
Tweeting Social Change: How Social Media Are Changing Nonprofit Advocacy

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Abstract

How are nonprofit organizations utilizing social media to engage in advocacy work? We address this question by investigating the social media use of 188 501(c)(3) advocacy organizations. After briefly examining the types of social media technologies employed, we turn to an in-depth examination of the organizations' use of Twitter. This in-depth message-level analysis is twofold: A content analysis that examines the prevalence of previously identified communicative and advocacy constructs in nonprofits' social media messages; and an inductive analysis that explores the unique features and dynamics of social media-based advocacy and identifies new organizational practices and forms of communication heretofore unseen in the literature.

Keywords

nonprofit advocacy, social media, Twitter, Facebook, new media, Internet, organizational communication, public relations

In March 2012, Invisible Children, a San Diego-based nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to bringing awareness to the activities of indicted Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony, started an Internet video campaign called “Kony 2012.” The goal

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was to make Kony internationally known in order that he be arrested by year's end. Within three days, the "Kony 2012" video quickly became one of the greatest viral successes in the short history of social media, drawing millions of viewers on YouTube. Within three weeks, it spurred action on Capitol Hill: Over a third of U.S. senators introduced a bipartisan resolution condemning Kony and his troops for "unconscionable crimes against humanity" (Wong, 2012).

Invisible Children's video campaign offers a vivid example of how the Internet has engendered new possibilities for advocacy organizations to engage stakeholders and influence public policy (e.g., McNutt & Boland, 1999; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007). Such is especially the case for *social media* sites such as Facebook and Twitter, technologies whose interactivity, decentralized structure, and formal networking ties boost nonprofits' capacity for strategic stakeholder communications (e.g., Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011). For advocacy nonprofits in particular, social media sites provide a way to expand advocacy efforts by reaching new networks of community actors and by mobilizing those networks to take action.

An emerging body of literature has explored advocacy organizations' employment of social media (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Edwards & Hoefler, 2010; Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). However, most of these studies only examine the prevalence of social media, or *whether* advocacy organizations use social media; they barely touch on *how* they use them, and when they do, have merely looked at static profile information. There is a striking need for research on how organizations are using the core dynamic feature of social media sites—the frequent brief messages, or "status updates," the organization sends to its network of followers.

This article represents a focused effort in this direction. Our research question is straightforward: How are nonprofit organizations using social media to engage in advocacy work? To answer this question, we investigate the social media use of 188 501(c)(3) advocacy organizations. We focus on two levels of analysis: Organization and message. At the organizational level, we examine the types of social media technologies employed and the use of the different communication tools available on Twitter. We then conduct the first study of advocacy organizations' social media messages. This message-level analysis is twofold: A quantitative content analysis that examines the prevalence of previously identified communicative and advocacy constructs in nonprofits' use of social media; and a qualitative inductive analysis that explores the unique features of social media-based advocacy and identifies organizational practices previously unseen in the literature. Drawing on insights from these analyses, we then present a "pyramid" model of social media-based advocacy that entails a three-stage process: Reaching out to people, keeping the flame alive, and stepping up to action. Beyond these theoretical contributions, this study represents a much-needed investigation into the social media use of nonprofit advocacy organizations. Our data shed new light on how social media help organizations engage in advocacy work.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: We begin with a review of prior research on nonprofit advocacy and emerging organizational uses of social media for advocacy work. We then discuss data and methods. The fourth section presents our

analyses and a discussion of our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the study's theoretical and practical implications.

Review of Prior Research

A central theoretical task of the article is to establish a framework through which to study how advocacy organizations are using social media to effect policy change. Given that Twitter and Facebook are primarily communication networks, and that the organizations studied are doing advocacy work, we bring together two important strains of research: Advocacy strategies and tactics from the nonprofit literature, and social media-based forms of advocacy communication from the communication and public relations literatures.

Nonprofit Advocacy Strategies and Tactics

Advocacy is a core nonprofit function that is attracting growing scholarly interest (e.g., Child & Gronbjerg, 2007; LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009; Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008; Suárez & Hwang, 2008). Through advocacy activities, nonprofit organizations contribute to democratic governance by representing the interests of citizens and promoting changes in public policy. The advocacy function is crucial not only to organizations that engage primarily in external representational activities, but also service providers and other charitable organizations. For most nonprofits, advocacy activities represent an additional path for helping achieve the organizational mission and improving the lives of their constituents (Guo, 2007; O'Connell 1994).

On social media as in the offline environment, an organization's advocacy efforts are revealed in the tactics it employs to implement its advocacy strategies. Berry (1977) made an early distinction between advocacy *strategies*, or the more general, long-range approaches to influencing public policy; and advocacy *tactics*, or the specific actions taken to execute a particular strategy. Berry (1977) identified four advocacy strategies: Litigation, embarrassment and confrontation, information, and constituency influence and pressure.

Scholars have since devised a variety of ways of broadly categorizing advocacy strategies: Gais and Walker (1991) characterized *inside* and *outside* strategies; Gormley and Cymrot (2006) theorized *insider* vs. *outsider* strategies; while Mosley (2011) conceptualized *insider* and *indirect* strategies. Though these studies differ in preferred terminology, they share a concern with distinguishing working "inside the system" (e.g., legislative lobbying, legislative testimony) from working "outside the system" (e.g., public education campaigns, mass media overtures, and protests and demonstrations).

