

Online: A Case Study of Advocacy Nonprofit Communications in the United States

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Abstract

This study examined two advocacy nonprofits in the United States to determine and compare primary factors that affect the organizations' Internet communication practices. Those most heavily involved with each organization's Internet presence were interviewed, and their websites were examined with attention to specific characteristics, such as interactivity and donation capabilities. Overall, this research did not reveal large differences between state and national advocacy nonprofits' communication strategies. The findings from this research, however, showed that while a small staff in an advocacy nonprofit did not lend itself well to website interactivity, it did not necessarily inhibit its overall web strategy. Therefore, small organizations were still capable of implementing strategic Internet communication practices.

I. Introduction

This research aims to identify the factors that influence how nonprofit organizations in the United States use the Internet for communications. Scholars have defined the nonprofit sector as "private organizations that are prohibited from distributing any profits they may generate to those who control or support them. These organizations are generally exempted from federal, and often from state and local, taxation on grounds that they serve some public purpose" (Salamon 2003). On the whole, scholars have determined that these organizations are not primarily motivated by commercial concerns (Najam 2000). Nonprofit organizations, also known as third or voluntary sector organizations, have been found to have an increasing presence in countries around the world. Recent estimates have determined that 11 percent of the American workforce is employed by a nonprofit organization, up from 7 percent in 1998 (Reed and Bridgeland 2009; Salamon 2003). Scholars have argued that nonprofit organizations are instrumental in a self-governing society (Ferris 1998; Pope 2009; Rees 1999; Taylor and Warburton 2003); however, they have also found that these organizations have served different functions throughout history. These functions include working with the government to provide services, working independently to provide services and advocating policy changes to the government (Young 2000; Hudson 2002).

II. Literature Review

Though the existing literature on the political communication of nonprofit organizations is not extensive, studies have revealed essential information about this area generally. First, a general history of the

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nonprofit sectors in the United States is delineated. Second, literature on what scholars have found to be the roles nonprofits fulfill is discussed. Third, research on the relationship between donors and nonprofits is laid out, for scholars have found that donors are an important audience for nonprofits to target in communications (Chew and Osborne 2009). Fourth, the existing literature on donor patterns is outlined. Finally, what scholars have determined to be communication strategies of nonprofits is discussed. All of these areas lead to the question: What factors affect the communication strategies of advocacy nonprofits in the United States?

History of the nonprofit sector

In the 1960s, nonprofit organizations in the United States reached an agreement with the government, which specified that nonprofits would provide an array of services with government funds (Salamon 2003). Scholars have found that as public attitudes, demographics and policies shifted, however, so did the role of the nonprofit sector (Salamon 2003). In 1996, Congress enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the Balanced Budget Act, both of which established caps on federal domestic expenditures that affect the safety net for low income and poor families (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001). Research has shown that both programs have changed the essence of government welfare, causing families to increasingly turn to nonprofit organizations for support (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001).

Though the sector experienced growth in the years up to 1992, it underwent decline throughout the 1990s because of decreasing government funding for nonprofits, as scholars have determined that the rise and fall of nonprofits is tied directly to the economy and government (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001). Yet government successes do not directly lead to nonprofit success: more research has shown that the nonprofit sector in the United States is more frequently competing for the same audience as for-profit organizations (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001; Young 2000).

Roles of the nonprofit sector

In an effort to explain the roles of the nonprofit sector in society, scholars have derived a variety of models that frame the relationship between governments and nonprofits. Generally, the scholarly models indicate how the form and structure of government impacts the roles nonprofit organizations fulfill (Ferris 1998).

Young (2000) designated three conceptualizations of nonprofit-government relations: complementary, supplementary and adversarial. Complementary organizations partner with the government, helping to carry out the delivery of public goods largely funded by the government. Supplementary nonprofits fulfill a demand from the people for public goods left unsatisfied by the government. Finally, adversarial organizations prod the government to make policy changes and to maintain accountability. These organizations may also be called advocacy organizations, whose activities are based on policy analysis, research and the channeling of information to the necessary bodies (Hudson 2002).

