Social Media on Violent Ideological Group Websites

Completed Research Paper

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ABSTRACT
Recent research has shown dramatic benefits to incorporating social media in public facing websites. Using a perspective based on the duality of goals, we argue that social media, with emphasis on facilitating visitors’ unconstrained exchanges, may undermine the communicative purpose of an organization’s website and may not be desirable in some cases. We tested these ideas by examining the social media features on 105 websites that are supported by nationwide or international groups. Some of the websites are supported by ideological groups that have a strong interest in controlling their messages and clearly articulating their ideology to the public. A subset of the ideological groups also promoted or were affiliated with acts of violence in support of their ideology. As we predicted, we found that desire for control outweighed the benefits of social media, but only for the violent ideological groups. Nonviolent ideological groups and non-ideological groups were nearly identical.

Keywords
Social media, ideological groups, control, website, dual-purpose theory

INTRODUCTION
Over 75% of internet users report participating in some form of social media (Forrester Research 2008) and this level of participation has attracted the attention of businesses and organizations that want to reach these individuals. In a recent report, a large majority of small business owners (69%) said they used social media to communicate with customers and even more (78%) intended to increase resources to support social media outreach (Protalinski 2011). This enthusiasm about social media by organizations is not without research support. Recent research has shown that individuals who engage with companies through social media are more likely to have a higher number of visits to company online resources (e.g., websites); additionally those individuals who show close ties through social media are more likely to purchase products at a premium and are less sensitive to promotions (e.g., discounted merchandise) (Riskika et al. forthcoming).

With the rapid uptake of social media by organizations, we investigate the following research question: For an organization, is using social media always desirable or are there conditions under which other factors may outweigh the benefits of social media? In answering this question, we focus on the potential conflict between social media and tight control of the organization’s message. We argue that social media, with its emphasis on facilitating visitors’ unconstrained exchanges, may undermine the communicative purpose of an organization’s message. We suggest that this potential conflict between social media and control is especially salient where the message of the sponsoring organization or group is highly controversial and will likely attract dissenting opinions. Under these conditions, an organization may be reluctant to tie its internet presence to social media, and instead preserve an intact, coherent message.

IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS

Ideological groups are defined as groups of individuals with similar and strongly held beliefs that form a mental model for how the individuals understand the world around them (Mumford et al. 2008). Examples of ideological groups abound; examples include groups supporting political views, religious beliefs, and social causes. Ideological groups fill a number of
needs for their members: 1) the groups help members manage uncertainty and perceived external threats; 2) they provide a sense of identity and meaning for their members; 3) the groups help foster a positive self-concept through the enhancement of self-esteem; and 4) they provide a structure through which members can make sense of their environment (Allen et al. 2008). As the internet has taken its place among the other more traditional media (e.g., television, radio, newspapers), some have noted one of the internet’s unique characteristics is its lack of regulation and oversight, especially in comparison to traditional media (Heath et al. 2009). Anyone with access to the internet can gather information from a multitude of sources, create content, and deliver it to a target group. Given the lack of oversight, relative ease of dissemination, and the affordances not available in traditional media, the internet represents fertile ground for the proliferation of ideological groups and their messages (Matusitz et al. 2008). In fact, the internet is quickly stepping in to serve as a central medium for ideological groups to interact, communicate, and build relationships with potential members (Stanton 2002). While there is substantial variation in ideological groups’ causes, there is also variation in ways that ideological groups advocate their principles or support their causes, and these methods of advocacy and support can generate disagreement and controversy. Among the most controversial are those groups that promote, condone, or are tied to acts of violence in support of their cause. In this research, we examine websites supported by both violent and nonviolent ideological groups because they likely have different goals with regard to social media use.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

To understand the reasons why the desire for control may conflict with the benefits of social media, we draw on work exploring website duality of goals (e.g., Belanger et al. 2006). Traditionally, IT investments have been primarily assessed from the perspective of the potential users and assumed to be successful when achieving the greatest amount of use from the largest number of potential users (see Delone 2003; DeLone et al. 1992). However, the interests and desires of the users may occupy a subordinate role to interests of the organization. In other words, a visitor’s perception of a successful web presence may differ dramatically from a sponsoring organization’s view of a successful web presence. Central to the duality of goals perspective is that various stakeholders surrounding an IT investment may have differing views on what constitutes a successful investment (Seddon 1997; Seddon et al. 1999). Prior research has established that goals adopted during the design of websites (e.g., organization-focused or visitor-focused) have significant impacts on the operation and perceived success of a website (Resnick et al. 2004). Further, what is at once labeled a successful IT investment by one group can later be characterized as an organizational failure (Larsen et al. 1999). Thus, in applying this perspective, the notion of success is critical to consider (see Nelson et al. 2005), but potentially more important is understanding success according to whom.

