The relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness to stakeholders

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Abstract

The Internet and World Wide Web are emerging as important public relations tools for both profit and non-profit organizations. Little evidence exists, however, about the extent to which new technologies help organizations build relationships with publics. This article examines the relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness to stakeholder information needs. Two organizational types with differing levels of resource dependency (general environmental activist and watchdog groups) are examined. Our analysis assesses each organizational type's general dialogic capacity as well as the responsiveness of the organizations to requests for information.
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Organizational communicators and scholars have an important stake in the development of the World Wide Web as a relationship-building medium. For organizations, Web sites provide a controlled channel through which they can communicate with stakeholder publics and the media. For stakeholders, Web sites provide publics with a channel through which organizations can be viewed and better understood. The body of scholarship dedicated to studying the Internet and the World Wide Web continues to grow. Recent theorizing suggests that the World Wide Web may facilitate more balanced organization–public relationships[1] and increased participation of citizens in community life.[2]

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Public relations research about the Internet and the WWW falls into two broad categories: attitudes and expectations about the Web as an organizational tool, and Web site design characteristics for providing information to publics. Research by Johnson,[3] White and Raman,[4] Springston,[5] and Ha and Pratt[6] has reported on practitioner attitudes and expectations about the Internet and the WWW as public relations tools. The general consensus by most public relations practitioners is that the Internet and WWW offer organizations one more tool for responding to publics. Another area of research by Esrock and Leichty,[7] and Taylor, Kent, and White[8] has reported on the design features of different types of organizations including Fortune 500 organizations and activist organizations. The findings from these research studies suggest that organizations should be strategic in the design of their Web sites to improve responsiveness to stakeholder information needs.

It is still very early in our understanding of the relationship between Web site design and the accomplishment of public relations goals. There appears to be a discrepancy between what practitioners believe their Web sites can accomplish in terms of relationship building and how Web site *design* actually facilitates relationship building. The purpose of this paper is to address both of these issues to better understand how organizational and stakeholder information needs are met by Web site design.

Two questions are central to understanding the relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness. (1) How adept are organizational Web sites at meeting stakeholder information needs? And (2) what characteristics of Web site design facilitate mutually beneficial interactions? This article explores both of these issues by examining the use of the Web by activist organizations. The first section of this article will briefly discuss activist organizations and their selection in this study. The second section of the article features a discussion of communication theories relevant to organizational–stakeholder relationships. The third section of this article details the hypotheses, methodology, and results of a comparative study of two different types of activist Web sites. The final section of the article provides an analysis of the relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness to stakeholder information needs.

1. Activist groups and organizational theories

There are many different ways to understand activist organizations. They may be examined based on size, mission, success, or use of public relations strategies. Scholars writing 20 years ago or more categorized activist organizations as either large or small based on their "efficiency," or ability to take action on behalf of members.[9] Olson, for example, suggested that "one purpose that is . . . characteristic of most organizations . . . is the furtherance of the interests of their members"[10] Grunig, writing in 1992, suggested that activist groups are inherently harmful to organizations because they force them to expend resources responding to the interests of a minority of citizens.[11] As Grunig noted: "Without a thorough understanding of adversarial groups, the organization may be at their mercy."[12] In contrast to Grunig's claim, however, Olson pointed out that even governments "with all of the [persuasive] emotional resources at its command"[13] cannot fund the vital activities of the state. Individuals and organizations (even government organizations) rarely act for the benefit of "the majority."

The flaw of early research on activist organizations was the assumption that activist groups are not "organizations" in the same way that "for-profit" organizations are. As Grunig suggested: "Activism, indeed, represents a major problem for organizations. Hostilities between organizations and pressure groups are commonplace and often lead to a marshaling of public opinion against the organization that may, in turn, result in government regulation."[14] Additionally, Olson's approach equated the media exposure that "small organizations" can readily attract to be synonymous with "effective public relations."

