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How activist organizations are using the Internet to build relationships

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Abstract

This study examines the mediated communication of activist organizations to understand how these groups use their Web sites to build relationships with publics. A study of one hundred environmental organization Web sites identified common features and examined the incorporation of dialogic communication into this new medium. The data suggest that while most activist organizations meet the technical and design aspects required for dialogic relationship building on the Web, they are not yet fully engaging their publics in two-way communication. Moreover, it appears that the activist organizations are better prepared to address the needs of member publics rather than media needs. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Although all types of organizations may benefit from communicating with publics through the WWW, activist groups may benefit most from the Web's dialogic potential. An activist public has been defined as "a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics or force" [1]. In the past, active publics have been considered threats that require a public relations response. But Dozier and Lauzen have critiqued the "modern positivist" "threat" approach that causes scholars to "overlook the heuristic merits

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of the ways in which activist publics are different from rather than similar to, other constituents and stakeholders that are players in the game of public relations” [2].

Activist organizations are important to study in public relations because they have unique communication and relationship-building needs. They “must maintain membership, thrive in what might be described as a competitive marketplace of ideas and issues, and adjust to changes in their environment” [3]. Many activist organizations, operating on minimal budgets, have traditionally relied on public relations as a cost-effective way to reach publics. Maintaining an activist organization is difficult because there are many different activist groups—large and small—working on similar issues and courting the same active publics. For instance, thousands of organizations advocate on behalf of endangered species, clean water, and better land use. One way that activist organizations can better serve their publics, extend their reach, and coordinate efforts with other like-minded groups, is through the Internet.

Coombs identified the Internet as a potential equalizer for activist organizations because it offers a “low cost, direct, controllable communication channel” that can magnify their efforts and create linkages with other like-minded stakeholders [4]. Similarly, Mitra has suggested that the Internet can be used effectively to bring members of diasporic groups together [5]. Leveraging the communication potential of the Internet is important because noncorporate organizations often lack expertise and sophistication in their public relations efforts [6]. The Internet may be one of the best channels for activist organizations to communicate their messages and build public support for issues [7]. One way that activist organizations can use the Internet to build relationships with publics is by fostering dialogic communication.

In 1998, Kent and Taylor proposed five dialogic principles that would guide organizations interested in creating mediated, two-way, dialogic relationships with publics [8]. The purpose of this article is to examine *activist* Web sites to determine the extent to which they use dialogue effectively to build organization–public relationships. Activist organizations are studied to determine if, and how, these groups are using their Web sites to engage their publics, encourage feedback, and meet the informational needs of their publics. To provide context to the concept of dialogue, the first section of the article reviews the relevant literature in public relations that addresses the development of dialogue as a framework for understanding ethical public relations practice. Dialogue is emerging as an important framework as public relations moves toward a relational approach. Dialogue, however, is more than a relational strategy for interpersonal communication; dialogue can also guide mediated relationships. Thus, the second section of the article examines the status of relationship building on the Internet and explores how organizations can actually build dialogic relationships through their sites on the WWW. To test for relationship building, the third section of the article reports the results of a study that examines the incorporation of dialogic features in activist organizations’ Web sites.

2. The emergence of dialogue in public relations theory

For the last 20 years, a prominent theme in public relations research and commentary has focused on either supporting or challenging James Grunig’s symmetrical model of public

relations as the most ethical way to conduct public relations. Alternative frameworks have slowly emerged, however, that are pushing the field in a new direction and raising critical questions about past assumptions [9]. Of particular interest are the relational and accommodation approaches to public relations that suggest alternative ways that organizations can engage publics.

The relational approach is significant because it situates relationship building as the central public relations activity [10]. According to Toth, too much focus has been placed on public relations as a management function and not enough emphasis has been given to relational communication in public relations [11]. Ledingham and Bruning's edited volume has outlined a relational approach to public relations and is already helping to move the field in a new direction [12]. According to Ledingham and Bruning, the dialogic or relational perspective "serves as a platform for developing public relations initiatives that generate benefit for organizations and for the publics they serve" [13].

Additionally, accommodation and contingency approaches are also useful for fostering dialogic relationships because they raise important questions about the pragmatics and limits of symmetrical communication [14]. To extend public relations research, Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, and Mitrook proposed a research agenda that examines contingency and accommodation in actual public relations decisions [15]. By focusing on the actual practices of public relations, rather than the normative model of symmetrical communication, the researchers created a continuum of factors that influence decisions made by practitioners. Cancel et al., have shown that public relations is grounded in relationships but is dependent on contingency factors [16]. The accommodation and contingency lines of research, although very critical of the symmetrical model, have prompted new ways of thinking about ethical and excellent public relations.

Indeed, James Grunig has responded to the decade long commentary about symmetrical communication as the normative and positive model for ethical public relations by acknowledging its limitations [17]. Reflecting back on his research, and addressing the criticisms of Cancel et al., and other scholars, Grunig concluded:

It is time to move on from the four (or more) models of public relations to develop a comprehensive theory that goes beyond the typology represented by the four models . . . I believe my colleagues and I moved toward such a theory in developing the new two-way model of excellent, or *dialogic*, public relations [18].

The term dialogue has appeared in the public relations literature for over three decades. In public relations, dialogue is often traced back to Sullivan and the values of public relations practitioners [19]. Dialogue has also been considered the most ethical form of public relations [20], as well as one of the key features of the symmetrical model [21]. In light of the new emphasis on "relationships" in public relations, "dialogue" appears to be joining and perhaps even replacing the concept of symmetry as an organizing principle in public relations theory building [22]. The shift to dialogue is not merely terminological. Rather, it is based on an interpersonal model of ethical and effective communication whereby dialogue is the "simultaneous fusion with the Other [sic] while retaining the uniqueness of one's self interest" [23]. Given the field's shift to a more relational approach to public relations, the concept of dialogue may now best capture the process and product of relationship building.

