



Faith-Based Nongovernmental Environmental Organizing in Action: Veroes' Campaigning for Vegetarianism and Mindful Food Consumption

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Ensuring an environmentally sustainable future has become one of the most trumpeted issues on the international political agenda. However, the dominant focus on reducing carbon dioxide emissions through renewable energy, emissions trading, and carbon capture and sequestration has shifted attention away from other factors contributing to climate change, such as the environmental impact of meat production and consumption. This article examines how a religious nongovernmental organization (RNGO) can respond to this issue through its mediated and nonmediated communication. More specifically, this in-depth case study explores how youth volunteers of an internationally renowned Humanistic Buddhist NGO enact an environmental communication campaign that promotes vegetarianism and mindful food consumption locally and translocally through three communicative practices: *affective embodiment*, *invocation*, and *transmediation*. Hence, this article provides important insights for research on the intersection between environmental communication and faith-based organizing.

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Date submitted: 2015–09–13

¹ We kindly thank all the Tzu Chi and VERO volunteers in Singapore who made the research for this article possible. We also thank Lucy Atkinson, Bruno Takahashi, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Finally, we are grateful to the Isaac Manasseh Meyer Fellowship, National University of Singapore, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (#410-2011-0453) for funding this research. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2015 meeting of the International Communication Association in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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Keywords: vegetarianism, mindful food consumption, environmental communication, religious nongovernmental organizations, public communication campaigns, affective embodiment, invocation, transmediation, Buddhist Compassion Relief (Tzu Chi) Foundation, mindful organizing

Tackling climate change is complex because various economic, social, and political factors inform and influence environmental protection and conservation. Yet the dominant focus on reducing carbon dioxide emissions through renewable energy, emissions trading, and carbon capture and sequestration has shifted attention away from other factors contributing to climate change, such as the environmental impact of meat production and consumption (see McMichael, Powles, Butler, & Uauy, 2007; Mohr, 2005). Although vegetarianism and veganism are not the only solutions to combat global warming, a meat- and dairy-free diet is increasingly presented as an effective way for consumers to help reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and care for the environment (see de Boer, Schösler, & Boersema, 2013; Freeman, 2010, 2014; Hertwich et al., 2010; McMichael et al., 2007; Mohr, 2005).

The role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting vegetarian or vegan diets to address climate change has not been investigated extensively so far, even though NGOs “represent one possible source of efforts to encourage decreased meat consumption, particularly given limited government action and media coverage of the issue (Bristow, 2011; Neff, Chan, & Smith, 2009)” (Laestadius, Neff, Barry, & Frattaroli, 2013, p. 26). Thus, these organizations may be potentially powerful actors, because they “have the benefit of experience using multiple communications and advocacy tactics, including direct action, lobbying, and public education” (Laestadius et al., 2013, p. 26).

Research suggests, however, that many NGO’s environmental campaigns do not sufficiently inform the public about the environmental benefits of vegetarianism or veganism (see Freeman, 2010, 2014). In fact, some studies indicate that the environmental movement tends to overlook meat (and dairy) as a problem altogether and downplays vegetarianism or veganism as solutions in their climate campaigns (see Freeman, 2010; see also Andersen and Kuhn’s [2014] documentary, *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*). As Freeman (2010) noted, for example, “Dietary choices are often left out of environmental discussions, despite growing food movements, best-selling books, and documentaries making food production and consumption an ecological, political, and ethical issue.” Environmental advocacy organizations seem, in other words, reluctant to “[put] meat on their campaign menu” (pp. 255–256).

Scholars have started paying more attention to the ways in which NGOs design and enact public communication campaigns² to alter meat consumption (see Laestadius et al., 2013, 2014, 2016). This research is insightful yet has focused almost exclusively on (Western) secular NGOs, meaning little is known about the role faith-based NGOs can play in promoting the reduction or elimination of meat eating.

² Public communication campaigns can be defined as “purposive attempts to inform or influence behaviors in large audiences within a specific time period using an organized set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple channels generally to produce noncommercial benefits to individuals and society” (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 3).

The current article aims to address this issue by investigating how youth volunteers of an internationally renowned Humanistic Buddhist NGO that originated in Taiwan collectively enact an environmental communication campaign (see Brulle, 2010; Cox, 2013; Norton & Grecu, 2015) to promote vegetarianism and mindful food consumption, both locally and translocally. Because their form of organizing is grounded in a Buddhist philosophy of interdependence and impermanence, it is particularly well suited for promoting environmental values that reflect a "care for nature and the welfare of animals" (see de Boer et al., 2013, pp. 1–2), which are significantly correlated with vegetarianism.

The current study, in turn, makes an important contribution to the intersection between environmental communication research and an emerging area of inquiry that looks at faith-based and religious NGOs, also referred to as "RNGOs"—i.e., "formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions." These social collectivities operate "on a nonprofit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level" (Berger, 2003, p. 15).