Neither size, nor organizational effectiveness, is sufficient to understand the complexity of activist organizations; both approaches can be improved by considering communication theory. Current theorizing about activist organizations suggests that although they may not function exactly the same way that "for-profit" organizations do,[15] their use of public relations is similar. Indeed, Grunig suggests that activist groups can gain from seeking out public relations counsel just as much as corporations.[16]

The mission of activist groups helps to explain their use of public relations, especially mediated public relations efforts on the Internet and WWW. For the purposes of this study, we will consider two broad categories of activist organizations: membership and watchdog. New technologies such as the Internet and the WWW are helping organizations that are highly resource/membership-dependent to meet the information needs of key stakeholders. Meeting information needs is essential for survival in a competitive marketplace. We believe that Web sites that facilitate interactivity and increased responsiveness to stakeholder information requests are essential for resource-dependent organizations to meet their stakeholder needs.

Thus, organizations that rely on members for money and action must provide certain features on their Web site. Design features that serve member publics needs include, but are not limited to, information about how to join, how to contribute money, updated calendars of events, frequently asked questions and answers, downloadable information, and opportunities for members to interact with the organization via the Internet.

Watchdog groups, on the other hand, are not as heavily dependent on members for accomplishing their mission and may not need to devote their scarce resources to mediated communication efforts. Rather, watchdog groups may devote their resources to lobbying, advertising, and direct pressure to their targets. This study seeks evidence to support these claims.

1.1. Activist groups as stakeholder-dependent organizations

Before dealing with stakeholder theories in mediated communication environments it is first necessary to explain why we have selected "activist" organizations rather than some other type of organization with a strong Web presence. Dozier and Lauzen have urged practitioners and scholars to value alternative perspectives, such as those of activists, to better understand public relations theory and practice.[17] Stakeholder theories are one method to understand activist groups. These "membership organizations" must meet the informational needs of their stakeholders, and as Smith and Ferguson[18] noted, adapt to changes in the marketplace of ideas. Low stakeholder-dependent organizations are those that see their primary job as being "watchdogs" or "corporate social responsibility groups." Their main purpose is to pressure other organizations such as corporations and governments and they are not as concerned with motivating individual members.

Another approach to understanding activist organizations is through their communication strategies. According to Smith and Ferguson, activist organizations "face some of the same challenges as do other organizations. They strategically use communication to achieve those goals."[19] Activists use public relations in a variety of ways to keep the organization viable and they also use public relations to achieve their missions. The goal of activist organizations is not only to pressure other organizations through strategic public relations, but also, "activist organizations must maintain membership, thrive in what may be called a competitive marketplace of ideas and issues and adjust to changes in their environment."[20]

Many activist groups share common general goals such as a cleaner environment, equal rights for oppressed groups, and improved health care. However, the mission of organizations and the level of dependency on their environment to survive varies. The next section of this article addresses the issue of stakeholder theories in mediated environments.

2. Stakeholder theories in mediated communication environments

Stakeholder theory posits that there are a variety of strategic publics that can influence an organization.[21] Several organizational communication theories help to explain the dynamics of organizational response to stakeholders in general, and organizational responsiveness through the Internet and WWW more specifically. Situational theory, resource dependency theory, and dialogic theory all help explain the complex relationships between activist organizations and publics.

Situational theory suggests that external publics exert influence on organizations.[22] These stakeholders have specific information needs and enact specific communication behaviors. Stakeholder theory explains how individuals recognize, define and resolve problems and it can be easily applied to Internet mediated organization–public relationships.

One of the strengths of Webbed communication currently is its ability to unite publics, or to help individuals recognize that they share interests with others. Traditionally, stakeholder theory has been applied to issues management and crisis communication. However, Cozier and Witmer[23] have extended situational theory to the Internet and have formulated a structuration approach to public formation. The major advance in Cozier and Witmer's theory is that it shifts the focus from publics being organized around organizations and their problems to a realization that publics are formed, and reformed, through mediated communication behaviors. While situational theory tells us *how* and *why* publics apply pressure to organizations, it is also important to understand why publics have *power* over some organizations. Thus, another way to understand the stakeholder is through resource dependency theory.

