



Social movement web use in theory and practice: a content analysis of US movement websites

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Abstract

While communication scholars suggest that the internet can serve as an important resource for social movement communication, few studies examine whether and how social movements actually use the internet. This article examines US-based social movement organization (SMO) internet use at one of its most visible points of access, the world wide web. Drawing on alternative media studies, the article develops a typology of communication functions central to social movements and surveys a random sample of SMO websites in order to determine whether and to what degree they exhibit features or attributes related to these types. The survey results suggest that the majority of US-based SMOs are not utilizing the web to its full potential, and posits a number of reasons why this might be the case, including organizational objectives, organizational resources and resource sharing.

Key words

alternative media • content analysis • internet • social movements • world wide web

INTRODUCTION

Social movements are important actors in democratic societies. They are key spaces for formulating, advancing and leveraging the interests of civil society against elites and authorities.¹ As such, they serve as sites of public advocacy around social and political issues, which markets and states are more reticent to address (Mueller et al., 2004). In essence, social movements are social networks that engage in sustained collective actions, have a common purpose and challenge the interests and beliefs of those with power (Tarrow, 2005). While communication processes are integral to their success (Atton, 2003; Downing, 2001), research shows that movement actors experience several difficulties communicating through the mainstream media. The mainstream media often systematically distort, negatively cast or ignore social movement viewpoints. They may deny social movements access or representation at critical moments in their development (Raboy, 1981), employ message frames that undermine or weaken public perceptions of a movement's legitimacy (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod and Detenber, 1999; Shoemaker, 1982, 1984), or tacitly encourage movement actors who seek coverage to cater to the questionable values of mainstream reportage on social activism, including a heightened interest in violence, emotionality and slogans (DeLuca and Peebles, 2002; Gamson, 1990; Kielbowicz and Scherer, 1986).

Although mainstream media coverage remains a crucial resource for many social movements (Carroll and Hackett, 2006), the problematic relations between the mainstream media and movements underscore the need for movements to employ alternative modes of communication. On this score, communication scholars have suggested that the internet can serve as an important resource for social movement communication, providing movements with communication opportunities not available in the mainstream media or alternative forms of movement media. Social movements can use the internet to bypass mainstream media gatekeepers or repressive governments and communicate directly with their constituencies and the broader public (Boyd, 2003). Moreover, the internet could help to level the playing field between social movement organizations (SMOs) and the more resource-rich institutions of business and government through its combination of greater speed, lesser expense, further geographical reach and relatively unlimited content capacity compared to older forms of print and electronic media (Downing, 1989; Gross, 2003; Kidd, 2003; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002). Of course, internet access is not universal and these benefits accrue only to those with the requisite skills and resources.

Although many scholars view the internet as a potentially useful tool for social movement communication, there is a dearth of scholarship examining whether, how and to what extent most SMOs use the internet. Most communication scholarship on the internet and social movements

has followed two threads. Scholars have undertaken case studies of social movements, such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the anti-corporate globalization movement and the anti-war movement against the second US War in Iraq, in order to examine vanguard uses of the internet designed to facilitate identity formation, mobilization and networking (Ford and Gil, 2001; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002). Others have focused on the role of the internet in enabling or shaping transnational movement activism (Bennett, 2003a, 2003b; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005; Downing, 2003; Kidd, 2003). While the current scholarship highlights the emerging vanguard and transnational uses of the internet, it does not investigate how the majority of SMOs utilize this communication resource or employ methods that produce generalizable results (Garrett, 2006). Yet, whether and how most SMOs actually use the internet is of interest to those who theorize the political value of this communication resource.

While communication scholars have studied some aspects of social movement internet use, social movement scholars have all but ignored this area of study. By and large, social movement literature has failed to consider the role of media and communication in the life of social movements, and at best offers thin descriptions of the actual communication practices of movements (Carroll and Hackett, 2006; Downing, 2001). In contrast, a growing body of communication research on alternative media offers a theoretical foundation for investigating movement media. This research suggests that movement media are best conceptualized as alternative media. Most scholars view social change as the *raison d'être* of alternative media, whether these media are associated with contesting and negotiating social and cultural codes, identities and relations (Rodriguez, 2001), forming an oppositional culture to a dominant order (Raboy, 1981), publicly communicating dissident ideas (Kessler, 1984), raising awareness of oppressed and marginalized groups (Gillett, 2003) or articulating and defending alternative identities and interests (Steiner, 1992). Although it is not limited to social movement communication, Downing's (2001) understanding of radical media best describes the overriding purposes of social movement media. Downing defines radical media as media that express the opposition of subordinate groups towards a power structure, engage in lateral communication against policies and power structures, and tend to be more democratically organized than conventional media. In his view, alternative media and social movements have a dialectical and interdependent relationship; each can constitute and influence one another mutually (Downing, 2001). As this view suggests, the study of alternative media is largely concerned with how social movements use media to debate, formulate, articulate, disseminate and sustain an oppositional culture and politics.