Collectively, this literature has also identified a comprehensive list of tactics nonprofit organizations use to execute their chosen strategies. Drawing upon existing typologies (e.g., Avner, 2002; Reid, 1999), Guo and Saxton (2010) identified eleven advocacy tactics: Research, media advocacy, direct lobbying, grassroots lobbying, public events and direct action, judicial advocacy, public education, coalition building,

administrative lobbying, voter registration and education, and expert testimony. Although they did not explicitly relate these advocacy tactics to broader strategies, one can reasonably infer that direct lobbying, judicial advocacy, administrative advocacy, and expert testimony fall under the umbrella of the “insider” strategy, whereas the other tactics fall under the “indirect” strategy.

In short, prior literature points to the importance of advocacy for nonprofit organizations and has identified the broad strategies and specific tactical forms these organizations employ *offline* to reach their public policy goals. We can use these insights to examine whether and how these tactics and strategies are utilized in the social media environment.

The Use of Social Media for Nonprofit Advocacy

Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media sites have introduced new convening platforms for organizations to facilitate relationship building and stakeholder engagement. Social media are claimed to help organizations engage present and potential stakeholders by sharing, cooperating, and mobilizing joint actions in near-real time (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). Social media’s interactive, decentralized environment offers a low-cost way for organizations to mobilize supporters, foster dialogic interactions with large audiences, and attract attention to issues that might otherwise be ignored by traditional media (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012).

Recent studies have begun to explore advocacy organizations’ social media use. Bortree and Seltzer (2009) investigated the Facebook profiles of 50 environmental advocacy groups. Greenberg and MacAulay (2009) analyzed 43 Canadian environmental organizations’ use of websites along with social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. Although nonprofit organizations have begun to adopt social media to enhance their communication, organization, and fundraising strategies, both studies indicated that advocacy organizations failed to fully utilize the affordances of social media.

While the above research has focused on *whether* organizations use social media, a number of recent studies have begun to examine *how* and *why* they use it. Petray (2011) found that Aboriginal activists in Australia are using listervs, blogs, e-petitions, and social networking sites to further their cause and bring awareness of their struggle to a wider audience. Meanwhile, in a study of 53 advocacy groups in the United States, Obar, Zube, and Lampe (2012) found most were using social media on a daily basis to facilitate civic engagement and collective action. When seen together with evidence from the political science literature (e.g., Ammann, 2010), social media appears to be an increasingly relevant tool for political and advocacy campaigns.

Notwithstanding their important contribution, existing studies on advocacy organizations’ social media use focus almost exclusively on either the adoption or basic organizational uses of social media. Scholars have yet to examine the messages sent by advocacy organizations on social media, despite the fact that messages, in the form

of “statuses” and “updates,” are the chief dynamic feature of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. As a result, we know little about the actual information content of advocacy organizations’ social media presence. Message-level analyses are needed to better understand the role of social media in advocacy work.

Communication scholars have made important inroads into such message-level analysis (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011) and thus provide helpful frameworks for understanding nonprofit advocacy work on social media. Most relevant for understanding advocacy is recent work by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), who identified three key communicative functions in the tweets sent by the 100 largest nonprofit organizations in the United States—*information*, *community*, and *action*. The “information” function covers tweets containing information about the organization’s activities, highlights from events, or other news, facts, reports or information relevant to an organization’s stakeholders. The “community” function covers tweets that serve to interact, share, and converse with stakeholders in a way that ultimately facilitates the creation of an online community. The “action” function covers tweets that aim to get followers to “do something” for the organization—anything from donating money or buying T-shirts to attending events and engaging in advocacy campaigns.

In sum, this review of existing research indicates an accumulating body of knowledge is available that can improve our understanding of nonprofit advocacy strategies and tactics in offline settings, but that we lack useful frameworks and typologies for examining advocacy in the social media environment. The review also suggests much can be learned from the communication literature about developing such a framework. By combining insights from the communication literature with those from the nonprofit advocacy literature, we have a base from which to analyze how advocacy nonprofits utilize social media to effect social change.

Method

Sample

Our sample comprises the 188 “Civil Rights and Advocacy” organizations rated in 2011 by Charity Navigator, an independent nonprofit organization that evaluates the financial health of American charities. To be evaluated, an organization must be a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, have available at least four consecutive years of IRS Form 990, and receive public support greater than US\$500,000 and total revenue more than US\$1,000,000. The average organization in our sample had US\$8.65 million in total revenues and US\$8.80 million in total expenses in the most recently completed fiscal year. They cover a range of sizes and advocacy issue areas, including health, education, civil rights, the environment, and others (a web appendix at gregorysaxton.net lists each organization’s name, location, size, industry, and social media profile).

Data Collection

We gathered two sets of data. First, we determined each organization's adoption of popular social media tools through a review of its website supplemented by queries on the Google, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn search interfaces. Second, we gathered detailed Twitter data. Twitter has an open application programming interface (API), and is arguably the world's premier *message network* (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Twitter is well suited to advocacy work, and broadly serves as a proxy for organizations' overall social media use.

