



A NETWORK ANALYSIS OF CHARITABLE GIVING

The Hillcrest Committee

Patty Hubbert
phubbert@pdx.edu
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Patty Hubbert
Dr. S. Read
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Abstract:

This paper is a network analysis of charitable giving by a non-profit organization wherein the primary beneficiary is a single organization. For this purpose, I examine the charitable giving of The Hillcrest Committee, a non-profit organization in southern Oregon which raises money for donation in the fight against cancer. Its primary beneficiary is Oregon Health Sciences University to which it donates a large sum each year. The public sees only a single generous grant but not the extraordinary, complicated structure of the non-profit and its fundraising activities. In order to understand how the Hillcrest Committee succeeds, or not, in its fundraising goals, I examine its activities through a network framework. Additionally, I will investigate whether socio/cultural change within the Hillcrest Committee and its subsequent adoption of new genres of communication has any impact on its fundraising abilities.

Introduction:

The framework for which I am analyzing The Hillcrest Committee's charitable giving is a network framework. Valuable insights into the HC's fundraising success can be achieved by examining its lengthy network of actants which coalesce in support of fundraising for the cause of finding a cure for cancer. For this purpose, I am treating the charitable donation the Hillcrest Committee (HC) makes to Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU), both an actual and figurative giant check, as a "black box" (Spinuzzi, 49). To any public observer the donation itself is a simple interface between the HC and OHSU. The HC is a fundraising organization that donates money to OHSU; the complicated organization of the group, its methods of communication and its social and cultural make-up are hidden to outsiders. One lens for

examining this network is actor-network theory (ANT). As defined by Spinuzzi, an actor-network is, “composed of many entities or actants that enter into an alliance in order to satisfy their diverse aims” (Spinuzzi, 49). In this instance, the central aim is to raise money for donation. Other actors involved in the HC’s process of fundraising, however, have other goals and motivations for aligning themselves in the network with the HC. The analysis of tracing the, “rhetorical-political associations, or translations, among actors, of which a particular object or interaction of contemporary knowledge work is an outcome” (Latour, 2005 as cited by Read & Swarts, 17), is the heart of ANT. Using ANT as a tool to analyze the network of both human and non-human actors the HC has assembled will illuminate whether those connections are vital to achieve its fundraising goal.

How the HC achieves its fundraising goals can also be understood through the framework of network activity theory (AT). Unlike ANT, AT takes into consideration, “how discrete activity systems interact, interpenetrate, and coevolve in complexes; that is, in ways that involve questions of power and politics as well as development. These activity networks are composed of activity systems that have become interlinked” (Spinuzzi, 51). The HC is composed of many interlinked activity systems which work together to achieve its fundraising goals. Within the HC, the membership is composed of several committees and subcommittees. Outside the HC, members have established relationships with sponsors and vendors. These activity systems interconnect and use a variety of tools to execute the HC’s strategy for fundraising. As opposed to ANT where the human actors and non-human actors (the tools or genres of tools operationalized in the network) have equal weight in the network, AT stipulates that, “The use of tools mediates the behavior of people in activity systems in specific and objective ways that are realized historically, through a developing cooperation and/or competition in the specialized use of tools arising from the social division of labor” (Leont’ev, 1981 as cited by Russell, 511). In this case, an AT analysis of the HC activity systems and its

mediating genres will show that its cultural and historical development toward more technologically advanced genres has affected its fundraising success.

Methodology:

