



Activist practitioner perspectives of website public relations: Why aren't activist websites fulfilling the dialogic promise?

Erich J. Sommerfeldt^a, Michael L. Kent^b, Maureen Taylor^{b,*}

^a University of Maryland, United States

^b University of Oklahoma, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 May 2011
Received in revised form
11 December 2011
Accepted 6 January 2012

Keywords:

Activism
Dialogue
Issues management
Public relations
Websites
Social media

ABSTRACT

Kent and Taylor proposed five dialogic principles for mediated public relations in 1998 and numerous studies of activist groups, corporations, and educational institutions have shown that most websites fail to meet their dialogic potential. This study explores some of the reasons why activist organizations do not integrate dialogic features into their websites. Thirteen activist public relations practitioners were interviewed to determine their perceptions of websites as tools for information dissemination and resource mobilization. Three consistent themes emerged from the interviews: (1) website communication is perceived to be most effective when tied to issue-specific events and issue currency, (2) websites cater to existing and highly involved publics, and (3) websites are viewed as passive communication tools that must be supplemented with traditional public relations practices.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, an emerging body of public relations research has attempted to establish the role of website communication in building relationships with publics (i.e. Callison & Seltzer, 2010; Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Hong, Yang, & Rim, 2010; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Kim, Nam, & Kang, 2010; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Rennie & Mackey, 2002; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Yang & Taylor, 2010). Kent and Taylor (1998) argued that strategically designed and well-managed websites may provide organizations with opportunities to engage in dialogic communication. Kent and Taylor subsequently outlined a set of five dialogic principles to help guide practitioners in facilitating organization–public relationships via the Internet. However, despite the exponential growth of Internet and web-based technology in recent years, the decade-long body of research that has studied these principles in a variety of contexts overwhelmingly shows that websites are poorly used dialogic tools (cf., McAllister-Spooner, 2009).

McAllister-Spooner (2009) identified four new areas to consider exploring in order to expand dialogic communication in public relations: (1) media choice and effectiveness, (2) internal organizational processes that may limit website design, (3) user preferences and expectations, and (4) ways to refine and standardize the measures of dialogic principles (pp. 321–322).

McAllister-Spooner's suggestions focus on understanding the people involved in relationships (organizational processes and user preferences) and less on the actual design and content of websites. The relational focus is a valuable research direction for studies of websites, given that much of the research about public relations dialogue has been based on content analyses of websites. Abundant content analyses of organizational websites continue to show that most websites are not very dialogic. However, little is known about the practitioners who oversee websites—even less is known about activist

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Erich.sommerfeldt@gmail.com (E.J. Sommerfeldt), Mkent@ou.edu (M.L. Kent), Mtaylor@ou.edu (M. Taylor).

practitioners and their websites. Content analysis has been valuable for understanding the manifest content of websites but it has done little to help us understand the people tasked with developing, maintaining, and innovating their websites. In keeping with McAllister-Spooner's call to expand our understanding of dialogue by broadening our scope of research, this paper addresses some of the gaps in our understanding of activist websites and activist communication. The article explores practitioners' orientation to publics and how these perceptions may influence the use of websites as dialogic communication tools.

The article begins with a discussion of activist groups and their use of websites. We argue that most of the dialogic literature of website relationship building has focused on the extent to which websites serve as a means of disseminating information and attracting resources. Thus, the second section of the paper reports the results of a study that qualitatively examined the perceptions of activist practitioners' views of the effectiveness of their websites in terms of their ability to provide information, obtain resources, and build relationships with publics. As the title of this article suggests, we intend to explain why the dialogic promise has not been fulfilled by going beyond content analysis of websites and actually talking to activist communication practitioners to see how they perceive websites as public relations tools. The third section of the article discusses the implications of activists' understanding of webbed communication and concludes with some suggestions for future research.

2. Internet technology helps activist organizations

Public relations scholarship has historically studied corporations, agencies, and non-profit organizations (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). Taylor et al. (2001) and Smith and Ferguson (2001) were among first to explore the unique public relations needs of activist groups and to consider activists as public relations practitioners. In order to remain viable, activist groups, mostly operating on small budgets, struggle to obtain media coverage and acquire support from key publics.