In the next section, we will develop a theoretical framework for our case study based on the literature on environmental communication and RNGOs. After this, we will present the Humanistic Buddhist NGO and the environmental communication campaign we investigated, explain our data collection and analysis methods, and present our findings. To conclude, we will reflect on the significance of the campaigning practices we have described and discuss the implications of our naturalistic research.

Environmental Communication and Faith-Based Nongovernmental Organizing

Historically, environmental communication researchers have addressed climate change by focusing on the transmission of climate-related information based on the "deficit model of scientific literacy," which presumes that literacy is rooted in asymmetric power relations and global inequities (see Groffman et al., 2010). In this conception, media are primarily seen as a "means of communication that distribute content" (Schäfer & Schlichting, 2014, p. 144) to an anonymous and spatially diverse public. Following this line of thought, scholars have examined mass (especially print) media framing and the contestation of climate politics by diverse social actors (Anderson, 1997), media communication avoidance in environmental conflict (Lester & Hutchins, 2012), celebrity endorsement of environmental cases (Brockington, 2008), and environmental organizations' Web technology use (Eimhjellen, 2014).

Organizational communication researchers, on the other hand, have examined climate change by exploring forms of alternative organizing that are economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable (Ganesh, 2007; Ganesh & Zoller, 2014; see also Mitra & Buzzanell, 2015). According to these scholars, one of the main challenges, alongside educating the public about global warming and developing legislation, is engaging lay people in grassroots environmental organizing (Ganesh & Zoller, 2014; see also Schlosberg, 2007, 2013).

What we learn from looking at both these strands of research combined is that translating internationally negotiated environmental goals and targets to local contexts has been difficult, not least because of the limited influence of national climate policies but also because of the knowledge and

affective gaps that many people experience while relating abstract environmental issues and resolutions to their daily lives. Some scholars have suggested that connecting the complexities of climate science to people's personal values and beliefs is important for building trust and empowering public participation (Groffman et al., 2010). Promoting meat-free or vegetarian meals *per se*, for instance, may be counterproductive and trigger negative responses among skeptics of climate change (de Boer et al., 2013; Laestadius et al., 2016). Hence, it seems communication efforts about sustainable development need to be aligned with people's moral values and life philosophies to become more diverse, personal, compelling, and participatory (Nisbet, Hixon, Moore, & Nelson, 2010). What is more, some scholars argue that paying attention to everyday communicative practices is critical for building culturally sensitive, ground-up social movements to address worldwide climate change (Cox, 2013). The academic literature also suggests using transdisciplinary research and input from practitioners (Smith & Lindenfeld, 2014) and partnering with religious or spiritual organizations and communities (Mohamad, Idris, Baharuddin, Muhammad, & Sulaiman, 2012) to mobilize people and promote environmental organizing.

Thus, a growing number of studies suggest that it is worthwhile to explore the intersection of faith-based organizing and environmental communication. "The rise of new religious movements," Tracey (2012) notes, "offers fertile ground to examine the role of agency in the creation and legitimation of new forms of organization with the capacity to exert a remarkably powerful influence over their members" (p. 118). As "a unique hybrid of religious beliefs and socio-political activism" (Berger, 2003, p. 16), RNGOs offer especially interesting sites for investigating how these new organizational forms promote environmental protection and care through their communicative efforts (see also Gottlieb, 2006; Veldman, Szasz, & Haluza-DeLay, 2013).

Well-known examples of RNGOs that originated in the Western world include the Salvation Army, World Vision, and Catholic Relief Services. These kinds of organizations have started to attract the attention of researchers in community psychology (Todd, 2012), development studies (Audet, Paquette, & Bergeron, 2013; Benedetti, 2006), management and organization studies (Tracey, 2012), sociology (Steiner, 2011), and urban studies (Conradson, 2008). Much of this research concentrates on trying to get a conceptual grip on what RNGOs are (Berger, 2003; Leurs, 2012) and how effective these organizations are in such areas as philanthropy, development, and humanitarian aid (Tomalin, 2012), especially compared to secular NGOs (Lipsky, 2011). For example, RNGOs are presumed to depend less on donor funding, making them more autonomous than secular NGOs (Clarke, 2006), and they often have a high degree of legitimacy, both domestically and internationally (Leurs, 2012). RNGOs are also considered to be highly networked volunteer organizations with a strong, enduring presence at the grassroots level, allowing them to operate effectively within and across national boundaries through the mobilization of local volunteers and paid employees (Berger, 2003). Some scholars take a more critical stance, however, and question whether these types of organizations privilege the interests of some while operating ideologically against those of others (e.g., see Connor, 2011).