Python code was written (available upon request) to access the Twitter API and download all Twitter activity for the organizations over the month of April, 2012. A month-long period was chosen to give sufficient time for each organization to send multiple types of messages, and is in line with prior social media research (e.g., Lovejoy et al., 2012).¹

Analysis Plan

We employ both organizational-level and message-level analyses. First, at the organizational level, we will look at the organizations' adoption rates for major social media platforms, along with the frequency with which they use the various communicative tools available on Twitter. The heart of our analysis, however, is on the core technological feature of Twitter—the messages the organizations send in support of advocacy work. For these message-level analyses a random sample of 750 messages (tweets) sent during April 2012 was selected, and we employ a mix of quantitative content analysis and qualitative inductive analysis of these data. The reason is simple: We seek to, on the one hand, explore how advocacy- and communication-related concepts and practices identified in the existing literature are manifested in organizations' uses of social media; and, on the other hand, to capture practices that are unique to social media and have thus not yet appeared in the extant literature.

Accordingly, our analysis of the data possesses a bifurcated strategy: We first employ quantitative content analyses—using the categories of social media-based forms of communication and categories of advocacy tactics identified in the existing literature—and then qualitative inductive analyses to identify categories of communicative and advocacy practices that are newly emergent in nonprofits' social media use and thus not previously identified. This approach is in line with the methodological literature, which sees content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004) as more appropriate for positivistic evaluations of frequency distributions, and so forth, and qualitative inductive analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as more appropriate for grounded theory building.

In short, we take a content analysis approach to studying previously identified constructs, and an inductive grounded-theory approach to finding new categories of advocacy practices. When combined, these analyses will help us to compare social media-based advocacy to existing theory and other forms of advocacy, as well as to

Table 1. Social Media Use—188 Advocacy Organizations, April 2012

| Social media platform | Total | Proportion of all organizations (%) |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------------------------------------|
| Twitter | 150 | 79.79 |
| Facebook | 163 | 86.70 |
| YouTube | 135 | 71.81 |
| Other (Google+, LinkedIn, etc.) | 79 | 42.02 |
| Any social media tool | 175 | 93.09 |

find new forms of action and new theoretical constructs that can inform future research on nonprofits' advocacy efforts.

Results

Before turning to in-depth analyses of nonprofits' social media messages, we report findings from organizational-level analyses that tap nonprofits' adoption of social media and basic employment of technological tools on Twitter.

Organizations' Adoption and Use of Social Media Tools

Social Media Applications Adopted. We first examine the organizations' adoption of social media. Table 1 shows the number and proportion of organizations that use the major social media platforms. Over 93% of the organizations ($n = 175$) in our sample are using social media in some capacity. Facebook is the most popular, being used by nearly 87% ($n = 163$) of the organizations. Twitter is a close contender, being used by almost 80% ($n = 150$). Slightly less than 72% use YouTube. About 42% utilize other social media platforms such as Google+ and LinkedIn.

Organizations' Use of Twitter Communication Tools. More important than whether organizations use social media is how they use it. Similar to other social media sites, organizations on Twitter have use of two dynamic tools: *connections* and *messages*. First, connections are made through "friending" behavior. This involves the formal, typically reciprocal connection between two users. As noted in Table 2, the average organization in our sample had 2,465 *friends* at the end of April, 2012, with a range from 0 to 83,559 (this is slightly below the 3,459 average friends of the large nonprofits on the *NPTimes 100* list studied by Lovejoy et al., 2012). Such connections are potentially important. Not only can they facilitate coalition-building, but they send a signal to the user community that the organization is interested in what that community has to say, given that these formal relationships facilitate the two-way flow of communication—the organization's followers automatically see what the organization is saying, and the organization automatically sees what its online community is talking about it. Highly engaged organizations can thus use these connections to "keep a

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Organizations' Use of Twitter Communication Tools, April 2012

| Variable | Observations | Mean | Standard deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|--|--------------|----------|--------------------|---------|---------|
| <i>Relationship tools</i> | | | | | |
| Number of friends | 150 | 2,465.39 | 8,099.59 | 0 | 83,559 |
| <i>Communication tools</i> | | | | | |
| Total number of tweets | 150 | 103.21 | 128.87 | 0 | 1,000 |
| Number of direct messages | 150 | 6.55 | 10.43 | 0 | 53 |
| Number of retweets | 150 | 23.11 | 41.68 | 0 | 329 |
| Number of hyperlinks | 150 | 77.41 | 97.74 | 0 | 567 |
| Number of hashtags | 150 | 108.51 | 189.67 | 0 | 1,354 |
| Number of mentions | 150 | 88.05 | 121.85 | 0 | 834 |
| Number of tweets with ≥ 1 hyperlink | 150 | 75.79 | 96.48 | 0 | 567 |
| Number of tweets with ≥ 1 hashtag | 150 | 62.44 | 100.22 | 0 | 773 |
| Number of tweets with ≥ 1 mention | 150 | 53.37 | 74.82 | 0 | 471 |

finger on the pulse of the community” while ensuring their own messages reached the broadest community possible. Needless to say, an organization with 0 *friends* will find it difficult to have a successful “call to action” in the online environment.

The second, and most important, technological feature of Twitter is the ability to send short messages, or *tweets*, or 140 characters or fewer. The 150 organizations in our sample with Twitter accounts sent a total of 15,482 tweets during the month of April. As shown in Table 2, on average, an organization sent about 103 tweets during the 4-week period, nearly 3.5 tweets per day. Compared to 2.3 tweets/day sent out by *NPTimes 100* organizations (Lovejoy et al., 2012), these advocacy organizations are heavier tweeters. Yet there is much variation: some organizations sent as many as 1,000 tweets, while seven of them did not send a single one.

