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'Resituating the political in cultural intermediary work: charity sector public relations and communication'

Abstract

Drawing on a case study of public relations in the UK charity sector, this article argues that cultural intermediary research urgently requires a more sustained focus on politics and the political as power relations, party politics, and political projects such as marketisation and neoliberalism. While wide-ranging research has analysed how cultural intermediaries mediate the relationship between culture and economy, this has been at the expense of a depth analysis of the political. Using our case study as a prompt, we highlight the diversity of ways that the political impacts cultural intermediary work and that cultural intermediary work may impact the political. We reveal the tensions that underpin practice as a result of the interactions between culture, the economy and politics, and show that the tighter the engagement of cultural intermediation with the political sphere, the more tensions must be negotiated, and the more compromised practitioners may feel.

Keywords: Charities; Communication; Cultural intermediaries; Public relations; the Political

Introduction

Drawing on a case study of public relations in the UK charity sector, this article argues that cultural intermediary research urgently requires a focus on politics and the political. While wide-ranging research has analysed how cultural intermediaries mediate the relationship between culture and economy, this has been at the expense of a depth analysis of the political. Bourdieu's (1984) classic account of cultural intermediaries, which has been a foundation for work in the field, was conceived at a very different cultural and political moment. The scope and significance of promotional cultures have since magnified (Davis, 2013; Wernick, 1991), and areas not previously saturated with promotional logics now feel their impact more fully. But more profoundly, it has become clear that the political has not been adequately captured in most existing cultural intermediary research. If the concept of cultural intermediation is to maintain its analytical power to explain flows of both ideas and finance, we argue, firstly, that the context within which today's cultural intermediary work takes

1

place needs to be more fully appreciated and, secondly, that this context needs to be conceptually linked to the political and politics, because the foundational assumption of a clear distinction between economic, cultural and political spheres no longer holds, if it ever did.

Shifts in the political context in the UK and many other western nations have impacted significantly on cultural intermediary work. The political project of neoliberal capitalism, and one of its manifestations as austerity politics, intensifies market ideologies and is aligned with a shift in the electorate to the right. In the current neoliberal environment, the economy, and particularly the ideology of the market, has enveloped civic, social and cultural spheres of life (Brown, 2015; Davies 2014) and the overdetermination of the political sphere by economic rationalities requires a more explicit engagement with the political context and political dimensions of cultural intermediation. As an area currently experiencing both an intensification of promotional work and a profound politicization in the context of neoliberalism, we take the charity sector as our case study, focusing on a specific cultural intermediary occupation – public relations. Public relations has received far less attention from researchers of cultural intermediary work relative to advertising and branding. However, public relations work has long been at the centre of social, cultural and political change (Author 1, 2016; Davis, 2002; Author 2, 2012; Ewen, 1996; Hodges, 2006; Marchand, 1998; Miller and Harkin, 2010) and we are currently winessing an increase in the scale and impact of public relations work as the industry takes advantage of the opportunities presented by new markets and opportunities (Author 1, 2018; Jackson and Moloney, 2016). The role of public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries therefore merits more detailed analysis. In order to add an important dimension to contemporary research we focus on production and practitioner perspectives, rather than the more common approach which analyzes charity cultural intermediation primarily through the lens of representation (e.g. in advertising campaigns). We use our case study to explore how the political is imbricated in cultural intermediary work and entangled with changing contextual factors, such as transformations in the media field, that shape the everyday work of intermediaries. Our analysis is aligned with Mouffe's (2005) account of *the political* as the inevitable tensions and antagonisms in society and *politics* as the set of practices that aim to establish social order.

> …by 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.
>
> (Mouffe, 2005: 9)

2

The empirical data in this article is drawn from an exploratory, one-day workshop with nine in-house charity communications practitioners in London in February 2017, convened to discuss the changing context of charity communication, the challenges that arise for practitioners, and strategies that might address these challenges. We selected youth-related charities because youth welfare is often an intense focus of political and public debate and young people often feel the brunt of neoliberal and austerity politics more than other groups. We asked a series of questions before the workshop to which participants sent written answers that we used to extract three themes for the discussion: context, audiences, and creating change. All the discussions were recorded with the consent of the participants. Following the workshop, we conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of the discussions and written answers to identify how changing cultural and political contexts are reflected in the participants' cultural intermediary work in various, overlapping ways. Each of the themes is discussed in detail below before we conclude with a reflection on the implications of the findings for understanding the relationship between politics/the political and cultural intermediation.

