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TOOLS BEYOND CONTROL: PRIVATE INFORMATION INTERMEDIARIES AND THE WORK OF ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

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Introduction

Advocacy organizations have come to rely heavily on a new generation of private information intermediaries that have become synonymous with the contemporary Internet. In the field of Internet governance, *private information intermediaries* have been defined as “private systems that do not provision actual content but rather facilitate information or financial transactions among those who provide and access content” (DeNardis, 2014, p. 153).

These private information intermediaries can increasingly determine how citizens and activists engage politically online through the technical architectures and policies they choose to implement—a phenomenon that can often disrupt the work of activists. Based on 16 in-depth interviews with present and former online strategists at several U.S. climate change and environmental advocacy organizations, this paper addresses the strategic importance and uses that online strategists assign to different types of private information intermediaries; their experiences using these tools and their responses to such experiences; and their perceived need to use these intermediaries to conduct their work and ability to use alternative tools.

Specialized and Non-Specialized Intermediaries

Below I will distinguish between two types of intermediaries: *specialized advocacy tools* and *non-specialized advocacy tools*.

Specialized advocacy tools are intermediaries that organizations use to conduct advocacy, have been developed mainly to conduct advocacy or can be customized extensively for this purpose, and over which activists have a comparatively high degree of control and agency. Examples include constituent relationship management (CRM) systems, content management systems (CMS), and software-as-a-service (SaaS) advocacy platforms that produce database-generated mass emails and ways to communicate with decision makers.

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Non-specialized advocacy tools are intermediaries that organizations also use to conduct advocacy but have *not* been developed primarily to conduct advocacy and cannot be customized extensively for this purpose, and over which activists have a comparatively low degree of control and agency. Examples include social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, and others. The combination of these specialized advocacy tools (Nielsen, 2011) and better-known private information intermediaries is central to Internet-mediated political advocacy.

Differing Conceptual Distinctions of Intermediaries

Virtually all strategists reported a high level of reliance on private information intermediaries to communicate with supporters and other potential audiences, but their strategic use of different *types* of intermediaries varied considerably. Most reported using non-specialized tools (primarily social networks like Facebook and Twitter) to engage with their supporters and new audiences, but not nearly as much for mobilization; specialized advocacy tools—especially database-generated email blasts—are still the tools of choice for the latter purpose.

Coping With Rapid Intermediary Innovation

Interviews revealed that some policies and technical features deployed by nonspecialized intermediaries often cause disruptions, but take on a wide variety of forms. One pervasive form is the constantly evolving nature of non-specialized intermediaries like Facebook and Twitter. The rapid pace of innovation characteristic of nonspecialized intermediaries can impose costs on advocacy organizations, both in terms of time and money. Liz Langton revealed that NRDC employs outside experts to help it optimize its use of Facebook (Personal communication, January 7, 2014).

Content Censorship in Intermediary Platforms

Some strategists recalled instances when non-specialized intermediaries disrupted their work more directly by censoring content. Greenpeace USA online organizer Dionna Humphrey recalled two such instances of censorship involving LinkedIn and Facebook (Personal communication, October 29, 2013). Since some private information intermediaries have shown a tendency to censor content within their platforms in order to avoid political controversies, these rejections represent additional instances of a worrisome trend in privatized Internet governance that is exacerbated by the growing dependence of advocacy organizations on non-specialized intermediaries.

Ideological Affinity and Tool Choice—or Lack Thereof

Specialized tools allow organizations much greater flexibility in choosing specialized intermediaries that broadly share their ideological leanings and goals. Respondents indicated that their organizations exercise such choices whenever possible. Michael Silberman, global director of Greenpeace's Mobilisation Lab project, described how Greenpeace would not sign a contract with Salesforce.com, a CRM widely used in the nonprofit world, until it pledged to move away from the "dirty cloud"—a pejorative term for cloud computing systems that rely on coal power plants to meet their energy

needs—and instead embrace clean energy (Personal communication, October 18, 2013). Organizations do not have this level of flexibility in relation to non-specialized intermediaries. Strategists revealed a sense of acceptance or even resignation to this situation.

Technological Architecture, Intermediaries, and Lock-In Effects

Advocacy groups may experience a lock-in effect similar to that of individuals who have invested too much time and effort curating their profiles and accumulating online interactions in one platform to switch to another. Attitudes regarding this prospect varied among respondents. Some characterized the potential need to migrate or rebuild communities developed through non-specialized intermediaries as daunting, while others were more sanguine about the prospect.

Discussion

The first pattern that emerges through these interviews is the overwhelmingly instrumental view that strategists hold of private information intermediaries. Another notable pattern is the lack of conceptual distinction strategists make between the disruptions they have to overcome in their use of specialized and non-specialized intermediaries. The distinctions between specialized and non-specialized tools become more relevant to strategists when the disruptions associated with the latter become most blatant—particularly when they involve censorship. This highlights the inherent tensions of treating non-specialized intermediaries as neutral collective action platforms, when in fact they are corporate entities with social and political agendas that can differ—sometimes substantially—from those of advocacy organizations, and will not hesitate to implement technological architectures or policies to support their agendas. This tension can often put activists in the awkward position of treating some of the very platforms on which they depend as targets of their advocacy efforts.

But aside from blatant instances like censorship, the general attitude among respondents toward disruptions stemming from technical or policy choices of information intermediaries is to treat them as inevitable consequences of using these tools, to be sidestepped, hacked, or simply endured because “there’s nothing else like it” or they see a need to “go where people are.” Interviews indicated a certain disconnect between how practitioners of online advocacy view private information intermediaries, and various concerns articulated by Internet scholars and policy experts. Given the increasingly important role that the Internet plays as a platform for political communication and participation, it would be beneficial to bridge this gap. If current trends hold, non-specialized private information intermediaries—particularly social networking services—should become even more important as collective action platforms. This means that the technological architectures and policies these corporations enact will increasingly dictate what activists can and cannot do online to further their goals.

References

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