This article examines social movement internet use by surveying how SMOs utilize this communication resource at one of its most visible points of access: the world wide web. As established social groups with shared activities and goals, organizations are more likely to engage in the sustained collective actions central to my definition of social movements. While previous empirical studies have focused on what the internet contributes to transnational social movements or on exceptional cases, this study randomly surveys the web use of SMOs operating in the USA. The national context remains of prime importance to movements whose collective actions are tied intimately to the political opportunities provided by reigning governance structures (Tarrow, 2005). Drawing on alternative media studies, the article develops a typology that identifies the communication functions most central to social movements, identifies a set of features or attributes within each type and randomly surveys the websites of US movement groups, in order to determine the degree to which their websites exhibit these features and functions. More specifically, the study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What features or attributes do US movement groups include on their websites and how prevalent are these features?

RQ2: To what level or degree do US SMOs use the web to engage in primary communication functions?

RQ3: Do US SMOs with greater financial resources or memberships utilize a greater range of features than groups with fewer resources and members?

This study aims to describe how and to what extent social movements are using their websites as a communication resource. Given the dearth of empirical research on SMO communication practices online, this study serves as an exploratory step in charting the uses that US SMOs make of web-based communication. The study also considers how additional research methods might serve to answer these questions further.

A TYPOLOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT COMMUNICATION

Alternative media scholarship suggests a variety of communication functions in which SMOs might engage, particularly on the web, which is thought to pose low barriers to movement communication and offer unmediated opportunities to reach potential and existing movement members. Drawing on this scholarship, this article offers a typology that highlights the functions most salient to social movement communication. The typology classifies communication according to whether it:

- provides information;
- assists action and mobilization;

- promotes interaction and dialog;
- makes lateral linkages;
- serves as an outlet for creative expression; and
- promotes fundraising and resource generation.

Although these functions often are interrelated in practice, I categorize them separately here for heuristic purposes. In this section I describe these categories and identify the features or attributes within web-based communication that contribute to each of them.

Information

Alternative media allow for the dissemination of information regarding movement identity, views and issues to interested recipients both inside and outside the movement. Groups may provide information in order to counter what is seen as misinformation or disinformation in the mainstream media and to disrupt prevalent ideologies while offering more radical alternatives (Downing, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001). Also, they may communicate movement identities and issues to interested parties, including the public, movement constituencies, the press, academics and others (Costanza-Chock, 2003; Kessler, 1984). Alternative information is essential for sustaining social movements and can serve as a record of alternative views and possibilities for posterity (Downing, 2001). Because the internet is relatively free of centralized gatekeepers, it provides a ready site for direct and uncompromised information dissemination by SMOs.

Action and mobilization

Alternative media serve as instruments of mobilization, defined as the organizing of collective action and initiatives aimed at producing specific outcomes. Alternative media can coordinate initiatives and action (Barlow, 1988; Kessler, 1984) and spread viewpoints designed to galvanize action, a process referred to as 'consensus mobilization' (Tarrow, 2005: 113). Alternative media scholars have documented the ability of the internet to supplement traditional forms of action and mobilization effectively. Social movements have used the internet to coordinate real-world events and actions, petition political representatives, disseminate action alerts and campaign materials and engage in virtual civil disobedience (Costanza-Chock, 2003; Ford and Gil, 2001; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Van Aeist and Walgrave, 2002). The ongoing presence of websites allows potential supporters to learn about and participate in SMO campaigns over time and at their convenience, overcoming the temporally sensitive nature of other forms of contact (Boyd, 2003; Van Aeist and Walgrave, 2002).

Interaction and dialog

Alternative media function as relatively autonomous sites of interaction and dialog. Fraser (1993) argues that such spaces are necessary to further participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups within larger spheres of discourse. Alternative media can act as counter-public spheres, a term Fraser (1993) uses to denote alternative discursive arenas where subordinated groups can deliberate, articulate and circulate oppositional interpretations of their own identities, interests, needs, strategies and objectives. Downing (2001) adds that the internal dialog these spaces permit, which often involve shared processes of meaning construction between activist producers and particularly active audiences, help movement participants to arrive at common understandings of their problems and strategies. Scholars have begun to examine the role of the internet in facilitating political discussion and debate among social movement and other actors. Many argue that participatory forums, such as chatrooms and bulletin boards, provide ongoing opportunities for dialog and discussion and facilitate the formation of discursive networks which offer alternative perspectives on both national and international issues (Downing, 2003; Ford and Gil, 2001; Kahn and Kellner, 2004).

