From Communication to Action: The Use of Core Framing Tasks in Public Relations Messages on Activist Organizations' Web Sites

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This exploratory research asks whether the public relations messages created by activist organizations and published in an unfiltered medium – their own Web sites – fit Snow and Benford's framing processes (Benford & Snow, 2000). These authors suggest that issue-related messages from activist organizations be structured to include their core framing tasks to help inform and motivate individuals seeking information about a particular issue. The findings indicate that only 18% of the Web sites in the study contained issue-related public relations messages that included all of the framing tasks. These results suggest that activist groups represented in this study may not be making the most efficient use of their Web sites as a means of advancing their interests.

Introduction

Framing is playing an increasing role in how public relations practitioners measure the effectiveness of their messages. A large body of research has focused on how policy actors, defined as organizations "that, because of their size and influence, have the ability to intervene in the production of news," attempt to frame their particular issue or event for the media (Andsager & Smiley, 1998, p. 185). That ability to frame the news is an exercise in power.

But what if an activist organization, seeking to be a policy actor, lacks the power to reach the media with its message? In a recent article, Kensicki (2004) looked at how nonprofit citizens' organizations are represented in newspaper coverage of social and environmental problems. Kensicki found that not only was there an overwhelming omission of the terms "environmentalist," "activist," and "advocate" as well as any public call for action around the issues she studied (pollution, poverty and incarceration), but that . . . "Those who read

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about these social problems may not have been inclined to become involved in any larger movement or citizen organization simply because they were not making the cognitive link between the problem and those organizations" (p. 66).

This is the problem facing many activist organizations. L. Grunig (1992) defines activist organizations as "a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics or force" (p. 504). As Coombs (1998) writes, the success of activist organizations "depends in large part on their ability to access and to use power resources such as the number of followers, favorable media coverage, public support, money, and political champions" (p. 290). Without the power to reach the media, the messages of activist organizations often go unheard by those they are trying to reach –followers, political champions, potential public supporters – and thus the organizations forfeit the money and energy that these publics might contribute.

To overcome this obstacle, public relations practitioners representing these organizations have increasingly turned to the Internet as their communication vehicle of choice simply because it is non-mediated. Their messages get through directly, as originally written, to their important audiences. Web site-publishing is inexpensive, takes a minimal amount of expertise to mount a visually appealing effort, and has no restrictions. In an article in *PC Computing,* Van Scoy writes that the Internet has "kick-started the languishing tradition of social activism in the United States" (2000, p. 56).

This study examines activist organizations' Web sites, with particular focus on how these organizations frame their messages to inform and motivate users about a particular issue. It is based on research by Snow and Benford (1988) which suggests framing tasks for structuring activist organizations' messages.

Review of the Literature

The Power of the Internet

The increased use of Web sites is a twenty-first century phenomenon that crosses the boundaries of organizational type. A 2003 survey conducted by the Software and Information Industry Association found 77% of those surveyed believe that web services are "critical to their organization's future successes" ("Web service", 2003, p. 24). Respondents in a study by Wright (2001) indicated that the Internet has provided public relations practitioners with the opportunities to disseminate information quickly and to larger audiences than ever before, and that they can communicate quickly with groups and coalitions of people at once. The ubiquity of the Web offers organizations the opportunity for making crucial information accessible from Web sites. Additionally, it

provides higher speed and reduced cost of communication across distances, as well as "the persistent accuracy of the original message and the overcoming of the traditional problem of distortion"(Diani, 2000, p. 388).

A study of Fortune 500 companies (Esrock & Leichty, 1998) produced findings that would appear to easily transfer to the needs of an activist organization. The authors found that Web pages tend to serve audiences that are more active in how they seek and process information than the more passive audiences that are reached using traditional mass media. They also noted that Web site messages are not controlled by external gatekeepers, as they are in print and electronic media. In fact, today nonprofit and activist organizations are making an increased use of Web sites as a way to circumvent the mass media in getting their messages out to targeted publics (Taylor, Kent and White, 2001).

According to Coombs (1998), activist groups have traditionally been seen as powerless, and a powerless group is easy to ignore. In his study, Coombs discussed how

> The Internet offers a low cost, direct, controllable communication channel for activists. . . .The Internet is direct, there is no intermediary needed to deliver the message. The Internet is controlled, the activists decide what material will appear and when it will appear. Moreover, a web site can contain a vast amount of information available in an array of formats including text, audio and video. (Coombs, 1998, p. 290)

By using the Web, public relations practitioners working for activist organizations escape the "packaging" which journalists are prone to, i.e., mixing one issue in with several similar issues.