Dialogue is more than a framework for understanding interpersonal relationships, it can also be used to understand mediated relationships such as those created by communication through the Internet.

3. Mediated dialogue and the WWW

In the last 4 years, there have been a number of articles and research studies published about mediated public relations. Johnson explored practitioner perceptions of the Internet and WWW and found that there were mixed attitudes about conducting mediated public relations through the Web [24]. Johnson found that while many practitioners enjoyed the ease of communication afforded through electronic mail and Web sites, some felt that it “depersonalized” public relations [25].

In a special issue of *Public Relations Review* (Fall, 1998), several researchers concluded that public relations and the Internet are inextricably tied together and offered examples of how organizations are using the Internet to communicate with publics. For instance, Esrock and Leichty examined the Web sites of Fortune 500 organizations for socially responsible messages [26]. Coombs looked at how activist organizations are using the WWW to amplify their reach [27]. Heath showed how corporations and activist organizations were using the Internet in issues management [28].

In that same special issue, Kent and Taylor argued that strategically designed Web sites and home pages may provide organizations with an opportunity to engage in dialogic relationships [29]. Kent and Taylor offered five principles for organizations to follow that enhance open communication and organizational responses to public needs. These principles include offering (1) dialogic loops, (2) ease of interface, (3) conservation of visitors, (4) generation of return visits, and (5) providing information relevant to a variety of publics.

To date, several studies in public relations and health communication have examined aspects of these dialogic principles. In public relations research, Esrock and Leichty studied the dialogic capacity of organizational Web sites and found that of the principles of dialogue tested, approximately one third employed two of Kent and Taylor’s principles of dialogic communication, one third employed one of the five dialogic principles, and one third did not encourage any dialogic interactivity with publics [30]. Esrock and Leichty concluded that only “a minority of Fortune 500 organizations have become so energetic and proactive in using the new medium to its fullest potential” [31]. In a detailed follow up study, Esrock and Leichty further tested the use of dialogue by corporations and found that most sites were easy to use, addressed a variety of publics and offered ways for publics to communicate back to the organization [32]. Esrock and Leichty characterized the Fortune 500 Web sites as “meeting several of the necessary preconditions for dialogic communication with publics” [33]. While Esrock and Leichty’s research suggests that corporations target a variety of publics, it appeared that media, consumers, and investors are most frequently targeted by organizational Web pages. Corporate Web sites, according to Esrock and Leichty, appear to serve commercial purposes.

In health communication, Rice, Paterson and Christine studied health database Web sites [34]. Rice et al., argued that health Web sites are conceptualized as repositories of infor-

mation with little dialogic communication for visitors. In another health communication study, Witherspoon noted that HMO Web sites could do much to “enhance two-way communication between HMOs and members” [35]. It appears that many organizations are missing the interactive potential of the Internet.

The lack of two-way Internet-facilitated communication may be attributed to Web site design. White and Raman evaluated how organizations create Web sites and found “the basic tenets of public relations research, planning, and evaluation are often ignored” [36]. Likewise, in a study of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members, Ha and Pratt found that “not many organizations employ their sites effectively as part of their public relations program” [37]. Moreover, Ha and Pratt noted that most organizations appear willing to use the WWW to collect information from visitors but very few are willing to assure the public that the information they provide to the organization will be protected [38]. Springston also surveyed PRSA members and members of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and found that:

There is a recognition by practitioners that the Internet has the capacity of leveling the playing field between large and small organizations. There is some recognition that individuals and groups opposed to one’s organization can use new media technology to significantly affect public perception about the organization [39].

Indeed, the Internet may be a place for previously unrelated publics to come together for a social or activist cause. Cozier and Witmer argued that the Internet provides a place for new types of publics, “which emerge because people who are on-line interact with others and influence each other’s meaning systems” [40]. Such relationships suggest new challenges to the roles and practices of traditional public relations.

What is clear from the previous research is that organizations expend employee and monetary resources to create and maintain Web sites [41]. For corporations and profit making organizations, Web sites are often one of many resources in an arsenal of advertising, public relations efforts, philanthropy, issues management, and community relations efforts. For smaller, and activist/nonprofit organizations, however, Web sites emerge as a primary resource for communicating with and responding to publics. It follows then that organizations that rely almost exclusively on the Web, such as activist and nonprofit organizations, would seek to use the Internet to its fullest potential—dialogically—to create relationships with publics.

When thinking about dialogic public relations it is useful to think about dialogue in terms of its original formulation—as a tool for effective and mutually rewarding interpersonal communication. Thus, the use of communication to “build dialogic relationships with publics” has the same qualities that “building interpersonal relationships and trust” has. Both are processes that involve trust, risk and multiple interactions. Theorizing about public relations through the lens of interpersonal, or dialogic, communication is not new. As Grunig and Huang suggest, many “have looked to the literature on interpersonal communication for concepts that can be adapted or modified for a theory of organization–public relationships” [42].

