**COCHABAMBA WATER WAR: WHOSE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY WON THE WAR?**

BY:

MODÚPÉOLA OYEBOLU

CANDICE NORWOOD

MEGAN NORTON

MARIANELLA AGUIRRE

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**INTRODUCTION**

        “¡El agua es nuestra carajo!” “The water is ours dammit!” This is one of the popular catchphrases that was passionately shouted by protesters in the streets of Cochabamba, Bolivia during the uprisings against water privatization and water price hikes between November 1999 and April 2000. This conflict came to be known as the Cochabamba Water War (Shultz, 2000b). The events attracted national and international attention as they unraveled during the same time of other emerging anti-globalization and anti-privatization movements. Our paper will use concepts that shape communication strategy including networks, framing, and participatory communication theory to conduct an analysis of how the key actors of the Cochabamba Water War used these tools to affect social change by shaping public opinion, with the help of local media.

We have used an array of newspaper articles, books, blogs, broadcast interviews, World Bank reports, and press releases to examine this case study. With these resources we will compare and contrast the communication strategy of the Bolivian Government, the Bechtel Corporation, the World Bank and the Cochabambino public. We argue that the public won the Water War because their communication strategy and their use of local media were the most effective. We will introduce the background of the water crisis in Cochabamba, followed by details of our conceptual framework, then a discussion of our content analysis and findings, and ending with our implications and concluding remarks.

**BACKGROUND**

In 1996, the Bolivian government turned to the World Bank for financial support to alleviate the country’s water crisis. In turn, the World Bank asked Bolivia to privatize publicly owned water utilities as a requirement to receive relief (Shultz, 2009). This led to the passage of the Drinking Water and Sanitation Law (Law 2029) in October 1999. Consequently, public water services in the cities of La Paz, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, and Cochabamba were directly impacted (World Bank Operations, 2002). In November of 1999, Aguas del Tunari, a subsidiary of the San Francisco-based Bechtel Corporation, won a bid for private ownership of the water services formerly administered by the public utility company Municipal Services of Potable Water and Sewage Systems, SEMAPA (SEMAPA, 2014).

Significantly, Cochabamba--Bolivia’s third largest city--and its surrounding areas, is home to one of Bolivia’s largest indigenous populations, some of who principally relied on independent and co-operatively managed water wells (not administered by SEMAPA). Law 2029 not only privatized publicly owned water utilities, but these co-operatively managed water resources as well (Finnegan, 2002). In addition, the shift to Bechtel’s management was followed by a rapid increase in household water service fees. In most cases this doubled the cost, and in some cases it tripled the price that average households previously paid. In response to these tremendous fee increases, the city of Cochabamba and its surrounding areas protested the price hikes and new management from November 1999 until April 2000. The contract with Bechtel was revoked and SEMAPA regained control of the city’s water administration (Finnegan, 2002).

**COMMUNICATION STRATEGY**

In “A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War for Ideas,” Steven R. Corman introduces the Pragmatic Complexity Model of Communication which opposes dominant Message Influence Models of Communication (sender-receiver) and embraces the idea that, “Communication is a complex process of interpreting one-another’s actions and making attributions about thoughts, motivations, and intentions” (Corman, 2007, p. 9). Furthermore he states that, “Strategic communication is best viewed as an unpredictable and risky tool, and should be used accordingly” (Corman, 2007, p. 11). The idea behind this statement, is that “less is more” when it comes to communication strategy. He advises that strategic communicators replace old notions of repeating messages to gain traction and influence, with diverse and varied messages (Corman, 2007). This coupled with the use of networks, framing, and participatory communication practices is the measure used in our paper to weigh the effectiveness of the communication strategies used by key actors involved in the Cochabamba Water War.