Cultural intermediaries, PR and communications

The concept of cultural intermediation is derived from Bourdieu's analysis of certain professions, including advertising and public relations practitioners, as arbiters of taste and distinction through the symbolic capital they associate with different forms of culture (Bourdieu, 1984: 359). Their roles in occupations whose business is to construct new cultural norms allow them to influence tastes and dispositions in order to sell products and services (Soar, 2000). Many scholars have developed Bourdieu's initial propositions with analyses of promotional professions, particularly advertising, in order to identify how cultural intermediation is realized in professional and organizational environments.

These studies have provided valuable analyses of the history, practices and processes of these occupations. Most locate their accounts in agency contexts, revealing the ways in which practitioners apply their skills in the service of external clients. Professional and organizational norms shape the environment for cultural intermediation, and clashes between client and consultant reveal the constraints, disjunctions and complexities that cultural intermediaries face in practice (Author 1, 2004; Moor, 2008; Nixon, 2003). The material circumstances that give rise to cultural intermediation are an important focus: while Bourdieu's argument centred on the identity of the practitioner and their representational work, contemporary scholarship has emphasized

technologies, networks, resources, occupational hierarchies and professional norms as factors that shape how cultural intermediation unfolds (Baker, 2012; Author 2, 2012; Hracs, 2015; McFall, 2002; Negus, 2002; Nixon and du Gay, 2002; Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012). Social and cultural contexts have also been incorporated into analyses, highlighting the ways in which environmental norms influence the practices, practitioners and effects of cultural intermediation (Benecke et al, 2017; Curtin and Gaither, 2007; Hodges, 2006; Tombleson and Wolf, 2017).

The scope of cultural intermediation in most scholarship has been understood to be cultural and economic: cultural intermediaries are thought to suture together the realms of culture and economy as, for example, in advertising practitioners' attempts to link consumers to products (Ariztia, 2015). The focus is on the circulation of capitalist and consumer ideologies in the context of consumer culture - intermediaries attach values to products and services to associate them with different lifestyles, preferences and social groups, and in this way they legitimize hierarchies of taste that ultimately serve different forms of institutional power. They draw on culture in their practice but intervene in culture in a recursive process of mutual influence, 'culturalizing' different areas of social and economic life (Moor, 2012). Thus, advertising is an industry in which practitioners can be artists and writers in their own right (Davis 2013), observing cultural and social trends and integrating their insights into commercial messages (Kelly, 2014). Branding consultants use design expertise and artistic insights to aesthetically shape a wide range of consumer 'touchpoints', enabling organizational identities and products to 'travel' across different markets. Public relations practitioners mediate culture through promotional work that runs alongside branding and advertising, but also through practices that extend beyond sales and marketing (for example, lobbying, public affairs, activism and reputation management) (Benecke et al, 2017; Ciszek, 2015; Author 2, 2009, 2012; Tombleson and Wolf, 2017). Some analyses have focused on cultural intermediary work in less obviously cultural arenas that are nonetheless incorporated into our experience of culture-as-everyday-life (such as personal training, accounting, bar tending, retro retailing, or online campaigning – see Baker, 2012; Negus, 2002; Ocejo, 2012; Smith Maguire, 2008). In this work researchers acknowledge the nature of cultural intermediation as an intervention driven by capitalist ideologies with the objective of creating and sustaining markets as well as ensuring that different forms of capital circulate effectively through the construction of taste hierarchies.

The value of existing research on cultural intermediation notwithstanding, we identify some areas worthy of further research. First, we note that research has often reified the analytical separation of cultural, economic and political spheres at the expense of acknowledging their hybridity in practice (McFall, 2002). Culture and economy have always been deeply connected, and politics and the political - while not determining economy and culture - are fundamentally entwined

in their operation. For example, the spread of neoliberalism and associated marketization, individualism and consumer choice, lies at the heart of the creation of 'markets' where none previously existed – such as education, health and social care (Brennan et al., 2012; Hearn, 2015; Krachler and Greer, 2015). The analytical exclusion of the political inevitably elides the ways in which it is both invoked and influenced by cultural intermediary work. The implications of cultural intermediary work beyond culture and economy tend to be approached obliquely in academic analyses, evading deep scrutiny.[i] Yet, traditional power structures continue to exert their influence on symbolic as well as material production and need to be accounted for (Negus, 2002). Moreover, cultural intermediation is often assumed to operate on behalf of dominant power in commercial contexts, but cultural intermediation in non-commercial sectors is also an important and common practice. The charity sector is a case in point where politics and civil society come face-to-face with culture and commerce in an increasingly marketized sector that borrows from the commercial toolbox of promotional practice to attach value to collective goods rather than commercial products. This kind of cultural intermediation constructs norms that underpin legitimacy claims for political principles and policies, and often challenges dominant power hierarchies. In these circumstances, the political takes on greater significance as both objective and context for cultural intermediary work.

