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Blurring the Lines Between Personal and Organizational Identity: The Role of Identity Construction on Twitter when Leaders Change Organizations

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The Role of Identity Construction on Twitter when Leaders Change Organizations

Sarah Bonewits Feldner and Kati Tusinski Berg

When Noah Kravitz left his former employer PhoneDog, LCC in 2010, the 17,000 followers he had amassed for his Twitter account, @PhoneDog_Noah, left with him. While he changed the name of the account to @noahkravitz, his employer sued claiming that it had rights to those followers as clients of the business (Hamilton, 2011). The suit was settled out of court, but the question remains as to who has rights to the Twitter followers of employees who tweet on behalf of organizations. This question is particularly salient at a moment when companies are empowering their employees to be brand ambassadors on social media, and CEOs take to social media with increasing frequency to put a face on their brands (Park, Kim, Cha, & Jeong, 2011).

This chapter examines two cases similar to PhoneDog LCC v. Kravitz in which the lines of individual versus organizational representation are blurred. There is much debate about the purposes and implications of individual employees engaging publics via Twitter. Eric Goldman (2012), a writer for Forbes, argued:

The law assumes that social media accounts have only two states: personal or not-personal. Instead, social media accounts fit along a continuum where the endpoints are (1) completely personal, and (2) completely business-related—but many employees' social media accounts (narrowly construed, ignoring the statutory overbreadth problem) fit somewhere in between those two endpoints. Indeed, employers and employees routinely disagree about whether or not a social media account was personal or business-related. (para. 7)

The legal implications of cases like these cannot be ignored, and there are larger theoretical implications that public relations professionals and scholars must explore. Specifically, what are the gains and losses when a company or brand is tied to a particular person, rather than to an official organizational account? For example, Steve Wojciechowski garnered tens of thousands of followers on his Twitter account while he was the assistant men's basketball coach at Duke University because the head coach, Mike Krzyzewski, did not have a Twitter account. Thus, fans could connect to Duke basketball via @

steve_wojo. Yet, what happened to those followers and their engagement with Duke basketball when Steve Wojciechowski left the university? Business executive Marissa Mayer built a Twitter following while at Google and then became the president and CEO of Yahoo. What are the implications of an organization's brand and identity being closely aligned with an individual? How are these relationships rebuilt and maintained in times of leadership change?

This study examines two cases, one situated in sports and one in technology, to explore questions of organizational identity, voice, and leadership along with the implications for branding. Organizational leaders who are active on Twitter have the potential to become thought leaders for their brands. Such participation plays a particular role in how the identity of the organization is constructed. And, the mere selection of tweet topics frames followers' thinking on which topics matter most.

Literature Review

The Changing Landscape of Corporate Communication

Communication has changed dramatically over the past 30 years, but the most significant shift came in the 1990s with the introduction of social media because it "impacts the way organizations communicate with people, the way people communicate and connect with each other, be they employees, customers, partners, competitors, adversaries, advocates, the general public, members of the media, or others" (Doorley & Garcia, 2015, p. 129). Social media platforms like Twitter are deeply rooted in the everyday lives of people all over the world. They are a common part of how people and organizations communicate and engage online. Doorley and Garcia (2015) described how individuals manifest social media in a variety of ways:

From live reports of breaking news crises like the Boston Marathon bombings, to pop cultural events like the birth of the British Prince George, to sporting events like soccer's World Cup, to the collection of individually meaningful events in people's lives that get posted and shared by the billions every day, social media serves to both distribute and collaborate, inform and comment, observe and participate. (p. 128)

The authors further explained that with social media,

- anyone can create and distribute content online, easily, quickly, often freely, and with little or no technical know-how;
- people can connect with organizations and each other in ways that were limited or not possible before;
- many of the traditional barriers – between public, social, and so-called mainstream media – have become blurred; and
- the combination of social media and search means that much of that content is available for all to see, not just days or months but often years after it was originally published.

