

“PRi Special Edition: The intersections between public relations and neoliberalism”

The Road to Nowhere: Re-examining activists’ role in civil societies

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Abstract

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu ⁽¹⁹⁷⁷⁾ argued that the presence of critical counter-voices and powers is a fundamental element of any genuine democracy. However, in Australia these counter-voices are increasingly marginalized and threatened by controversial laws that would limit the legal standing of conservation groups and the use of overseas donations for advocacy purposes based on the argument that “systematic, well-funded” environmental campaigns are threatening the nation’s economic prosperity.

Drawing on social movement theory and Bourdieu’s theory of practice, this case study details the final months of the Save Beeliar Wetlands campaign in the lead up to the 2017 West Australian state election. The author challenges three common assumptions in the extant PR activism literature: The existence of activists in opposition to organizations and governments, the presence of a ‘zone of compromise’ between activists and the organizations or governments whose actions they are opposing and the conceptualization of activists as homogenous entity.

Evolving into a colorful collective of over 35 local groups, five local councils and thousands of individuals, Beeliar Wetland Defenders successfully created an alternative narrative to the State and Federal Governments’ neoliberal agenda. Activists thereby contributed significantly to a change in leadership and the termination of a \$1.9billion infrastructure project. This paper argues that activist groups’ interventions in public debate perform a valuable societal voice as critical counter-voices in challenging established hierarchies and power relationships. However, in mounting and framing their arguments *within* the neoliberal framework, activist groups may also inadvertently reinforce this worldview.

Keywords

Activism, Australia, democracy, neoliberalism, Bourdieu, symbolic violence, civil society

Introduction: “The land of a fair go”

Within its history and culture, Australia is positioned as the land of the ‘fair go’; a multicultural country that values rights such as freedom of speech and equality (Department of Home Affairs, 2016). Despite reinforcement in everyday rhetoric and political debate, media and political commentary suggest that some voices are valued more than others. Indeed, contrary to the ‘fair go’ narrative it has been suggested by members of the Australian Federal Government and aligned media commentators that some voices should be quietened, as they are perceived to threaten the Australian lifestyle. These identified threats include advocacy and in particular so called ‘green groups’, which have been singled out by political decision makers for allegedly endangering Australia’s economic prosperity and hence requiring “greater oversight”. In step with the neoliberal ideas of reducing the role of the public sector and obstructing public participation and resistance to economic development, the Federal Government has put forward a proposal under which environmental groups would have to spend up to half of their funds on “non-activist work”, such as education and revegetation, or otherwise lose their tax deductible status (Hobday and Goswell, 2017; Milman, 2015). In addition, under a separate proposal, charities would only be able to use donations from “allowable donors” – such as Australian citizens or residents – for political advocacy efforts (Karp, 2018b). The onus of certifying an allowable donor status would be on individuals, e.g. in the form of a statutory declaration, which most certainly will impede fundraising efforts. Furthermore, under the proposals, any group spending more than \$100,000 on political activities over the previous four years, would be required to register as a “political campaigner” (Karp, 2018a). A coalition of Australia’s major charities has warned about the implication of this proposed red tape on democracy (Karp, 2018d). However, legislative changes have been justified by senior politicians and decision makers, following concerns raised by some Members of Parliament over the “activism of green groups” (Milman, 2015), their efforts to undermine the government (Karp, 2018c) and in the words of the then Deputy Prime Minister, Barnaby Joyce; their role in “destroying the economic base of Australia” (Karp, 2017). Comments like this, combined with minimal critical coverage of the proposed restrictions on not-for-profit groups in mainstream media and everyday debate, highlight the deeply entrenched nature of neoliberal ideology and economics in contemporary Australian society.

With close reference to the Save Beelir Wetlands campaign, this paper argues that progressive social movements perform an important role in challenging the status quo and prevailing neoliberal values, as well as their representations, by encouraging citizens to re-assess their values and priorities.

Literature review: Activist public relations

Activism represents a prominent body of knowledge in public relations scholarship and practice to date, which is largely due to the fact that activist communication and the evolution of the field of public relations are inherently intertwined (Coombs and Holladay, 2007; 2012). At the core of the activism PR body of knowledge has historically been the argument that excellent public relations is based on two-way symmetrical communication

(Grunig and Grunig, 1997). Hence, organization-activist engagement should be marked by “negotiation and compromise” (Smith and Ferguson, 2001: , p.296). However, critical scholars have strongly questioned the notion of negotiating a ‘middle ground’ as a desirable goal of ‘excellent’ public relations. A ‘compromise’ may not appeal to many activist groups who are often opposed to a business proposition or policy decision (Weaver, 2010; Stokes and Rubin, 2010), as in the case of the Beelir Wetlands Defenders. The concept of balanced, two-way communication, as championed in the extant literature essentially ignores that even in cases of genuine dialogue, power remains distributed asymmetrically between participating parties (Toledano, 2017), specifically between activists and organizations or governments (Coombs and Holladay, 2007; Jones, 2002), where the commercial entity is typically favoured.