Laterallinkages

Social movement actors use alternative media to communicate laterally and build networks among movement members. The alternative media can link social change activists by making them aware of one another's views and interests and by uniting communities of interest across national and transnational space (Barlow, 1988; Kessler, 1984; Steiner, 1992). One way in which the internet can facilitate lateral linkages is by connecting one site to another through hyperlinks. External links to other sites are a strategic choice that acknowledges the presence of other actors, establishes an interconnected sphere of online sites and may reflect an organization's desire to offer information provided by others (Foot and Schneider, 2006; Rogers and Marres, 2000). In addition, hyperlinks may carry movement supporters to sites of news and research, and to national or international SMOs affiliated with their primary movement or with other social movements.

Creative expression

Alternative media can function as a site for creative expression. As Downing (2001) points out, political communication does not always take the form of rational argumentation. Emotion, imagination and aesthetics are central aspects of much political expression, taking such forms as satire, irony, cartoon, caricature, slander and pornography (Downing, 2001).

Costanza-Chock (2003) notes that SMOs have used the internet to display art, including poetry, visual art, video, music and parody which support social movements. Given the web's ability to display a variety of media forms, one might expect SMO websites to host a variety of creative expression.

Fundraising and resource generation

Finally, social movements can use the alternative media to engage in fundraising and resource generation. Movement groups attempt to raise financial support and resources through a variety of means, including requests for donations, sale of merchandise, building member databases and recruiting new members, personnel and volunteers (Costanza-Chock, 2003; Van Aeist and Walgrave, 2002).

A COMPARISON OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION TYPOLOGIES

The above typology is similar to others designed to analyze the communication functions of political party and candidate websites. However, it differs in accord with its theoretical grounding in the communication aims of social movements. Political communication typologies tie communication functions to goals associated with persuasion or winning elections. For example, Foot and Schneider (2006) construct a typology of political communication during elections that is driven by the need to persuade. This typology includes:

- presenting information;
- promoting interaction between supporters and organizations in order to garner resources;
- connecting with others through hyperlinks or cognitive links; and
- mobilizing supporters to promote a candidate to others (Foot and Schneider, 2006).

Gibson and Ward (2000) utilize a typology that includes:

- information provision;
- campaigning to recruit voters;
- generating resources;
- building links between organizations; and
- promoting participation in political processes.

The typology used here employs some of the same concepts, but does so from the vantage point of social movement communication, which is motivated theoretically by a broader and more far-reaching set of goals. While many social movements engage in campaigns and aim to persuade, they also may emphasize participatory democratic communication forums,

the need to mobilize on multiple fronts and long-term efforts toward society-wide change. These goals merit special attention in a communication typology of social movements. Consequently, in addition to a focus on information provision, lateral links and resource generation, this typology foregrounds the concept of mobilization broadly conceived, forums for creative works and interaction in association with dialog (rather than interaction aimed at extracting resources from supporters). While they are not concerned with mobilization or creative works, several other studies focused on democratic participation online similarly highlight the role of dialog and discussion in their communication typologies (Gibson and Ward, 2003; Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000; Tsagarousianou, 1999). Thus, while the typology presented here draws support from other political communication typologies, it is uniquely tailored to the purposes of social movements.

METHOD

Sample

The sampling frame consisted of a master list of US-based groups identified with six social movements:

- 1 environmental;
- 2 lesbian/gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT);
- 3 anti-corporate globalization;
- 4 human rights;
- 5 media reform; and
- 6 women's movement.²

These movements are notable for their contemporary prominence and for their efforts to harness media for public communication.³ Ten researchers compiled a list of 749 organizations from the *Encyclopedia of Associations: National*, the most comprehensive source of information on US non-profit membership organizations with national scope (Hunt, 2005).⁴ The *Encyclopedia's* publishers estimate that the volume includes 90 to 95 percent of all US-based organizations at any given time (personal communication with Kristy Swartout, 12 October 2006). A search of *Worldcat* for other handbooks and directories related to these movements yielded no results. So while a cross-check of the principal source with others was not possible, this master list is likely to represent the vast majority of established and active organizations from this study's selected social movements. The researchers reviewed the *Encyclopedia of Associations* keywords index in order to identify keywords broadly associated with one of the movements cited above. Multiple keywords were found for each movement. For example, keywords associated with environmentalism included 'environment', 'environmental

education', 'conservation', 'forestry', 'pollution control' and 'rainforests', among others. The researchers then identified the organizations associated with each keyword and reviewed the self-reported descriptions of each in order to determine whether they qualified as a SMO. Organizations that self-identified with a movement and its goals, engaged in some form of collective action and advocated social change, met my criteria for SMOs. Our criteria followed Castells (2001) in presuming that we should identify SMOs largely on the basis of whether they consider themselves part of a broader social movement. However, the researchers did scrutinize organization self-descriptions and later their websites in order to eliminate those that utilized some movement rhetoric, but espoused purposes contrary to commonly recognized movement goals.⁵ Finally, the researchers recorded the annual budgets and membership numbers of each organization whenever that information was available.

