

THE RAPPROCHEMENT OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AND ACTIVISTS: LESSONS FROM DOTCAUSES

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurship and social movement scholars both describe how social innovators pursue social change. However, both fields could benefit more from exchanging theories more frequently. There are, still, some reasonable explanations for this disconnect: (1) scope and (2) logic. Social entrepreneurship's scope is traditionally on the individual level, whereas social movements mainly focus on large-scale societal movements. Additionally, unlike social entrepreneurs that apply a market logic, some social movement scholars warn for the potential risks of mainstreaming' movements when business strategies, such as marketing, are adopted. A theoretical rapprochement is essential, as the activities of social entrepreneurs and activists are increasingly mixed in practice. Specifically, we consider the combination of social entrepreneurship and social movement theory particularly useful to describe a new breed of NGOs, also known as dotcauses. These dotcauses use the Internet to mobilize support (e.g. moral, financial or human) for their social cause. We want to know to (1) what extent both social entrepreneurship and social movement theory describe the activities of the dotcauses (2) to what extent the Internet supports these activities and (3) what ethical considerations arise from combining activism and entrepreneurship. To do so, we conducted semi-structured

interviews with 9 dotcauses and compared them on the three aspects described above. Finally, we draw up lessons for social entrepreneurs and conclude with directions for future research.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, social movements, social innovation, dotcauses, Internet, social media, resource mobilization, case study

Introduction

THE RAPPROCHEMENT OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AND ACTIVISTS IN PRACICE

The activities of social entrepreneurs and activists are often combined in practice (Martin & Osberg, 2007; Nicholls, 2010; Zahra, Gedajlovic, Neubaum, & Shulman, 2009). To be effective nowadays, both types of social innovators (Mulgan, 2006) increasingly need to adopt their strategies. Activists face major budget cuts by governments, which need them to increasingly adopt entrepreneurial strategies (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009). These entrepreneurial strategies help activists to efficiently and creatively mobilize and use resources. Recent examples of entrepreneurial strategies are micro-donations, micro-volunteering and the innovative use of (social) media campaigns. For example, activists use innovative (social) media tactics to frame and communicate their 'hot cause' to the general public, 'coolly mobilize' sympathizers and exploit political opportunities to shape institutional norms that constrain or stimulate firm behavior (King & Pearce, 2010; Rao, 2009).

Social entrepreneurs, like activists, increasingly need mobilization strategies similar to activists to scale-up their social innovation (Perrini & Fazzolari, 2006). Apart from financial resources, social entrepreneurs specifically need to mobilize moral resources, such as sympathizants, coalitions with morally powerful organizations and even celebrities (Foreman,

2009). These moral resources help social movements to “*build legitimacy and support for their ideas, products and technologies*” (Pacheco, York, & Hargrave, 2011). An example is the mobilization of consumers to promote fair trade products among other consumers (e.g. friends, family members or relatives), which is an active form of political consumerism (Nicholls, 2010).

In sum, the activities of social entrepreneurs and activists are increasingly exchanged in practice; a ‘*rapprochement*’ of both fields. Therefore, it seems to be particularly useful for social entrepreneurs to study activists’ best practice in resource mobilization.

THE RISE OF THE DOTCAUSE

A specific trend of ‘*rapprochement*’ in practice is the rise of the dotcause. Activists increasingly use the internet, such as social media, to spread social causes and mobilize resources. Research on the use of internet by activists emerged during the late nineties (Castells, 2001; Donk, Loader, & Rucht, 2004; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003), exemplified by *cyberactivism* case studies such as the Zapatistas movement (Clever, 1998). This emerging field of research shows both advantages and disadvantages of internet usage by social movements (Bimber, 2005; Garrett, 2006; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Internet can stimulate the scope of collective action, as large groups of citizens can participate with low effort or co-presence, while the costs to organize an online protest stay relatively low (Bimber, 2005; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Lupia & Sin, 2003).