There is also substantial variation in the use of five remaining technological tools available to organizations in their tweets: Direct messages, retweets, hyperlinks, hashtags, and user mentions. First, the *direct message* (also known as an *@reply*), characterized as any message that starts with “@[username]”, represents a form of “public email” directed at the indicated user. Sending a direct message demonstrates responsiveness and establishes a dialogue between users and the organization. Users direct questions and comments to the organization using a public message, and organizations can acknowledge and respond to these messages. We found 6.35% of all tweets were direct messages, well below the 16% by nonprofits on the *NPTimes 100* list (Lovejoy et al., 2012) or the 12% and 22% proportions sent by the individuals studied by Java, Finin, Song, and Tseng (2007) and Hughes and Palen (2009), respectively. As shown in Table 2, the average organization sent 6.55 direct messages over the month, just over one every 5 days.

A second special type of tweet is the *retweet*. Indicated by “RT,” the retweet function allows one user to repost a tweet from another user while acknowledging that user by adding “RT@[username]” to the beginning of the message. We found 22.39% of the tweets ($n = 3,466$) in our sample were retweets, with the average organization sending 23.11 over the month of April. This is more than the 16.2% found by Lovejoy et al. (2012) for *NPTimes* 100 organizations but less than the 28% found by Hughes and Palen (2009) for individuals during natural emergencies. Retweets can serve a variety of functions; most importantly, they are a means of disseminating information generated elsewhere that an organization believes is important or relevant to its user community (Lovejoy et al., 2012). They can also serve to make a connection to the user mentioned in the retweet, insofar as there is an implicit acknowledgement that what the original sender has said is valuable.

The three remaining tools—hyperlinks, hashtags, and user mentions—are available *within* tweets and are not mutually exclusive. Hyperlinks were included in 73.43% of the tweets ($n = 11,368$), with the average organization sending 75.79 tweets with a hyperlink over the month. This is slightly higher than what was seen in large nonprofits (68%, Lovejoy et al., 2012) and much higher than individuals’ use of hyperlinks (13% and 25%, respectively, for Java et al., 2007, and Hughes & Palen, 2009). Hyperlinks play a key role on microblogging services such as Twitter: By including a (typically shortened) external link, organizations can bypass the 140-character restriction and share longer textual passages, as well as photos and videos, with their user community.

Hashtags are one of the most interesting innovations on Twitter. Represented by the pound sign (#), hashtags denote that a message is relevant to a particular topic (often an abstract concept), including political and social movements (*#kony2012*), conferences (*#arnova11*), places (*#Haiti*), and knowledge bases (*#womenshealth*). This convention allows for easier searching as well as aggregation of information on a particular topic, which renders hashtags particularly important for advocacy organizations for aggregating knowledge, for rapidly disseminating information during crises, and for use as mobilizational tools during advocacy campaigns and social movements. We found the average organization sent 62.44 tweets with at least one hashtag during April; this represents 60.50% of all tweets sent, much higher than the 30% of tweets seen in Lovejoy et al. (2012).

The last tool is the *user mention*, represented by the “@” symbol anywhere in the tweet except at the very beginning. Such messages indicate the sender is “talking about” another user, and are thus useful ways of acknowledging or making connections to other Twitter users. We found 51.71% of the tweets ($n = 8,006$) contained at least one user mention, and the average nonprofit sent 53.37 such messages over the course of the month.

Message-Level Analyses

We now have a sense of the frequency with which advocacy organizations are employing various social media tools. To better understand the nature of this use,

Table 3. Forms of Communication in 750 Randomly Chosen Tweets, April 2012

| Category | Example | Frequency | (%) |
|--------------------|---|-----------|-------|
| <i>Information</i> | <i>chej</i> : Concerned about phthalates and polyvinyl chloride (PVC)? Check out our updated list of PVC-free resources http://t.co/dBUm4RuD#phthalates#PVCfree | 515 | 68.67 |
| <i>Community</i> | <i>FAIRImmigration</i> : @cspanwj it is a federal law to carry registration papers so we do have that law all over the country, Obama admin just not enforcing | 148 | 19.73 |
| <i>Action</i> | <i>FreedomWorks</i> : Over 200,000 have signed the petition to end #Obamacare. http://t.co/O9nkLbelHaveyou?#tlot | 87 | 11.60 |
| | Total | 750 | 100 |

however, we now turn to in-depth examinations of the key tool available on social media—the messages. As noted earlier, we conduct both quantitative content analyses and qualitative inductive analyses of 750 randomly selected messages.

Quantitative Content Analyses. In line with our review of the literatures on social media-based organizational communication and nonprofit advocacy, our quantitative content analyses involved coding each message along two critical dimensions: its broad form, or function, of communication, and the presence of specific advocacy tactics.

Form of communication: Information, community, and action. To determine the prevalence of previously identified forms of communication, each of the 750 randomly chosen tweets was assigned a single code from the *information-community-action* scheme (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) described earlier. In cases where a tweet appeared to serve dual purposes, codes were assigned according to what was considered the tweet's primary purpose. Discrepancies between codings were discussed and coding rules refined until 100% agreement was reached on the first 100 messages. Using the refined rules, another 100 tweets were coded with 93.0% intercoder agreement and a Cohen's kappa score of .83, indicating a high level of intercoder reliability. Table 3 shows the number and frequency of the messages in each category along with an example of each. Over two thirds of the tweets ($n = 515$) fall into the "information" category, nearly 20% ($n = 148$) fall into the "community" category, and slightly under 12% ($n = 87$) fall into the "action" category.