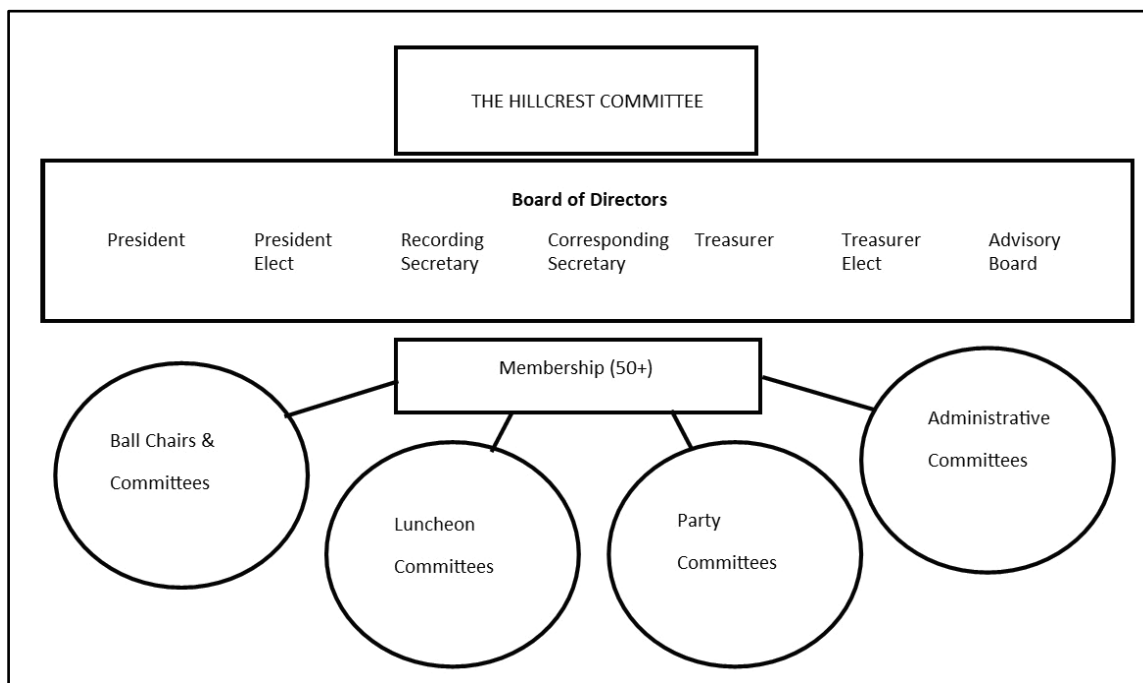
In this paper I will lay out a network analysis of the Hillcrest Committee (HC) using three approaches: actor-network theory (ANT), activity theory (AT) and genre theory (GT). First, I will layout the basic operation of the Hillcrest Committee which will name all the actors in the network and their role in the group's fundraising. I will then use the lens of actor-network theory to examine the human and non-human actors in the HC network and evaluate their impact on the group's functions. Next, I will use the lens of activity network theory to consider the many activity systems within the HC and their operational genres. And finally, I will discuss whether a shift in the social/cultural makeup of the activity systems and their operationalized genres has had an effect on the group's fundraising success.

The Hillcrest Committee:

The Hillcrest Committee was founded in 1946. It began as a small group of women, spouses of physicians, whose shared social and cultural backgrounds united them in the cause of finding a cure for cancer. They became a unit of the American Cancer Society, adding legitimacy and gravitas to their fundraising activities. Its first fundraiser was a Silver Tea, where "silver" quarters and dimes were collected, and its fundraisers grew over time into a series of parties hosted by the members at the historic Hillcrest House in Medford, Oregon and in other locations across the Rogue Valley. Over the years the structure of the HC has changed dramatically. Today, the HC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, The Southern Oregon Foundation Supporting a Cure for Cancer, doing business as the Hillcrest Committee. It consists of approximately 50 diverse, volunteer members who work in concert to raise money toward developing cures for cancers. Its structure is common to many non-profit corporations. It has a

board of directors, bylaws filed with the state, and a set of motivated volunteer members dedicated to achieving the group's goals. Figure 1 below lays out the basic structure of the HC.

Figure 1.



A basic tenet of the group is that all members must serve in several overlapping ways. The entire membership meets once per month at a predetermined locale selected by the luncheon committee. The president sets the agenda and leads the business meeting while the luncheon committee serves lunch to the rest of the members. The business discussed at each meeting relates for the most part to three topics: (1) preparations for the main fundraiser, the holiday ball, (2) the execution of parties that were auctioned off at the previous ball, and (3) the status of and disbursement of ball proceeds to selected cancer research projects. The entire process is cyclical. Parties are auctioned off at the holiday ball which takes place in December. In the months following, the party committees plan for the execution of the parties auctioned off at the ball. At the same time new ball chairs are selected and preparations for the next holiday

ball begin. The net proceeds from the ball are tallied and the membership debates how the money should be disbursed. Every member participates in several committees simultaneously, alternating among leader and server roles. What makes the HC unique among non-profit organizations, though, is its fundraising success with such a small group of dedicated volunteers. I attribute the HC's fundraising success to its lengthy network of activity systems and its adoption of more sophisticated communication genres which overlap and interact in concert to achieve the organization's' fundraising goals.