Ideological websites may have many functions (e.g., supply information to or facilitate exchanges between visitors); however in general, these functions are in support of a certain worldview or perspective (Allen et al. 2008). Under Belanger et al.’s (2006) taxonomy of website goals, the main goal of ideological websites is to supply information that will influence a visitor’s perception. When applying the duality of goals perspective, however, it is important to note that influencing visitors’ opinions is the goal of the website’s sponsoring organization, a goal that may not necessarily be shared by visitors.

Social media are growing in popularity and these media represent an attractive platform for online groups. Social media can facilitate exchanges between visitors and group members, but on a scale that was previously unthinkable. Little is known about how ideological groups utilize social media in communicating their ideology. However, what is clear is that social media depend on user generated content – this is content that is largely outside the control of the sponsoring organization. Thus social media can undermine an organization’s central message if it facilitates or displays disagreement with the group. For example, through comments or posts, a visitor who does not agree with an ideology could attempt to engage a group member in argument. In this case, the group has lost control of the message being portrayed.

Clearly, most, if not all organizations wish to control the messages their websites convey. However, the ideological groups may be especially protective of the messages they send. One of the defining features of ideological groups is that they provide a structure through which individuals can make sense of the world around them (Murray et al. 2002). Ideological groups reward conformity in social and personal forms and provide members a sense of meaning through their representation of the truth (Allen et al. 2008). Any attack or distortion of an ideological group’s message is an attack on group members’ deep-seeded beliefs and is likely met with efforts to minimize, counter, or suppress. Therefore we hypothesize the following:

**H1:** Websites from ideological groups will link to fewer social media than non-ideological groups.

We predict that as the desire for control grows, the level of social media use will decrease. Among ideological groups, violent groups are likely to desire the greatest amount of control. They encourage group members to surrender their own identities for that of the groups, are wary of threats from outside sources, and emphasize obedience and loyalty (Burdman 2003; Post et al. 2002). Violent groups also harbor a very strong sense of moral superiority (Moghaddam 2005). Therefore, we predict
that the desire for control over interactivity will be even more clearly manifested in violent ideological groups (as compared to nonviolent groups).

H2: Websites from violent ideological groups will link fewer social media than non-violent ideological groups or non-ideological groups.

METHOD

To test our hypotheses and determine if the need for control outweighs the benefits of social media, we sampled websites from three separate groups: violent ideological, nonviolent ideological, and non-ideological. We then coded the websites and recorded linkages between the public pages of each website and popular social media.

Website Selection

Selection and categorization of ideological and non-ideological categories required several steps. We consulted the limited past work (Angie et al. 2011; Byrne et al. 2013) on ideological group websites for candidate websites to use in this investigation. We then added to the list of candidate websites by searching for additional group websites which were written in English. Consistent with past work (e.g., Byrne et al. 2013), we limited our search to websites for groups that met face-to-face, had local chapters, or the group website included some function for outreach, recruiting new members, or facilitating communication between group members. These constraints on our search ensured existence and vibrancy of the group. Finally, we selected groups that operated at a national level in the United States or at an international level to ensure that the group had sufficient visibility to generate traffic to their website.

Next, we separated ideological from non-ideological groups. Consistent with past research (e.g., Byrne et al. 2013), we defined ideological groups as groups 1) that express a rigid mental model that is based on negative past events, 2) tie interpretation of current events tightly to the rigid mental model, 3) focus on a few transcendent goals that are largely centered on a return to a past idealized state, and 4) reject other beliefs that are not congruent with the group’s mental model. All candidate groups were coded by three coders who rated each candidate group on these four characteristics. An overall mean for each group was calculated, then means were transformed into Z-scores. Groups with a Z-score greater than 1.00 were classified as ideological, and groups with a Z-score less than -1.00 were classified as non-ideological.

Finally, we separated violent groups from non-violent groups. Groups were characterized as violent if they condoned or celebrated violence on their website, if the group was known to condone violence, if group members or the group had been linked to two or more acts of violence, or if the group had been classified as such by a reputable third party (e.g., Southern Poverty Law Center, PEW, Gallup, RAND, the Terrorism Research Center, the Anti-Defamation League, the Terrorism Project, or the Memorial Institute for Prevention of Terrorism). Using these steps, 105 groups were gathered for coding including 32 violent ideological, 36 nonviolent ideological, and 37 non-ideological groups. The list of websites and their categorization is shown in the Appendix.

Website Linkages to Social Media

Coders evaluated the presence of social media on groups’ websites by accessing public webpages. Webpages that required registration or logging in to access were not coded. Coders evaluated the top level webpage (i.e., home page) and then searched available public webpages for the features listed in Table 1. To address our hypotheses, we then calculated the percentage of websites which contained social media.