Donor-nonprofit relationships

While many argue the United States is experiencing a civic decline, scholars have found an exception to the decline in voting and association membership in the long-term growth in volunteering (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001). Scholars have determined, therefore, that the relationship between donors and nonprofit organizations is more valued than that between citizens and the government. In the United States, scholars have seen that individual choice is held in high esteem, especially choices relating to philanthropy (Brammer and Pavelin 2005). Scholars have argued this may be related to the fact that Americans place a higher level of confidence in nonprofits than in government or business (O'Neill 2009). Further, research has shown donors in the United States give based on their commitment to an individual organization and its mission, a highly individual choice (Waters 2009).

Donor patterns

Seventy percent of American households reported giving 2.1 percent of their income to charitable causes in 1998 (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001). Further, scholars have determined that Americans on the whole plan their giving, making donations to their charity of choice on a regular basis (Wright 2001). They have also shown that the bulk of this income is given to religious organizations, yet organized religion has "average" to "high" confidence ratings compared to other charitable institutions (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001; O'Neill 2009). Again, scholars trace this to the high value placed on individual choice (Brammer and

Pavelin 2005). Scholars have also found that Americans give to charities they are personally involved with where results can be seen (Wright 2001). On the whole, individual giving has remained consistent in the United States between 1988 and 2001 (O'Neill 2009). Finally, American laws allowing donations to nonprofit organizations to be tax-deductible is a motivator to donate. (Wright 2001).

Communication

Because the mass media and public opinion are important venues of gauging influence of nonprofit organizations, scholars have determined it is important that these organizations understand worthy communication practices (Andrews and Edwards 2004). Scholars have found that for advocacy nonprofits in the United States, gaining media attention for their specific goals is important in defining the issues and creating consensus (Andrews and Edwards 2004). Since the media most frequently cover events rather than issues and show advocacy organizations in an unfavorable light (Andrews and Edwards 2004), scholars have found that nonprofits must actively work to maintain positive media coverage. According to Rees (1999), nonprofits should not attempt to lead public opinion, however—they should aim to tailor their message to current public attitudes.

Further, studies have suggested that nonprofits striving for policy influence should develop their message in the following ways: define the problem to make it seem manageable; present accurate and reliable data on the issue; survey the views of organization members and pass the information along; comb through official data to document the need for policy change; use economic arguments; and appeal to democratic and constitutional principles (Rees 1999).

Scholars have also determined that while the primary audience for nonprofits is its users or beneficiaries, funding sources are a close secondary audience (Chew and Osborne 2008). Studies have found that in order to obtain government contracts, strategic account management, or the practice of differentiating among organizations, combined with identifying client organizations whose contracts are critical for the financial well-being of the supplying body and then serving these key clients in a more individual manner generally provides successful outcomes (Bennett 2008; Chew and Osborne 2008). Essentially, scholars have found that nonprofits should enter government contract bids with a plan, a flexible mission and open communication (Bennett 2008).

Though nonprofit organizations value marketing, scholars have determined that nonprofits are not fully realizing their marketing capabilities when it comes to online or electronic resources (Pope 2009; McNutt and Boland 1999; Burt and Taylor 2000; Hackler and Saxton 2007; Waters 2007; Kang and Norton 2004; Ingenhoff and Koelling 2009). According to previous studies, the primary challenge for nonprofit organizations is a lack of keeping up with and retaining staff (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001; Pope 2009). Additionally, a lack of time, funding, a clear message and knowledge of what to do hinders the ability of nonprofit organizations to market effectively (Pope 2009).

While expertise was the largest source of resistance to electronic marketing, scholars have seen that expense, equipment and awareness also hinder nonprofits' ability to effectively communicate online (McNutt and Boland 1999). Studies have found that 83.6 percent of nonprofits use electronic networking, which primarily consisted of organizations utilizing email (Burt and Taylor 2000; Waters 2007). Fewer than 10 percent of nonprofit organization websites included interactive functions (Kang and Norton 2004). Researchers have also found that websites generally target donor rather than media audiences, ignoring an important avenue through which public opinion can be created (Ingenhoff and Koelling 2009). Finally, scholars have determined that nonprofits generally only participate in electronic advocacy they perceive it will be effective and/or they believe other groups are using it (McNutt and Boland 1999).