These low costs of internet to organize protests changed the way activists work, especially of new social movements (Tarrow, 2001): it lowered the threshold for potential activists to establish their own Social Movement Organization (SMO). Moreover, the free information flow and transparency of the internet enabled global opportunities for social entrepreneurs (Zahra, Rawhouser, Bhawe, Neubaum, & Hayton, 2008). Consequently, a new,

entrepreneurial form of activism, dotcauses, has rapidly gained in number since 1980 (Clark & Themudo, 2006). This trend is similar to the rise of the dotcom ventures, such as Amazon, in the nineties. Dotcauses are political networks that mobilize support for their social cause (partly) by means of the internet (Clark & Themudo, 2006). They vary in the degree in which they rely on the internet. Such dotcauses recognize and exploit opportunities to mobilize masses of citizens for social change. For example, the dotcause Avaaz.org mainly operates on the internet and has a global network of more than 10 million members in 2011. A particular difficulty for these dotcauses is to effectively combine an ideological support base with slick marketing campaigns, e.g. using social media, to attract members (Tatarchevskiy, 2011). This problem has been described in social movement research as ‘mainstreaming’ activism (Gamson, 2004; Tatarchevskiy, 2011). The ethical consideration is that activists start to treat potential supporters as consumers, rather than critical citizens (Gamson, 2004; Tatarchevskiy, 2011).

MORE EXCHANGE OF THEORIES NEEDED

Despite of the rapprochement in practice, social entrepreneurship and social movement theory have not widely exchanged theories so far (Mair & Martí, 2006). This is not a surprise. Social entrepreneurship is a nascent academic field, which research agenda initially focused on defining the concept and exploring its own boundaries (Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009). Moreover, both theories differ in scope and logic. Firstly, Social entrepreneurship’s scope is traditionally on the individual level, whereas social movement theory mainly focuses on large scale societal movements. Secondly, social movement scholars are traditionally reluctant to adopt entrepreneurial theories to describe and understand social movements, as scholars emphasize the risks of ‘mainstreaming’ activism (Gamson, 2004; Tatarchevskiy, 2011). For example, Tatarchevskiy (2011) points out that ‘mainstreaming’ the message of social justice

by slick marketing campaigns can raise questions about *“the democratic potential of such culture of popularized charity and advocacy”*. Consequently, there are only few articles that combine social entrepreneurship and social movement literature (Alvord, Brown, & Letts, 2004). Mair & Marti (2006), however, stress that tactics used by social movements, such as framing, mobilization, protest and negation, can be useful for social entrepreneurship research and practice. A recent trend in social movements is the rise of the dotcause and the innovative use of internet by these dotcauses to mobilize support (Clark & Themudo, 2006). These dotcauses seem to combine activism and social entrepreneurship, while using internet to support their activities.

Taken together, we want to know to what extent dot causes use the internet to support both social entrepreneurship and social movement activities. Therefore, the research question of this article is:

“To what extent do dotcauses purposely combine social entrepreneurship and social movement activities?”

We address this research question by conducting 9 case studies of dotcauses that, to some degree, combine activism and social entrepreneurship activities. The cases differ in degree of virtualization and the degree of entrepreneurship and social cause.

Theory

DEFINITIONS

Activists are the members of social movements, which are “*collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are part*” (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004). To achieve their desired social change, activists recognize and exploit political opportunities, frame causes, mobilize resources and are in repertoires of contention. Their essential goal is to reach social change, such as CO2 reduction, equal rights and fair trade. Activists increasingly focus on markets: they put pressure on brands, firms and even sectors to change their behaviour (Soule, 2009) and have increasingly impact on (sustainable) innovations as ‘market rebels’ (Rao, 2009).

Social entrepreneurs, on the other hand, do not necessarily strive for radical social change. Their primary goal is to fulfil social needs while creating economic value by offering products or services: “*social entrepreneurs discover, define, and exploit opportunities in order to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organizations in an innovative manner*” (Zahra et al., 2009). Whether social activists are included in the definition of social entrepreneurship depends on how precise the definition is formulated. Short et al. (2009) point out that early definitions of social entrepreneur are broader and focus on entrepreneurial behaviour (Dees, 1998; Leadbeater, 1997) rather than the delivery of products and services. For example Leadbeater (1997) originally defined social entrepreneurship as “*the use of entrepreneurial behaviour for social ends rather than for profit objectives, or alternatively, that the profits generated from market activities are used for the benefit of a specific disadvantaged group.*” Martin & Osberg (2007), however, explicitly discern activists and social entrepreneurs as two clearly separated concepts: activists

do not create social value by delivering products and services, but persuade others (e.g. businesses or government) to do so.