The activism PR literature has commonly referred to activists and activist groups as homogenous entities (see e.g. Smith, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2007; Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002). References to activism in extant scholarship encompass international NGOs (see e.g. Reber et al., 2010), context-driven social movements (see e.g. Ciszek, 2017), grassroots groups (see e.g. Weaver, 2010), civic crowdfunding activities (see e.g. Doan and Toledano, 2018), as well as activist investors, who spend millions of dollars on their lobbying efforts (see e.g. Thompson, 2018). Scholars have thereby failed to explicitly recognize the kaleidoscope of activist activities and have ignored the vast disparity in resources, professionalism, decision-making processes, and capabilities available between – and even within - individual activist groups or movements. In contrast, social movement scholars (e.g. Diani, 2007; Melucci, 2000) emphasize that movements are not homogenous entities, but instead characterized by a plurality of perspectives and relationships, even *within* any given collective. Social movements can involve people from a broad range of social backgrounds, who seek an outlet for political expression, not restricted to, but including, the relatively non-powerful, non-wealthy and non-famous (Zirakzadeh, 1997). Supporters may come from different walks of life, but are tied together via a common purpose and commitment to challenge the interests and beliefs of those in positions of power (Tarrow, 2005). The multifaceted nature of activism will be further examined and illustrated within the context of the Save Beelir Wetlands campaign. However, it is worth re-emphasizing that despite the focus on a progressive movement in this case study, activism is a polyolithic concept, capturing not only groups committed to political reform but extending to those hostile to environmentalism, spaces inhabited by fundamental movements, and those seeking to oppress civic rights (Dryzek, 2002; 2013).

Despite notable exceptions (see e.g. Demetrious, 2013; Weaver, 2013; Stokes and Rubin, 2010; Ciszek, 2017; Somerville and Aroussi, 2013), the PR (activism) research agenda has traditionally focused on activists’ impact on corporate performance and the guarding of capitalist interests (Adi, 2019), failing to recognize activists’ achievements in relation to the promotion of civic engagement and societal change. From this perspective, activists create the need for issues management and damage limitation programs (see e.g. Deegan, 2001; Grunig, 1992; Turner, 2007) and hence justify the existence of public relations as a management function (Kim and Sriramesh, 2009). Ironically, this historical animosity to activists and their legitimate role in civil society has dominated the field of public relations (Demetrious, 2013), despite claims by some scholars that activists have been practicing PR for hundreds of years (e.g. Coombs and Holladay, 2007; Heath and Waymer, 2009). In reality, activist and organizations do not occupy “separate camps but ... a fluid environment informed by cultural-economic forces” (Ciszek,

2015: p. 453). Holtzhausen⁽²⁰¹¹⁾ further argues that opposed to silencing counter voices, PR practitioners have a responsibility to create opportunities to express dissent. Notably, whilst activism PR scholarship has largely failed to recognize the role of activists as producers of strategic communication for social change, this is not the case in related disciplines, such as international relations and political sciences (see e.g. Piper and Uhlin, 2004; Dryzek, 2010; Keck and Sikkink, 2014). In failing to challenge - or at least to highlight - existing power relationships public relations scholars and practitioners have arguably performed a key role in supporting, promoting and reinforcing the neoliberalist agenda (Moloney, 2006; Miller and Dinan, 2007; 2008), which has situated organizations in a position of power over citizens of civil societies. Surma and Demetrious⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾ further argue that public relations has been pivotal in laying the foundations for neoliberal ideology to become accepted as part of mainstream (Western) ideology and reasoning.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How did SBW activists challenge the status quo and prevailing neoliberal values in the lead up to the 2017 West Australian State Elections?

RQ2: What dynamics in the SBW campaign contributed to broader citizen participation in social action that successfully challenged a neoliberal agenda?

Neoliberalism as a form of symbolic violence

As part of his theory of practice, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu⁽¹⁹⁷⁷⁾ introduced the notion of “symbolic capital”, which entitles the owner to create discourses that generate consensus, whilst simultaneously misinterpreting the real interests that underlie that reality, so that those who are subjects remain unaware of the actual drivers and motivations (Edwards, 2009). The exercising of symbolic power, i.e. concealing the power relations that enable powerful actors to impose meanings as legitimate, thus leads to what Bourdieu⁽¹⁹⁹¹⁾ coined “symbolic violence”. Critics of corporate public relations (see e.g. Stauber and Rampton, 1995) argue that this captures the function and intention of modern public relations, i.e. the representation of an organization’s or client’s intentions as fair, legitimate and in the interest of society, whilst simultaneously concealing underlying interests, such as economic consequences and power advantages. As the term suggests, in this context violence is exercised upon individuals in a figurative, rather than a literal way. This may take the form of people being denied resources, treated as inferior, or being limited in terms of aspirations (Webb et al., 2002). However, most importantly, it requires the collaboration of the dominated, who perceive their domination as right, natural and legitimate. Reinforced in daily life, these socially created classifications become normalized and legitimize themselves via the construction of a seemingly natural ground (Bourdieu, 2001).

At times Bourdieu appears to be ambivalent about what he refers to as the act of consciousness-raising, which arguably is a common goal of activist groups. Indeed, on occasions he explicitly rejects it as a merely symbolic act, which in itself is not able to challenge the existing complicity of victims of social domination (Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu, 2000).

