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An Analysis of Webmasters’ Identification Targets

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Abstract

This paper argues that webmasters identify with multiple targets, including their organization, WWW users, and the webmaster profession. Because identification theory suggests actors make decisions favoring their identification targets, this issue has important implications for the WWW and its users.

Introduction

The proliferation of the World Wide Web (WWW, or web) has pushed the role of webmaster into a central and powerful position in contemporary society. Webmasters control the WWW technology, thus creating the potential for significant influence over individuals who use the web, organizations with web sites, and society as a whole. For example, webmasters can collect data about individual behavior at an unprecedented level of detail. While this data is valuable for the organization that owns the web site, its collection may be costly in terms of individual privacy.

Despite their potential influence, we know very little about the webmaster role and the individuals who perform it. The trade press suggests four distinct roles must be fulfilled in the development, implementation, and maintenance of any website: author, media designer, software developer, and system administrator (Anonymous 1996; Barkakati 1996; Mohler 1997). The goal of this paper is to explore this emerging profession through a theory-driven, descriptive analysis of webmasters and decision making. This analysis draws on identification theory, defined as “a process where individuals become connected to elements in the social world” (Scott 1997, 493). While other theories would likewise contribute to the analysis of webmasters; identification is this paper’s focus because it has been theoretically and empirically linked to important organizational and individual decision outcomes (Cheney 1983a), and is thus consistent with the applied nature of this analysis.

Literature Review

Identification is a perception (Conrad 1994) of one’s relationship with some collective or group (Scott 1997). The perception involves feelings of similarity, belonging, and membership (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bullis and Bach 1989), as well as acceptance of the values and goals of the collective (Schneider, Hall, and Nygren 1971). These feelings are a product of identification and the result of communication with the collective. Through communication, the individual and the collective reach an understanding of each other’s values, goals, and interests and the degree to which they are similar (Cheney 1983b). Cheney and Tompkins (1987) suggest communication both produces and reproduces the feeling of identification held by the individual. Since individuals communicate with multiple groups, it follows that they can identify with more than one collective at a given time. Identification scholars recognize individuals can identify with multiple targets (Cheney 1983b). Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggest several possible targets based on employment, occupation, gender, religious affiliation, and age. In organizations that are increasingly divisionalized and distributed, organizational targets can range from local workgroups to regional subunits on up to the entire organization (Scott 1997).

Identification is linked to a number of important outcomes, including commitment and motivation (Cheney 1983a). It is also an integral part of the decision-making process, as noted in the definition developed by Tompkins and Cheney (1983, 144): “A person identifies with a unit when, in making a decision, the person in one or more of his or her organizational roles perceives that unit’s values or interests as relevant in evaluating the alternatives of choice.” The relationship between decision-making and identification is supported by a number of other researchers (Bullis and Tompkins 1989; Cheney 1983b; Tompkins and Cheney 1985). Because decision makers accept the interests of their identification target as their own, it is in the organization’s best interest (or that of other collectives) to foster this feeling of identification (Bullis 1991). Through identification, collectives can control individuals unobtrusively, leading to decisions and actions that support the collective (Barker 1993; Bullis 1991; Tompkins and Cheney 1985). This is the most significant implication of identification in the WWW context. It suggests webmasters will make decisions that favor the interests of the group with which they most strongly identify.

Identification Targets of Webmasters

Identification is the product of communication, and is manifested in communication, so the analysis of identification targets begins by cataloging the collectives with which webmasters communicate. Webmasters are boundary spanners who send organizational messages to a mass audience, and in turn receive feedback from individual users, members of this mass audience. Webmasters are also members of an emerging profession, and so they likely communicate with fellow webmasters. Because webmasters communicate with organizations, users, and other webmasters, these are the most likely identification targets.
Organization

The goal of webmasters is to communicate organizational messages using the web. As boundary spanners, they are in a position to receive messages from organizational sources describing the goals, values, and interests of the organization (These messages in turn comprise the content of the organization’s website). This kind of communication fosters organizational identification, because given their many opportunities to receive these organizational messages, it is reasonable to expect webmasters to internalize the interests of the organization and adopt them as their own.

Users

When webmasters send organizational messages via the web, they communicate with WWW users who visit the organization’s website. Because these users are the consumers or recipients of the webmaster’s message, the webmasters likely consider the perspectives of the users in order to frame their messages most effectively. For users to understand and interpret the organizational messages, the webmaster must encode the message in a meaningful way. Webmasters must consider the goals, values, and interests of users in order to do this.

Webmasters also learn about their users through feedback submitted by users. Nearly every website has an email address to send comments to the webmaster who manages the site. This provides a channel for users to express themselves to webmasters, and communication to and from users can lead webmasters to identify with users.

Profession

Webmasters have many opportunities and incentives for communicating with other webmasters. The Internet provides an indispensable source of information relevant to the technical and organizational tasks facing webmasters. For example, there are a number of USENET newsgroups which focus on web management issues, and many WWW sites that provide information about these tasks. Some of these websites also offer forums where webmasters can communicate directly with their peers, such as www.cio.com/forums/career.html.

In addition, professional associations provide another important channel for interaction among webmasters. The Association of Internet Professionals (www.association.org) and the International Webmaster Association (www.iwa.org) are two of the largest, with 10,000 and 3,600 members, respectively. The development of these professional associations and the vast array of computer-mediated communication channels are evidence that webmasters do communicate with each other. This communication helps to define common goals, values, and interests, which results in identification with the webmaster profession.

Implications

This analysis presents arguments supporting the identification of webmasters with the organization, with users, and with the webmaster profession. All of these targets are feasible, yet their interests may not be complementary and may in fact conflict. The degree to which webmasters identify with each of these targets is an important practical and empirical question, for identification research contends that individuals make decisions in favor of their identification targets (this research has not yet examined the impact of multiple identification on decision making, but has instead focused on single targets). This has important implications for those groups affected by the actions of webmasters. The issue of privacy is one example that has many stakeholders. For example, webmasters who identify most strongly with users may choose to respect and protect the privacy of this group, so they will not use the organization’s website to collect personal information about users. On the other hand, webmasters who identify most with their organizations may choose to collect this personal information, which allows the organization to develop more customized and directed marketing messages. Given these disparate behaviors resulting from different levels of identification with multiple targets, it is important to understand the nature of webmasters’ identifications. The analysis presented here is simply a first step in this process.

References


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