Consequently, the general definition of a social entrepreneur differs too much among scholars (Peredo & McLean, 2006), to simply compare the definition of social entrepreneurs with the definition of social activists. However, Zahra et al. (2009) and Nicholls (2010) both specify a type of social entrepreneur that aims at social change and fulfilment of social needs at the same time. The social engineer (Zahra et al., 2009) or the transformational social entrepreneur (Nicholls, 2010) are institutional entrepreneurs that use advocacy and campaigning to achieve systemic social change (Nicholls, 2010; Waddock & Post, 1991; Zahra et al., 2009). Table 1 shows a matrix which positions transformational social entrepreneurs as specific type of social entrepreneurship that combines (radical) social change and fulfilling social needs.

Table 1 Transformational social entrepreneurs aim at social change and fulfilling social needs

	<i>Fulfilling social needs</i>	
<i>Social change</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>High</i>	Transformational social entrepreneurs (Zahra et al, 2009; Nicholls, 2010)	Normal activists
<i>Low</i>	Normal social entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurs

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT PROCESSES

Social entrepreneurship theory and social movement theory both describe the process towards social change. Their activities, although termed differently, overlap. Table 2 shows the steps in the social entrepreneurship process (Perrini & Fazzolari, 2006; Thompson, 2002) and social movement process (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Rao, 2009). There are two large

differences between the activities of social entrepreneurs and activists: (1) scope and (2) phase (3) formal organization. The activities of social entrepreneurs as described in Perinni's process model are on individual or organizational level. Thompson (2002) even focuses on the individual social entrepreneur as critical success factor in the process: "*the social entrepreneurs should champion and lead the project to a satisfactory conclusion*". In social movement literature, the scope focuses more on the group who embraces an idea by assuming that once this group is made. An explanation is that the concept of leadership is insufficiently developed in social movement theory (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). Regarding the phase, social entrepreneurship focuses more on recognizing and evaluating opportunities that are worth exploiting, whereas social movement literature mostly starts with the premises that there is a cause to fight for. In the social movement process there is more focus on how to spread the idea through the creation of a social identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001), than the exploitation of the resources. The key success factor of a social movement is the number of people (see e.g. WUNC by (Tilly, 2004)). Regarding formal organization, the social entrepreneurship theory focuses more on formalizing the efforts by enacting a business plan to acquire resources so the entrepreneur can effectuate its plans.

Table 2 Overview of Social Entrepreneurship (Perinni, 2010) and Social Movement (Rao, 2009) activities

	<i>SE activities</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>SM activities</i>	<i>Description</i>
Identification	Social opportunity identification	The social entrepreneurs' awareness of the need for challenging mainstream views surrounding a social burden (Perrini, 2010)		
Evaluation	Social opportunity evaluation	Balancing the extent to which a long lasting change will be produced and the economic sustainability of the social innovation. (Perrini, 2010)		
Expression	Social opportunity formalization	Articulating consistently the innovativeness of the offering, its expected	Framing	Call upon shared understanding and emotions of the

		social impact and the bases for its sustainability. (Perrini, 2010)		problem (Rao, 2009; Snow and Soule, 2009)
Exploitation	Social opportunity exploitation	Developing an appropriate intervention model and organizational vehicle for the social innovation (Ucbasaran, Westhead, and Wright 2001; Perrini, 2010).	Identifying political opportunity	Analyzing constrains and drivers in the political context (structures, configurations of power and interaction contexts) that affect the opportunity set of the social movement (Kriesi, 2004).
Mobilization	Social opportunity scaling-up	Spreading the social innovation as widely as possible in order to maximize social change (Chell, 2007; Perrini, 2010).	Mobilization / collective identity	Mobilizing resources and forming a collective identity by diffusing the cause through informal and formal mobilization structures (Rao, 2009)
Persuasion			Contentious activity	Contentious collective action challenging extant authority using tactical repertoires (Snow, Soule & Kriesi, 2004; Rao, 2009)

Methods

This study provides a comparative case-study analysis of 9 dotcause cases. The multi-case study design (Yin 1994) aims at exploring the strategies, activities and struggles of the specific cases in detail, rather than testing hypothesis. In order to have a fairly representative set of cases, we sampled the cases on various sizes (from a single activist with 115 members to a global organization with 10 million members). Additionally, we used the following selection criteria:

- Some form of online mobilization of citizens or firms;
- Aimed at social change, rather than fulfilling social needs;
- Active in markets, rather than only in the public sector;

- Recent activity: at least active in 2009, 2010 or 2011;
- Visible in the Dutch media;

Consequently, the scope of this study is limited due to a low number of cases and visibility in the Netherlands.

