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# How Activist Groups Use Websites in Media Relations: Evaluating Online Press Rooms

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Content analysis of activist organization Websites determined how activists use online resources in media relations. Seventy-four activist Websites were analyzed. About one-third (32.4%) included organized online press rooms. The most common media relations materials were organizational history (70.3%), organizational mission statement (54.1%), organizational publications (47.3%), press releases (33.8%), and policy papers (31.1%). Activist Websites did not provide strong dialogic features for journalists, but dialogic features were more available for the general public. Theoretical implications are examined and 6 recommendations are made for improving online activist press relations.

Public relations scholarship has traditionally viewed activism from the perspective of the organization being “acted” on (L. A. Grunig, 1992). Increasingly, public relations scholars have urged a move to research that examines the efficacy of activist groups themselves (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996).

In a rapidly changing media environment, activist tactics may be evolving. Effective activism is dependent on building relationships among people of like mind, building alliances between organizations with similar goals, influencing the agenda of policy makers, and serving as an expert source of information on topics

of pertinence to the activist organization. The Internet serves as an ideal way for activist organizations of all sizes and means to achieve these activities.

The goal of this research is to examine the online tactics of environmental activist groups, especially as they relate to providing useful information to and building relationships with journalists.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundations of this research are rooted in relationship management and public relations theory.

The study of public relations through the lens of relationship management has been promoted by Ledingham and Bruning (2000) and Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999), among others. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) conceptualized a relationship as dependent on “exchanges, transactions, communications and other interconnected activities” (p. 16). Relationships form, according to Broom et al., “when parties have perceptions and expectations of each other, when one or both parties need resources from the other, when one or both parties perceive mutual threats from an uncertain environment, or when there is either a legal or voluntary necessity to associate” (p. 17). The perceptions and expectations of one another and the shared need for resources describe the relational intersection of activists and journalists.

Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) argued that “the most productive relationships ... are those that benefit both parties in the relationship” (p. 11). They also noted that relationships develop because “one party has consequences on another party” (p. 12). These antecedents to relationships are seen in the tactics environmental activists use to inform and enlist the support of journalists. Hon and J. E. Grunig suggested that relationship maintenance requires access, positivity or making the relationship enjoyable, openness, network building, and more (pp. 14–15). They noted that relationship maintenance can be measured by both outcomes and process (p. 18). According to Hon and J. E. Grunig

Often mutually beneficial exchanges can begin to build trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. Then, a public relations professional can help to build a long-range communal relationship where the level of these four indicators will become even higher and remain stable over time. (p. 21)

The use of Website press rooms and online tactics by activist groups may meet this standard of building mutually beneficial exchanges that can lead to exchange and communal relationships. In fact, Hon and J. E. Grunig noted this facet of the relationship between organizations and the press.

In applying relationship theory to the media relations realm, Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) wrote

Savvy media relations experts know ... that good relationships with reporters are ones in which both [journalists and public relations practitioners] feel they have some degree of control over the reporting of the organization—neither party is in control to the exclusion of the other. Both parties trust each other to help them do their job; indeed they have a communal relationship so each helps the other even though they may get nothing in return. They are committed to making the relationship between the organization and the media work. The bottom line is that they are satisfied with the relationship. (p. 24)

The Internet would seem to provide an ideal context for journalists and activists to find this feeling of shared control. Journalists are able to access posted information freely on a 24/7 basis. Activists are able to control the content, availability, and frequency of posted material.

To develop relationships with journalists, activists must show a commitment to such a relationship and build trust between the activist organization and the media. Morgan and Hunt (1994) identified commitment and trust as variables that mediate successful organization–public relationships. Their research suggested

that relationship commitment and trust develop when firms attend to relationships by (1) providing resources, opportunities, and benefits that are superior to the offerings of alternative partners; (2) maintaining high standards of corporate values and allying oneself with exchange partners having similar values; (3) communicating valuable information, including expectations, market intelligence, and evaluations of the partner's performance; and (4) avoiding malevolently taking advantage of exchange partners. (p. 32)

Activist Websites can serve as a means of relationship building if the sites provide functions essential to organization–public relationships as defined by Broom et al. (2000). They defined organization–public relationships as follows:

Organization–public relationships are represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics. (p. 18)

In a vein similar to Morgan and Hunt (1994), Huang (2001) wrote that trust, control mutuality, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment are the essence of organization–public relationships (p. 65). Therefore, Websites that promote trust, control mutuality, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment should serve the cause of relationship building.