The five principles of dialogue suggested by Kent and Taylor can be related to interpersonal relationship development. Although the literature on interpersonal communication

varies in its use of relationship development and maintenance terminology, most interpersonal communication theories acknowledge several basic components of interpersonal communication exchanges: (1) relationships are based on interest or attraction; (2) relationships are based on interaction; (3) relationships are based on trust yet involve some risk; (4) relationships require periodic maintenance; and (5) relationships involve cycles of rewarding and unsatisfactory interaction. Dialogue as both an interpersonal and public relations activity facilitates each of these relational development components. Dialogue first involves attraction whereby individuals or groups desire to interact (“usefulness of information”); for relationships to develop interactions must occur (“ease of interface”); for relationships to grow dialogue must occur (“conservation of visitors”); and for relationships to thrive, maintenance and satisfactory interactions must occur (“generation of return visits” and “dialogic loops”).

Activist organizations have unique communication and economic constraints and may be able to use the Internet dialogically. To test for dialogic relationship building through the Internet, this study examines the extent to which activist organizations are using their Web sites to build relationships with publics. Research questions that guided this study included: *RQ1. What are the dialogic characteristics of activist Web sites?* This question involves an assessment of the extent to which a sample of Web sites produced by activist organizations incorporate design features that facilitate dialogic communication. The nature of such design features is theorized by Kent and Taylor [43] and to some extent empirically assessed in Esrock and Leichy [44]. The current research thus extends an ongoing research program through the application of a descriptive and normative taxonomy to a new public relations context.

RQ2. Which publics are targeted by activist Web sites? The notion of dialogic communication, with its symmetrical and relational implications, implies that activist Web sites will not be optimally designed for any and all potential users of the site. Instead, the design of the site will suggest particular publics that are the targeted constituency of the organization producing the site. The targeted publics should be expected, Kent and Taylor imply, to be those publics whose attention is strategically valuable to the organization in question [45]. Since activist organizations are conceived of here as organized around the mobilization of public interest, it may be expected that activist Web sites will target volunteer publics more than they will media publics. This leads to this study’s first formal hypothesis:

H1. Activist Web sites will be more useful to volunteer publics than to media publics.

RQ3. How effectively do activist Web sites employ dialogic principles? This question attempts to link the communication behavior and structure of activist organizations with their incorporation of dialogic principles in their Web sites. That is, we ask to what extent is the employment of dialogic principles in activist organizations’ Web-based communication associated with other behavioral and structural properties of those organizations. Research Question 3 suggests a second hypothesis:

H2. Organizations that respond to requests for information will be more dialogic than organizations that do not respond to such requests.

A spontaneous request for information is an opportunity for an organization to engage in dialogic communication. An organization's employment of dialogic principles in its Web site design may be indicative of an overall dialogic disposition on the part of the organization. We therefore expect that response rates to researcher-generated requests for information should increase with the use of dialogic communication design features.

H3. Institutes, research centers, and foundations will be more dialogic than will other types of activist organizations.

The employment of dialogic communication principles into Web site design reflects a commitment to and a professionalization of the organization's communication with external publics. This professionalized commitment may be resource-intensive. Organizations that identify themselves as institutes, research centers, and foundations may be expected—by virtue of their potentially greater permanence and stability—to be more likely than “networks,” “interest groups,” or “alliances” to possess the resources necessary to develop and sustain dialogic Web sites.

4. Method

This study is based on a random sample of 100 activist organization Web sites. The data for this project were collected during spring 2000. The study operationalized five principles of dialogic relationship building deductively from Kent and Taylor's principles [46] into a 32-item questionnaire. Esrock and Leichthy's article on corporate Web sites also provided insight into two of the features of usefulness of information and ease of use [47].

4.1. Operationalizing principles of dialogue

To ensure reliability of the thirty-two questions each term was operationalized as follows.

4.1.1. Ease of interface

The dialogic principle of ease of interface is based on the idea that visitors should have an easy time navigating a site and finding information. Ease of interface is a prerequisite for Webbed dialogue. Ease of interface is also one predictor of dialogic potential because if a site is not “user-friendly,” then visitors will not have a positive experience at the site and may not be encouraged to return. Features of sites that facilitate ease of interface include: having site maps (or links to site maps) clearly identifiable on a home page; ensuring that major links to the rest of the site are clearly identified on the home page; incorporating a search engine box (or a link to a search box) on home pages; creating image maps that are self-explanatory; and incorporating minimal graphic reliance into site design.

4.1.2. Usefulness of information

The second feature that is necessary for dialogic relationship building is the usefulness of information on a Web site. Research shows that home pages often target a variety of publics and attempt to provide information of interest to each group targeted. Esrock and Leichthy

noted that certain publics (media, investors, customers) are more often targeted than others [48]. Two publics—media and volunteers/members—were identified inductively through a pilot study of activist Web sites. Features that target media publics include press releases, speeches, downloadable graphics, clear statement about organizational positions on policy issues, and identification of the size and composition of an organization's member/supporter base. Because activist organizations are social cause organizations, their goal is usually to empower members. Features of usefulness of information to members or volunteers include: statements on the philosophy and mission of the organization; details on how to become affiliated with the organization; information about how to contribute money to the organization; links to relevant political leaders making it easy for interested individuals to express their opinions on issues; and the creation of memorable organizational logos and icons to create a sense of identification for members and visitors.