We used in-depth semi-structured interviews and project documentation (Yin 1994) to collect data. All dimensions of the research model were operationalized in interview questions and organized in an interview protocol. We selected 9 interviewees using snowball sampling to ensure richness in data. Interviewees include directors, online campaign manager, innovation director or communication manager. We conducted 10 interviews in a time period of two months. The average interview length was about 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Apart from interviews, a large number of online content, annual reports and media articles were collected to complement the interviews. After the interviews, additional questions were asked by e-mail to fill information gaps.

We analysed the data by coding relevant words and phrases in the interview transcriptions. A matrix was used to cluster all coded phrases on the concepts of the research model (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in which the factors and interviewees were listed on differences and similarities. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted to compare all cases. We compared these cases along the four sub research questions: (1) organization (2) mobilization strategies and (3) ethical considerations of mainstreaming activism. Table 3 briefly gives an overview of the cases: (1) description, (2) online activities, (3) size and (4) legal status.

Table 3 Overview of the nine dotcause cases

<i>Case</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Number of employees</i>	<i>Funding</i>	<i>Legal status</i>
A	A Dutch online community of about 1000 citizens, which collects and highlights (quick) charity actions to be taken by citizens. Established in 2011 by a social entrepreneur.	5-25	Subsidy and advertisement	Company

B	A Dutch ad-hoc twitter and weblog campaign, with 155 followers, against the provision of traditional winter cookies, 'Pepernoten', in the summer time. Established by a consumer in 2009.	0-5	No funding	N/a
C	A UK-based multi-campaign website with over 800,000 members in 2011. It describes itself as a citizen-driven online social movement. Established by entrepreneurs in 2009.	5-25	Donations by members	Company
D	A global multi-campaign website with over 10 million members in 2011. It describes itself as a network of citizens that take action on issues. Established by activist networks in 2007	25-100	Donations by members	Foundation
E	A Dutch foundation and online community that researches the sustainability (e.g. fairness) of consumer goods (e.g. food and clothing). It publishes rankings and advice for consumers on its website. Established by a social entrepreneur in 2002.	5-25	Membership fees for citizens and firms	Foundation
F:	A Dutch online platform of 16,000 consumers in 2011, which connects and encourages consumers and firms to jointly develop and execute sustainability innovations. Established by a former businessman in 2010.	5-25	Advertisement and income from services to firms	Company
G	A global environmental trust with over 5 million members that aims to improve the environmental sustainability on the earth. It uses internet to globally mobilize millions of citizens, for example to turn off their light during the earth hour (earthhour.org). Established in 1961	100+	Donations and subsidies	Trust
H	Dutch affiliate of a global advocacy association, dedicated to a fair world without poverty. It has over 400,000 members in the Netherlands. It aims to be a platform for citizens to take action: it increasingly uses social media to inform, mobilize and even co-create projects and decision-making. Established in 1956.	100+	Donations and subsidies	Association
I	Global environmental advocacy organization with almost 3 million members. Apart from research and lobbying, it uses internet for campaigns against unsustainable behaviour by firms. An example is a large scale online campaign against the construction of coal plants in the Netherlands. Established in 1971.	100+	Donations and subsidies	Association

Results

This section describes the patterns identified across the 9 cases on three aspects: mix of social entrepreneurship and social movement activities, internet support for activities and ethical considerations. We provide tables with brief descriptions of the cases on various dimensions of these aspects. We briefly discuss the differences and similarities that emerge from the cross-case analyses.

MIX OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTIVITIES

Table 4 shows an overview whether the social entrepreneurship and social movement activities were identified in the cases. In general, the more formal the dotcauses, the more they combine social movement and social entrepreneurship activities. Three cases (C, D and H) combined all social entrepreneurship and social movement activities.