From the late 1990s onward, public relations scholarship has increasingly focused on the ways that activist groups could use the Internet (Coombs, 1998; Kent et al., 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006; Roper, 2002; Taylor & Sen Das, 2010; Taylor et al., 2001; Wakefield, 2008; Yang & Taylor, 2010). Activist groups use public relations to communicate positions on issues, and since the widespread adoption of the Internet, scholars have touted websites as a boon for activist group communication (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 1998). Taylor et al. (2001) argued that websites are an important resource for activist groups, particularly for smaller organizations with limited resources. Taylor et al. (2001) and Kent et al. (2003) also positioned websites as one of the primary resources that activist organizations would be expected to use to communicate with and respond to their publics.

In a similar vein, much of the dialogic research of activist websites and of activists in general has positioned Internet technology as providing two essential communication paths for activists: (1) as an ethical and practical means for providing information to publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent et al., 2003; McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009), and (2) as a means for mobilizing the resources necessary to become successful (Coombs, 1998; Kent et al., 2003; Taylor & Sen Das, 2010).

2.1. Information dissemination

Kent and Taylor (1998) argued that activist group websites "are a primary means for communicating with and responding to publics" (p. 267). As activist groups are issue-oriented and "resource/membership-dependent" (Kent et al., 2003, p. 65), providing information to publics is a key task of activist group communication practitioners. Kent and Taylor (1998) also noted "making information available to publics is the first step in developing relationships with them" (p. 328). Roper (2002) studied the online communication strategies of activist groups and found that they use websites to provide information to their constituents and, in so doing, help to further organize, network, and create strategies for action.

While research has found that some activist groups engage in online media relations with news releases and press kits (Reber & Kim, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2011; Taylor & Sen Das, 2010; Taylor et al., 2001), the extent to which such information subsidies are effective in attracting the attention of the media is unknown. Callison (2003) and Hachigian and Hallahan (2003) demonstrated that growing numbers of journalists are using the Internet as a tool to find information that supplements news stories. But this has been true for more than a decade.

While research has examined the presentation, content and capacity of activist websites in terms of dialogic communication via information provision, no studies have addressed how activists themselves actually see online technologies as a tool for information dissemination or relationship building. To address this gap in the research, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: How do activist practitioners view websites as tools for disseminating information?

In addition to disseminating information, activist organizations must also mobilize resources.

2.2. Resource mobilization

Resources can be broadly defined as anything an organization needs to survive (Jenkins, 1983). Freeman (1979) suggested that activist groups require tangible resources. Such assets can include money, facilities, and a means to publicize

the group and its activities. Waters (2008) noted that Internet donations are becoming a progressively more mainstream public relations practice, and Kang and Norton (2004) pointed out that Internet technologies are increasingly being used to communicate with donors.

Activist groups mobilize resources from their publics to become and remain successful (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Additionally, activist groups “must maintain membership, thrive in what might be described as a competitive marketplace of ideas and issues, and adjust to changes in their environment” (Smith & Ferguson, 2001, p. 295). Activist groups thus use public relations to gain resources in order to achieve their missions, as well as to keep the organization viable (Kent et al., 2003).

While websites can be used to disseminate information quickly and efficiently to geographically dispersed publics, they also help activists solicit support necessary to facilitate collective action. Kent et al. (2003) suggested that for membership-based activist groups, the effectiveness of resource mobilization efforts is largely dependent on the group fulfilling the information needs of stakeholders (insiders, people who have a stake or interest in an organization) and providing information to the media. In turn, Kent et al. suggested that activist groups should design websites that help to fulfill the needs of stakeholders.

Despite activists' need for resources, few researchers have specifically examined how activists mobilize resources online (Hara & Estrada, 2005; Sommerfeldt, 2011; Taylor & Sen Das, 2010). Activists have traditionally been at the forefront of utilizing new technologies for the mobilization of both money and people (Oliver & Marwell, 1992), yet no research has determined how activists *themselves* perceive websites as a tool to gain the resources necessary to ensure organizational survival and efficacy. A second research question was posed to answer this question:

RQ2: How do activist practitioners view websites as tools to mobilize resources?