Finally, Hutton (1999) wrote, “Relationship management refers to the practice of public relations as an exercise in identifying mutual interests, values, and benefits between a client-organization and its publics” (p. 208). He wrote that mutual

trust, compromise, cooperation, and win–win situations are hallmarks of successful relationship management.

Excellence theory suggests that normative practice is symmetrical (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992, 2001; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), which implies the importance of dialogue. Contingency theory argues that ideal practice is dynamic and may be either advocacy or accommodation oriented (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Reber & Cameron, 2003).

Symmetrical public relations practice focuses on building and maintaining relationships through give and take. Practitioners generally agree that such a win–win orientation is their primary goal. They also acknowledge that contingencies often drive ideal practice because they are advocates for their client or organization and must understand journalists' decision points to be effective advocates.

These theoretical foundations inform this research, which attempts to identify how activist organizations use their Websites to build relationships, facilitate dialogue, and advocate for their cause with journalists.

### The Nature of Activism

Because public relations scholars often are former practitioners in large organizations or are current consultants to such entities they have developed an “intellectual myopia” when it comes to studying activist publics (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, p. 7). Dozier and Lauzen suggested that activism is studied “from the perspective of organizations with pockets deep enough to hire professional public relations practitioners” (p. 8). Such a research agenda neglects analyzing how activists practice public relations.

Activism has been defined by public relations scholars as “the process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions that the activists find problematic” (M. Smith, 2005, p. 5). And activists have been defined as “a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics, or force” (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002, p. 446).

Activist organizations have an inherent fiscal disadvantage compared to the corporate and governmental interests that they frequently seek to influence, but the Internet may level that playing field. Activist organizations, Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) postulated, would be likely to “use the Internet to its fullest potential—dialogically—to create relationships with publics” (p. 267). Similarly, Springston (2001) noted that public relations practitioners acknowledge the value of the Internet as a potent means of affecting public opinion, especially for small organizations (p. 613). Because journalists are such an important public for cash-

strapped activist groups, the Internet may serve as an ideal means of media relationship building for activists.

Tactics used by activist organizations warrant their own stream of public relations scholarship. It is important to study activist organizations because of their “unique communication and relationship-building needs,” according to Taylor et al. (2001, p. 264).

Public relations scholars have observed that the primary purpose of activist organizations “is to influence public policy, organizational action, or social norms and values” (S. Smith, 1997, as cited in M. Smith & Ferguson, 2001, p. 292). Ferguson (1997, as cited in M. Smith & Ferguson, 2001) noted that activist organizations face similar challenges to other organizations and therefore must use strategic communication to achieve their goals. Although organizational public relations programs aimed at activist publics have more frequently been the subjects of public relations scholarship, M. Smith and Ferguson wrote that activist organizations employ public relations tactics, too. Activists use public relations to rectify conditions they deem undesirable and to maintain the activist organization itself through membership involvement and growth. “Tactics used to maintain activist organizations” are little studied by public relations scholars (p. 296). Among the tactics used by activist groups are informational activities such as media relations (M. Smith & Ferguson, 2001).

Activist groups often use the media not only as a means of setting the public agenda but also as a way to convey legitimacy to the activists’ cause (L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 510). The mass media are used in image-building, public education, and public opinion formation, L. A. Grunig argued (p. 510).

Reber and Berger (2005) in a framing analysis of three areas of interest to the Sierra Club found that environmental sources were the majority in the sampled newspaper articles. They suggested this use of environmental activists as sources provides a powerful opportunity for framing of public opinion with focused message frames and trained environmental spokespeople at national, regional, and local levels.

Although the opportunity for impacting media coverage exists, Taylor et al. (2001) found in a content analysis of activist organization Websites that fewer than two-thirds of the sites analyzed included press releases (p. 272). They found that activist Websites appeared to encourage dialogue with volunteers but not with journalists (p. 274). They suggested that activist organizations need to provide more content of specific interest to members of the media and other publics (p. 278).

### Building Relationships With Journalists via Effective Websites

Although it would seem that Websites are a natural location for organizations to connect with the media in a way that is easy for both the organization and the

journalist, there is evidence that the Internet is not being used to its full advantage yet. Only 39% of Fortune 500 company Websites have clearly labeled online press rooms (Callison, 2003). The same study found that most press rooms included news releases and around half included executive biographies or profiles and executive photographs. About one-third of corporate press rooms included company fact sheets, financial reports, and company history. Furthermore, most corporate press rooms identify a public relations media contact by name. An analysis of marketing communication content on Websites of 188 Fortune 500 companies found the most common public relations components on corporate sites were "news-related" items, press releases, and educational information (Perry & Bodkin, 2002, p. 138).