Once I had the master list, I assigned researchers organizations for further examination using a stratified random sample. They surveyed more than 10 percent of the websites of each type of SMO on the list. Nearly all of the 86 SMOs selected had their own websites. In the few instances where this was not the case, additional SMOs of the same movement type were randomly selected for inclusion. In total, researchers surveyed the websites of 33 environmental, 10 LGBT, six anti-corporate globalization, 16 human rights, 10 media reform and 11 women's organizations. While 68 percent of the SMOs did not give their annual budget, the remaining 32 percent had annual budgets that ranged from \$3,000 to more than \$3 million. Of the organizations, 60 percent did not list the number of affiliated members. Of the remainder, 13 organizations had fewer than 1000 individual or group members, 14 had between one and 10,000 members, four had between 15 and 150,000 members and one listed 1.8 million members. Researchers examined the SMO websites were examined over a four-month period between February and May 2006.

Survey instrument

The typology constructed here was the basis for a survey instrument that enumerated the features or attributes of each communication function, categorizing them according to whether they:

- provided information;
- engaged in action and mobilization;
- promoted interaction and dialog;
- made lateral linkages;
- hosted creative and cultural works; and
- attempted fundraising and resource generation.

While the survey instrument did not include an exhaustive list of all possible features, it did represent activities theorized as central to the purposes of social movements. The researchers examined all webpages on each organization's site and coded each feature or attribute on the survey form as present or absent. An open coding process allowed the researchers to record additional features found on the websites through an 'other' category, which subsequently led to the inclusion of some additional items'-A total of 63 items were coded (reported in Tables 1 to 6).

Data analysis

Intercoder reliability was determined by coding a reliability sample consisting of 10 percent of the total number of websites selected for analysis. Reliability was measured according to Krippendorff's alpha, an appropriate measure for studies that include more than two coders and multiple variables involving both ratio and nominal levels of measurement. Each coder coded all websites included in the randomly selected reliability sample and completed all sections of the survey instrument. Utilizing three coders for analysis enhanced the inherent conservativeness of Krippendorff's alpha, already one of the most conservative and reliable measures of intercoder reliability (Lombard et al., 2005). Several variables had an alpha of less than .60 and were eliminated from the study. Five of the remaining 63 variables had an alpha of between .60 and .69; 12 had an alpha of between .70 and .79; 26 had an alpha between .8 and .89; and the remaining 20 had an alpha of .90—1.0.⁶ Given the exploratory nature of this study, the enhanced reliability gained through the use of three coders rather than two and the inherent conservativeness of Krippendorff's alpha, I included in this study all the variables which had an alpha of .6 or greater.

After obtaining the completed surveys, I compiled data on the frequency of activities in each category and then aggregated the data to describe the percentage of organizations that made no, low, moderate or high uses of the web to engage in each of these communication functions. The overall engagement of an SMO in each function was coded as low, medium or high according to whether the observed activities fell into the bottom, middle or top third of all recorded activities in that function. I report both sets of data below. The survey's results provide some insight into whether and how national SMOs are using web-based communication to further the central communicative functions of social movements.

RESULTS

First, this study examined what features were present on US SMO websites and how prevalent various features were within each communication type. One set of features involved the provision of information related to an

organization's views, issues and identity. As Table 1 shows, two-thirds or more of the organizations offered information about their identity, providing organizational descriptions and histories. More than half of the organizations also offered information about movement perspectives and issues through self-published articles and reports, newsletters and law and policy analysis. One-quarter to under one-half offered alternative and mainstream news articles, suggestions for further research, speeches or articles by movement leaders and press releases. Fewer than one-quarter offered video or audio reports, critiques of mainstream media coverage, frequent updates (really simple syndication) and read-only listservs.

Another set of features, categorized as action and mobilization, involves the organization of actions and initiatives aimed at specified outcomes or the propagation of viewpoints which can spur action. I was also interested in whether SMOs employed the web to mobilize locally, nationally or internationally. Although more than four-fifths of the websites featured project descriptions or news and three-fifths coordinated offline actions of some kind, other action and mobilization features were far less frequent, as Table 2 indicates. A little more than two-fifths of the SMOs posted calendars of events or planned national actions online, and only about one-quarter issued urgent action alerts or planned local or international actions. Fewer than one-fifth solicited participation in online petitions, email campaigns, online action or surface letter-writing campaigns. Only one group engaged in virtual denial of service attacks.