With extant literature on activist public relations behavior and the needs of activist groups in mind, this study analyzed online activist information dissemination and resource mobilization through the lens of the activist public relations practitioners.

3. Method of the study

Early research about the public relations practices of activism has been based on content analyses of activist websites. Content analysis methodology has allowed public relations scholars to identify evidence of dialogic features. However, this method does not ascertain whether members of the organizations studied actually understand dialogue. This study sought to understand the knowledge and perceptions of activist public relations practitioners that influence the design and content of their websites for information dissemination and resource mobilization. This study also helps to provide an answer to the question posed by some public relations scholars about why activist websites are not fulfilling the dialogic promise.

A qualitative method, preferable in exploratory research where the purpose is to gain an understanding of a process or phenomena, was chosen for this study (White & Raman, 1999, pp. 407–408). Accordingly, in-depth respondent interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) were used to gather data on the perceptions and practices of activist public relations practitioners.

3.1. Interviewees

Interviews were conducted with activist leaders who were responsible for the public relations activities of their organization. The research team used several methods to identify and recruit interviewees including asking for volunteers that had participated in a larger survey research project, and a snowball or network method where interviewees were asked to identify other activist public relations practitioners who might be willing to be interviewed—a practice common to qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Research suggests that data saturation is generally reached somewhere between 8 and 22 interviews (McCracken, 1993). This study conducted 13 interviews over a period of four months, yielding enough data to identify excessive variability and unique experiences among the interviewees.

All but three interviewees were full-time, paid employees of the activist organization. All of the interviewees claimed to practice public relations or communication-related activities for the organization, including the production of content for or management of their websites. Six interviewees were male and seven were female. All of the interviewees were Caucasian. All but one had obtained undergraduate degree. Two held graduate degrees. The age of the interviewees ranged from 24 to 60 years. Job titles of the interviewees included: director of communications, political director, Web and communications coordinator, leadership director, managing director, and policy director.

All interviewees worked or volunteered for self-described activist or advocacy organizations. Three interviewees were located in Washington, DC and advocated for human rights or environmental issues on a national or international scale. Seven interviewees were associated with GLBT-rights organizations located in Washington, DC, Michigan, California, New York, and Iowa. The GLBT groups in Michigan, Iowa, and California were focused on state-level issues, while the remaining GLBT organizations addressed national issues. The remaining three interviewees were associated with a grassroots, progressive political organization in Minnesota (state level issues), a water-rights activist group in Oklahoma (state level issue), and a grassroots peace organization in Texas (national level issue).

Snowball samples can result in interviewees with similar characteristics. Although the sample is somewhat skewed toward one type of activist cause (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender—GLBT), the authors are aware of no studies that suggest that members of activist groups behave differently in any sort of systematic fashion. Kent et al. (2003) suggested that “the mission and dependence on stakeholder publics for achieving organizational goals can explain the use of the WWW by most activist organizations”—not the type of public themselves. Further, Taylor et al. (2001) found that activist organizations are often more focused on member needs than on the media; although large activist organizations tend to be more media-focused simply because they have more resources. Thus, the fact that a number of the organizations studied shared similar missions should have little effect on the usefulness of the results.

3.2. Procedures

Interviewees gave verbal consent. Interviews were conducted by telephone and recorded. Given the difficulty of traveling across the country to meet with each activist, the telephone was selected and the most information-rich and reliable medium given that video chat features like Skype are notoriously unreliable. Extensive notes were also taken during the interviews. Interviews lasted 27–63 min, with an average of 38 min. The research instrument used for the interviews was a semi-structured topics guide developed to determine activists' perceptions of the value and effectiveness of websites in disseminating information and mobilizing resources (interview guide available upon request).

3.3. Interview analysis

After all interviews were completed, the analysis of data began with verbatim transcription. Transcripts were examined for common themes and experiences, key words and topical relevance.