Diani, in his 2000 study of social movements networks, writes that Web-based communication is especially important for those professional activist groups like Greenpeace or Sierra Club that need to mobilize and secure resources from a dispersed and fairly unorganized membership body. Mitra, in her 2004 study of how the marginalized women of South Asia use the Internet, writes that "[t]he Internet has transformed popular culture by providing a virtual forum in which different communities and groups can produce a 'presence' that might have been denied to them in the 'real world'" (p. 492).

Both Mitra (2004) and Coombs (1998) emphasize that those who have money, political champions and public support have the power to speak through the media. The Internet has the ability to change that power balance because reaching an audience of interested individuals is no longer dependent on wealth or power, but rather on technological savvy.

A 2007 study by the USC Annenberg School states that 77.6% of Americans have Internet access. The report also addresses the finding that activism is often triggered by an individual's activity on the Internet.

It would appear that public relations practitioners would be hard pressed to find reasons not to utilize a Web site in getting their messages across to this large population of Internet users.

Framing the Activist Message

Research in the study of social movements and activism has used the concept of framing as first conceptualized by Goffman (1974). Goffman defined frames as methods of interpretation that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" things that happen in their lives and the world at large (p. 21). Frames help to make such happenings meaningful and thereby organize experience and guide action.

Sociologists David Snow and Robert Benford have amassed a body of research on the ways that social activist organizations can most successfully frame their messages. These frames are action-oriented and attempt to inspire the activities and campaigns of various activist organizations involved in the same or similar issues. Collective action frames also perform this interpretive function by simplifying and condensing aspects of the "world out there," but in ways that are "intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198).

Part of the difficulty is that such movements must not only gather support for their views from previously unengaged individuals, but also must activate those who already agree with the organization or movement's purpose and aims (Snow & Benford, 1988). This problem parallels the daily struggle of public relations practitioners trying to engage and inform their publics.

In a 2000 overview of framing processes and social movements, Benford and Snow write that "frames are constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation . . . define[d] as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change" (p. 620). They call the framing that makes up these action frames the "core framing tasks" that must be accomplished.

Snow and Benford (1988) define the core framing tasks as "diagnostic framing" (problem identification and attribution), "prognostic framing," and "motivational framing." Because activist organizations attempt to cure or remediate some problem or issue, it follows that action of the organization and

its publics is contingent on identification of not only the problem, but those who have caused the problem and thus can be blamed. This attributional component of diagnostic framing thus focuses blame or responsibility. For the purposes of this study, the researchers separated these two different aspects of diagnostic framing into the two components of "problem identification" and "attribution."

The separation of "problem identification" and "attribution" is supported by Entman's four functions of framing that indicate: (1) they *define problems*, or "determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits"; (2) they diagnose causes or *identify what is causing the problem*; (3) they make moral judgments about the situation causing the problem, and (4) they suggest remedies or "offer and justify treatments for the problems" [emphasis added] (1993, p. 52). Entman, (1993) in turn, bases the four functions on Gamson's (1992) framing research. Gamson indicates that frames typically include the three dimensions of diagnosis, evaluation and prescription.

Through this review of the literature the researchers determined that the core framing tasks of Snow and Benford were distinctive in their focus on activism and activist organizations. These scholars' approach to message framing seemed well suited to the goal of public relations practitioners in informing and educating their publics.

Research Questions

Based on the review of the literature, the researchers developed several research questions to explore activist groups' possible use of Snow and Benford's core framing tasks in the messages developed by public relations practitioners for an organization's Web site.

RQ1: Are the core framing tasks identified by Snow and Benford, as modified by the researchers, in the issue-related messages on activist organization Web sites?

RQ2: If the core tasks are used, in what combination are they employed on activist organizations' Web sites?

RQ3: Is there a difference in environmental and social-activist organizations' use of the core tasks on their Web sites?

Methodology

The study consisted of an analysis of the contents of issue-oriented Web site pages produced by a sample of nonprofit activist groups. The researchers were interested in determining the use of Snow and Benford's core framing tasks in messages on activist group Web sites.

Sampling Plan

The researchers chose to look at the Web sites of activist organizations to determine what a user interested in a particular issue would find when surfing the Web. For the content analysis, the researchers obtained a sample of more than 300 Web site pages of activist groups involved in social and environmental causes.

Thirty-two issues were selected from national news stories that appeared within the six months prior to the initiation of the research. A conscious attempt was made to include a wide variety of issues to reflect a diversity of activist group Web sites. A number of highly charged issues (e.g. abortion rights) that received overwhelming media coverage during the time frame of this study were excluded in favor of issues that had not received extensive media coverage and, therefore, were more likely to cause those interested in the issue to turn to the Internet for more information.