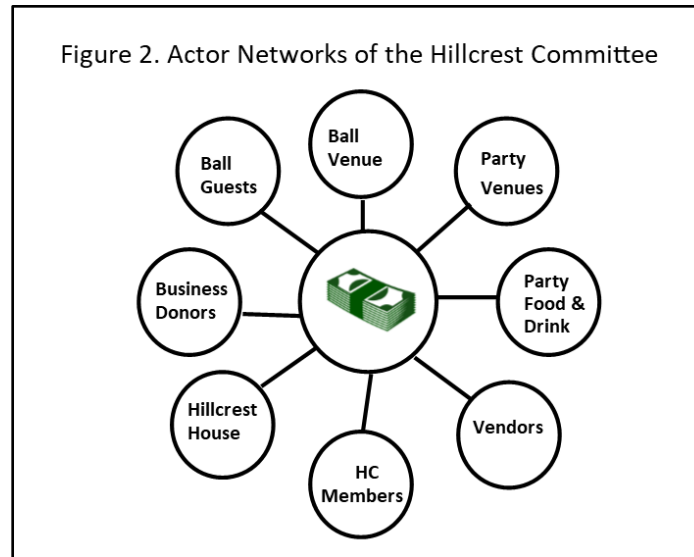
Actor-Network Theory of the Hillcrest Committee:

Actor network theory can be distilled down to the idea that it is a moment by moment look at how a network of actors fits together and stays connected. From an ANT perspective, all the actors in the network have equal weight in the outcome of the network's goals. As expressed by Magnus Bergquist, et al, (2008), "An actor network is built of both technical and non-technical elements to form a heterogeneous network, i.e. ANT is granting both humans and non-humans the same explanatory status". In the case of the HC, the membership represents only one actor network among several that have come together for the cause of finding a cure for cancer. For example, to host the holiday ball, the HC must negotiate with a venue to accommodate this large event. The owners of the venue are not necessarily motivated to rent their space to the HC simply because it stands for a worthy cause. It is their business to make money from the rental space. Yet, it has a choice of which groups with which to do business, and its reputation benefits from association with a prestigious, philanthropic event. Likewise, the HC benefits from hosting an event in a luxurious venue. Wealthy guests are attracted to the event, and they are more likely to donate to the cause. The HC membership and the venue itself are both actors in a dyadic relationship, coming together in support of one cause.

A similar relationship exists between the guests at the ball and the parties that are auctioned off. As with any fundraising organization, the HC's goal is to convince people to donate to the cause. Their formula is to host extravagant parties with gourmet food and drink and entertainment. Guests at the ball compete in an auction format to place the winning bid for the desired party. Ultimately, the winning bid far exceeds the dollar value of the party because the buyer/guest is not solely motivated as a consumer. The guest has a second motive of wanting to support the philanthropic cause of the HC. It is best summed up below:

The social process of aligning an initially diverse collection of interests to "one", i.e. reaching a certain degree of alignment of interests, leads to acceptance, "truth" or stability. The solution reached is constituted by an aligned actor-network. To achieve this, one must be able to translate (i.e. represent) the interests of others (not-aligned) to one's own. The translation process is forming the actor-network by generating ordering effects such as devices, agents, institutions or organizations" (Law, 1992 as cited by Bergquist, et al, 9).

These venues and ball guests are only two examples of actors (human and non-human) that come together in the HC's network. Figure 2 on the next page shows a variety of actors that play a role in the HC's fundraising.