Because social media are ingrained in culture, organizations – large or small, for-profit or non-profit, local or global – must include social media as part of their corporate communication matrix. People expect to use social media to communicate with the organizations that matter in their lives. Men and Tsai (2012) suggested that because social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are inherently social and communicative, they have the potential to humanize an organization by allowing SNS users to become "friends" with and "like" the organizations, which allows organizations to build relationships on a more personal level. Organizations participate in social media for a variety of reasons, including

media have emerged as spaces in which organizations make arguments about who they are and the legitimacy of their identities. Social media add a layer of complexity to understanding how organizational leaders' use of Twitter constructs identities for corporations because corporations have limited control of the audience (i.e., followers). While these leaders may represent a corporate voice for many stakeholders, when they change positions, the audience travels with them to the new role by default. That is, the Twitter application is such that users may change their organizational affiliation, but unless they create a new account, their followers do not change (unless followers choose to "unfollow" the person). As opposed to statements on a company website or in letters to shareholders, followers self-select accounts and remain followers, or connected to these accounts, even when the role of the person changes. For example, I may choose to follow the CEO of my favorite retailer because I am a fan of its products. By so doing, I will learn about my favorite retailer and its activities through updates posted by the CEO. However, if that CEO moves to a competitive retailer, my followership of the individual remains the same, yet I am now by default following a different company's activities. While the individual voice may remain the same, the corporate voice has changed, and I will be following a different corporation.

Case Studies

In this chapter, we focus on the intersection of organizational leaders' presence on Twitter, their followership, and organizational identity. Specifically, we seek to draw attention to an important yet unasked question, which is how these intersections are changed and managed as leaders move from one organization to another. To start to identify the most salient issues for corporate communication practitioners in these cases, we examine the tweets and retweets of two leaders who made moves from one organization to another. Our aim in these cases is to ascertain how leaders use the Twitter platform in ways that personify the corporate voice and how this voice might change as they switch organizations.

We identified two prominent individuals, Steve Wojciechowski and Marissa Mayer, who each made organizational changes within the past five years. We gathered a sample of tweets from each individual before and after the organizational moves. As we read, we identified the basic topics of tweets and retweets and compared the activity between each role. That is, we were interested in what each was tweeting about at each place, and if and how that changed after the respective moves. In adopting this approach, we seek to identify how organizational leaders' Twitter use can be understood as a representation of a company's identity.

Steve Wojo: From Duke Assistant to Marquette Head Coach

In our first case, we examined Steve Wojciechowski, who is (as of this writing) the head basketball coach at Marquette University. We start with a case of athletics because the world of coaching is fairly volatile. That is, it is common for coaches to move from team to team as they advance their careers. Further, coaches are well known and can often serve as the face of the organization or team. This is particularly true in the case of college athletics where athletes' time with the organization is temporary while coaches hold more stable positions. Although not a CEO, the coach of a college team is recognized and reflects the identity of that team. Therefore, this case provides a good illustration of how Twitter activity contributes to understanding of a team.

Wojciechowski's case is slightly unusual because prior to relocating to Marquette University he served as an associate head coach at Duke University under head coach Mike Krzyzewski, who does not maintain a Twitter account. Fans who wished to follow the coaches of Duke basketball had to look to individuals like Wojciechowski to represent the team. Wojciechowski joined Twitter in April 2009 using the handle @steve_wojo. By December 2015 he had approximately 55,000 followers and followed about 400 accounts that were a mix of Marquette University players and personnel, charity organizations, other sports, broadcasting networks, specific broadcasters, and various people and organizations from Duke University.

While an associate head coach at Duke University, Wojciechowski's tweets focused primarily on former Duke players and inspirational statements and quotations. For example, in January 1, 2014, he tweeted, "Congrats to @hoopsatharvard Coach Amakar on his 300th career win tonight! Great accomplishment for a world class guy. #dukefamily." His inspirational quotes often spoke to competition, work ethic, and tenacity. One example was his tweet from December 10, 2013: "Fortune Favors the Prepared' Dr. Louis Pasteur." In addition to tweets about Duke players and messages of inspiration, Wojciechowski shared general thoughts about Duke basketball, information about Coach Krzyzewski, and offered support for other Duke athletic programs and the university.

Wojciechowski's Twitter use while at Duke University reflects limited explicit references to Duke, and, yet, a clear picture emerges of the kind of leadership associated with Duke basketball. Taken as a whole, Wojciechowski's tweets present himself and by proxy Duke basketball as an organization with clear values: hard-work, dedication, and loyalty. At one level, Wojciechowski's Twitter activity functions to build a persona for Wojciechowski as a coach, but we argue that the tweets simultaneously assert particular meanings for Duke basketball. A primary strategy for organizational identity construction is values advocacy (Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Wojciechowski's Twitter activity functions as values advocacy by invoking values through quotes and praising individuals who embody particular values. Together, the tweets contribute to a larger reputation of both the coach and the program.