However, Bourdieu unequivocally emphasizes that activists inhabit a crucial role in modern societies as in his words “there is no genuine democracy without genuine critical powers” (Bourdieu, 1998: p.8). Hence, the Australian Government’s efforts to silence, or at least quieten, progressive activists arguably undermines the country’s democratic values and processes. Although movements like the Beeliam Wetlands Defenders (BWD) may be relatively under-resourced in comparison to governments and corporate entities whose actions they challenge, Bourdieu believes in the significance of activists’ mere existence, as it “annoys people just like that” (Bourdieu, 1998: p.56). In this context, the role of Save Beeliam Wetlands (SBW) activists may be interpreted as raising awareness of symbolic violence among those who have accepted and complied with their personal suppression by other elements of society, such as State and Federal Governments and corporate contractors. Based on Bourdieu’s ideas, activists’ role is not to convince the community of their subjugation, but to challenge societal norms and assumptions. This is particularly relevant within the context of Western Australia, a state that has been characterized by feelings of indebtedness towards the mining and construction sector, which has facilitated elevated living standards (Downes et al., 2014; Department of Mines and Petroleum, 2009), and hence a high regard for the neoliberal agenda of Australian Governments. Within this context citizens are complicit in their acceptance of decisions being made about multi-million dollar infrastructure projects, which are justified based on the continued need for development and economic prosperity, even though they may negatively impact on the community’s standard of living and future access to cultural, heritage and environmental sites. Hence, the concept of symbolic violence emphasizes the importance of grassroots activists, like the BWD, in challenging the status quo and the complicity of the West Australian community, as illustrated in the following case study.

Methodology

This paper aims to provide an in depth insight into the Save Beeliam Wetlands (SBW) campaign and the dynamics that contributed to broader citizen participation in social action that successfully challenged the State Governments’ neoliberal agenda. The selected single case study approach is considered appropriate to capture the ‘fluid’ nature and limited structure of social movements like the Beeliam Wetlands Defenders (BWD) (Andrews and Edwards, 2004) and furthermore enables the inclusion of a wide range of different information sources (Daymon and Holloway, 2011) which facilitate an in depth insight into the case. To examine the SBW campaign, data were gathered from relevant social media platforms, as well as national and local media outlets. Using Salesforce’s social listening software Social Studio, the researcher identified more than 27,000 “Beeliam Wetlands” related items between 6th December 2016 and 15th March 2017. Based on Gold’s (1958) typology, the researcher predominantly adopted an observer as participant role, as she followed the unfolding events over the summer of 2016/2017 predominantly from the sidelines, most notably via social media, such as campaign specific Facebook pages and groups. These were popular locations for activists to share details about upcoming actions, report on unfolding events, post calls for action, to discuss latest news and to reflect on the campaign itself. In addition, the researcher attended selected events, such as the Fremantle Carnival (protest march) and

the post campaign artefact collection, which aimed to capture items, such as banners, poems, photos, and costumes etc, as cultural reference points for future generations.

Additionally, this project draws on 13 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with SBW activists, ranging from 54 to 120 minutes, as well as multiple informal conversations and meetings, to gain an in depth understanding of the campaign, and in particular the Beelihar Wetlands “Defender” perspective. This study used purposive sampling, utilizing existing contacts and networks, followed by snowball sampling, relying on participants to facilitate access to other activists involved in the SBW campaign. The goal was not to develop a representative sample, but rather to collect rich data and obtain data saturation, i.e. to reach a state where no new information emerged during the interview process that would enhance or change the findings of this particular study. Interviews were audio recorded and consequently transcribed verbatim. In order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, interviews have been numbered in chronological order (BWD#1-#13). These first-hand accounts have facilitated a more rounded insight into the events of the summer 2016/2017 and – as it will be argued – a different perspective of activists’ actions and motivations than the one portrayed in the (state’s) mainstream media.

This research draws on ideas from and features of grounded theory, which is recognized as particularly suitable for exploring social organizations from the participants’ point of view (Glaser, 1998) and in contexts where little is known about a particular topic or phenomenon” (Daymon and Holloway, 2011: p.133), which in this case seeks to address the limited insight in PR scholarship from the activist perspective. Data, such as personal reflections by the researcher, interview transcripts, images, audio recordings, news items and social media posts were stored with the aid of the software package NVivo 11. Following Charmaz’s (2006) guide to coding in grounded theory, the researcher first coded each word, line, or segment of the data. This was followed by a focused and selective second phase, in which the most useful initial codes and emergent themes were further explored and tested against the data. At this stage, activists’ desire to challenge prevailing neoliberal values emerged as a prominent theme.

The Save Beelihar Wetlands (SBW) campaign

This case study examines the community opposition to a proposed highway extension through a wetland reserve in Western Australia that required the destruction of almost 100 hectares of bushland. Resistance to the so called Roe 8 extension had existed for decades. However, this case study focuses on the period between 6th December 2016, when the first bulldozers commenced clearing, and 11th March, when the newly elected Labor Government announced that that construction would cease immediately (2017h), thereby providing a win for SBW activists and supporters.