Because research on RNGOs is still relatively young, many of these assumptions remain to be corroborated. What is missing, in particular, is a thorough understanding of how volunteer members of RNGOs produce (i.e., "bring forth," see Ingold, 2011, p. 12) their organizations in everyday interactions that are increasingly mediated by digital communication technologies (see Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011;

Cheong, Hwang, & Brummans, 2014). Communication research can provide insight into this question by revealing how volunteers (inter)act based on a “commonality of a perception of what they are doing, and why, that makes it possible for [them] to work together, productively” (Taylor, 2012, p. 9). Scholars have yet to examine, though, how volunteers of an RNGO create and sustain “the instrumentality that supports [their] collaborative effort” (Taylor, 2012, p. 9) in their day-to-day communication to engage in environmental organizing.

In this study, we seek to understand how volunteer members of an RNGO engage in this form of alternative organizing by enacting an environmental communication campaign (see Brulle, 2010; Cox, 2013; Norton & Grecu, 2015). Our main goal is to enrich scholarship on the intersection between environmental communication and RNGOs by moving our understanding of communication for social change beyond information dissemination to viewing environmental communication campaigning as a form of symbolic action (Cox, 2013) that increasingly relies on the appropriation of media technologies. From our perspective, RNGOs that focus on promoting environmental awareness and action are, for an important part, produced or constituted through communication campaigns, which are enacted by volunteers in the course of mediated and nonmediated interactions (see also Cheong et al., 2014).

More specifically, we aim to examine the communicative practices in which volunteers of an RNGO engage to carry out an environmental campaign that promotes vegetarianism and mindful food consumption by promulgating a view of environmental protection and care that is grounded in a particular religious or spiritual philosophy. What interests us in studying these campaigning practices is how the appropriation of media technologies, combined with nonmediated communication, enables volunteers to advocate vegetarianism and mindful food consumption in their local communities as well as beyond (see Ganesh & Zoller, 2014; see also Cheong et al., 2014; Rodríguez, Ferron, & Shamas, 2014). Hence, the following research question guided our naturalistic inquiry:

RQ: In what mediated and nonmediated communicative practices do volunteer members of an RNGO engage to enact a communication campaign that promotes local and translocal vegetarianism and mindful food consumption?

Methods

Tzu Chi Singapore’s VERO Campaign

We developed informed responses to our research question by analyzing the VERO campaign (VERO is a catchy portmanteau of “veggie” and “hero”), organized by young volunteers of the Buddhist Compassion Relief (Tzu Chi) Foundation in Singapore. Although Tzu Chi was founded in the Republic of China (Taiwan), the organization operates in many other countries in Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Europe. By some estimates, Tzu Chi is the largest NGO in the Chinese-speaking world, with more than 10 million members in over 50 countries providing charity, medical care, and education (Brummans & Hwang, 2010; Huang, 2009; O’Neill, 2010). Its charismatic leader and founder, Master Cheng Yen, is one of the most prominent dharma masters in Taiwan who has received both national and international awards for her humanitarian efforts (e.g., the Buddhist nun was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993).

In the early 1990s, Cheng Yen became increasingly concerned about the earth's future, urging members to expand Tzu Chi's missions by creating community-based environmental protection and education centers in Taiwan and elsewhere—presently, more than 50,000 lay volunteers actively contribute to more than 4,500 centers in Taiwan alone.³ Each day, recycling volunteers in various parts of the world do mentally and physically challenging work, such as collecting and sorting trash, and thereby set an example for people in capitalistic societies where mass consumption is the norm and large amounts of waste are produced. Over the past years, Tzu Chi's environmental organizing has been further expanded to include reducing energy consumption and waste, developing eco-friendly products, and encouraging an overall mindful lifestyle based on a Buddhist philosophy of interdependence and impermanence. As far as dietary practices are concerned, Tzu Chi advocates mindful eating by promoting the "Four Concepts of Good Health":

Heart—Broadmindedness and contentment help one get rid of worries
Vegetarianism—Vegetarian food is good for health and helps to prevent diseases
Eating—Vegetarian food is environmental friendly and helps keep calamities at bay
Etiquette—Practice courteous and gracious table manners⁴

Hence, Tzu Chi provides an exemplary case for studying how volunteers engage in environmental organizing. Moreover, through publications such as *Tzu Chi Monthly*, books, websites and social media, and satellite radio and television programs broadcasted globally by Da Ai ("Great Love") TV, Tzu Chi is adept at using mediated communication to mobilize and inspire its volunteers around the world (see Cheong et al., 2014), making it a compelling case for studying the role of mediated and nonmediated communication in this form of alternative organizing.