4.1.3. Conservation of visitors

Research suggests that corporations and profit-seeking organizations should try to keep visitors on their own Web site—this is called “stickiness”—rather than encouraging them to “surf” to other sites. Features of commercial sites that follow the rule of conservation of visitors minimize advertising, hide links behind “link” buttons, and carefully screen the type of organizations that they link their site to. Profit seeking organizations create sites that encourage visitors to stay for as long as possible with the goal of a sale culminating the visit. Conversely, social cause organizations often include links to other relevant sites as a way of establishing credibility and situating the organization within a greater activist cause. In other words, activist organizations often use links to suggest identification with other reputable and like-minded organizations. Because of this difference between corporate and activist Web sites, this study considered links to be a facet of “return visits” rather than “conservation of visitors.” The rule of conservation of visitors in this study focused primarily on the presence of important information (or organizational messages) on the first page; the amount of time that the site loaded on a medium speed, networked computer; and a clear posting of the date and time the site was last updated.

4.1.4. Generation of return visits

Activist organizations want visitors to return to their site on a regular basis. The principle of generation of return visits establishes the conditions upon which relationship building can take place. That is, relationships are not established in one-contact communication interactions. Relationship building requires time, trust, and a variety of other relational maintenance strategies that can only occur over repeated interactions. Features of Web sites that encourage visitors to return include: providing links to other activist Web sites; appealing to visitors with explicit statements inviting them to return; encouraging visitors to “bookmark this page now” to facilitate easy return; the announcement of regularly scheduled news forums; providing visitors with question and answer forums; including calendars of events; offering visitors downloadable and regularly updated, information; offering visitors information that can be automatically delivered through regular mail or e-mail; and the posting of news stories within the last 30 days.

4.1.5. Dialogic loop

The final and most important feature of a dialogic Web site is the incorporation of interactivity. Even if a site follows the suggestions of the first four dialogic principles, it cannot be fully dialogic if it does not offer and follow through on two-way communication. Features of sites that incorporate dialogic loops include: opportunities for visitors to send messages to the organization; opportunities for individuals to vote on issues; the option to request regular information updates; and the option for visitors to fill out surveys identifying priorities and expressing opinions on issues. These features are necessary but not sufficient for dialogue. It is also important to note that Web sites that simply create the illusion that the organization cares—such as Web sites that provide boxes for individuals to “tell us what you think”—cannot be considered dialogic unless the organization actually responds to each comment.

4.2. Data

As noted previously, a 32-question survey based on an operationalization of Kent and Taylor’s five dialogic principles was created [49]. Operationalization of each of the five principles included a range of 3 to 9 questions per dimension with a mean of 6.4 categories per principle. The instrument recorded information about the speed at which the site loaded, what time of day the site was accessed, the URL of the Web site, its links, and the presence or absence of the principles of Web-based dialogue.

4.2.1. Sample

The EnviroLink Web site (www.envirolink.org) provided the sampling frame for this study. EnviroLink lists over 1200 activist organizations devoted to environmental issues and corporate social responsibility. The “EnviroLink” Web site serves as a library for individuals and organizations interested in environmental issues and its goal is to bring like-minded individuals and organizations together to better serve and protect the environment. The links listed on the EnviroLink Web site include local, regional, national and international environmental organizations. According to EnviroLink:

The EnviroLink Network’s EnviroWeb program offers free Internet services to nonprofit organizations within the environmental and animal rights communities. EnviroWeb provides these services to any organization within these communities, regardless of their politics or opinions. Furthermore, services provided by EnviroWeb do not indicate any sort of endorsement of the organizations’ actions, opinions or expressions. The EnviroLink Network/ EnviroWeb holds no positions on any environmental or animal rights issues. (<http://support.enviroWeb.org>)

The organizations on the EnviroLink Web page were arranged alphabetically and by group interest—for example, general environmental groups, groups concerned with specific issues such as whaling, and corporate social responsibility groups.

One trained coder randomly selected Web sites from the EnviroLink category “environmentalist activist organizations.” EnviroLink’s Web site did not discriminate based on the size or prominence of organizations. All organizations were equally accessible by links from

the Envirolink site. Organizational sites that were under construction or did not load were excluded from the sample.

The coder reviewed each Web site using the 32 questions on the survey instrument. Web sites were accessed from “average” (speed/performance) networked computers at approximately the same time every day. The time standardization procedure helped to ensure that the measures of loading speed for each Web site would be determined not by the coder’s computer, but instead, primarily by site design. The coder printed the home page of every site visited for archival purposes, and also printed the lists of links to other activist Web sites present on each organization’s Web pages. Using the survey instrument, the coder evaluated the performance features of each home page visited, and then evaluated the relevant content features of each Web site for answers to the survey questions. The coder was also trained to write qualitative comments about each site.

The categorical data were tabulated and checked for accuracy. Means were calculated for interval level data and percentages were calculated for categorical questions. To better calculate the strength of each of the dialogic principles evaluated in the sample, a composite “index score” was created for each principle. The index averaged the questions in each dimension allowing for comparison of Kent and Taylor’s dialogic principles. The resulting data were used to explore the research questions and test the hypotheses discussed above.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptives

The Web sites visited loaded quickly, with 87% loading in less than four seconds on a networked computer. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the sites included links to other activist Web sites. The Web sites were linked most often to other local environmental organizations ($M = 8.9$ links per site). Additionally, the sites were also linked to national environmental organizations ($M = 8.3$ links per site) and international environmental organizations ($M = 8.2$ links per site). The links to other Web sites often were located behind “link” buttons. Fifty-nine percentage (59%) of the sites visited had been updated in the 60 days prior to the data collection, 54% had posted news stories during the last 30 days, and 60% of all sites visited included news releases.

