

Canadian Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of Social Media Adoption and Perceived Affordances by Advocacy Groups Looking to Advance Activism in Canada

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ABSTRACT One hundred and fifty-seven representatives from 63 advocacy organizations operating in Canada were surveyed to evaluate the extent to which these groups are adopting social media, and perceive that these technologies offer affordances that contribute to the advancement of activism objectives. Quantitative results of social media adoption reveal that groups are engaging with a limited selection of social media technologies (mainly Facebook and Twitter) a few times a week or more, while avoiding other options like Google+ and Tumblr. Qualitative results addressing perceived social media affordances suggest that while groups are enthusiastic about social media's potential to strengthen outreach efforts, enable engaging feedback loops, and increase the speed of communication, they remain cautious of unproven techniques that may divert resources from strategies known to work.

KEYWORDS Social media; Advocacy; Activism; Social movements; Affordances; Technology adoption; Democracy; Civic engagement

RÉSUMÉ On a sondé cent cinquante-sept représentants de soixante-trois groupes de pression œuvrant au Canada afin d'évaluer dans quelle mesure ces groupes sont en train d'adopter les médias sociaux et combien ils croient que ces technologies contribuent à l'atteinte des objectifs de l'activisme. Les résultats quantitatifs sur le recours aux médias sociaux montrent que les groupes utilisent un éventail limité de ceux-ci (principalement Facebook et Twitter) quelques fois par semaine ou plus, tout en évitant des alternatives comme Google+ et Tumblr. Les résultats quantitatifs sur les affordances perçues à l'égard des médias sociaux suggèrent que les groupes sont enthousiastes envers le potentiel des médias sociaux à faciliter la communication, permettre des boucles de rétroaction engageantes, et accroître la vitesse des échanges. En revanche, les groupes demeurent réservés par rapport à des techniques qui n'ont pas fait leurs preuves. En effet, ils préféreraient ne pas détourner des ressources qu'il vaudrait mieux consacrer à des stratégies éprouvées.

MOTS CLÉS Médias sociaux; Plaidoyer; Activisme; Mouvements sociaux; Affordances; Adoption de technologies; Démocratie; Engagement civique

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Introduction

On the global stage, advocacy groups demonstrate how social media may afford new opportunities for advancing activism. On Monday, March 5, 2012, the Invisible Children organization posted the “Kony 2012” video on YouTube; by Wednesday the group had raised \$5 million in support of its cause. By Friday, the video had been viewed 70 million times and had received widespread media attention from around the world (McCarthy, 2012). Also in 2012, Canadian advocacy group Openmedia.ca led the Stop Online Spying coalition to oppose the Canadian government’s Bill C-30, an attempt to expand the government’s online surveillance capabilities. Coalition tactics included Twitter attacks, YouTube videos, memes, and an online petition with more than 150,000 signatures (Obar, Shade, & Clement, 2014). In February of 2013, Justice Minister Rob Nicholson said, “We will not be proceeding with Bill C-30 ... We’ve listened to the concerns of Canadians who have been very clear on this ...” (Payton, 2013).

The burgeoning literature on social media use by organizations suggests that the technology offers communication opportunities that differ from offline forms of communication and traditional forms of computer-mediated communication (e.g., Grudin, 2006; Mansour, Askenäs, & Ghazawneh, 2013; Qualman, 2012; Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2008). Studies and reports advancing this idea often focus on two areas of inquiry: social media adoption rates and social media affordances. In the area of business communication, much has been written about the rise in social media use by businesses both small and large. In 2013, a study of more than 1,200 small businesses revealed that close to 50 percent had increased their social media use, and nearly 55 percent said they were using sites like Facebook and Twitter as their primary tools for acquiring new customers or generating sales leads (Casserly, 2013). Larger businesses are also engaging with social media. A recent report from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth revealed that 77 percent of Fortune 500 companies have Twitter accounts, 70 percent have Facebook accounts, 69 percent have YouTube accounts, and 34 percent are actively blogging. The report also noted that companies are using Foursquare, Instagram, Pinterest, and other social networking sites (Barnes, Lescault, & Wright, 2013). Beyond studies of adoption rates, assessments of social media affordances reveal a number of promising possibilities. For example, Jeffrey Treem and Paul Leonardi (2012) identify four social media affordances that offer benefits to organizations: visibility, persistence, editability, and association. Osama Mansour, Linda Askenäs, and Ahmad Ghazawneh’s (2013) evaluation of two large multinational corporations, IBM and Consolidated Contractors Company, builds on Treem and Leonardi’s work and suggests four additional affordances (associated with wikis specifically): commenting, accessibility, viewability, and validation. (All eight affordances are described in greater detail further on). It is interesting to note that in the business world, social media adoption has not necessarily followed from an academic understanding of affordances (Mansour, Askenäs, & Ghazawneh, 2013). Trade press headlines like “Social Media Will Change Your Business” (Baker & Green, 2008) and “Social Networking Puts Your Business on Steroids” (Stengel, 2013) fuel excitement about social media’s possibilities, even though studies continue to yield questionable evidence that social media commitments will produce a return on investment (Burg, 2013; Casserly, 2013).

Similar claims (and concerns) about social media's unique potential for organizations engaging in political communication and/or forms of activism have also been expressed. An early and often-cited claim by Clay Shirky (2008) suggests that "we are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations" (p. 12). Much of the research into social media's contributions to contemporary activism, however, has addressed examples that have received considerable attention from the mainstream media. This includes social media use during the Arab Spring (e.g., Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari, & Mazaid, 2011), the Occupy movement (e.g., DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012), and the opposition to the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect I.P. Act (PIPA) (e.g., Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, & Etling, 2013). Consequently, far less is known about how small and large organizations use social media to engage in everyday activism, outside of these high-profile campaigns.