In an attempt to help organizations develop their online presence for journalists, Kent and Taylor (2003) compiled a Website checklist. To have relevance to the media, Websites should include contact information, biographies of organizational leaders, "backgrounders, fact sheets, position papers, news releases," and more (Kent & Taylor, 2003, p. 15). These elements can be used to analyze the relationship theory concepts of control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, Huang, 2001).

Based on the importance of media relations to activist groups as well as the potential of the Internet as a means of building relationships with journalists, this research seeks to answer several research questions and hypotheses.

The first research question seeks to begin to develop normative theory by identifying common elements in activist Website press rooms and examine how those elements contribute to relationship building between activists and journalists. According to Heath and Bryant (2000), "Normative theories are advanced to propose ways to improve human communication" (p. 10). Understanding how activists attempt to address the communication needs of journalists via online press rooms contributes to a normative theory of activist press relations.

RQ1: What media relations materials are available on activist Websites?

Based on research by Callison (2003) regarding the prevalence of press rooms on the Websites of publicly traded companies, the first hypothesis proposes that activist Websites will be no more media savvy than corporate sites. This hypothesis addresses the relationship theory concepts of control mutuality and commitment.

H1: Most activist Websites will not provide organized press rooms.

Perry and Bodkin (2002) found that the most common items on corporate Websites were press releases. Thus, we hypothesize that most activist Websites will include press releases. From the perspective of relationship theory, the pres-

ence of press releases addresses concepts of commitment, satisfaction, and exchange relationships.

H2: Most activist Websites will have press releases posted.

## Dialogic Websites

Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested that building dialogic relationships via the Web was possible and proposed five principles to be followed in building dialogic Websites. Their principles serve as a useful means of operationalizing relationship theory concepts. The first principle is to *create a dialogic loop*. “A dialogic loop allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, it offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns and problems,” they wrote (p. 326).

Kent and Taylor’s (1998) second principle is to be sure that information on the Website is *useful to all publics*. According to Kent and Taylor (1998), “Information is made available to publics not to stifle debate or win their assent, but to allow them to engage an organization in dialogue as an informed partner” (p. 328). In this study, this principle is applied to journalists as a public.

The third principle is the *generation of return visits* by members of the public. Websites should include elements that make return visits desirable by the public, according to Kent and Taylor (1998, p. 329). This means that the site must not be static. It must promise and provide updates of pertinent and valuable information at minimum. Websites can generate more return visits by including features such as downloadable or mailed information, regular online forums, and question and answer sessions with executives or other experts (p. 329).

The fourth principle is the *ease of interface* with the site. In short, the site should be arranged intuitively and be easy to navigate. Having a table of contents on the home page facilitates ease of use, for example (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 329).

The fifth principle is to *conserve visitors*. Kent and Taylor (1998) argued that links should not lead users away from your organization’s site to other sites (p. 330).

Since developing principles of dialogic Websites, Kent and Taylor (1998) and their colleagues focused on ideal features of sites (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2003; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor et al., 2001). For example, Taylor et al. (2001) identified 31 dialogic characteristics of activist organization Websites that fell into six categories: ease of interface, usefulness of information to media publics, usefulness of information to volunteer publics, conservation of visitors, return visits, and dialogic loop (p. 273).

Bauer, Grether, and Leach (2002) looked at how the Internet can play a role in cultivating customer commitment, satisfaction, and trust. Their statistical analysis of

data showed that “customers who trust a corporation feel more committed to it” (p. 159). They found that high availability of an organization through presence on the Internet has a positive effect on trust among customers. Furthermore, efficient information transfer via a Website increases commitment. In short, the opportunity to interact with an organization increases commitment to that organization (p. 159).

Finally, research has suggested substantial room for improvement in online public relations. Callison (2003) determined that companies ranking higher on the Fortune 500 list are more likely to have online press rooms than are those ranking lower on the list. Gustavsen and Tilley (2003) found that online public relations is only modestly interactive.

In summary, public relations research related to Websites suggests the need for dialogic features; content can engender commitment, satisfaction, and trust; and larger and more profitable organizations set the pace of Website strategies and content.

Based on literature regarding features of dialogic Websites, the following hypotheses are tested in this research. Taylor et al. (2001) found that the highest percentage of activist Websites they content analyzed employed dialogic features, which leads to the third hypothesis. Dialogic features are key to developing satisfying and committed relationships, according to relationship theory. Therefore, the presence or absence of dialogic features, as proposed in the third and fourth hypotheses, speaks to trust and satisfaction in relationship building.