Furthermore, promotional cultures are heavily influenced by the development of digital technologies and datafication which are reshaping the practices of cultural intermediation (McStay, 2016; Turow, 2011; van Dijck, 2013) and also foregrounding its political character. Algorithms, platforms, online crowd-sourcing and DIY culture-making have all been recognized as important intermediaries and there is increasing recognition of the significance of non-human actors to the information curation, circulation and filtering processes that influence the political-economic context for cultural intermediation (Gillespie, 2010; Hracs, 2015; Moor, 2012; Morris, 2015; Nixon, 2014). The ways that digital technologies and data are used in promotional work to surveil, measure and quantify audiences (Kennedy, 2016; Lupton, 2016; van Dijck, 2013) make explicit both the political and politics inherent in the practices of cultural intermediation, but also present challenges due to their scale, scope and constant evolution.

Neoliberal politics of austerity, charities and promotional culture

A key manifestation of the neoliberal political project in the UK has been austerity politics. Defined as the political decisions made regarding the management of the global financial crisis since 2008,

austerity is a political project that has been promoted by adopting a language of collective responsibility for recovery and economic sacrifice for future gain (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Brown, 2015). These messages communicate not only economic principles, but also cultural norms about what it is to face hardship as a community and what role one should play as a member of that community. They contribute to the construction of austerity 'as a mood' that pervades culture (Forkert, 2017), but are also deeply political in their effects, reducing or removing power and voice from some groups while others are more protected. In this way, austerity has become both a material reality that has tightly constrained the availability of capital and a normative part of the social and cultural environment to which cultural intermediaries must adjust their practices if they are to be successful. The re-election of the UK Conservative government in 2019, while promising enhanced state funding, is likely to augur a continued alignment with the principles of the neoliberal project in the longer term (not least when the repayment of government debt incurred from the COVID-19 pandemic becomes a political imperative).

The successful construction of 'austerity' as a solution to social problems has benefitted from the increasing ubiquity of promotional cultures that facilitate the circulation of austerity principles to target audiences. Promotional cultures are most readily associated with extending market logics to new, often civic arenas of activity (such as education or politics), but they also reinforce the primacy of market ideology over civic values – even when those values are the object of promotion itself (Davis, 2013). The cultural intermediation enacted in this context helps to redefine politics and civic life by superimposing market logics onto collective interests and by transforming markets into arenas for individualized interpretations of politics and civic interests (Brown, 2015). Thus, audiences are targeted by messages that emphasize how adopting ethical, civic-oriented forms of consumption can contribute to political goals (e.g. environmental protection or the elimination of sweatshops). Choices are validated on the basis of lifestyle and consumption preferences, rather than an overarching ideological commitment (Banet-Weiser, 2012), thereby weakening our sense of collective belonging (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012).

The UK government's austerity policies have increased demand for charities' services while reducing funding from state grants and public donations. In neoliberal capitalism the state has withdrawn from much service provision, relinquishing that role to the charity sector, while government initiatives have created a 'market' of charity provision (Lang, 2014). This increases competition and the pressure for charities to develop as distinctive brands, heightening the role of communication in broad political initiatives such as austerity politics. New statutory regulation on data protection and fundraising have also restricted the sector's practices.[ii] Corresponding transformations in how charities fund and deliver services - through government contracts,

corporate sponsorships, and the promotion of their brand and cause in competitive 'markets' - mean that the sector is now fully imbricated in the wider economy and unavoidably drawn into politics, whether party politics, national politics or the entrenching of particular political ideologies.