Table 4 Overview of which social entrepreneurs and social movement activities were identified

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Activities</i>		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>I</i>
Identification	Social opportunity identification	SE	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Evaluation	Social opportunity evaluation	SE	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Expression	Social opportunity formalization	SE			√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	Framing	SM		√	√	√				√	√
Exploitation	Social opportunity exploitation	SE	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	Identifying political opportunity	SM			√	√	√			√	√

Mobilization	Social opportunity scaling-up	SE	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	Mobilization / collective identity	SM	√		√	√	√	√	√	√
Persuasion	Contentious activity	SM		√	√	√			√	√

Only one case did not specifically identify the social opportunity. In case B, a single consumer expressed a grievance on her twitter account about the misbehaviour of a supermarket. However, this was a spontaneous action. In all other cases, the social opportunity was deliberately chosen.

All cases evaluated the social opportunities they identified. In some cases, this was done through informal networks, for example asking friends and family members if a social innovation was worth to pursue. In other cases, specifically cases C, D an F, this is done by asking members. At last, in some cases, the opportunities were evaluated by internal decision-making, for example by a professional campaign team.

Almost all cases, except one, expressed specific mission and goals for their opportunities. However, only 5 out of 9 cases called used framing to call for shared understanding and emotions. Almost all cases, except the single consumer, defined a business model and organizational vehicle to exploit the social opportunities. However, in some cases the organization remains mainly virtually. For example, cases C and D are totally financed by virtual members.

Strategically analyzing the political opportunity and subsequent contentious activity seem to differentiate the activists from the social entrepreneurs. Cases C, D, E, H and I do conduct a strategic analysis prior to their activities. For example, case D draws with a team of campaigners a complete picture of the situation: stakeholders, there goals, policy and regulation, potential weak points, etc. Moreover, specialists, local citizens and journalists are

give information, so the organization can optimally define how to exploit best the social opportunity. Contentious activity, in other words protest, is done by 5 out of 9 cases. In most of these cases, for example two large NGOs (cases H and I), the extant authority are firms that behave unsustainable. For example, case H focuses on supermarkets that sell unfair chocolate or banks that invest in cluster bombs.

Last, some form of scaling-up the social innovation is found in almost all cases. The exception is case E, which does not explicitly diffuse their social opportunities among citizens. Yet, they provide other NGOs and sustainable firms a ranking of sustainable performance by firms. A last, six cases aim to grow their membership base and form a strong collective identity. Their membership can range from clicking on a petition once (passive) to submitting and evaluating social causes. The cases A, E and F, however, cooperate with firms and governments instead of challenging their authority. For example, firms are encouraged in case F to submit and execute projects with the members of the website to increase their own sustainability.

ACTIVITIES SUPPORTED BY INTERNET

Table 5 gives an overview of how internet supported the activities of the dotcauses. Especially the social movement activities, such as framing, creating a collective identity and contentious activity towards the extant authority were supported by internet. It seems that social entrepreneurial activities, such as opportunity recognition, evaluation, formalization and exploitation, are done offline. Smaller cases, such as C, D and F, are more virtual organizations. These organizations would be called 'Clicks only' by Clark & Themudo (2006). As these organizations are almost completely driven by their members, they need online platforms to receive and discuss their input. Internet allows these clicks only dotcauses to have and engage a large member base (for example 10 million in case D), while spending

little on organizational costs. Cases C and D claim to be completely financed by the online donations of their online members.