"Offline" advocacy tactics in Twitter messages: 11 categories of advocacy action. We then coded each message for the presence of 11 advocacy tactics broadly identified in the nonprofit literature and described in detail in Guo and Saxton (2010). Similar to the above coding of communicative forms, to code the 11 advocacy tactics the two coauthors looked at a series of off-sample tweets to develop a provisional set of coding rules. These rules were used to code the first 100 of the 750 randomly sampled tweets; differences in codes were discussed and coding rules refined until 100% agreement was reached on these 100 messages. Using the refined rules, another 100 tweets were

coded with 93.0% intercoder agreement and a Cohen's kappa score of .87, indicating high intercoder reliability. Table 4 shows the number and frequency of messages associated with each advocacy tactic along with an example of each.

Slightly over 52% ($n = 391$) of the tweets did not reflect any of the 11 advocacy tactics identified in the existing literature. The rest of the tweets ($n = 359$) collectively cover all 11 tactics save for "expert testimony." Most of these advocacy-related tweets ($n = 303$) embody the "public education" tactic. Next, but far behind, are "grassroots lobbying," "public events and direct action," and "voter registration and education," being associated with 18, 15, and 10 tweets, respectively.

Summary and discussion of content analyses. In terms of communicative functions, to a large extent, the advocacy organizations in our sample tend to put the greatest effort into providing information to stakeholders, followed by building a community, and then calling to action. In terms of advocacy tactics, the tweets sent by these organizations cover almost all the advocacy tactics identified in the existing literature, though the focus is clearly on public education and a few other forms of *indirect* tactics.

Seen from a different angle, the former set of results relate to how organizations are communicating, while the latter relate directly to the organization's advocacy mission. To further explore how these two dimensions coexist in advocacy organizations' messages, Table 5 reports the cross-tabulation of the communicative functions and advocacy tactics in the 750 messages.

The results in this table yield several interesting insights. First, we can consider tweets without an advocacy tactic (the "None" row) as not being direct manifestations of the core mission. In generalizable terms, we might label these *support* messages, and explicitly advocacy-related messages as *strategic*. Seen in this light, if we examine the "Action" column, slightly over half ($n = 49$) of the action messages are support messages that ask followers to do something non-advocacy related, such as attending a performance or buying a t-shirt; the remainder ($n = 38$) are strategic, mission-focused messages that ask followers to perform advocacy work. These latter messages form a key, mission-driven cluster of messages—those designed to "call to action" the organization's supporters using specific advocacy tactics. There also appears to be a strong cluster of messages in the "Community" column with no advocacy tactic ($n = 133$). This suggests organizations are separating their community-building tweets from their advocacy work. Lastly, in the "Information" column the majority of messages are either support messages ($n = 209$) or strategic messages designed to fill a public education role ($n = 287$). In fact, informational messages appear to be key to the "public education" approach and, it appears, to advocacy organizations' Twitter work overall—with 38.3% of the tweets being informational public education messages.

In sum, this two-dimensional view of social media-based advocacy communication provides a useful framework for organizing the results of our quantitative content analyses. In terms of communicative functions, informational messages outnumbered community messages, which in turn dwarfed action messages. In terms of the relevance to core mission, a slight majority of tweets were *support* messages in that they

Table 4. Advocacy Tactics present in 750 Random Tweets, April 2012

| Advocacy tactic | Example | Frequency | (%) |
|---|--|-----------|-------|
| <i>Public education</i> | <i>CCHR</i> : Psychiatrist and former DSM chairman Allen Frances admits: There are no objective tests in psychiatry http://t.co/axCUxsSJ | 303 | 40.4 |
| <i>Grassroots lobbying</i> | <i>FreedomWorks</i> : Over 200,000 have signed the petition to end #Obamacare. http://t.co/O9nkLbelHaveyou?#tlot | 18 | 2.4 |
| <i>Public events & direct action</i> | <i>GoAffirmations</i> : Join us in Lansing tomorrow at 10:30—we're announcing 50+ electeds' support for our work! http://t.co/5dcswrS4#mipolitics | 15 | 2 |
| <i>Voter registration & education</i> | <i>MaketheRoadNY</i> : Great work everybody! MT @LICivicEngage Tks for pledging to reg. voters this year! @naacp_ldf, #local1102, @32bj_seiu, #liia, #carecen | 10 | 1.33 |
| <i>Research</i> | <i>OpenSecretsDC</i> : Funders behind anti-Obama energy ads remain hidden: @NewYorker cites our data in a post http://t.co/5RzKjExT | 3 | 0.4 |
| <i>Multiple advocacy tactics</i> | <i>NCJW</i> : Check out http://t.co/iEb4Gz604statement sfromursens&articlesinurstateaboutfedjudnomns. #courtsmatters | 3 | 0.4 |
| <i>Judicial advocacy</i> | <i>InstituteForJustice</i> : Fan of gov't-imposed monopolies? We aren't and we were in court yesterday fighting to stop one in Washington State. http://t.co/J54TE3yF | 2 | 0.27 |
| <i>Coalition building</i> | <i>southerncenter</i> : Thrilled to be part of the coalition! RT @bartoncenter Small Victories For Juvenile Justice @southerncenter! | 2 | 0.27 |
| <i>Media advocacy</i> | <i>MaketheRoadNY</i> : On Tues tenants will lead press tour showing how Brooklyn Housing Court is overcrowded/inadequate. Advisory: http://t.co/d6ooERDH | 1 | 0.13 |
| <i>Administrative lobbying</i> | <i>americansunited</i> : Catholic shrine declines \$750 "tourism" grant from NY county thanks to a complaint from Americans United. http://t.co/xBALU3jO | 1 | 0.13 |
| <i>Direct lobbying</i> | <i>WithoutViolence</i> : Thank-you to Senator Crapo for your overall leadership on the #realVAWA #reauthorizeVAWA #VAWA | 1 | 0.13 |
| <i>Expert testimony</i> | None | 0 | 0 |
| <i>No advocacy tactic</i> | <i>FreedomWorks</i> : "The Constitution is certain and fixed; it contains the permanent will of the people, and is the supreme law of the land"—William Paterson | 391 | 52.13 |
| | Total | 750 | 100 |