Resource dependency theory holds that organizations vary in their dependence on external publics and their environment. Emerson suggests, for example, "Social relations commonly entail *ties of mutual dependence* between the parties."[24] According to Pfeffer and Salancik, organizations "depend on their environments. Survival comes when the organization adjusts to, and copes with, its environment."[25] Many public relations researchers implicitly assume a resource dependency model when they theorize about the organization–public relationship. This dependency extends to Internet-mediated relationships. Badaracco, for example, noted that because of new communication technologies "the individual enjoys unprecedented access to

information and a newfound advantage in the sphere of public influence."[26] Heath detailed how mediated information sharing between members of Greenpeace helped influence the decisions of Shell in the United Kingdom.[27] And Coombs showed how small activist Web sites pressured organizations to change their behaviors.[28] How can organizations meet the information needs of mediated stakeholders? Dialogic theory provides a set of communication assumptions that links the situational and stakeholder theories discussed above.

One of the most ethically-grounded theoretical traditions to emerge in communication is dialogue.[29] Pearson was one of the first public relations scholars to use dialogue as a framework to understand relationship building.[30] More recently, Grunig,[31] and Kent and Taylor[32] have offered dialogue as a way to view ethical public relations. Dialogic theory suggests that for organizations to create effective organization–public communication channels, they must be willing to interact with publics in honest and ethical ways. At the most basic level, the presence of activist organizations on the Internet gives them equality in *status* to corporations. As far as providing for stakeholder information needs, Taylor, Kent, and White found that activist organizations do meet the informational needs of member publics but have yet to facilitate genuine dialogue between organizations and their stakeholders.[33] One limitation on the creation of dialogue is interactivity. The concept of interactivity, or responsiveness to stakeholder information needs, is crucial to relationship building and is at the core of this article.

Are organizations creating Web sites that allow for interactivity with stakeholders? Or, are organizations merely creating a Web presence to keep up with their competition? The answers to these questions have implications for the development of the Web as a public relations tool. The remainder of this article explores the relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness to stakeholder needs. This research builds on past research studies of Web site design[34] and quantitatively evaluates the relationship-building functions of Web sites.

3. Hypotheses, methodology, results

To further investigate the relationship between activist organization type and the use of the Web for building relationships a replication and extension of Taylor, Kent, and White's study was conducted.[35] Ha and Pratt suggest that "Organizational type plays a role in predicting certain organization's public relations practices."[36] Taylor, Kent, and White found that activist organizations very in their level of responsiveness based on whether they are "membership interest groups" or "foundation" type activist organizations.[37] To further explicate this relationship we tested three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 posited that:

Hypothesis 1. Membership activist organizations will be more responsive than watchdog organizations.

As noted above, Web site research often compares the Web sites of different organizations. For instance, Witherspoon[38] studied interactivity of top ranked HMO Web sites. Schneider, Frechtling, Edgar, Crawley, and Goldstein examined interactivity in federal health Web sites and public and private health care Web sites.[39] Rice, Peterson, and Christine compared the interactivity of government health related Web sites to privately funded Web sites.[40] Given

that the needs of membership and watchdog organizations vary with their environments and publics, Hypothesis 2 posited that:

Hypothesis 2. Membership organizations will employ dialogic principles in their Web site construction to a greater extent than will watchdog organizations.

Webbed dialogue represents an application of both mediated communication theory and dialogic theory.[41] Activist and watchdog groups, by their missions, must be able to respond to stakeholder information needs. Based on principles of dialogic Web design, Hypothesis 3 posited that:

Hypothesis 3. Responsive organizations will employ dialogic principles to a greater extent than will non-responsive organizations.

Hypothesis 3 seeks evidence of the relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness to stakeholder information seeking behaviors. The methodology is explained below.

3.1. Methodology

This study is a replication and extension of the work of previous public relations researchers. The authors used Taylor, Kent, and White's data set and method.[42] The study followed the operationalizations of the five principles of dialogic relationship building set forth by Kent and Taylor,[43] and Taylor, Kent, and White.[44] To extend this line of research about Web site design and dialogue, the current project collected a second data set and included a different type of activist organization hypothesized to be dialogic—watchdog organizations.

The goal of the comparative study is to generate a model of responsiveness based on resource dependency. A random sample of 150 activist organization Web sites (100 activist environmental organizations from the Taylor, Kent, and White's study and 50 environmental "watchdog" organizations) were analyzed.[45] Activist group samples were randomly selected from the Envirolink Web site (www.envirolink.org). The activist organizations studied were self-sorted into link categories by Envirolink. The two groups differed primarily in terms of mission where "activist" environmental organizations sought to motivate monetary support and participation from members in order to support environmental causes, while "watchdog" organizations are less interested in member support as they are in informing the general public about environmentally or socially unethical/unfriendly organizations.