H3: Most activist Websites will have dialogic features for members.

Taylor et al. (2001) found that activist Websites target volunteer publics significantly more than they target media publics (p. 274), which provides the rationale for the fourth hypothesis.

H4: Most activist Websites will not have dialogic features for journalists.

Finally, two relationship building research questions were posed. Although functionality of a Website is important to anyone who visits the site, it may be especially so for journalists who are searching for information or sources and are faced with an impending deadline. The second research question is based on the assumption that a Website that is not easy to use will not generate return visits from journalists and therefore not serve as a means to building a relationship with media representatives. It addresses the relationship theory concept of satisfaction and exchange relationships.

RQ 2: Are activist Websites easy for journalists to use?

The final research question addresses the quality and quantity of information available on activist Websites. If information is valuable, journalists will be more

likely to remain and return to the Website. If the information is unvaluable or, worse, not present, then the journalist is unlikely to remain at the Website. The current nature of the information is also a concern in maintaining journalists at the sites and addresses the relationship theory concepts of commitment.

RQ 3: How do activist Websites maintain visiting journalists?

## METHOD

This study employed content analysis to systematically document activist organization Websites and borrows theoretically from relationship theory (e.g., Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001, Hung, 2005; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) and methodologically from Taylor et al.'s (2001) dialogic Website constructs.

### Measures

The purpose of this study was to examine the online media relations tactics of environmental activist groups from a relationship theory framework. Eight categories were adapted from Kent and Taylor (1998) and Taylor et al. (2001) and enlarged to address media- and activist-specific issues: (a) media relations, (b) useful information, (c) communication (interactive, dialogic loop), (d) downloadable information, (e) return visits, (f) renewal, (g) ease of use, and (h) features of activist Websites.

Operationalizations based on Kent and Taylor's (1998) categories were developed and enhanced based on aforementioned literature (e.g., Callison, 2003; Perry & Bodkin, 2002).

To examine a dialogic loop, *interactive communication* was defined by 18 variables including means of contacting the information, email listservs, online forums, and invitations to request information. "Response to inquiries" was included as a measure of the response time and words by the staff of activist organization Websites.

To examine usefulness to journalists, *media relations* were measured by six variables including the presence of a press room and the presence of press releases. *Useful information* was measured by five variables including policy statements, annual reports, and history of the organization. *Downloadable information* was measured by three variables: presence of downloadable audio-video, graphics, and commercials.

To examine generation of return visits, *return visits* was defined by three variables meant to identify reasons to return to the Website: membership offered or required, bookmark Website, posting calendar of events.

To examine ease of interface, *ease of use* was measured by seven variables including the presence of a table of contents, site map, and search engine.

To examine conservation of visitors, *renewal* was measured by two variables related to the frequency of Website updates. In addition, *features of activist Websites* was measured by four variables—donations, fundraising products, volunteer information, and links to affiliate Websites. To examine relationship theory (e.g., Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001), the operationalized variables were assigned to theory concepts.

Control mutuality is based on balanced power (Hon and J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 3) and was measured through the presence or absence of press rooms. Press rooms represent shared control between the activist organization and the journalist. The activist group has the control to post and update material. The journalist has the control to access a variety of data in one location within the site.

According to Hon & J. E. Grunig (1999), trust has three dimensions (i.e., integrity, dependability, and competence). Trust was measured through the presence of dialogic loop elements. These elements (e.g., means of contacting the organization, response to inquiries) suggest dependability, integrity, and competence.

*Satisfaction* as a theoretical construct was defined by Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) as a relationship in which “positive expectations ... are reinforced” (p. 3). Satisfaction was measured through the presence of dialogic loop elements, conservation of visitors, and ease of use.

*Commitment* was defined by Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) as “the extent to which each party believes ... the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain” (p. 3). Commitment is measured by presence of the press room, usefulness of material, and generation of return visits.

*Exchange relationship* was defined as “one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future” (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 3). Exchange relationships suggest that activist groups provide information to journalists in the hope of future benefits. Exchange relationships are therefore measured by the presence of press rooms, usefulness of information, and ease of use.

Although Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) argued that the ideal relationship with journalists is communal, in which both parties provide benefits with no expectation for getting anything in return, communal relationships may be difficult, if not impossible, to develop via Websites. However, exchange relationships are certainly possible via Websites. Therefore, exchange relationships, as one facet of relationship theory, are examined.