5.2. Web site characteristics and utility

RQ1 inquired about the dialogic characteristics of activist organizations’ Web sites. The environmental activist membership organizations’ Web sites in this sample appear to encompass many of the characteristics of dialogic communication. Table 1 summarizes how the 100 organizations in the sample were coded on 31 dialogic communication items, each of which contributed to one of six dialogic principle indices, as discussed above. The value for each item represents the number of “yes” responses to a dichotomously coded (i.e., yes or no) index item. For example, 38 of the 100 organizational Web sites were coded as having a site map (as the first item in the Ease of Interface category indicates).

Table 1
Occurrence of dialogic features (n = 100)

| Category | n % |
|--|-----|
| Ease of Interface (4 items, $M = 67.0$, $S = 21.3$, alpha .29) | |
| Site map | 38 |
| Major links to rest of site | 99 |
| Search engine box | 44 |
| Low reliance on graphics | 87 |
| Usefulness of Information to Media Publics (6 items, $M = 47.5$, $S = 18.1$, alpha .50) | |
| Press releases | 60 |
| Speeches | 22 |
| Downloadable graphics | 18 |
| Audio/Visual capacity | 5 |
| Clearly stated positions on policy issues | 99 |
| Identifies member base | 81 |
| Usefulness of Information: Volunteer Publics (5 items, $M = 81.4$, $S = 17.8$, alpha = .46) | |
| Statement of philosophy/mission | 100 |
| Details of how to become affiliated | 91 |
| How to contribute money | 82 |
| Links to political leaders | 39 |
| Logo of organization is prominent | 95 |
| Conservation of Visitors (3 items, $M = 62.7$, $S = 27.7$, alpha = .11) | |
| Important info available on 1st page | 41 |
| Short loading time (less than 4 seconds) | 87 |
| Posting of last updated time and date | 54 |
| Return Visits (9 items, $M = 44.2$, $S = 16.2$, alpha = .59) | |
| Explicit statement invites user to return | 16 |
| News forums (regularly scheduled) | 21 |
| FAQ's or Q&A's | 28 |
| Bookmark Now | 1 |
| Links to other Web sites | 73 |
| Calendar of events | 76 |
| Downloadable information | 33 |
| Things that can be requested by mail/e-mail | 96 |
| Posting news stories within last 30 days | 54 |
| Dialogic Loop (4 items, $M = 47.5$, $S = 26.5$, alpha = .66) | |
| Opportunity for user-response | 94 |
| Opportunity to vote on issues | 44 |
| Survey to voice opinion on issues | 46 |
| Offers regular information through e-mail | 6 |

Scores for the dialogic principle indices were computed by dividing the number of observed “yes” responses on the items comprising the index by the number of total items in the index and treating the result as a percentage. Table 1 indicates for each index the number of items comprising it, the mean and standard deviation of the calculated index scores for the 100 organizations, and a reliability measure indicating the extent to which the items in the index tended to co-vary.

There was wide variance in the presence of the characteristics of dialogue with a range of 6% to 94%, $M = 47.5\%$. The principle indices for ease of interface (67%) and usefulness of information to volunteer publics (81.4%) scored the highest. The principle indices for return visits (44.2%), dialogic loop (47.5%), and usefulness of information to media publics

(47.5%) scored the lowest. In other words, more sites tended to have features facilitating ease of interface and information utility for volunteers, than tended to have features relating to encouraging return visits or dialogic loops and information utility for media professionals.

As indices, the six composite variables summarized in Table 1 reflect the concatenation of multiple concepts within a single construct rather than the isolation of a singular concept via multiple items, as in a scale. The reliability scores are thus provided as indicators of the multiplexity of each dialogic feature rather than as pointers toward measurement validity, which is better assessed by intercoder reliability. An index with lower reliability is more limited than one with higher reliability in its ability to detect relationships among conceptual variables of interest to this study. Low reliability detracts from the construct validity of an index and the extremely low reliability of the “Conservation of Visitors” index suggests that results involving this variable should be interpreted cautiously.

RQ2 asked which publics were targeted by the activist Web sites. Volunteer and media publics were identified as the two most common targets of Web site communication. Given that these two groups have different informational needs, the principle “usefulness of information” was operationalized as two categories: usefulness of information for media publics and usefulness of information for volunteer publics. Indices were created for media publics and volunteer publics.

H1 posited that activist Web sites would be more useful to volunteer publics than media publics. Because of the different needs of volunteer and media publics, the principle of “usefulness of information” was operationalized as two categories: usefulness of information for media publics and usefulness of information for volunteer publics. Indices were created for media publics and volunteer publics.

To answer RQ2, several items related to information relevant to each public (media/volunteer) were coded (see Table 1). Sixty percentage (60%) of the sites examined posted news releases and 81% identified their membership base. The mean media-public utility index was 47.5% while the mean volunteer-public utility index was 81.4%. It thus appears that while these sites target both publics, most lean more toward meeting the information needs of members and potential members rather than the media. Surprisingly, only 39% of these sites offered visitors links to political leaders, while 99% clearly noted their organization’s stance on policy, or political, issues.

H1 posited that activist Web sites will be more useful to volunteer publics than to media publics. The usefulness of the information on these Web sites ($n = 100$) to media publics ($M = 47.5$, $S = 18.1$) was lower than its usefulness to volunteer publics ($M = 81.4$, $S = 17.8$), $t(99) = 15.9$, $p < .0005$. Sufficient evidence exists to allow rejection of the null hypothesis. We conclude that activist Web sites do tend to target volunteer publics rather than media publics by a significant margin—supporting H1.