**CONCEPTS**

The most significant of the theories we used to assess the Cochabamba Water War, was the primary actor’s use of networks. According to Dr. Amelia H. Arsenault, “the study of networks is, in essence, a study of relationships (Arsenault, 2011, p. 2).” By this definition, the interpersonal relationships of key individuals involved, as well as the relationships between principal organizations involved, are of the utmost importance to the understanding of the outcome of our case study. Importantly, Arsenault defines points of communication (data points) as nodes. She states:

“Networks are mercenary, ‘they kill or kiss nothing personal,’ depending on whether the node fulfills the needs of the network (2004b: 32). Networks are thus, flexible, scalable, and survivable because they constantly adapt to changes in the environment, deleting and adding nodes while maintaining a unity of purpose—the survival of the network (Arsenault, 2011, p. 17).”

        It is also important to distinguish between formal networks and informal (emergent) networks. While formal networks are sustained by officially organized arrangements of nodes, such as in legal contracts that bind local offices of larger corporations together, nodes in emergent networks are connected through shared identities and common goals (Arsenault, 2011). Nevertheless, in both cases it is the organizational strength of these networks that determines their survival.

Framing

In *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership,* Gail T. Fairhurst and Robert A. Sarr propose that effective leaders not only pay attention to how things get down, but they understand how to function as managers of meaning. The skill required to manage meaning is called *framing* (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996)*.*

“To hold the frame of a subject is to choose one particular meaning (or set of meanings) over another. When we share our frames with others (the process of framing), we manage meaning because we assert that our interpretations should be taken as real over other possible interpretations.” (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996, p. 3)

The framing techniques we will use to examine the actors in the Cochabamba Water War are “metaphor,” “spin,” “story,” and “catchphrases” (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

Participatory Communication Theory

In line with Corman’s Pragmatic Complexity Model of Communication, which challenges dominant “top-down” communication strategies, in “Theories of Development Communication,” Srinivas R. Melkote asserts that in Participatory Communication Theory “...the key players are the people handling their problems in local settings and learning and honing their competencies in the concrete experiences of their existential realities (Melkote, 2010, p. 118).” This concept stems from understanding that traditional forms of development and development communication do not successfully affect social change.

It is through these lenses that we will assess the effectiveness of the communication strategies used by the Water War’s main players to influence opinion and affect social change.

**THE “POWERS”: THE BOLIVIAN GOVERNMENT, THE WORLD BANK, BECHTEL**

The Bolivian government used **metaphors** to construct its narrative of the protests (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Officials appealed to popular ideals like “democracy” and the maintenance of “law and order” in an attempt to delegitimize the protests. According to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (2000), the president of Bolivia, Hugo Banzer, described the protesters as a threat to democracy. Banzer said that he was “obligated” to declare a state of siege in order to protect this order (The BBC, 2000). The Bolivian Information Minister, Ronald MacLean-Alboroa took this one step further by using Latin and South America’s drug stereotypes to build up opposition to the public. “These protests are a conspiracy financed by cocaine trafficking (sic) looking for pretexts to carry out subversive activities,” he said (McFarren, 2000). It is interesting to note that the Bolivian Government did not directly address the concerns of the protesters. Instead, its narratives sidestepped those concerns and attempted to attack the legitimacy of the protests themselves.

Bechtel and the World Bank differ from the Bolivian government in that they both directly addressed the reasons behind the protests. But this did not preclude these organizations from using **spin** to exclude important details in order and give the conflict a positive connotation (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). In this case, the organizations ignored critical details, such as the logistics of implementing privatized water systems and the public’s ability to pay the new rates. Instead, Bechtel emphasized SEMAPA’s mismanagement of the water systems (Bechtel, 2006). While the claim of mismanagement was true, it was also true was that the majority of Bolivian people could not afford Bechtel’s new water rates. The organization said the rates in Bolivia were 20 percent lower than the South American average (Berger, 2000), while ignoring Bolivia’s status as the poorest nation in South America. The World Bank’s president, John Wolfensohn insisted “the biggest problem with water is the waste of water through lack of charging” (PBS, 2000).

