Social media echo chambers create serious issues for organisations

Recent political events such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have taken political pundits and observers by surprise. How could these things have happened? One explanation offered is that we are increasingly living in bubbles of like-minded people that limit our ability to understand other points of view. These bubbles are a result of the "micro-targeting" of news, and social media algorithms that deliver only content that we already agree with (Wilson, 2016). Further, the virality of content on social media through "friend" networks means that this content, whether fake or real, tends to travel quickly and "echo" among like-minded people.

We set out to research social media "echo chambers", and found they are not confined to political issues, but can also create serious issues for organisations trying to communicate with their stakeholders. Further, we found that the bubble effect is not just about opinions: it is also about emotions and the emotional language that people use to express their arguments and opinions. When an organisation's communications contradict the emotional language expected by its stakeholders, the anger and betrayal experienced by the stakeholders can escalate through social media echo chambers to result in stakeholder activism, with serious material consequences for the organisation.

But before we elaborate, let us back up and explain our study and, in doing, illuminate some factors that could have helped the organisation avoid the frenzy of emotional online activity and the offline activism it triggered.

The organization we studied was a non-profit federation created with a dual mission: 1) to promote *research* into the cure for a degenerative disease and 2) to advocate for the *treatment* of those with the disease. To fulfill their research aim, they relied on a scientific research logic, and to fulfill their treatment aim, they relied on a compassionate care logic. A logic is like a "worldview": it filters what you see and affects what you believe, how you act and how you judge yourself and others. It provides guidelines for appropriate forms of action (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012).

In this research, we found that a logic also includes norms about the appropriate experience and expression of emotions. Specifically, a research logic is associated with an objective, skeptical and dispassionate approach to new information, regardless of its impact on particular humans, and uses dispassionate language. The care logic, on the other hand, is empathetic, considering the human experience as primary. New information is evaluated with respect to its effects on individuals with whom the evaluator empathizes, and emotional expression focuses on care for those individuals.

Our study period commenced when an investigative journalism TV show reported a new treatment for a degenerative disease with crippling consequences. In response, members of the federation (a key stakeholder group for the organization) expressed hope and excitement on the organization's Facebook page, believing the treatment would improve the lives of people suffering from the disease – themselves and their family members. Their language was full of hope and referenced care for those with the disease.

However, organization leaders interpreted the research very skeptically, and initially dismissed it out-of-hand. They used rational, dispassionate and science-based language and discounted the treatment.

This organisational response triggered, in the words of the organisation, an "unprecedented" "uprising from members" who felt betrayed. Using arguments and emotional language consistent with a care logic, members pleaded with the organisation to consider member welfare and tried to shame the organisation into working to make the treatment available. As these sentiments were shared on Facebook, members' emotions escalated and amplified, shifting from betrayal to anger. In response, the organisation doubled down on the research logic, avoiding emotion and claiming more research was needed.

What we saw was members and the organisation speaking past one another. Members wanted a caring response, and yet the organisation felt a dispassionate research-based response was more appropriate. As a result of this disconnect, the more unemotional and skeptical the organisation's response was, the more angry members became. Members soon began to shun the organisation, asking funders to stop donating, and telling the government that the organisation was no longer the legitimate representative of people with the disease. The organisation saw a drop in donations and membership, and the media depicted it negatively, picking up on member sentiment. The escalating mobilisation on Facebook had material, negative effects on the organisation.

After almost eighteen months of only unemotional, scientific language, we saw a shift in the organisation's response as these negative impacts became clear. Managers began to include emotion in their Facebook posts and combined a care perspective with the research logic they had used all along. In response, the conflict de-escalated and members returned to pre-conflict topics online.

To summarise, our findings show that emotions expressed on social media by an organisation's stakeholders may spread like fire and have material consequences if fuel is thrown on them (instead of water). In this study, throwing unemotional, research-based arguments at members' stories of suffering and pleas for help acted as fire, not water, escalating their emotions which amplified on Facebook.

The key take–away from our study is that it is important for organisations to understand their stakeholders' concerns and emotional norms – what we call the emotional register of their logic. For example, if stakeholders are using a research logic, dispassionate, skeptical language is appropriate. If stakeholders are using a care logic, however, organisations need to consider their concerns and express their arguments using language and emotions consistent with the care logic. If you ignore your stakeholders' emotional language you may just be fuelling the social media fire – amplifying the impact of emotions shared in echo chambers.

So what can you do?

- Consider the worldview of your stakeholder and the type of emotional experience and expression it values (even if you disagree).
- Adapt your response to include language with appropriate emotionality, and use it – alone or in combination with the organisation's perspective.
- Make sure your social media team is connected to your stakeholders and understands the logics that govern their respective areas of interest so they can reflect appropriate emotional meanings and language.
- Do not underestimate the power of a few betrayed stakeholders: emotions amplify and escalate online, and a few can become many very quickly.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper [The Message is on the Wall? Emotions, Social Media and the](#)*

- *Dynamics of Institutional Complexity*, *Academy of Management Journal, June 1, 2017*
- *The post gives the views of the authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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