5.3. Dialogic capacity

RQ3 asked how effectively activist Web sites employed dialogic principles. As Table 1 indicates, 47.5% of the activist organizations visited employed dialogic principles. To allow the employment of dialogic principles to be correlated with a measure of organizational communication behavior, a follow-up question (number 32) was asked of each organization

Table 2
Differences between responsive and non-responsive membership organizations

| Index | Responsiveness | | | | Difference Test | |
|----------------------|------------------------|------|----------------------------|------|-----------------|--------|
| | Responsive (n = 36) | | Non-Responsive (n = 64) | | | |
| | M | S | M | S | df | t |
| Ease of interface | 68.1 | 18.5 | 66.4 | 22.8 | 98 | .4 |
| Media utility | 51.4 | 19.7 | 45.3 | 16.9 | 98 | 1.6 |
| Volunteer utility | 87.2 | 15.2 | 78.1 | 18.4 | 98 | 2.5* |
| Visitor conservation | 75.0 | 25.7 | 55.7 | 26.6 | 98 | 3.5** |
| Dialogic loop | 47.2 | 30.3 | 47.6 | 24.3 | 98 | -.1 |
| Return visiting | 49.1 | 16.0 | 41.5 | 15.7 | 98 | 2.3*** |

* $p < .01$ for a one-tailed test.

** $p < .001$ for a one-tailed test.

*** $p < .05$ for a one-tailed test.

to see which actually responded to an e-mail request for more information. An actual dialogic response creates a more accurate measure of an organization's dialogic potential than simply whether visitors can "respond," or "express an opinion." The message was as follows:

I am interested in environmental organizations and I recently found your Web site at envirolink.org. Could someone please briefly answer the two following questions for me? (1) What does your organization consider to be the biggest threat to the environment in the next decade? And (2), what can the common citizen do to help the environment?

This message was sent to the appropriate e-mail address listed on each organization's Web site. In the cases where there was more than one e-mail contact, the message was sent to the "for more information" e-mail address. Each organization was coded as "responsive" if it returned a response to the researcher's e-mail message within two weeks of the original message being sent. Otherwise, the organization was coded as "nonresponsive."

H2 posited that organizations that respond to requests for information will be more dialogic than organizations that do not respond. Differences between responsive and non-responsive organizations exist in terms of their Web-based dialogic communication index scores. Table 2 summarizes these differences. The hypothesis is supported; the nature and extent of this support is discussed below.

Of the 100 environmental membership organizations in the sample, 36 responded to an e-mail request for additional information while 64 did not. As Table 2 indicates, for each of the six indices except dialogic loop, responsive organizations scored higher than did non-responsive organizations. For dialogic loop scores, the differences between the two categories of responsiveness was minimal. The differences for volunteer utility, visitor conservation, and return visiting however, were significant as indicated. The largest difference was in visitor conservation, followed by volunteer utility and then return visiting.

Additionally, discriminant analysis was used to determine if the dialogic communication indices could be used to "retrodict" responsiveness for the 100 organizations [50]. In a manner like that of the more commonly employed linear regression, discriminant analysis attempts to fit continuous independent variables into an algebraic equation that will produce

Table 3

Standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients for the retrodiction of responsiveness by dialogic communication indices

| Index | Coefficient |
|----------------------|-------------|
| Ease of interface | -.2 |
| Media utility | .3 |
| Volunteer utility | .6 |
| Visitor conservation | .7 |
| Dialogic loop | -.4 |
| Return visiting | .1 |

the value of a dependent variable for each case. Whereas in regression analysis, the predicted dependent variable is also measured along a continuous scale, discriminant analysis attempts to produce a categorical or grouping value for each case. In other words, the discriminant analysis attempts to predict group membership based on each case's scores on some variables. The output of the procedure consists of coefficients for the predictor variables entered into the equation; these coefficients indicate the relative strength and the direction of the relationship between each predictor variable and the dependent variable.

A discriminant analysis procedure using all six indices identified one function explaining 100% of the variance, Wilks' lambda = 0.8, $p < .005$. The discriminant function correctly classifies 69 of the 100 cases. Of the 36 responsive organizations, it categorized 17 (53%) cases correctly and 19 (47%) incorrectly. Of the 64 nonresponsive organizations, it categorized 52 (81%) correctly and 12 (19%) incorrectly. Responsiveness is thus somewhat idiosyncratic—it is harder to predict than nonresponsiveness.

Table 3 indicates the standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients; these coefficients indicate (a) how much weight each dialogic communication index has on responsiveness, and (b) whether higher values on an index contribute to an organization being classed as responsive (if the coefficient is positive) or nonresponsive (if it is negative). In other words, a negative coefficient associated with an index indicates that when an organization's value on that index increases, it is less likely to be responsive. A positive coefficient indicates that a higher value on that index represents a higher likelihood of being responsive. Note that these coefficients agree with the difference tests displayed in Table 2, in that they assign visitor conservation and utility to volunteers the greatest (positive) weight on responsiveness. The low negative coefficients for ease of interface and dialogic loop are ambiguous and somewhat counterintuitive, as they suggest that organizations with well-designed Web pages incorporating principles of symmetry and interactivity will be less likely than other sorts of organizations to respond to an e-mail requesting additional information. The evidence presented here should be interpreted cautiously, in light of the small, nonsignificant differences between responsive and nonresponsive organization sites in terms of ease of interface and dialogic loop. A conservative interpretation of these results suggests that responsive organizations produce Web sites that are (a) designed to be useful to members of volunteer publics, and (b) intended to retain visitors at the site.

