

Title of event: *NGOs advocacy communications in times of crisis and uncertainty: discussing challenges and building a roadmap for change*

Context

Advocacy communications, defined as submitting well-reasoned arguments that undergo appraisals of worth to inform collective decisions (Heath, 2006; Heath, 2018), is a form of communication developed by activist groups, social movements and charities whose aim is to bring forward marginalised groups' issues into the public sphere (Ciszek, 2017; Waymer & Heath, 2007), thus making use of communication strategically for this purpose (Wilkins, 2016; Matos, 2023). In the humanitarian and development field many NGOs are also using more communications to advocate for their causes and to influence the public sphere, making better use of online media and other journalistic devices, such as storytelling, to engage more with communities, with some further seeking to embed communications across policy (Matos, 2023). This is the case for instance of NGOs working with human rights and other more complex topics, such as reproductive health.

Submitted also to increasing market ideologies and pressures (Cronin & Edwards, 2021), NGOs and charities have augmented their communicational capacity, the effect being an increase in the scale and impact of the use of communication strategies, tools and practices, as well as in public relations work, by the third sector altogether. The latter have thus sought to make better use of media to their advantage in the midst of an increasing competitive and digital, uncertain and challenging geo-political global environment (Cronin, 2018). Arguably, the Chartered Institute of PR UK last data from its annual 'State of the Profession' survey, has underlined that the third-sector and specifically, charities represent the third largest employer (CIPR, 2022). Moreover, within the field of political science and international relations and development also, a big debate in the last decades has been how far NGOs can actually go, and can they make a difference? (Bebbington et al, 2008).

Despite its large organisational communications capacity (Moloney, 2006), the third sector also has struggled with its essential communicative purpose, i.e. "asserting the legitimacy and authenticity required to influence collective decision-making when appraisals of worth are predicated on the cultural context that marginalizes them." (Aghazadeh, 2022, p.257). Despite also scholars' great efforts of investigating how collectives can successfully employ advocacy for social change and marginalized groups within an ideal, inclusive public space (e.g., Ciszek, 2017; Ciszek & Gallicano, 2013; Waymer, 2012), the realities are of: **1)** limited access to voice (Edwards, 2018), resources (Cronin and Edwards, 2021), positioning (Waymer, 2012) and **2)**

attacks to marginalised groups' legitimacy and authenticity of views (Aghazadeh, 2022) are major challenges that the researchers of this event will address.

Carolina Matos's Research

Matos' research is concerned with the role of media and communications for social change, having engaged in past research on the role of public service broadcasting and the public media in processes of democratisation in Latin America in comparison to Europe (2013). Matos' (2023) current work has engaged with over 50 women's health NGOs from across the world to assess how they make use of communications to advocate for gender equality and reproductive health, which was the result of a *Global Challenges Research Fund* (GCRF) project. Matos' (2024a; 2024b) has recently worked on research with women's disadvantaged communities in Brazil, US and Guatemala to assess these groups' understandings on health communication messages on reproductive health in the context of rising ideological manipulation and misinformation/disinformation in politically polarised geopolitical contexts.

Raluca Moise's Research

Raluca's passion for advocacy communications has led her to research various dimensions of this form of communication. Firstly, applying Putnam's conceptualisation of social capital, Raluca looked at the ways in which diasporic communities build relationships with various publics and stakeholders, in order to influence and make relevant changes at both community and societal levels (Moise, 2022a). Secondly, drawn from a research project led by the3million, an advocacy UK-based organisation supporting European migrants' rights in UK, Raluca investigated a specific practice of advocacy communications, the rise in uses of beneficiaries' lived experiences in NGOs advocacy rhetoric (Moise, 2022b).

The aims of the research event

1. To connect City researchers with expertise in advocacy communications and advocacy communications professionals
2. To assess the challenges that NGOs and charities face in the contemporary world
3. To discuss more possibilities of engagement for the communities and relevant stakeholders, including drawing a participatory research plan and other advocacy communication strategies that other NGOs could use.
4. The event will also be an opportunity for Matos (2023) to officially launch the 'NGO practitioner toolkit', a summary of the GCRF research findings which includes also an advocacy communications template with further suggestions of communication strategies.

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