In the Canadian context, Josh Greenberg and Maggie MacAulay's (2009) study of 43 environmental nonprofit organizations (NPOs) revealed that these NPOs were not engaging heavily with social media technologies. The authors noted at the time:

NPOs should be leaders in using social technologies to grow and strengthen their networks. These are, after all, relationship-driven organizations: online communities and social media offer a new way of harnessing existing loyalty and passion. Yet, the data reported in this study suggest that this potential remains mostly untapped. (p. 74)

Among the reasons suggested for this finding, the authors noted that even though social media may reduce costs associated with maintaining an online presence, disparities in financial and human resources could be contributing to a digital divide.

In an attempt to further understanding of the potential communication opportunities offered by social media to a broad range of organizations engaged in forms of activism and to update and broaden our knowledge of these opportunities in a Canadian context, this study aims to address: a) the extent to which advocacy groups in Canada are adopting social media technologies, and b) the extent to which these groups perceive social media as offering affordances for advancing forms of activism. Advocacy groups serve as a unique population for study, as previous research suggests that they are increasingly engaging with new media technologies to advance organizational goals (Biddix, 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Guo & Saxton, 2013; Karpf, 2009; Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012; Petray, 2011). Furthermore, advocacy groups often attempt to contribute to democratic governance through interactions with the general public—and subsequent representations in the policy arena—by utilizing various "tactics" or "strategies" that could potentially be supported, and even enhanced, by social media (Guo & Saxton, 2013). For example, drawing from existing typologies and other lists (such as Avner, 2002 and Reid, 1999), Chao Guo and Gregory Saxton (2010) identify eleven such "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 educa-

tion; and expert testimony. It is also worth noting that by studying advocacy groups and their uses and perceptions of social media as tools for advancing forms of activism, the intention is also to contribute to the broader discussion about social media's political efficacy and utility.

This study presents a follow-up to Jonathan A. Obar, Paul Zube, and Cliff Lampe's 2012 survey of 53 advocacy groups operating in the United States. In "Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of How Advocacy Groups in the United States Perceive and Use Social Media as Tools for Facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action," Obar et al. revealed that all the U.S. advocacy groups surveyed were using social media technologies to communicate with citizens almost every day. Facebook was the outlet of choice, with Twitter a close second. Groups felt strongly that social media offer a variety of unique communication opportunities for facilitating civic engagement and collective action, including: 1) helping groups to strengthen outreach efforts, 2) enabling engaging feedback loops, 3) increasing the speed of communication, and 4) being cost-effective (i.e., enabling groups to do more for less). Some groups did voice concerns about social media, though the negatives dealt more with the process of transitioning from established routines to new strategies than with social media's ability to contribute to desired outcomes. Overall, groups lauded social media's democratizing function and the technology's ability to advance advocacy-related goals. This follow-up study will attempt to add to our understanding of social media adoption by advocacy groups and their perceptions of social media affordances. It will also aim to contribute to a more stable foundation upon which subsequent inquiries can address the extent to which social media actually strengthens social movements and effects political and ideological change.

Social media affordances

James J. Gibson's (1986) theory of affordances posits that environments and objects contain latent action possibilities. He notes, "[a]ir affords breathing, more exactly, respiration. It also affords unimpeded locomotion relative to the ground, which affords support" (p. 30). Gibson continues by noting that these latent action possibilities are realized in relation to the individual. A rock, for example, can be used as a missile or a paperweight or be placed onto another rock to form a wall; an individual can sit or stand on a chair, or a chair can be carried. Gibson's theory highlights the relationship between perception and behaviour, suggesting that individuals interact with objects and environments differently because the utility and nuance of behaviour depends upon the extent of our understanding and ability.

Communication scholars have applied Gibson's theory to the study of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in an attempt to understand why different individuals use technologies differently. For example, the relationship between digital literacy development and ICT affordances has been explored (Hsieh, 2012), and suggests a linkage between digital skill development and an enhanced ability to use ICTs effectively. Others have studied the technology itself to assess how the design properties of an ICT impacts individual perceptions and, as a result, affordances (Gaver, 1991; Norman, 1990). Others have focused specifically on the "social affordances" of ICTs, or the ability of an ICT to facilitate different social actions (Boase & Wellman, 2006; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase, Chen, Hampton, Isla de Diaz, & Miyata, 2003).

Treem and Leonardi (2012) reviewed 75 papers that present empirical data on social media use in organizational settings. The ICTs assessed included wikis, social networking services (SNSs), blogs, social tagging applications, and microblogs. One of the primary questions asked was, “what affordances commonly emerged from social media use in organizations?” (p. 9) As was noted earlier, Treem and Leonardi organized their findings into four categories. The first affordance identified was *visibility*, with many of the papers suggesting that social media afford users an enhanced ability to make “behaviors, knowledge, preferences, and communication network connections ... visible to others in the organization” (pp. 9–10). The second affordance identified was *persistence*, meaning that user-generated content remains accessible in the same form even after the actor has finished presenting. This is beneficial to organizations because it allows one to revisit content—not as if one was rummaging through old files—but through the various functionalities social media provide: search, browse, annotation, repackaging, mashups, et cetera. The third affordance was *editability*, which suggests that Web 2.0 interfaces often allow individuals to write and rewrite material before publishing online. The fourth affordance was *association*, or the ability to establish person-to-person, person-to-content, and content-to-content relationships.

Mansour, Askenäs, and Ghazawneh’s (2013) evaluation of IBM and Consolidated Contractors Company suggests four additional affordances linked to social media technologies (wikis specifically): *commenting*—advancing conversation and understanding of content by engaging in discussion functionalities; *accessibility*—the ability to structure interaction through limited and directed forms of access to content and services; *viewability*—the ability to allow users to view aspects of content that would otherwise be restricted; and *validation*—an enhanced ability to work toward content accuracy.