A brief history of the SBW campaign

Opposition to the 5.2 kilometer long Roe 8 highway extension in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia, is not new. Changing State Governments and their different priorities have kept activists on their toes since the project was originally proposed in 1955, and consequently included in the state's planning register (O'Connor, 2015). A 1970s study of the wetlands system, supported by the state's Environmental Planning Authority (EPA), recommended the incorporation of the Beeliiar Wetlands into an urban national park (Gaynor et al., 2017). Nevertheless, plans for the road reserve were still in place in 2008, when the Labor Carpenter Government responded to community pressure to delete plans for Roe 8 from the Metropolitan Regional Scheme (MRS). However, Labor was defeated before it could act on their promise. Plans for Roe 8 did not re-emerge until 2014, when the Federal Liberal Government, under its self-styled "infrastructure prime minister" (2014) Tony Abbott announced that it would fund Roe 8 as part of a freight tollway, along a yet to be determined route, to West Australia's main port in Fremantle. Notably, this announcement was made despite the road not being mentioned in the state planning strategy at the time (Young, 2017b). The fact that even under the integration of the Roe 8 extension into the newly proposed \$1.9 billion Perth Freight Link (PFL) the actual access to the port was missing, resulted in SBW activists dubbing the project "the road to nowhere".

The most contentious element of the Roe 8 proposal was the construction of a major highway across the Beeliiar Wetlands, bringing together a range of issues, including nature conservation and Aboriginal heritage. The wetlands are made up of two chains of lakes that run parallel to the coast of Western Australia. They are the only remaining part of what used to be an extensive network of wetlands, running parallel to the Western Australian coast. The area holds significance for the local Nyungar people, who have a deep spiritual memory connection to the land, which used to be the location of a number of important camping and ceremonial areas (Dortch and Hook, 2017). Clearing for the road reserve was to destroy an area that had been recognized as an Aboriginal birthing site. Furthermore, the wetlands provide a home to more than 220 plant and 123 bird species, including the endangered Carnaby's Cockatoo (Save Beeliiar Wetlands, 2017).

Moreover, the freight link proposal raised broader concerns, relating to sustainable transport, infrastructure priorities, health and wellbeing, as well as government accountability (Lawrence et al., 2017). On 16th December 2015 the Supreme Court ruled that the existing environmental approval for Roe 8 was invalid (Young, 2015). However, a subsequent appeal by the State Government saw the assessment reinstated. Step by step decisions were reversed and new approvals sought. Eventually, on 6th December 2016, three months prior to the next state elections, bulldozers moved into the wetlands reserve under heavy police guard and commenced the clearance of 90+ hectares of bushland to make way for the new road. After years of planning, lobbying and protesting at local festivals, this marked the start of the highly visible stage of the SBW campaign, including the first arrests of activists. Over the coming weeks and months SBW activists mounted a high profile campaign to interrupt and slow down clearing activities in the wetlands, as well as to challenge both the State and Federal Governments' rationale for the project.

At this point it is worth noting that although the "SBW activist" label is used throughout this paper for purposes of identification, it is not intended to imply the existence of a cohesive, centrally coordinated group of people with a shared identity. In reality, the

SBW movement represented over 35 local community groups, five local councils and hundreds – if not thousands – of individuals who opposed the project going ahead. Actions, activities and communication styles were as diverse as the movement itself, ranging from coordinated non-violent-direct-action (NVDA), such as locking on to machinery and tree sits, to legal action, silent protests, phone jamming, banner drops and carnivalesque activities. There were on site concerts, supported by major local artists (Young, 2017c; Young, 2017e), poetry readings and eventually even a musical, in which activists re-enacted key moments of the campaign. The campaign attracted support by experienced activists and NVDA coaches, but equally encouraged local families to become engaged. One such example is Sandra Roe, the great-great-granddaughter of John Septimus Roe, the first Surveyor-General of Western Australia, who the Roe Highway was named after.

When I feel the need arises, I'm an activist. I'm not most of the time. [But] when I see a need, I get involved.....So I thought – enough is enough. I better put my spoke in.

These comments indicate that activist characteristics are part of an individual's identity, which are triggered by a perceived urgency and need to act on behalf of an issue or cause that a person feels passionate about. In the case of the SBW Defenders motivation varied, including a personal connection to the wetlands, local residents' lifestyle and outrage about a perceived injustice and lack of community consultation. One volunteer campaign coordinator reported setting up over 35 sub-groups on Facebook to cater for “different sections of the community” (BWD-6), such as families, schools and musicians, as well as those interested in creative actions and media response. Interviewees consistently emphasized the level of diversity as a core characteristic and a strength:

The diversity meant that we had people wanting to do different things. We had people that were interested in writing letters. We had people that were interested in calling up talkback. We had people interested in doing civil disobedience. We had people interested in baking cakes for people doing civil disobedience. We had people who worked full-time and had lots of money and donated thousands of dollars to the cause. We had people who were experienced in media, in arts, in songwriting. We had even a carers' group: healers and therapists for Beeliiar Wetlands that would take care of the activists and do things like massages, counselling, sound healing and all of this beautiful stuff. (BWD-1)

These first-hand insights illustrate the kaleidoscope of skills, abilities and backgrounds that are concealed by the use of the simplified SBW activist label. Rather than consisting of “professional activists”, as frequently implied by politicians and the mainstream media (see e.g. Taylor et al., 2017), ordinary citizens contributed to the overall campaign efforts, not necessarily based on campaign requirements, but based by their talents and interests. Community fundraising enabled at least one individual to cover their living cost and family commitments to ensure they could fully dedicate their time to the coordination of SBW activities during the peak of the protests. However, even though the existence of a campaign coordinator and a media team may suggest a synchronized effort and hence the existence of a consistent communication strategy, in reality it would be impossible to streamline the actions of such a diverse group of people. In contrast, interviewees unanimously emphasized the value of different communication styles and Beeliiar

Wetland Defenders' commitment to 'celebrate' the diversity of strengths, talents and perspectives.