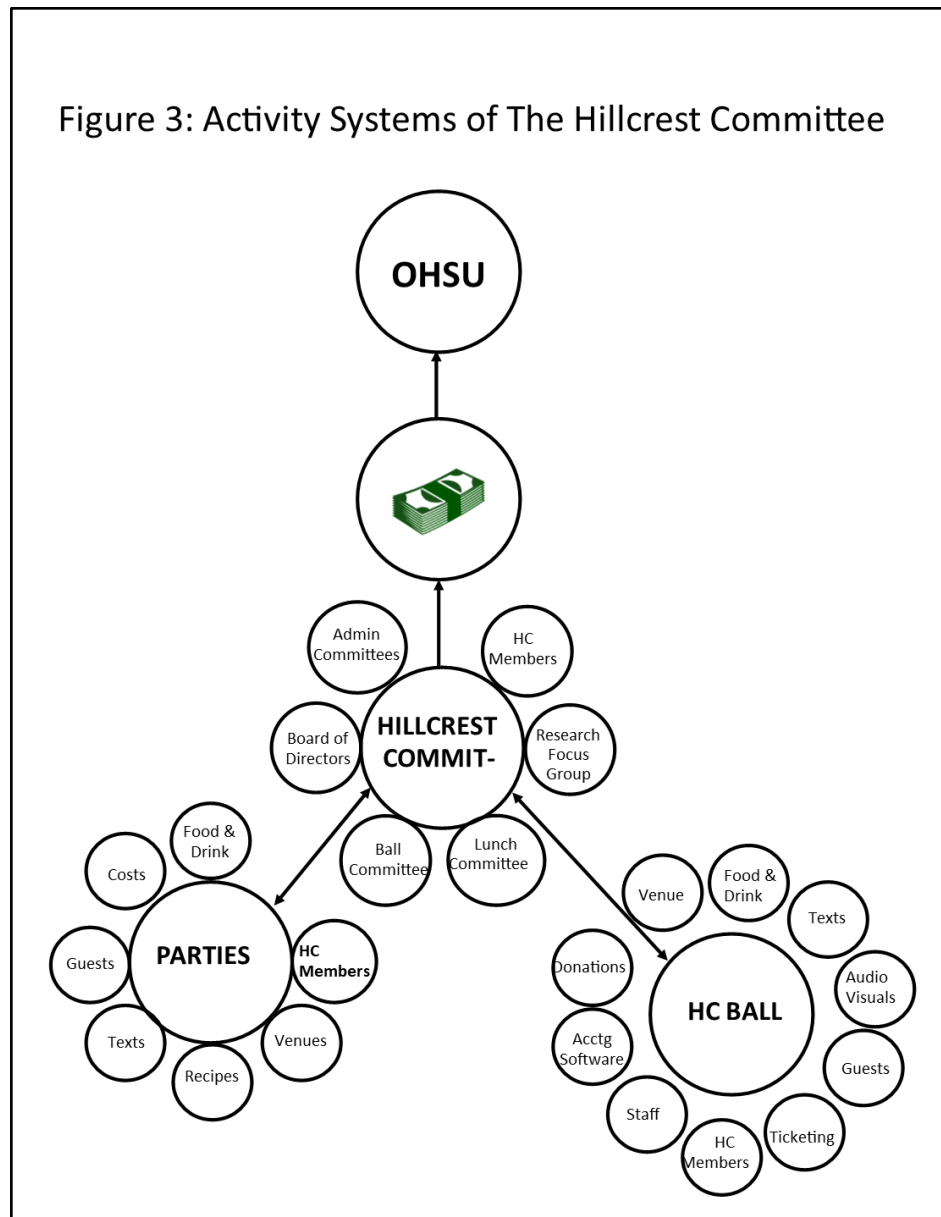
Yet, ANT does not give a complete picture of how the HC achieves its fundraising goals. After all, there are many worthy organizations which use the ball/auction strategy for fundraising without achieving the same results. While other actors may align themselves in a network with the HC, the pool of donors in Southern Oregon is limited, and the HC must compete with other organizations for donations. What sets the HC apart is its highly effective, complicated structure which makes the most of its volunteer membership, its relationship with outside groups, and its use of mediating tools (genres). To better understand these connections, I turn to an activity theory (AT) framework.

Activity Systems of the Hillcrest Committee:

Activity theory provides an excellent framework for examining the inner workings of the HC. As Spinuzzi says, “Activity theory is equipped to study groups and organizations, and indeed its unit of analysis, the activity system, is meant to examine developmental activity of a collective that cyclically works to transform an object” (Spinuzzi, 2007). In this case, the object of the HC is to raise money for cancer research, and the members have designed a network to achieve that end. The primary activity system of the HC is the membership itself. At its inception it was a group composed exclusively of educated, wealthy, Caucasian, married, middle-aged

women who had the time and resources to dedicate to the cause of finding a cure for cancer. It was a homogenous group, sharing social, cultural and political ties that contributed to its unified approach to fundraising. Over years the membership grew to its current more diverse state comprising approximately fifty members (all women): married/divorced/widowed, stay-at-home/working, Caucasian/women of color, and skewing younger. Activity theory affords a way to analyze the HC's fundraising in lieu of its changing demographics over the years. Indeed, the "focus of network analysis is the sum of measurable qualities of actors (e.g. influence, connections, permanence), their relations (e.g., strength, multiplicity, redundancy, intersection), and the flow of actions across them (e.g., directionality, reciprocity, volume)" (Read and Swarts, 19). In other words, the current more diverse makeup of the HC's membership brings with it a kind of tension as the members adopt new and more technologically advanced tools in pursuit of their fundraising goals, and activity theory is a way of examining these relationships to evaluate their success.

