How charities can overcome donors' 'silent resistance' to engage them in taboo causes

Rogare praxis paper #2

⊙ Brand management

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ROGARE
THE FUNDRAISING THINK TANK

Contents

Rogare (Latin for 'to ask') is the independent think tank for the global fundraising profession. We are the engine that translates academic ideas into professional practice; and aim to Rethink Fundraising by encouraging better use of theory and evidence in decision-making.

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Foreword

Claire Routley

I am delighted to write the foreword to the second in the series of Rogare praxis papers. 'Praxis' is turning theory into action, which is a core part of what we do at Rogare. Rogare praxis papers showcase the ideas that a practising fundraiser has developed as part of recent research for a PhD or Master's degree, with recommendations about how this research can be translated into professional practice.

In our first paper, published in 2021, Dr Lucy Lowthian described how fundraisers could tap into psychological well-being factors to better inspire people to leave a legacy to charity.

In this next addition to our series, David Harrison – using the research he completed at Birkbeck, University of London – shows how fundraisers can overcome what is known as donors' 'silent resistance' to causes that they are uncomfortable engaging with, particularly around the topic of death.

David – who is now marketing manager at Blind Veterans UK, but completed his study while working as individual giving fundraiser at Marie Curie – presents a thoroughly well-constructed paper that gives some excellent insights into how charities that tackle socially-taboo issues can better manage their brand to build more engaged relationship with their donors.

As someone whose speciality is legacy fundraising, the focus on ways to talk about death is particularly interesting.

In this second paper, we have introduced a new traffic light system that is designed to give fundraisers confidence in the practical recommendations that praxis paper authors make, which is explained in the box on this page. And any words highlighted in **bold** in the text are included in a new **glossary**, to further help fundraisers understand concepts used in the paper.

Rogare praxis papers are written by fundraisers for fundraisers. If you have research you would like to turn into a paper in this series, please submit your idea via our website here – https://www.rogare.net/fundraising-practice.

Finally, I would to thank the Jess Burgess and Nigel Harris, my colleagues on the Rogare praxis paper editorial panel for reviewing this paper to help ensure it was the right format for publication in this series. ◑

Dr Claire Routley
- Head of gifts in wills consultancy, Legacy Voice
- Rogare Council member and editor of the Rogare praxis paper series.

Traffic light system for recommendations

Green The recommendation is supported by a body of evidence. The author tested this in their research or it builds on/incorporates other research where this recommendation was tested.

Amber The recommendation is strongly implied by the research and the theory behind it, even though the author might not have tested this idea. In this case, we could recommend that practitioners could try this out, for example, in split tests.

Red The recommendation is highly speculative, perhaps because it's come from a discipline outside of fundraising but has never been tested in a fundraising context, or it is a stretch of the theory to get to this recommendation.

1
Introduction – the challenges raised by 'taboo' social problems

The process of recruiting and developing new donors, which is becoming increasingly tough as fewer people are giving, relies on individuals being able to acknowledge, and ruminate on, the social cause being communicated (CAF 2019, 2020). Concurrently, we've seen a marked shift in how organisations communicate their cause. Marie Curie's 'TalkAbout' campaign, which aims to encourage and enable individuals to discuss death and dying, is one such example.

This campaign marks a noticeable shift in strategy, stepping away from cause-led, 'emotional-punch' branding toward an increasingly positive, open, and disassociated 'story' of the organisation's forward-thinking vision for change. Featuring animations of common euphemisms for death and dying, alongside an up-beat jingle, featuring the line 'whatever you call it, we should talk about it', this contrasts with previous campaigns featuring healthcare professionals, beneficiaries of care, and viscerally emotional narratives (Keifer 2019).

This is a trend across many organisations, choosing new positive strategies to communicate their *raison d'être*. In 2019 the British Heart Foundation (BHF) launched new branding with a campaign entitled 'Boy', which sought to educate audiences on its role in developing research into heart and circulatory conditions with the lighter tone of 'beat heartbreak forever' (Glenday 2019; BHF 2019). This is juxtaposed against their 2015 'emotional punch' branding 'Heart Disease is heartless' (Faull 2015).

The research I did as part of my Master's degree in marketing at Birkbeck College, University of London – for which I interviewed appropriate staff and conducted an intepretivist visual analysis of four case studies (listed in the Methodology, p17) – aims to further the domain of brand activism and morality by shedding new light on the element of silent resistance to brand activism, and how organisations are trying to overcome it, as Marie Curie is doing with 'TalkAbout' and BHF with 'Boy'.

Silent resistance is the way individuals seek to mentally or physically distance themselves from a **taboo** 'word', taboo 'thing', taboo 'persons', and taboo 'acts' and, as such, won't engage with the communication. It's important to briefly unpack the concept of 'taboo'.

Émile Durkheim, a founding father of the discipline of sociology, identified taboos as protecting 'the sacred', by defining what is deemed to be 'acceptable social behaviour' (Durkheim 1897). Through differentiating types of taboo, they serve to restrict thought and action within society but also "restrict thinking about and reflecting on what is forbid" for the benefit of maintaining social order (Frazer 1911; Michelson and Miller 2019, p395).