Research on charity communications has largely restricted its analysis to media representations, particularly those in humanitarian marketing and advertising campaigns. There is a strong focus on the ethical implications of viewing 'distant suffering' and the ways in which hierarchical relationships are established between donors and beneficiaries (e.g. Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013; Christiansen and Frello 2016; Hill 2019; Markham 2015). The emphasis on textual outputs fails to capture the range of ways in which communications practitioners are adapting to and influencing new economic and political conditions through their production practices. Such practices are affected by a range of factors: charities need to account for all monies not spent on their cause (Institute of Fundraising, 2018), and they need to have a comprehensive understanding of the specific communicative environment pertaining to the charity. Practitioners must respond to traditional politics (e.g. party politics, changing government priorities) and new forms of the political (e.g. appealing to the consumer-as-citizen, or populist politics). They must operate in a highly competitive 'market' for donations where audience attention is scarce, accommodate a changing media environment, and adapt to the rise of digital channels as indispensable communication tools (Worley, 2015).

In the remainder of the paper, we draw on the workshop findings to illustrate how these complex contexts mean that the political is woven throughout contemporary cultural intermediation, and is a crucial factor in the relationships between culture and the economy that It constructs.

UK politics and the political

A striking theme that emerged in the workshop discussion is that of the contemporary context shaped by UK austerity politics, post-2008-crash economics and the uncertainties thrown up by Brexit (the EU referendum result). These issues affect the public's sense of the possibilities for action as well as the structure and content of charity work and are therefore a powerful influence on charities' communications strategies and practices. For participants, the ongoing impact of austerity cuts and Brexit had created a general mood of uncertainty, and what they called 'hopelessness', which affected the level of public support they could expect. Public fear and anger tended to dominate the discursive landscape (see also Forkert, 2017) and what participants called 'cross' or

'angry' public voices were more visible in the rise in hate speech and polarized debates on social media. Our participants struggled to compete with such pervasive negativity. While they agreed that 'good deeds' were still plentiful, they perceived a nervousness among their charity's supporters about 'going public' with their stories. In the current political context, speaking out about good works required a degree of courage.

> Since post-Brexit, […] the sense that we're getting is that [charity volunteers or supporters] are just not… They're feeling ashamed… Not ashamed, but afraid to actually say about the work they're doing. So we do a lot of work with refugees, child refugees, and the stories that actually are existing are very positive, they're very good. […] But people aren't actually communicating […] people aren't being brave. (P2, large charity)

The situation was problematic because participants wanted to make their own causes more visible in public discourse, but pervasive negativity affected the availability of resources – they needed supporters' positive stories to integrate into their communication strategies, particularly to raise their charities' profiles at a local level. Local news outlets were more welcoming of 'good news' and making the most of the opportunity they presented was essential to counter audiences' apathy and sense of hopelessness. Still, transforming willingness to help into genuine action was difficult:

> I feel they [the public] might be quite politically aggravated or agitated … But actually engaged? I'm not so sure because most of them just don't feel like they can [act]. (P6, large charity)

Aligned with this issue, practitioners also identified 'a politics of skepticism' towards the charity sector. The sector has faced widely publicized scandals around executive pay, aggressive fundraising tactics, governance and financial management (Dixon, 2018), which have eroded public confidence in their legitimacy.

> Then there is the growing media assault against charities as seen by the almost relentless assault on charities' fundraising activities. It is creating a suspicion of charities at a time when people need them more than ever. (P2, large charity)

Added to these communication problems was the material issue of intense competition for people's income: participants recognized that donations were at risk in a context of austerity

because they were the first casualty of tightening purse strings. Regular donations were a 'soft' obligation that could be cancelled without consequence, while an unpaid utility bill could bring round the bailiffs. One-off donations did not guarantee the kind of commitment that long-term support could offer and was compared to 'clicktivism' by one participant – assuaging conscience, but doing relatively little to protect the long-term future of the charity.

The political context had a direct and material effect on the politics of charity provision. Austerity had reduced the resources available for charities, but simultaneously increased demand for their services. One participant suggested that the pressure on charities may be a conscious political strategy aimed at reducing government intervention and shrinking the state:

> the actions are more insidious and cause long-term damage, for example in deliberately under-funding organizations running charitable care-homes and hospices, confident that the organization will make up the deficit by fundraising. (P1, small charity)

Participants showed a clear awareness of the contradictions in political narratives associated with charities. On the one hand, charities provide a valuable safety net for government as policies protecting vulnerable groups are scaled back. On the other, the contentious nature of charity practices – particularly fundraising – resulted in greater scrutiny and regulation.

