

Chapter 10

Using Social Media to Organize a Marginalized Community: A Case Study Examining LGBT Military Leaders Advocating for Inclusive Service

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ABSTRACT

Potential leaders within marginalized communities find it difficult to connect, learn, strategize, and support one another and build a cohesive community capable of effecting social change. This research contributes to filling a gap in empirical research on effective approaches to employing social media tools to organize and engage in social movements. The research builds on earlier studies of marginalized communities and social media to organize and engages in social movements by applying a case study design to assess how the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) military community employed social media to organize and advocate for inclusion and end discrimination within the U.S. armed forces. Seventeen findings were identified that describe key ways the LGBT military community employed these tools to organize, identify leaders and their roles, and how online behavior affected offline advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter demonstrates how case study research employing content and social network analysis can provide a framework to explore inter-group dynamics of a social movement.

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Using Social Media to Organize a Marginalized Community

The purpose of this research was to identify how social media tools connect and organize members of a marginalized community. The research question asks: How did the LGBT military community employ social media tools to organize and advocate to seek inclusion and an end to discrimination within the U.S. armed forces?

- How did the online LGBT military community develop/organize?
- How were leaders of online groups identified and what was their role?
- How did online behavior affect offline behavior/advocacy?

The case study examines how LGBT military personnel used social media to organize online during the effort to end DADT and the following effort to end the ban on transgender military service.

BACKGROUND

Potential leaders within marginalized communities find it difficult to connect, learn, strategize, and support one another and build a cohesive community capable of effecting social change (Arredondo, 2008). Further research can demonstrate the value of these tools and to identify how communities have most effectively employed social media to advance their social cause. As social media tools have become commonly available and accessible, they have the potential to facilitate connections and allow individuals to connect and organize for collective social action (Delany, 2016; Garrett et al., 2012; Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012).

The theoretical framework focuses on the intersection between social movement theory as described in Blumer's four-phase model defining the lifecycle of a social movement (Della Porta & Diani, 2006) and the emerging field of social media research, assessed against a series of four factors identified by Fulton (2013) in her assessment of the group OutServe as key to effective organizing online. Figure 1 depicts the interaction between these factors and processes.

Social movement theory, as articulated by Blumer (1969), in his seminal work "Collective Behavior" and later expanded on by other researchers (Della Porta & Diani, 2006) describes four phases through which a social movement progresses: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline as depicted in Table 1.

As social media tools have become broadly accessible and widely adopted, they provide new ways for organizers of social movements to facilitate work towards changing their status. Allsop (2016) describes three distinct perspectives on the effectiveness of social media for political organizing. Skeptics view social media as an army of armchair "slacktivists" who do not convert interest to action (Gladwell, 2010; Lewis, Gray, & Meierhenrich, 2014; Lievrouw, 2011; Rutledge,

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