The current study focuses on the role of a specific environmental communication campaign that started in Singapore because it shows how young volunteers contribute to Tzu Chi's environmental organizing through specific campaigning practices. Inspired by Master Cheng Yen's Buddhist philosophy of compassion and the interdependence between humans and their environment, Tzu Chi Singapore's Collegiate Youth members (known as *Tzu Chings*, *ching* meaning "young") started the VERO campaign in 2011 to promote vegetarianism as part of Tzu Chi's mindful eating philosophy among young people and to create awareness about its carbon reduction benefits. Since then, they have organized the campaign annually and plans are underway for VERO 5.0 (the campaign started as VERO 1.0). Its campaign slogan ("Go green! Be bold!") highlights the enterprising and courageous counter-cultural stance of "Veroes" (as these "veggie heroes" like to call themselves) among their meat-eating peers.

³ Tzu Chi Philippines Environmental Protection website: http://tzuchi.org.ph/mission_cat/brief-intro-environmental-protection/

⁴ Tzu Chi Singapore Environmental Protection website: http://www.tzuchi.org.sg/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=652&Itemid=567

Data Collection

The data for this article were collected as part of a larger four-year, multidisciplinary, naturalistic study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) that examined various aspects of Tzu Chi's organizing and was funded by the Isaac Manasseh Meyer Fellowship, National University of Singapore, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We investigated how Singaporean Tzu Ching volunteers enact the VERO campaign through their mediated and nonmediated communication (RQ) by analyzing their appropriation of social media. Specifically, we examined the VERO Facebook page,⁵ the main website through which VERO is carried out; the links it provides to video clips (e.g., inspirational songs or YouTube clips of public events); and its links to other websites. From 2011 to the end of 2014, the VERO Facebook counted 208 posts (2011: 57, approximately 4 per month; 2012: 74, approximately 6 per month; 2013: 51, approximately 4 per month; 2014: 26, approximately 2 per month). Posts were written in English (135 of 208) or Mandarin (65 of 208); few of them were bilingual.

To complement these media data, the second author visited Tzu Chi Singapore's office and clinic, and conducted semistructured ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) with 12 Tzu Ching leaders and volunteers for a total of 500 minutes, in the spring of 2014 and 2015. These interviews focused on understanding Tzu Ching Singapore leadership, volunteers' backgrounds, their motivations to become involved in VERO, their views of Master Cheng Yen, their appropriation of social media, and their overall experiences with enacting the campaign. During her fieldwork, the second author also conducted nonparticipant ethnographic observations (Spradley, 1980) for a total of 80 hours and kept a fieldwork journal to trace the evolution in her own sensemaking along the course of this naturalistic study (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Data Analysis

The online data were archived and the interview data were transcribed. When necessary, Mandarin data were translated into English. To investigate our research question, we conducted a thematic analysis, because this is an appropriate method for systematically uncovering structural aspects in accounts of lived experience (see Lindlof, 1995; Ryan & Bernhard, 2003). More specifically, we relied on the open, axial, and selective coding techniques that Strauss and Corbin (1990) outline in their explanation of grounded theory, as they provide robust, well-tested analytical procedures for developing in-depth insights into a phenomenon.

Through open coding, we individually compared and contrasted events, actions, and interactions while repeatedly reading through the archived VERO Facebook posts, transcripts, and fieldwork journal entries to get a first sense of Veroes' mediated and nonmediated communicative practices. This repeated reading allowed us to identify recurring points of reference in the data, such as "compelling incidents, sequences of action, repetitive acts, and other critical details that inform[ed our] understanding of [the VERO campaign's enactment]" (Lindlof, 1995, pp. 219–220). Based on discussions of our individual analyses during joint data-analysis sessions, we then looked for the regularity with which these points of

⁵ VERO Education website: <https://www.facebook.com/vero.singapore/notes>

reference recurred in the data. This enabled us to define conceptually similar categories or themes in Veroes' ways of communicating, such as their frequent online and offline referral to Master Cheng Yen, their publicizing of VERO events, and their integration of links to other sites in their Facebook posts. Axial coding, in turn, allowed us to check these emerging themes against our data and uncover conceptual relationships between them. In the final selective coding stage, we sought to define these themes conceptually and determined that the VERO campaign is enacted through three specific communicative practices, which we coined *affective embodiment*, *invocation*, and *transmediation*. We will further describe and illustrate each of these themes in the next section, thus detailing the mediated and nonmediated practices in which Singaporean Tzu Chings engage to carry out their campaign.