Unity of Purpose and Network Survival

Arsenault (2011) describes the importance of the unity of purpose for the survival of a network. Her analysis discussed earlier of networks that “adapt to changes … while maintaining a unity of purpose” (p. 16) is demonstrated in the relationship between the World Bank, Bechtel, and the Bolivian Government following the protests in Cochabamba. Bolivia’s dependence on the World Bank and Bechtel for debt relief (The Democracy Center, n.d.), and the World Bank’s active role in the government’s cabinet meetings (Barlow, 2000) helped to form a layered network. Initially, these groups worked together toward the common goal of privatizing Bolivia’s water. However, as the protests escalated, the three actors were unable to maintain the unity of purpose within their network. This led to the network’s disintegration. In the post-water-war battle for public opinion, the World Bank distanced itself from the conflict by re-narrating its role in Bolivia’s water privatization (Finnegan, 2002). This is, perhaps, best articulated in a letter written by Christopher Neal, the World Bank’s (former) External Relations Officer on Latin American Relations and the Caribbean:

“Your web articles erroneously suggest that the World Bank supported the recent Cochabamba water privatization project, in which the government of Bolivia accepted an offer from Consorcio Aguas de Tunari. In fact, the World Bank advised the government against proceeding with the privatization plan and water tariff increases that sparked tragic violence in Cochabamba last month.” (Shultz, 2000)

Bechtel also turned away from the Bolivian government following the outbreak of the protests. In an official statement, Bechtel said the water war was partly attributable to other social and economic circumstances that had nothing to do with its presence in Cochabamba. This narrative subtly suggests that the water rates were peripheral to the protests, thus shifting the blame. The Bolivian government remained largely uncommunicative throughout this time.

The Powers’ Communication Strategy

The three institutional powers reacted aggressively in their public communication strategies, both during and after the protests. The Bolivian government had the fewest number of statements in the press. This might be related to the President Banzer’s previous history as a military dictator. When Banzer declared a state of siege the government closed down the radio and television stations (Barlow, 2000), most likely because the protesters had gained traction through press coverage.

During the protests and in the months following, the World Bank and Bechtel almost exclusively relied on letters to newspaper editors and press statements. The letters to the editors specifically addressed the conflict by refuting the version of events that had been described in newspapers. This reactionary media tactic was not effective because it demonstrated little concern for the Cochabambinos and isolated the institutions from the people, rather than engaging them in discourse that could have diminished their concerns.

**THE PUBLIC**

On November 12, 1999, the public created a unified group and name: “La Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida” (“The Coalition in Defense of Water and Life”).  The Factory Workers Federation in Cochabamba, called “Fabriles,” also joined La Coordinadora to create a unified resistant network of both unionized and non-unionized workers. Despite the diversity in terms of occupation and even cultural practices, this alliance proved to be capable of integrating local, urban, and rural identities (Olivera, 2004).  The publics’ identity of equality through unity was driven by a desire to secure access to water and public services. The people who led community initiatives named themselves “spokespersons” rather than leaders. Oscar Olivera, a Bolivian factory worker took on the role as La Coordinadora’s unofficial leader, but the public did not give authority to any single person.  The public used three framing techniques discussed by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) in their communication strategy: **metaphor**, **slogans**, and **catchphrase**.

Their most common narrative was the “David and Goliath” metaphor, which the public embodied by juxtaposing themselves against the government and Bechtel.  Olivera popularized this trope in connection to the Cochabamba movement.  He explained, “It’s become a fight between David and Goliath, between poor people and a multinational corporation.  They have a lot of money, and they want to take away our water” (Finnegan, 2002). In addition to the metaphor, slogans such as, “The water is ours, damn it” and “Capitalism is killing mother Earth and humanity” were used to popularize and solidify the public’s message to outside audiences.

The Public’s Communication Strategy

Solidarity, trust, and mutual support merged into a power network.  The public worked toward “the ability to control their own economic and political destinies and thereby to recover a sense of dignity, both as individuals and as a people” (Olivera 2004, p. 161).  The protesters used the catchphrase, “The Takeover,” to articulate that they would take what was theirs; not only water, but also Cochabamba. This “takeover,” however, was misinterpreted by the government, which violently dispelled the crowds with tear gas and violence.  Olivera recounts:

“All the talk about taking over Cochabamba frightened many people – businessmen, state officials, city council members – and said things like ‘the Indians are coming to seize the city.’ We did call it the takeover of Cochabamba, but we meant in it in a symbolic way.  We said we were coming to take what is ours – the main plaza – to take it over physically and in a peaceful way.  We were coming to take each other by the hand – workers in the city and workers from the countryside – and we were coming to take our own decisions.  That is why we called it ‘la toma’” (the takeover)” (Olivera, 2004, p. 33).

