers. This campaign is evidence of the misuse of the expectancy violation theory, focusing too much on the short term artistic way to create a shock effect, rather than focusing on a long term, clear and representative message that seeks to change public perception and social stigma.

Social communications focusing on sex workers should consider the cognitive dissonance theory, in place of the traditional expectancy violation method. The cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people tend to avoid information and situations that are likely to increase a dissonance with their existing beliefs, attitudes, or other value judgments" (Festinger cited in Wolfgang, 2008). Trying to change wider

society's perception on sex workers in order to give them a voice can be difficult as it contradicts their existing stigmatised judgements of sex workers. The sex workers themselves also face cognitive dissonance as they may be used to being voiceless due to factors such as: believing they do not want to be heard, seeing sex work as part of their everyday life and/or fear of repercussions such as being further stigmatised or violence. Cognitive dissonance is most likely to occur after a decision and so reassurance is the most important element to communicate to both sex workers and wider society.

In order to tackle potential cognitive dissonance and give sex workers a voice, blogs can be a useful tool as an alternative media. Blogs are a simple version of web-based log or weblog, where authors can publish information on a variety of topics and are conducive for two-way communication as they generally seek to have conversations with readers and visitors (Scoble et al. 2006 & Baker et al. 2005). The nature of blogs means that bloggers can publish their stories, beliefs and opinions to a wide audience without having to reveal their identity. Thus, a sense of power and voice can be established as it minimises their dissonance to speak as their identities are safe, reassuring them of minimal repercussions. Conversely, readers and visitors can easily access the published information and digest/interact with it discreetly. This two-way nature of blogs means that it has the potential to create a sense of belonging and form social groups, creating a sense of power and a platform for sex workers to gain and use their social capital. However, individuals within wider society are unlikely to actively seek out information that may create cognitive dissonance and are likely to avoid this information in the future if it contradicts their existing beliefs and opinions. It is therefore PR's responsibility within social communications to promote blogs within communities to improve engagement potential (Bamford 2014).

"Research into prostitution from the perspective of the prostitute is rare" (Jacks on 2014 p.1). As blog entries are increasingly published by the sex workers themselves, the validity and representativeness of the information provided becomes stronger. Not only is the information accurate in terms of what the sex workers believe, want or need, blogs can also represent the entirety of sex workers regardless of age, sexual orientation, occupation and class as they are self-representative. Taking a more holistic view of these sex workers is one way to break through, in this way helping to reduce the easy focus on 'just' the stereotypical view of groups who represent 'difference'. As previously mentioned, many organisations, such as STOP THE TRAFFIK, attempt to speak for sex workers but can often only make sex workers feel even more marginalised and voiceless. Other organisations such as Prostitutes Collective claim to listen to sex workers and campaign for government reform. However, these types of organisations tend to focus on female sex workers and fail to represent the male and transgender demographic meaning that they can also further marginalise certain sex workers. Not only this, whilst they actively campaign for more governmental support, they do not seek to change wider society's perception and in fact often play up to their own stereotypes, which detracts its persuasive impact as governmental figures are unlikely to support a group that is stigmatised, especially during times of financial uncertainty.

To conclude, social communications using a Public Relations approach in targeting sex workers need to stop focusing on short-term tactics that appear to be primarily about offering a sympathetic voice about the victim. This is not what a large proportion of sex workers want. Instead, they should aim to create long term

governmental support so they have the resources to rehabilitate themselves into mainstream society. However, in order to do this, social stigma attached to sex workers must first be addressed, to enhance the campaign's viability. The two-way nature of blogs means that it has the potential to create a sense of belonging and form social groups, increasing sex workers social capital and power as well as minimising potential cognitive dissonance. Blogs are also self-representative and so it has the potential to combat wider society's perceptions of a 'typical' sex worker. As a result, blogs should be listened to and used as a primary solution for giving sex workers a voice in society. If Public Relations is a form of ensuring due care and attention is given to all stakeholders, then we can argue that it has a responsibility to ensure the promotion of these blogs within communities to improve engagement potential (Bamford 2014).

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