Taboos draw their power from the nature of 'risk' from violating a societally-agreed taboo (Bataille 1962). These risks can be internally focused – a negative emotion – or imposed upon an individual by other social actors. However, regardless of the source of the risk, taboos cause negative reactions: shame, disgust, anguish or guilt (Pelzer, 2002; Lambek 1992; Bataille 1962). Furthermore, these visceral reactions are a "result of nearness, of proximity…and catches our attention almost completely" (Pelzer 2002, p846) and as a result encourage distancing reactions from the taboo (Michelson and Miller 2019).

As individuals' proximity to a certain taboo increases, the frequency and potency of risks concurrently diminish and erode, slowly morphing and changing the agreed taboo between groups, people and societies (Pelzer 2002; Lambek 1992).

Nevertheless, for activist brands communicating a cause that is itself a taboo, this phenomenon creates immense resistance. Brands must communicate their

value, while contending with the need for distance from the feelings of disgust, anger and anguish the communications evoke. This requires that managers find new ways to talk about the cause that reduce these negative reactions and move toward some emotional/mental flexibility.

Fundraisers seeking these novel ways of speaking about causes in ways that overcome **silent resistance** should look at the **Narrative Transportation Model**. This model supposes that persuading individuals to acknowledge the importance of a cause, and therefore to add value to a brand's message, lies within 'transporting' consumers (Van Laer et al 2014; Green and Brock 2000). The model argues that beliefs, perceptions and attitudes can be changed or altered by using 'narrative persuasion' – story-led communications that may not, overtly, be attempting to change or manipulate opinion and beliefs of the consumer, also referred to as a '**sleeper effect**' in literature (Appel and Richter, 2010).

The Narrative Transportation Model further argues that narrative advertisements stimulate an empathetic and emotional response, whereas analytical messages stimulate a cognitive response. In other words, emotional punch encourages distancing reactions, and instead, as seen with Marie Curie's 'TalkAbout', or the BHF 'Boy' campaign, using humour, animation, stories to disassociate from reality encourages openness, or **psychological flexibility**, to communications.

Psychological flexibility sits within **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy** (ACT) – a field of human psychology – which can be applied by health care practitioners in everyday practice to help individuals with mental health issues related to painful experiences and bereavement. ACT is the result of research into how humans process and acknowledge (or avoid) painful experiences. Research on ACT proposes that healthcare professionals encourage people to move toward psychological flexibility as a means of acknowledging, and accepting, painful experiences and stimuli; and away from psychological inflexibility, which is occupied with **experiential avoidance** (avoiding focusing or acknowledging the painful topic).

In my research, there are parallels to be drawn between the act of a clinician providing care to individuals and the movement of organisations attempting to communicate painful/taboo topics in a way that will encourage people to accept them. It could be argued that charities and activists have moved from inflexibility to flexibility in how they approach communicating their cause, from emotional punch to open, inviting means, through:

- Moving their communications away from 'emotional punch' to stories based in humour, animations, and other tactics to remove their point from reality and encourage people to be present, which this research calls '**deliteralising** communications'
- Moving away from campaigning judgements to a more open 'this is important' messaging, bolstering the compassion needed to tackle the taboo causes they seek to communicate
- Encouraging '**committed action**' – patterns of consistent action
- Clarifying values as meaning – the morality of Marie Curie as the leader to impose moral judgements on values.

Broadly, these can be seen to be encouraging acceptance away from avoidance among cold audiences by focusing on 'hope' and openness (Frankl 1984; Sabucedo 2019). My research used this framework to map and understand the shift in strategies enacted by activist brands to communicate their causes and encourage people to acknowledge the taboos they seek to address.

Drawing on brand activist literature, as well as the Narrative Transportation Model from the field of narratology and the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy model of psychological flexibility from the field of humanistic psychology, this research seeks to address the question:

What strategies can activist brands and charities develop to generate a willingness to acknowledge the painful social problems they are seeking to address?

In tackling this research question, I analysed four campaigns run by Marie Curie since 2013 and interviewed five relevant staff at the charity (this paper features some of their quotes). You can read an outline of the methodology I used on p17, where you will also find YouTube links to all four campaign videos. ◔

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- Former individual giving fundraiser at Marie Curie UK.

2

Silent resistance – and inflexible responses to it

Much of the research in marketing, as well as marketing and fundraising practice, that considers resistance to communications is engaged with the idea of '**backlash**' – angered or frustrated responses to stimuli – as a litmus test for negative campaign controversy (Holt and Cameron 2010). While this is an important element that needs to be monitored, my research proposes another element that needs to be considered in the planning process – silent resistance.

Silent resistance is where the receiver cannot acknowledge, consider, or act on a communication because the cause communicated is so painful or unthinkable (**taboo**) that it causes a distancing reaction. It often manifests in situations where organisations cannot communicate their value in tackling an issue because the cause is so painful or taboo that is forces the receiver to mentally distance themselves from the stimuli. To the fundraiser, it wouldn't be immediately obvious that their campaign wasn't penetrating new target audiences.

Communicating the value of a brand that is seeking to draw attention to a taboo can cause significant resistance as proximity, or exposure to a taboo (taboo imagery, taboo acts, taboo words) is a key factor to provoking a reaction to distance oneself from the taboo subject (Lambek 1992; Pelzer 2002). As temporary, ever-changing boundaries of 'acceptable' behaviour in relation to a taboo, activist brands have a very narrow 'window' of acceptability through taboos' ability to "restrict thinking about and reflecting on what is forbid" for the benefit of maintaining social order (Michelson and Miller 2019, p395).