Neoliberal framing of the SBW movement

Marked by a temporary downturn of the state's mining boom and a record low share in the national Goods and Services Tax (GST), the incumbent West Australian Government framed the \$1.9 billion PFL project as a crucial injection into the local economy. In a joint media release the federal Minister for Finance promised a "game changing project", which would drive economic growth and benefits of more than \$3.9 billion, as well as vital employment opportunities in the form of 2,400 construction jobs (Corman and Briggs, 2015). The project attracted major support from the transport industry, based on the promise that the PFL would streamline access to the port city and take 2,000 trucks off the existing highway (2017b). Among the biggest benefactors were construction company CIMIC, a regular donor to the WA Liberal and National parties (2016a). Within this context, protestors were framed as economic wreckers, obstructing the delivery of an essential piece of infrastructure, and 'greenies', a term that in the Australian context is loaded with negative connotations. SBW activists were continuously portrayed as 'jobless hippies' and 'professional protesters', who not only undermine the economy but waste police time and cost the taxpayers vast amounts of money due to security requirements (Taylor et al., 2017; 2016b). The media also ran reports based on first-hand accounts by contractors and State Government representatives, depicting activists as defecating in machinery, intimidating young workers (Caporn, 2017) and injuring police horses (Gartry, 2017). Throughout, the State Premier and his deputy framed the protests as illegal and a danger to community safety, threatening prosecution (Beattie, 2017; 2017f).

The editor of The West Australian, the state's only weekday daily newspaper, proudly proclaimed that "This newspaper supports Roe 8 going ahead" (2017c). The paper belongs to the same media organization that owns the state's most popular TV channel, Channel 7, which has double the evening prime time audience than its nearest competitor. Given the editor's unequivocal support for the road project and the newspaper's increasing dependence on advertising income, the media bias in reporting should come as no surprise. Activists were continuously being portrayed as disruptive and destructive (e.g. Taylor et al., 2017).

In the summer of 2016/17, the Barnett Government and SBW activists failed to achieve meaningful engagement in the resolution of their differences. Opposing viewpoints left no room for negotiation or a compromise. This stalemate and intransience undermine the idea of a win-win style 'zone of compromise' between activists and the organizations espoused in 'excellent public relations' theory. The model, by totalizing knowledge and failing to account for shifting in situ cultural dynamics, thus exposes its conceptual and theoretical weakness.

The State Government's attitude towards activists was characterized by a 'dismissal' of the Wetlands Defenders' legitimacy and a level of arrogance, illustrated by how actions were implemented with limited to no consideration of their impact on the local community. Clearing operations commenced as the government was about to enter

caretaker mode in the lead up to the state elections (O'Connor, 2017a). A freedom of information request relating to the planning documents for the PFL was fought by the incumbent State and Federal Governments for almost three years, at a cost of more than \$150,000 (2017g). Once released, the documents highlighted major discrepancies between the project's environmental report and its business case, suggesting "a rushed job based on massaged figures that could hang WA taxpayers out to dry" (Young, 2017a). A subsequent Senate committee inquiry identified multiple breaches of environmental conditions by contractors at the Beeliar Wetlands site (2017e). Throughout, the State Government and most noticeably its Environmental Minister refused to respond to enquiries relating to community concerns and declined to attend hearings to respond to allegations of environmental breaches (Young, 2017d).

Among SBW activists there was mounting belief that the timing and the location of the earliest clearing was politically motivated and intended to create irreversible damage, possibly to provoke a reaction and break the spirit of community opposition to the project (see also Wish-Wilson et al., 2017).

The destruction in there is incredibly brutal...It was just spite...It felt like they were just determined to do as much damage as possible... there were 'fuck you'-s that came all the way through... You can't sit with it going, okay, I'm [not] going to take it personally. This is a spiteful government. [Instead] You go, well, what else can we do [to stop the construction]? (BWD-8)

Echoing comments in the above quote, the State Government's attitude towards activists and the local community emerged as a key theme throughout the interviews and informal conversations, highlighting distrust in the state's leadership, the questioning of political motivations, and cynicism surrounding the government's and contractors' communication strategies: When challenged about the project in a radio interview, Premier Barnett dismissed any concerns, stating that Roe 8 "will not damage the environment of the Beeliar Wetlands other than you will see a major road going between two lakes" (Durrant, 2016). He thereby illustrated his government's disregard for community concerns, emphasizing their lack of validity in comparison to infrastructure and economic investments. Notably, two weeks prior to the state elections it was revealed in a senate estimates hearing that even though clearing had already begun, there was still no final business case for the PFL (O'Connor, 2017b). Furthermore, it later emerged that the government was presented with alternatives to mitigate exposure to financial risk and other damages if they should lose the election and a Labor Government would subsequently cancel the contracts. Instead, they chose the most expensive and arguably destructive option by clearing the Beeliar Wetlands site first (Emerson, 2017). In the words of a local environmental historian:

"The government, in spite of clear indications from both public and internal party polling that they would lose the election, chose the first option, saddling the taxpayer with substantial cancellation expenses and the community with needless destruction of urban bushland and wetland" (Gaynor et al., 2017: p.35).