When implemented effectively, scholars have determined that information and communication technologies can be used to deliver enhanced campaigning and more successful user services (Burt and Taylor 2003). A relationship between total organization income and their website's dialogic capacity, or ability to interact with relevant audiences, has also been found (Ingenhoff and Koelling 2009).

From the existing literature, it is evident that nonprofits are more likely to experience success when communication strategies are implemented. While it becomes obvious that nonprofits are generally not utilizing their Internet capabilities to the fullest extent possible, it is not clear how different nonprofits implement successful communication strategies. In light of the current global economic climate, nonprofit organizations will likely take a more prominent role in providing services. In many cases, this will involve competition among nonprofits for government contracts and jockeying to become the most desired provider among citizens.

Therefore, a nonprofit must know how to market itself effectively to survive. This research will contribute to the body of analyses of nonprofit communications within the United States. Therefore, this research will seek to determine the factors that affect the communication strategies of advocacy nonprofits in the United States.

III. Research Design

This research will seek to determine the factors that influence the Internet communication strategies of advocacy nonprofits in the United States.

H1: The primary content audience for advocacy organizations will be governmental sources or figures.

This hypothesis is based on Young's (2000) research on the different roles of nonprofit organizations. As advocacy organizations prod the government to make policy changes and to maintain accountability, they will, therefore, target the government as the primary audience for their website.

H2: A small staff and a lack of expertise will lead a nonprofit to have a less interactive web presence and non-comprehensive overall web strategy.

Prior research has found that the primary challenge for nonprofit organizations is a lack of keeping up with and retaining staff (Hodgkinson and Nelson 2001; Pope 2009). Additionally, a lack of time and knowledge of what to do has been found to hinder the ability of nonprofit organizations to market effectively (Pope 2009). Therefore, it stands to reason that these factors will work against the functionality of the website.

This study will use four ways to measure political communication strategies: the website, the use of social media, the website's interactivity and the organization's overall web strategy. For the purposes of this study, the term "website" is defined as whether or not a nonprofit has its own website. Social media is defined as having Facebook or Twitter accounts and/or a blog that is hosted separately from the primary website. A website's interactivity is defined by whether the site facilitates user feedback, which is further defined as having contact information, a contact form or other methods a web user could submit information to the nonprofit organization. An organization's web strategy is defined by the measures taken to target or seek out users.

The study's independent variables are as follows: the scope of the nonprofit, the size/staffing of the organization and its web content audience(s). The nonprofit's scope is characterized by whether the organization serves a state-wide or national audience. One of each was chosen for this study. The staff size of a nonprofit is characterized as small when each member had more than one significant responsibility. Finally, the content audiences are delineated as beneficiaries, donors, government and volunteers. These audiences were derived from prior research that found that while the primary audience for nonprofits was its users or beneficiaries, funding sources were a close secondary audience (Chew and Osborne 2008).

Certain controls were incorporated into the study when choosing which nonprofits to study. First, each nonprofit deals with children or youth as their issue area of focus. The way in which they focus on children varies, but each nonprofit's beneficiaries are children. Second, both nonprofits have a similar income or revenue. In their 2009 reports to the IRS, both organizations posted around \$1,000,000 in revenue. This control is to ensure that both nonprofits studied would have similar resources so that comparisons can be made. Third, both nonprofits are advocacy organizations located in the United States.