Google[tm] served as the search engine. A 2007 study by comScore Networks found that Google[tm] was the number one Web site worldwide for search/navigation and grew nine percent in that category from December 2005 to December 2006 (Lipsman, 2007). The 32 search terms representing 16 environmental and 16 social issues were entered into Google[tm] under the premise that those wishing to learn more about a topic would follow this same search strategy. The researchers were interested in the "landing page" a user would normally access through a Google[tm] search if wishing more information about an issue. Therefore, the links produced were not always to an organization's homepage. However, if the homepage of an organization was the suggested link in this search process, it was used.

The 16 environmental issues selected were:	The 16 social issues selected were:
1. Global Warming	1. Assault weapons and legislation
2. World Over–Population	2. Stop Homelessness
3. Mountaintop removal mining	3. Hate Crime Legislation
4. Farm pollution pfiesteria	4. Condom distribution in public schools
5. Plastic Pollution of the sea	5. Child Abuse Legislation
6. Ozone Depletion	6. Marijuana Legal
7. Cape Wind Project	7. Gay Partner Rights
8. Genetic Engineering	8. Domestic Violence Against Women
9. Urban Sprawl: Destruction of Wildlife Habitat	9. Rights of Immigrants
10. Animal Experimentation	10. Predatory Lending
11. Oil Drilling in Alaska	11. Trash transfer
12. Toxic Children Toys	12. Medicare Reform Legislation
13. Dangerous Pesticides and Herbicides	13. Partial birth abortion
14. SUVs and Pollution	14. Patriot Act
15. Nuclear Waste	15. Child Labor in Sweatshops
16. Protection of Endangered Species	16. The Death Penalty

The basic sampling unit was one page from an activist organization's Web site. Web sites were chosen for the analysis because of their unfiltered and non-mediated nature. Web sites produced by a trade association, union, or other membership group did not qualify. Government sites were also eliminated. For similar reasons, Web sites from individual churches were eliminated, but religious organizations per se could be considered if their Web site was designed to appeal to only those interested in a particular issue or cause. Both international and domestic organizations were included but the site must have been written in English.

The first 10 Web pages from activist groups supporting each issue that fit the search criteria were chosen for the analysis. Although it is possible that the use of an alternative search engine might have presented the user with differently ordered pages, the ubiquity of Web searches based on Google™ was thought sufficient reason to employ this strategy.

The first link to an organization's Web site was selected. If the same organization's site appeared again regarding the same issue, it was not selected. However, if an organization's national site was found when searching for issues and subsequently a local chapter of the same organization's site was also found, the researchers accepted both sites as qualified on the premise that the two sites contained different information. If the local chapter's Web site page was simply a reference to the national chapter, only the parent Web site was accepted. To ensure that only non-profit activist groups were selected, a Web site address was required to end in ".org" and sites containing advertising (other than corporate underwriting) were excluded.

Data Collection Methods

<u>Categories</u>

The core tasks adapted from Snow and Benford served as the basic categories for coding in this study. After pre-testing the coding scheme, the motivational task was separated into two components: a "general" and a "specific" motivational appeal. The four tasks of "successful" activist messages (i.e., diagnostic, attribution of cause/blame, prescriptive solution and motivational call-to-arms – general and specific) as operationalized by the researchers were:

• Diagnostic – the use of language that draws attention to a problem that poses a current or future threat to an identified victim or group of victims that may be human or non-human.

• Attribution of Blame – the use of language that identifies parties responsible for creating, contributing to or allowing the existence of conditions that cause

the previously mentioned problem. Identified parties include but are not limited to individuals, corporations, industries, political states, organizations or the general public.

• Prescriptive – the use of language that proposes a way to eliminate a problem or reduce the problem's impact. This compares to Snow and Benford's "prognostic" task that involves articulating a proposed solution to the problem – or at least a plan of attack – and the strategies for carrying out the plan. The word prescriptive was used in this study to clarify the meaning of the term "prognostic" for the coders.

• Motivational – the use of language that provides a "call to arms" and then communicates to the audience what they can do to help solve the problem. For the purposes of this study, the motivational task was separated into two components:

- Motivational General – the use of language that asks the reader to take a general course of action (e.g. send money to support organization's goals) and does not address a specific problem or problems, and

- Motivational Specific – the use of language that asks the reader to take a specific action that will contribute to the elimination of a specific problem.

The four tasks could take the form of paragraphs, sentences, phrases, a few words, illustrations/images or Web site icons pointing the way to the indication of the category.