On 3rd January 2017, after coming under consistent pressure to clearly state his party's position and commitment (and arguably seizing on the Barnett Government's increasing unpopularity), opposition leader Mark McGowan publicly committed to cease

construction of the highway if his party won the upcoming state elections ^(2017b). The Australian Federal Government responded by emphasizing its influence on the state's economic prosperity, insisting that the allocated funding was “specific to the [PFL]” and could not be re-allocated to other infrastructure projects ^(O'Connor, 2017c). Framed as an act of neoliberal benevolence in a joint media release by the Federal Minister for Finance and the Assistant Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development ^(Corman and Briggs, 2015), this was a case of government and industry “know best” and “we deem what's appropriate”, i.e. West Australian taxpayers either accept what they are given, or the local economy will miss out, with a flow on effect on jobs and standards of living.

A change in strategy: #PutLibsLast

Social media and in particular Facebook emerged as invaluable tools to “raise awareness” [of the destruction] (BWD-6), “rally troops” (BWD-1), “organize response teams” (BWD-8) and to provide a counter-narrative to that of the state media, in which activists were portrayed as disruptive, angry and wasting taxpayer funds ^(e.g. Taylor et al., 2017). One of the most notable initiatives was the active rejection of activist stereotypes. By printing placards that stated “I am an [*occupation*] and I oppose Roe 8”, Wetland Defenders not only emphasized, but furthermore celebrated the diversity of their community. Nurses, firefighters, medical professionals, academics and small business owners were among those encouraged to attend protests in their work attire to undermine efforts by State and Federal Governments, contractors and the mainstream media to denigrate protestors as “jobless hippies” (BWD-7). Ironically, this campaign strategy arguably simultaneously reinforced the neoliberal worldview as authoritative, as it highlighted individuals who enjoy economic status. Other invaluable communication tools were bright orange “Rethink the Link” posters and drop banners off bridges that raised awareness of the issue. The rise of online news outlets such as Fairfax's WA Today and the Guardian Australia also increasingly provided an alternative perspective on the Roe 8 and PFL protests to that portrayed by the Seven West Media group, including stories of personal sacrifice framed around the notion of ‘community hero’ ^(2017i; Beattie, 2017)

However, after months of picketing and protests the SBW movement was waning::

It was so grueling, what we did every day. I was up at 4.30 ...and finishing meetings at 10pm-11pm at night. ...It was intense work and it failed every day. Every fucking day we didn't succeed in stopping anything or slowing the work down. (BWD-4)

As families returned to work and school, activists were feeling increasingly deflated and frustrated after witnessing the destruction of the wetlands despite their best efforts. With legal avenues to stop the project being exhausted, the SBW activists were aware that protests and non-violent action would at best be able to slow down the destruction of the local wetlands. An actual end to the project could only be achieved with a change in State Government, given the Labor opposition's public commitment to immediately halt construction if elected. However, activists increasingly recognized the limited appeal of the narrow “Save Beelihar” message, which largely relied on a personal connection to the area: In the words of one of the volunteer coordinators:

We were so exhausted and so tired. The things that we were doing weren't working. We needed to engage the rest of the population that weren't engaging in the civil disobedience.... [those] that were rejecting the civil disobedience... (BWD-6)

As the quote illustrates, activists increasingly realized that their positioning and messaging did not resonate with the wider West Australian public, failing to encourage broader participation and engagement.

The Australian electoral system uses various forms of preferential voting, requiring citizens to number the candidates on their ballot paper in order of preference. By drawing attention to record levels of state debt, especially against the backdrop of a recent mining boom, SBW activists decided to tap into taxpayers' growing levels of discontent with the incumbent government. Encouraging voters to list the Liberal Party as their least preferred choice, Wetland Defenders effectively shifted the tone, direction and message of their campaign, away from conservation and a single infrastructure project, to a more general emphasis on the economic mismanagement of the incumbent government and criticism of its overarching agenda. The #PutLibsLast hashtag provided a clear call to action that could be executed at an individual level. It enabled Wetland Defenders to both broaden their message and most importantly their reach and relevance. They did so via a number of humorous actions that challenged the incumbent leadership team, resulting in visual opportunities that resonated with the public. Over the coming weeks numerous stunts emerged as SBW activists embraced the new messaging and grew progressively bolder, challenging an increasingly frustrated Premier with witty messages and multiple carnivalesque actions that drew attention to political decision making processes and attracted further media attention, eventually even bringing the previously hostile SevenWest Media group on site. For example, a photo emerged of the Premier at a major sporting event, posing next to a group of activists dressed in swimming costumes and proudly displaying the #PutLibsLast and #DrowningInDebt messaging in big letters on their arms (Young, 2017f). In another televised stunt an activist dressed in a wedding dress confronted the Premier in front of Parliament House, drawing attention to a controversial preference deal with the right-wing, populist National Party (2017d). One of the arguably most recalled images of the election campaign is that of an activist dressed as a giant cockatoo challenging the Premier on the evening of the election (2017j). This shift in language and focus is clearly reflected on social media. Following public outrage by supporters over the government's decision to commence construction in December and January, the focus shifted to the documenting of environmental damage, including animal casualties in early February. However, by early March social media posts included clear, election related calls to action, including the now widely recognized #PutLibsLast. Wetland Defenders used banner drops, social media memes and media stunts such as those detailed above to shift the attention beyond a relatively narrow focus on conserving the Beeliiar Wetlands to emphasizing the value of the environment and sustainable infrastructure planning ahead of economic gain and industry profits. In doing so they used hashtags such as #DrowningInDebt to justify their call on the West Australian public to vote out the incumbent State Government on the basis of economic mismanagement, thereby challenging the neoliberal agenda and consequently the status quo.