One of my interviewees summed this up, pointing out that the connection to the cause is strongest where someone has seen a family member go through the dying process and they receive support from Marie Curie. However, for the new supporters the charity is trying to attract – those for whom the charity doesn't have this prior connection – "it is a very difficult subject to approach where experiences can be so varied, a willingness to kind of engage with it can be quite off putting".

Taboos are able to create societal structures that regulate how people behave by focusing our attention on the 'risk' of violating a socially agreed taboo (Bataille 1962). These risks can be internally focused – such as a negative emotion – or imposed upon an individual by another social actor. However, regardless of the source of the risk, all risks cause negative reactions: shame, disgust, anguish or guilt (Pelzer 2002; Lambek 2002; Bataille 1962). Furthermore, these visceral reactions are a "result of nearness, of proximity…and catch our attention almost completely" (Pelzer 2002, p846). This may be a physical reaction in response to being in close proximity to a taboo foodstuff or an emotional, mental reaction to put emotional distance from the taboo (Michelson and Miller 2019).

For activist brands communicating a cause that is itself a taboo, this creates immense resistance. They must find a way to communicate their value, while contending with the need for distance from the feelings of disgust, anger and anguish the communications evoke. This requires that managers seek new ways to talk about causes to reduce these negative reactions and move toward some emotional/mental flexibility. Furthermore, because the idea of taboo is a lived experience as a result of proximity, existing consumers of activist brands may themselves find these new ways of speaking 'taboo', creating the same feelings of anguish and guilt. This requires we explore novel ways of communicating taboo causes to encourage people to acknowledge their existence.

This element will be explored further through ss2.1-2.4 – reactions to stimuli. ◐
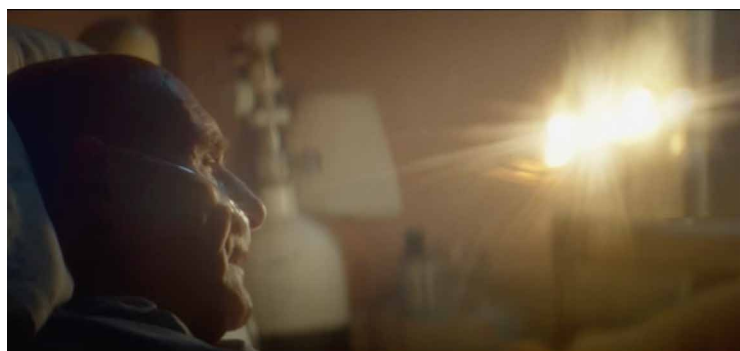
In 'Light in the darkest hours', Marie Curie nurses are represented as a reassuring light in the middle of the night, thus moving away from the 'hard-hitting' messages that have the potential to distance recipients from the taboo subject of death. See p17 for a YouTube link to the video.

2.1 Inflexible response: apathy

An inflexible response to **taboo** stimuli is that of **experiential avoidance** – being unwilling to accept or face private events when they're unwanted or distressing (Hayes et al 2012). Rather than accepting the cause, and therefore being able to take positive action based off the stimuli, this reaction leads some to distance themselves from the taboo, and apathetically ignore the brand entirely, due to the distressing nature of the content – the 'hard hitting stuff' as it was often referred to in my interviews

Along with this is a perception among charity staff – as my interviews revealed – that if you show this hard-hitting stuff, people will immediately switch off to protect themselves from having to deal with the taboo. I was told that the "punchy, hard-hitting stuff isn't quite landing anymore". One commented:

"We had a sentence that said, 'death is inevitable'. And that kind of bluntness really turns people off."

Instead, interviewees spoke of a more "reciprocated relationship":

"People fundamentally want what they've always

known, but really embrace it with more and more stewardship and relationship fundraising, and that you don't want to kind of, force people into it. You want to invite them to join a community, it has to feel that they've come to you rather than you've actually prompted them to come to yourself."

This is reflected in the cases reviewed by this research. Over the course of the four case studies (see Methodology, p17), each has become increasingly disassociated from the reality of the cause of death and dying.

With 'Light in the darkest hours' (2016) Marie Curie nurses were represented with a golden, reassuring light in the middle of the night, providing expert care to those living with a terminal illness.

This is juxtaposed against the hard-hitting, emotional nature of 'Symmetry' (2013) and, to a lesser extent, 'Any Terminal Illness' (2017). TalkAbout (2019) used this disassociation to encourage acceptance and discourage apathy in its animated portrayal of idioms to talk about death and dying. ❻

How fundraisers can avoid apathetic response

Through transforming your message, **deliteralising** away from the raw stimuli – with humour, animation, engaging stories further removed from people's lived experiences – fundraisers can avoid the 'emotional punch' nature of communications and focus on the value your organisation poses in relation to tackling the cause, and awareness of it.

One element that was highlighted during this research was the individual nature of taboos, being cultivated and reinforced on the individual level. As such, since warm

supporters have overcome the taboo through proximity and experience, they will have an expectation to continue speaking in the same way. Therefore, because of this pivot to less literal communications, warm supporters will need to be stewardarded on the change to avoid attrition or complaints.

This is explored further in s3.1 – 'Deliteralise the cause'.