Building on this literature, this study questions the extent to which advocacy groups operating in Canada are adopting social media technologies, and whether they perceive social media as offering affordances that can help to advance forms of activism.

Advocacy groups

Often applied in a political context, the term “advocacy” can refer to the act of championing, supporting, or advocating a specific viewpoint or cause. The process of advocacy often involves systematic efforts formulated and carried out by specified actors, generally in a group setting, working to further organizational, political, and/or ideological goals (Prakash & Gugerty, 2010). The distinctions between an advocacy group, a conspiratorial group, and a political party are clear, as those involved in advocacy seek to influence policymakers, but not to exercise the formal powers of government (Moodie & Studdert-Kennedy, 1970; Young & Everitt, 2004).

Today, advocacy groups are commonly referred to as lobby groups, pressure groups, activist organizations, social movement organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Advocacy groups in Canada engage in a wide variety of issues that include (among others) civil rights, education, health care, labour, religion, animal rights, the environment and media reform. More than a thousand of these groups advocate for causes at the federal, provincial, municipal, and/or community levels. At the federal level, the Lobbying Act of 2008 and the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada (OCL) regulate and oversee the formal practice of direct lobbying

the federal government. The OCL maintains a registry of lobby organizations, and enforces a Code of Conduct “to ensure transparency and accountability in the lobbying of public office holders in order to increase the public’s confidence in the integrity of government decision-making” (Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada, 2012). While groups that engage in direct lobbying of the Canadian government are required to disclose grassroots efforts, those that only engage in grassroots advocacy are not required to register with the OCL.

Advocacy groups, the Internet, and social media

Previous research suggests that the Internet can contribute to the communication and mobilization efforts of activist groups (e.g., Ayres, 1999; Bennett, 2003; Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Opel, 2004; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002; Van Laer, 2010; Yang, 2009). An early example took place in 1997 when the Preamble Collaborative helped to develop an extensive online advocacy network to dispute the negotiation of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), a trade agreement between 29 countries designed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The site promoted by the Collaborative allowed members of the network to share government documents and position papers about the MAI, as well as a wide variety of protest materials (Kobrin, 1998). When a draft of the MAI was leaked over the network, the coalition quickly shared it and responded to it with a flurry of criticism. The strong reaction contributed to the halting of negotiations and, eventually, the closing of negotiations altogether (Neumayer, 1999).

Since the MAI campaign, there have been many other examples of Internet activism¹ and a variety of online activism strategies have been developed. Massive email campaigns have in some instances supplemented or replaced letter-writing campaigns (Shulman, 2009), and advocacy organizations have developed software tools to make the process of submitting formal comments to government easier and more effective (Obar, 2010). Online campaigns have also been used to promote and strengthen forms of offline activism (Carty, 2010; Harlow, 2012).

Research is beginning to examine the use of social media for political communication, focusing often on citizen involvement in political campaigns (e.g., Effing, van Hillegersberg, & Huibers, 2011; Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma, & Ponder, 2010), e-governance initiatives (e.g., Osimo, 2008), and the impact of “slacktivism” (e.g., Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Obar & Argast, 2013). The use of social media by social movements is also beginning to be addressed (e.g., Caren & Gaby, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2013; Harlow, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Skinner, 2011); however much of the research in this area focuses on movements that have received considerable attention from the mainstream media—most notably the Arab Spring and Occupy. Consequently, little is known about the use of social media by advocacy organizations that are not directly involved in these high-profile campaigns. In the Canadian context, an early study by Greenberg and MacAulay (2009) content analyzed the websites of 43 Canadian environmental nonprofit organizations, revealing scarce social media use. In the four years (at the time of writing) since Greenberg and MacAulay’s study, it is possible that much has changed. Indeed, the extent to which advocacy organizations are adopting social media technologies, and

perceive social media affordances as tools for advancing forms activism, remain questions in need of further exploration, especially in a Canadian context.

Method

Participants

More than 500 advocacy groups were identified using the registry of lobbyists made available on the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada's website². Additional groups were found using Web searches for "Canada" and "advocacy" or "coalition." Groups were not excluded due to political or ideological orientation; in fact, constructing a list that reflected the broad spectrum of groups operating in Canada was a goal of the sampling procedure. Eighty-seven groups agreed to receive the online survey (via surveygizmo.com), and between March and June of 2012, 157 representatives from 63 advocacy groups operating in Canada took the survey (see Appendix A for a list of groups that participated in the study).

There were two versions of the survey. The first was a longer version that asked about organization size and social media use. Individual perceptions about social media affordances were also requested. The second, shorter version only included perception questions. One social media/communications director from each group took the longer survey, and was then asked to forward the shorter survey to their colleagues. Fifty-six social media/communications directors took the longer survey and 101 participants took the shorter survey ($n=157$)³. Participants were predominantly female ($n=88$, 65.7%) and represented a wide range of ages ($M_{age}=36.1$ years, range: 22–65). Social media directors were slightly older than the overall average, ($M_{age}=38.0$ years, range: 23–59) and were also predominantly female ($n=33$, 63%)⁴.

The survey

The longer version of the survey began with questions about organization size and the number of employees and volunteers working in online outreach positions. This was followed by questions about the type of social media technologies the organization has adopted to communicate with the public and the frequency of usage. A list of popular social media technologies was provided, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, MySpace, LinkedIn, blogs, Wikipedia, Tumblr, Digg, Reddit, Delicious, Foursquare, and mobile apps. Participants were also asked to list any other social media they use, as well as how often they send emails and to what size group.

To begin to assess perceptions of social media affordances, social media/communications directors were asked to rank six technologies—Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, blogs, and email—based on the technology's ability to help their group complete nine advocacy-related tasks (see Table 2). The tasks were adapted from (Obar et al., 2012), and also draw from several "advocacy tactics" noted by Guo and Saxton (2010): grassroots lobbying; public events and direct action; public education; and coalition building.