## Sample

Using M. Smith’s (2005) definition of activism (i.e., groups putting pressure on organizations to change problem policies or practices), we chose to study the

Websites of organizations involved in environmental activism. Environmental activism was selected because it is pervasive, crosses many interest and policy areas, and includes a wide range of types of activists—from mainstream to extreme groups.

The EnviroLink Network Website ([www.envirolink.org](http://www.envirolink.org)) provided the sampling frame for the list of activist organization Websites. The EnviroLink Network is a nonprofit organization that has been indexing thousands of environmental Websites since 1991. The directory of EnviroLink contains activist organization Websites sorted by 29 issue–topic areas. These 29 categories of Websites listed in the EnviroLink Network were used as the population for this study. EnviroLink was selected based on its extensive organizational membership.

Collectively, these lists categories contained 2,906 activist organization Websites. After alphabetizing the Websites and eliminating repetition, a subset of 1,868 Websites were numbered and 110 Websites were selected using random numbers generated by Microsoft® Excel 2002. Of the 110 Websites identified by this process, only 74 had currently active Websites. Therefore, 74 activist Websites were finally analyzed. An admitted weakness of this study is the limited sample.

### Intercoder Reliability

After a training session, two researchers coded the Websites in the sample. Twenty (27%) of the Websites were cross-coded to determine intercoder reliability. This cross-coding resulted in 1,160 coding decisions. There were 58 coding decisions for each site. There were 116 differences in coding decisions, which represents a reliability coefficient of .90 using the Holsti (1969) formula cited in Stacks (2002, p. 116). This falls within the acceptable range of .90 or above (Stacks, 2002, p. 116). Because few questions or disagreements were reported between coders, Holsti was used to measure intercoder reliability. It is acknowledged that Holsti does not take into consideration agreement that occurs by chance.

The fourth hypothesis (“Most activist Websites will not have dialogic features for journalists”) was also explored qualitatively. Websites with “contact us” email functions were emailed to determine response time. Email to these organizations asked three questions: (a) How do you handle requests from journalists?, (b) Do you have a designated spokesperson?, and (c) How many media inquiries do you receive, on average, per month?

The unit of analysis was the Websites. Coders aggregated the information at each site and completed one coding sheet per site. Research questions were examined and hypotheses tested through analysis of frequencies.

## FINDINGS

## RQ 1: What Media Relations Materials Are Available on Activist Websites?

Media relations materials were defined as organizational press releases, affiliate press releases, email press kits, searchable press archives, biographies of leaders, policy papers, newsletters, organizational history, and links to stories about the organization.

About one-third (33.8%) of environmental activist Websites included organizational press releases. Affiliate organization press releases were available at 10.8% of the Websites analyzed. Only 2 of the 74 Websites (2.7%) analyzed offered any type of email press kits. And 14.9% of environmental activist Websites offered searchable news archives.

Biographies of organizational leaders were offered by 17.6% of Websites. Policy papers and related materials such as speech texts were available on 31.1% of environmental activist sites. Just over half (54.1%) of the Websites analyzed provided organizational mission statements and almost half (47.3%) offered online versions of publications such as newsletters. A strong majority (70.3%) of Websites provided a history of the organization. And 28.4% of environmental activist Websites offered links to stories about the organization and its work.

In summary, the most common materials that would be of use to journalists were organizational history (70.3%), organizational mission statement (54.1%), organizational publications (47.3%), press releases (33.8%), and policy papers (31.1%; see Table 1).

TABLE 1  
Frequencies of Media Relations Elements on Activist Websites

<i>Element</i>	<i>%</i>
Organizational history	70.3
Organizational mission statement	54.1
Organizational publications	47.3
Organizational press releases	33.8
Policy papers	31.1
Links to stories about the organization	28.4
Biographies of organizational leaders	17.6
Searchable news archive	14.9
Affiliate press releases	10.8
E-media kits	2.7

### H1: Most Activist Websites Will Not Provide Organized Press Rooms

The first hypothesis was supported. Just less than one-third (32.4%) of the environmental activist Websites did provide press rooms of any kind. Those sites that did offer specific pages devoted to media relations were most commonly labeled “press room” (6.8%), “press release” or “press releases” (6.8%), “news room” (4.1%), and “media” (2.7%).

### H2: Most Activist Websites Will Have Press Releases Posted

The second hypothesis was not supported. Only 33.8% of environmental activist Websites included organizational press releases.