The nonprofits studied were found through extensive online searches. Google searches were conducted with phrases similar to: "nonprofit organization + children + Washington DC," "nonprofit + advocacy + youth" and more. More often than not, lists of various charities in the United States would be returned as a top result. Idealist.org, an online database of nonprofit organizations around the world, as also searched for viable nonprofits. Once a potential organization was found, their financial information was sought on GuideStar US, a database that allow nonprofits to list themselves and provide whatever information they wish, which includes recent Form 990s and other financial reports. If the organization's financials were within the desired revenue range, it was added to a list of potential organizations to study. Approximately five to ten viable organizations were found. Each organization was then sent the same email explaining the purpose of the research and asking for their participation.

Once a nonprofit agreed to participate in the study, one interview was set up between the researcher and the staff member primarily involved with the organization's online presence. Interviews were conducted

either in person at the location of the nonprofit or via telephone. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Interviews will prove to be a more productive method of data collecting than a different method, like focus groups, for several reasons. First, past research has shown that participants are more likely to open up in interviews when sensitive topics are being discussed (Lindlof 1995). Further, since subjects are chosen because of their background and/or insight, results are more likely to be useful in the research (Rosenberry and Vicker 57).

The organization's websites were then examined to procure such information as their use of social media and their ability to collect feedback. This analysis is a sort of content analysis, as elements of the nonprofits' websites will be sought and examined. Though the sample size for this particular study is small, having a systematic method for collecting the same data from each site will ensure the accuracy of the study (Rosenberry and Vicker 42).

IV. Case Presentation

This study involves two nonprofit organizations: one national nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., and one state organization based in Raleigh, N.C. Both are advocacy organizations.

The national advocacy organization studied was the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, or CCAI, which is located in northeast Washington, D.C. CCAI was formed in 2001 in response to federal policy that inhibited foster parents from adopting their foster children. In founding CCAI, advocates for orphaned and fostered youth sought to be an objective resource for information necessary in advancing the efforts of policymakers on behalf of children. According to its website, "CCAI's goal is to educate federal policymakers about the need for reform; coordinate Congressional and community efforts to bring about change and facilitate opportunities for communication and awareness." The organization not only works to educate policymakers about adoption; it also hosts events and programs to raise awareness about adoption. One such program, Angels in Adoption, provides the opportunity for members of Congress to honor an individual or entity that has made a contribution on behalf of children in need of adoption. According to the last filed Form 990, CCAI's revenue was \$653,201 in 2008.

Emily Collins is the director of external relations for CCAI and was interviewed for this research. She joined the organization in June 2006 to assist with the Angels in Adoption program, and has since moved on to a larger role that involves organizing CCAI's involvement in National Adoption Day; managing CCAI's website, blog and database; and assisting the policy department within CCAI. Collins is almost entirely involved with CCAI's web presence, as there are only four other people employed by the organization.

The state advocacy organization studied was Action for Children North Carolina, which is located in downtown Raleigh, NC. According to its website, Action for Children NC "is a statewide, independent, non-partisan, non-profit child advocacy organization, dedicated to educating and engaging all people across the state to ensure that our children are healthy, safe, well-educated and have every opportunity for success." The organization was founded in 1983 as the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute in response to the lack of impartial data and research on the well-being of children in the state. In 2006, the current president and CEO, Barbara Bradley, joined the group and it was re-named Action for Children NC. The organization is the major source for research and data on North Carolina's children and publishes the North Carolina Children's Index, a profile of indicators on the health and well-being of the state's children. It is the nationally-recognized state affiliate of Voices for America's Children and is the state Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT partner. According to the last filed Form 990, the organization's revenue was \$1,038,345 in 2009, though it should be noted that more current estimates put Action for Children's revenue closer to \$750,000.

Mandy Ableidinger is Action for Children's director of policy and budget analysis. She joined the organization in November of 2007 and is primarily responsible for state budget and data research and analysis on a variety of topics, as well as lobbying at the General Assembly. Ableidinger is also responsible for Action for Children's website, as the organization does not currently employ a communications director. The communications duties are split up between three employees: the CEO searches the Internet to find articles mentioning Action for Children or pertinent issues, the office manager does news updates on the website, and Ableidinger manages the website and does most other updates. Personally, Ableidinger says that communications duties take up about 10 percent of her time.

