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Celebrity, Network, Meaning, and Fun: the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge [1]

In the digital age, things often go viral on the Internet, such as a funny cat video or a picture of cute panda cubs is circulated on social networking platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. Sometimes it is easy to understand why certain videos, pictures, or quotes receive attention: they are either related to current events, or they are funny. Sometimes, though, it is less clear why certain movements or campaigns gain popularity. They arise out of nowhere, and all of a sudden it seems everyone is talking about them or participating in them. Yes, I'm talking about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

The Ice Bucket Challenge is a fundraising and awareness raising campaign for the disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) organized by the ALS Association. The challenge works in an interesting way: once someone challenges you, you have to make a video of yourself pouring a bucket of ice water over your head, and then name two friends to take the challenge. A small donation is requested if you accept the challenge, and a larger one if you do not accept.

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According to the ALS Association, they raised more than $90 million between July and August 2014. By learning and talking about the Ice Bucket Challenge on social media, many people around the world started to pay attention to ALS. The huge scale of participation and the increasing awareness of the cause have marked the ice bucket challenge as a successful campaign. There are controversies, of course, around the issue of water preservation and too much attention on to the nomination and response game, rather than to the disease. For example, in California where there is a serious drought, some are concerned that the Ice Bucket Challenge wastes water. Overall, however, the campaign did achieve its goal of raising awareness and funds.

As a scholar researching public diplomacy, I wonder if public diplomacy can learn something from this successful campaign. Investing little money while making a huge profit is the ideal in every industry and field. Public diplomacy is no exception, both in traditional public diplomacy that mainly projects messages and in "new" public diplomacy that emphasizes two-way interactions. Attention-getting is always the first, if not the most important, component of successful public diplomacy. There is no doubt that the ice bucket challenge has achieved huge success in terms of attracting public attention. Consequently, the goals of increasing awareness and fundraising are also achieved.

Successful campaigns can provide models for future action. The ice bucket campaign

certainly has implications for public diplomacy, in terms of getting people's attention and participation. Essentially, I believe four factors are the most crucial:

1) Celebrity
2) Network
3) Meaning
4) Fun

Celebrities have the halo of fame, which is why they often appear in advertisements. Celebrities can garner much media attention. However, using a celebrity for product endorsement usually costs a lot of money and not many organizations, especially non-profits, can afford that. The beauty of the ice bucket challenge is that celebrities have participated in the campaign voluntarily, for free.

Why did these celebrities join the ALS campaign if they are not getting paid? One reason some celebrities took the ice bucket challenge was because their celebrity friends did it and named them to do the challenge themselves. The ice bucket challenge went viral because it takes advantage of the power of **social networks**. Like the "word of mouth" effect, asking people to participate in the Challenge is not enforced, but it is made possible by having an interesting rule that participants need to name two recipients after they have completed the Challenge. In other words, the rule is "enforced" by social relations.

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However, having a rule that participants must name other people to take the challenge is not enough. Celebrities are often called on to support causes. Why is the ice bucket challenge so special? First, it is about charity. It is about raising awareness of a rare disease. Not only do the ALS Association and those with ALS benefit from the campaign, but celebrities do as well: it is good for their image to be associated with charity and philanthropy.

Second, the numbness caused by dumping ice water over oneself allows participants to experience the sensations that those with ALS experience. This action-**meaning** closeness gives more sense to the ALS campaign. It not only offers a chance for challengers to feel ALS symptoms, it also delivers a clear message to the video audience.

Third, this is an easy game and the videos are **fun** to watch. For participants, the combination of ice and bucket is simple enough that nearly everyone can try the ice bucket challenge. For viewers, the videos are amusing. The entertainment value has contributed to the sensation. After all, you have to attract people with something enjoyable.

These elements have all played important roles in the success of the ice bucket campaign. It's like cooking. You need both the right kind and right amount of ingredients:

- The win-win situation between organizations and their celebrity partners should be emphasized during a campaign.
- The social network element creates a ripple effect.
- Activity and meaning should be closely linked.
- And finally, the substance of the campaign should be fun and attractive in nature.

In the ice bucket challenge, every single one of the ingredients is important and without any one of them the campaign would have not been this successful.