The analysis was conducted in three parts, guided by Strauss and Corbin's (1990) qualitative data analysis procedures. First, data were broken down into conceptual units by looking for observations, incidents, ideas, or events in the text deemed interesting by the researchers. Second, units were organized and subdivided until cohesive, distinct, categories of information emerged. Finally, categories were given conceptual names that described the subcategories and groups included within the category. Similar conceptual events and incidents were grouped together to form thematically representative categories and items of interest. The emergent themes were used to address the research questions. Post-analysis interviewee checks were also solicited to allow respondents to comment on or clarify interview responses.

4. Results

The research questions inquired how interviewees viewed websites as vehicles for information dissemination and resource mobilization. They also were asked to discuss the means by which websites assisted communication with publics, if at all, and the specific resource mobilization strategies that they have used online. In addition, interviewees were asked to consider if they believed websites to be useful relationship building tools for activist organizations.

Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis. First, activist communication practitioners considered their websites as secondary communications tools that supplement traditional public relations practices: *websites as passive communication*. A second theme explains how online information and resource mobilization efforts are mainly targeted at highly involved publics (those people who contribute to causes and monitor news stories and organizational messages) rather than generic audiences: *websites cater to existing publics*. A third theme that emerged suggests that activists believe the best way to use online communication for information dissemination and resource mobilization is to tie messages to specific issue campaigns: *effective web communication is issue-related*. Each theme and supporting quotes from the interviewees are discussed below.

4.1. Theme one: websites as passive communication

Interviewees believed that websites are primarily a passive form of organizational communication that does not generate interest or raise awareness on their own. The tendency to view websites as passive communication tools is illustrated in the following comment from an interviewee associated with the political group in Minnesota: “Historically, I don't think we have really been getting much new traffic on our website or new awareness or support from the website itself. It hasn't really been driving anything.” The perception of websites as passive is consistent with much of the early Internet research which talked about the web as being a pull versus push technology.

Websites were described as a passive form of communication via three interrelated subthemes: (1) websites require promotion before they can provide information, (2) websites are not an effective means of gaining media attention, and (3) websites provide merely an archival and symbolic function for the organization.

4.2. Websites require promotion

There was wide consensus that in order for websites to become valuable secondary-level tools for information dissemination or resource mobilization, website communication must be preceded by or used in conjunction with more traditional

and proactive communication behaviors that promote the website and the efforts of the organization. As an interviewee from a GLBT group in Michigan explained:

You've got to have someone saying to the public: Did you see our awesome new website? Did you see our cool new feature? And do you have any questions? Or, did you know. . .? And then give them the facts you want them to hear.

The interviewee from Minnesota expressed a similar sentiment:

Just having the website there, that's like having a store and not doing anything to drive traffic to your store . . . I think we spend a lot more of our time trying to provide exposure and awareness about it, instead of thinking "Oh, we have a website and it's out there doing stuff for us." I don't believe that I've got a website and that's all I have to do.

The capacity for websites to generate interest and involvement on their own was not a concept endorsed by most of the interviewees. As the interviewee from a grassroots, peace organization in Texas commented: "I don't think websites are the most effective vehicle for getting the word out about anything."

4.3. *Media attention*

Websites were also not viewed by interviewees as particularly effective ways to gain media attention and thereby disseminate information about the group to broader publics. Interviewees were largely skeptical of the notion that journalists might be coming to their websites to gain information of their own accord—only two interviewees knew of instances when journalists had used the information placed on their websites.

In all cases, however, practitioners talked about efforts to attract journalists through more traditional means. A participant from an international child advocacy group stressed that traditional promotion techniques were far more effective at garnering media attention than websites, and said "I can't think of a single instance where we've gotten media attention for something that we didn't do a press release or a press conference for."

While all of the interviewees noted that websites are used to post news releases and other information that could theoretically be used by journalists, they tended to view media relations as a job requiring more than just Internet communication. Because interviewees believed that the media do actively seek out information from websites, posting any web content like news releases is usually followed by directing reporters to the same information. "Unless someone called a reporter and said 'here's what we're doing,' I don't think anyone would write a story about it." As an activist practitioner for a GLBT marriage-rights organization Washington, DC said, "The media assumes you will be giving them information directly, not waiting for them to stumble across information on your site." Interviewees widely attributed the lack of media attention gained through websites to the medium's inherent passivity.