V. Findings

After all of the interviews were completed, each organization's website was explored to find the various qualities noted in the research design (See Table 1).

CCAI allowed users to donate on the home page via a red "donate now!" button. Additionally, there was a "support CCAI" page under the "get involved" tab on the site's header. CCAI was present on many social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WordPress – which were all linked on its home page with the respective logos for each platform. The website had no way for users to submit feedback, though there was a link to a Microsoft Word document that potential volunteers can submit. An "info@ccainstitute.org" email address was also included at the footer of every page, along with the organization's physical address. There was no contact page on the website. The site's primary audiences were congressional staff members and the public – two audiences the site aimed to educate about adoption. CCAI worked to drive people to its website through the use of email lists to congressional staffers and general supporters from the media or friends of the organization. Such emails always linked back to website. Collins generally cited a lack of time as a challenge regarding the website, as she is the only person responsible for it but has other significant duties as well.

Action for Children also allowed users to donate on their home page – a "donate now" button under an Action for Children superhero graphic was just over halfway down the page. The same graphic was located on the "research and publications" page. The site also had a "donate" page that is static on the site's footer. Action for Children was present on Facebook, and the homepage displayed a "find us on Facebook" button just underneath the "donate" button. The organization also seemed to have two different YouTube channels – 1ncchild and ncchilddotorg – but neither were linked on their website. The site did not feature a way for users to submit feedback other than through an "admin@ncchild.org" email address, submissions to which were routed into the CEO's email inbox. This address was found on the contact page, which was linked at the footer of every page of the website. The page also contained the organization's physical address, phone number and driving directions. The site's primary audiences were interested members of the general public and state policy makers, each of which are audiences that Action for Children aimed to inform about the well-being of children in the state. Action for Children attempted to drive people to its website by distributing its information at conferences or other events where interested citizens were present. Further, whenever the organization hosted children's advocacy days or other events, they signed people up for action or information email lists. Finally, Action for Children asks their allies in the state to forward information along to their users, as people who are interested in issues like low-income housing issues might also be interested in low-income education issues. Ableidinger cited a lack of time and expertise as the primary challenges when it came to the organization's web presence.

VI. Discussion

As was expected, both advocacy organizations named governmental figures as at least part of their primary web audiences. In fact, both organizations listed both governmental figures and members of the public as their combined primary audiences. CCAI listed congressional staff specifically as their governmental audience, as is expected with a national organization, while Action for Children named state policymakers. A slight difference was evident in what sort of public each organization sought to reach: while CCAI believed this audience was comprised of anyone who had heard about the organization and wanted to learn more, Action for Children thought this audience was comprised more of self-selected, active individuals looking to affect children's issues in the state. This difference aside, it seems that the hypothesis was correct in this particular study.

The next hypothesis positioned that a small staff and a lack of expertise would lead a nonprofit to have a less interactive web presence and non-comprehensive overall web strategy. Both nonprofit employees mentioned the small staff size of their organization and a lack of expertise as a challenge they faced with regards to their website. Neither organization, however, had interactive components to their website. CCAI had a Microsoft Word document available on their website that potential volunteers could submit and a generic "info" email address on the footer of every page. The site did not, however, have a contact page. Action for Children's site had a contact page linked on the footer of every page with a generic "admin" email address.

Table 1: Comparison of Two Websites

	Congressional Coalitio on Adoption Institute	Action for Children NC
Donation Ability		
Home page	yes, red button	yes, bottom half
Donate page	“Support CCAI” under “Get In- volved”	yes on footer
Other		
Social media		
Facebook	“f” logo on homepage	“find us on facebook” on homepage
Twitter	“t” logo on homepage	no
Blog	yes; linked on homepage	no
Other	youtube account; linked on homepage	2 youtube channels; one visited 2 mo ago, one visited 3 wks ago
Interactivity		
Feedback	Word doc volunteer form; “info” email address on footer	admin@ncchild.org email on “contact us” page (footer)
Other	no contact page	
Content audiences		
Beneficiaries	congressional staff and general public primary audiences - edu- cate them	interested publics and policy-makers - educate
Donors		not mentioned
Government	educate congressional staff	educate state lawmakers
Other		inform people who can advocate for change, not necessarily children
Web strategy		
Targeting techniques	email list of congressional staff- ers; list of general supporters from media or friends - always link back to website	give people at conferences/events cards w/ website; sign people up for action notices; ask allies to forward things on to their networks
	national	state