Table 5 Overview of how Internet supports the SE and SM activities

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Activities</i>		<i>Cases</i>	<i>Ratio</i>	<i>Description</i>
Identification	Social opportunity identification	SE	C, D and F	3 out of 8	Cases C, D and F offer a crowdsourcing platform on their website. Internet users can, after registration, submit social opportunities or causes.
Evaluation	Social opportunity evaluation	SE	B,C,D and F	4 out of 9	Cases C and F use the same social media platform on their website to evaluate the submitted opportunities. Internet users can vote on their favourite opportunity. In case B, the consumer evaluated the social opportunity by checking the responses of her twitter followers. In case D, a weekly online poll is used to test and evaluate the identified social opportunities.
Expression	Social opportunity formalization	SE	C, D and F	2 out of 7	Only three cases (C, D and F) used internet to articulate the mission and goals of each social opportunity. For example, case D visualizes the goals on their webpage with counters that indicate how many support a petition needs.
	Framing	SM	B, C, D, H and I	5 out of 5	All dotcauses that use frames to elicit emotions, use internet in some form. Images, stories and persuasive texts are prominent on the websites. Some cases, for example H and I, publish shocking or entertaining youtube movies.
Exploitation	Social opportunity exploitation	SE	Cases C and F	2 out of 8	Overall, the actual organization of the dotcause remains offline. In case C and F, however, the organizational vehicle and business / intervention model, is almost only virtual. For example, case F offers an online platform where internet users, and employees, can collaborate on social causes.
	Identifying political opportunity	SM	No	0 out of 5	The strategic analysis of the political opportunity is done offline in teams. No internet or help from internet users is used. A possible reason is the political sensitivity of the information.

Mobilization	Social opportunity scaling-up	SE	All	8 out of 8	All cases that try to scale-up their social opportunity use internet as diffusion channel. Most cases even state that there is no other technology available that has the global reach, speed and social infrastructure. Although some cases (for example case B, C and D) mention the low costs of internet, other cases (e.g. case A and H) point out that the uncertainty of large-scale diffusion is high. Most cases use online (micro) donations to fund their activities.
	Mobilization / collective identity	SM	All	6 out of 6	Like scaling up, all dotcauses use internet to form a collective identity. Specifically, the dotcauses use social media (twitter and facebook) and forums on their own website to mobilize and engage members. However, a stronger form of identity creation is prevalent in the smaller cases (A and F): these cases use their own online social networks, where members have profiles and can communicate. Case A organizes competition between members who spent most time on social causes.
Persuasion	Contentious activity	SM	All	5 out of 5	All cases with contentious activity use internet for their protest. A wide range of online tactical repertoires are used: twitter and facebook attacks, large scale e-mail campaigns towards the target, telephone attacks, online petitions, youtube video's and even games. For example, case H designed an online game, in which internet users could paint messages on the buildings of the firms that were targeted.

The use of internet for social entrepreneurship and social movement activities has advantages and disadvantages. The global reach, speed, interactivity and low costs allow dotcauses to mobilize and engage thousands of citizens, journalists, experts and firms. For example, some cases use online platforms to identify and evaluate social opportunities, or to organize collective protest against firms. Moreover, social media offer an existing mobilization structure for dotcauses. Some cases, however, indicated also disadvantages. As stated by Rao

(2009), face-to-face contact is needed to create a strong collective identity. Therefore, even the virtual dotcauses considered to combine their online community with face-to-face meetings. Next, the low threshold to start a dotcause has a drawback: the competition for the attention of citizens, e.g. for a social opportunity, is very high. Traditional media and collaboration between dotcauses and other organizations is needed to grow or to stay visible anyway. Last, some dotcauses pointed out that diffusion on the internet is quite uncontrollable. For example, why do some social opportunities spread faster on social media than others?

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF COMBINING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND ACTIVISM

As mentioned in the introduction, nonprofit organizations can face ethical considerations when combining social value creation with economic value creation. A profitable business model could possibly clash with the ideological ideals of these nonprofit organizations (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009). Two cases (A and F) do indeed struggle with this dilemma of legitimacy. Both cases collaborate with instead of challenge firms and, often, require a contribution for their services. For example, case A offers firms and NGOs to place their petition for a small financial contribution on its website. Some NGOs and most citizens, however, hesitate to pay this financial contribution, as they do not want to spend any money on advertisement. Additionally, the dotcause does not optimally use its democratic potential, as it increases the barrier for citizens to place their petition on the website. Both dotcauses (case A and F) are careful in selecting firms they cooperate with. They only select firms that are known for their sustainable reputation, as they fear criticism of promoting 'greenwashing' or plain advertisement.

The use of Internet raises ethical considerations as well. First, some cases (for example A, G and I) use entertainment and competition as incentives for internet users to participate.

For example, case A has a monthly prize for the most active member of the community. However, some board members of the dotcause consider competition as an undesirable incentive to support a social cause. The same ethical considerations apply to the use of entertaining elements, such as games and humorous YouTube films. However, in a utilitarian view these marketing strategies help to effectively reach the social goal.