Three coders evaluated four features of social media listed in Table 1 (Twitter-Admin, Twitter-Others, Recommend, Follow-Group). To prepare for coding, the coders attended several training meetings in which the features were explained and trial coding on sample websites was performed. After coding several practice websites and achieving acceptable agreement, the coders started coding the sample websites. Coders were instructed to first seek the features in logical places on the website, if they did not find them, they were then to traverse two levels of each website (with the homepage being level 0) looking for the features. During coding, the coders held weekly meetings to review the level of agreement between them and address any arising problems.
RESULTS

The level of agreement between coders for linkages to social media (calculated as the absolute agreement) averaged 76%. Complete agreement was not achieved unless all three coders independently recorded the presence of the social media feature. The inconsistencies between coders were resolved by coder majority. If two coders reported a feature was present on a website, the feature was recorded as present. If two coders reported that a feature was not present, the feature was recorded as not present. The mean was then calculated across the four website features to produce the mean of linkages to social media.

We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with group type (violent ideological, nonviolent ideological, and non-ideological) as the independent variable and mean of linkages to social media as the dependent variable. The ANOVA demonstrated that group type significantly affected the percentage of social media linkages, $F(2, 102) = 12.37, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .20$. Therefore, differences between violent ideological, nonviolent ideological, and non-ideological groups were identified using Tukey’s HSD. Means for linkages to social media are shown in Table 2. There were no differences between nonviolent ideological groups and non-ideological groups in linkages to social media ($p = .98$). However, when compared to nonviolent ideological groups and non-ideological groups, violent ideological groups provided fewer linkages to social media ($p < .001$, $p < .001$ respectively). These findings provide mixed support for H1 and support for H2.

DISCUSSION

Notwithstanding the benefits that social media can bring, violent ideological groups opted not to include features on their websites that link to social media. We observed this despite the fact that social media features are relatively inexpensive, easy to incorporate, and simple to manage in modern websites. The difference between violent ideological groups and the other groups is robust (partial $\eta^2 = .20$) and is evidence that for violent groups, the goals of the organization clearly outweighed the interests of the visitors. Thus we conclude that this research highlights an important condition under which social media seems to be undesirable: when the desire for control exceeds the anticipated benefits of social media. Social media are largely operated by independent third parties where users can say whatever they wish for all users to see. Thus, organizations that link to social media run the risk of losing control of the message they desire to send. Our results suggest that this risk is too great for most violent ideological groups. In speculating about the generalization of this these findings, we believe that the purposeful curtailing of social media will likely be limited only to those groups or websites that either don’t wish for the added attention that social media brings or will be so controversial and likely to attract countering messaging so as to lose complete control over their core message. We also note that credible threats against the safety of others and overt hate speech
may be against the terms of service for some social media companies (e.g., Facebook). This may be one alternative explanation for the lack of use of social media by violent groups. However, other social media companies (e.g., Twitter) may permit potentially inflammatory messages as long as they do not contain specific, credible threats of violence.

Despite the risks of losing control, we noted a small percentage of violent groups actively using social media. This was especially apparent in having visitors recommend the site to others (25%) and permitting visitors to follow the group (31.25%). Official sanctions (e.g., by the service provider) against violent groups pertain mainly to direct or overt threats, but may not pertain generally stated beliefs. Thus, even some violent groups are able to spread their message through social media. We are left to conclude that for this small group, the benefits of social media outweigh the costs. While we have examined groups that clearly attract controversy, it is not difficult to imagine non-ideological organizations facing a similar trade-off.

An additional surprise of this research was the relative comparability of the nonviolent ideological websites and the non-ideological websites. Across all social media features we coded, these two groups were nearly identical. This finding has several potential implications. The first is that nonviolent ideological websites have begun to value the benefits of interactivity more than they value control over their message. This could indicate a greater willingness to tolerate dissenting view points, engage with a variety of people, and offer openness to the general public similar to that of non-ideological websites. These results suggest that non-violent ideological groups are using social media at a level at least on par with small and large business today. Second, this finding may be indicative of the imperative for nonviolent ideological groups to follow the masses. Similar to businesses who must meet their customers where they are if they expect to survive, ideological groups must also meet potential and existing members where they are if they expect to survive. This is evidenced by a surprising 83.5% of all nonviolent ideological groups linking with social media to permit visitors to follow the ideological group, a percentage we note that in an absolute comparison exceeds that of the non-ideological groups.