Therefore, from the nonprofits studied, it can be seen that organizations with a lack of time or expertise do not have interactive websites. Both organizations, however, had strategic plans to drive people to their websites.

CCAI utilized lists of congressional staffers and friends in the public to send emails that link back to their website. Action for Children employed a similar method, signing people up to receive email updates and

action notices at various conferences and events and asking their nonprofit allies to forward pertinent information on to their networks. Therefore, the nonprofits studied in this case show that a small staff does not necessarily lead to a less comprehensive overall web strategy. Thus the second hypothesis was only partially correct.

VII. Conclusion

Overall, this research did not reveal large differences between state and national advocacy nonprofits in the United States with regards to their Internet communication strategies. There were no differences in the primary audiences of each organization's website, nor were different comprehensive strategies employed. Finally, a small staff and a lack of expertise presented a challenge for each nonprofit, and their websites did not have a high level of interactivity. Each organization did, however, have a plan to drive web users to their website. Therefore, this research shows that a small staff in an advocacy nonprofit does not lend itself well to website interactivity, but does not necessarily inhibit its overall web strategy.

As this particular research only provided a small insight into the differences in Internet nonprofit communication between state and national advocacy organizations, further research could be done to expand our understanding of these differences. A larger number of organizations could be examined to broaden the extent to which these findings are true. For example, a larger study might sample an advocacy nonprofit from each state as well as a few additional national organizations. Additionally, as a small staff was noted as a hindrance to the communication practices in this research, studying larger nonprofits with more specialized staff members that are solely responsible for communication might yield different results, as they might be more focused on a more comprehensive communication strategy. Finally, future research would benefit from conducting all interviews in person. While it became impossible to do so for this research, it became evident that speaking to someone in person yields richer data than interviewing someone over the phone.

Overall, this study shows that small nonprofits, whether on a state or national level, are inhibited by staff, expertise and resources when it comes to their Internet communication strategies. Small organizations should note from this research that while their capabilities are limited, it is not impossible to have a comprehensive web strategy and a website that adequately informs its primary audience. Nonprofits, therefore, should focus on web strategy in an effort to more effectively serve their beneficiaries. Further, it is interesting to note that for one of the nonprofits studied, communications efforts only indirectly support the services the nonprofit provides and is therefore not seen as essential as other efforts. This study should also serve to show such organizations the importance of an Internet communication strategy. From this and prior research, it is evident that nonprofits who aim to serve more beneficiaries, gather more volunteers, achieve a higher number of donations or any combination of the above should focus some energy into web communications. Such efforts, while time-consuming in the short term, may very well prove their usefulness in the long term, as the Internet becomes an increasingly important venue for information gathering and two way communication.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Briefly, what is the purpose of your organization?
 2. Who/what is the primary audience for your website?
 3. How is this audience targeted?
 4. Secondary audience? And so on.
 5. Government role?
 6. How often is your website updated?
 7. Who in your organization is involved with your online presence?
 8. What do you believe to be the most important function of your website?
 9. What content do you have on the website?
 10. What content do you believe to be most important?
 11. How do current events affect your web presence?
 12. What sort of customer feedback do you most value?
 13. How do you obtain user feedback?
 14. How frequently do you receive feedback?
 15. How do you deal with feedback?
 16. When was your last website redesign?
 17. How often do you plan on re-evaluating your web design?
 18. Do you look at your competitor's websites when evaluating your own?
 19. Do you use social networking?
 20. What other online methods do you use to get the name of your organization out?
 21. What are some challenges you encounter when it comes to your online presence?
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