Becoming more engaged in delivering or compensating for government services was one way for charities to make a difference in society, providing an alternative to services 'becoming lost and everything falling apart' (P3, large charity), and generating valuable income. However, participants were suspicious of the motives behind government 'outsourcing', aware that it was also a cost-cutting strategy. Moreover, they noted that smaller charities were less likely to secure funding through outsourcing because the cost to government of managing them might outweigh the benefits they deliver. Furthermore, government sometimes requested charities to deliver services in ways that did not align with their mission or remit. The root of this problem was perceived to be a lack of 'listening' in government, as well as ineffective charity lobbying groups, ultimately limiting understanding and respect for the sector. As one participant put it: 'I don't feel we're well represented in government at all. I feel we're a dogsbody. […] There's nobody actually saying this is a valued bunch of people. […] I just don't feel there's anyone rooting for us at the very top.'

The sense of exploitation was paralleled by an understanding of the political utility for governments of being seen to manage a 'problem' sector (particularly, aggressive charity fundraising tactics) in ways that would appease public concern. In reality 'management' could be more accurately termed 'imposition', since there was very little consultation about regulatory changes.

This raised the suspicion that some legislation, like some outsourcing, was opportunistic rather than informed and considered. However, participants acknowledged that such problems were not easily addressed because the traditional opposition between government and the political sphere, vis à vis charities and the civic sphere, meant that getting too close to government endangered their 'true values' and was potentially damaging for their reputations, particularly among their peers. In this context, charities' PR practices were more crucial than ever in attempting to influence government and engage with the public as donors and supporters.

As the above discussion makes clear, the political – manifested as engagement with power relations, party politics and political projects like austerity – permeates the cultural intermediary work of charity sector PR practitioners in ways that cannot be filtered out from the 'cultural' or 'economic' aspects of their role. As we discuss in the following section, this influence is further extended through the increasing dominance of markets and market relations as parameters for practice.

The market, market relations and PR practice

The political valences of the neoliberal project and charity provision in turn intersect with the market in which charities are now inevitably embedded. The rationalities of the market force charities to compete for funding and encouraged participants to adopt an approach to communication underpinned by principles of visibility, branding and reputation management. The result is a perpetuation of market ideologies through commercialization, competitive promotional communication, and collaboration with the corporate sector. For example, the political context had increased competition for support and funding from the public and policymakers, but the concomitant emphasis on efficiency also led to a logic of collaboration between similar organizations. However, collaboration was a problem for charities with a strong founder figure and founding vision, because it could be perceived as a threat to their core identity or 'brand'. This was particularly challenging when a key response to market-driven competition was brand promotion. For larger organizations with a certain level of visibility, brand promotion was relatively straightforward, but for smaller organizations the struggle to generate a brand profile with limited budgets was demanding and ongoing, requiring engagement with both digital and traditional channels and an agile response to 'free' PR opportunities.

As [charity A] is such a small charity and don't run campaigns (eg. Sponsor a Child week etc.), we are not well-known and struggle to promote our brand – we're currently re-designing our website, improving SEO and attempting to place more adverts in newspapers/run radio appeals. (P5, small charity)

Positive branding was crucial because it could encourage supporters to tell the good news stories that charities were hoping for. In addition, a strong brand offered a platform on which to base partnerships with lucrative corporate sponsors – an increasingly common strategy. Participants emphasized the importance of strategic corporate partnerships in a fragmented and divided political environment where corporate brands can capture popular sentiment (Author 1, 2018), providing one of the few channels through which we identify with others. This gave them enormous political as well as economic power, according to one participant.

The Waitrose, the John Lewis, the Marks & Spencers[iii]. […] I think they are the politicians, the stalwarts of society that we see in ourselves. […] So there's the power of the supermarket and the power, the brands that the supermarket identifies with. (P1, large charity).

Corporate partnerships were strategic, focused on establishing a 'brand fit' and mutual benefit, and participants were highly aware of their importance to a partner. 'It's about brand fit […] it's about borrowing each other's brand values. It's a mutually beneficial relationship, not one-way, really' (P5, small charity). However, a brand fit was no panacea when non-profit and corporate politics clashed. Dependence on a large sponsor could bring its own problems if the corporate agenda for social responsibility eclipsed the charity's purpose, so that companies were 'dictating' the terms of funding in ways that could contravene charities' regulatory status. The ideological differences between charities and for-profit organizations also made brand-based collaborations an inherently uncomfortable partnership, 'because this is heresy, really, isn't it? The idea that the company's image, its brand image, is that the most important thing for a charity?' (P2, large charity)