### H3: Most Activist Websites Will Have Dialogic Features for Members

The third hypothesis was not supported. Nearly all activist Websites provided substantial general contact information. However, just around one-third offered clearly dialogic systems such as means by which to respond to the organization, request information from the organization, or receive regular updates from the organization.

Because activist organizations are only effective if they build and maintain relationships with current and prospective members, the third hypothesis suggested that dialogic features that cater to members would be common. These dialogic features were defined as general contact information, frequently asked questions section, forums, user-response mechanism, voting, surveys, vehicle for requesting information, and regular email contact or updates.

Nearly all (97.3%) activist Websites included some sort of general contact information. Means of contacting the organization included postal address (95.9%), telephone number (90.5%), fax number (74.3%), and email address (93.2%). Very few included any forum (9.5%) or frequently asked questions (8.1%).

Dialogue was encouraged on these Websites by providing response mechanisms (31.1%), request mechanisms for information (33.8%), and offers of regular email updates (37.8%). Fewer activist Websites empowered members through voting on issues (5.4%) or participating in surveys (8.1%; see Table 2).

### H4: Most Activist Websites Will Not Have Dialogic Features for Journalists

The fourth hypothesis was supported. Most Websites did not have contact information for experts and most did not have strictly dialogic elements, as noted in

TABLE 2  
Frequencies of Dialogic Features on Activist Websites

<i>Feature</i>	<i>%</i>
General contact information	97.3
General postal address	95.9
General email address	93.2
General phone number	90.5
General fax number	74.3
Expert contact information	40.5
Expert email address	35.1
Expert phone number	18.9
Expert postal address	6.8
Expert fax number	4.1
Regular email updates	37.8
Information that can be requested	33.8
Opportunity for user response	31.1
Online forums	9.5
Frequently asked questions or questions and answers	8.1
Survey of opinions	8.1
Opportunity to vote on issues	5.4

response to Hypothesis 3. Furthermore, most organizations did not respond to an email asking questions about media relations tactics.

Dialogic features for journalists were measured in two ways—through the items mentioned previously for members (i.e., frequently asked questions section, forums, user-response mechanism, voting, surveys, vehicle for requesting information, and regular email contact or updates) and through contact information for specialists or experts.

Although almost all Websites had general contact information, fewer than half (40.5%) of the Websites had contact information for specialists or experts. The most common means of contacting specialists or experts was email (35.1%), followed by phone (18.9%), postal address (6.8%), and fax (4.1%; see Table 2).

This hypothesis was also explored qualitatively. Websites with “contact us” email functions were emailed to determine response time. The email query asked about media relations techniques. Of the 74 organizations contacted by email, 10 responded within 2 days, 3 responded within 6 days, and 61 never responded (including 5 because of message delivery failure). In short, 82% never responded to our email query. The very limited response to the email query does not allow the findings to be generalized in any way. Of the organizations that responded, most have a referral system in place for requests from journalists and most have a designated spokesperson. The monthly requests varied by size and type of organization from 1 to 2 to 100 to 400. Most important, this tactic suggests that the “contact us”

feature on most of the Websites may not be a truly dialogic function. The nature of the questions may have influenced response rate.

## RQ2 :Are Activist Websites Easy to Use?

Ease of use was measured by whether the Website had a table of contents, site map, search engine, links to home page, needed advanced applications, and had lots of graphics or special effects on its home page.

Almost all (95.9%) activist Websites had a table of contents on their home pages, but only 20.3% had a site map. Fewer than half (40.5%) had a search engine on their home page.

Three-quarters (78.4%) of Websites had links back to the home page on other pages within the site.

About one-third (33.8%) required advanced applications to run properly. These applications included Acrobat Reader, RealOne Player, and Windows Media Player. Almost all (94.6%) Websites included graphics on the home page. The highest percentage (22.9%) included only one graphic; 17.1% included three graphics. Only 18.9% had some sort of special effect, such as flashing or sweeping of pictures.

Tables of contents, links to home pages, minimal special applications, and minimal special effects facilitated ease of use. The frequent lack of a search engine impeded user friendliness of sites.

## RQ3: How Do Activist Websites Maintain Visitors?

“Stickiness” or efforts to invite involvement by visitors was measured by useful information such as downloadable audio–video, graphics or commercials, calendar of events, products for sale, explicit invitation to return or bookmark the site, information on how to volunteer or donate for the cause, and frequently updated material.

Only a few (14.9%) Websites identified their membership. No Website explicitly invited browsers to return. One-third (33.8%) of sites analyzed included a calendar of events. More than one-quarter (28.4%) noted the last time the site was updated.