3.2. Results

The researchers were interested in whether organizational level of dependency on publics for achieving their missions would influence an organizational type's responsiveness to Internet visitors' questions and comments. Utilizing resource dependency theory, Hypothesis 1 posited that membership organizations will be more responsive than watchdog organizations. Hypothesis 1 is supported. Thirty-six percent of the 100 membership organizations responded to an e-mail request for more information whereas only 16% of the 50 watchdog organizations responded similarly.

Table 1
Differences in dialogic principle use by organization type

Index	Organization type				df	t
	Membership		Watchdog			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Ease of interface	67.0	21.3	54.7	22.9	146	3.2*
Dialogic loop	47.5	26.5	20.8	21.5	112.2	6.5**
Return visit gen.	44.2	16.2	21.6	18.4	148	7.7**
Useful to media	47.5	18.1	33.3	22.8	146	4.1**
Useful to volunteers	81.4	17.8	63.8	20.9	80.8	5.0**
Visitor conservation	62.7	27.7	61.1	26.9	146	0.3

* $p < .01$.
** $p < .001$.

The second hypothesis posited that membership organizations will employ dialogic principles in their Web site construction to a greater extent than will watchdog organizations. Again, as noted above, activist organizations have different goals and serve different constituencies. Watchdog organizations devote resources to monitoring governmental and corporate activities rather than on mobilizing individuals and publics. Because watchdog organizations are "partisan,"[46] they are posited to be more asymmetrical and less likely to engage in dialogue with publics. The goal of their discourse is to change organizational/governmental behavior (persuasion), and not simple agreement or understanding. The data from Table 1 show that the hypothesis is supported.

The data show that membership organizations were different from watchdog organizations in their use of four out of six dialogic principles, displaying those principles to a greater extent in the cases of dialogic loop, return visiting, media utility, and volunteer utility, but not visitor conservation. Table 1 summarizes the results of separate t tests used to test this hypothesis. Because multiple bivariate comparisons were conducted, the alpha for each comparison was made more restrictive by dividing 0.05 by 27 (the total number of bivariate comparisons made in the course of the analysis), resulting in a requirement that significance levels reach .002 or lower (after rounding) in order to reject the null hypothesis.[47]

Taylor et al. tested the relationship between dialogue and organizational responsiveness and found that the use of dialogue and the likelihood that organizations would respond were correlated.[48] Indeed, Taylor et al. suggest that responsive organizations are "(a) designed to be useful to members of volunteer publics, and (b) intended to retain visitors at the site."[49] Hypothesis 3 sought further evidence for this claim. Hypothesis 3 tested if: responsive organizations will employ dialogic principles to a greater extent than will non-responsive organizations. The hypothesis is supported. Responsive organizations were different from non-responsive organizations in their use of three out of six dialogic principles, displaying those principles to a greater extent in the cases of return visiting, volunteer utility, and visitor conservation but not ease of interface or dialogic loop. Table 2 summarizes the results of separate t tests used to test this hypothesis. As with Hypothesis 2, the alpha was made more restrictive.

The employment of dialogic principles clearly seems to be conditioned by organization type and to subsequently influence the responsiveness of that organization. The remainder of this analysis seeks to make sense of this relationship.

Table 2
Differences in dialogic principle use by responsiveness

Index	Responsiveness				df	t
	Responded		Did not respond			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Ease of interface	61.7	23.6	65.9	19.5	146	1.0
Dialogic loop	37.0	26.8	43.2	30.2	146	1.2
Return visit gen.	32.7	19.7	46.2	17.6	148	3.9**
Useful to media	40.7	20.4	48.1	21.0	146	2.0*
Useful to volunteers	72.1	20.8	84.1	17.6	146	3.4**
Visitor conservation	56.4	25.9	75.6	26.3	146	4.1**

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .001$.

