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...
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.

3. Method

We used a robust case study approach (Sellnow, Littlefield, Vidoloff, & Webb, 2009) to analyze multiple data points. The websites and blogs of Kraft and Food Babe were first examined to identify official comments regarding the GMO and food dye controversies. Media coverage of the case was then collected via a Google News search using the terms Kraft and Food Babe. The news stories were examined to create a case timeline and narrative and identify how the strategies used by Kraft and Hari were reflected in the news coverage of the hoax.

The spokespersons cited in the news coverage, Lynne Galia for Kraft and Vani Hari for Food Babe, were also contacted directly by the researchers via the email addresses listed on their respective corporate website and blog. Galia declined the interview but sent a response via email. Hari took part in a phone interview, which was recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Galia’s response and Hari’s interview comments are used to support the case description and findings.

User generated comments added under Kraft’s posts on their Macaroni and Cheese Facebook page from May 28 to June 15 were also analyzed. Comments were coded as either positive/neutral or negative. Because Hari’s petition was to remove the food dyes and Kraft only responded to the GMO accusation, negative comments were also coded whether the comment included the terms GMO or dye. If both GMOs and dyes were listed in a single comment, the comment was coded based on whichever term was listed first. 20% (n = 93) of the comments were first coded separately by two coders. Cohen’s Kappa was used to determine intercoder reliability. Reliability was satisfactory (κ = 0.939), and the rest of the comments were coded by one of the coders.

4. Case analysis

In April 2013, blogger and activist Vani Hari hand delivered a petition with over 270,000 signatures to the Kraft headquarters in Chicago asking Kraft to remove from their products the petroleum-based dyes that have been linked to ADHD in children. Yellow No. 5 and Yellow No. 6, both used in Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, are currently allowed in the U.S. but require a warning label in the European Union stating the product “may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children” (Gardner, 2010, para. 9). Kraft reformulated their Macaroni and Cheese products marketed in the European Union to avoid the labeling requirement but did not change the formula of the U.S. products.

Hari appeared on Dr. Oz, The Today Show, Good Morning America, FoxNews, and CNN to draw attention to the discrepancy before securing a meeting with Kraft. Hari said that in her meeting with Kraft, Galia refused to talk about why Kraft’s U.S. Macaroni and Cheese was formulated differently than the products sent overseas. Galia stated only that Kraft was following the FDA guidelines for what could and could not be in their products.

After leaving the Kraft offices, Hari tried following up with Kraft but her calls were not returned. So Hari went online and built an army. She posted to Facebook, Twitter, and her blog. She sent emails to her email list and contacted her friends who run similar activist groups like the Organic Consumers Association, The Cornucopia Institute, GMO Inside, and 100 Days of Real Food. She encouraged her followers to boycott and act as a group to change Kraft’s ways. Then, on May 30, 2013, Hari posted the hoax video to her Food Babe blog.

For the purpose of this study, we contacted Kraft Foods for an interview to discuss the strategies they used to respond to Hari. We received a personal email from Lynne Galia, but the content of the message was the same scripted response published by The New York Times. Kraft also offered us contact information for the International Food Information Council (IFIC) to learn more about the global regulatory environment for GMO’s.

No statements regarding the controversy were provided on either Kraft’s corporate website or its social media page. The challenge for Kraft’s public relations team is that Kraft is not the only entity that can communicate with its consumers via its social media page. Anyone else on Facebook who likes the page can add comments, and while most users would have to go directly to the Kraft Macaroni and Cheese Facebook page to see comments, anyone who does comment on a post receives an automatic update when anyone else comments on the post. Negative comments can be posted in the same manner as positive comments. And, especially in the case of online activism, a team of Facebook users can change the tone of any Facebook post by hijacking the social media page and outweighing the number of positive comments with negative comments.

4.1. Content analysis

This case study also looked specifically at the comments on Kraft Macaroni and Cheese’s Facebook page to demonstrate the ability of online activists to change the tone of Facebook posts from positive to negative. Kraft does have the ability to delete comments and block posts; however, previous cases demonstrate that these strategies only anger negative posters and increase the likelihood of future negative posts. In comparison to Kraft Macaroni and Cheese’s almost 1.5 million likes on Facebook, Food Babe’s Facebook page only boasts 141,458 likes. However, at the time of this study only 1687 people were talking about Kraft Macaroni and Cheese elsewhere on Facebook, whereas 29,747 people were talking about Food Babe elsewhere on Facebook. This demonstrates the power of online activists to widely disseminate their controversial messages despite limited resources.

