



## Organizational balancing of website interactivity and control: An examination of ideological groups and the duality of goals



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### ABSTRACT

Researchers have overwhelmingly concluded that substantial benefits can be achieved by organizations increasing the level of interactivity on their websites. However, interactivity, with its emphasis on facilitating visitors' unconstrained exchanges and control over website content, may undermine the communicative purpose of an organization's website. Taking a perspective based on the duality of goals, we argue that interactivity may not be desirable for some supporting organizations. We tested these ideas by examining the features of interactivity on 105 websites that are supported by national and international groups. Some of the websites are supported by ideological groups that have a strong interest in controlling their messages and clearly articulating their ideology to the public. A subset of the ideological groups also sanctions acts of violence in support of their ideology. As predicted, we found substantial differences in the level of interactivity between the violent groups and other ideological and non-ideological groups, with the greatest disparity occurring in social media. We conclude that for violent groups the need for control over website content and representation outweighs the benefits of interactivity. Surprisingly, we found little difference between nonviolent ideological and non-ideological groups. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

For more than a decade, website interactivity has garnered significant attention and research interest (see [Rafaelli & Ariel, 2007](#) for a review). The overwhelming conclusion from this inquiry suggests organizations may achieve substantial benefits by increasing the level of interactivity on their websites. Although the definitions of interactivity vary, most researchers agree that website interactivity includes the degree to which the website facilitates exchanges of information (i.e., with the website) or interpersonal messages (i.e., with other visitors), permits a visitor to control the functionality or information available on the website, and is responsive to the visitor's requests ([Rafaelli & Ariel, 2007](#)). These dimensions of interactivity have been labeled respectively two-way communication, active control, and media

synchronicity ([Liu, 2003](#)). Interactivity has been linked to greater acceptance of the information presented on the website ([Campbell & Wright, 2008](#); [Tam & Ho, 2006](#)), and increased intentions to revisit the website ([Palmer, 2002](#)). When individuals exchange messages through interactive websites, they experience higher satisfaction with communication processes and outcomes ([Lowry, Romano, Jenkins, & Guthrie, 2009](#)). Organizations increasingly attempt to engage visitors through their websites by supporting two-way exchanges (i.e., exchanges between website visitors and the supporting organization or among website visitors themselves), linking to social media, and providing a customized visit (i.e., granting visitors control over the content they see).

However, interactivity, with its emphasis on facilitating visitors' unconstrained exchanges and control over website content, may undermine the communicative purpose of an organization's website. For example, if a group has a controversial message, its website could be inundated with comments expressing disagreement that actually detract from the group's main message. Under these conditions, interactivity may be of less concern than preserving an intact, coherent message in support of the

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organization's goals. Our investigation is guided by the following research question: How do organizations balance the benefits of interactivity with the need to communicate a consistent, coherent message in support of the organizations' goals? In answering this question, we focus on the potential conflict between interactivity and tight control of the website's message.

### 1.1. Website interactivity

Interactivity influences interpretation and processing of messages on a website in several ways (Liu & Shrum, 2009). First, interactivity determines, in part, what information is available for consumption on a website (i.e., visitor-generated content such as comments, discussion board threads). Second, interactivity influences how that information is presented and processed by website visitors (i.e., customization and control over website content). Third, interactivity can serve as a marker of credibility that can influence the organization's message communicated through a website. For example, in a study of political websites, interactivity improved visitors' attitudes toward a candidate despite them being previously apathetic about the candidate (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). Therefore, high levels of interactivity are thought to make more information available, facilitate visitors' information processing, and elevate the credibility of the website's message.

Interactivity has been associated with greater acquisition and acceptance of the information presented on the website (Sharda et al., 2004; Tam & Ho, 2006), increased intentions to revisit the website (Palmer, 2002), greater ability to make decisions using website information (Jiang & Benbasat, 2004), and higher satisfaction with communication processes and outcomes (Lowry et al., 2009). In a multi-disciplinary literature review, Rafaeli and Ariel (2007) demonstrated benefits such as higher perceived satisfaction, trust, effectiveness, efficiency, value, and liking for websites and advertisements that are delivered interactively. They stated:

The preponderance of field empirical evidence regarding consequences of interactivity leans toward positive outcomes. . . . It should be noted that there have been some indications that interactivity may have other than positive outcomes. However, only very few negative or problematic outcomes of interactivity have been given empirical documentation. (p. 80)

Clearly, these benefits of interactivity would likely seem highly desirable to an organization sponsoring a website.