Table 1 Providing information

| FEATURES OF PROVIDING INFORMATION | FREQUENCY | PERCENT | ALPHA |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------|-------|
| Podcast video or audio reports | 5 | 5.8 | .76 |
| Stream audio reports | 9 | 10.05 | .85 |
| Stream video reports | 12 | 14 | .85 |
| Mainstream media critiques | 12 | 14 | .82 |
| RSS/frequent updates | 15 | 17.4 | .83 |
| Read-only listservs | 19 | 22.1 | .80 |
| Alternative news articles | 23 | 26.7 | .75 |
| Mainstream news articles | 26 | 30.2 | .84 |
| Further research suggestions | 34 | 39.5 | .98 |
| Leadership speeches and articles | 37 | 43 | .83 |
| Media/press releases | 39 | 45.3 | .67 |
| Self-published articles/reports | 49 | 57 | 1.00 |
| Newsletter | 51 | 59.3 | .94 |
| Law and policy analysis | 54 | 62.8 | .83 |
| Organization history | 57 | 66.3 | .90 |
| Organization description | 80 | 93 | .91 |

A third set of features facilitates two-way communication between and among movement supporters and social movement organizations. Alternative media theorists consider this category, labeled interaction and dialog, to be essential to the formation of collective meaning and identity among members of social movements. While nearly all of the organizations provided their contact information, other activities related to interaction and dialog did not feature heavily on the websites. Table 3 shows that little more than one-third of the organizations provided support services or advice of some kind, but fewer offered first-person accounts of movement activities, online discussions of organizational strategies or participatory forums. About one-tenth of the sites made member profiles or member contact information available and only six or fewer groups discussed organizational issues, held meetings, made weblogs (blogs) available to site visitors or conducted polls and surveys online.

• Table 2 Action and mobilization

| FEATURES OF ACTION AND MOBILIZATION | FREQUENCY | PERCENT | ALPHA |
|--|-----------|---------|-------|
| Denial of service attacks | 1 | 1.2 | .70 |
| Online petitions | 11 | 12.8 | .98 |
| Email campaigns | 12 | 14 | .82 |
| Coordinates online actions | 16 | 18.6 | .69 |
| Surface letter-writing campaigns | 16 | 18.6 | .87 |
| Plans international actions | 20 | 23.3 | .86 |
| Urgent action alerts | 23 | 26.7 | .87 |
| Plans local actions | 27 | 31.4 | 1.00 |
| Plans national actions | 36 | 41.9 | 1.00 |
| Calendar of events | 37 | 43 | .77 |
| Coordinates offline actions | 51 | 59.3 | .90 |
| Project or campaign descriptions or news | 71 | 82.6 | .73 |

Table 3 Interaction and dialog

| FEATURES OF INTERACTION AND DIALOG | FREQUENCY | PERCENT | ALPHA |
|--|-----------|---------|-------|
| Discusses organizational issues online | 1 | 1.2 | .85 |
| Holds meetings online | 2 | 2.3 | 1.00 |
| Weblogs | 5 | 5.8 | .71 |
| Online polls and surveys | 6 | 7 | .78 |
| Member or supporter profiles | 7 | 8.1 | .64 |
| Member or supporter contact information | 10 | 11.6 | .83 |
| First-person accounts of movement activities | 17 | 19.8 | .81 |
| Discusses strategies online | 17 | 19.8 | .82 |
| Participatory forums | 18 | 20.9 | .85 |
| Support services or advice | 29 | 33.7 | .79 |
| Organization contact information | 81 | 94.2 | .97 |

Theory suggests that SMOs should foster lateral linkages in order to build networks among social movement actors and to lead supporters to sources of news and information related to their cause. This study operationalized lateral linkages as hyperlinks to other SMO sites and to alternative news, mainstream news and independent research sites. While about one-fifth of the SMOs linked to mainstream news sites, more than one-quarter offered links to alternative news sites, as shown in Table 4. National SMOs linked to other national organizations more often than to international SMOs, with more than one-half linking to the former and a little more than one-quarter to the latter. More than three-fifths of SMOs maintained links to other SMOs affiliated with their movement and more than one-third linked to sites affiliated with other social movements, as well as to research sites.

The category of creative expression encompassed features involving imaginative cultural works that communicated political ideas without relying on rational argumentation or reportage. Fewer than one-third of the organizations acted as a platform for any type of creative expression, as Table 5 shows. About one-third offered visual art on their sites and half of that number offered creative videos. Only a handful of SMOs offered cartoons or poetry, and only one or two offered parody or music.

The last set of features related to fundraising and resource generation, defined as attempts to solicit financial and human resources in order to

Table 4 Lateral linkages

| FEATURES OF LATERAL LINKAGES | FREQUENCY | PERCENT | ALPHA |
|--|-----------|---------|-------|
| Links to mainstream news | 17 | 19.8 | .82 |
| Links to alternative news | 22 | 25.6 | .73 |
| Links to international SMOs | 24 | 27.9 | .78 |
| Links to SMO sites of other movements | 30 | 34.9 | .88 |
| Links to research sites | 33 | 38.4 | .61 |
| Links to national SMOs | 44 | 51.2 | .95 |
| Links to SMO sites of primary movement | 53 | 61.6 | .95 |

