Raining on SeaWorld’s Parade: PETA’s Direct Action and Public Interest Communication

Ashli Q. Stokes

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Abstract

PETA is well-known for creative animal rights activism, with studies exploring how its text-based advocacy creates change regarding societal treatment of animals. What is less explored is how PETA uses “on the ground” direct action strategies as public interest communication (PIC). For PIC scholars, these strategies are relevant, as direct action provides communicators with experiential ways to persuade stakeholders of new perspectives to push for social change. Building on previous studies in public relations activism and PIC, this essay argues that PETA’s direct action strategies complement its text based advocacy by shaping stakeholder perception through encounters with material realities, specifically by using embodied forms of persuasion. Answering how public interest communicators create effective persuasive messages “on the ground” is crucial in understanding contemporary social change.

*Keywords: direct action, PETA, SeaWorld, social change*

Ashli Q. Stokes (Ph.D., University of Georgia) is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her award-winning research using rhetorical approaches to analyze public relations controversies, frequently concerning social movements and activism, has been published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research, Public Relations Inquiry, Journal of Communication Management,* and *Public Relations Review,* among others. Stokes also co-authored *Global Public Relations: Spanning Borders, Spanning Cultures* (Routledge, 2009). In her work on communicating Southern identity, she published *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* (with Wendy Atkins-Sayre; University of Mississippi Press, 2016), essays for the *Southern Communication Journal, Smithsonian*, and *Academic Minute,* an edited collection from UNC Press Office of Scholarly Services, and has served as a guest on public radio.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ashli Stokes, Department of Communication Studies, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, 28223. Contact: aqstokes@uncc.edu