Table 5. Cross-Tabulation of Communicative Form and Advocacy Tactic

| | Form of communication | | | Total |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|--------|-------|
| | Information | Community | Action | |
| Advocacy tactic | | | | |
| None | 209 | 133 | 49 | 391 |
| Public events & direct action | 3 | 0 | 12 | 15 |
| Public education | 287 | 10 | 6 | 303 |
| Grassroots lobbying | 0 | 2 | 16 | 18 |
| Voter registration & education | 6 | 1 | 3 | 10 |
| Judicial advocacy | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Media advocacy | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Administrative lobbying | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Direct lobbying | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Research | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Coalition-building | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Multiple advocacy tactics | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Total | 515 | 148 | 87 | 750 |

did not serve a primarily advocacy-related function. Among the advocacy-related, or *strategic*, messages, in turn, most implemented a public education tactic. Collectively, these findings suggest the advocacy organizations in our sample used Twitter mainly for information dissemination and public education purposes.

Qualitative Inductive Analyses. The goal of the preceding analysis was to identify the prevalence of previously identified communicative and advocacy constructs in nonprofits’ social media messages. In this section our task is distinct: To explore the unique features and dynamics of social media-based advocacy, and to identify new organizational practices and forms of communication heretofore unseen in the literature. Accordingly, the method is also distinct. Instead of a more positivist, quantitative content analysis, our approach is to employ a qualitative methodology to inductively develop theoretical insights.

In particular, following qualitative methodological tenets outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), we analyze the data inductively to identify theoretical constructs and conceptual categories that are unique to the social media environment. Specifically, our coding relied on the *constant comparative method* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), whereby newly coded messages are compared to those previously coded to ensure that the validity and integrity of emergent constructs holds. When differences in coauthors’ codings were discovered, they were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved.

Coding thus involved an iterative, multistage process of cycling back and forth among data, existing literature, and emergent theoretical constructs (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Analysis of these 750 randomly selected tweets,



Figure 1. A pyramid model of social media-based advocacy

representing messages from 121 diverse advocacy organizations, helped us reach the point of *theoretical saturation* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), insofar as the analysis of additional messages would not be likely to yield significant additional theoretical insights.

These inductive analyses led us to identify a series of new types of social media-based advocacy work, which we grouped into three broader categories that form the basis for an original “pyramid” model of social media-based advocacy. This hierarchical model entails a three-stage process: (1) reaching out to people; (2) keeping the flame alive; and (3) stepping up to action. The organization first reaches out and brings awareness of the organization’s cause to current and potential supporters. Once a constituency is built, the next step is to sustain the constituency and keep alive the flame of passion among supporters. When the timing is right, the final step is to mobilize the supporters to act. The hierarchy implicit in the model reflects how each successive layer of the model is built on the one below. Given the greater number of messages at the earlier than later stages, the three elements of social media-based advocacy can be depicted as a pyramid (Figure 1).

Though the three components represent “stages,” all three can happen simultaneously—the stage is conceived with respect to the organization’s relationship with a specific group of constituents at any given point in time. In the fluid social media environment, an organization must always be seeking to reach out to new audiences (Stage 1), deepen that audience’s knowledge and sustain its interest (Stage 2), and then motivate it to act (Stage 3). In other words, the organization is always cultivating and organizing new supporters. In effect, it is a model of *mobilization-driven*

relationship-building—how organizations can generate and mobilize network support through communicative relationship-building strategies.

Stage 1: Reaching Out to People

At this stage, tweets are largely informational and the advocacy tactic they serve to implement is predominantly public education. As such, advocacy at this stage is essentially a *communicative* practice—what might be termed “message-based advocacy”—that involves making new connections and getting the word out through the continual sending of brief messages to the organization’s followers. We find evidence of several innovative forms of communication in nonprofits’ use of Twitter.

Hashtags are a helpful tool for implementing the *public education* tactic at this stage: When used in a communicative, informational role, hashtags serve as “bookmarks” under which vast, user-generated bodies of knowledge can accumulate. Hashtags thus facilitate information dissemination by categorizing messages around specific topics; organizations can use hashtags to find tweets on the same topic or help others find their tweets. Hashtags also help to decentralize public education: With information flowing through networks of users connected by formal ties as well as informal hashtag networks, new possibilities for educating the public emerge.