Coding Procedures

The coders were allowed to proceed one page beyond the landing page for each task because it was thought unfair to "penalize" a page that had clear directional signposts. If the coders were provided clues or guideposts on the site's landing page that suggested the existence of a task on another page of the organization's Web site, they were instructed to proceed to the second page. Thus it was possible that a coder could click away from the landing page for each of the four tasks. Coders were instructed that going beyond the landing page required that a clear indicator be present that a task was one click away (e.g., icons for linking like "The Problem" or "The Issue").

The coding sheet was constructed by the researchers based on their adaptation of the Snow and Benford core framing tasks, and subjected to pre-testing on a sample of Web sites similar to those used in the actual study. The actual coding took place over the course of a two-week period.

<u>Inter-Coder Reliability</u>

Both coders coded all of the chosen sites. The measure of agreement was determined by the use of Scott's Pi. The coefficient of agreement was computed to be .89, which the researchers considered to be acceptable.

Findings

Three hundred and twenty Web sites served as the initial basis for this study. Sixteen sites proved to be unavailable at the time the coders attempted to access the pages and therefore were not included in the final analysis. As a result, a total of 154 activist group Web sites focused on environmental issues and 150 activist group Web sites focused on social issues comprised the sample.

RQ1 asked if the core framing tasks identified by Snow and Benford, and modified by the researchers, were found in the messages on activist organization Web sites. Of the 304 sites observed, 17 (5.6%) lacked any of the core framing tasks adapted from the Snow and Benford model. Some of these sites were simply pages consisting of nothing but links to other pages. In most instances, these pages ranked high in the Google^{tm} search because most of the links included the search terms even though the organization sponsoring the Web site simply referred users to other Web sites for additional information.

Diagnostic Task

Organizations that fulfilled the diagnostic task identified a problem dealing with an issue related to the search terms. The techniques by which the organizations accomplished this first step varied greatly. Some pages offered a vivid and extensive description of the dilemma, while others used single statements to communicate the problem.

Table 1: *Overall Presence of Tasks*

Diagnostic		Attribution of Blame		Prescriptive		Specific Call to Arms		General Call to Arms	
P	**%**	**P**	**%**	**P**	**%**	**P**	**%**	**P**	**%**
267	87.8%	177	58.2%	207	68.1%	83	27.3%	160	52.6%

Total Web sites = 304
P = sites in which the task was present

Of the 304 sites in the sample, 267 (87.8%) satisfied the diagnostic task. Of the 154 environmental issue sites, 138 (89.6%) identified a problem compared to 129 (86.0%) of the 150 social issue sites. RQ3, asked if there is a

difference in environmental and social-activist organizations' use of the core tasks on their Web sites, and is addressed in Table 2.

Table 2: *Presence of Tasks: Environmental and Social Issues*

	Diagnostic		Attribution of Blame		Prescriptive		Specific Call to Arms		General Call to Arms	
	P	**%**	**P**	**%**	**P**	**%**	**P**	**%**	**P**	**%**
Environmental Issue Sites	138	90%	101*	66%	104	68%	54**	35%	69**	45%
Social Issue Sites	129	86%	76*	51%	103	69%	29**	19%	91**	61%
TOTAL	267	88%	177	58%	207	68%	83	27%	160	53%

Total Environmental Issue Web sites = 154
Total Social Issue Web sites = 150
P = sites in which the task was present   * p<.01   **p<.005

The easiest way an organization could have satisfied the diagnostic task was by describing the potential impact the problem could have if allowed to continue. This is illustrated by the example from the Algalita Marine Research Foundation (2002) in which the organization described problems associated with plastic pollution in the sea:

> Most plastic floats near the sea surface where some is
> mistaken for food by birds and fishes. Plastics are carried
> by currents and can circulate continually in the open sea.
> Broken, degraded plastic pieces outweigh surface
> zooplankton in the central North Pacific by a factor of 6-1.

Some sites employed many different arguments to explicate the problem rather than relying on a single reason. One organization using this strategy was Drugwatch.org, a group that opposes the legalization of marijuana. The following passage, reproduced as it appeared on the Drugwatch International Web site (1997, para. 6), lists multiple reasons why the legalization of marijuana would be inappropriate, for example:

> Marijuana has many harmful effects: it is psychotoxic,
> addictive, cancer-causing, immunosuppressive, harmful to
> the lungs, reproductive system and the developing fetus . . .
> Scientific experiments show marijuana smoking impairs
> motor coordination and stability in multiple sclerosis,
> causing gait disturbance . . . Studies have shown that
> children born to mothers who smoke marijuana while
> pregnant tend to have lower performance on intelligence
> testing and more behavioral problems.