The question, then, is why do activist organizations devote resources to something that is not an essential or primary communications tool? The answer may be that websites provide activist groups with an archive for information and a means to establish credibility.

4.4. *Websites' archival and symbolic functions*

Although all of the interviewees agreed that websites were a tool their organization would not be without, websites were largely believed to serve an archival or symbolic role—a place for information to reside that publics can be redirected to via other communication. Indeed, one participant described the website as "a mechanism for storing information and credibility." Websites were seen as serving as a repository for information that can be used by interested parties. As an interviewee from a New York City-based GLBT marriage organization noted, "I think they primarily serve as an archive of information in a way that Facebook and Twitter don't . . . I think primarily it's more a library than it is a relationship or communication tool."

Websites were commonly interpreted as placeholders for historical information. Little conscious effort to "build relationships" exists. Instead, activist practitioners see websites as one-way places for interested publics to learn more about issues and for the organization to establish a credible organizational persona.

4.5. *Theme two: websites cater to existing publics*

The literature about dialogic websites suggests that effective sites should include information for a variety of publics. When asked about whether they were targeting multiple publics, interviewees were unsure about how websites could be used to reach broader publics, achieve greater information dissemination, or attract more resources. Activist groups believed that websites served existing publics, and seemed not to use them to reach new publics or strengthen relationships with their publics. Interviewees suggested: (1) publics are directed to the website after a relationship has been established elsewhere, and (2) websites are geared toward highly involved publics (or people who already understand or are heavily involved with issues).

4.6. *A place to direct publics*

Activist practitioners agreed that their websites were a good place to send people once public attention had been gained or after the initiation of a relationship. Many believed that websites are not an effective tool to disseminate timely information. Interviewees noted that it was common for them to include the website as part of their message branding, or to support an activity. Many interviewees commented that they include their web address on all print materials, and encourage people to visit their website to become members or to make donations. One interviewee, described his website as a way to “funnel” people into getting more involved and providing the organization with contact information for potential members. Indeed, although websites serve as a hub to direct people to campaign and organizational information, the real purpose of such direction is often just to secure contact information. As the interviewee from Minnesota explained:

We do have signups on the website, but the primary driving tool for that is email, and then through email we send people to the website. I don't think that many people go to the website of their own accord and sign up for something. Yes, it's a vehicle, but I think it's disingenuous to say it's a primary vehicle for building relationships with volunteers.

Many interviewees just guessed about their website, unaware of whether they were actually useful communication tools. Interviewees could not state with any degree of certainty that their website was helping them reach broader audiences and thereby increasing support for their issues. No one mentioned web tracking software or having reviewed any analytic data. Involvement with publics by most of the activist groups interviewed is achieved primarily through traditional media relations tactics, rather than through web-based strategies.

4.7. *Websites for highly involved publics*

Activists generally agreed that relationships were not initiated online and that the usefulness of their website was to provide information to highly motivated publics. Websites were also seen as effective tools for resource mobilization among highly engaged publics. As an interviewee from the Oklahoma water-rights group explained:

I would say more of our donations have come in the form of those who have actively participated in events and other campaigns we have coordinated, versus people who come across the website, learn about what we do through the website, and then are compelled to support our work.

Interviewees said that the majority of their support, in terms of both donations and volunteerism, came from the personal relationships created through events and long-term involvement. No one knows whether significant support came from previously uninvolved individuals who happened upon website. Two interviewees noted that because of the ability to electronically transfer donations to accounts, websites were merely convenient places to send people to donate money.

4.8. *Theme three: effective web communication is issue-based*

Scholars have suggested that activist websites can help push issues on to the public agenda. However, only three of the interviewees (all associated with GLBT rights groups) believed their organizations' websites were central to the group's success or a driving force behind their interactions with publics.