Last, some scholars argued that in specific activists criticize the easiness of online actions, such as online petitions (Karpf, 2010). The cynical terms ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’ refers to these low-cost tactics of dotcauses (Karpf, 2010). However, none of the cases expressed the fear that citizens are replacing activism on the streets by virtual clicks. In the contrary, most cases see low-cost tactics as opportunities to make citizens aware of social causes and as a first step to engage them in high-cost tactics, such as offline protest or sit-ins.

Discussion

This article explored and compared 9 cases of dotcauses, which to some degree combine activism and entrepreneurial strategies. We compared these cases on three aspects (1) mix of social entrepreneurship and activism activities (2) use of internet and (3) ethical considerations.

DOTCAUSES: SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS OR ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVISTS?

The data shows that most cases combine social entrepreneurship activities with activism activities. In specific, the opportunity identification and evaluation activities seem to complement the traditional activism activities. However, mobilization and scaling-up social opportunities were overlapping, indicating the importance for both social entrepreneurs and activists. However, a significant distinction among the dotcauses is how firms were gathered:

as targets for protest or as business partners? In case the dotcause saw (sustainable) firms as partners, the dotcause relied on the income of the services offered to these partners. So, although all cases mix social entrepreneurship and activists activities, the analyses reveals two types of dotcauses: (1) the online social entrepreneurs, that often use activism, and (2) entrepreneurial activists, that leverage the Internet to protest in an entrepreneurial way: recognizing and exploiting political opportunities, risk taking and creative in resources and highly flexible in strategies. Some of the activists do indeed describe their behavior as entrepreneurial. For example, one of the online campaigners stated: *“We need to change our strategies every day to be as effective as possible, in some sense we are entrepreneurs”* and *“online campaigning is, apart from low-costs, more risky in financial terms and uncontrollable than conventional channels for protest”*

INTERNET ENABLES ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVISM, BUT CAN CONSTRAIN COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The data shows that the Internet indeed lowered the costs to frame a social cause to a wired public, mobilize quickly and engage large groups in low-involvement protest, such as petitions or social media messages to firms. Therefore, relatively small organizations can engage an enormous membership base. Moreover, the free flow of information and increased transparency helps activists to monitor their targets and identify opportunities for social change. However, the social entrepreneurs among the dotcauses experienced also drawbacks of their virtual existence. The low threshold for starting a dotcause can create an overload of initiatives, all competing for the attention of the same citizen. Additionally, creating an identity requires face-to-face contact. An online community, therefore, could consist of a large group of passive members and a small group of active members that really form the collective identity.

DOTCAUSES STRUGGLE WITH COMPETING INCENTIVES: IDEOLOGICAL, FINANCIAL OR HEDONISTIC

Dotcauses do experience some ethical difficulties when they combine entrepreneurship and activism. As earlier described by Zahra et al. (2009), social entrepreneurs increasingly rely on private contributions (e.g. from citizens or firms), putting pressure on the use of business strategies, such as offering products and services, or slick marketing strategies. This raises the question about the 'right' motivation of citizens and firms to join their initiative. Are citizens, for example, reduced to consumers if the dotcause uses entertaining marketing strategies to engage them? And regarding firms, what is the risk that a firm misuses a dotcause to promote their sustainable image, while tolerating unsustainable behaviour by its suppliers? In general, these ethical considerations urge dotcauses to think about their desired impact: do they strive for achieving social change (no matter what motivations were used) or making citizens and firms aware of the social cause.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has clearly some limitations. First, the number and selection of cases constrains the results to exploring the phenomenon, but do not allow wide claims. A more quantitative approach, for example a large scale survey or case analysis, could help to draw a broader picture of organizations that combine social entrepreneurship and activism, such as dotcauses. For example, a distinction could be made between campaigns, lobby groups and monitoring / research and development. Second, we looked at two process models that describe the activities of social entrepreneurs and activists. However, more in-depth research could compare entrepreneurial theories and social movement theories in specific phases of the process, e.g. diffusion or the political processes. Last, we explored dotcauses, varying in how virtual their organization and activities are. However, we did not compare these dotcauses with traditional social entrepreneurs or activists. In addition, research could provide insight in best practices of the use of internet. For example, can we determine an optimal mix of offline and online activities?

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