Some sites in the sample, however, presented both sides of a controversial issue without identifying a specific problem. A page produced by the Humane Society of the United States dealing with the Cape Wind Project in Massachusetts (Almy, 2007) illustrated this approach. Although the organization's Web site stated that the proposed wind turbines would inevitably kill migrating birds, it seemed willing to concede that this unfortunate effect may be a reasonable sacrifice for a cleaner environment. The organization left its options open, noting that it is waiting for additional research before deciding if windmills pose a significant problem.

Attribution of Blame Task

Coders were asked to note if an organization's Web site identified a party responsible for causing the problem or allowing the problem to exist. Therefore, blame for a problem could be attributed simply because nothing was done to address the issue. Most organizations fulfilling this task attributed blame to a specific individual, group of individuals or industry.

Although, as discussed above, most of the sites identified a problem related to the search terms, far fewer attributed blame for the problem. Of the 267 sites that identified a problem, 177 (66.3%) attributed blame for the problem. The broader picture shows that of all 304 sites in the sample, 177 (58.2%) attributed blame (See Table 1).

The type of issue (environmental or social) was a factor in how frequently an activist organization attributed blame for the identified problem. Of the 138 environmental issue sites that contained the diagnostic task, 101 (73.2%) contained the attribution of blame task as well. By comparison, of the 129 social issue sites, only 76 (58.9%) also attributed blame for the problem, a statistically significant difference at the .05 level (See Table 2).

In very few cases, an organization clearly attributed blame for the problem by naming a specific individual or company rather than an industry (e.g., the oil industry) or bad lifestyle choices (e.g., lack of exercise). For example, Generation Green (1998), after telling the user of its Web site why polyvinyl chloride (PVC) is harmful for children, specifically attributed blame for the problem:

> Mattel set itself up as the take-charge leader in addressing the PVC problem (Hasbro, for example, made no movement at all in the period right after the CPSC [Consumer Product Safety Commission] announcement about PVC in toys). As such, we believe Mattel should report back to us at Generation Green (as we have requested) and to the public

at large. They should tell us what has been done and what,
if anything, still needs to be done about PVC in their product
lines.

Obvious attribution of blame (as illustrated in the previous example) was rare. Most of the sites that attributed blame did so by implication. The following example from the Center for Community Change (2003) attributes blame for predatory lending by making a fairly general statement:

The term predatory lending is commonly used to describe
practices whereby lenders or mortgage brokers: **engage in
high-pressure sales tactics** or outright fraud and
deception, change borrowers excessive, often hidden fees;
successively refinance loans (i.e. flipping) at no benefit to
the borrower; and **make loans without regard to a
borrower's ability to repay.** [Bold in original]

Although the subjects here are lenders or mortgage brokers, the text implies that only a small number of these practitioners engage in such tactics rather than the industry as a whole. The activist organization appears to rely on interpretation of the text rather than specifically stating who is responsible for the problem.

Prescriptive Task

An organization satisfied the prescriptive task by proposing a solution to a problem. Almost all of the solutions found in the sample focused on eliminating or changing the conditions that contributed to the problem. In some cases, an organization presented itself as the answer to a problem by showing how it could serve as an advocate for a solution.

Unlike the attribution of blame task, it was possible for a site to propose a solution even though it did not identify a specific problem. Seven of the 304 sites (2.3%) did just that. The researchers, realizing that this was an unlikely finding, reexamined these Web sites to see if the coding was valid. After examining the content of these sites, it appeared that the organizations apparently believed there was no need to specifically identify a problem about which most people were already aware. In these cases, the site did not have language that specifically said why the issue was a problem. Two of these sites dealt with homelessness. The others concerned dangerous pesticides and herbicides, child abuse, the legalization of marijuana and hate-crime legislation.

Of the 304 sites, 207 (68.1%) offered a solution for a problem (see Table 1). No significant differences were noted between environmental issue (67.5%) and social issue (68.1%) Web sites. The scope of the issue, however, did seem

to make some difference in whether an organization's Web site contained the prescriptive task, although this difference was not statistically significant. An example of the use of the prescriptive task was again provided by the Web site of Generation Green dealing with children's toys made from PVC. Generation Green (1998) made the solution obvious by including the following:

> Furthermore, we call upon other toy manufacturers, such as Hasbro, to work toward eliminating PVC use, to let us know what they [sic] extent of their activities will be, and to set and announce a timetable for reducing or eliminating toxins from their toys

Motivational Tasks

The researchers divided the motivational task into two types: specific appeals and general appeals. Overall, 191 sites (63%) contained one or both of the specific or general motivational appeals. Of these 191 sites, 108 (56.5%) contained only a general motivational appeal. These 108 sites represent 35.5% of all 304 sites. Fifty-two (27%) of the 191 sites had <u>both</u> a general and specific motivational appeal. This represents 17% of the total Web sites in the study.