One of the most interesting practices seen on Twitter is what might be called “celebrity poking” or “celebrity fishing.” Celebrities have tremendous “network” powers, in the sense that their tweets almost immediately reach an audience of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of followers. If a nonprofit can capture the attention of a celebrity, the payoff in terms of geometrically increasing the diffusion of an organizational message or call to action is enticing. The following tweets thus attempt to target celebrities (a progressive news talk show host and Oprah Winfrey, respectively):

southerncenter: @RichFrenchLive Connecticut joins lawmakers across the country who are reconsidering the death penalty - more states will surely follow!

PublicCounsel: @oprah in tribute video to Elie Wiesel: “you survived horror without hating”

Stage 2: Keeping the Flame Alive

While the aim of the first stage is to make new connections, this second stage involves deepening and building emergent ties. At this stage, information dissemination is still important, but the number of community-oriented tweets increases. Advocacy at this stage is mainly a *relational* practice. The focus of the organization is on deepening and sustaining communities of interest and networks of supporters. There are effectively two types of community-oriented tweets: Dialogue and community-building. First, there are tweets that spark direct interactive conversations between organizations and their publics. For example, see the following tweet:

Save for the public education and coalition-building tactics, the ultimate advocacy goal involves mobilizing supporters. At this stage, advocacy is mainly a *mobilizational* practice, with the organizations' tweets being used to facilitate public events, direct action, and grassroots lobbying, though perhaps to a more limited extent than might be expected. Tools such as hyperlinks and hashtags are frequently used in conjunction with mobilizational messages at this stage. For instance, the following call-to-action tweet from the National Council of La Raza, a large U.S. Latino civil rights and advocacy organization, contains two hashtags:

NCLR: Today we are storming the Supreme Court to highlight the injustice of #SB1070. Join us and demand #Justice4AZ

This tweet highlights two important points. The first is that a tweet can serve multiple functions. While this tweet primarily serves a mobilizational purpose, and is thus coded as a call-to-action message, there is a community-building facet to this message that complements its primarily mobilizational intent. Specifically, the two hashtags within this message serve to connect the tweet to the #SB1070 and #Justice4AZ communities on Twitter. The first tag refers to Arizona Senate Bill 1070, considered by many as a harsh anti-immigrant legislation. The inclusion of this hashtag in the message helps in the aggregation of information from a diverse, decentralized body of Twitter users related to this legislation. The second tag, #Justice4AZ, was initially created to help spread information about a Supreme Court hearing related to SB1070 on April 25, 2012, but has since morphed into a "movement" hashtag.

At the same time, (to paraphrase the salesperson's credo "always be selling"), an organization cannot "always be mobilizing." Too many "calls to action" might make the organization's follower base turn away. Thus, even though tweets that carry an explicit call to action are proportionally small, they nevertheless comprise an important piece in the advocacy organization's strategic repertoire.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, whereas most prior studies focus almost exclusively on *whether* organizations utilize social media, our study pays attention to *how* they utilize it. Our analysis suggests that Twitter is a powerful communication tool—and an especially formidable tool for "public education" approaches. It is less prevalent in its role as a mobilization tool, with the organizations' tweets being used to facilitate public events, direct action, and grassroots lobbying less frequently than might be expected.

Second, our study suggests a two-dimensional view of advocacy communication on social media, where messages can be meaningfully examined in terms of the basic form of communication and the direct relevance to the core advocacy mission. With respect to communication forms, we found the majority of the tweets were aimed at providing information to stakeholders, followed by building an online community, and

then calling that community to action. Along the mission-relevance dimension, we found organizations were employing a mix of *strategic* and *support* messages on Twitter, with support messages tending to predominate. Further research should seek to further develop this two-dimensional framework and understand the interconnections between strategic and support messages in furthering an organization's long-term advocacy goals.

Third, our study facilitates theory building by proposing a three-stage pyramid model of social media-based advocacy: reaching out to people, keeping the flame alive, and stepping up to action. This pyramid model of *mobilization-driven relationship-building* offers a framework for understanding the process through which nonprofit organizations utilize targeted stakeholder communication on social media to effect social change. The model is descriptive rather than normative in nature, in that it aims to describe how the function of social media *actually* varies with the stage of the advocacy process, not how it *should* vary. At stage one, the organization's priority is to reach out and bring awareness of the cause to the public. The messages sent by the organization are predominantly informational and serve to support the public education tactic. At stage two, the organization's priority switches to sustaining communities of interest and networks of supporters. The messages, in turn, focus more on community building and direct interactive conversations between organizations and their publics. At stage three, the organization's priority becomes mobilization, which the organization achieves through a smaller number of targeted "call to action" messages.