In April 2014, Marquette University announced its hire of Steve Wojciechowski as its men's basketball head coach. Wojciechowski's Twitter handle did not change as he made this move, and presumably a large number of his followers from Duke remained with him as he transitioned to his new role in a new organization. At the time of this analysis, we observed that Wojciechowski increased his social media presence with greater Twitter activity after he moved to Marquette University, but the content continued to run parallel to his activity at Duke. As of this writing, he continues to offer inspirational thoughts similar to one posted on November 2, 2014: "Champions behave like champions before they are champions.' Bill Walsh" His focus clearly shifted toward a greater emphasis on Marquette University basketball, his activities as coach, and what was happening with the team. In addition, Wojciechowski focused attention on the university itself. His connection to Duke University remains with continuing tweets about former Duke players, but these tend to focus on those players and coaches with whom he worked directly.

The content of Wojciechowski's tweets shifted from Duke University to Marquette University with his transition, but the overarching strategy of these tweets was consistent with values advocacy and reputation management underlying the tweets. Organizations often seek to rhetorically connect themselves with social values in order to build a strong reputation (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; Hoffman & Ford, 2010). In the case of Wojciechowski, his tweets connected Duke and Marquette with the values of leadership and a strong work ethic. In our examination of this case, one prominent change emerged as he transitioned from Duke to Marquette. A number of these tweets seem geared toward establishing Wojciechowski as a credible spokesperson for his new organizational home. His tweets reflect his growing identification with his new employer. On February 18, 2015, he tweeted, "3 amazing nights on the road recruiting – amazing how admired the Marquette brand is nationwide! WE ARE MARQUETTE! #oneofakindprogram."

Marissa Mayer: From Google Executive to Yahoo CEO

For our second case we turn to a corporate example. Unlike the world of sports, corporate leaders may not always enjoy the same kind of notoriety as a college basketball coach. However, many corporate executives represent the face of the organization in important ways. We believe this is especially true in the case of Marissa Mayer, a business executive and computer scientist who is currently the president and CEO of Yahoo. Prior to joining Yahoo, Mayer spent 13 years at Google working on some of the company's most recognizable and successful products. In September 2013, Mayer was ranked number

one by *Fortune* magazine in its annual "40 Under 40" list of business leaders. She joined Twitter in November 2008 using the handle @marissamayer. She has about 1.1 million followers and follows about 300 accounts, which are primarily people and organizations in the technology community.

While at Google, Mayer's tweets focused on Google as a company. Tweets about Google emphasized projects and products associated with the company, such as on September 24, 2002, when she tweeted, "Very excited about the new 'Places Pages' on Google Maps: <http://bitly/q0xqV>." Most of her tweets were about the company at this time, but they also focused on the technology industry (e.g., September 29, 2002, "I love TechCrunch Disrupt! Congratulations to @qwiki, @cloudflare, and @pinger :) Great presentations by all ...") and her personal interests (April 8, 2011, "Hey SF sushi lovers, which is better Ryoko (@zackbogue'sfave) or Ozumo (mine :0)?"). Taken together, Mayer's Twitter activity does not point toward an explicit communication strategy, and yet, the tweets speak to her thinking, topics she feels are important, and who she is as a person and leader. Her tweets not only predominantly promote the company, but also serve to frame notable issues in technology. Her topic selections speak to her interests and simultaneously reflect her role as a leader at Google.

Mayer's Twitter use at Google is notable for the frequency of information about her personal interests and hobbies. The personal tweets remain now that she is in her role as president and CEO at Yahoo. For example, on January 6, 2013, when she tweeted, "So sad to see Stanford @Hobees closing – 20 years of memories! Glad I got there today." But her emphasis clearly shifted to professional tweets as she made this transition. Her tweets and retweets are dominated by Yahoo-related information announcing hiring opportunities, partnerships, and new programs. Based on our observations at the time of this analysis, it is notable the extent to which her use of retweeting increased and those retweets largely featured others complimenting Yahoo. For example on February 20, 2013, she retweeted from Michael Yavonditte, co-founder and CEO of @yeildmo, "@marissamayer a newsfeed made of real news. Genius!" As with the Wojciechowski case, the topics of Mayer's tweets (her company, views on technology, and her personal interests) are consistent across each position. However, there is a clear shift in organizational emphasis, as her tweets explicitly highlight Yahoo and its products. For example, on June 12, 2013, she tweeted, "Want a nice, easy to remember email address? YourName@Yahoo.com could be available soon! yahoo.tumblr.com/post528059292." Of particular interest are the ways in which tweets and retweets about Yahoo highlight the quality and innovation of its products. A retweet on April 18, 2013, from Matt Kelly, the chief content officer at Archant, praised the new weather app: "@marissamayer is this the best functionality on an app to date? could be...yahoo weather is wonderful." In this, Mayer's tweets collectively establish Yahoo as a competent company that produces high quality, functional, and usable products. As such, when one asks who Yahoo is as a company, Mayer's tweets argue that Yahoo stands out as a technology company that is user friendly and one that is moving forward.

