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Click and mortar: Organizations on the web☆

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ABSTRACT

The webpages of organizations are both a form of representation and a type of narrative. They entertain, persuade, express a point of view, and provide a means to organize collective action and economic exchange. Increasingly, webpages are the primary point of access between an organization and its environment. An organization's online presence offers a major new source of rich information about organizations. In this paper, we develop three perspectives on websites from an organizational point of view: as identity projects, tools, and relational maps. We draw on data from the online and offline presences of "brick and mortar" nonprofit organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area to both illustrate how a digital transformation shaped these organizations and identify a host of new methods that can be used to study organizations using webpages. Finally, we reflect on both the strengths of these new sources of data as well as possible limitations and conclude with theoretical implications for organizational scholars.

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1. Introduction

Today, websites are a primary point of access and communication between consumers and organizations. This relationship is true not just for Amazon and Alibaba – for whom webpages are the central point of contact – but for charities, social movements, schools, and government agencies as well. Activities as diverse as scheduling an appointment, checking your bank account, offering a donation, applying for a job, or making a purchase are done through organizational websites. Webpages, which we take to be the corpus of an organization's online presence, represent an important new source of rich information on organizations. They are much more detailed than annual reports, and are read and used much more widely. Due to their interactive nature, webpages are more "live" than most other forms of organizational communication. The use of websites can be verified through analytics data, which permit measurement of how often a website is accessed and from where. Consequently, we think it is incumbent on organizational scholars to develop new methods and concepts to analyze the contents of webpages, and to consider the ways in which organizations are changing due to their online presence.

As with any new idea or technology, as it becomes available and groups adopt it, the meaning and functions of the technology change, and the nature of the problems it was designed to solve expand. Consequently, new uses develop. Webpages are ubiquitous. They are both a form of representation and a type of narrative. Like narratives, they have many purposes (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). They inform, entertain, persuade, and express a point of view. Webpages display a distinctive design, which may tell us a good deal about the structure and functioning of organizations. They contain varying amounts of text and visual content, and this content suggests important differences between, say, a formal bureaucracy and a grassroots social movement. Webpages are also a means to organize collective action, and have been widely used in various forms of political participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In turn, these new participatory practices and new forms of contribution are, in some cases, creating new types of workplaces, with novel points of contact with the external environment (Contractor, 2013).

The internet is a powerful, transformative technology. Through it, organizations that were once tethered locally become accessible globally. The web also enables individuals to access organizations and participate in them well beyond the boundaries of their local communities. This access has profound implications for the spread of ideas both to and from organizations. To be sure, similar changes accompanied the advent of other major new technologies. The emergence of the postal system, newspapers, radio, telephone, and television had considerable influence over how organizations learned, communicated, and traded. As these technologies progressed, they variously enabled organizations – and their audiences – to cross boundaries of time, space, and knowledge.

The web, however, may be even more dramatic in its ramifications for social science research than these earlier technologies. Science makes progress not only through discovery and ideas, but also through the development of new tools and methods (Kuhn, 1962). Network scientist Duncan Watts (2011: 266) has argued that mobile, web, and internet communications are the equivalent of the telescope for the social sciences as they have "the potential to revolutionize our understanding of ourselves and how we interact." Economist Shane Greenstein (2015: 419–442) contends the web is different from other technologies because it has fostered "innovation from the edges," with inputs originating from multiple places through dispersed decision-making. Sociologists Golder and Macy (2014: 130) suggest that studies of "digital footprints collected from online communities and networks enable us to understand human behavior and social interaction in ways we could not do before."

The development of organizational theory also follows a trajectory of boundary crossing. Weber's ideal-type bureaucracy strove to be hermetically sealed from much external influence. Thompson's (1967) classic treatise emphasized how organizations tried all manner of strategies to "buffer" themselves from their external environments. As organization theory progressed, it began to engage with the external environment: first, in the Carnegie School tradition as an information processing problem to be solved by the organization, and later as the source of resources that organizations attempt to control and manage (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Ensuing research on inter-organizational networks and studies of organizational fields and populations further transformed our understanding of organizational boundaries.

Organizational theory, by its very nature, has long been grounded in the material and technical reality of the time period in which ideas were developed. Technological change has played an important role in both the evolution of organizations and organizational theory. Chandler (1977), for example, argued that the large industrial firm came about because an explosion of new faster communication and transportation technologies made it more efficient to organize within firms, thereby giving rise to the salaried manager. But new technologies do not drive

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