2.2 Inflexible response: blaming the brand

Traditionally, **backlash** can be characterised as anger responses to stimuli, resulting in shock and horror as a result of processing stimuli. Blaming the brand, however, focuses more on internal blame response to the brand for evoking thoughts. Not speaking 'acceptably' about a taboo topic has caused Marie Curie to be the target of backlash and negative responses.

As an inflexible response, this doesn't encourage action or even a willingness to acknowledge a taboo cause (Sabucedo 2019).

Marie Curie tracked and recorded a number of such complaints about TalkAbout. One proposed development of the TalkAbout campaign would have been the use of fear as an emotion – the fear of creating more pain in the years ahead if you didn't deal

How fundraisers can avoid blaming the brand response

This finding, while not ground-breaking, further demonstrates that fundraisers and marketers should still be aware of blame response, opt outs and complaints. Having a supporter panel for discussions would also allow fundraisers to dig into these further.

This is explored further in s3.3 – 'Create hope'.

with problems now. But as I was told:

"That was by far the one that got the most negative response, so people really don't engage with things that are threatening. And also it feels like where we're taking a superior position." ❻

2.3 Inflexible response: bewildered confusion

When marketing strategies don't align with the expected values or norms that individuals have come to be familiar with in the way an activist organisation markets a taboo cause, this research posits that this can result in bewildered confusion.

Bewildered confusion is the inflexible response to a marketing stimulus that doesn't align with an individual's expectation for how an organisation should communicate 'acceptably' within the framework of a taboo.

As my interviews illustrate, bewildered confusion was something Marie Curie encountered in response to the TalkAbout campaign:

"I wouldn't call it a backlash, but we did receive some

contact from supporters saying that they didn't like the tone. They felt that it was a little bit too jovial that they didn't feel that that's something we should be doing."

"For the second iteration we used almost a reggae kind of sound, which some people really loved. But a lot of people thought was just too jolly, just too happy, too in your face, and kind of was like not caring. So we had to move away from that – still kind of lighthearted and a little bit upbeat, but not, over-the-top jolly."

Critically here, the member of staff makes a distinction between **backlash** and a nuanced response to demonstrate the confusion that individuals may feel when targeted with a communication that doesn't align with an individual's expectation of 'acceptably' communicating a cause. ❻

How fundraisers can avoid bewildered confusion

Because **bewildered confusion** is a factor in **silent resistance**, there is a need to develop fundraising messages with your supporters in mind, including new supporters, in a way that will help them to overcome it.

While new strategies might resonate with and enable cold audiences to accept and consider a painful cause, there is a need to consider warm supporters who may react with confusion as this isn't how the organisation normally speaks about its cause. Using supporter panel feedback, qualitative understanding, and drip-feeding new strategies into warm communications may help bring warm supporters on this journey, by being clear to the organisation's missions and values.

This is explored further in s3.2 – 'Clarify values'.

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2.4 Superficial action and committed action

As presented by this research, short-term strategies are a necessary factor in maintaining financial stability, implemented concurrently with vision-led strategies with the objective of changing attitudes and encouraging more individuals to acknowledge the **taboo** cause being commuicated. In the **psychological flexibility** model of **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**, committed action is defined as a 'pattern' of effective decisions directed to chosen values, which rely on acceptance of a taboo (Sabucedo 2019; Hayes et al 2012).

An example of a committed action would be being open to a communication, giving a donation, and continuing to engage with the organisation. However, its inflexible opposite is defined as "inaction or impulsivity" (Sabucedo 2019, p6). This inflexible impulsivity can be used depending on the objectives of the campaign:

"[TalkAbout versus emotional strategies] *isn't a binary choice. There are different messages for different audiences with different objectives. And so, in an emergency appeal, you are looking for fast response, and cut through. And so you are using signals shortcuts, and signposts and emotion – if you can show that emotion in a way that's true to the message you're trying to deliver, that will always work. And what we needed for the emergency appeal to do was raise money now."*

The impulsivity, outlined above, in needing to put distance between the communication and the receiver, could largely be described as a superficial action in so much as the action is one of distancing from a taboo (Bataille 1962). A superficial action doesn't represent a flexible choice to maintain a "pattern of committed actions which align with values" – enacting attitudinal change and acknowledgement – but rather it's an acknowledgement of painful taboo stimuli (Sabucedo 2019, p8). Challenges could then arise in communicating brand value, as this impulsivity isn't an engagement on a level that would allow Marie Curie to communicate vision and mission.

Committed action is a flexible response to painful or taboo stimuli and represents the physical, detectable, embodiment of psychological flexibility, within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ibid). Rather than a superficial action, committed action is used to describe a pattern of actions directed toward a set

of values (Hayes et al 2012). Committed action is the process whereby individuals can:
* experience acceptance of a painful experience
* be present with stimuli unjudgmentally
* experience cognitive diffusion
* be clear on the values that define an individual.

In the context of Marie Curie communicating death and dying, this is the process whereby individuals acknowledge the taboo cause, and take patterns of action, "creating and nurturing" communities for people to talk about these taboo issues in which they can be curious about the other types of service that Marie Curie provides and is campaigning for.

These patterns of action aren't restricted to financial actions, but offer opportunities for brand activism through volunteering, donating, advocating, opening up to other areas of brand activity and creating a community.