Both the long and the short surveys included a variety of open-ended questions that allowed all 157 representatives from the 63 groups surveyed to present their perceptions of social media's affordances for advocacy organizations. Qualitative responses were assessed using thematic analyses to further explain the extent to which Canadian

advocacy groups perceive social media as technologies that can help advance forms of activism.

Table 1: Online outreach workers by organization size

	Employees			Volunteers		
	Small	Medium	Large	Small	Medium	Large
Site Development and Maintenance Workers						
5+	0	1	1	1	1	0
3-4	0	0	5	3	1	0
2	5	4	5	4	1	3
1	10	7	7	2	0	3
0>1	0	3	0	0	0	0
0	5	0	1	10	12	13
Social Media Workers						
5+	0	1	1	2	1	2
3-4	0	0	0	6	1	0
2	2	2	3	1	1	2
1	13	5	12	1	1	5
0>1	0	3	1	0	1	0
0	5	4	2	9	10	10
Total Online Outreach Workers						
5+	0	2	4	6	2	2
3-4	1	1	7	2	0	2
2	5	2	0	2	3	1
1	9	4	3	2	2	3
0>1	0	3	1	0	0	0
0	5	3	2	7	8	10

(Notes: $n = 54$; 20 small groups, 15 medium, 19 large. Data missing for Social Media Workers (employee): 1 small group; Total Online Outreach (employee): 2 large groups, (volunteer) 1 small group, 1 large group).

Results

Of the 63 advocacy groups (see Appendix A), 56 had social media/communications directors that took the long survey. The quantitative results reflect the responses from those 56 directors. Answers from all 157 participants are represented in the qualitative section.

Organization size

Organization size was determined by comparing the total number of paid employees. Of the 56 groups, 20 were “small,” employing 0 to 5 individuals, 15 were “medium,” employing 6 to 20 individuals, and 19 were “large,” employing more than 20 individuals. The remaining groups did not identify organization size.

Employees and volunteers working in online outreach

As shown in Table 1, larger organizations were more likely to have paid employees working in various online outreach positions, whereas smaller organizations were more likely to have volunteers doing these same jobs.

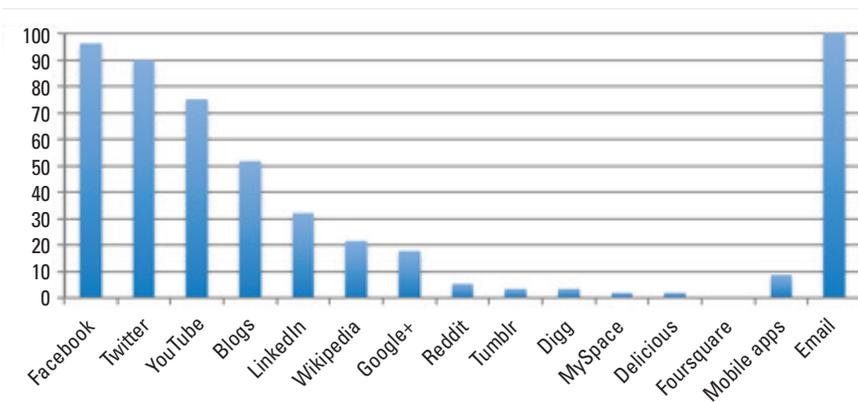
Larger groups were also more likely to employ more individuals in website development and maintenance positions, although most groups noted that they employ at least one person in this area. Smaller groups had more volunteers in the area of website development and maintenance, with eight of 20 groups having two or more in these positions. There was more similarity among the groups for social media and online outreach positions, although larger groups were more likely to have additional employees and smaller groups were more likely to have additional volunteers.

Social media adoption

In response to the question: *does your organization use social media to interact with members of the general public?* 54 of 56 groups answered “yes.” Only the Fur Institute of Canada and the Louis Even Institute for Social Justice answered “no.”

As noted in Figure 1, the findings suggest that most groups are using Facebook (54 of 56) and Twitter (50 of 56). YouTube is also quite popular (75%) as are blogs (52%). The remaining social media technologies are not being adopted by a large percentage of groups.

Figure 1: Percentage of Canadian advocacy groups using social media technologies



Fifty-two percent of all groups surveyed use Facebook every day, and an additional 30 percent use it a few times a week. Fifty-seven percent use Twitter every day, and an additional 22 percent use it a few times a week. Of the remaining technologies, blogs are used the most often, with 5 of 56 groups blogging every day and an additional 11 blogging a few times a week. Most groups use YouTube a few times a month.

The advocacy organizations were also asked about their adoption of other social media technologies. Openmedia.ca, CARE Canada, Four Green Steps, and a large anonymous group use Pinterest. Four groups use Flickr, one uses Constant Contact, and another uses FeedBlitz.

All 56 organizations send emails to members of the general public. The Feminist Majority Foundation sends emails to 170,000 individuals a few times a week, and both the David Suzuki Foundation and World Wildlife Fund Canada send emails to 150,000 individuals less than once a week. Openmedia.ca (a small group) has the largest list, sending 600,000 emails less than once a week. Most large organizations have email lists of more than 10,000 people, whereas most medium and small organizations have lists of between 100 and 5,000 people. The majority of groups send emails a few times a week or less, with only three of 56 sending emails once a day or more.

Ranking social media technologies for facilitating advocacy-related tasks

To help assess how the Canadian advocacy community perceives social media affordances, communications directors ranked six social media technologies—Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, Blogs, and email—based upon perceived ability to help facilitate advocacy-related tasks.

