



Online activists vs. Kraft foods: A case of social media hijacking



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ABSTRACT

This study examines a case in which activists used a corporation's social media page to disseminate activist campaign messages. Specifically, we examine how a blogger-activist took advantage of an online hoax regarding a warning label for Kraft Macaroni and Cheese to spur others into hijacking Kraft's Facebook page. While the hoax was quickly exposed, the reputation damage was done and within 6 months Kraft announced it was changing the ingredients in some products. This study offers several implications for online activists and public relations researchers and practitioners by (1) providing an example of how traditional activist strategies have adapted for the online environment; (2) presenting hoax as a viable, albeit potentially unethical, strategy to motivate action; (3) showing the impact of social media hijacking and dismissing the notion that "slacktivism" cannot lead to change; (4) encouraging further research on collaborative relationships between activist groups; and 5) outlining the benefits of more proactive issue management strategies.

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1. Introduction

On May 30, 2013, Vani Hari, activist and author of the blog Food Babe, posted a video shot by one of her followers in a Tesco store in Ponders End, U.K. The video featured boxes of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese containing a label stating that the product "may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children" and may contain genetically modified (GMO) wheat. The New York Times and several online media outlets covered the story. Kraft responded to media inquiries explaining that they do not export Kraft Macaroni and Cheese to the U.K. and do not have a distributor in the U.K. that sells to Tesco. Furthermore, GMO wheat is illegal in the U.S. and abroad and is therefore not used in any Kraft products. Kraft spokesperson Lynne Galia stated simply, "Anyone implying that G.E. wheat is in Kraft Mac & Cheese or any of our products is wrong" (Strom, 2013, para. 5).

The May 30 post on [FoodBabe.com](#) was not Kraft's first run-in with Hari. Just the month before, with the help of [Change.org](#), Hari delivered a petition with over 270,000 signatures to the Kraft headquarters in Chicago asking Kraft to remove from their products dyes that have been linked to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children and require a warning label in the European Union. Over the next several weeks, Hari used the publicity from the label hoax to raise awareness of the campaign against Kraft, including organizing an effective hijacking of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese's Facebook page.

This study examines a growing trend of activists using the target organization's social media sites to propagate campaign messages opposing the target organization's practices. Specifically, we examine how Hari took advantage of the hoax to

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spur her followers into hijacking Kraft's Facebook page. While the hoax was quickly exposed, the reputation damage was done and within 6 months Kraft announced it was removing the suspect dyes from its Macaroni and Cheese shapes products targeted at children.

This study unfolds in three parts. First, we outline literature on online activism and the specific strategies used in the campaign, hoax and social media hijacking. Then, we provide a robust case study that includes evidence from a media textual analysis, statements submitted to us by Kraft public relations executives, an interview with activist–blogger Hari, and a content analysis of Kraft's Facebook wall in the weeks immediately following the hoax video post. Finally, the case is discussed to provide implications for online activism and public relations practice and research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online activism

Activism is defined as a “process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions the activists find problematic” (Smith, 2005, p. 5). Jones and Chase (1979) suggested the role of activists is to create a “perceived need for reform” (p. 10). Activists must establish the legitimacy of the issue they support while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of their target organization. This “legitimacy gap,” which yields the exigence of a solution, creates the motivation for activism (Heath & Waymer, 2009).

Taylor and Sen Das (2010) proposed that a goal of activists today is to create an advocacy network to generate support for a variety of interrelated issues within a social movement. Sommerfeldt (2013) posited that “how activists participate in public dialogue is influenced by the resources that shape organizational strategic communication capacity” (p. 350). Larger, more organized, and more resource-rich activist groups will use strategies similar to those used by the entities they target; whereas, smaller, grassroots, resource-poor activists must rely heavily on media attention and the larger social movement network to gain attention.

As low cost communication resources, “Internet and Web capabilities have been a boon to activists” (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 181). Supporters can join a movement without leaving their computers simply by sharing negative information about the target organization, and thereby undermining the organization's legitimacy and tarnishing its reputation. While the ease of retweeting or liking an activist message has led some to term online activism, “slacktivism” (Mozorov, 2009), when organized, even “slacktivists” can wreak havoc on an organization's reputation.

2.2. Organizational responses to activists

With the rise of online activism and incredulity over the level of true outrage perpetuated online, organizations may determine it is not prudent to respond to every criticism or activist threat. Indeed, Veil, Petrun, and Roberts (2012) found that organizations that respond unnecessarily to online threats could make the situation much worse. According to Waldron, Navis, and Fisher (2013), organizations respond to activist demands based on whether they perceive the campaigns will produce identity or economic threats. If the reform does not call to question the organization's defining attributes, the organization is not likely to change until economic threats materialize. The case at hand proves that some activists will not be ignored unless the reform is substantial. Thus, it is imperative that organizations be ready and willing to engage publics and activists in a way that satisfies their demands if an identity or economic threat is realized.

2.3. Emerging activist strategies

While activists have adapted Jackson's (1982) original taxonomy of strategies for the online environment, this study contends that the Internet has also expanded the activists' arsenal. The following literature outlines two of the strategies used in this case to apply pressure to Kraft, hoax and social media hijacking.

2.3.1. Hoax

Veil, Sellnow, and Petrun (2012) define hoaxes as “deceptive alerts designed to undermine the public's confidence in an organization, product, service, or person” (p. 328). The credibility of the claim is not as important as whether the public thinks the claim is possible. Katz (1998) examined the history of hoaxes and rumors and suggested that the Internet has transformed the way in which hoaxes are introduced and spread. What used to be a good rumor or even an urban legend, can now have an entire online community dedicated to perpetuating the conspiracy theory.

2.3.2. Social media hijacking

Social media hijacking was originally equated to hacking whereby the hacker would illegally access the login and password of the owner of the page and make changes or post comments to the page. However, organized activists can easily and legally take over a corporation's social media page. Facebook's open-comment platform and the Internet's anonymity create a perfect place for public outrage to break out on the walls of a corporation's social media page.

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