Moving away from having big one-off campaign moments to the continuous brand activism of 'TalkAbout' delivered similar levels of traffic to the 'TalkAbout' webpage as when the campaign first launched with a big marketing spend behind it, which Marie Curie interprets as reaching a relevant audience. People also engaged with the campaign having signed up for direct debits to street fundraisers. ⊙

How fundraisers can avoid superficial action and encourage committed action

Encouraging committed actions starts with an easy first interaction, and builds from there. We should be looking to build a relationship with donors from their first gift. Superficial actions, of distancing from the taboo, don't encourage people to engage with the cause in an open and psychologically flexible way, and have the potential to make donor journeys more difficult.
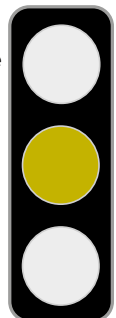
But using '**deliteralised**' communications – rather than trying to deliver an emotional punch – telling stories about beneficiaries through novel means such as animation, humour and music would allow people to initially process this first interaction. This would allow the donor to position themselves as the catalyst for hope, providing support to an organisation that brings hope to a situation.

Committed action is explored further through ss3.1-3.3.

9

3
Strategies to overcome silent resistance

In my research I was aiming for an understanding of the types of responses given to stimuli. In this section I'll outline the ways brands can overcome **silent resistance**. Through using humanistic psychological lens of **psychological flexibility**, my research has attempted to outline how activist brands more generally can encourage individuals to acknowledge the **taboo** social problems they are seeking to address, through:

1. Creating hope by encouraging individuals to be present non-judgementally with stimuli, and encouraging easy, **committed actions**.

2. Disassociating from reality – using novel windows (humour, animation, music, metaphors) to create content that encourages individuals to reach cognitive diffusion, and '**deliteralise**' thoughts.

3. Clarifying values through which individuals will be able to create meaning through positive, change-focused thoughts, viewing oneself and experiences as individual.

Through using these strategies – borrowing from literature used by healthcare practitioners – on an individual level to think flexibly, brands have rhetorical strategies that may be used to generate a willingness to acknowledge the taboo social problems they are seeking to address. The characteristics of the consumer response this research advocates are psychologically flexibility, open to acknowledgment, responses of committed action, as opposed to the inflexible opposites of blaming the brand, **bewildered confusion**, **superficial action** and apathy toward the brand. ◔

3.1 Deliteralise the cause

The **Narrative Transportation Model** supposes that overt storytelling isn't as persuasive as covert messaging, hidden in narrative devices such as narrative arcs, humour and non-literal visuals (Van Laer et al 2014; Green and Brock 2000). Through using narrative devices to transport audiences, activist brands can use the '**sleeper effect**' of covert messaging to influence receivers to have a more empathetic, emotional response rather than a cognitive, wary response. My research explored to what extent this disassociation from reality, and lived experiences, is effective at eliciting a psychologically flexible reaction.

Increasingly Marie Curie is using new, creative angles to communicate death and dying. In the most recent case reviewed by this research, 'TalkAbout' (2019), Marie Curie used animations to present idioms used in the UK to refer to death and dying. This advert features an upbeat jingle, the lyrics of which contained the idioms people use daily to avoid mentioning death and dying, with humorous, animated interpretations of these idioms. By doing this Marie Curie hoped to open a 'gateway' or 'window' to promote a willingness to acknowledge the taboo cause of death and dying.

One interviewee described the dilemma of including the word 'death' in the copy/creative for 'TalkAbout'. They said it would have made sense, "because the whole point was to say 'we need to be more transparent and more open about talking about death and dying'". But, having adopted novel, deliteralised windows as a way to communicate about the taboo, more direct language could be introduced in later communications:

"Once someone has been exposed to the adverts without mentioning death, but still understanding that it was about death, then as a second touchpoint or second exchange, you could definitely mention the word death. But it's just too hard to use the words when
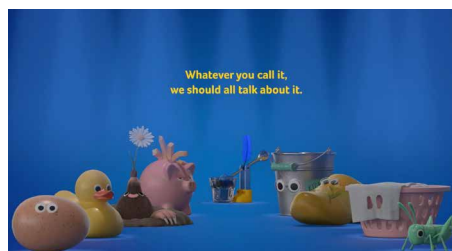
Marie Curie's 2019 'TalkAbout' advert contained deliteralised motifs such as the song *Go Belly Up*, a rubber duck floating in a full bat of water, and a bucket with a post-it saying 'kick me' while being kicked.

people are having dinner in front of the TV or when it's completely out of the blue, out of context. You need to manage people's emotional response and not just the brainy and kind of rational response that they might have later."

Humour was a deliberate attribute of 'TalkAbout' specifically designed to accomplish this: *"If you can shift something from 'I didn't want to talk about it at all' to 'that made me smile". You opened a different gateway to a different conversation".*

These gateways, through disassociating communications from reality, seek to open a conversation and encourage individuals to acknowledge the taboo causes that activists need to draw attention to, so that brands can communicate their value. There's evidence to support that responses that separating cause from reality is working for Marie Curie by encouraging people to acknowledge the taboo cause of death and dying:

"It did really well in terms of spontaneous awareness; it really did shift the dial. People who hadn't acknowledged it could then sort of, kind of bring Marie Curie to the fore and say, Oh, yeah, that's a charity. I know, that was really good. And how people felt then, the kind of values people thought Marie Curie really stood for, are all really positive and have gone in the right direction." ❻

How fundraisers can deliteralise the cause

By using novel windows – such as songs and animations – to communicate your cause, fundraisers will encourage individuals to recognise the cause you're wishing to present without judgement.