Table 3 summarizes the differences in terms of dialogic principles among organizations cross-tabulated by type and responsiveness, as indicated by a Scheffe post hoc test of one-way analyses of variance for each dialogic principle. Note that membership organizations are not statistically different from one another in terms of their employment of dialogic principles, regardless of their responsiveness. The same is true of watchdog organizations. For each type of organization, however, responsive organizations do employ dialogic principles to a numerically greater degree than do non-responsive organizations.

The data offers support for all three hypotheses regarding the relationship of responsive and non-responsive organizations and membership and watchdog organizations. Table 3 supports the assumptions of resource dependency theory that suggest that organizations are more responsive to stakeholders who have influence over organizational outcomes.

The final table to be reported here, Table 4, summarizes how the 150 organizations in the sample compared to Taylor et al.'s 31 dialogic communication items. The values for each item represents the number of "yes" responses to a dichotomously coded (i.e., yes or no) index item. The table includes totals for both types of activist organizations as well as individual data for each type of activist organization.

Table 3
Dialogic principle use by organization type and responsiveness

Index	Organization type							
	Membership				Watchdog			
	No reply		Reply		No reply		Reply	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Ease of interface	66.4	22.8	68.1	18.5	54.4	23.3	56.2	22.2
Dialogic loop	47.7 a	24.3	47.2 a	30.3	20.0 b	21.3	25.0 b	23.1
Return visit gen.	41.5 ab	15.7	49.1 a	16.0	19.3 c	17.5	33.3 bc	19.7
Useful to media	45.3 ab	16.9	51.4 a	19.7	33.3 b	23.3	33.3 b	21.8
Useful to volunteers	78.1 ab	18.4	87.2 a	15.2	62.5 b	20.8	70.0 b	21.4
Visitor conservation	55.7 a	26.6	75.0 ab	25.7	57.5 ab	25.0	79.2 b	30.5

Note. Means with different letters are different, $p < .05$, based on post hoc tests.

Table 4
Occurrence of dialogic features

Scale or item value	Total	Activist	Watchdog
Ease of interface			
M (alpha = 0.29)/SD (N = 148)	63.0/22.5	67.0/21.3	54.7/22.9
Site map	32	38	19
Major links to rest of site	97	99	94
Search engine box	38	44	25
Low reliance on graphics	86	87	83
Usefulness to media			
M (alpha = 0.50)/SD (N = 148)	42.9/20.8	47.5/18.1	33.3/22.8
Press releases	55	60	44
Speeches	19	22	12
Downloadable graphics	18	18	17
Audio/visual capacity	6	5	8
Clearly stated positions	80	99	71
Identifies member base	72	81	53
Usefulness to volunteers			
M (alpha = 0.46)/SD (N = 148)	75.7/20.5	81.4/17.8	63.8/20.9
Statement of philosophy	99	100	96
How to join	84	91	70
How to contribute money	68	82	39
Links to political leaders	36	39	30
Logo of organization is prominent	93	95	90
Conservation of visitors			
M (alpha = 0.11)/SD (N = 148)	62.2/27.4	62.7/27.7	61.1/26.9
Important info available on first page	43	41	48
Short loading time (<4 s)	64	87	15
Posting of last updated time and date	50	54	42
Return visit encouragement			
M (alpha = 0.59)/SD (N = 150)	36.7/20.0	44.2/16.2	21.6/18.4
Explicit invitation to return	12	16	2
News forums	18	21	12
FAQ's or Q&A's	20	28	4
Bookmark now	1	1	0
Links to other Web sites	70	73	62
Calendar of events	60	76	25
Downloadable information	30	33	23
Requestable information	74	96	29
News items posted w/in last 30 days	51	54	44
Dialogic loop			
M (alpha = 0.66)/SD (N = 148)	38.8/27.9	47.5/26.5	20.8/21.5
Opportunity for user-response	83	94	60
Opportunity to vote on issues	33	44	8
Survey to voice opinion on issues	36	46	15
Offers regular information	4	6	0

Note. With respect to column headings: where the total N is less than 150, the missing cases are from the latter sample. After the composite data for each scale is given, data for individual items (expressed as a percentage of cases assigned affirmative or "yes" scores) within each scale are provided.