Table 2: Advocacy group rankings for various social media technologies in terms of their ability to facilitate various advocacy-related tasks

Advocacy Tasks	1	2	3	4	5	6
Educating the public about the issues that matter to your organization	Email	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	YouTube	Google+
Informing citizens about relevant dates, events, government deliberations, etc	Email	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	YouTube	Google+
Getting your existing members involved in your work	Email	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	YouTube	Google+
Reaching out to new people	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	YouTube	Email	Google+
Giving citizens a place to voice their opinions	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	YouTube	Email	Google+
Conversing with citizens	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	Email	YouTube	Google+
Getting your members to take action!	Email	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	YouTube	Google+
Collecting petition signatures	Email	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	YouTube	Google+
Mobilizing citizens	Facebook	Email	Twitter	Blog	YouTube	Google+

Note: Rankings based on 56 social media/communication director responses

As noted in Table 2, email and Facebook were the preferred methods of communication for most tasks. Regardless of Facebook's ranking, Twitter always followed, (except in one instance), and blogs were almost always the next most popular. Most surprising was Google+, which ranked last in all categories. YouTube was most often second last.

Though Facebook and email were often the top-ranked technologies, the pattern changed slightly when groups were asked which technologies help with "reaching out to new people," "giving citizens a place to voice their opinions," and "conversing with citizens." Facebook always ranked first, Twitter second, and blogs third, while email

dropped to either fourth or fifth, suggesting that perhaps the advocacy community feels that Web 2.0 social media technologies—as opposed to more traditional Internet technologies like email—have enhanced their ability to accomplish these more interactive tasks.

Qualitative analysis

All 157 participants answered open-ended questions about social media's potential for advancing forms of activism. Participants identified perceived benefits afforded by social media, as well as drawbacks associated with social media usage. Both are described below.

Perception of benefits afforded by social media

The social media affordances described, emphasize how Canadian advocacy groups perceive social media technologies as tools for advancing forms of activism. The affordances repeated most often are organized here into three sections. Social media technologies: 1) strengthen outreach efforts, 2) enable engaging feedback loops, and 3) increase speed of communication.

1) SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES HELP TO STRENGTHEN OUTREACH EFFORTS “OUTREACH”

The perceived social media affordance repeated most often addressed an enhanced ability for advocacy organizations to strengthen outreach efforts. As noted in Table 3, advocacy groups identified four ways that social media contribute to outreach: a) facilitating communication with a larger number of individuals, b) building connections with younger individuals, c) ease of use, and d) overcoming the limitations of organization size and budget.

Facilitating communication with a larger number of individuals. Groups noted that social media help them to reach a larger number of individuals. The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) talked about “cast(ing) a wider net”; the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) said, “we’re able to connect far more broadly than ever before”; and the Wellesley Institute noted, “we’re not just talking to the same people all the time.” Speaking about LinkedIn, the Canadian Bar Association (CBA) commented that it “gives the CBA exposure to 60,000 Canadian lawyers who have accounts but are not association members.” Some groups emphasized the relationship between the power of the social network and an organization’s reach. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) said, “the viral part of social media is important, it helps us reach people we perhaps would not be able to identify, using the friend of a friend, etc.” The CCLA said, “we’ve been able to forge relationships with ‘influencers’ on Twitter who will RT (retweet) our tweets if we ask,” and CASA added, “magnification from other users on social media sites allows the message not only to cast a wider net, but to be imbued with the tacit implication that other users believe it to be worthwhile.”

Building connections with younger individuals. The ability to find and connect to younger individuals, a generally untapped population for the advocacy community, was an often repeated aspect of social media’s outreach capabilities. Ducks Unlimited Canada said social media, “bridges the gap with our younger audience, or the audience who, of course, would never go to any of our events or get our

volunteer emails.” Similarly, some groups spoke about staying “relevant,” and noted that social media have helped them to raise their “profile.” Egale Canada Human Rights Trust said:

Social media has strongly influenced the way our organization is perceived amongst certain niche communities. For instance, some individuals and news sources now view [Egale] as more relevant and responsive than before we were on Facebook and Twitter, despite the fact that the quality and nature of our work remains extremely similar to the pre-social media days.

Ease of use. Advocacy groups emphasized that social media support outreach efforts by being relatively easy to use and also by making certain organizational tasks easier. For example, the David Suzuki Foundation said that social media make it “easier to communicate with followers and to give them ways to take action in their daily lives.” A number of groups also pointed to social media analytics and metrics, which have made it easier (and less expensive) to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of advocacy efforts. Groups noted that social media’s ease of use helps contribute to the “snowball effect,” which helps build advocacy group size. The Toronto Environmental Alliance said, “social media can help bring our message to new people by making it easy for our members and followers to share information about us.”

Overcoming the limitations of organization size and budget. The most compelling benefit articulated about social media’s role in strengthening outreach efforts was overcoming the limitations of organization size and budget. As the Dogwood Initiative commented, “our organization is terribly underfunded. Social media helps us get bigger using less time and resources.” Indeed, those who described how social media “make the small big” (Wellesley Institute) recounted how the technology has opened doors and created opportunities to participate in a political game often dominated by larger organizations. As Openmedia.ca said:

Social media demonstrate huge potential for reinvigorating local communities. ... As an organization that facilitates social change through participatory decision-making, it is hugely important to have these low-cost, low-barrier tools to allow us to reach thousand[s], to receive feedback, and to build communities online.

2) SOCIAL MEDIA ENABLE ENGAGING FEEDBACK LOOPS “FEEDBACK LOOPS”

Another social media affordance identified was the engaging feedback loop (see Table 3). Advocacy groups emphasized that social media contribute to this in two ways: a) facilitating conversation, and b) providing community-building opportunities that are not available via offline communication or other forms of online communication.

Facilitating conversation. Groups perceive the interactivity central to social media as a contributor to more effective communication and community-building efforts. World Wildlife Fund Canada said that social media allow them “to respond to questions and criticism openly ... [and] gives us tools to empower our supporters.” The Rideau Institute said, “social media gives us a greater ability to understand what issues people are talking about and to introduce new issues into that conversation.” Many groups referred to the form of communication taking place over social media as a “con-

Table 3: Advocacy group perceptions of social media affordances.