Using the element of humour allows more people to engage with death and dying "because if you can shift something from 'I didn't want to talk about it at all' to 'that made me smile', you open a different gateway to a different conversation".

Developing strategies that include narrative devices such as narrative arcs, humour and non-literal visuals works to develop acknowledgement of the cause, rather than a need to distance oneself from it.

Deliteralising communications allows the first interaction to be an easy one, through which one can communicate both service value in tackling a cause, and the long-term vision and mission of the organisation you're communicating, while avoiding apathetic distancing reactions.

> ❻ *'Deliteralising communications allows the first interaction to be an easy one, through which one can communicate both service value in tackling a cause, and the long-term vision and mission of the organisation you're communicating, while avoiding apathetic distancing reactions.'*

3.2 Clarify values

The differentiating factor between strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR) and activism is the element of moral authority in 'taking a stand' on an issue that sits outside of pure business function (Hoppner and Vandekkapat 2018; Sarkar and Kotler 2018). Rather than simply take up a position or stance, as in CSR, what makes activist organisations 'activist' is that their entire business function is structured to tackle key societal issues, embodying this in everyday business practices (Eilert and Cherup 2020).

My research found that Marie Curie is increasingly looking to assert its role in society as a force for societal change, an activist organisation with a clear mission, moving away from a perception as just a care-giving charity toward a vision-directed approach.

'Light in the darkest hours' (2016) and 'Any Terminal Illness' (2017) both featured narratives that focused on communicating Marie Curie as a care-oriented organisation featuring healthcare professionals and/ or people living with terminal illness. 'TalkAbout' (2019) marks a strategic movement away from care-oriented communication toward value driven communication.

As one interviewee said, it was talking much more about the "forward-facing mission of changing the way people behave, talk about, and think about death and the end of life". While this creates new challenges, it also brings new opportunities and different ways to allow people to engage and align with Marie Curie, encouraging people – "urging them", as one interviewee said – to have a conversation. In the absence of such conversations, charity communications focus on the negatives – the downsides – of the effects of the **taboo** issue, which people may not want to hear about. A conversation permits more positive engagement and reaches a wider audience that had not traditionally been supporting Marie Curie.

Widening the offering of support products available as a brand will therefore widen reach and relevancy, working to reinforce an organisation's moral authority as an opinion-, attitude- and change-maker. Ultimately, it will encourage more individuals to acknowledge the taboo cause of death and dying through proximity and acceptance (Hayes et al 2012; Bataille 1962). As one interviewee said, showing that they do this "shows that Marie Curie is true to its values". ➏

How fundraisers can clarify values

To overcome **silent resistance**, there's a need to encourage acknowledgment of the cause you're seeking to address, as explored in s3.1. However, there were both campaign level and strategic level options Marie Curie enacted to develop attitudinal change and encourage **committed actions** once individuals can acknowledge stimuli.

- On a campaign level – positioning the ambitious long-term values of the organisation in tackling a social cause, while putting the individual at the centre of enabling that change will enable individuals to clearly see value in their impact.

- On a strategic level – clarifying values to tackle silent resistance aims to engage more people by

talking about the forward-facing mission of changing the way people behave, talk about and think about death and the end of life. Doing this creates a new set of challenges. But it also creates a new set of opportunities and different ways to bring people into the organisation and for them to align themselves with what it does.

Clarifying the values then, presents a forward-looking, ambitious, organisation that has moral authority in gaining an individual's support and helps to develop a willingness to acknowledge taboo or painful social cause when combined with **deliteralisation** (s3.1) and creating hope (s3.3).

'Widening the offering of support products available as a brand will widen the reach and relevancy, working to reinforce an organisation's moral authority as an opinion-, attitude- and change-maker.' ➏

3.3 Create hope

In the movement toward **psychological flexibility**, following **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**, healthcare practitioners encourage people to change two factors:

1. Make conscious decisions to be present with their surroundings, without judgement, focusing on interacting with the world around them and the stimuli that this presents without bias.

2. Take steps to develop patterns of positive **committed actions** toward tackling a problem, rather than avoiding it (Hayes et al 2012; Sabucedo 2019). This built on research and philosophies from Viktor Frankl, who called this 'hope' (Frankl1984).

My research shows that displaying 'hope' – encouraging 'being present' and committed action – has featured increasingly in Marie Curie strategies to encourage audiences to acknowledge the **taboo** cause of death and dying among a general audience.

The earliest case reviewed, 'Symmetry' (2013), focuses on the juxtapositions between 'firsts' and 'lasts' – such as a baby's first steps against an elderly man's last steps – and extends to a number of emotional, evocative 'firsts'. This is a visceral advert, which uses 'emotional punch' to confront the dominant misconceptions toward the end-of-life experience as being less imbued with meaning, love and happiness than the 'firsts', creating a moment of social disruption (Holt 2012).

This advert was successful, and effective at increasing short-term awareness of the cause of death and dying, but gained notoriety for the way this was presented, displaying commonly associated 'happy' moments of life's 'firsts' – first walk, first word, first kiss, against the viscerally 'sad' lasts – the last word, last kiss, last walk (Gillies 2013). Increasingly 'hope' is being redefined as a "general message from charities to focus more on the positive side, on the hope that we bring, and on the resolution that we can achieve together". It's a thus more collaborative and constructive approach.

