



## Research in brief

## Dialogic strategies and outcomes: An analysis of environmental advocacy groups' Facebook profiles

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### ABSTRACT

Previous studies of advocacy groups' Web sites suggest that the use of dialogic strategies could lead to greater dialogic communication. This study examined whether dialogic strategies utilized by environmental advocacy groups via their social networking profiles lead to greater dialogic engagement between organizations and visitors. This study offers the first examination of the relationship between the creation of an online space for dialogue and actual dialogic engagement by identifying and measuring six dialogic outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Dialogue refers to “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325) and represents efforts by parties in a relationship to engage in an honest, open, and ethically based give and take. A stream of research by Kent, Taylor, and White investigating organizations' use of dialogic principles in online communication has identified the principles necessary for fostering dialogic communication online (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). Recent studies have extended this line of inquiry to Web 2.0 by investigating the use of dialogic principles in weblogs (e.g., Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Traynor et al., 2008). Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) examined candidates' use of Facebook during the 2006 midterm election; they proposed that Facebook has immense potential for dialogic communication. These studies suggest that organizations are not adequately utilizing the Web to generate dialogic communication; there are gaps between organizational relationship-building goals, implementation of online strategy, and actual dialogic engagement.

Social networking sites provide organizations with a space to interact with key publics and to allow users to engage with one another on topics of mutual interest; this should provide the ideal conditions necessary for stimulating dialogic communication. This study sought to determine to what degree advocacy organizations are utilizing dialogic strategies on their social networking profiles as well as the degree to which these strategies are related to actual dialogic outcomes i.e., metrics that indicate that dialogue between the organization and stakeholders is taking place. Two types of dialogic outcomes were measured in this study: (1) on-site posts by the organization and users and (2) the extent of the social network linked to organization profiles.

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## 2. Methodology

A purposive sample of 50 Facebook profiles created by environmental advocacy groups was content analyzed by two trained coders using an 82-item questionnaire. Intercoder reliability scores were calculated using Scott's Pi (Holsti, 1969) for dialogic strategies and Holsti's coefficient of reliability (Holsti, 1969) for dialogic outcomes. Scores ranged from 61% to 87% with Scott's Pi and 90% to 100% with Holsti's.

Content categories were developed based on the dialogic communication literature (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Taylor et al., 2001) and included both organizational dialogic strategies and outcomes of dialogic engagement. The items measuring Taylor et al.'s (2001) dialogic strategies (ease of interface, usefulness of information, conservation of visitors, generation of return visits, and dialogic loop) were modified for application to a social networking context. New items included "links to organization homepage," "number of advertisements on a site" (as a negative factor), "use of applications," "ease of donations,"<sup>2</sup> "join now option," "offers of regular information through email," "profile sharing," and "content sharing." Eliminated or modified items included "site map," "major links to rest of site," "search engine box," "short loading time," "post of last updated time and date," "news forums" (though posting of news stories was retained), "bookmark now," and "important information available on first page" (modified to examine the usefulness of information on the profile). A new strategy, *organization engagement*, was added that included one item, "organization comments in dialogic spaces" (i.e., wall and discussion boards). This was argued to be a strategy because organizations can post to their own sites in an attempt to encourage dialogue. All strategies were coded as present or absent.

In addition to dialogic strategies, six outcomes of dialogic communication were identified and coded. Four outcomes indicated content posted by organizations and visitors: "user posts" (number of user posts on wall and discussion board), "network activity" (number of user posts in 1 week), "user responses to others" (number of user posts in response to inquiries by the organization or others), and "organization response to users" (number of organization posts in response to user inquiries). In addition, two outcomes considered the number of user profiles that were linked to the organization profile since organizations engaging in dialogue should build ties with a greater number of stakeholders. The two outcomes were "network extensiveness" (total number of friends or fans of the profile) and "network growth" (1 week increase in number of profile's friends or fans).

## 3. Findings

Frequency counts were generated to determine the extent to which social networking profiles used the dialogic strategies. Organizations typically used three features of usefulness to members (median = 3); one feature of usefulness to media, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors (median = 1); and no features of generation of return visits, dialogic loop, and organization engagement (median = 0).

A Spearman's *rho* correlation was conducted to identify significant relationships between dialogic strategies and dialogic outcomes. Findings indicated that dialogic outcomes are correlated with three dialogic strategies—conservation of members, generation of return visits, and organization engagement. Generation of return visits appears to be significantly correlated with the number of user responses to others ( $r = .28, p = .05$ ). Conservation of visitors shows a reciprocal relationship with two outcomes, network growth ( $r = .38, p = .04$ ) and organization response to users ( $r = .28, p = .05$ ). Organization engagement exhibited the most significant relationships with outcomes; it was correlated with all six dialogic outcomes: user posts ( $r = .35, p = .02$ ), network activity ( $r = .39, p < .01$ ), network extensiveness ( $r = .44, p < .01$ ), network growth ( $r = .44, p < .01$ ), user responses ( $r = .44, p = .001$ ), and organization response to users ( $r = .47, p = .001$ ).

## 4. Discussion

Most of the advocacy organizations in our study seem to adopt the position that the mere creation of an interactive space via a social networking profile is sufficient for facilitating dialogue. However, these organizations are missing a significant opportunity to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders by failing to effectively utilize the full gambit of dialogic strategies that social networking sites offer. As with Web sites and weblogs, advocacy groups are not taking advantage of the dialogic strategies afforded by social networking. This is unfortunate as dialogic strategy use appears to be closely related to positive dialogic outcomes, including network activity, network extensiveness, network growth, user responsiveness, and organization responsiveness. The results suggest that using dialogic strategies to create opportunities for dialogic engagement may produce positive outcomes such as increasing the number of stakeholders who interact with the organization by growing the organization's social network. This is especially true when the organization takes the first step to stimulate dialogic engagement by posting comments in dialogic spaces on their profile where users within the social network can then capitalize on available dialogic loops.

These findings suggest that advocacy organizations should post frequently to their own profile via applications that provide photos of events, videos, RSS feeds, calendars of events, etc., and that will serve to stimulate discussion. Additionally,

<sup>2</sup> "Ease of donation" differs from the "how to contribute" item by asking if donations can be made without requiring users to provide donation applications access to their profiles.

advocacy organizations should be sure to designate someone to be responsible for following through on dialogic opportunities by responding to user posts, as well as by providing timely, relevant information about issues of mutual concern to the organization and stakeholders and by providing useful information about the organization itself.

## 5. Conclusion

Our study extends the investigation of online dialogic communication by examining the application of dialogic principles via the Facebook profiles of environmental advocacy organizations. Social networking sites offer dialogic opportunities that need to be included in a re-conceptualization of the dialogic principles for studying Web 2.0. Additionally, our study linked dialogic strategies to dialogic outcomes. Future research should continue to examine whether dialogic strategy use is successful in generating actual dialogic communication.

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