Perceived Social Media Affordances	Features
1) OUTREACH	a) Facilitate communication with a larger number of individuals b) Build connections with younger individuals c) Ease of use d) Overcome the limitations of organization size and budget
2) FEEDBACK LOOPS	a) Facilitate conversation b) Provide community-building opportunities not available via offline or other forms of online communication
3) SPEED	a) Facilitate communication in real time b) Facilitate engagement as issues of interest are unfolding

versation,” or, as one anonymous group noted, “not a monologue.” The same anonymous group also said that social media help to “humanize” their organization.

Providing community-building opportunities not available via offline or other forms of online communication. Advocacy groups described the affordance of engaging feedback loops by comparing the communication opportunities offered by social media with those offered by more traditional advocacy strategies. The Green Action Centre said social media provide “an opportunity for dialogue about everyday issues that aren’t normally had in person, at events, or via email/newsletters.” An anonymous group said that social media provide “the possibility to enter a direct conversation with constituents. Unlike email or offline channels, [social media] are more immediate and less formal, which help to create more personal relationships.”

3) SOCIAL MEDIA INCREASE THE SPEED OF COMMUNICATION “SPEED”

The third perceived social media affordance articulated by Canadian advocacy groups suggested that the technologies help to facilitate forms of activism by increasing the speed of communication. As illustrated in Table 3, advocacy groups noted two ways that social media contribute to this communication opportunity: a) facilitating communication in real time, and b) facilitating engagement as issues of interest are unfolding.

Facilitating communication in real time. The Songwriters Association of Canada mentioned that social media offer the benefits of communicating in “real time,” which they suggested contributes to their ability to generate and maintain a more “tangible community.” World Wildlife Fund Canada emphasized similar benefits associated with “daily connectedness” and, as a result, a link to “cultural relevancy.” An anonymous group said:

When we plan events, Twitter and FB [Facebook] are great tools to get the information distributed and to update the status of each event. For example, when we decided to stop selling tickets [to an event], we posted it on FB and Twitter and gave everyone 24 hours notice. It is much more effective than simply posting an update on our website.

Facilitating engagement as issues of interest are unfolding. Most often when Canadian advocacy groups emphasized the speed of communication as a benefit, they

noted that social media offered them an enhanced ability to engage in issues as they are unfolding. The Canadian Alliance for Student Associations said that social media “allows us to be a constant contributor to whatever issue we may be dealing with or any breaking news matter.” It was also suggested that speed strengthens collective action efforts, including “the ability to forward polls and other advocacy tools quickly” (Catholic Civil Rights League) and “enable[ing] massive mobilization at critical moments” (Feminist Majority Foundation).

Perceptions of drawbacks associated with social media use

The most common drawbacks associated with social media, identified by the advocacy groups surveyed, are organized here into three sections: 1) social media require a considerable commitment of staff time and resources, 2) social media do not necessarily advance the goals of advocacy, and 3) social media need to be better understood to be used more effectively.

SOCIAL MEDIA REQUIRE A CONSIDERABLE COMMITMENT OF STAFF TIME AND RESOURCES

Many groups emphasized that it requires a considerable amount of staff time and resources to maintain an effective social media presence. The Fur Institute of Canada said bluntly, “we don’t have the resources to use social media.” Apathy is Boring noted that “it takes up a lot of staff time to simply maintain a presence and keep up with conversations.” The Polaris Institute described how smaller organizations are at a disadvantage:

We have low capacity and have a hard time to keep [sic] everyone’s attention span on our issues without putting in a lot more effort. Social media is more adapted for organizations with much larger structures, with people dedicated to communications.

Many groups articulated that the day-to-day requirements of maintaining a social media presence that has both breadth and depth can be challenging, and are potentially damaging to an organization. The Dogwood Initiative commented on the diversion of resources: “It takes a tremendous amount of time to maintain a presence in the ever-expanding universe of social media. ... It can distract from other, more important forms of communication.” The Feminist Majority Foundation highlighted that a lack of social media resources can have an impact on public perception of an organization:

With varying numbers of interns/staff, the amount of human power we have to keep up all the different platforms changes greatly. This always leaves us in the place of trying to not look like we are no longer socially active on all fronts. We may have enough interns to write 5 blogs a week in the summer, and then only have staff in the winter and it is hard to put out more than 1 blog a week. The fluctuation makes us look inconsistent.

SOCIAL MEDIA DO NOT NECESSARILY ADVANCE THE GOALS OF ADVOCACY

Some groups remain unconvinced that social media are effective tools for advocacy. An anonymous group said social media provide “basic recognition, nothing more. A ‘like’ button does not help us in any way.” Another anonymous organization noted,

“social media allows us to create a base movement, but [it] has also created a substantial class of ‘slacktivists’ who ... can never truly be nurtured into real activists.” Citizens for Public Justice emphasized how the superficiality of slacktivism does little to effect change, “people click, but don’t come out; they support a cause online, but that’s millimeters deep and does not truly bother the powers that be.” Some groups went a step further and emphasized how social media may actually create a false sense of a movement’s size and capability, which could be damaging to collective action efforts. Democracy Watch said:

It sends an unrealistic sense of our reach and influence, and if you fall victim to believing this is real, one runs the risk of attempting to mobilize people or call upon them to act with little follow through, which could lead to some humiliation.

Social media need to be better understood for more effective use

Many groups noted that they are relatively new to social media and that integrating the technology into established routines poses a variety of challenges. The Wellesley Institute added that they are still trying to figure out “that fine balance between too much and too little.” The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters voiced a desire to learn how to use social media more effectively:

There appears to be little information or instruction available on how to use social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook. ... We have goals and a strategy for the use of social media, and understand the technical side, but the actual operational side ... is largely guesswork.