H3 posited that institutes, research centers, and foundations will be more dialogic than will other types of activist organizations. Given the institutionalized and professional structure of

Table 4
Differences between interest-group and foundation-type organizations in dialogic communication

| Index | Interest Group | | Foundation | | Test of Difference | |
|----------------------|----------------|------|------------|------|--------------------|-------|
| | M | S | M | S | df | t |
| Ease of interface | 66.0 | 22.7 | 69.6 | 17.2 | 64.9 | .9 |
| Media utility | 48.6 | 17.6 | 44.6 | 19.3 | 98 | -1.0 |
| Volunteer utility | 83.3 | 15.7 | 76.4 | 21.2 | 98 | -1.8 |
| Visitor conservation | 62.5 | 26.2 | 63.1 | 31.9 | 98 | .1 |
| Dialogic loop | 48.6 | 26.2 | 44.6 | 27.5 | 98 | -.7 |
| Return visiting | 46.3 | 16.0 | 38.9 | 15.6 | 98 | -2.1* |

* $p < .05$ for a two-tailed test.

environmental institutes, research centers, and foundations, H3 posited that these types of organizations will be more dialogic than the membership organizations. The null hypothesis for H3 cannot be rejected given the evidence available here. Among the environmental membership organizations, little difference seemed to exist between interest group and foundation-type organizations in terms of the dialogic communication indices. However, as Table 4 indicates, foundation-type organizations had slightly higher (albeit nonsignificant) index scores for ease of interface and visitor conservation while interest group organizations were more highly rated on media utility, volunteer utility, dialogic loop, and return visiting—the last significantly, $t(98) = -2.1$, $p < .05$.

Note that the direction of the difference is the opposite of the one predicted. This suggests that the theoretical premise leading to the prediction should be revised. It may be that interest group organizations are more likely to offer useful content while foundation-type organizations are more likely to produce Web sites that are well designed. In light of this revision, a one-tailed post hoc hypothesis to the effect that “interest group Web sites will have higher utility for volunteer publics than will foundation-type Web sites” is supported, $t(98) = -1.8$, $p < .05$.

6. Discussion

The data suggest that activist organization Web sites are not fully employing the dialogic capacity of the Internet as expected. The Web sites do meet some of the prerequisites of dialogue in that they are easy to use, contain useful information, and provide reasons for visitors to remain on the site. However, the relationship-building capacity of encouraging visitors to return and allowing for visitor interaction are both lacking. Two clusters emerged from the data analysis: a *technical and design cluster* including “ease of use,” “usefulness of information,” and “conservation of visitors,” and a *dialogic cluster*, incorporating opportunities for a “dialogic loop” and “generating return visits.” These two clusters of principles provide insight into the challenges of fostering dialogue through the Internet.

6.1. Technical and design proficiencies

Activist organizations *have* embraced the *technical* side of organization–public “relationship” building. Activist Web sites are designed to be easy to use and will be most effective during the early stages of relationship building with publics. Most sites (87%) have a low reliance on graphics and consequently load quickly (87% in less than 4 seconds), and most sites have clear links to other areas of their sites (99%). However, less than half of the sites examined have site maps (38%) or search engines (44%). This finding is consistent with Esrock and Leichty who reported that 48% of the corporate Web sites they visited contained site maps or indexes and 47% of the corporate sites had search engines [51]. While Fortune 500 organizations and activist organizations have very different goals, their Web site’s design strengths and weaknesses appear very similar.

Activist sites also incorporate useful information and attempt to conserve visitors. Kent and Taylor suggested that sites should “target a variety of users,” not just “customers” or “the media” [52]. A majority of the Web sites examined do this with combined index scores on “usefulness of information” (media and volunteer publics) of 64.5% and a score of 60.7% on “conservation of visitors.” Where the activist Web sites seem to fail in regard to conserving visitors, however, is in “providing important information on the first page” (41%). Indeed, many Web sites evaluated did not include contact information (or an indication of where such information might be located) on their Web site’s first page. Motivated visitors could obtain contact information only circuitously—almost all sites had information about how to become affiliated (91%) and most had information about how to contribute money (82%). Activist organizations, however, need to do more to serve a variety of publics (especially the media) and to provide more in the way of content for specific visitors.

The unstated assumption behind any Web site is that the site host has something of value—a product, information, or ideology—to share with visitors. Over 73% of the sites visited contained links to other Web sites. These linkages are to other local, regional, national and international organizations. This points to a major difference between profit-seeking Web sites and activist Web sites. Stickiness is a major design factor for corporate sites especially if they are sales oriented. However, activists gain prestige and credibility when they link to other like-minded organizations. Courtesy links to other environmentalist organization sites show the cooperative nature of these organizations and show visitors that the movement is larger than any single organization.

The data suggest that these activist sites are best designed to meet the needs of volunteer publics. However, they are missing important opportunities to serve their policy goals. One missed opportunity is in leveraging member action. Only 39% of the sites tell visitors how to contact political leaders—the individuals who have the “potential” to accomplish the goals the organization seeks. Clearly there is a gap between “informing” publics and “mobilizing” publics. There are also many missed opportunities to communicate with the media. Middleberg and Ross noted that as of 1998, almost all (95%) journalists use of the Web for information gathering compared with only 63% in 1997 [53]. Although not including graphics or sound-bites on Web sites might seem trivial, the print and broadcast media thrive on images and sound. Similarly, for a print journalist to consider using Web content to supplement a news story requires that there be content—beyond news releases and canned

policy statements. Again, only 28% of activist Web sites contain FAQs/Q&As, only 21% offer regularly scheduled news forums, only 16% even encouraged visitors to return, and only one site in one hundred (1%) reminded visitors to “bookmark this site now.” Based on the limited information available for media publics, there appears to be little reason for media representatives to return to these Web sites.