Thirty-one Web sites (16.2%) had only a specific call to arms but did not have a general motivational appeal. These 31 sites represent 10.2% of all the 304 sites. The numbers suggest that sites using a specific motivational appeal were more likely to use it in combination with a general motivational appeal than by itself.

Specific appeals were defined as any request or suggestion that called for the user to take a specific action or actions to deal with a particular problem. Specific motivational appeals almost always required the user to make a personal sacrifice of time and effort.

As an example, the Caribbean Conservation Corporation & Sea Turtle Survival League (1996) suggests the following:

> *Do not walk on the beach with a flashlight or shine a light in the sea turtle's face. The light may cause the female to abort the nesting process, or other sea turtles nearby may be discouraged from nesting if these are lights on the beach.

> * Do not take pictures using flashes. This high intensity light can be even more disturbing than the flashlights.

> * Stay clear and out of sight of the turtle until she begins laying eggs, otherwise you may scare her back into the sea

Of the 304 sites in the study, only 83 (27.3%) contained a specific motivational appeal (See Table 1). This was the least frequently employed of all tasks. The numbers suggest that both the type of issue and the scope of the issue were factors in whether this call-to-arms task was present. Of 154 environmental issue sites, 54 (35.1%) contained a specific motivational appeal compared to 29 (19.3%) of the 150 social issue sites (See Table 2).

A specific motivational appeal often advocated an action that empowers an individual. The following example, taken from the Darkness to Light (2003) Web site (an activist group for victims of child abuse), employed three different specific appeals:

You can do three things that will **make a difference.** You can:

1. **E-mail your legislators** to voice your opinion. Click on the legislative alerts below to e-mail a pre-formatted letter which you can modify with your own words if you like. Adding your personal story will make your letter even more powerful.

2. **Write a letter to the Editor** at your local paper. Click here to write your letter.

3. **Enlist others** to join in this important battle.

General motivational appeals differ from specific motivational appeals because they do not propose explicit action for the user to take and require only a minimal amount of effort. The most common example of a general call to arms was a simple request for donations to support the overall goals of the organization sponsoring the Web site.

Other general motivational appeals included requests for users to join the organization, subscribe to the organization's newsletter or purchase products from the organization's online store. In each of these cases, the user is essentially making a general donation of time or money and is not required to actually do anything to solve a specific problem.

Of the 304 sites in the study, 160 (52.6%) contained a general motivational appeal (See Table 1). The simplicity involved in presenting the message and the limited amount of effort asked of the user may have contributed to the reasons general motivational appeals were used more frequently than specific calls to arms.

A difference was noted between environmental and social issue sites, with 69 (44.8%) of the 154 environmental activist sites containing a general motivational appeal compared to 91 (60.7%) of the 150 social activist sites (See Table 2).

Execution of the Tasks in Combination

Research question two asked: "if the core tasks are used, in what combination are they employed on activist organizations' Web sites?" Of the 267 (87.8%) Web sites that identified a problem, 177 (66.3%) also attributed blame for the problem, while 200 (75%) of the 267 proposed a solution for the problem. Only 141 (53%) of the 267 sites contained the prescriptive task and one of the two motivational tasks. If you add the attribution-of-blame task as a factor the numbers decrease dramatically. Of the 267 sites that contained a diagnostic task, 101 (38%) included the attribution of blame, prescriptive task and either a general or specific call to arms. This is 33% of all 304 sites included in the study. As illustrated in Table 3, 56 sites representing 18.4% of all 304 sites in the sample contained the first three tasks and the specific motivational appeal.

The type of issue, environmental or social, appeared to be a factor in whether a site contained the first three tasks and a specific call to arms. The difference between the social and environmental sites may not be surprising considering the low frequencies for the attribution of blame and specific motivational appeals in the social issue sites. A Chi-Square analysis generated a value of 11.848 (p<.0001), demonstrating a statistically significant difference between the two types of sites in terms of whether the three major tasks and a specific call to arms were present.

According to the findings of this study, many of the organizations failed to include the call to arms task. Table 3 shows that there were 80 sites with some combination of the first three tasks but lacking any of the call to arms tasks. In these instances, the sites presented information about an issue, but failed to give any direction that would enable the user to take action to attack the problem.