Enacting VERO through Affective Embodiment, Invocation, and Transmediation

Enacting VERO through Affective Embodiment

Affective embodiment denotes Veroes' practice of verbally and nonverbally acting out Tzu Chi's values and principles to bring forth their campaign. Our analysis shows that Tzu Chings enact VERO by "incarnating" (see Brummans, 2011; Brummans & Cooren, 2011; Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008) Tzu Chi's philosophy of mindful eating in their everyday lives and during special events. They do this, for example, by following Master Cheng Yen's "2/8 principle": They only eat enough to feel 80% full and donate the money they would have spent on the remaining 20% to Tzu Chi's charitable causes by putting it in a bamboo coin bank. As Ms. Zhang Yue, a campaign volunteer, said,

Placing the bamboo coin bank in front of me is a way to remind myself. I will actively try to buy smaller portions of food so that I can put the remaining 50 cents into the coin bank. When I lift up the coin bank occasionally and feel it is too light, I will motivate myself to work harder.

By acting out the 2/8 principle in their daily interactions, Veroes thus reflect on their food consumption habits and purchasing behavior, and think deeper about their true needs versus their desires. Whether cooking meals at home or eating out at a buffet restaurant, they therefore learn to be more mindful of the amount of food they consume and the value of each meal.⁶

⁶ Veroes' increased mindfulness reflects rising concerns about the impact of food waste on the environment. According to Lipinski et al. (2013, p. 1),

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that 32 percent of all food produced in the world was lost or wasted in 2009. This estimate is based on weight. When converted into calories, global food loss and waste amounts to approximately 24 percent of all food produced. Essentially, one out of every four food calories intended for people is not ultimately consumed by them...Environmentally, food loss and waste inflict a host of impacts, including unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions and inefficiently used water and land, which in turn can lead to diminished natural ecosystems and the services they provide.

To attract young people's attention to Tzu Chi's holistic approach to mindful eating, VERO campaign organizers frequently co-opt the formats of well-known reality television game shows, thus engaging youths in experiential games and role-playing. According to Mr. Liu, one of the organizers, "If you give young people an hour's lecture about environmental protection, they may feel bored, but if you use a game to influence them, they will learn faster and change their behavior." For example, The Amazing VERO Race 1.0⁷ and 2.0⁸ were modeled after one of the longest running reality shows in the U.S. During these events, participants were split into teams to meet various physical and mental challenges, such as escorting a group of seedlings to the botanical gardens or visiting vegetarian restaurants to try different foods. Through interactive games like these, participants learned more about how a vegetarian lifestyle can improve one's own health as well as the earth's. These games also taught them how being aware of small actions in everyday life promotes mindfulness of one's own body and the impact of one's decisions on the world. Another event, Running VERO, was held in 2012 and 2013. This event was modeled after a popular South Korean variety show, *Running Man*, in which emcees and guests complete various missions to avoid punishments and win prizes. For Running VERO, youths accustomed to supermarkets and an urban lifestyle were invited to Pasir Panjang, a local vegetable and fruit wholesale center. Here, they learned about the transportation and storage of vegetables that have to be imported into Singapore. They also had to select the sweetest fruits and search for dried goods to meet nutritional requirements. Thus, this event focused on promoting greater appreciation of the energy needed to sustain food consumption in a country largely bereft of urban agriculture.

A final example illustrating how Veroes embody Tzu Chi's philosophy of compassion for all sentient beings is volunteers' creation of corporal experiences to enable role-playing and help participants reflect on animal abuse and cruelty. During the first year of the campaign, participants were told to close their eyes and pretend they were chickens in a factory farm, raised for food and suffering in cramped and filthy conditions before being trucked away to the abattoir. In another year, participants entered a mock animal farm with dim lights and the sound of animal cries. Team members struggled to collect bread by squeezing through a crowd of people and then needed to pass the bread to a sitting member who had to consume everything. This 30-minute experiment was created to simulate conditions in a stuffy slaughterhouse where animals are confined in small spaces, tortured, force-fed, and then killed. The physical and psychological discomfort made some of the participants perspire and even cry. Hence, the sensual immersion of youths in a confined environment enabled the campaign organizers to eschew lectures on food production and instead focus on promoting vegetarianism by cultivating compassion for mistreated animals in a system of "industrialized carnivorousism" (Johnson, 2012, p. 979).

Enacting VERO through Invocation

Our analysis shows that Veroes cite or quote Master Cheng Yen's words and aphorisms in their everyday communication to make sense of climate change and stay motivated to practice holistic environmental care, particularly through vegetarianism and mindful consumption. *Invocation* thus refers to Veroes' practice of calling upon or appealing to their dharma master, who incarnates Tzu Chi's

⁷ Amazing VERO Race flashback: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4r8-9sB6Lps>

⁸ Amazing VERO Race 2.0 Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/events/344901732270404/>

philosophy, in mediated and nonmediated interactions to inspire themselves and others to accomplish their campaign goals (see also Brummans, Hwang, & Cheong, 2013).