The confidence in the ability of websites to successfully attract people, generate interest, and build relationships, was believed to lie more in the issue for which the group advocated than in the technology itself. Topics that comprised this theme included: (1) website traffic and success in disseminating information and gaining resources is tied to event and issue currency, and (2) the use of microsites (individual webpages, sometimes with their own domain name) as a means of attract attention for timely issues.

4.9. *Website success related to events and issue currency*

As suggested above, websites were not seen by activists as dynamic (“push”) tools, effective in information dissemination or resource mobilization. However, several interviewees suggested that efforts to use their websites were thought to be most successful when tied to timely, issue-specific communications of events, or having a newsworthy issue for which to advocate. In other words, the website was a support tool. As an interviewee who worked for a GLBT group in California noted:

You can plug into a certain audience of activists that are really engaged in a particular issue, more so than some other issues. It's really targeted towards the things that motivate them to action and the things that make them care, you are going to see a higher return rate, whether it's attendance, whether its money given, whether it's volunteer hours.

As mentioned, few interviewees claimed that their organization's website played an active communication role. However, several practitioners tied the success of their public awareness to the group's affiliation with the larger social issue for which they advocated.

In keeping with the purely strategic value ascribed to websites, several interviewees discussed the relationship between issue currency and web traffic, suggesting that the effectiveness of activist websites was inexorably tied to the issues for which they advocate. Success can be augmented by capitalizing on the currency of an issue, and by attempting to funnel

traffic to a website and tailor the site content to meet the information needs of publics and thereby gain resources from them. Again, websites were marketing or sales tools rather than public relations tools. Microsites were seen as a way for organizations to capitalize on the Internet.

4.10. *Microsites*

Five of the interviewees suggested that the creation and employment of microsites is an effective means for disseminating information and gaining resources (donations) for issues. Microsites are targeted webpages, sometimes with their own domain name, intended to supplement an organization's primary website (Hanekamp, 2007). Microsites are developed to focus on particular products, service, or issues. Several interviewees noted that their groups have had great success in reaching broader publics with information and gaining resources from them via the use of microsites.

Many interviewees believed that when an activist organization's main webpage is not generating a lot of media attention on its own, a microsite can be successful at attracting media attention. Interviewees tied the creation of microsites to mentions in specialty publications, online news sites, and to traditional media attention in general. One interviewee, whose national-level organization created a microsite for a local policy issue in Oklahoma during election season in 2010, mentioned that she believed the site's success at garnering media attention was tied to the interest local media showed in the site. This was valuable because the site was directed at influencing a particular politician to support a specific issue.

5. Discussion and implications for mediated dialogue

This study sought to determine how activists view their websites as tools for communication and relationship building with publics. By listening to the voices of the people who create and maintain the websites, we gain a better understanding of how to connect theory building with practice. If we step back from the interviewees' answers, we see two themes emerge: lack of awareness of the information dissemination dimension of websites and a belief that issue-driven sites are inherently valuable tools. Each will be discussed below.

5.1. *Activist websites are not considered information subsidies for journalists*

Although a number of media studies conducted over several years have shown that journalists do visit websites for informational purposes (cf., Callison, 2003; Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003; Middleberg & Ross, 2000), the results of this study suggest that activists are either not aware of the extensive use of the Internet by journalists, or fail to understand how their groups may attract media attention.

Journalists go where the story is. As one interviewee for this study pointed out, the Internet is a pull medium. People need to know something exists to go looking for it. That is the principle behind agenda setting theory and advertising: to make people aware of issues. The disconnect between theory and praxis in this case is significant. Because an activist organization has not been contacted by the media via their website does not mean that people are not interested in the content. Indeed, every big website started out as a small site. But that begs the question: a site that is not maintained, kept up to date, and filled with useful content—indeed, all messages that are produced by organizations ought to find a home on their website—will not be useful to publics. Many of the interviewees described sites that are little more than calendars of events or fund-raising storefronts. Organizations that do not provide rich and updated content to visitors on their websites cannot conclude that a site is not useful as an information dissemination or relationship building tool, any more than a store with empty shelves can complain about not having customers.