The political character of market rationalities also made itself felt in the ways that charities were identifying and targeting audiences. Participants adopted a very different strategy to their engagement with corporates, recognizing that the public had to be reached via the 'coalface' - through grass roots networks and the frontline of local volunteering. Still, techniques associated with audience analysis in the marketing and advertising industries were common. Research into motivations, lifestyles, habits and political persuasions was discussed as a form of best practice and participants used psychographic categories such as 'empty nesters', demonstrating a sophisticated

understanding of the need to match their 'product' and values (brand identity) with audience identities. In larger charities, this strong promotional orientation was backed up by sophisticated systems in place to communicate meaningfully with audiences, ensuring that 'information [about the charity] kind of surrounds your targets'. In smaller organizations this was more challenging.

> In all our communications with them, we are putting in like a survey. But our response rate is so low. […] It's always the same people responding, giving donations […] So, we are trying to understand, but it's proven difficult. (P5, small charity)

Other participants used audience networks to communicate their cause, generating advocacy from grass roots supporters. To some extent this was a risky strategy but the need to raise awareness made it necessary. The political emerged here as struggle to control the desired 'message' about the charity, where communications managers were re-positioned as dominant authorities for communication (rather than agents of political resistance), in line with the strategic approach to publicity and reputation management that markets demand (Pallas, Fredriksson and Wedlin, 2016):

> It also means taking a step back from control, which is really difficult. Because you have to say these people, frankly they're going to mess up, right, at some point. […] But you have to give them the freedom to do that because otherwise… You know, it's just difficult for [charity] because reputation for us is really important. But we need people to be out doing the message, doing that sort of stuff. (P2, large charity)

As the above quote shows, publicity that engaged with the political, and reputation management that spoke to market logics, were not always easy bedfellows; this was further reflected in other dilemmas of representation and mediation that participants described as part of their everyday practice.

Representation, mediation and PR practice

In line with existing research on the politically-laden issue of the representation of charity beneficiaries (see Chouliaraki, 2006; Seu and Orgad, 2017), many participants raised the dilemma of representing 'victims' to generate support, and thereby depriving their beneficiaries of agency.

One of the challenges we face is around the willingness of agencies (normally larger) to use images of people, especially children, that destroy their dignity and portray them in a negative light. […] As other avenues are closing down or becoming more restricted with new legislation (direct marketing, face-to-face fundraising) we can only assume that advertising using this kind of imagery will increase. (P7, agency)

Participants knew an image that might be ethically compromising could trigger powerful support by maximising the potential for visibility and circulation, both essential to market success. However, this paradox could lead to internal tensions between fundraising and communication. Internal political struggles arose because of their different objectives: raising money (often with the ambition of generating growth in services and support) and raising awareness (a more indirect and reputation-driven objective). Such internal tensions are not new, but austerity, increased scrutiny and the high media profile of charity scandals has increased their salience for cultural intermediation.

One of our participants worked for a charity that supported beneficiaries by teaching them promotional techniques to tell their own story to target audiences, rather than have the charity speak on their behalf. Here, the politics of representation was put to work by and for people who were normally sidelined in the public sphere.

We're looking for the power of that personal story […] because that helps us actually get the story published somewhere, which is the whole point of doing it, bearing in mind we don't want to make them all victim case studies. […] (P4, large charity)

While such accounts may not be emotive in a 'victimising' way, the passion communicated could 'be quite raw', and therefore more powerful. However, problems could still arise when media became involved because of the demands they made of beneficiaries who could lose control of their narratives and have their interests subordinated to media agendas. '[I]t has to be on a case-by-case basis. It's pretty daunting getting involved with the media if we're thinking about comms in that sense.' (P4, large charity)

Participants also considered that the increasing prominence of right-wing politics meant that society was becoming 'de-sensitized' to ubiquitous emotive appeals. As one participant put it, 'I actually think that people care a bit less because so much is thrown at them all the time. You can't care about so much all the time.' (P4, large charity). Political challenges also arose from the ways in which emotive images oversimplified suffering and limited debate about its complex causes. As a

result, audiences see repeated appeals for the same issues which further contribute to donor fatigue.

The political character of representation – which is well researched in existing cultural intermediary analysis – here intersects with shifts in the larger political landscape, including in right wing rhetoric. But it also highlights how some cultural intermediary initiatives can give voice to subordinated groups in ways that have intense political resonance. Indeed, a core goal of charity communications practitioners is to influence institutional politics, and to shape the political by engaging with the public. This is primarily effected through the media.

