

The NRA and Social Media: Context Collapse, Power, and Multilevel Identity Construction for Complex Organizations

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Abstract

Current scholarship treats organizational and issue identity as a fluid, discursively constructed concept, inextricably bound to the negotiation and maintenance of power structures. The interactive nature of identity construction emphasizes the importance of communicative interactions between stakeholders and organizations in shaping identities. This paper uses social and semantic network plus qualitative analysis to investigate the social media strategies adopted by the National Rifle Association (NRA). The NRA constitutes its identities and power through a complex network of relationships, and seeks to personalize the issue to constituent groups through differentiated use of digital media. The analysis conducted offers insights into the ways in which complex organizations may structure their social media presence to construct their identity and influence aggregation patterns among stakeholders.

identity; social media; organizations; issues; power

Current scholarship increasingly treats identity as a fluid, discursively constructed concept (Author, 2013). Along with organizational identity, both issues and publics can be conceptualized as dynamic, cocreational processes rather than objectively defined entities (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Issues in particular may be characterized as having a range of identities, constructed by publics working from various cultural contexts (Curtin & Gaither, 2006). Henderson (2005) pointed out that issue identities have practical consequences, since “the ways in which public issues are signified in discourse . . . both represent and institute power and resource allocation” (p. 121). These identity construction processes are therefore also inextricably bound to the negotiation and maintenance of power structures.

The interactive nature of identity construction within this theoretical framework, which “allows for pluralistic identities and multiple meanings” (Motion & Leitch, 2002, p. 46), places significant emphasis on stakeholders and their communicative interactions with organizations in shaping organizational and issue identities (Curtin & Gaither, 2006). Given the importance of interactivity in constituting issues, many organizations turn to social media platforms in an attempt to strategically influence the emergence of publics and issue identities. In doing so, they also coconstruct their own identities.

Previous research has examined ways in which organizations use social media to present a cohesive core identity, while engaging with constituents to emphasize different identity aspects through different platform formats and engagement styles (Gilpin, 2010). Scholars have also addressed the influential role of interactive digital media in global issues, noting that activist organizations adopt varying approaches to dialogue and narrative to personalize issues that support their mission (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). However, the linkage between efforts by politically engaged organizations to construct their own socially mediated identity while influencing the identities of issues and publics with which they are involved, has not yet been widely explored.

Lobby organizations represent a particular set of organizational features and highly diverse stakeholder networks: they must serve their constituents’ needs while simultaneously representing them to the public at large and seeking to influence both public opinion and policy decisions. Issue networks are morphologically diverse, including special interest organizations, the policy makers they seek to influence, and various constituent networks. They can contain a virtually unlimited number of players, and these players may change over time as they move in and out of the issue domain in question (Hallacher, 2005).

This paper investigates the social media strategies adopted by the National Rifle Association (NRA). Gun ownership and security has risen to the forefront of public discourse in the United States in recent years, due primarily to high-profile mass shootings at schools and other public places. Meanwhile, the political and social climate in the U.S. surrounding the topic of gun ownership has grown highly contentious. Tensions over interpretations of the Second Amendment, which ensures “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms,” have caused social rifts and led to battles over proposed gun-related legislation.

The NRA plays a pivotal role in mediating gun-related issues. It has positioned itself as a central actor advocating for protection of gun ownership and the availability of firearms for sports, hunting, and personal defense. This position places the organization at the nexus of American gun owners and enthusiasts, law enforcement and military personnel, policy makers, and the public at large. Through its public communications and online presence, NRA represents itself, its key constituents, and gun rights issues.

The complexity of identity

Complex systems, comprised of numerous relationships among agents interacting to produce nonlinear outcomes, are particularly relevant when studying questions of power relations and identity construction in online settings (Gilpin & Miller, 2013; Qvortrop, 2006). The NRA occupies a unique position within the complex system of the firearms issue network, thus an exploration of how it constitutes its various relationships through publicly accessible online media can illuminate patterns of power and influence, as well as the multifaceted identity construction processes surrounding gun issues, the NRA as an organization, and its constituent stakeholders.

Addressing these questions not only provides insights into the specific activities of the NRA, but also offers a starting point for understanding the ways in which complex organizations negotiate the tensions created by context collapse in a relatively transparent communication environment. Context collapse has been defined as “the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients” (Vitak, 2012, p. 451). It has typically been addressed from the standpoint of individuals with diverse social circles on social networking sites. However, complex organizations also find themselves having to negotiate multiple, potentially conflicting relational contexts in public through social media platforms.

Methods

The NRA has an articulated social media presence linked through the organization’s main site, numerous subsites, print publications, and activity programs. These include 55 multiple, overlapping accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Google+, and Pinterest, as well as blogs. The messages of each subsite are tailored to an array of interests and needs, and mini-communities emerge from sites that frequently share or repost content from each other. This complex network of relationships, all of which are publicly visible and interconnected, can be investigated using a combination of social and semantic network analysis, to identify both structural patterns of connections and the content of the various interactions.

This study examines twelve months of text data collected from NRA Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and blogs throughout 2012. The data were analyzed both qualitatively and using the Automap semantic network analysis package, which detects patterns of aggregation and allows the creation of context-specific ontologies (Carley, Columbus, & Azoulay, 2012) to classify the different issue, organization, and stakeholder identities.

Conclusion

The NRA constitutes its identities and power through a complex, multiplexed network of relationships with consumer and social publics, which express the organization's ontological perspective with regard to gun ownership and use in the United States. The primary NRA sites focus on Second Amendment issues, whereas ancillary sites variously emphasize sportsmanship, personal protection, education and safety, or lifestyle and values. The structure and content of this network suggests that the organization approaches its stakeholders as varying widely both in their views of gun issue identities and the degree to which those issue perspectives contribute to constituents' self-identity. The NRA thus seeks to personalize the issue to constituent groups through differentiated use of digital media while constructing a richly nuanced tapestry of gun culture. The analysis conducted offers insights into both the specific context of gun rights advocacy as well as the ways in which complex special interest organizations may seek to structure their social media presence to construct their identity and influence aggregation patterns among stakeholders.

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