Our interview data especially illustrate the central role of invocation in carrying out the VERO campaign. Mr. Tai Ming Hang, for example, noted that he had the idea of starting VERO in 2009, when he attended the annual International Tzu Ching Summer Camp in Taiwan, organized for more than 6,000 Tzu Chings from 18 countries. During the camp, Mr. Tai attended the Master's daily teachings, which included stories about Tzu Chi volunteers' worldwide environmental protection activities, and felt that Singaporean youths were lagging in their efforts. Feeling a new sense of purpose, Mr. Tai's senior guardian brought him before the statue of Guan Yin, a well-known Buddhist deity. Here, Mr. Tai vowed to gather other collegiate members and start a campaign to "pledge 100,000 meatless meals over 6 months" and thus "help make the world greener."

Starting a grassroots campaign to promote vegetarianism among youths in Singapore was a formidable challenge. However, according to Mr. Zing Quan, Tzu Ching's executive secretary and VERO coordinator, the youth group leadership team found inspiration in Cheng Yen's teachings, which stress the power of individual action to spur social change. As Mr. Zing mentioned, he wakes up early to attend the Master's daily address at 5:30 a.m., transmitted by satellite television from Taiwan. Invoking the Master, he mentioned that she always reminds them that *yī shēng wú liàng* ("one life can yield boundless beneficence"), and this motivates him to promote the campaign. Behind VERO, he mentioned, "there is this spirit that is pushing it," and he recalled the Master's relentless pursuit to grow Tzu Chi internationally by sticking to a strict regime of hard work and little sleep. He said, moreover, that "willpower, not superpower" is needed to prepare for the campaign over many months, because the Master teaches that *rén yǒu wú xiàn de kě néng* ("human beings possess a limitless prospect of possibilities"). According to Mr. Zing, invoking the Master has thus helped the core organizing team consolidate different views, put aside personal opinions, and persevere in the face of campaign challenges.

Invocation also plays a central role in the way social media are used to enact the campaign. The VERO Facebook page shows a number of posts in which Master Cheng Yen is invoked to encourage people to adopt a vegetarian diet and eat mindfully. Veroes, for instance, posted a short Da Ai TV YouTube video on their Facebook page in which the Master explains the aforementioned 2/8 principle.⁹ "By reducing our desires," she says in the video, "we can help the needy with what we have." While we are blessed to have access to an abundance of food and resources, the Master goes on to say, there are people in other parts of the world who suffer from poverty and food scarcity. If we can "be more compassionate and loving, and if we can live more frugally," she asks, "wouldn't we be able to help and save those in need?" Otherwise, our desires are like "a bottomless pit" that creates a "spiritual tsunami" within our minds. This imbalance, the Master contends, will harm the world. Hence, "by lessening our greed and desires," she claims, "we are able to share what we have with those in need." This same principle is communicated on Facebook through posts that quote the Master's aphorisms (e.g., "Saving a handful of rice each day, an act of giving

⁹ Master Cheng Yen's 2/8 teaching: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YC64nm4sYeI>

to enhance the wisdom of life¹⁰”; “Simply saving 5 cent a day in the bamboo bank, we are cultivating our kindness to give back”¹¹) or provide simple tips to reduce one’s carbon footprint (e.g., using reusable shopping bags, lowering the air conditioning, turning off unused appliances, reducing food and water waste, recycling, etc.).¹²

Enacting VERO through Transmediation

Transmediation refers to Veroes’ practice of sharing their campaign stories across different linked and interactive platforms in a global culture of mobility and convergence (Jenkins, 2006) to expand their campaign goals translocally and connect with others beyond their local communities. Veroes enact their campaign through transmediation by featuring the VERO brand logo and “Go green! Be bold!” slogan (see Figure 1) on various linked communication platforms. During the first two years, for example, campaign organizers circulated e-newsletters about VERO events to share personal stories, reviews of local vegetarian restaurants and interviews with their owners, and vegetarian recipes. In addition, they made several YouTube videos to disseminate promotional teasers and campaign highlights.



Figure 1. VERO Logo.

¹⁰ Master Cheng Yen’s 2/8 teaching (Myanmar): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?x-yt-cl=84503534&x-yt-ts=1421914688&v=Yh8VVbFO8cU>

¹¹ Tzu Chi’s bamboo coin bank spirit:

http://www.tzuchi.org.tw/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=62%3AMaster-other-speeches&id=763%3A2009-05-26-07-33-16&Itemid=186&lang=zh

¹² Master Cheng Yen’s 2/8 teaching (complete coverage) and VERO 3.0:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?x-yt-ts=1421914688&x-yt-cl=84503534&v=U4RNtaLTKt4>