As with Taylor, Kent, and White's method, "scores for the dialogic principle indices were computed by dividing the number of observed "yes" responses on the items comprising the index by the number of total items in the index and treating the result as a percentage."[50] Table 4 includes for each index the number of items comprising it, the mean and standard deviation of the calculated index scores for the 150 organizations, and a reliability measure indicating the extent to which the items in the index tended to co-vary.

4. Web site design and organizational responsiveness

Organizations that rely on relationships with their publics to accomplish their goals need to solicit, consider, and adjust to stakeholder feedback. There is a clear difference in responsiveness between the two types of environmentalist organizations. The data show that the more dialogically oriented an organization "appears," then the more likely that organization is to actually respond to stakeholder information seeking behaviors.

4.1. Design features of responsiveness

The data show that organizational type, and level of dependence on publics for accomplishing an organizational mission, may influence responsiveness. While the two types of organizations studied here have many similarities (see Table 4), the differences are illustrative of their desire to interact with publics. For instance, membership organizations appear much more likely to identify their membership base (perhaps in an attempt to build identification), provide information about how to join the organization (and thus increase their power base), provide a means for visitors to donate money (revenue building), detail a calendar of events (mobilizing publics for an activity), and solicit feedback about issues through votes, surveys, or feedback loops. All of these features are crucial for a highly dependent type of organization to organize and adapt to member needs. Adaptation is necessary because if an organization in a highly competitive area does not meet the needs of its member publics, then another organization is always available to do so. The watchdog organizations show a very different picture on these features. It appears that the watchdog organizations in this study do not devote their resources to membership information needs, but may instead allocate them to other types of efforts.

That visitor conservation proves to be an important variable in predicting responsiveness and yet it appears to play little or no role in predicting dialogue is worth exploring. Like Taylor et al. this study tested visitor conservation using three variables: important information on the first page, short load time for pages, and posting information regarding when the page was last updated. When one considers the diverse interests of the two types of stakeholders studied here, this apparent contradiction becomes clearer. Organizations that have made a commitment to providing valuable information to a variety of publics and regularly updating Webbed information tend to respond (dialogically) to requests for information. This is not surprising. Nor is it surprising that watchdog organizations, which tend to be less responsive and less dialogic, appear to be less willing to expend resources in providing up-to-date information.

Like Taylor et al.'s findings, neither membership nor watchdog environmental organizations show much concern for the needs of media publics, nor do they make much of an effort to

foster genuine dialogue—the dialogic loop has the lowest dialogic index score for watchdog organizations and is tied for second-lowest for membership organizations. Although detailed exploration of this finding is beyond the scope of this paper, it does lend support to Taylor et al.'s claim that activist organizations do not take full advantage of the Web as a tool for dialogue with stakeholders.

As suggested by Cozier and Witmer, stakeholder theory suggests that the creation of cohesive (or aware) "publics" is facilitated by organizational communication and through mediated communication channels such as the Web.[51] And as situational theories suggest, publics only become active when they recognize that they are participants in a shared issue and that they have the power to do something about an issue. Organizations that can create identification between themselves and their publics increase the likelihood that publics will turn to that organization (a source with which they identify) for guidance. Thus, from a stakeholder perspective, organizational Web sites are important tools for creating strong, mutually beneficial ties with publics.

4.2. Implications for public relations

The data in this study lend support to many of the critical and qualitative assessments of public relations and the Internet. For instance, Witmer[52] used the term "Web presence" to describe organizational Web sites that exist just to provide public exposure of the organization. In addressing design characteristics, Witmer tells practitioners to determine the purpose of the site, understand technical considerations, incorporate two-way communication, select and register a domain name, and utilize a high-speed host server. In a series of studies specifically designed to measure Web site content, Esrock and Leichty examined Fortune 500 organizations' Web sites for evidence of social responsibility.[53] Esrock and Leichty[54] found that many organizations create Web content that details evidence of the organization's good deeds and that Web site designs are fairly straightforward—product information, history of organization, news releases, contact information, and social responsibility claims. The data from this study confirm these claims.