With substantial evidence touting benefits of interactivity, some researchers have begun exploring cases where interactivity may not be beneficial. Initial work along this line has suggested that interactivity is most effective when it is employed on entertainment websites rather than on websites whose primary purpose is to supply information (Liu & Shrum, 2002). Others have found that time pressure makes non-interactive websites more preferable (Amichai-Hamburger, Fine, & Goldstein, 2004). Additionally, researchers have noted the elevated cognitive cost when dealing with additional functionality in websites (Jones, Ravid, & Rafaeli, 2004; Liu & Shrum, 2009). We add to this stream of research by arguing that the desire for accurate representation of website messages and tight control over website content may also compete with the benefits of interactivity. To examine this potential conflict we turned to websites and supporting organizations that value control over messages they send: ideological groups.

### 1.2. Interactivity and ideological groups

Ideological groups are defined as organizations of individuals with similar and strongly held beliefs that form a mental model for how the individuals understand the world around them

(Mumford et al., 2008). Examples of ideological groups are widespread, such as groups supporting political views, religious beliefs, and social causes. In addition to their abundance, they also wield considerable political power, control substantial financial resources, and attempt to influence the attitudes of entire societies. Ideological groups fill a number of needs for their members: (1) the groups help members manage uncertainty and perceived external threats; (2) they provide a sense of identity and meaning for their members; (3) the groups help foster a positive self-concept through the enhancement of self-esteem; and (4) they provide a structure through which members can make sense of their environment (Allen et al., 2008).

As the internet has taken its place among other more traditional media (e.g., television, radio, newspapers), researchers have noted the internet's lack of regulation and oversight, especially in comparison to traditional media (Heath & O'Hair, 2009). Anyone with access to the internet can gather information from a multitude of sources, create content, and deliver the content to a target group. Given the lack of oversight, relative ease of dissemination, and the affordances not available in traditional media, the internet offers fertile ground for the proliferation of ideological groups and their messages (Matusitz & O'Hair, 2008). In fact, the internet is quickly stepping into serve as a central medium for ideological groups to interact, communicate, and build relationships with potential members (Stanton, 2002). In particular, many of these groups have chosen to set up websites because they can increase the reach of their ideological message beyond what is available to them through more traditional media sources. Additionally, these groups are able to attract individuals who would otherwise be unable or unwilling to participate in person, but who still express an interest in the group's ideology (Lee & Leets, 2002).

While there is substantial variation in ideological groups' causes, there is also variation in ways that ideological groups advocate their principles or support their causes, and these methods of advocacy and support can generate disagreement and controversy. Among the most controversial groups are those groups that promote, sanction, or publicize acts of violence in support of their cause. For example, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' website publicizes its acts of philanthropy in support of peaceful animal advocacy, while the Animal Liberation Front's website describes why and how it commits acts of violence (e.g., laboratory liberations, threats against animal researchers) to support its cause. In this research, we examine websites supported by both violent and nonviolent ideological groups because they likely have different goals with regard to the level of control they wish to maintain over their messages.

Despite the prevalence of ideological groups, research on ideological group websites is scant, and research focusing on the interactivity of ideological group websites is even rarer. Although not specifically referring to ideological websites, Chua (2009) noted that virtual communities regulate messages among members and suggested the reason for the regulation was preservation of group identity. However, how such regulation is manifest in website interactivity remains unknown. In a review of how online ideological groups promote their ideals and causes, Byrne et al. (2013) used content analysis to assess various facets of information variety, media types within the website, and website functionality. The findings showed nonviolent ideological websites, compared to violent ones, had a wider variety of information, including viewpoints that were non-committal or even opposed to the ideals espoused by the group. Information on these sites was rated as more educational than that on violent websites. Violent ideological websites had less variety of information, incorporated media that was more emotionally evocative, and had a greater volume of pro-group information than either the nonviolent or non-ideological sites. Website functionality was also rated as higher for the nonviolent ideological sites.

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