Almost half (48.6%) of the environmental activist Websites provided a means of making a donation to the organization. Fewer (29.7%) provided products for sale. About one-third (35.1%) provided information on how to volunteer with the organization (see Table 3).

More than half (56.8%) the sites provided links to other sites.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to examine the online tactics of environmental activist groups, especially as they relate to providing useful information to and

TABLE 3  
Frequencies of Involvement Factors on Activist Websites

<i>Factor</i>	<i>%</i>
How to contribute money	48.6
Posting of news stories within last 30 days	36.5
How to volunteer	35.1
Calendar of events	33.8
Products for sale	29.7
Posting of last updated date	28.4
Membership identification	14.9
Downloadable audio/video	10.8
Downloadable graphics	4.1
Downloadable commercials	0.0
“Bookmark now” feature	0.0

building relationships with journalists. Through this research normative activist online media relations tactics emerge. In addition, relationship management and public relations theory is examined from the vantage point of activists and one of their publics—journalists. This study measured process variables important to relationship building in a media relations context.

Media relations is an important element of online activism. Understanding and providing what journalists want and need is as important as cultivating a personal relationship with reporters who cover issues of interest to your organization. The Internet provides a useful portal to reporters searching for expert sources. Of course, the Internet alone doesn't suffice as a media relations program, but it is an additional and potent tool. This research suggested that activist organizations are not using their Websites to their fullest potential when it comes to courting and serving journalists.

Theorizing about activist online media relations emerges from analysis of the most common elements and the literature. The most common elements of Websites analyzed included background material such as mission statements and organizational history; far fewer included elements that might have more newsworthy elements such as policy papers or organizational publications such as newsletters and press releases. More than one-quarter of the Websites analyzed included organizational history (70.3%), organizational mission (54.1%), or organizational publications (47.3%). Furthermore, just less than one-third of activist Websites included any sort of online press room. The findings suggest activist organizations could improve their media relations by grouping existing elements of interest to the press on a page in the organization's site dedicated to journalists' needs. If environmental activists are seeking press coverage, they must include press-friendly elements on their Websites and package them in easy-to-locate press rooms.

Evidence (e.g., Taylor et al., 2001) has found dialogic features were available for the general public, but there were fewer dialogic features of use to journalists. Reber and Berger (2005) wrote that activist groups would benefit by making information specifically dedicated to journalists readily available. One logical place for such information would be activist organizations' Websites. Fewer than half the activist Websites in this study included any sort of specialist or expert contact information that would be beneficial to journalists. Furthermore, most activist Websites do not offer the dialogic features that would be of most use to journalists—expert contact information, information request mechanism, and email updates. This lack of information and contact points could easily be addressed by activist organizations with an Internet presence. The evidence in this and other studies suggests it would behoove activist organizations to be more journalist-friendly on their Websites to build online relationships with the press.

Unfortunately, where true dialogic features exist (i.e., invitations to contact the organization for more information) they are not being used to their full benefit. In this study, a simple series of questions about media relations went unanswered by 82% of the sample.

About one-third of activist Websites include elements that would especially encourage return visits. In addition to two-thirds of sites not including such elements, even the sites with return visit elements do not appear to cater to journalists.

The theoretical implications in these findings suggest that media relations as practiced by activist organizations on their Websites exhibit neither accommodative nor advocative ideals. From the perspective of relationship theory (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Hung, 2005), the relative absence of press rooms (32.4%) suggests a lack of control mutuality and commitment to journalists, at least as practiced in the organization's Website.

There is a marked lack of characteristics that would encourage journalists to interact with activist organizations via their Websites. In addition to the absence of press rooms, elements that Taylor et al. (2001) used to identify dialogic loops in Websites were among the variables used to examine the theoretical concepts of trust and satisfaction. The findings show that most Websites did not employ dialogic features that could serve to build trust and satisfaction among journalists. About 60% did not have expert contact information; about 60% did not have email updates; about 70% did not have a way to request information or allow user response. Fully 82% never responded to a brief email query.

Satisfaction was measured by usefulness and conservation of visitors. Activist organizations, via their Websites, failed to enlist online tactics that might serve to satisfy journalists. Only one-third of these Websites had online press releases (33.8%). Even fewer had policy papers (31.1%) or leaders' biographies (17.6%) online. Only 14.9% had searchable news archives. Around half included their organizational mission statements (54.1%) and provided online versions of their publications (47.3%). In conserving visitors, activist Websites offered very few

sticky features—there was a dearth of online press rooms, only 28.4% provided information about when the site was last updated.