Groups also emphasized the difficulties associated with social media’s seemingly constant evolution. A representative from the Canadian Library Association said:

Right now I am experiencing issues drawing members from the face book [sic] group to the new page. Also if the technology changes (like the new face book [sic] timeline and you are not keen on the changes) it is difficult.

The Canadian Alliance for Student Associations expressed a similar concern:

As with any new development, it has taken care and attention to work out the kinks in our system. A fair amount of time that could have been spent doing other things is now directed at social media use, and it is difficult to measure that impact. Inevitably, this medium will continue to change and necessitate further analysis and labour hours.

Indeed, many groups emphasized that social media present a considerable challenge to the understaffed and underfunded. Though most said they are engaging in some form of social media strategy, for some, the deterrent risks may be affecting their level of engagement and experimentation.

Discussion

The results of this survey of 157 participants from 63 advocacy groups operating in Canada suggest four conclusions: 1) most of the Canadian advocacy groups surveyed are adopting a limited selection of social media technologies, mainly Facebook, Twitter,

blogs, and YouTube, 2) these same groups perceive social media as offering a variety of beneficial affordances, 3) many groups have reservations about overcommitting to the technology, and 4) when the results of this study are compared with Obar et al. (2012), the Canadian groups appear more cautious in their adoption of social media strategy than their American counterparts.

Beginning with social media usage, the findings of this study reveal that Canadian advocacy groups both large and small have been building online outreach teams that include workers specifically devoted to the management of a social media presence. Larger groups are slightly more likely to hire employees to work in these positions, whereas smaller groups more commonly work with volunteers—a finding that is not surprising as smaller organizations typically have fewer financial resources.

When the groups were asked about specific social media technologies they have adopted, preferences were clear. Almost all focus the majority of their efforts on Facebook and Twitter, with most engaging these technologies at least a few times a week. Seventy-five percent of groups use YouTube, generally a few times each month. This suggests that groups are primarily using YouTube to manage a video presence, as opposed to using the technology to engage in ongoing conversations. Slightly more than half of the groups also use blogs; however, few reported updating them more than a few times a month. Email was found to be very popular, with all groups emailing relatively large lists of individuals. The frequency of email communication, however, varied considerably across groups.

The finding that most groups are not engaging heavily with social media technologies other than Facebook and Twitter is surprising considering the wide variety of popular outlets and functionalities available. Perhaps this can be attributed to the finding that many Canadian groups are concerned about the resources required to maintain a broad and deep social media presence, which may take away from more traditional, trusted outreach methods. As the Dogwood Initiative commented: “It takes a tremendous amount of time to maintain a presence in the ever-expanding universe of social media. ... It can distract from other, more important forms of communication.”

Preferences for Facebook, Twitter, and email were also noted when the groups ranked a selection of technologies in terms of their ability to help facilitate advocacy-related tasks. Across all tasks, Facebook and email usually received the first or second ranking, with Twitter coming in third, and blogs fourth. The pattern was altered slightly when groups were asked about “reaching out to new people,” “giving citizens a place to voice their opinions,” and “conversing with citizens.” In these instances, Facebook always ranked first, Twitter second, blogs third, and email fourth or fifth. Perhaps this change can be attributed to groups perceiving that interactive technologies like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs enhance their ability to accomplish these specific outreach and communication tasks. The results of the qualitative section support this finding, as many groups noted that both an expanded reach and an ability to engage in community building through interactive communication are affordances offered by social media. These findings may also help to clarify blurred distinctions between email, which can be considered a “social” media, and “social media” technologies that offer Web 2.0 functionality. Perhaps this suggests that email should not be considered social

media, because it does not offer the same opportunities for virtual expression and conversation made available by sites like Facebook and Twitter.

A surprising finding was the consistent ranking of Google+ in last place across all tasks, and the fact that only 10 of 56 groups surveyed use the service. Google products, including search, Gmail, and Google Docs, are among the most popular products of their kind, yet the results suggest that Canadian advocacy groups do not see the need to engage with Google's social networking service. As of September 2012, Google+ had 400 million users (Newton, 2012), compared to Facebook's one billion and Twitter's 500 million. This suggests that the decision to avoid Google+ likely has more to do with the challenges of resource allocation than with concerns about audience reach.

The qualitative section revealed that while many Canadian advocacy groups perceive social media to be effective tools for strengthening advocacy-related initiatives, many also have reservations about overcommitting to the technology.

When asked about the beneficial affordances social media provide to their organization, participants routinely suggested that the technology helps to strengthen outreach efforts. This is similar to the "visibility" affordance identified by Treem and Leonardi (2012). Reaching more people, connecting to younger individuals, ease of use, and the ability "to make the small big" (Wellesley Institute) were four benefits groups attributed to social media technologies. Groups are realizing an enhanced ability to build larger organizations through expanded recruitment opportunities and louder and more effective microphones for advertising and promotion—bringing the attention of the mainstream media, donors, and policymakers to those previously ignored. Groups are finding that they can do more with less, and are pursuing collective action initiatives in response to a larger number of issues with a sense of confidence that responses will have more of an impact. In sum, groups believe that these "low-cost, low-barrier tools" (Openmedia.ca) are helping to open the door to the public sphere and are giving groups of varying sizes and resources access to a political game traditionally dominated by a select few.

Other perceived affordances emphasized that social media enable engaging feedback loops and increase the speed of communication. In terms of the former, groups identified that engaging feedback loops foster community building through interactive conversations with site visitors and fellow activists, and help groups to overcome the limitations of offline and other online communication tools. This is similar to the "association" affordance identified by Treem and Leonardi (2012). By speeding up communication, groups identified an enhanced ability to contribute detailed and timely responses to time-sensitive issues. Not only does this help to facilitate the feedback-loop affordance (contributing to community building), it also allows groups to participate in a greater number of collective action initiatives, as they are able to do more with less. As the Feminist Majority Foundation noted, social media "enable massive mobilization at critical moments."