I suppose it's always about influencing things and it doesn't matter what the context is. So whether you're trying to raise funds or whether you're trying to gain the change politically or whatever the sort of short-term objective is. It's always about influencing. (P2, large charity)

The pursuit of influence is complicated by the politics of mediation which are focused on achieving engagement and dealing with public skepticism about charity work. Fundamental to this were the changing format requirements of media outlets, which in turn altered communication practices in participants' charities. For instance, practitioners noted that newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* now have a video policy for their online sites which encouraged charities' use of video to secure media coverage. In contrast, the demand for photographs to accompany stories presented practical difficulties: 'We're weak on getting good quality photographs because we don't have a team of photographers going out and getting them. So like many journalists or people are conscious sort of rifling through Facebook accounts saying: Can I use this? And it's a terrible file' (P5, small charity).

Such changes in mediation practices require practitioners to develop new technical skills in order to maintain their status as significant intermediaries. Moreover, while technological developments such as the growth of social media open up new ways of communicating with audiences, they do not entirely displace what might be termed the 'political economy of influence' established by the mainstream media: 'You should not ignore the big old news outlets […] because they are actually still… They're the people with all the money.' (P2, large charity). Thus, the politics of mediation, linked to the politics of representation, explicitly connect to the cultural economy of the (mainstream) media sphere.

Resituating the political in cultural intermediation

We present this case study of charity sector PR, firstly, as an entry point for considering the multiple ways in which cultural intermediary work interests with politics and the political and, secondly, as a prompt to encourage future cultural intermediary research to analyse not only its role in the culture–economy relationship, but the place of the political in this dynamic. While charity sector PR cannot be taken as exemplary of the wide field of cultural intermediary occupations, we intend our analysis to highlight the diversity of possible manifestations of the political in such work and to prompt questions that may helpfully orient future research. Indeed, we have shown how various manifestations of the political intersect and interact, potentially generating new formations both of cultural intermediary work and of power relations. For instance, in charity sector PR issues of representation interface with the influence of the market in ways which have been shaped by the new political context and changes in media demand for certain forms of visual content. The interaction also affects the ways that market-driven practices are presented to the public - for example, as mechanisms that facilitate choices about which victims to support, or which form of suffering merits most empathy, rather than simply about which goods to consume.

But charity PR practitioners as cultural intermediaries are also in the business of challenging rather than sustaining hierarchies of power and their struggles were evident in the interactions between the politics of austerity, the politics of charity provision, and the politics of the market. Their desire to reintroduce positive discourses about society and community, and to work against the fear and uncertainty that accompanied austerity policies and Brexit, directly countered the efforts of governments to manage the sector, problematize its contributions and yet instrumentalize its existence as a service provider. Structural power is visible here in the ability of government to set the policy agenda; the power of the regulator to enforce limits and changes to communication practices; and in the capacity of media to influence public discourse, provide space for charity voices to challenge normative attitudes, but also to represent charities in ways that may not be favourable to their intermediary efforts.

More generally, we note the expansion and intensification of the role of PR in the charity sector. The neoliberal political project of marketization has embedded principles of market competition - through the creation of distinct charity brands and competitive bids for public funding - and accountability to the public in charity organisations, and is performed on highly visible platforms. This has led to a rise in significance of cultural intermediaries, like PR practitioners, who can manage and promote market rationalities. While previous research has focused on this role in commercial contexts, examining PR in the charity sector reveals a more explicit cultural intermediary

engagement in mediating *social values* in particular political contexts (which may themselves be shifting with the dissemination of market rationalities throughout social life).

