Changing the story of retirement: How AARP utilizes a strategic narrative to advocate for the aging workforce

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ABSTRACT

The modern conceptualization of retirement is changing as more people choose to work later in life or opt back into the workforce. AARP has contributed to the modern perception of retirement through its use of a strategic narrative titled "Modern Retirement." This case study examined AARP's strategic narrative in order to understand how it created and perpetuated the issue of adapting an older workforce. A thematic analysis of AARP's organizational documents revealed that the narrative was layered, meaning that it was told and retold through the sharing of personal experiences and situated within the national discourse. This case emphasizes the need for public relations scholars to examine topics related to the aging workforce and adds to the understanding of how issues are rhetorically constructed, and managed within larger corporate environments.

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1. Introduction

The national discourse around retirement is shifting due to changing demographics and organizational responses to an increasingly "gray" population. The new discourse corresponds to larger demographic trends. More than 10,000 people will turn 65 each day until 2030, when all of the Baby Boomer generation will have reached that age (Cohn & Taylor, 2010). The Pew Research Center (2008) projects that at that time, adults over the age of 65 will make up almost 20% of the total population. This is a dramatic increase when compared to the just 13% of the population this demographic makes up today.

The original discourse that surrounded retirement was that this influx of retirees would drain social security and negatively impact the economy as the Boomer generation left the workforce. However, the story has taken a turn. Now organizations, like AARP, are promoting a narrative where older workers (those over the age of 50) can and should still contribute to the workforce because they are "economic assets" (Farrell, 2014). AARP has adopted and refined this story by crafting the "Modern Retirement" narrative as part of the larger Life Reimagined program.

The newly established narrative is especially important given that the average retirement age is older than ever at 62 (Riffkin, 2014) and retirement no longer marks a full-time exit from the workforce. In fact, over 70% of currently employed workers who are 50 and older want to work during retirement (Merrill Lynch & New Age Consulting, 2014).

AARP is contributing to this changing discourse as it creates and perpetuates a strategic narrative about work during retirement, thus creating and managing an issue. Its narrative is focused on two types of employment, (1) continued, which refers to people working later into life, past the standard retirement age and (2) bridge, which are the jobs people engage in after formally retiring. While it may seem counterintuitive that a non-profit organization affiliated with retirees would

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have such a strong focus on work issues, it makes sense given the larger demographic trends and AARP's founding principle, which is "to serve not be served" (AARP-About, 2014).

This case study explores how AARP rhetorically constructed a narrative around the issue of an aging workforce and topic of retirement to advocate for continued employment and bridge-work opportunities. Through a thematic analysis of organizational documents, including the AARP website, the 2014 issues of *AARP the Magazine* and the *AARP Bulletin*, as well as the 2011, 2012, and 2013 annual reports, I found that AARP crafted a strategic narrative that was then communicated to its publics. This narrative is supported through layering and created an issue that facilitated its organizational goals as an advocacy resource for people over the age of 50.

2. Literature review

Through the development and perpetuation of its strategic narrative, AARP created an issue related to the aging workforce to which other organizations must respond. The aging workforce and retirement are important issues to consider given that aging is all but missing in public relations research. This is true even though the changing global demographics will have profound implications for publics as well as organizations that must take communicative action in order to respond to a rhetorically constructed issue and remain "legitimate" in the eyes of their publics (Anderson, 2013).

2.1. Issues management and legitimacy

An issue emerges when a public perceives a problem in terms of facts, values, or policies and attaches significance to that topic (Crable & Vibbert, 1985). Issues do not exist in a vacuum, rather they thrive in a larger environment where internal and external forces play a role in the issue life cycle. With that said, issues management tends to be participatory and proactive in nature as this organizational process emphasizes the larger operating environment (e.g., resources, publics, relationships) (Heath, 1997). Definitions of issues management tend to emphasize corporations' ability to move outside of the organizations' singular environment and engage in larger dialogs with other publics, organizations, and governmental agencies to participate in public policy and engage in conversations about a topic (Bronn & Bronn, 2002). An issues management approach requires organizations to participate in the construction, identification, and management of issues while also advocating for other publics to become involved in the process (Jaques, 2009).

In this case, AARP contributes to the development of the overarching environment. Organizations use communication in order to rhetorically create, maintain, and manage issues that inform public understanding of a topic and contribute to larger organizational goals (Penaloza de Brooks & Waymer, 2009). As such, organizations use issues to advocate on behalf of their publics and promote their interests, while simultaneously raising issues of legitimacy.

Legitimacy is a socially constructed term used to describe a public's perception of the actions of a given organization (Hudson, 2001; Suchman, 1995). Due to the changing organizational environment created by the national discourse surrounding retirement, an organization's legitimacy may be threatened if it is perceived as not adapting. Thus, creating an exigency that the organization must respond to in order to remain "legitimate" in the eyes of its publics and underscoring the relational component of topics related to legitimacy and issues management (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

The combination of issues management and legitimacy is not new (Boyd, 2000; Penaloza de Brooks & Waymer, 2009; Roper & Toledano, 2005; Smith & Ferguson, 2013). In fact Palenchar (2009) claimed that legitimacy is the "central theme" within the topic of issues management (p. 9). What is new is moving the lens back to get a broader perspective of the organizational landscape to determine how issues surrounding an older workforce were constructed and perpetuated. In other words, examining how AARP creates and maintains an issue through its narrative that shapes the organizational environment while raising legitimacy concerns for other organizations. Communication then becomes an important resource as organizations attempt to respond to a changing environment and resolve any discrepancies that could lead to "legitimacy gaps" (Sethi, 1979). In this case, AARP contributes to the construction of the environment through the telling and retelling of its narrative, which creates perceived gaps between other organizations and public expectations.

2.2. Narrative

AARP crafted a strategic narrative that promoted its organizational efforts through the development of an issue. A strategic narrative is a "compelling story line, [that] explains events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn." (Dimitriu, 2011, p. 195). Narratives aid in the public sense-making process and are an important public relations tool that can create, define, and explain a topic (Fisher, 1984, 1987; Smudde & Courtright, 2012). When an organization develops a narrative, it must strategically select the "events to include, how to arrange them causally and temporally, and how to describe them from a rhetorical standpoint," so that the narrative maintains fidelity and coherence (Fisher, 1984; Gilpin, 2007, p. 11). In doing so, the narrative becomes a tool that can create and define an issue as well as explain and situate an organization in terms of that issue.