Table 5 Creative expression

| FEATURES OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION | FREQUENCY | PERCENT | ALPHA |
|---------------------------------|-----------|---------|-------|
| Parodies | 1 | 1.2 | 1.00 |
| Music | 2 | 2.3 | .94 |
| Poetry | 4 | 4.7 | 1.00 |
| Cartoons and comics | 6 | 7 | .94 |
| Video | 14 | 16.3 | .76 |
| Visual art | 28 | 32.6 | .78 |

support the organization or its activities. Nearly three-fourths of the organizations attempted to recruit volunteers or solicit donations online, and more than half enabled new members to join online. Table 6 summarizes the results. A little more than one-third of the SMOs collected information from members or supporters, sold merchandise online or posted job listings. More than one-quarter of the sites enabled members to renew their membership or pay fees online. Less common activities included facilitating membership recruitment by offering a form that supporters could print and mail to the organization, or allowing members to subscribe to products or services. Only two SMOs carried advertising from third parties on their sites.

In addition to examining the frequency of features found online, the study also asked to what level or degree do SMOs engage in different types of communication considered essential to their purposes. Table 7 summarizes the levels of activity found across each communication type.

While very few organizations engaged in high levels of communication across any type, some types of communication were more prevalent than others. The most common type was information provision. All the organizations engaged in information provision, with more than half engaging in informing activities at medium or high levels. The next most common communication categories were action and mobilization and fundraising or resource generation. More than 90 percent of the organizations engaged in these activities online, with around 35 percent undertaking them at medium to high levels. While comparatively fewer organizations (81%) made lateral linkages, a greater number (nearly 49%) performed these activities at medium or high levels, although more than 18 percent made no lateral linkages. The least commonly exhibited communication functions included interaction and

• Table 6 Fundraising and resources

| FEATURES OF FUNDRAISING AND RESOURCE GENERATION | FREQUENCY | PERCENT | ALPHA |
|---|-----------|---------|-------|
| Advertising | 2 | 2.3 | 1.00 |
| Allows new members to join offline (print form) | 9 | 10.5 | 1.00 |
| Sells subscriptions to products or services | 18 | 20.9 | .82 |
| Membership renewal | 23 | 26.7 | .82 |
| Pay dues | 26 | 30.2 | .88 |
| Collects member or supporter information | 29 | 33.7 | .89 |
| Sells merchandise | 30 | 34.9 | .68 |
| Job listings | 31 | 36 | .82 |
| Allows new members to join online | 46 | 53.5 | .81 |
| Volunteer sign-up | 63 | 73.3 | .94 |
| Solicits donations | 66 | 76.7 | .87 |

• Table 7 Levels of communication activity

| TYPE OF COMMUNICATION | NO ACTIVITY | LOW ACTIVITY | MEDIUM ACTIVITY | HIGH ACTIVITY | TOTAL ACTIVITY | ALPHA RANGE |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|
| Providing information | 0 0% | 39 45.3% | 42 48.8% | 5 5.8% | 86 100% | .67–1.00 |
| Action and mobilization | 5 5.8% | 50 58.1% | 26 30.2% | 5 5.8% | 86 100% | .69–1.00 |
| Fundraising and resources | 6 7% | 51 59.3% | 26 30.2% | 3 3.5% | 86 100% | .68–1.00 |
| Lateral linkages | 16 18.6% | 28 32.6% | 35 40.7% | 7 8.1% | 86 100% | .61–.95 |
| Interaction and dialog | 3 3.5% | 72 83.7% | 8 9.3% | 3 3.5% | 86 100% | .64–1.00 |
| Creative expression | 52 60.5% | 30 34.9% | 2 2.3% | 2 2.3% | 86 100% | .76–.94 |

dialog and creative expression. More than 95 percent of the SMOs engaged in interaction and dialog, but only about 13 percent did so at medium or high levels. About 39 percent of the organizations acted as a platform for creative expression, with fewer than 5 percent doing so at medium or high levels.

Finally, the study asked whether SMOs with greater budgets or memberships use the web more than those with fewer financial resources and members. I had hypothesized that organizations with greater amounts of resources and supporters would be more likely to offer more elaborate websites that utilized more features. However, the analyses revealed no significant correlations between the levels of web-based communication types and the estimated yearly budget or membership size of the SMOs.

DISCUSSION

Communication theory suggests that social movements have multiple incentives for utilizing new communication resources, such as the web, to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and get their messages out to supporters and the public at large. Alternative media scholarship further suggests a typology of social movement communication that encompasses the range of communication functions vital to social movements. However, this survey indicates that by and large, some of the most prominent contemporary social movements are not engaging heavily in such communication on the web.⁷ The SMOs examined here show moderate or high levels of activity in four areas deemed central to social movements: providing information; coordinating action and mobilization; engaging in fundraising and resource generation; and making lateral linkages. However, with the exception of information provision, the majority of SMOs exhibit no or low activity

in these areas. Furthermore, substantial activity across the remaining two categories, interaction and dialog and creative expression, is uniformly lacking. These findings are somewhat comparable to those of Foot and Schneider (2006) in their study of political campaign sites during elections. They found that while most campaign organizations engaged in informing activities online, very few engaged in connecting (similar to lateral linkages) or mobilizing. Lateral linkages appear to be more common among SMOs, although as with political campaign sites, mobilization fared more poorly. In addition, these findings are consistent with a study of anti-globalization websites that found few opportunities for interaction and dialog (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002).