At the same time, some groups expressed reservations about overcommitting to the technology. Concerns that the hype may be diverting resources from proven strategies were common. Why take on a multitude of projects and do a poor job, when the traditional tools for advocacy can produce predictable and satisfactory outcomes in a

smaller number of projects? The rise of “slacktivists” that delude organizations into a false sense of power also raised concerns, and further reveals why groups are hesitant to overcommit to social media. As exemplified when Citizens for Public Justice said, “people click, but don’t come out,” it is clear that some groups remain unconvinced that social media can substitute for proven on-the-ground techniques. These drawbacks highlight an interesting distinction from those that are excited by the perceived affordance of being able to overcome their size and budget limitations and do more with less.

The third drawback expressed—the steep learning curve—may help explain the aforementioned reservations. Perhaps some groups are apprehensive about social media because they have yet to fully realize how they can benefit from the unique strengths and opportunities that others believe social media provide. How can the energy and vast numbers social media have the potential to produce—albeit perhaps superficially—be used to an organization’s advantage? Until groups figure out how to benefit from the firepower that social media supposedly provide, it is likely that apprehension will persist.

When the results of this study are compared with those in “Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of How Advocacy Groups in the United States Perceive and Use Social Media as Tools for Facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action” (Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012), the Canadian groups appear to be more cautious in terms of their social media strategy than their American counterparts. More of the American groups are using Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and YouTube and are doing so more often. The American groups also engage with a wider variety of technologies, with more groups also using Flickr, Tumblr, Foursquare, Diigo, Vimeo, and a variety of others. The American groups are also more optimistic about the affordances social media provide, and expressed very few concerns. By comparison, Canadian groups seemed both enthusiastic and guarded, which perhaps has contributed to a slightly slower and narrower adoption of social media technologies and strategies.

Four years ago, Greenberg and MacAulay (2009) noted that nonprofits operating in Canada ought to be leaders in the use of social media technologies, in part, because they are relationship-driven organizations. At the time, “the data reported ... suggest that this potential remains mostly untapped” (p. 74). Among their explanations for this finding, Greenberg and MacAulay noted that limited financial and human resources might have played a prominent role. The findings of this study suggest that social media adoption by Canadian advocacy organizations has increased these past four years. They also support Greenberg and MacAulay’s assertion that resources do indeed impact an organization’s ability to maintain a social media presence.

On the global stage, advocacy groups have generated excitement about a number of unique communication opportunities that social media technologies may afford. The results of this study suggest that members of the Canadian advocacy community believe that while social media have the potential to strengthen advocacy campaigns, there are reasons to remain cautious. These findings were evidenced through their admitted uses (and avoidances) of social media technologies. If social media realize the democratizing function that so many envision, those groups that have been aggressive

and willing to take risks will likely be the first to enjoy the rewards. Conversely, if social media fails to live up to expectations, those groups that have been more measured in their approach will likely have avoided a potential threat to their viability. As the debate over the place of social media in advocacy work evolves, and as online tools multiply, new empirical research must assess the extent to which social media technologies are capable of facilitating various forms of political communication. Hopefully this study has provided another step in that direction, and contributed to a more stable foundation upon which future research can work to determine social media's actual ability to engage and mobilize the public, as well as effect political and ideological change.

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Notes

1. One famous example took place in 1999, when a combination of online and offline collective action techniques were employed by activists who successfully halted the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Seattle.
2. URL: <http://www.ocl-cal.gc.ca>.
3. Seven of the groups only took the shorter survey.
4. Participants included 88 females, 46 males, and 23 participants who did not identify gender. Of those, social media/communications directors were: 33 females, 19 males, and 4 participants who did not identify gender.

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Appendix A

Canadian Advocacy Groups Surveyed

Small Groups (0–5)

African Canadian Social Development Council
 Alberta Public Interest Research Group
 Anonymous Organization
 Anonymous Organization
 Apathy is Boring
 Canadian Apparel Federation
 Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment
 Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals
 Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East
 Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association
 Canadian Veterans Advocacy
 Catholic Civil Rights League
 Democracy Watch
 Four Green Steps
 Louis Even Institute for Social Justice
 Openmedia.ca
 Polaris Institute
 Rideau Institute
 Songwriters Association of Canada
 Sport Matters Group

Medium Groups (6–20)

Anonymous Organization
 BC Civil Liberties Association
 Canadian Alliance of Student Associations
 Canadian Civil Liberties Association
 Canadian Library Association
 CARP
 Citizens for Public Justice
 Dogwood Initiative
 Egale Canada Human Rights Trust
 Food Banks Canada
 Fur Institute of Canada
 Green Action Centre
 Journalists for Human Rights
 Toronto Environmental Alliance
 World Society for the Protection of Animals – Canada

Large Groups (21+)

Anonymous Organization
 Anonymous Organization
 Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada
 Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies
 Canadian Association of University Teachers
 Canadian Bar Association
 Canadian Labour Congress
 Canadian Real Estate Association
 CARE Canada
 Dairy Farmers of Canada
 David Suzuki Foundation
 Équiterre
 Federation of Canadian Municipalities
 Feminist Majority Foundation
 Frontier College
 Huntington Society of Canada
 Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters
 Wilderness Committee
 World Wildlife Fund – Canada

Did Not Identify Organization Size

Anonymous Organization
 Campaign Life Coalition
 Canadian Taxpayers Federation
 Ducks Unlimited Canada
 Heart and Stroke Foundation
 KAIROS Canada
 Otesha Project
 Vancouver Rape Relief & Women’s Shelter
 Wellesley Institute