



The power of activist networks in the mass self-communication era: A triangulation study of the impact of WikiLeaks on the stock value of Bank of America



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ABSTRACT

This case study examines a confrontation between WikiLeaks and Bank of America (BOA). Drawing upon Castells' concept of mass self-communication and the cocreational approach to public relations, a triangulation of social network analysis and event study method allows this project to capture the structure of WikiLeaks' global network and to document how the activist network affected BOA's stock value. The analysis reveals that WikiLeaks emerged as the center of a global mass self-communication network consisting of a diverse group of members, such as social media sites and mass media outlets. The study offers implications for a re-conceptualization of the role of activism in public relations.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, WikiLeaks, an activist group launched in 2007, has frequently appeared on the headlines of news media across the world because of its many attempts to disclose sensitive information (Gellman & Harrell, 2010; Ludlow, 2010). In 2010, WikiLeaks targeted at Bank of America (BOA)—a multinational banking and financial services corporation. In 2010, *Forbes* listed BOA as the third biggest company in the world and with branches in over 40 countries. The idea of an activist group with mostly anonymous members taking on such a large publicly owned company seems almost similar to a David vs. Goliath situation in which one party is incommensurably more powerful than the other. In this old story, David won his battle. Similarly, WikiLeaks seemed to win out in this case and BOA's stock values dropped significantly. There lies the main question: How did WikiLeaks win?

Activist groups such as WikiLeaks, according to the Excellent Theory perspective, are part of the activist public. Based on the two-way symmetrical model, Grunig and Grunig (1989) argued that activists employ either symmetrical or asymmetrical approach to promote their agenda, and they collaborate with corporations to achieve a possible compromise. From this perspective, activists inherently lack of authority or power and have to rely on corporations to promote social changes.

Nevertheless, as illustrated by this case and also documented by other studies (e.g., Sommerfeldt, 2011; Yang & Taylor, 2010), activists are increasingly empowered with new media technologies that allow a constant flow of communication among networks. Guided by their causes, activists leverage their networked power to build their autonomy and challenge

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powerful institutions. Compromising or seeking corporations' cooperation may not always be a necessary step toward directing social changes. These emerging social realities require reconsideration and re-conceptualization of the role of activists and the value of their public relations practice.

In addition, although many have noted that the Internet could benefit activists (Coombs and Holladay, 2012; Smith & Ferguson, 2010), to advance theory building and practice, it is necessary for scholars to move beyond simply acknowledging the “magical” power of technology. What is more important is to systematically analyze the mechanisms through which new media technologies facilitate activists' confrontations against powerful social actors.

Recognizing the gap in the literature, this study advocates for a theoretical perspective that combines Castells' (2007, 2009) concept of *mass self-communication* and a cocreational approach to activism. Mass self-communication is a horizontal many-to-many communication form that has no top-down control and bypasses editorial filtering. This perspective helps to explain how activists can effectively elicit changes through creating activist-centered networks of communication in the virtual space, which might ultimately create a positive social change.

To understand how activism has been studied in the public relations scholarship, Section 1 of the paper discusses two approaches to activism in public relations: the functional approach and the cocreational approach. Further, we introduce Castells' concept of mass self-communication, which explains the mechanism through which new media empower grassroots actors and therefore allow activists to be cocreators of social reality. Section 3 presents the confrontation between WikiLeaks and BOA, followed by the method section. The final sections of the paper review the triangulated findings and present suggestions for future research.

2. Two approaches to activism in public relations

Activism is the efforts to promote, hinder, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). Coombs and Holladay (2012) noted that activists often strive to achieve three goals through their actions: (1) to either elicit or resist change on the part of a target organization; (2) to seek public policy or regulatory changes that would affect changes in public behavior; or (3) to change social norms. The success of activists' action depends on their ability to access and use resources (Sommerfeldt, 2011). In addition, activism can take a wide range of forms and there are different ways to conceptualize activism in public relations—functional and cocreational approaches (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

2.1. The functional approach to activism

The functional approach to public relations has its roots in positivism (Dozier and Lauzen, 2000). The positivist approach values a single truth that can be obtained through scientific research, and this approach denies multiple perspectives on the understanding of the nature of public relations. The functional approach conceptualizes activists as part of the activist public. Grunig and Grunig (1989) argued that activists employ either symmetrical or asymmetrical approach to promote their agenda, and they collaborate with corporations to achieve a possible compromise. This model suggests that activists press corporations into adopting their perspective in decision-making and the most active agencies in the process of social change are corporations.

From this perspective, activists, to a large extent, have to rely on corporations to promote social changes. The functional approach to activism thus conceptualizes activism as obstacles of corporate goals, and as problems or issues that managers need to learn to deal with. Overall, as McKie (2001) and Holtzhausen (2007) observed, there were widely spread negative attitudes toward activists among scholars who take a functional approach to public relations.

However, the functional approach essentially limits public relations to only serve “organizations with pockets deep enough to hire professional public relations practitioners” (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, p. 8). Such a perspective may constrain the further development of public relations. Ihlen and van Ruler (2009) argued that “the instrumental and administrative approaches that currently prevail must be supplemented with societal approaches that expose what public relations is in society today, rather than only what it should be at the organizational level” (p. 5). Scholars studying activism from different perspectives challenged the proposition of the functional approach, and argued that it does not adequately account for activist public relations (Holtzhausen, 2007). Clearly, the functional approach is inadequate to explain the recent encounters of activists with large corporations. Hence, we turn to the cocreational approach.

2.2. The cocreational approach to activism

Public relations scholars have noticed a paradigm shift in the field. Botan and Taylor (2004) argued that in public relations, the dominant status of the functionalist perspective is being challenged by a cocreational approach, which focuses on publics of all sorts as cocreators of meaning. This approach opens up new possibilities to understand the nature of public relations, and allows for the possibility of plural realities. The cocreational approach echoes with Dozier and Lauzen's (2000) suggestion that public relations research should distance itself from the management perspective to gain broader understanding of public relations' social implications.

The cocreational approach to activism considers activists as cocreators of the relationships between organizations and their publics, and examines the strategies that are utilized by activists. Guided by the cocreational approach, a line of research examined the ways in which activists use public relations to attain their goals (Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Yang & Taylor, 2010).

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