Given the gap between the theory and practice of social movement communication online, these findings beg the question: why are national SMOs not utilizing the full potential of the web to engage in the types of communication that are thought to be central to their very existence? This section will draw on the scholarship examining social movements and the internet to consider three factors which might account for SMOs' relatively low levels of web use and to consider how additional research methods could help to explain or refine the present study's findings.

Underutilization of the web as a communication resource may relate to three factors having to do with the social and economic conditions surrounding internet use: organizational orientations (including goals, strategies and beliefs); organizational resources; and resource-sharing among organizations. In their accounts of social movement communication, alternative media scholars have yet to differentiate among types of SMOs and their varying communication needs. Diani (2001) suggests that different types of SMOs have different needs and goals when it comes to internet use. For example, those focused on organizing professional resources may be motivated to use the internet to diffuse information online but not to increase member interaction with the organization, while those focused on broader participatory resources may have more incentive to cultivate grass roots participation in organizational activities and actions (Diani, 2001). In addition, organizations may have different ideas or beliefs about the efficacy of the web as a communication tool, preferring to focus their efforts on more traditional or direct communication forms such as face-to-face contact, print materials or more targeted forms of internet communication such as email. Finally, scholars have identified the potential drawbacks of using computer-mediated communication (CMC) for traditional social movement activities, such as building trust, community or commitment on the part of movement members when not reinforced by offline relationships (Calhoun, 1998; Diani, 2001). Multi-method studies could combine surveys or interviews of key personnel responsible for website content with comparative quantitative

analysis of websites. Researchers could utilize surveys or interviews to gather data about the experiences, attitudes and goals of website producers, and assess whether differential orientations correlate with different types of SMOs or whether differences among these variables explain varying levels of web use. For example, Foot and Schneider's (2006) work on political websites found that different levels of website features correlated with the aims and orientations of webmasters and with the target audiences and goals of campaign organizations. Taking account of different organizational orientations — including different types of SMOs, different strategies and goals and different perceptions about the utility of communications technology — may reveal calculated, strategic and efficient uses of the internet on the part of SMOs, rather than broad-based uses.

Alternatively, established national SMOs may simply be less likely than other types of social movement formations to make full use of web-based communication. Some scholars suggest that new media are precipitating the development of online movement formations which are decentralized, flexible and issue-oriented, and that these formations may rely more heavily on internet communication than traditional SMOs, which may be more inclined simply to integrate internet use into their pre-existing routines (Bennett, 2003a; Ward et al, 2003). One study of political party websites found that smaller parties experimented more with participatory and dialogic features than larger, more entrenched parties (Cunha et al., 2003). Moreover, some scholars and activists have criticized mainstream national SMOs for their professionalized, hierarchical structures and lack of commitment to discursive and participatory processes (Mitchell, et al., 1992; Schlosberg, 1999). The present study surveyed relatively established national SMOs and did not include local SMOs or social movement formations that exist primarily or exclusively online. Consequently, it did not capture information about these other important fields of social movement actors. Comparative analyses of the strategies, goals and online activities of local or primarily web-based social movement actors with more established national organizations could reveal significant differences in how they think about and use the web.

Another reason why SMOs may not take advantage of the full range of web functions is that they may lack the necessary resources, including time, money and knowledge. Kirschenbaum and Kunamneni (2001) have identified an 'organizational divide', particularly among the community-based non-profit sector. Many such organizations lack the technological capacity to generate relevant online content, develop new applications and use CMC to address their needs and goals. Lacking the time, skills or funds to integrate computer technology into their work, the majority of community-based non-profit organizations make only limited use of computers and the internet as communication tools (Kirschenbaum and Kunamneni, 2001). Scholars

have begun to study the actual resources, including time and money, required to design and maintain websites (see De Cheveigne, 2007; Foot and Schneider, 2006),⁸ and one study suggests that resource limitations may be a major factor inhibiting SMO internet use (Leon et al., 2009). Ethnographic observations of website producers within selected SMOs, or interviews or surveys with respectively larger numbers of website producers, could be used to assess the human, financial, temporal and technical resources devoted to different levels of web use, and whether the availability or allocation of resources affect web use among differently resourced organizations.