'Any Terminal Illness', 'Light in the Darkest Hours' (2017) and 'TalkAbout' (2019) present Marie Curie's cause – which involves death and dying – in a far more accessible way. Presenting stimuli that can be accessed in a way that may encourage acknowledgement and committed action. It allows people to consider the subject from the perspective of a glimmer of hope, positivity and empathy, while recognising the truism that people avoid talking about death, dying and bereavement. ◔

How fundraisers can create hope

By building hope, and focusing on the positive hope that organisations can bring, and the resolution that donors and charity can achieve together, while avoiding 'emotional punch' messaging, charities will encourage more people to acknowledge a **taboo** social cause, and engage with the value the organisation delivers, focusing less on the cause and more on the positive impact and positive change the organisation will bring.

This approach can help to mitigate the common perception among charity staff (as discussed in s2.1) that if you show donors the hard-hitting stuff that they immediately switch off and not pay attention to it because they want to protect themselves.

By encouraging acknowledgement through deliteralising communications, and clarifying its long-term values to the cause, an organisation can start to overcome this resistance. But by focusing on the positive – hope, impact and change – more individuals may be able to overcome their **silent resistance** and inflexible responses to its 'taboo' subject matter.
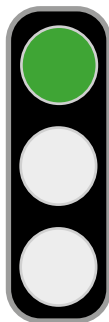
Marie Curie's 2013 campaign 'Symmetry' gained notoriety for the way it juxtaposed happy 'first' with sad 'last' life events.

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Embracing silent resistance: bouncing off the taboo

The three strategies to encourage individuals to acknowledge the **taboo** causes that activist brands seek to address (described in s3) focus on positive long-term attitudinal change:

1. Dissociating the communications from the cause (**deliteralisation**) to find new ways (windows) to engage donors, such as song and animation (s3.1).

2. The process of eroding risk from taboo violation and moving toward a psychologically flexible mentality through proximity with clarifying values (s3.2).

3. Utilising 'hope' (Lambek 1992; Michelson and Miller 2019) (s3.3).

In direct contrast, I also found that short-term individual giving strategies utilise visceral negative reactions as a result of "nearness, of proximity" to taboo stimuli in order to raise more money in the short term (Pelzer 2002, p846).

One motivation for people to give to a difficult cause is because they want it to go away. If they make a donation, they can then walk away from it and be done with the cause (and its taboo) without having to engage with it. As one of the Marie Curie team I interviewed said, some organisations employ this as a deliberate tactic.

This works at raising money, but not at changing people's minds, because it isn't encouraging a willingness to acknowledge the taboo social cause. Rather, it's a continuation of the avoidance, of distancing, as a result of proximity to stimuli. By using such a short-term fundraising approach, organisations such as Marie Curie may not be able to communicate their brand value in tackling a problem, or develop a conversation to provoke attitudinal change around the taboo.

One interviewee said:

"It seems like charities have understood that exploitative advertising may deliver short-term results. But in the long run, I don't think it really benefits them, because people feel like they're being played, their emotions are being played with, and they're kind of taking advantage of fears." ⊚

When bouncing off the taboo is appropriate

This is an important note, that for short term financial gain, distancing reactions can be valuable for an organisation when short-term gain is needed rather than vision-led attitudinal change to allow more individuals to become a part of your community of donors. For an emergency appeal, or for short-term financial gain, where long-term development isn't the objective, visceral adverts that focus on distinctly literal visuals and 'emotional punch' are effective.

This research has called this 'bouncing off the taboo' as a result of the impact, where income may be generated as a result of a superficial action to distance oneself from the stimuli, there may be negative response as a result of "people feel like they're being played, their emotions are being played with, and they're kind of taking advantage of fears". Silent resistance would still play a part in this, where reactions may be apathetic, blaming, or anger. Reactions would likely be distancing, and the ability to change perceptions to overcome silent resistance may be limited.

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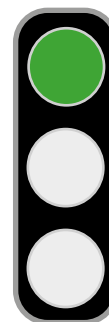
4
Conclusion: More awareness of resistance to taboos is needed

I set out with this research to shed light on the element of **silent resistance** to brand activist communications when tackling **taboo** or intensely painful causes that evoke a strong emotional, and personal, response. It has shown there is resistance that Marie Curie meets when attempting to encourage individuals to acknowledge the taboo cause of death and dying in society. Rather than talking openly, candidly, and factually about a taboo, marketing managers have had to make bold decisions to test and refine new ways of speaking, to 'acceptably' market the vision and mission of Marie Curie, navigating the myriad elements of taboo words, phrases, visuals, and items.

Furthermore, this research has shed light on the strategies brands can utilise to encourage acknowledgement of taboo social causes in society, lessening this silent resistance. Through borrowing learning from the **Narrative Transportation Model**, and **psychological flexibility** from **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**, this research has presented three psychologically flexible means of approaching building brand strategies, or 'windows' into a taboo:
• Disassociate from reality
• Clarify values
• Create hope.

These three strategies aim to evoke a psychologically flexible response, one of acknowledgement and **committed action**, through which brands can communicate their value and start a conversation with their publics.