Although it is evident that an increasing amount of groups—both ideological and non-ideological—are turning to social media, it is not clear yet whether such a transition is necessarily desirable for all groups. Clearly some violent ideological groups feel it necessary to adopt a social-media presence, and most non-ideological and non-violent ideological groups do as well. However, practitioners considering adopting social media for their organization, or adding to their current social media repertoire, would be well-advised to consider the need for control of information presented on their respective social media site. For example, a charity organization might be able to recruit a greater number of individuals by creating a Facebook fan page or a Twitter account. However, in reaching a greater number of people, there is also the possibility of reaching a greater number of detractors, who may post negative comments (factual or otherwise) about the group itself, its mission, its founders, etc. Such a response could deter potential supporters of the organization. Thus, before adopting a social media presence, a group or organization must be willing to accept the fact that they may lose followers due to some of the content posted, or have the resources to monitor what is being placed on the social media to ensure that everything posted is in accordance with their core values and mission.

LIMITATIONS

Despite our attempts to examine the balance between control and use of social media, there are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting this research. First, this work examined only public facing webpages in English. It is possible that the differences between groups we noted on the public webpages could change when private webpages (e.g., webpages behind a login) or non-English websites are taken into account. An interesting extension of this research would be to investigate non-English websites. Second, we only examined the linkage to social media from the groups’ websites. We reasoned that if the group had a presence on social media it would be referenced by the main website for the organization. Therefore we did not search social media for group pages or other websites that may be operated by the group but hosted by the social media company. Third, we cannot rule out the possibility that group leadership was not well-versed in the most recent technology and that the lack of linkages to social media was a result of ignorance. Finally, this sample was not randomly drawn and consequently there could be other explanations (e.g., access to resources) that could contribute to the disparity in social media use.

CONCLUSION

Using a sample of websites, we judged the level of linkage between social media and ideological and non-ideological websites. From our investigation, we can conclude that the desire for control pervades violent ideological groups and inhibits integration with social media. Nonviolent groups (ideological and not) did not show the same inhibition toward social media.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Non-Ideological</th>
<th>Nonviolent Ideological</th>
<th>Violent Ideological</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amateur Entomologists’ Society</td>
<td>American Baptist Church</td>
<td>Aggressive Christianity Missionary Training Corp (ACMTC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)</td>
<td>American Cause</td>
<td>Alpha 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>American Astronomical Society</td>
<td>American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)</td>
<td>Americans for Truth About Homosexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>American Botanical Council</td>
<td>Americans United</td>
<td>Anarchist Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>American Cancer Society</td>
<td>Center for Bioethical Reform (CBR)</td>
<td>Animal Liberation Front (ALF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>American Diabetes Association</td>
<td>Christian Exodus</td>
<td>Army of God (AOG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>American Fisheries Society</td>
<td>Coalition to Stop Gun Violence</td>
<td>Aryan Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>American Heart Association</td>
<td>Coffee Party</td>
<td>Creativity Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>American Meteorological Society</td>
<td>Council of Conservative Citizens</td>
<td>Earth Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>American Red Cross</td>
<td>Earth First!</td>
<td>English Defense League (EDL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>American Sewing Guild</td>
<td>Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR)</td>
<td>Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigade (Hamas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>American Trucking Associations</td>
<td>Freedom from Religion Foundation</td>
<td>Heterosexuals Organized for a Moral Environment (HOME)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Amnesty International</td>
<td>Friends of the Earth</td>
<td>Imperial Klans of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Asian American Arts Alliance</td>
<td>Hadassah</td>
<td>Institute for Historical Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Association of Woodworking and Furnishings Suppliers</td>
<td>Independent American Party</td>
<td>Jewish Defense League (JDL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Atomic Age Alliance</td>
<td>Islami City</td>
<td>Kingdom Identity Ministries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America</td>
<td>Islamic Society of North America</td>
<td>Ku Klux Klan (KKK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>British Beatles’ Fan Club</td>
<td>Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP)</td>
<td>League of the South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)</td>
<td>John Birch Society</td>
<td>National Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Doctors without Borders</td>
<td>LDS (Mormon) Church</td>
<td>National Association for the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advancement of White People (NAAWP)  National Democratic Front
22 Jenny Craig  National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)  National Socialist Movement
23 Lions Club  National Coalition for Men  Negotiation is Over (NO)
24 Mensa  National Organization for Women (NOW)  Operation Rescue
25 Mustang Club  National Rifle Association (NRA)  Power of Prophecy
26 National Association for Amateur Radio  No H8 Campaign  People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)
27 National Association for the Self-Employed  One Campaign  Prairie Fire Organizing Committee
28 National Association of Miniature Enthusiasts  Pro Life Action League  Sovereign Citizens
29 National Association of Rocketry  Sierra Club  The Barnes Review (TBR)
30 National Street Rod Association  Socialist Party USA  United for a Sovereign America (USA)
31 Photographic Society of America  Tea Party Nation  Volksfront
32 Shriners International  The Family International  Westboro Baptist Church
33 Society of Professional Journalists  Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
34 Special Olympics  United Methodist Church
35 Teamsters  United Pentecostal Church International
36 US Tennis Association  United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
37 Yellow Ribbon Club

REFERENCES