Technical and design proficiencies provide the necessary foundation for dialogic communication because they provide visitors with clear and easy Web site navigation and content information. However, technical and design features are merely the first step of dialogic sites and alone cannot foster true dialogue between organizations and their publics. The more important Web site features are the dialogic principles of “generation of return visits” and the “dialogic loop,” which are necessary for genuine dialogic communication to emerge.

6.2. Dialogic relationship-building

The dialogic capacity of “generation of return visits” and “conservation of visitors” can be equated with the interpersonal relationship maintenance stage. Repetitive interactions and dialogue form the basis of any successful/ongoing relationship. This “relational maintenance” cluster offers Web site visitors reasons why they might remain engaged in dialogue and encourages visitors to return for further relationship development. It is in dialogic communication that trust and commitment emerge.

Ironically, the dialogic cluster of principles included some of the lowest scores. Although 94% of the organizations surveyed provided places for users to “respond,” very few were interested in whether visitors agreed with the activist organization’s position (16%) or how visitors felt about issues (44%). Over 76% of the organizations visited included “calendars of events,” but only slightly more than half (54%) of the activist organizations evaluated had updated their information within 30 days of the visit. There is very little reason for anyone—a member, volunteer, interested visitor, or media representative—to return to an information source that has not been updated.

“Dialogic loops” and feedback or “generating return visits” are necessary if publics are to develop long-term, satisfying (dialogic) relationships with organizations. In other words, organizations need to offer reasons for publics to return to sites if the organization hopes to engage publics in dialogue. The very low mean index of 44.2% on generating “return visits” suggests that activist organizations probably do not understand the importance of “human interaction” and “acknowledgment” to creating a dedicated and loyal base of support. Individuals and publics need to be “acknowledged” if dialogic, mutually beneficial, relationships are to be created.

The lack of dialogic capacity may be a function of who designs an organization’s Web site. In many organizations, the individuals who design and maintain Web sites are Web designers with vast expertise on the technical side of the computer–human interface but with little communication training. As Table 4 suggests, organizations that do score high on dialogic loop are less likely to respond to direct requests for information or clarification. That is, the more dialogic an organization “looks,” the less likely it is to respond to attempts by the public to create dialogue with the organization. Such a finding seems counter intuitive but at least two explanations exist.

First, as Kent and Taylor explain, many organizations rely on what might be termed “presence over content” whereby fancy page layouts and sophisticated graphics take the place of actual content [54]. This explanation becomes all the more plausible when coupled with the finding that “ease of interface” (which receives one of the highest index scores) is also inversely correlated with an organization’s likelihood to respond to requests from visitors for information (see Table 3).

A second possible explanation can be explained by aspects of the threat-rigidity hypothesis [55]. At the most basic level, threat-rigidity means that individuals and organizations tend to behave rigidly in uncertain situations. The threat rigidity hypothesis posits that as organizations become more sophisticated or bureaucratized they respond less quickly—and less effectively—to external cues from their environment. The threat rigidity hypothesis explains both of the counter intuitive scores on “ease of interface” and “dialogic loop” (Table 4). Indeed, most organizations did not respond to e-mail requests for more information. The results from Table 4 suggest that the size, or complexity, of the organization is one of the features working against Web-based dialogue. Formal organizations appear less likely to respond to input from their environment.

7. Conclusion

Dialogue has increasingly been described as one of the most useful frameworks for conceptualizing the organization–public relationship [56]; and the Web has increasingly been described as one of the essential tools for activist and nonprofit organizations [57]. In merging both of these areas this study has provided insight into the use of the Web for dialogic purposes. However, this study also highlights certain deficiencies inherent in “measuring” Webbed dialogue. That is, measurements of dialogic “procedure” will only yield insight into the “potential” for dialogue. To access whether “genuine dialogue” is taking place will require research methods whereby individuals actually attempt to “communicate” with organizations. The results advanced in this article suggest that many Webbed organizations—perhaps most—are currently far from dialogic.

Additionally, although this article was not intended as a comparative follow-up to Esrock and Leichty’s [58] article on “corporate Web pages,” or Coombs’ [59] article on “activist Web sites,” it does lend support to both studies. The data support Coombs’ contention that activist Web sites can serve to “equalize” the power gap between powerful organizations and powerless individuals. At the most basic level, the presence of activist organizations on the Internet gives them equality in status to corporations. The high level of interconnectedness between activist organizations shows the breadth and depth of the environmental activist movement. The research conducted here also suggests that from a dialogic (or relationship building) standpoint, activist organizations and corporations are drawing on similar features in the development of their Web sites. Activist organizations have different communication constraints and needs but their Web sites appear to be following the same design format as corporate sites. Again, this may be an issue of the people who design the site rather than an issue of what the site seeks to accomplish.

Future studies that incorporate more discriminating means of measuring dialogue are

necessary, as are comparative studies that examine the content of messages contained on organizational Web pages. A study comparing activist and corporate Web sites would likely highlight interesting and important similarities as well as differences. Finally, an analysis of the actual feedback that was provided to visitor's questions to activist Web sites would be instructive to further understand the usefulness of the dialogic loop.

Constructing a model of dialogic public relations and theorizing about the World Wide Web in a public relations context are two of the most important areas for researchers to explore. The Web offers something unique in mediated organization–public communication: an unobstructed path between publics and organizations. The Web also allows both small and large organizations access to many of the tools of modern public relations. Our understanding of how to use the Web dialogically will influence whether it continues to exist primarily as a marketing tool or if it grows into a tool for relationship building.

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