The public’s network structure was informal and emergent. It was built around identity rather than assigned responsibility  (Arsenault, 2011).  It was also a counter-power network because the actors had the capacity to not only challenge but also change the power structures and relations in society  (Castells, 2007). Lastly, the public was a collective, horizontal network.  Similar to Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action through horizontal networks, La Coordinadora formed a social space that heralded equality between those “affected by the social problem of water, who have equal rights in practice of expression, intervention, and action” (Olivera, 2004, p. 72).  The network was flexible as individuals, workers, and even children intervened and participated in protests to express themselves. This participation legitimized the network and continually broadened the social base  (Olivera, 2004, p. 74).

In the beginning of the water war conflict, the network did not realize their social power and economic importance (Olivera, 2004).  La Coordinadora responded to a political vacuum by “uniting peasants, environmental groups, teachers, and blue- and white- collar workers in the manufacturing sector …La Coordinadora spoke in the name of people who felt ignored, excluded, and neglected....and could find no space within which to voice their ideas.” (Olivera, 2004, p. 28-29)

The public’s communication strategy parallels a participatory development communication grassroots model.  The purpose of participatory development, according to Silvio Waisbord (n.d., 18), is to “inform, motivate, and train rural populations mainly at the grassroots.” Everyone in La Coordinadora participated in decision-making throughout the protests.  Through this model, the public became empowered, and solidified their trust and unity.

**FINDINGS**

The public’s communication strategy was the most effective in the Cochabamba water war. Their strategic narrative: the David and Goliath metaphor was the most powerful because it humanized their image and efforts. Olivera reflects that the public’s narrative was successful because everyone saw “the importance of uniting all workers on the basis of clear objectives, and of having a transparent leadership that shares in the suffering of ordinary people, and of the mass mobilization of workers from both the city and the countryside.” (Olivera, 2004, p. 126)

The media helped the public’s network to expand. Protesters heard the stories of “ordinary people” through television and radio interviews, fueling support for the movement. Olivera explains, “I think the press played a huge role [in the protests] because it revealed to the populace what was going on in the city” (Olivera, 2004, p.35). Jim Shultz, founder of the Cochabamba-based independent media center, was one of the first Western media producers to cover the conflict. His detailed reports of the conflicts helped to project the issues in Cochabamba to a global audience. Television also played a role in shaping the water war. One theorist, Hafez states that a crisis must be “suited” for television in order to moving images that will grab attention. As a result, an element of “sensationalism” was applied to the media broadcasts of the water war.  The dominant media story of the violent demonstrations was displayed on a global news platform.

The televised death of 17-year-old protester Victor Hugo Daza, who was shot in the face by Cochabamba police, added a grimmer element to the conflict and ultimately brought about the political resolution the public was seeing. Following Daza’s murder, the Bolivian government signed an agreement with Oscar Olivera and La Coordinadora to remove Aguas del Tunari from Cochabamba. In addition to winning the water war, the public managed to modify labor relations and the water privatization law. Following the termination of Bechtel’s contract in April 2000, the 1999 law that permitted the Bolivian to privatize the water was repealed. Water management was returned to SEMAPA, but the new board of directors included members of La Coordinadora.­

Following the water war, Bolivia officially established jurisdictions called “Indigenous Peoples’ Peasant Autonomies (Autonomías Indígena Originaria Campesinas, AIOCs) to regulate the right of peoples to self-governance and autonomy” (Tockman, 2014). The Coordinadora successfully modeled how a social management movement can reach a public enterprise platform (Olivera, 2004) Cochabamba became the symbol of hope and dignity for the exploited and oppressed all across Bolivia.