This research also found one strategy activist brands use to 'Bounce off a taboo' – shocking individuals for short-term financial gain and working to move recipients further away from a positive response and appealing to psychologically inflexible responses – apathy toward the brand, **bewildered confusion**, blaming the brand, or further away from the organisation, toward **superficial action**.

Overall, it highlights how the failure of activists brands to acknowledge the 'response' and '**backlash**' to their branding needs to be explored further. We've talked about greenwashing, and the popularisation of certain causes, in branding, but there needs to be more awareness of the resistance that taboo, and intensely painful, topics evoke in recipients and how brands can effectively navigate this. ❻

'There needs to be more awareness of the resistance that taboo, and intensely painful topics, evoke in recipients and how brands can effectively navigate this.'

Appendix – Glossary

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
A field of humanistic psychology used by medical professionals in everyday practice to help individuals accept, and face, painful experiences that have caused, or are causing, mental illness. It focuses on mindfulness, and developing positive action to encourage psychological flexibility.

Backlash
Overt and measurable angered or frustrated responses to a stimulus, characterised by complaints, opt-outs, unsubscribes and media attention. Often caused by a lack of consistency, or lack of speaking 'acceptably', that individuals are confused/shocked by.

Bewildered confusion
A psychologically inflexible, distancing response to a marketing stimulus that doesn't align with an individual's expectation for how an organisation should communicate 'acceptably' within the framework of a taboo. As opposed to backlash, this isn't measurable, as it goes undetected by the organisation.

Committed action
A psychologically flexible response to painful or taboo stimuli resulting in a 'pattern' of effective decisions directed to chosen values.

Deliteralisation
The use of animation, humour, stories, music, in marketing or fundraising communications to make the taboo topics easier to access, and comprehend, by removing them from reality.

Experiential avoidance
A psychologically inflexible response, being unwilling to accept or face events when they're unwanted or distressing. In a fundraising context one interviewer said: "You need to manage people's emotional response and not just the brainy, rational response that they might have later."

Narrative Transportation Model
Narrative Transportation Theory proposes that when people lose themselves in a story, their attitudes and intentions change to reflect that story – defined as narrative persuasion. It proposes that the opposite, where communications overtly attempt to change

opinions, are less effective, due to the receivers being more aware of the objective of the communication.

Psychological flexibility/inflexibility
A critical part of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is to encourage psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility is the ability to stay in contact with the present moment regardless of unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and sensations caused by stimuli, while choosing one's actions and behaviours based on the situation and personal values. Psychological inflexibility is the opposite: being unable to process, or face, experiences or the present moment, due to unpleasant thoughts, feelings and sensations.

Silent resistance
Silent resistance is where the receiver struggles to acknowledge, consider, or act on a communication because the cause communicated is so painful or unthinkable (taboo) that it causes a psychologically inflexible distancing reaction.

Sleeper effect
The idea that beliefs, perceptions and attitudes can be altered by using 'narrative persuasion' – story-led communications that may not, overtly, be attempting to manipulate opinion and beliefs of the consumer.

Superficial action
A distancing response to taboo/intensely painful stimuli. One interviewee described superficial action as: "One motivation for people giving to a difficult cause is because they want to make it go away. 'I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to understand it. I don't want to fix it. But I just know that if I give you a tenner now, I can just park it, and I don't have to think about it anymore. Go away. I'm done'… So, it works in terms of raising money, but it doesn't at all work in terms of changing people's minds."

Taboo
Durkheim (1897) first described taboos as 'the sacred' – defining what is acceptable social behaviour. Later expanded to be types of taboo with 'taboo acts', 'taboo imagery', 'taboo things' and 'taboo words', taboos serve to restrict action among social actors but also "restrict thinking about and reflecting on what is forbid" for the benefit of maintaining social order.

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Appendix – Methodology

This research – conducted as part of a Master's degree in marketing at Birkbeck College, University of London – explored the strategies activist brands can develop to generate a willingness to acknowledge the painful social problems they are seeking to address.

It explored three things:

1) **Formulating strategies**: Identify the process, and rhetorical strategies, currently employed by activist brands in communicating their vision and mission to audiences in an 'acceptable' way.

2) **Reception and resistance**: Identify and explore the challenges, and identify possible resistance presented, when communicating painful and/or taboo social issues.

3) **Impact**: Identify how different stakeholders react to rhetorical strategies used to communicate cause and how this has changed over time, taking into account varying warm and cold audiences.

This was conducted through interpretivist visual analyses of four case studies of campaigns run by Marie Curie, and semi-structured interviews with five relevant Marie Curie employees, which were subsequently coded at two levels to identify themes and patterns.

The four cases studies, all of which were released on TV and social media, were:

- **Symmetry** (2013)
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QTcb92SukQ
- **Light in the darkest hours** (2016)
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8MkE4x6SQU
- **Great Daffodil Appeal: Any terminal illness rebrand** (2017)
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lw_j6TIAKbs
- **TalkAbout** (2019)
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCYTQvoXQgk

Any Terminal Illness

Anyone seeking more detail about the research methodology should contact the author (see p19 for contact details).

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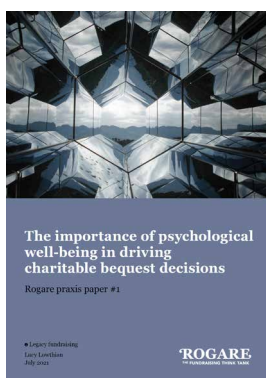
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