On May 28, 2013, Kraft Macaroni and Cheese posted to Facebook: “If there were a summer blockbuster starring Mac & Cheese, what would you call it?” Over the next two days, Kraft received 229 likes and 119 comments, of which 110 were
positive ranging from suggested movie titles like “Cheesy Does It” to “Lunch.” However, on May 30, the tone of the comments changed. After May 30, there were only positive comments and 100 negative comments, of which 35 specifically mentioned GMOs and six included the link to the Food Babe blog. Some even maintained the movie title format such as “Frankenfoodle for all the GMOs" and “Mutants by GMO.”

The next post on the Kraft Macaroni & Cheese Facebook page wasn’t until June 6 when Kraft posted, “If only mac&cheese came in a convenient cup so you can take it anywhere. Oh, wait...” and included a picture of Kraft’s Easy Mac. This post received 667 likes and 46 comments; 18 comments were positive/neutral and 28 were negative. Of the negative comments, 12 mentioned GMOs first and 5 mentioned dyes first. The following day, Kraft posted “Break out the cheese, noodleheads. And join us in welcoming the weekend.” This post received 557 likes and 47 comments; 17 comments were positive/neutral and 30 were negative. Of the negative, 12 mentioned GMOs first and 6 mentioned dyes first.

The final post we examined was on June 15 featuring a picture of a bowl of macaroni and cheese with the words, “World’s Cheesiest Dad” imprinted on the side. The post read, “For the world’s cheesiest Dad, a World’s Greatest Dad coffee mug just won’t do this Father’s Day.” This post received 8041 likes and 155 comments; 48 comments were positive or neutral and 107 comments were negative, of which 51 mentioned GMOs first and 12 mentioned dyes first. The comments primarily focused on the thought, “if you love your dad, why feed him poison?” Also, for this post we examined the number of likes across the positive and negative comments. The positive comments received a total of 10 likes. The negative comments received a total of 538 likes, which means those who posted negative comments received positive feedback for doing so and those who posted positive comments received little to no positive reinforcement from other Facebook users.

The social media hijacking furthered the promotion of the label hoax and drew attention to the ingredient differences in Kraft Macaroni and Cheese sold in the U.S. compared to other countries. Hari was able to increase the signatures on her Change.org petition to Kraft to almost 350,000 signatures following the Facebook onslaught (personal communication). Despite Kraft’s adamant statement that they had no intention to change their stance on the dyes, on October 31, 2013, Kraft announced that they would indeed be removing Yellow No. 5 and Yellow No. 6 from the character pasta products of Macaroni and Cheese. That same day Kraft posted a Halloween costume idea using Macaroni and Cheese. The post received 123 likes and 143 comments. Of the 143 comments, 141 commented on the news that Kraft was removing artificial dyes from three of its products. Most of the comments were in the vein of saying “thank you, it’s a nice start but there is more work to do.”

5. Findings and implications

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.

5.1. Online adaptation of traditional activist strategies

This study demonstrates that the strategies included in Jackson (1982) original taxonomy continue to be used by activists today. Hari participated in informational activities including several media interviews and the sharing of both the original concerns and the hoax through social media networks. She also engaged in symbolic activities by boycotting and encouraging the Food Babe Army to boycott Kraft until they made their products safer and more natural. Hari took part in organizing and litigious activities like networking and filing a petition through Change.org. Even the social media hijacking could be considered a form of civil disobedience as trespassing where unwanted and administering a virtual sit-in on Kraft’s Facebook page. Thus, the online environment has not made traditional activist strategies obsolete; the strategies have simply been adapted for the online environment.

5.2. Hoax as activist strategy

This study looked more closely at the role of online hoax in inciting activism. The hoax video created a “legitimacy gap” and a motivation for activism (Heath & Waymer, 2009). According to Hari, the video showed that “This is a company that is not trustworthy. I had the absolute 100% right to question them on it. They claimed it was some rogue product, and yet no one could get in touch with the distributor to ask about the label.” The hoax simultaneously legitimized Hari’s claims and undermined the legitimacy of Kraft.

