



Digital activism: How social media and dissensus inform theory and practice



Erica L. Ciszek

Jack J. Valenti School of Communication, University of Houston, 101 Communication Bldg, Houston, Texas 77204, USA, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 August 2015

Received in revised form

11 November 2015

Accepted 14 February 2016

Available online 28 February 2016

Keywords:

Postmodernism

Dissensus

Activism

Social media

ABSTRACT

Through thematic analysis of user-generated comments to posts on Chick-fil-A's Facebook page, this article explores the postmodern concept of dissensus (Lyotard, 1988) as an area for development in activist and social media research. This article examines which dissenting perspectives emerged, how dissensus was expressed, and the implications of this for practitioners and scholars. Several areas for embracing dissensus suggest how social media may impact public relations practice and theory.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Same-sex marriage has been a topic of debate since the 1970s, gaining increasing attention following a 1993 Hawaii Supreme Court decision that declared the state's prohibition of same-sex marriage to be unconstitutional. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage, and public support for same-sex marriage has grown considerably during the 21st century (Lax, 2009; Silver, 2012). While many of the debates over same-sex marriage in the United States have taken place in political and legal venues, discussions have carried over to business as well. Food, as journalist Ron Ruggles (2012, p. 35) notes, "is woven into the fabric... of American rights experiences, fueling not only the advocates but also the issues themselves." Foodservice has become a battleground for social issues, such as in July 2012, when fast food restaurant Chick-fil-A's Chief Operating Officer Dan Cathy triggered a public relations firestorm after expressing in an interview that his company supports a "traditional definition of marriage," contending that gay marriages "violate God's plan."

Although excellence theory advocates consensus and compromise as central tenets of public relations, during the Chick-fil-A situation no concessions were reached between the organization and its publics. In fact, attempting to reach consensus with activist publics may be counter productive (Stokes & Rubin, 2010). Keeping with Holtzhausen (2000, 2002, 2012) articulation of postmodern values in public relations and Kennedy and Sommerfeldt (2015) call for a postmodern turn for public relations scholarship, the purpose of this paper is to examine the postmodern concept of dissensus as an area for development in social media and activist research to better understand how social media may affect public relations practice and theory.

E-mail address: elciszek@central.uh.edu

1.1. The case: Chick-fil-A

In 2012, at the time of the Chick-fil-A controversy, the American public was divided on the issue of same-sex marriage, with 43% opposing and 48% favoring allowing gays and lesbians to legally marry (Pew Research, 2014). Cathy's comments led to a deluge of accusations, denunciations, boycotts, demonstrations, and rallies stemming from both sides of the issue.

The media stories that followed reported that from 2008 to 2010 the Cathy family's nonprofit (the WinShape Foundation) had donated \$3.2 million to anti-LGBT groups opposing same sex marriage and supporting therapy to "convert" gay "tendencies." Since early 2011, LGBT rights advocates had been calling for a boycott of Chick-fil-A because of these donations (Arnold, 2011). As a result of Cathy's comments, Chick-fil-A restaurants around the United States became a battleground for the nation's same-sex marriage debate. On August 1, 2012, former Arkansas Governor and Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee organized "Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day," a supportive "buycott" event drawing the support of thousands of Americans. Two days later, groups of LGBT rights advocates participated in a "National Same-Sex Kiss Day," organized by activist Carly McGehee (2012) to "show Chick-fil-A that EVERYONE deserves to be able to fall in love, start a family, and take their children to eat fried chicken after a soccer match."

Government and business officials soon joined the debate. On July 20, 2012, in a public letter to Chick-fil-A, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino denounced Cathy's "prejudiced statements," stating that there was "no place for discrimination on Boston's Freedom Trail and no place for your company alongside it" (Boston Mayor's Letter, 2012, para. 4.) Several days later, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel told the Chicago Tribune "Chick-fil-A values are not Chicago values," noting "they disrespect our fellow neighbors and residents" (Dardick, 2012). Corporations also responded to Cathy's comments, and in a July 20, 2012, statement, the Jim Henson Company (2012), which provided toys for Chick-fil-A kid's meals, announced on its Facebook page that it had notified Chick-fil-A that they "do not wish to partner with them on any future endeavors." Additionally, the organization donated the payment it received from Chick-fil-A to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), an LGBT advocacy organization.

As both sides of the issue took to social media, the controversy generated national and international media coverage, inciting debate over equality, freedom of speech, and private business rights. Chick-fil-A experienced what one reporter deemed a "major public relations tsunami" (Jonsson, 2012). Public relations professionals criticized Chick-fil-A for not responding appropriately to the crisis. The company was pegged as "flunk[ing] crisis PR 101" (Tice, 2012). According to *Business Insider*, Chick-fil-A earned the number-four spot in the top 10 "Biggest PR Disasters" from 2012.

Despite the seeming crisis that ensued, four months later, in November 2012, Chick-fil-A was named one of the top-10 "Breakout Brands" for its work connecting with customers. While some have deemed the case a public relations nightmare, then, others have lauded the company for creating "strong emotional bonds that inspire repeat purchases and loyalty" (Holmes Report, 2012). This apparent contradiction points to issues surrounding social media controversies, organizations' relations with publics on social media, and the goals of public relations practice in terms of consensus and accommodation.

2. Social media and public relations

Over the last 10 years, research on social media in public relations has emerged as a central area of inquiry (Duhé, 2012; Kent, 2013) that has grown exponentially (Ye & Ki, 2012). Public relations scholars recognize the ubiquity of social media, and as Taylor and Kent (2010) note, "The question today is not so much a question of 'if' but 'how' to use social media in public relations."

Social media have been much studied and hailed as the great new way to build relationships by leading to organizational credibility (Kang, 2010), trust (Yang & Lim, 2009), and eventually mutual understanding or consensus between an organization and its publics. The nature of social media lends itself to two-way communication, seemingly supporting relationship management theories. Research demonstrates, however, that practitioners often use social media as one-way forms of communication instead (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Carim & Warwick, 2013; O'Neil, 2014; Yang & Kent, 2014), which then support marketing objectives (Avidar, Ariel, Malka, & Levy, 2013; Carim & Warwick, 2013; DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; McCorkindale, 2010).

While social media may not be living up to their two-way communication promise, research suggests that activists have often used social media to good effect, such as shifting the balance of power and functioning as tools of resistance (Veil, Reno, Freihaut, & Oldham, 2015) and alternative platforms for communication (Kaur, 2015). From a critical perspective, power may be more profitably viewed as relative (Foucault, 1995), and activist publics can use social media to empower themselves and disempower the organization they are fighting against (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a,b). From this perspective, social media may become counter-public spaces where activists challenge dominant discourses and provide a platform for multiple competing, and often conflicting, perspectives to emerge. It may be productive, then, to examine cases of conflicting perspectives through the lens of postmodernism, which suggests dissensus as an illuminating concept.

3. Postmodernism and dissensus

Postmodernism shatters seemingly unified concepts, making space for new ways of seeing and thinking about the social world and challenging dominant modes of consideration and universal truths. Postmodernism focuses on diverse, subjective,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/138631>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/138631>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)