The findings of our study also have important practical implications. One question raised by our analysis regards the "advocacy mix" that organizations employ in seeking to reach their public policy-related goals. In the social media environment, a handful of tactics dominated. The "king" was public education—appearing in 40% of all tweets sent. Only three other advocacy tactics—grassroots lobbying, public events and direct action, and voter registration and education—appeared in more than 1% of all tweets. All other categories of advocacy tactics (research, judicial advocacy, coalition building, media advocacy, administrative lobbying, direct lobbying, expert testimony) were rare or (in the case of expert testimony) not found in the organizations' tweets. In effect, social media advocacy is heavily *indirect* in terms of strategic orientation (Mosley, 2011); there is little evidence of *insider* strategies. This distinct mix of advocacy tactics might be partially due to the characteristics of the medium: Unlike email, which can be much more selectively stratified, Twitter is a *mass* approach in that tweets go out to everyone. Such a mass approach seems to work better with indirect advocacy tactics (e.g., public education, grassroots lobbying, etc.) that aim at diffused publics; it works less well with direct lobbying and other "insider" tactics that require a targeted approach. This "advocacy mix" raises questions for nonprofit advocates about new ways of thinking and operating. If more advocacy work moves online, and it involves primarily coalition-building, calls to action, and public education—as we found here—what will the implications be for the sector as a whole? What will it mean if administrative lobbying and expert testimony, among other tactics, are less common?

Our study also suggests several avenues of research. First, our study only examined the use of Twitter. It did not consider how advocacy organizations actively use other social media tools. In view of the considerable role Facebook and other technologies appeared to play in, for instance, the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, and the fact that the major Web 2.0 tools are frequently used together, future research should examine the interrelations and potential synergies of these technologies with respect to the effectiveness of advocacy engagements.

In addition, our study did not consider the organizations' *offline* advocacy work. It may be that social media strategies are more employed by smaller, resource-poor organizations, or perhaps instead resource-rich organizations use all available means of advocacy. To answer these questions, follow-up research is needed that examines the interaction of organizations' offline and online advocacy efforts. It would also be helpful to further explore the relationship between organizational size and technology adoption and use. There is a large literature (e.g., Hackler & Saxton, 2007; McNutt & Boland, 1999; Saxton & Guo, 2011; Schneider, 2003) that has found a strong relationship between technology use and size in nonprofit organizations, with smaller organizations being at a serious disadvantage when it comes to the adoption of earlier technologies such as computers, websites, and email. By contrast, Nah and Saxton (2012) recently found evidence of a negative or no relationship between size and the adoption of newer social media technologies. Admittedly, they looked at the 150 largest U.S. charities. Still, their evidence ". . . suggests there might be something different about social media that has 'freed' nonprofits from some of the capacity and environmental constraints that have hampered them in the past . . ." (p. 22). In other words, size may not be so strong a determinant of the use of social media as it has been for previous technologies. Overall, we believe there are substantial opportunities for additional research that builds on our findings.

Another area of future research is to understand the organizational capacities needed to enhance advocacy. Some prior research recommends advocacy organizations establish governance mechanisms permitting constituents to participate in the shaping of the organization's mission, vision, and strategies, as doing so enables the organization to more accurately reflect the needs of constituents (Guo & Musso, 2007; Guo & Saxton, 2010). Considering their highly interactive framework, social media offer strong possibilities for constituency engagement. The number of media employed (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and the number of accounts and users involved in sending messages on social media can dramatically increase the number of "voices" involved in communicating with the public. Our study indicates advocacy organizations are taking advantage of this possibility. That said, might this multiplicity of voices lead to a "cacophony" that renders it harder to identify a unified organizational voice? Future research could answer such questions.

Our findings also raise issues regarding the decentralization and democratization of advocacy work in the context of social media. With individual followers not necessarily having a formal connection to the organization, with followers and "supporters" able to dynamically join with and exit from the organization's advocacy work,

and with cross-organizational coalitions forming and splitting fluidly, what are the boundaries of “the organization” working for social change through social media? Is an organization’s social media presence analogous to a variable “membership” organization, with the number of followers akin to the number of members? What role(s) do the organization’s supporters play on social media, and how is this different from traditional activities? And will we see any evidence of the decentralization of advocacy work? In a way, we are, at least with users’ retweeting of organizational messages. The organization’s followers are thus what we could call “public education foot soldiers.” More cynically, one might refer to such relatively low-cost efforts by supporters as examples of what has been called *slacktivism* (Karpf, 2010). Either way, this raises the issue of how organizations can best make use of their loose networks of online followers.

Moreover, such types of actions beg the question: Is there a “centrifugal pull” toward decentralized, “extraorganizational” advocacy work? For instance, a real *movement* sprang up around the *#kony2012* hashtag—and there was not necessarily a single organization or group of organizations that were central to the movement’s success. Just as important were the celebrities, such as Oprah Winfrey, Rihanna, or P. Diddy (Sean Combs), and their legions of followers, who were critical in bringing this issue to the attention of a vast audience. In any case, our study sheds light on some key elements of advocacy work that carry important implications for the nonprofit sector. Future work should continue to probe more deeply into the nature and consequences of this fast-changing and increasingly important environment.

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Note

1. While some nonprofits may limit their advocacy to policy issues arising at certain times of the year, we believe we have, collectively, tapped the sample’s range of advocacy efforts. Temporal predilections would cancel each other out, such that any particular month would capture the range and approximate frequencies of the different forms of advocacy and communication. Moreover, most advocacy tactics, save for perhaps political lobbying, would not be tied to particular seasons. Still, it was possible we over- or under-represented the frequency of certain tactics. As a robustness check, we drew a second random sample of 750 tweets from the pool of 100,607 tweets sent by the 150 nonprofits from January 1 to June 30, 2012. One co-author coded this new sample, which generated similar results in terms of the distribution of communicative forms and advocacy tactics. This validates the April sample.

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Bios

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