The hoax also provided an opportunity for Kraft to address consumer concerns. Veil, Sellnow, et al. (2012) used actional legitimacy to explain how an organization can respond to a rumor or a hoax by demonstrating learning from the vulnerability, the perceived threat exposed, even if the organization was not directly threatened. Rather than simply denying that Kraft uses GMO wheat, Kraft could have used the label hoax as an opportunity to enact change regarding the food dye warning. Instead, Kraft suffered through a 6-month social media onslaught only to go part way in making the change anyway. While Kraft is removing the dyes from the children’s “shapes” products, Kraft is not changing the ingredients in its signature “blue box” product.
5.3. Social media hijacking as legitimate activist strategy

The notion that online activists are lazy “slacktivists” should be dismissed. Hari explained, “They sign the petition with their name and address. They tell their friends and family members that they identify with this cause and they care about the food we eat. They care about people. I might be leading this with my voice, but they amplify my voice . . . To call these people slacktivists is a freaking insult . . . They are changing the world” (personal communication). This case demonstrates that when you get enough people challenging a corporation, even online, change can occur. And, while Kraft may not admit Hari’s strategies are what led to the decision to remove the dyes, the news media outlets drew that conclusion in the coverage of the story (Wilson, 2013). Hari’s “success” may encourage other activists to duplicate her strategies.

5.4. Collaborative activist relationships

This study also demonstrated how online activists work together to promote common interests. Rather than fighting for the attention of engaged consumers, in this case, Hari was able to rely on her network of activist organizations within the larger natural food social movement to promote the cause. Hari’s original petition had nothing to do with GMOs, but the hoax video helped her take advantage of the GMO inside network to apply pressure to Kraft. She said, “The multiplicity effect is essential.” By working together, “you can reach millions of people. That is the way you create change and take over a Facebook page” (personal communication). This strategy aligns with Taylor and Sen Das’s (2010) proposal that activists today seek to create an advocacy network to generate support for a variety of interrelated issues within the social movement. Future research should examine these collaborative relationships between activists to determine whether the relationships are mutually beneficial and how activists balance these relationships. After all, the GMO hoax overshadowed the harmful dye campaign, and yet, Hari still got the outcome (removal of the dyes) for which she campaigned.

5.5. Need for proactive issues management

Finally, this study offers insight into how public relations practitioners should respond to online activists. Just as the traditional activist strategies have adapted to the online environment, so too must organizations adapt their own issues management strategies. Having a strong prior reputation may not be enough to protect an organization; in fact, a strong reputation may make an organization an even more attractive target for activists (Spar & La Mure, 2003). Research has shown that a poor response to a reputation threat online can have dire consequences for an organization (Veil, Petrun, et al., 2012). And, while some scholars suggest organizations can ignore some activists and they will simply go away (Dougall, 2006, p. 174), this study shows that with the right network and a dedicated leader some issues will simply lie dormant until the right motivation (or hoax) can be leveraged to breathe new life into the campaign. Hari suggested, “The corporation wants you to quit. They want you to give up and forget. Waging a war on a company is hard work. You have to have tenacity and determination, and a thick skin to get your message across” (personal communication).

Kraft may still maintain more than 80% of the macaroni and cheese market share, suggesting that this campaign produced little economic threat; however, the constant negative comments on Kraft’s own social media page could lead to an identity threat (Waldron et al., 2013). And, considering several comments on Kraft’s page promoted Annie’s Organic Macaroni and Cheese, the number two product in the market, that identity threat could lead to an economic threat down the road. Hari suggested that to manage reputational threats online, public relations practitioners should meet with the individual leading the social media campaign to understand their point of view. “Build a personal relationship with someone who has concerns about your organization. Most of the time they’ll back off if they’re being heard. But the more you ignore them, the louder they get” (personal communication).

6. Conclusion

Issue management studies often end with a call to action, much like Hari’s, for organizations to scan their environments for emerging issues and be proactive in addressing those issues before they lead to crises. This study adds to that argument by calling for organizations to move faster. As Coombs and Holladay (2007) noted, activists were using online tools long before corporations recognized their value. Traditional activist strategies have already been adapted to the online environment and are expanding to include hoaxes and social media hijacking. Rather than ignoring online activists until they build an army, organizations need to embrace online tools as a direct line for discussing consumer concerns. If organizations continue to use reactive change strategies, activists will continue to wreak havoc on organizational reputations.

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