Furthermore, Veroes designed their own campaign posters and handed them out in vegetarian restaurants around the country, and one local volunteer even composed a song, titled “We’re All VERO,” to convey the campaign’s goals and spirit. To promote campaign participation, a T-shirt featuring the VERO logo was also designed and given to the first 400 persons who completed a Go Green Veggie Pass (a credit card-sized pass with bubbles that can be checked to track the number of vegetarian meals someone has consumed—participants “vow to go meatless for 100 meals and help make the world greener”). The Go Green Pass is a colorful adaptation of Tzu Chi’s Veggie Country Pass, which is also used to record the consumption of vegetarian meals. As Figure 2 shows, the Go Green Pass contains cartoonish animal images and catchy phrases (e.g., “you are such a green saver!! (:”). In the past, completed passes were used to form mural-like wall art, displayed in the Tzu Chi headquarters and shared on the VERO Facebook page (see Figure 3). Nowadays, participants can also record their meals through a shared Google document that tracks the total number of vegetarian meals accumulated during the campaign.¹³ In the near future, the campaign founder mentioned, the group also hopes to create an interactive app that not only tracks the number of vegetarian meals but also locates vegetarian restaurants and reminds users of their targeted number of veggie meals for each week.



Figure 2. Go Green Veggie Pass.

¹³ VERO meal records: <http://tinyurl.com/87mh4v8>



Figure 3. Wall art shared on VERO Facebook.

Finally, the role of transmediation in the VERO campaign's translocal enactment is further illustrated by the use of Facebook posts that link the campaign to environmental initiatives in other parts of the world, such as Tzu Ching Malaysia's VERO spin-off, which is inspired by Tzu Ching Singapore's campaign.¹⁴ In addition, Veroes regularly post links from other media platforms, such as CNN,¹⁵ TED,¹⁶

¹⁴ We are all VERO (Malaysia): <https://www.facebook.com/IPGvero>

¹⁵ Singapore's cold storage to stop the sale of shark's fin products:
<http://travel.cnn.com/singapore/eat/singapores-cold-storage-stop-sale-shark-fin-products-139926>

¹⁶ Graham Hill: Why I'm a weekday vegetarian:
http://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_weekday_vegetarian

and CommonWealth Magazine,¹⁷ on topics related to vegetarianism (nutrition, benefits, recipes, vegetarian celebrities, etc.), wildlife conservation, natural resource conservation, waste reduction, and fighting global warming, on their Facebook page.

Discussion

This article explored the mediated and nonmediated communicative practices in which volunteer members of an RNGO engage to carry out a communication campaign that promotes local and translocal vegetarianism and mindful food consumption. To investigate this question, we conducted an in-depth naturalistic study of Tzu Chi's VERO campaign, showing how vital affective embodiment, invocation, and transmediation are in this campaign's enactment. VERO can be seen as one of the many incarnations of Tzu Chi's Humanistic Buddhist philosophy. As mentioned, this RNGO's philosophy underscores the importance of taking compassionate action, being grateful to others, and promoting civic engagement, rather than traditional chanting and meditation, as pathways to holistic growth. The three aforementioned practices enable Singaporean youths to act out this philosophy locally and translocally and, thus, to contribute to Tzu Chi's transnational (co-)production (see also Cheong et al., 2014). However, this enactment is not without challenges.

According to the campaign founders, their work to date has been fairly successful, as close to 400 youths have pledged to eat vegetarian meals. This achievement is remarkable: Though it is not uncommon for Buddhists in Southeast and East Asia to eat vegetarian meals sporadically as a form of penance and to accumulate merit, it is less common to find locals who are strongly committed to vegetarianism and eschew meat and fish products entirely.

Moreover, the founders were quick to point out that being a Vero is not without challenges in Singapore—a "food paradise" with multiple signature cuisines that include meat and fish. According to Mr. Zing, converting to vegetarianism is hard, because dealing with peer pressure to eat meat or fish when going out for lunch or dinner is difficult—and people don't want to inconvenience peers by asking them to find restaurants with vegetarian options. It is more realistic for Singaporean youths, as Mr. Ming Hai said, to switch to vegetarianism slowly, but consistently, over time. In this way, he mentioned, "[you do] not experience culture shock" and "cause trouble for . . . parents" who may not know how to prepare veggie dishes and who may worry about their child's health. This reluctance to "tell people what to do" and sensitivity to existing sociocultural norms and values regarding meat consumption echoes recent research on "the factors influencing [secular] NGO decisions to campaign for reduced meat consumption in light of climate change" (Laestadius et al., 2014, p. 32) and messaging choices in Western countries such as the U.S., Canada, and Sweden (see Laestadius et al., 2016).

In addition, while VERO team members receive occasional guidance from their Tzu Chi mentors and Tzu Ching alumni, the youth volunteers are solely in charge of their campaign's daily operations. Another organizational challenge, therefore, is the recruitment of dedicated youths willing and able to

¹⁷ Stop wasting food, part 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=4t1-MzvH160; part 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PpzLbzY9TA

devote significant periods of time to plan events and communicate their efforts via multiple mediated channels—similar to McAllum's (2014) findings in her research on nonprofit volunteering in New Zealand.