Table 3: *All Core Framing Tasks*

Diagnostic	Attribution	Prescriptive	Specific Motivation	General Motivation		Env.	Social	Total
X	-	-	-	-		8	6	14
X	X	-	-	-		11	10	21
X	-	X	-	-		8	16	24
X	X	X	-	-		22	13	35
X	-	X	X	-		4	0	4
X	X	X	X	-		19	2	21
X	-	X	-	X		7	20	27
X	X	X	-	X		18	27	45
X	-	-	X	-		0	1	1
X	X	-	X	-		1	1	2
X	-	-	-	X		4	5	9
X	X	-	-	X		7	7	14
X	-	-	X	X		2	0	2
X	X	-	X	X		2	2	4
X	-	X	X	X		4	5	9
X	X	X	X	X		21	14	35
-	-	X	-	-		0	2	2
-	-	X	X	-		1	1	2
-	-	X	-	X		0	3	3
-	-	-	X	-		0	1	1
-	-	-	X	X		0	2	2
-	-	-	-	X		4	6	10
No Tasks Present on Site						11	6	17
Valid Sites						154	150	304

An **X** indicates the presence of the task

Table 3 lists all combinations of the four tasks. The intermittency and infrequent use of the different tasks in conjunction with each other do not fit the model based on the work of Snow and Benford. One interesting (and seemingly illogical) finding is the 19 sites that did not identify a problem, yet still completed one or more of the other tasks. Of these 19 sites, 10 had nothing but a general motivational appeal. In each case, those creating or maintaining the Web site may have assumed that users would be so aware of the issue at hand that they felt no need to specify a problem.

Discussion and Recommendations

As Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) state, "activist organizations are important to study in public relations because they have unique communication and relationship-building needs" (p. 264). The Snow and Benford model suggests that the core framing tasks are critical in the formation of messages

that are part of such activist campaigns. For those public relations practitioners working in activist organizations, this means that their messages can best be disseminated by (1) first stating the problem or issue that the organization wants addressed (e.g., global warming), (2) identifying those entities responsible (e.g., polluting industries), (3) clearly explicating what needs to be done to resolve the problem (e.g., reducing emissions) and then finally (4) indicating what the concerned individual can do about it (become active in the organization or attend city council meetings for example).

This study focused on whether the tasks of Snow and Benford's model were found in the issue-related messages on activist groups Web sites. The overall finding that only 18% of the Web sites in the study actually contained messages structured in such a manner means that the activist groups represented in this study may not be making the most efficient use of the messages on their Web sites as a method to advance their interests.

The results did indicate that most sites provided a diagnostic (problem) statement of some sort. This was not surprising given the orientation of the activist organizations creating the issue-oriented landing pages in this study. Coders reported, however, that a sizeable number of Web sites did not state the problem in specific terms; rather they alluded to a problem or implied a problem.

When it comes to attribution of blame (who or what is responsible for the problem), the findings showed a dramatic drop in assigning responsibility for the problem compared to the number of Web sites citing a problem (88% included a diagnostic task compared to 58% that attributed blame). According to Snow and Benford (1988), attribution of blame is an equally critical piece of the model because of the need to identify a common opponent against which to unify those wishing to get involved in the issue.

Interestingly, the environmental Web sites sampled in this study were significantly more likely to attribute blame for the problem than were the social-issue Web sites. Perhaps social-issue activist groups and organizations find it difficult to easily identify those responsible for an issue (e.g., "stop homelessness"), whereas environmental-issue groups often can blame large companies, industry trade groups or legislatures for creating or neglecting environmental ills.

Snow and Benford (1988) suggest that messages containing the diagnostic task often include the prescriptive task, and this research shows a similar pattern. The findings indicated that 75% of the Web sites that contained a diagnostic task also contained messages that included the prescriptive (suggesting a solution) task.

That 25% of the sites do not suggest a solution may be attributable to the organizations' expectations that the solution will be obvious from the presentation of the problem, and therefore a specific solution need not be presented. Snow and Benford suggest, however, that simple awareness may not be enough, particularly if the purpose of the message is to mobilize supporters to play an active role in resolving an issue.

The concepts suggested by Snow and Benford are similar to the hierarchy of effects that is considered to be important in communicating through both advertising and public relations. For example, advertisers must first make consumers aware of a brand or product, then influence their expectations about the benefits of the product, and finally encourage them to try it. In public relations, researchers frequently discuss three types of measurable objectives in a hierarchical pattern: (1) cognitive or awareness objectives that focus on information provided to our publics, (2) affective or acceptance objectives that focus on the audiences' attitudes toward our organization, product or cause, and (3) behavioral objectives that focus on changing actual actions of our audience. In each case, awareness is at the lowest level of the hierarchy.