The capacity for the Internet and organizational websites to serve as information subsidies for journalists may need reexamination—at least for some activist organizations. However, the fact that the majority of interviewees noted that traditional media relations behaviors such as pitching, submitting news releases and holding news conferences (old-school relationship based public relations) were more useful, only supports what the research about journalists use of the Internet has said for more than a decade (Middleberg & Ross, 2000; Sommerfeldt, 2007). Journalists do not randomly cast about looking at content on websites that have nothing to say. A website that is devoid of content will not come up in online searches—the tool everyone from schoolchildren to professors use to find information of relevance on the Internet.

Websites are seen by activists as archives for news releases of current activities and organizational information that positively augments the knowledge of highly-involved and interested publics, not to provide subsidies to journalists. These are not mutually exclusive findings. Traditional public relations and media relations efforts are still required and used by all of the most well-organized activist organizations, corporations, marketers, and advertisers. Indeed, no advertising or public relations professional would advocate producing videos or other organizational content and simply placing it on a website. Videos are released to the media and video content sites like YouTube. Messages about important events are distributed via Twitter, blogs, Facebook, and other social media. But relationships are not built with Twitter. Dialogue requires the interaction of individuals, not mass mailings. Not every organization has to be concerned with building relationships with their key publics, however, activist organizations, as resource dependent organizations, should be more aware of the potential afforded by the web.

5.2. Website efficacy possibly tied to issue currency

Unlike for-profit organizations, whose existence depends on investments by stakeholders and consumption of products and services, activists rely wholly on the salience of their issue and generosity of donors to ensure continued viability. The success of activist websites in distributing information and gaining resources may also be dependent on the stage of the issue for which they advocate. When an issue is current (cf. Crable & Vibbert, 1985) an activist group's website will benefit from prevailing public interest and media attention. Interviewees whose organizations' issues were more salient believed their websites had more success in meeting the information needs of publics and processing resources. Same-sex marriage and civil unions are among the most salient issues of the day, which may explain why three of the GLBT groups, all of whom advocated for marriage rights, had a higher opinion of their website and its ability to gain attention and support. Conversely, those activist organizations whose issues were not as current displayed little confidence in the ability of their websites to attract media attention. In other words, the media need to be aware of issues and issues have to be salient before journalists go looking for information on issues. We see this phenomenon not as a tautology but as a causal relationship.

Groups without current issues need to expend additional energies in the form of "traditional" practice promoting their websites as hubs for information and valuable content. More importantly, they need to fill their sites with an abundance of content to increase the likelihood of interested individuals and publics landing on the site based on a web search. Currently, activist communication via websites is less about relationship building, and more about effective issues management, at least in the case of organizations promoting issues whose lifecycle is not at its apogee.

Issue-specific communications in the form of microsites, e-mails, and events appear more successful in disseminating knowledge about issues and organizations and are possibly more reflective of a particular issue's currency. Such sites are timely, updated more regularly, and are designed to provide publics with information deemed essential by activist groups.

5.3. Suggestions for future research

This study was not intended to be another web-based extension of Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles. A large body of literature has tested and refined these principles and, for the most part, determined that websites as a technology are not meeting their dialogic potential. As such, based on the data gathered in this study, the myth of the website as the key form of communication for activist groups may be over.

Clearly, websites alone are not seen as sufficient to bring journalists or interested publics to activist websites. But blaming the technology for what are essentially deficient new-technology communication skills on the part of activists is a mistake. Websites do not magically bring visitors to an organization any more than paying for an advertisement guarantees that anyone will see or watch it. Effective, dialogic websites still require content, strategic thinking, integration into existing and future campaigns, the guidance of a skilled communicator capable of understanding how to appeal to multiple publics, creation of a navigational interface that visitors will find compelling, and efforts to provide content that visitors want to see.

Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles were intended to provide suggestions for website "potential." Arguing more than a decade ago that the web can do a lot more than it does. As the authors noted:

But, for all of its public relations *potential*, the World Wide Web still remains underutilized by many organizations . . . (p. 322) convivial tools and social responsibility is another dialogic framework to understand the *potential* of the WWW (p. 324) . . . The Web has great *potential* as a dialogic communication medium (p. 331). (emphasis added)

The research here suggests that the potential still needs to be realized and activist organizations seem to need more training in how to develop compelling and useful web content.