Commitment was measured by presence of online press rooms, usefulness of information, and generation of return visits. As previously noted, these Websites were marginal in exhibiting a commitment to journalists via press rooms and useful material. To generate return visits, 33.8% included calendars and 36.5% posted stories within the past 30 days. Therefore, about one-third provided some reason to visit the Website with relative frequency.

We used the usefulness and ease of use variables to examine the concept of exchange relationship. The lack of useful tactics on the majority of Websites, as outlined previously, suggests that most activist Websites in this study did not use these sites to build even exchange relationships, let alone the more preferred communal relationships. Furthermore, although some of the general ease-of-use measures were present, there was a relative lack of features that might make the Websites easy for journalists to use (e.g., only 14.9% had searchable news archives).

Tactics and behavior of an organization are antecedent to relationship building. To begin to analyze relationship theory in activist media relations, it is important to understand how an activist organization uses its Website to address the needs of journalists. Theoretically, journalists who are better served by activist organizations via the organizations' Websites and in other ways would be more likely to build a mutually satisfying relationship in which activists depend on journalists to report on issues of significance to the organization and journalists readily turn to the organization for reliable and easily accessible information of relevance to the organization's expertise. Reber and Berger (2005) found that journalists frequently turn to environmental activists as expert sources. To continue building relationships with journalists, activists should make available their expertise via organizational Websites. This study lays a foundation for future research in understanding journalists' attitudes toward organizational Websites as a means of relationship building.

The findings suggest that activist organizations could make much better use of their Websites to build relationships with journalists. Although we acknowledge that Websites alone do not constitute effective media relations, a Website that is well-appointed with up-to-date and specific information can serve as a meaningful augment to interpersonal media relations efforts. Furthermore, by not taking advantage of the characteristics of Internet communication, activist organizations are not advocating for their organizations at their maximum capacity.

The findings suggest the need to post press releases regularly, organize appropriate materials in an online press room, post policy papers and statements, and identify specialists or experts and make them available to the press. Large national or international organizations are likely better at using their Websites for press relations than are small, local, or regional grassroots organizations. However, much

activism occurs at that local level, so enhancing the ability of small activist organizations to provide useful information to journalists is essential.

Findings in this study also suggest several practical guidelines related to activist online media relations:

1. Home pages of activist Websites should include a link to a press room. In many cases the information exists; it would simply be a matter of combining the information in one space and providing a link from the home page to that space.

2. Activist Websites should identify and provide contact information for experts in specific issue areas. To build relationships with journalists, activist organizations need to provide access to people who can serve as expert news sources.

3. Activist Websites should provide a mechanism through which journalists can contact the organization with questions. Such a feature is meaningless if it is not routinely monitored and responses quickly posted. Deadlines are part of a journalist's reality. Those sources that provide timely and reliable responses quickly become valuable.

4. Regular email updates on issues of particular interest to the activist organization and to the press provide a means of building an online relationship.

5. Activist Websites should post news releases and updates with regularity and archive dated releases. A news release archive allows access to past releases but acknowledges the short shelf life of real "news."

6. Make position papers, backgrounders, and organization's publications available in press rooms.

## Future Directions and Weaknesses

This study only scratches the surface of the important intersection between activist organizations and journalists. The relatively small sample and the focus on environmental activists are weaknesses in this study. They do not allow for any generalization beyond the simple random sample collected here. In addition, using an intercoder reliability that does not account for chance limits the accuracy of the instrument as well as the reliability of the study's findings.

Activist communication provides fertile soil for public relations scholars to work. This research extends earlier work by Taylor et al. (2001) and contributes to relationship theory by analyzing relationship building tactics via an important medium. This study used an established methodology to analyze antecedents to relationship building or process elements pertinent to relationship theory concepts. Although this study provides some insights into the employment of relationship theory concepts by environmental activist groups, additional studies must look at the relationship from the journalists' perspective, perhaps using survey methodology. Future research might involve qualitative work such as depth interviews with

activist communicators and journalists to identify how they see themselves working with the other party. Future research should also identify differences by size of organization. Are large, national organization Websites different in their press relations than regional, grassroots sites? Websites of other types of activist groups—beyond environmentalists—should be studied. Because the action in activism happens at the grassroots level, local leaders should be provided the necessary tools, such as Website press rooms and media training, to communicate most effectively with journalists. This study illustrates what current online media relations practices exist and which can be improved. Finally, future research should attempt to gather relationship information from the journalists' perspective using Hon and J. E. Grunig's (1999) relationship scales.

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