Some answers as to why choices are made can be found in White and Raman's interviews with Web site decision makers. White and Raman found that most organizational Web sites are designed to provide information, to showcase advertising and marketing, and for customer service communication and feedback (e-mail).[55] Additionally, White and Raman reported that most organizations could not determine whether or not their Web sites were actually reaching their target publics. Indeed, many respondents noted that the purpose of their organization's Web site served more of a "status symbol" or "image building" function than as a relationship-building tool (presence over content). In an extension of this line of research, Hill and White[56] interviewed public relations practitioners and found that while many recognized the value of their Web sites for media relations, reaching new audiences, and building relationships, most of the practitioners viewed their responsibility for the organization's Web site as a "B-list" job. Public relations' responsibility for Web site design and content appears tenuous at best. The low levels of interactivity that are built into Web sites in this study support Hill and White's findings.

There is an inconsistency between what practitioners think is possible through the Internet and what they are actually doing to facilitate relationship building. Springston[57] surveyed public

relations professionals and found that most practitioners believed that effective Web site design could facilitate public interaction with the organization. Many practitioners value Web sites because they allow smaller organizations to compete with larger ones in the mediated marketplace. Ha and Pratt[58] studied practitioners' use of organizational Web sites and found that most contain e-mail addresses (67%), most are infrequently updated (ranging from less than once a month to more than 2 years), and most are unwilling to safeguard the privacy of their publics (97%).

As it now stands, many, if not most scholars studying the Web, recognize that Web sites are very poorly used dialogic tools. In spite of the recommendations of scholars to incorporate two-way (and dialogic) communication channels[59] most Web sites fail to effectively maintain open channels of communication with stakeholders. This study supports that trend. As indicated above, both types of activist organizations studied employed poor dialogic communication, exhibited little commitment to building relationships with interested publics, and fewer than 30% of the total sample even responded to interested publics when contacted directly via e-mail. Given the increasing role played by the Web in the conduct of commerce and as tools for organization–public relationship building organizations would be advised to increase their commitment to public dialogue if the full potential of the Web is to be realized. Indeed, most theories of interpersonal and group relationship building highlight the importance of acknowledging publics and creating relationships of trust and dependence. It is unfortunate that public relations has been so slow to embrace the importance of mediated relationship building to develop and maintain public commitment and trust.

To make the Internet and Web successful public relations tools it is important to understand their potential as well as their limitations. With Webbed communication, the potential for organizations to have direct communication with interested publics is possible. The limitation of Webbed communication is that the actual design of a Web site can dramatically influence a visitor's perception of an organization.

5. Conclusion

The data collected here have explored how the Internet allows activist organizations with different levels of resource dependency to reach new and existing publics. A cursory look at the plethora of activist organizations out there shows that there is a group organized around almost every issue—abortion rights, the environment, war and peace, democracy, rights of the marginalized (women, homosexuals, minorities, handicapped) and so on. However, the mission and dependence on stakeholder publics for achieving organizational goals can explain the use of the WWW by most activist organizations. For the purposes of this study, we followed Taylor et al.'s classification of environmental activist organizations as "membership" and "watchdog."[60] Environmental activist membership organizations seek to improve the environment by bringing pressure on politicians and organizations, and by raising the awareness of publics interested in activist causes; watchdog groups and social responsibility groups seek to use education and pressure to keep American and international corporations ethical. The Internet varies in its use as a key part of their public relations efforts.

The value of this current study is that it examines mediated responsiveness through resource dependency theory and demonstrates that the more dialogically oriented an organization

"appears," the more likely an organization is to actually respond to its stakeholders. Although explaining the organizational psychology of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this article, stakeholder theory, situational theory, resource dependency theory, and dialogic theory all point to the same conclusion: organizations that want to build lasting relationships based on trust with their publics need to actually pay attention to them—or care about them. Those organizations that see publics as merely means to ends, that is, simply as "customers," will have difficulty building lasting relationships with their publics.

The data suggest that if organizations want to use their Web sites to build relations with publics, certain design features are necessary. The more an organization depends upon its publics for achieving its mission, the more it should employ dialogic features into its Web site design. Organizations already recognize the value of their Web sites for relationship building. Now, the challenge is to move the tasks associated with Web site design and maintenance away from being a "B-list" job to being an imperative for the survival of highly stakeholder-dependent organizations. When this happens, then public relations will gain influence in organizational decision-making, and publics will gain the information that they need to make informed choices.

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