That said, while many activist communication practitioners do not have the formal public relations training or the resources of their for-profit counterparts, studies of corporate websites have shown a similar deficiency in website content and potential for dialogue. The problem of developing a content-rich, highly dialogic website is universal—not limited to those who are not "real" public relations practitioners. Public relations scholars interested in Internet communication and activism should begin to focus attention on the other mechanisms that activists use to be successful, as well as examining how to make websites actual dialogic tools (if that is desired) and how to foster relationship building via the Web.

Areas for future research should include studies of how web metrics and analytics can make websites more useful to activist practitioners. Future studies should examine action alerts, microsites, social media, member lists, online newsletters, and other push tools. Such technologies are likely to be the primary means by which activist groups draw attention to their websites and engage the media on salient issues.

This study also raises the question: what constitutes a web-based relationship for an activist group? The interviewees felt that websites were not the best medium through which to maintain a relationship with broader publics. Even the most engaged of publics appear to only use the website to donate money and check the calendar of events. Indeed, many people consider themselves "highly involved" in an issue simply because they read about it and contribute to a cause. As one interviewee noted, her group was trying to move away from the "clicktivist" mentality of relationships—encouraging people to become more involved than simply signing an online petition or pressing a donate button, neither of which are, or should be considered, dialogic.

Researchers might also examine the characteristics of activist websites whose issues are at different stages in their lifecycles and compare their use of dialogic communication strategies. The assumption of research in the dialogic tradition

has been largely based on the proposition that relationships are positive, ethical, and desired by publics. The reality of day-to-day activism is that communication is often more focused on the pseudo-event and where the next dollar is coming from, rather than on nurturing the next generation of activists.

6. Conclusion

We have known for almost two decades that websites are not inherently a push medium. While public relations studies have repeatedly shown that websites have yet to emerge as effective relationship building tools, we also see that activists do not expect their sites to perform that function. The brunt of the work of relationship building is currently managed via other means, such as traditional communication and media relations. Researchers are currently attempting to explain the potential of social media to build relationships. Websites are thought of as information repositories rather than nascent organization–public relationship building mechanisms. The power of websites in public relations research has been on their “potential” rather than on their “actual” power.

But, as Cory Doctorow, a blogger for the website BoingBoing.net wrote recently,

So, let's go back to 1998. You're a new writer and you want to establish a permanent residency online. Which would be wiser: Having your own site at your own domain, or putting up a site at GeoCities? It's 2001, same drill: Which is wiser: Having your own domain, or creating a site on AOL servers? 2003: Your own domain, or a Friendster page? 2007: Your own domain, or a MySpace page? . . . And now it's 2011 and the choice is one's own domain or a page on Facebook. Guess which I think you should do. (2011, July 1)

Arguably, many communication professionals simply do not understand the history of online communication or they would understand that the potential of the Internet has just begun to be tapped. Historically speaking, the website is the longest-living Internet phenomenon, and it continues to exert influence.

The general question that guided this study inquired: Why aren't activist websites fulfilling the dialogic promise? The answer appears to be that the organizations included in this study do not view websites as a dialogic tool. If an organization does not consciously invest time and resources into building online relationships, none will flourish. As Irving Babbitt said, “Where there is no vision, the people perish. Where there is sham vision, they perish sooner.” The same is probably true for dialogue. Where there is no dialogue, relationships perish. Where there is sham dialogue, relationships perish sooner.

Unless activist organizations recognize the value in building relationships online, any effort to prove that they are using dialogue on their websites might be akin to a “snipe hunt.” Snipes don't exist. The field of public relations has been on its own snipe hunt trying to validate some of its most well-known theories. We feel that there is enough evidence to date to say that websites are not dialogic and they are not dialogic because practitioners do not see them as tools for dialogue. This disconnect between public relations researchers and practitioners is really where we must focus our future energies.

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