It is important to note that the Wetland Defenders only provided a particular perspective on the Roe 8 project, thereby illustrating the earlier argument that activism is not limited to progressive movements. Throughout the SBW campaign there were counter voices who advocated in favor of the PFL. One local council in particular invested substantial funds in a “public information campaign”, which advocated for the re-distribution of traffic away from its electorate (Zimmerman, 2017). Supporters used similar social media tactics to those employed by SBW activists, creating videos and Facebook groups, e.g. @Build-Roe-8, with an emphasis on traffic flow, safety and the right to have their voice heard. Their efforts focused largely on media commentary, advertising and image based memes, lacking the diversity, community input and visibility of the SBW movement, which arguably provided a platform for previously powerless individuals to come together, have a voice and channel their collective frustration via the #PutLibsLast messaging. However, like the Wetland Defenders, the Build-Roe-8 voice added to the debate and arguably to voters’ ability to make an informed decision.

On 11th March 2017 West Australian voters did what SBW activists had encouraged them to do: they delivered a state record 16 per cent swing against the incumbent government and delivered a landslide win for the Labor opposition ^(2017a). Even before he was sworn into office, the newly elected West Australian premier announced that all work on the PFL had been suspended indefinitely ^(2017h).

Discussion and conclusion

Activists as challengers of symbolic power

Based on this case study, SBW activist may be seen as challengers of symbolic processes and hence the exercising of what Bourdieu ⁽¹⁹⁹¹⁾ refers to as symbolic violence, as they contest the acceptance of the existing social order. By definition, symbolic power is not physical; however, it is exceptionally powerful as it is exercised with the implicit support of its subjects, i.e. even those people who are disadvantaged by it. Marked by the privatization of government services, market deregulation and an increased role of the private sector, the dominance of neoliberal ideology in countries such as Australia is a typical example of modern symbolic violence in action. From Bourdieu’s perspective, the inevitability of neoliberalism is evidenced in its naturalization in the eyes of many.

Within the context of this case study it may take the form of large construction companies and major political donors influencing government spending ^(Lawrence et al., 2017), by instigating projects “with marginal benefit to the community” (BWD-1). It includes the legitimacy of citizens’ perspective being dismissed, their inability to access infrastructure due to toll pricing, or to afford housing, in return for the perceived honor of belonging to the country’s “powerhouse economy”. It may also be in the form of compulsory land and home acquisitions ^(2016c), to afford the widening of roads, and restricted access to traditional sites for Aboriginal communities ^(Ceranic, 2016), justified by the continued need for development and economic prosperity. Equally, it may be illustrated by the destruction of heritage and/or ecologically valuable sites and limited

natural diversity for future generations to enjoy, as road reserves eradicate or limit access to national parks and open green spaces.

This paper argues that progressive movements like the Wetland Defenders seek to challenge symbolic violence by revealing the underlying power relations that enable actors to impose preferred meanings as legitimate. Government and corporate public relations activities perform a central role in these legitimization processes. Community activists' responsibility in society can thus be interpreted as raising awareness of symbolic violence among those who have traditionally accepted and complied with their personal suppression by other, more powerful elements of society. The aim is not to convince the community of their subjugation, but to encourage citizens to ask questions, challenge norms and encourage others to do the same. Common questions that were embedded in the SBW campaign include: Why are we building a road to a port that is nearing capacity? Why are we prioritizing road infrastructure spending over investment in more sustainable options? Why do we continue to sacrifice green, open space for infrastructure projects to boost the economy? Why does the community not qualify to have an input into decisions that impact future generations' quality of living?

Challenging key assumptions in the extant PR activism literature

The Save Beelir Wetlands (SBW) case study challenges a number of key assumptions within the extant PR activism literature. For example, PR scholarship has to date predominantly conceptualized activists as a homogenous entity (Hughes and Demetrius, 2006). This study illustrates the diversity of backgrounds, influences and communication styles within what local politicians and contractors referred to and depicted as a single, coordinated unit. In reality, grassroots movements are not monolithic, but consist of a number of groups and individuals, including the marginalised, economically disadvantaged and ordinary people. They are multifaceted, dynamic and continuously changing, as activists drift in, take on responsibilities and consequently may move on or into the background due to conflicting demands. BWD was an umbrella movement for 35 local groups, five councils and thousands of individuals from all walks of life, who at various stages contested the activist label and associated stereotyping by the mainstream media and governments' communication departments. Indeed, the author argues that it was this collective nature and social characteristics of the SBW campaign that enabled activists to successfully challenge the interests and beliefs of those in positions of power and hence disrupt the West Australian neoliberal reality.

