

Upfront

Nonprofits and the News **Why a handful of organizations get all the publicity**

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COMMUNICATIONS

Nonprofits and the News

Why a handful of organizations get all the publicity

Ever wonder why some nonprofits get all the press?

That's the question a pair of sociologists from the State University of New York at Albany set out to answer in a new study. And their findings might surprise anyone, especially any journalist, who assumes that newsworthiness dictates media coverage.

SUNY researchers Ronald Jacobs and Daniel Glass poured through news articles in the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, and *Newsday* published between 1990 and 1998, searching for mentions of nonprofits in a sample group of 750 New York nonprofits. They found that nearly a third of the organizations received no publicity in the 9,071 articles that the authors retrieved, while about 2 percent appeared in more than 100 news stories each. The median nonprofit organization was mentioned in two news articles over the eight-year span, indicating that publicity was a relatively rare event for most groups.

Their report, published in the September 2002 issue of *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, found, not surprisingly, the larger the organization's income, paid staff, and membership, the greater the likelihood of receiving publicity. Those factors allow organizations to hire public relations professionals and develop effective information infrastructures. Nonprofits that have many members also have legitimacy in the eyes of news reporters, who seek out authoritative sources.

However, the study found that such factors aren't absolutely necessary. For example, cultural groups,



such as the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and the Drawing Center (a not-for-profit institution that focuses on drawing exhibitions), generated above average amounts of publicity despite having fewer staff and organizational resources. Jacobs and Glass explained that program officers at cultural organizations typically can draw

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on the professional skills and connections of more privileged members – who in effect act as “volunteers” to bolster media outreach.

“Indeed, if volunteers can offer the same kind of labor power as professional public relations workers ... they can act as effective substitutes for paid professional staff,” Jacobs and Glass wrote. By contrast, ethnic organizations (such as the Asia Society, the

United Jewish Appeal, and the Africa-America Institute) and social justice organizations (including Animal Rights International, Amnesty International, and the Natural Resources Defense Council) received less than average publicity. The report pointed out that ethnic organizations tended to have a more “disadvantaged membership and constituency” than, for instance, cultural organizations – which might translate into a lack of media access.

Curiously for both ethnic and social organizations, the study found a negative relationship between the probability of publicity and the number of organizational chapter affiliations and meetings. In other words, organizations with fewer meetings and chapter affiliations have a greater probability of media coverage. One reason, the authors speculated, is that media-hungry organizations focus resources on generating publicity, as opposed to concentrating on, say, spurring participation through community volunteerism, which often requires local chapter meetings.

Jacobs and Glass acknowledge that other factors, such as news content, affect media coverage. Indeed, many journalists would scoff at the notion that organizations with certain kinds of human or financial resources can more easily get in the news. “It’s all about the story,” says Maureen Fan, New York correspondent for the *San Jose Mercury News*.

Jacobs and Glass’s data suggest that this may not, in the end, be true.

–Ken Yamada