The motivational (call-to-arms) task specifying a suggested course of action to implement the solution was the least employed core framing task. Only 27% of the issue-oriented Web sites contained messages that asked the Web site user to do something specific about the issue. The groups who developed these sites may be good at raising awareness with their messages, but may have trouble motivating users to action.

It is possible that issue-oriented groups and organizations are so deeply immersed in the issue that they simply leave the statements of the problem and (to a lesser extent) the solution to speak for themselves. Similarly, the practitioners developing these messages may believe that if it is "obvious" who or what is to blame, that "obviousness" should be enough to motivate people.

The researchers, however, agree with Snow and Benford who argue that "participation is contingent upon the development of motivational frames that act as prods to action" (1988, p. 202). Therefore, the public relations messages on these Web sites should be constructed with the goal of not merely educating but also motivating the person who is simply seeking more information. Those already willing to rally in support of the issue may not need specific calls to action, but those accessing an organization's Web site in search of information are likely to be in the developmental stage of interest in an issue, and not yet care enough to take action. They need prodding.

Environmental issue Web sites were more likely to suggest a specific course of action to achieve a solution to a problem than were social issue Web sites. This may be because the messages in environmental issue Web sites

focus on the action of the individual to help make a difference, while social issues may require something beyond the individual such as legislation.

Of course it should be remembered that the ideal is not simply the inclusion of one or two of the Snow and Benford framing tasks in issue-related Web site messages, but rather the employment of all the core framing tasks. As noted above, the issue-related messages on more than 80% of the Web pages in this study did not fit all the elements of the adapted Snow and Benford tasks. Only 23% employed the diagnostic, prescriptive and motivational tasks, while only 30% contained the diagnostic, attribution of blame and prescriptive tasks.

Clearly, the adapted Snow and Benford tasks do not fit the structure of the issue-related messages on the Web site pages in this study. If Snow and Benford's tasks are assumed to be the ideal, these very low numbers leave little doubt that groups and organizations formed to advance a cause should take a more careful look at how they are structuring their public relations messages. This is the case particularly if a key purpose of their Web sites is to recruit and motivate new adherents to their causes.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the researchers make the following recommendations for activist groups or organizations. Experimental research (Dardis, 2004) has shown that adopting the Snow and Benford model increases the likelihood of involvement with an issue. These tasks, therefore, can provide a template for structuring an activist organization's public relations messages. Thus it is incumbent on the practitioner maintaining the Web site to clearly convey the group's issue-related messages in such a way as to not only inform, but to motivate. The staff or volunteers of an activist group may be so immersed in an issue that they overestimate the enthusiasm of those who have yet to become converts. These groups should never forget that many users who come to an activist group's Web site are merely seeking information about an issue and are not already committed to the cause.

A second recommendation is that greater attention be paid to the presentation of issue-related messages if the organization is to make the most efficient use of its Web site as a means of advancing its interests. Members of activist groups or organizations may realize they need a Web site ("everybody else has one") and therefore have created a site without taking the time to think clearly about how users may discover the site. This results in the anomalous situation of a homepage that grabs attention, but might never be seen by a user who accesses the organization's site by entering terms into a search engine.

Third, because they lack the requisite graphic design expertise or the staffing to keep the site up-to-date, activist organizations often outsource the

creation and maintenance of their Web sites. In such cases, an organization's public relations staff may fail to pay close attention to the structure and content of the actual messages conveyed on the site on an ongoing basis. As specific issues evolve, care must be taken to structure new messages to serve the core framing tasks if the site is to continue to achieve maximum benefit.

The employment of the core framing tasks creates a powerful way to motivate people to action. Therefore, reinforcing all of these tasks with multiple message techniques (e.g., stating the problem, illustrating the problem, giving examples of the problem) may produce even more effective results.

Conclusion

Snow and Benford provide one of the few tested models to suggest how public relations practitioners working for activist groups should structure their messages to create support for their issues or concerns, and then to transform this support into action. This study indicates that those charged with the communication role in issue-oriented environmental and social activist groups generally are not employing these core framing tasks and, therefore, may not be making the most effective use of their Web sites.

The results of this study suggest that additional research be conducted to look at specific message framing techniques that could be employed to strengthen the effectiveness of the core tasks. Also, the investigation of the use of these tasks in alternate communications vehicles could add to the growing body of knowledge about framing and its relationship to public relations.

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