**IMPLICATIONS**

There are a number of implications of the Cochabamba water war, as well as several recommendations from our team for future development organizations and communication specialists. In 2001 Bechtel and Aguas del Tunari sought restitution by suing the Bolivian government collectively for $50 million in financial losses as a result of the newly terminated 40-year contract (PBS, 2002). Spearheaded by Olivera in 2002, a group of 125 protesters marched to the Bechtel headquarters in San Francisco (Plumer, 2006). This brought about increased mainstream media attention from publications such as the San Francisco Chronicle and the New Yorker. The increased pressure forced Bechtel to back down the lawsuit and settle for almost no financial reimbursement. Bechtel and the Bolivian government reached the settlement in 2006. The parties stipulated that Bolivia would not be forced to pay as long as the country publicly attributed the contract’s termination to public unrest rather than Bechtel’s services (Associated Press, 2006).

Though the Cochabamba protests had been covered heavily by local, independent media services, the Bechtel lawsuit gave rise to more U.S. media attention. In addition to the San Francisco Chronicle and the New Yorker, the New York Times, PBS, and the Associated Press were some of the other large organizations to cover the protests in connection with the lawsuit. The media coverage not only brought international awareness to the Cochabamba protests, but it also highlighted privatization as a widespread issue across the world including in South Africa and England (Interlandi, 2010). This conflict also became a model for other social movements across the world including the anti-globalization movement budding in 2000 and the Bolivian gas conflict (Marzoga, Cordova 2009).

In the years following the Bechtel lawsuit, the protests have been analyzed in academic literature and pop culture. The book *Blue Gold: the Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World’s Water* was adapted into an award-winning 2008 documentary by filmmaker Sam Bozzo. Another film called “Tambien la Lluvia” (Even the Rain) was released in 2010 and tells the story of a Spanish film crew that travels to Bolivia to shoot a movie during the protests. A more publicized reference to the Cochabamba situation was the 2006 James Bond movie “Quantum of Solace,” which has a secondary plot line involving control over Bolivia’s water supply. Even with these successes, the struggle over water in Bolivia continues. Our research team noted that although La Coordinadora and the protesters were able to expel Aguas del Tunari and lower water prices to the pre-Bechtel rates, the groups did not devise an adequate alternative to water privatization. In the years after La Coordinadora took control over SEMAPA, about half of the rural population of Bolivian still did not have regular access to fresh water and SEMAPA continued to be criticized for mismanagement of the water system (Finnegan, 2002). What became a new challenge for SEMAPA following the water war was the fact that the organization had driven away previously interested capitalists, and was now void of new investments (Finnegan, 2002). The Cochabamba protest is a good case to examine the different ways that development and development communication need to improve on different levels.

On the local level we believe representatives of future social movements should strive to meticulously develop concrete solutions that improve livelihoods of the native people rather than keeping the situation the same. While the Bolivian public guided by La Coordinadora succeeded in relieving themselves of the higher water prices under Bechtel, they did not effectively devise a solution that would provide regular water access at a reasonable prices. The general structure of their movement is more akin to what we later in the later “Occupy Movement” of 2011. Like the Cochabamba water struggle, the Occupy Movement also did not have an official leader, or a definitive method of bringing about its desired outcome. On the governmental and financial levels, organizations such as the World Bank need have a problem of dictating “solutions” to countries that are not necessarily applicable. These organizations need to better work within the economic and cultural systems of individual countries rather than making general proposals.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the Cochabambino public effectively used framing techniques and independent media to bring awareness to an important development issue. They were able to capture audience’s attentions by playing off of the common “underdog” trope, something that people naturally tend to identify with. There efforts to emphasize access to water as a basic human right, structured the conflict in a way that most people across the world can understand. The televised death of 17-year-old Victor Hugo Daza, solidified this humanizing story, and helped to propel the struggle to a global level. Once Bechtel conceded control of the water system back to SEMAPA, the public provided the short-term solution of lowering water prices and changing the water privatization laws. With these types of movements, however, there needs to be another step that directly addresses the issue. Our research team believes that governments and development organizations need to have more interest in working with members of the public to solve social, economic, and environmental problems. Because while aggressive social and political movements can have lead to profound short-term change, if there is no precise plan then they could have potentially disastrous long-term effects.

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