The combination of marketization in the charity sector and the enhanced role that cultural intermediaries play in mediating social values constitutes a reworking of cultural intermediation and an intensification of its impact. The highly visible profile of charity PR highlights social problems and operates through the foregrounding of social values, but has paradoxical political effects. The circulation of charity communication may convey a sense that state support for various social problems is unnecessary as they are being addressed by the charity sector, but it also has the effect of depoliticizing social needs by framing those problems, and their solutions, in terms of the long-rooted Victorian philanthropic tradition of 'good works', which diverts attention from structural causes and appropriate political solutions. The philanthropic mode that many fundraising tactics draw upon also bolsters a perception that 'the poor are always with us', thus obscuring how particular political initiatives actively foster social problems such as poverty. A further depoliticizing effect derives from charity communications' increasing adoption of market practices such as intensified branding, which foregrounds consumer engagement with individualized social issues via the charity brand, rather than citizen engagement through political participation. However, the high visibility of charity PR also has other more positive political effects. Its circulation through a range of media brings to light the impact of neoliberal politics on the everyday lives of individuals, although it also has to push against the 'politics of skepticism' in which the public may be wary of or antagonistic to charity communications, a development which may be stoked by media representations of 'undeserving scroungers' (see Jensen, 2018). The increased focus on PR work in the charity sector and its foregrounding of social values may also have the effect of challenging the legitimacy of market rationalities (competition, value defined exclusively in monetary terms), because charities inevitably flag up the failures of the market system to address social problems. For practitioners, the result of this reworked, intensified cultural intermediary role is that they must manage a heightened tension between the market ideologies embedded in practices such as audience targeting, reputation management or maximizing circulation, which may instrumentalize politics and reduce collective political agency, and the political objectives of charity cultural intermediation, which are aimed at empowering collective interests and the public voice.

Our account also highlights important factors influencing cultural intermediary work. First, the in-house location of the workshop participants illustrates how working within an organization brings different factors into play for cultural intermediaries. Organizational identity, size, and networks all affected processes of cultural intermediation and the level of influence practitioners were able to exert over audiences because they influenced organizational visibility and the

16

availability of symbolic and material resources. Strong volunteer networks, for example, meant that practitioners could consider blurring the boundary between their own role and grassroots 'workers', co-opting workers' stories as promotional material. Large organizations could leverage existing awareness of their brand to extend their influence over new targets, or in relation to new issues. Smaller organizations, however, enjoyed neither of these advantages and had to adopt different tactics, such as maximizing any publicity opportunity that might arise, or engaging in corporate sponsorships to raise their profile. The sector in which an organization operates is also a factor in cultural intermediation. For our participants, organizational reputation and legitimacy was affected by the general reputation and vulnerabilities of the charity sector in a particular political context, by scandals in other charities that had knock-on effects, and by sector-wide systems (such as telephone fundraising) that had fallen into disrepute – all of which had to be managed when crafting communication strategies.

The digital environment also led to new forms of politicised cultural intermediation by allowing practitioners to communicate directly with their audiences via social media. Rather than reducing their reliance on traditional media, this capability introduced an additional opportunity to extend the reach of their messages and their potential influence. Digital technologies also allowed them to better understand their audiences by monitoring their activities online and finding out more about their lifestyles and preferences. However, the digital could be a limiting factor for smaller organizations that had neither the staff expertise nor the time to devote to the additional work that digital communication demanded. For all charities, digital communication was a double-edged sword because it meant they could both share news and store information (for example, donor databases or image banks), but could also lose control of publicly available material (such as images or videos posted on Facebook), and had to find a way to manage the increasing volume of material being stored. Here, the in-house context was an important factor: agencies have the capacity to set up specialist divisions to manage the ongoing challenges of complex and fast-moving digital communication technologies and trends, but only the largest in-house communications teams would have the capacity to devote staff to this kind of work.

Our analysis shows that cultural intermediation shifts the nuances of its political character as it becomes more closely linked to representing the public and the public voice - rather than simply mediating a corporation's products or brand - through the charity sector's enhanced role in the provision of social services and its consequent imbrication in politics and policy. We argue that this political character may also be observed in other areas, not least because of PR's role in mediating social values across a range of sectors (see also Author 1, 2018). This mediation work not only frames ideas and actions - in our case study, donations and practices of civic engagement - but also

shapes the public's sense of their potential as political actors. In sum, and contrary to accounts that suggest that the significance of cultural intermediaries is waning, we argue that an expanded understanding of cultural intermediation to include its political aspects reveals the full significance of this sector's work. Our account therefore offers important insights for renewed theoretical and empirical research on cultural intermediaries and their role in the changing relationship between civil society and the state in times of neoliberal politics, political uncertainty and ubiquitous, digitized promotional culture. Future research can acknowledge this context more effectively by asking new questions about the multiple valences of the political and politics in cultural intermediary work and explore more deeply the reality that suturing culture and economy inevitably involves political agency on the part of intermediaries.

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[i] Although some insightful work does exist, e.g. Davis' (2002) work on lobbying and PR in politics.

[ii] *The Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Act* of 2016 regulates UK fundraising practice and a new Fundraising Regulator has been established. Additional restrictions on charities derive from *The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act* of 2014.

[iii] These are large, well-known retail brands in the UK.