Discussion and Conclusion

We acknowledge that an examination of the tweets leaders post does not allow us to understand the intentions, motivations, and behaviors of followers. Yet, it does allow us to begin to describe the potential implications of leadership transitions relative to Twitter followership. There are several issues we contend should be considered when thinking about organizational leader participation on Twitter. First, corporate leaders' Twitter activity functions to simultaneously convey a personal and an organizational identity. Both cases suggest that although each individual used the Twitter platform to establish a unique persona, these personas function as reflections of the organization itself. Wojciechowski established himself as one with a strong belief in work ethic, and Mayer shared her social interests and posted about her personal tastes. What kind of organizations are Marquette and Yahoo? Based on the statements of these two leaders, one is led to the conclusion that they are organizations led by people who believe in hard work and have a tight connection to current popular trends. These personas clearly fit with the aims and priorities of the organizations as Marquette's mission reflects its emphasis on

leadership and excellence (<http://www.marquette.edu/about/mission.php>), and Yahoo touts itself as a company that informs and connects users (<http://info.yahoo.com/>).

Second, these cases suggest that when leaders advance their careers, their social media use and sophistication grows, too. These two high-profile leadership shifts serve as a starting point for broader studies. For example, does the online persona become more professional and focused on a strategic presentation of the organization when one becomes the leader of an organization? We also surmise that the change in organization allowed for a fresh start in establishing how Twitter might be used to advance organizational aims. Further, in both cases, Wojciechowski and Mayer were promoted, and the shift in approach might be tied to an increased sense of responsibility and a recognition of their roles as organizational spokespersons.

We have explored the ways in which leader participation on Twitter can contribute to identity construction and legitimacy aims of an organization. This research has inspired additional research questions to be explored:

- RQ1: How does the selection of tweet topics contribute to an organization's identity and goals? How does such selection frame followers' thinking on what topics matter?
- RQ2: What is the intentionality of followers when they decide to follow a leader on Twitter? What does this followership mean for the organization?
- RQ3: How can leadership changes be an opportunity or a loss for organizations?

Essentially, we suggest here that companies inherit the social media reputation of those they hire. But how might organizations effectively manage and leverage these transitions? We argue that leaders and organizations should recognize the social capital (in this case, social media capital) a leader has accrued in intentional ways. That is, leaders and their respective employers should be mindful of those early moments and the extent to which stakeholders might be transitioned to the new organization via their followership. A leader who has an established Twitter followership can use the moment of transition to strategically tweet content that will help followers identify with the new organization.

For the organizations that are left behind, potential strategies are less clear. The challenge is determining how an organization might retain or recapture those followers. Certainly, this requires further investigation, but one that seems warranted. Our tentative suggestion is for organizations to establish proactive strategies that link followers of leaders to the organization itself. That is, consider tweets from other leaders that draw followers to the organization. At a minimum, no matter the size of the organization, this suggests that companies should not rely on leader Twitter accounts alone to serve as the voice of the organization. Organizations likely will need to consider ways to keep leader and organizational accounts linked in some clearly identifiable way.

In many respects, these cases raise as many questions as they answer, but identifying potential issues and emerging trends is a necessary first step in effectively managing a social media strategy. The real time nature of Twitter prevents us from tracking exact changes in followers retrospectively, but the significance of leader participation as a strategic communication initiative is clear, and changes in that participation as leaders change from one role to another are evident. Yet, questions remain for further study. First, future work should focus on the followers themselves to discern why people follow organizational leaders and how leader communication on Twitter influences their views of the organization. Second, greater understanding is needed of how Twitter followers respond to leaders who change organizations. That is, do they stop following the person, or do they stay with him or her? Greater understanding of these issues along with the lessons learned from these cases will allow for a more robust and nuanced approach to leader participation on Twitter.

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