Our study shows how the three aforementioned campaigning practices help Veroes deal with these challenges. However, these findings also have broader implications for research on the intersection between environmental communication and faith-based organizing, as we will discuss next.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

So far, research on environmental communication campaigns has mainly focused on campaign design (e.g., see Norton & Greco, 2015). The current study makes several important contributions to this literature by showing how specific campaigning practices can enable faith-based nongovernmental environmental organizing, yet these practices may also benefit secular NGOs focused on environmental protection and care.

First, this paper illustrates how affective embodiment allows NGO members to demonstrate the benefits of vegetarianism rather than tell people what to do, and thus they align their campaign efforts with local mores without engaging in active proselytizing. This communicative strategy may be particularly effective in view of "the potential unpopularity of messages focused on meat-free diets" and "the significance of meat consumption [in many cultures]" (Laestadius et al., 2016, p. 88; see also Freeman, 2010, 2014).

Second, this research highlights the importance of inspirational leaders in the success of environmental communication campaigns in particular and grassroots environmental organizing more generally (see also Ganesh & Zoller, 2014). As our study shows, volunteers motivate themselves and others to carry on by invoking such a leader in their day-to-day interactions and thereby create a much-needed sense of *esprit de corps* (see also Brummans et al., 2013) for dealing with the challenges of volunteer environmentalism.

Third, this article illustrates how transmediation can help members of religious and secular NGOs extend their environmental campaign beyond the limits of their immediate locality. Our research shows, in other words, how vital mediated communication practices are for the translocal communicative constitution of religious and secular NGOs pursuing environmental missions. As Cheong et al. (2014) pointed out, it is useful to see transnational NGOs' like Tzu Chi "as autopoietic [i.e., self-producing] systems with specific symbolic and material features that emerge within our current convergence culture and are made present (Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008) through ongoing appropriations of digital media" (p. 20). The current study advances this view by illuminating the key role of young volunteers' environmental communication campaigning practices in the translocalization of these organizations.

In addition to advancing research on environmental communication campaigns, this article makes an important contribution to the budding literature on *mindful organizing*, conceived from an Eastern (Buddhist) perspective (see Brummans, in press; Brummans et al., 2013; Purser & Milillo, 2014; Weick & Putnam, 2006). Our naturalistic study reveals how Tzu Chings enact their campaign by engaging in

organizing practices that focus on “cultivating organizational members’ ability to be present in the here-and-now and act with wisdom and compassion, based on continuous awareness of the impermanent, interdependent nature of phenomena” (Brummans, in press, p. 1). Hence, our investigation reveals that mindful organizing is particularly well suited for promoting “universalism” and, more particularly, its subset of nature-related values.¹⁸ These findings, in turn, illustrate how communication efforts about sustainable development can become more diverse, personal, compelling, participatory, and altogether effective if they are aligned with people’s moral values and life philosophies (see also Nisbet et al., 2010).

More research is needed to understand how “transferrable” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) this study’s findings are to other organizational and sociocultural contexts, especially because different “intuitions [appear to] guide food choices across [Eastern and Western] cultural contexts” (Ruby, Heine, Kamble, Cheng, & Waddar, 2013, p. 341). It will be particularly interesting, in this regard, to explore the role of campaigning practices such as affective embodiment, invocation, and transmediation in the constitution of other religious NGOs pursuing environmental missions (see also Gottlieb, 2006; Veldman et al., 2013), and to compare and contrast these practices with those of secular NGOs.

Although RNGOs are presumed to “exert a . . . powerful influence over their members” (Tracey, 2012, p. 118), it will also be worthwhile to investigate how these volunteer organizations deal with tensions between organizational members caused by conflicting views of how to incarnate a particular religious or spiritual philosophy, varying degrees of organizational identification, or dissent (see also Ganesh & McAllum, 2009). Conducting long-term ethnographic research, including participant observation and “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), will be particularly useful in this respect, as it will help us understand even more deeply how these organizations promote environmental protection and care through members’ participation in the ongoing flux of mediated and nonmediated communication.

¹⁸ Universalism, de Boer et al. (2013, pp. 1–2) reported,

is significantly correlated with vegetarianism (Kalof, Dietz, Stern, & Guagnano, 1999) and, among non-vegetarians, with a low level of meat consumption (de Boer & Aiking, 2011; de Boer, Hoogland, & Boersema, 2007). This correlation refers to the universalism values from Schwartz’s Value Survey (Schwartz, 1992) and the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ, see Schwartz et al., 2001), which can be separated into a subset of social justice values and a subset of environmental values (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). The latter can be interpreted in terms of care for nature and the welfare of animals (de Boer et al., 2007).

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