Although the central activity system of the HC is the membership itself, it is actually comprised of several smaller activity systems. These smaller "committees" allow the members to distribute the fundraising work across the group so that no one individual is overburdened with responsibility. A complete representation of the HC activity systems appears as Figure 3 on the next page.



Every member of the HC participates in several related, overlapping activity systems and uses tools to get work done. For example, all members volunteer to work and serve at the parties that are auctioned off at the ball. Each party is organized by a party committee, and those members who want to participate sign up as party volunteers. The signup sheet is a tool, in this case an actual text, used by the activity system (the party committee) to help regulate the activity. It is an example of a, “self-regulative mediational means such as computer programs, documentation, scripts, technologies and ad hoc innovations [that] are constantly being learned,

adopted, adapted and discarded on both individual and collective bases in attempts to properly regulate the work of the network” (Spinuzzi, 53). In fact, the HC uses many such lists to regulate and organize activities, so much so they have become operationalized genres. These written genres, “help mediate the actions of individuals with others in collectives (activity systems) to create stabilized for now structures of action and identity” (Russell, 514). Indeed, in the HC there are signup sheets to serve at the monthly luncheon/business meetings, to serve at the hosted parties, and to shoulder particular responsibilities at the fundraising ball. This particular type of written genre is used in all the activity systems in the HC’s fundraising network.

All members of the HC also participate in preparing for the holiday ball. Led by the ball committee, and its various sub-committees, members review a signup sheet delineating responsibilities and choose the one they are most interested in doing. There are so many actors involved with the ball that it is another activity system itself. In this case, there are outside parties that the HC members must work with to achieve its goals. A contract must be signed with the venue, invitations and programs must be printed and mailed, and the ticketing and seating arrangements must be made, among other responsibilities. A system of keeping track of who does what is needed to insure a positive outcome. As explained by Russell (521), “It is through this microstructural circulation of texts and other tools in genres, these regularized shared expectations for tool use within and among systems of purposeful interaction, that macrosocial structure is (re-)created.” The HC ball chairs and committees keep track by maintaining several signup sheets. They help the leaders know who has committed to do the work, and they help the members by organizing and distributing work along the activity network.

Genres Mediate Change:

The HC committee has been dedicated to the cause of raising money for cancer research for several generations. Since its inception it has grown in size and scope. It has developed a complicated structure and adopted texts as an important mediational genre in its organizational structure. But the nature of written communication has changed drastically over the last decade. In the past, the activity systems communicated by telephone or via written, paper documents. Fundraising totals were calculated by hand or with a calculator, and money collected was by cash or check. As outside activity systems began to adopt digital technology, the HC had to adapt in order to maintain its network. The written genres of the HC were, “transformed as the interaction with other activity systems change[d]” (Russell, 522). Today, the HC has embraced modern technology in its fundraising activities and its communication genres have evolved. It still uses lists and contracts, but they are now distributed to members and vendors via email. It still calculates fundraising totals, but now uses accounting and ticketing software programs and accepts contributions by credit cards. These changes have been facilitated by new, more diverse members who brought with them advanced technological skills, who by their participation in the activity system, helped transform the mediational genres. The result has been a resounding success. The HC has increased its fundraising revenue more than 100% over the last decade.¹

Conclusion:

The Hillcrest Committee is a dynamic, successful, non-profit organization dedicated to raising money to donate in the fight against cancer. It is gratifying to note the HC is able to make a substantial donation directly to the Oregon Health Sciences University each year. But to an

¹ Net holiday ball revenues for the Hillcrest Committee from 2008 to 2018 show a steady increase from approximately \$50,000 in 2008 to more than \$100,000 in 2018. These numbers are very general, as the Hillcrest Committee keeps its actual finances private.

outsider, it is a mystery how the HC's fundraising is achieved. Examining the HC's organizational structure and operations through a network framework sheds light on their process. Using both actor network theory (ANT) and activity systems theory (AT) one can see the many actors engaged in the HC's network and the mediating genres used to communicate between the varying activity systems. Additionally, taking note of the HC's adoption of new technology in its mediating genres is especially interesting. While it cannot be said that adopting new technology alone is responsible for the HC's increased success in fundraising, it must certainly be a factor. Busy members are more efficient in their communication because of email (vs paper); people are more likely to donate if they can use their credit cards (vs. checks or cash), the history and impact of the group is more widely known due to social media (vs. word of mouth). All these factors combine to have a positive impact the HC's fundraising network.

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