Bourdieu's public actions during the later stages of his career were characterized by his use of colorful language and analogies with battle fields and "power games" (Bourdieu et al., 2008), thereby drawing attention to what he considered to be intrinsic to activism; that is, conflict and the absence of a "zone of compromise" or mutual benefits, which have traditionally been referred to as best or excellent practice in PR activism literature (e.g. Grunig and Grunig, 1997; Smith and Ferguson, 2001). The SBW case study illustrates an example where the incumbent government and their contractors, aided by bureaucrats and their advisors, assumed the role of decision makers, whilst disregarding community opposition as too

emotional, misinformed or lacking an understanding of the complexities of the issues at hand. These actions represent what Bourdieu (1991) would label a form of symbolic violence, as the public is led to believe that the privileging of the economy over everything else may not benefit them, but is legitimate as it is in the state's best interest. Simultaneously, the importance of environmental and cultural claims is negated as negligible and furthermore framed as irresponsible and a threat to economic prosperity. Consequently, the SBW activist-government 'relationship' was marked by an absence of - or indeed any interest in - the negotiation of a compromise, thereby illustrating Weaver (2010) and Stokes and Rubin's (2010) argument that contrary to best practice recommendations in the extant PR literature, the notion of a 'compromise' may not appeal to activists who are opposed to a business proposition or policy decision. The SBW campaign's shift away from the relatively narrow focus on a single infrastructure project to overt criticism of the State Government's prevailing neoliberal agenda supports Bourdieu's (2000) argument that consciousness raising in itself does not change the existing complicity of victims of social domination. Public protests, the displaying of stickers and campaign banners, signature collections and public pledges of support in online forums in themselves are merely symbolic acts of outrage. By including a clear call to action, i.e. #PutLibsLast, activists provided individuals with a means to have their voice heard beyond the protest movement and to publicly reject the incumbent government's prioritizing of economic success ahead of community concerns via active civic engagement and conscious participation in the ritual of electoral politics.

PR scholarship and practitioner literature in particular have traditionally positioned activists as trouble-makers in opposition to corporate and government goals, failing to acknowledge the legitimate role activists perform in civil society (Demetrius, 2013). However, as the SBW campaign illustrates, contractors and in particular the State Government were merely targeted as a means to an end, due to limited alternative opportunities to impact decision making processes. In a top-down, neoliberal society, which reduces democratic processes to casting a vote once every electoral term, Australian grassroots activists' ability to influence change is limited to positioning the two major political parties against each other. This process is less about personal, political preferences, but instead about vote-driven pre-election promises. The relegation of democracy to equal voting has created what Lawrence et al. (2017) describe as "a situation of decision making see-sawing between economic and environmental axes as elections come and government's ethos changes" (p.158), with limited political interest in long-term, sustainable decision making. Within this context, single issue pressure groups' role in politics has been criticized for its narrow focus, hence the failure to acknowledge conflicting priorities that influence political decision making processes. Described as practicing infantile or consumerist politics, some scholars challenge the value of these groups as part of modern democratic societies, arguing that they may make it more difficult to govern fairly and effectively (see e.g. Grant, 2000; 2014). However, the author argues that despite SBW activists' original focus on a single infrastructure project, their efforts have raised awareness of broader issues, as Wetland Defenders challenged the state's neoliberalist agenda.

As illustrated by the Build-Roe-8 counter-movement, activism is not limited to progressive movement, but extends to those hostile to environmentalism and political reform. However, in extending the above argument it may be argued that by offering an

alternative narrative, activists – irrespective of the causes and issues they seek to promote - contribute to the multiplicity and visibility of views and perspectives in a given society, thus encouraging citizens to re-assess their assumptions, values and priorities.

As Bourdieu ⁽¹⁹⁷⁷⁾ points out in his theory of practice; despite symbolic violence being an invisible power that requires buy-in by the ‘suppressed’, this nevertheless does not signify complicity by the entire population. Instead, the concept of symbolic violence illustrates the important role progressive activists might perform in neoliberal societies, as emphasized by the Australian Federal Government’s current efforts to undermine, sideline and disempower grassroots opposition via the introduction of new legislation. In challenging the neoliberal status quo and the complicity of the West Australian community, Wetland Defenders held up a mirror to society. However, based on examples of SBW activists’ interventions the following question arises: in their effort to appeal to mainstream audiences, might progressive activists be inadvertently or necessarily complicit in reinforcing a neoliberal worldview and values, which reduce the role of the public sector and obstruct public participation and resistance to economic development? This is evident in this case study via references to economic performance (#DrowningInDebt), which imply criticism of government spending irrespective of community value or necessity, and the challenging of activist stereotypes based on existing power structures which favour economic and class status.

The author concurs with Bourdieu in arguing that the presence of critical counter-voices and powers is a fundamental element of a genuine democracy. However, the activist-government conflict is arguably characterized by a greater level of neoliberal complicity than would appear at first glance.

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