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Using online platforms to engage employees in unionism. The case of IBM

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ABSTRACT

To date, there is a paucity of studies that looked into the way unions can use social media platforms to increase employee engagement in activism. Understanding the most effective ways in which unions can make use of online communication to increase membership and raise awareness becomes of paramount importance in light of the decline in union participation that occurred during the last decades and that deepened wage inequality. In addition, union efforts were shown in past studies to be hampered by upper management. Online platforms become an important means that unions can use to eschew managerial control and indirectly increase their membership. The current study used the predictors for online engagement to analyze the online interaction of IBM's union and assessed the extent to which it was effective in engendering increased employee participation. IBM represents a unique case study as a result of the company's current focus on offshoring and restructuring. The results of this study showed that the union engaged in an informative and one-way communication style which failed to increase employee activism. The results and their implications are discussed for theorists and practitioners.

1. Introduction

In the US, a country characterized by a high level of activism (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009), labor unions have historically played a paramount role in triggering equality in the workplace and the society (Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). Their activism forced companies to adopt fairer wages, led to the decrease of upper management income, and contributed to the development of a more moral economy by exerting pressure on legislative bodies (Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). However, union membership plummeted considerably over the past few decades, namely from 16 to 6 percent for women and from 34 to 8 percent for men, all of which led to an overall increase in wage inequality of 10% (Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). Several factors explain the decline in unionism, the most important of which is intensified employer opposition manifest through reticence toward union employment and/or similar forms of internal organizing (Hirsch, 2008; Tope & Jacobs, 2009; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). The continued decline in union membership is likely to further inequality and lead to increased managerialism. While upper management can impede employee participation in activism in offline settings, the possibilities of engagement in activism are limitless online. Specifically, the advent of the internet forever changed business as usual (Weinberger, 2011) by breaking down the boundaries between internal and external stakeholder groups, decentralizing organizations, and disrupting hierarchies. The internet in general and the Web 2.0 in particular deprive upper management of the safety once provided by clear definitions of roles and authority and shift power relations from a delineated hierarchy to a set of hyperlinks that employees can now access to gain and spread information about their organizations (Weinberger, 2011). In the era of online engagement, power relations reside in the connections developed online as employees have borderless access to other users (Weinberger, 2011) and can expose current organizational practices to force their employers to enact more

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ethical business practices. Consequently, the internet proves an invaluable tool with the help of which silenced employees can now subvert managerialism, engender a shift in their company's culture and leadership and enable a transition from the information model of managerial control, characterized by strategy and consent, to a democratic environment that revolves around employee participation and direct involvement (Deetz, 2000, 2004). However, the potential of the internet to trigger organizational changes has to be exploited strategically with the ultimate purpose of increasing online interactivity and engagement. Social media platforms for the purpose of unionism become a public relations tool that employees can resort to for interactions that would translate offline and materialize in increased participation and union membership. While the public relations literature is fraught with studies on activism, there is currently a paucity of research that deals with online unionism.

The present study aims to fill in this gap by shedding light on how union communication emerges online and by assessing whether it is strategic and engaging enough to foster increased online interaction. For this purpose, the study uses the case of IBM's union and analyzes its social media communication over a period of nine months and in the aftermath of layoffs and offshoring allegations. The results of this study represent the first step toward understanding social media communication and unionism and can be used to improve online union communication in the US as well as in countries that are characterized by similar levels of activism, power distance, and individualism (Hofstede, 2011). The article first discusses past literature on public relations and activism, after which it introduces the hypotheses and the research design. Next, the article presents the results, their implications and provides recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations, activism, and union communication

Past research on public relations and activism was conducted threefold. First, studies looked into public relations practices employed to establish relationships with external activist groups (Ciszek, 2015; Grunig & Grunig, 1997; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Reber & Kim, 2006; Smith & Ferguson, 2001; Veil, Reno, Freihaut, & Oldham, 2015) and aimed to understand the way activists make use of offline and online resources to exert pressure on organizations. Second, several studies shed light on the best PR practices that activist groups can employ to accomplish their agenda. For example, Grunig and Grunig (1997) provided guidelines that activist groups can use to communicate their demands to organizations and have their concerns addressed (McCown, 2007), and several studies determined how activists make use of the internet to promote their issues (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003; Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012). However, to date, there is a paucity of studies that determine how internal stakeholders embrace activism in an attempt to constrain managerialistic practices. In this respect, McCown (2007) examined employee activism in an educational setting and ascertained that internal activism was likely to arise in light of the lack of communication between leadership and employees as well as the management's low solicitation of employee feedback. Yet, employee activism in a corporate context has remained unexplored.

The third line of research viewed the very practice of public relations as activism (Berger, 2005; Ciszek, 2015; Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen, 2013; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Smith & Ferguson, 2001), as several researchers referred to the boundary-spanning role of the practitioners and placed activism on behalf of an organization's stakeholder groups at the nexus of the public relations practice (Ciszek, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Holtzhausen, 2000; Kohring, Marcinkowski, Lindner, & Karis, 2013; Stehle & Huck-Sandhu, 2016; Vardeman-Winter, Tindall, & Jiang, 2013).

The present study falls under the second line of research on activism and considers the union an internal activist group that uses public relations practices to the best of its abilities to garner further support, increase its membership, and expose current organizational practices. The study addresses the gap in the current literature on internal communication in general (McCown, 2007; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012) and on internal activism (Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; McCown, 2007) in particular. In addition, its contributions to the literature consists in its analysis of online platforms for employee communication and engagement (Wright & Hinson, 2006). Finally, there are currently no studies that address how unions can make use of online communities for activist purposes, which becomes of paramount importance in companies where management attempts to impede union membership by direct or indirect means.

The study of unionism in relation to online engagement becomes particularly important in light of past studies that showed union participation to be higher for individuals who are active in political activities such as voting and protesting (Kerrissey & Schofer, 2013), involvement that was shown to increase after information seeking and sharing on social media platforms (Dozier, Shen, Sweetser, & Barker, 2016; Pennington, Winfrey, Warner, & Kearney, 2015). Therefore, it is expected that employee engagement on social media platforms will positively affect their participation and engagement in union activism. Much of the employee activism can take place online, as discussed next, and can be effective in the recruitment of new union members, raising awareness of the issues that employees face, and finally, setting the media's agenda.

2.2. Online communities

The advent of the internet engendered new forms of socialization among which the spirit of community that had been long lost in offline interactions (Rheingold, 2001) as a result of industrialization. The internet in general and Web 2.0 platforms in particular facilitate the emergence of online communities through dialogue and erasure of social markers such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, etc. (Matei & Bruno, 2015). Past research studies showed that members of online communities exhibit psychological bonds that are formed around affect, need, and obligation (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2008), bonds that enable the translation of the

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