A third explanation for relatively low levels of activity among the majority of national SMO websites may be found within larger patterns of web use within social movements themselves. Scholars have documented the existence of internet sites designed to pool the resources of social movement actors, and to act as hubs allowing movement members to exchange information and analysis, coordinate action and formulate discourse and dialog around movement agendas (Downing, 1989; Leon et al., forthcoming). Such sites exist on both sides of the national political spectrum, as exemplified by the conservative movement's Town Hall (www.townhall.com) or progressive sites, such as those of Alternet.org, Greenpeace, ThomasPaine.com or [Human Rights Watch](http://HumanRightsWatch). The existence of central sites devoted to information dissemination, networking and mobilization may render unnecessary the duplication of these functions by others. Even if such central sites do not exist, organizations may offer links to direct visitors to information or features available elsewhere in order to avoid resource duplication. Studying the anarchist community's use of the web, Owens and Palmer (2003) found a core periphery structure among the movement's websites. Moreover, an informal division of labor existed between the peripheral sites that addressed movement insiders and the small number of core sites that served to present anarchism to movement outsiders. Core sites offered the public an introduction to anarchist philosophy and identity that peripheral sites could reference, rather than reiterate (Owens and Palmer, 2003). Similarly, Foot and Schneider (2006) found that many political organizations link to other sites in order to offer information without having to collect, maintain or display it themselves. Further research could map the linkages between social movement organizations, determine whether core periphery structures exist among websites affiliated with particular movements, and perform qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the function of links between actors.

Finally, research on how users engage with the functions and features of SMO websites would complement our understanding of the form that these sites take. Web-based surveys can illuminate how and why visitors use SMO websites, how frequently they use them and who these users are.

CONCLUSION

Communication scholarship suggests that the internet can serve as an important resource for social movements. This study has drawn on alternative media scholarship in order to construct a typology of communication functions that encompasses the potential usages that movement actors can make of the internet. The study designed a survey instrument based on this typology which enumerates the features and activities linked to each communication function, investigated which features actually appear on the websites of a random sample of national SMOs, and highlighted the discrepancy between the potential and actual uses of the web by SMOs. The survey results suggest that the majority of national SMOs are not utilizing the web to its full capacity and posits a number of reasons why this might be the case, including organizational goals, strategies and objectives, organizational resources and organizational efforts to share or pool resources made available to movement supporters. In addition, this article has suggested additional methods that researchers might use to investigate these issues and to hone theory addressing social movement web use in future empirical research.

While alternative media scholarship elaborates the potential purposes and functions of social movement communication, scholars can advance the study of movement communication and new media by broadening their empirical and theoretical horizons. Empirically, scholars can undertake quantitative and comparable studies of movement web use, paying particular attention to:

- the attitudes, strategies and goals of website producers;
- the different orientations and types of SMOs;
- the disparate resources, opportunities and constraints available to movement actors;
- the presence and nature of online linkages between movement groups; and
- how actual users experience movement websites.

Theoretically, communication scholars can draw on social movement studies in order to enhance their understanding of the broader dynamics that shape movement structures, strategies and practices and how these dynamics condition the production and use of movement media. In addition, scholars should draw on the intersection of social movement and organizational studies to delineate organizational forms, functions, structures, goals and repertoires of action and mobilization, employing these categories to investigate and analyze the range of actors and activities operating within social movement communication. These theoretical and empirical avenues of research can help scholars to gain a better understanding of how and why social movement actors use the internet.

Notes

- 1 Civil society denotes that segment of collective social life that is separate from markets and states.
- 2 I selected a number of movements in order to gain a more general picture of SMO web use, but limited the number to six due to resource and time constraints. While comparative data of web use between movements might prove valuable, the small sample size of some of these groups effectively ruled out valid comparisons.
- 3 In his book analyzing the role of technology in modern social change, Castells (2001) focuses on environmentalism, anti-corporate globalization and the women's movement and highlights, to a lesser extent, the LGBT movement. In their book examining networks and strategic communication, Keck and Sikkink (1998) focus on the human rights, women's and environmental movements. In addition, scholars have identified the media reform movement as an emerging social movement (Carroll and Hackett, 2006).
- 4 While all of the organizations included operated in the USA, 30 of them also operated in other countries.
- 5 Most of these organizations appeared to be lobbying groups for industries targeted by social movement actors.
- 6 KALPHA, an SPSS macro, was used to generate Krippendorff's alpha (see Krippendorff, 2003 and Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007 for more information). Lombard et al. (2005) maintain that:

Coefficients of .90 or greater are nearly always acceptable, .80 or greater is acceptable in most situations and .70 may be appropriate in some exploratory studies for some indices. Higher criteria should be used for indices known to be liberal (i.e. percent agreement) and lower criteria can be used for indices known to be more conservative (Cohen's kappa, Scott's pi and Krippendorff's alpha).
- 7 However, given the lack of other research on the parameters of the SMO population as a whole, there is no basis by which to compare this sample population with the overall SMO population.
- 8 Foot and Schneider (2006) found that political campaign sites that engaged in higher levels of involving and mobilizing devoted more staff and time to website production than the sites lacking those features.

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