5-25-2016

How Social Media Can Impact the Organizational Political Process

Gordon B. Schmidt

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne, schmidtg@ipfw.edu

This research is a product of the Organizational Leadership faculty at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Follow this and additional works at: http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs

Part of the Industrial and Organizational Psychology Commons, and the Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons

Opus Citation

http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs/95

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Division of Organizational Leadership and Supervision at Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. It has been accepted for inclusion in Organizational Leadership and Supervision Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. For more information, please contact admin@lib.ipfw.edu.
How social media can impact the organizational political process

Gordon B. Schmidt

INTRODUCTION

The world of work is a political arena. Managers, employees and organizational groups vie for power and influence within organizations in both formal and informal settings for personal and organizational benefit (Ferris et al., 1989; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006). A significant body of work has looked into how to understand how organizational politics processes take place and how they impact organizations.

While we have learned much about how organizational politics unfold in organizations, to date little attention has been given to the impact of changing technologies on the organizational political process, with the exception of work on influence tactics in virtual teams (Elron and Vigoda-Gadot, 2006; Steizel and Rimbaud-Gilabert, 2013). Technology has transformed not just how people engage in job behaviors, but also how individuals communicate and connect. One particularly important communication technology is social media.

Social media constitutes a range of websites and computer applications that allow people to share content, such as documents, opinions and information (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media includes websites such as Facebook and Twitter, but also includes knowledge-sharing platforms such as Wikipedia and content-sharing platforms such as YouTube. Social media is having a significant impact on how people communicate. A recent survey found that 71 percent of adult US citizens who use the Internet are on Facebook (Duggan et al., 2015). This impact is global, with a survey of 32 emerging and developing countries finding in the sample that the median figure for countries was 82 percent of Internet users accessing social networking sites such as Facebook or region-specific sites (Poushter et al., 2015).

Workers often have co-worker connections on social media. Duggan and colleagues (2015) found that 58 percent of participants reported having work colleagues as social media connections. Weidner et al. (2012) found that 40.5 percent of study participants were in fact friends with their supervisor.
With such existing co-worker connections on social media, it is not that surprising that social media use is impacting work-related outcomes. For one example, a new phenomenon has been that workers have been fired for posts they have made on social media sites, dubbed by some in the popular press “Facebook Fired” (Drouin et al., 2015; Schmidt and O’Connor, 2015). With co-workers or bosses as social media connections, the viewing of inappropriate content becomes that much more likely. For another example, organizations have used social media in the selection process, screening out candidates with posts deemed undesirable, or using posts as an indicator of value for others (Davison et al., 2011; Roth et al., 2013). Social media is seen by recruiters and evaluators as a potentially valuable source of information on candidates and how they might behave in organizations.

With social media impacting how people communicate and increasing the number of co-worker connections, we would expect it to impact how people communicate and organize in relation to organizational politics. Social media offers a host of unofficial channels by which workers can communicate political information, organize work coalitions, engage in impression management, and gain politically relevant information about colleagues and supervisors. Social media interactions between co-workers and managers can also be viewed by other workers and used in judgments related to how political an organization is (e.g. seeing workers seeking promotion interacting with a manager’s social media content and believing it to be for political ends). Despite these natural social media applications to organizational politics, there is a dearth of existing research.

This chapter aims to begin the theoretical examination of how social media can be used to engage in organizational politics behaviors and how it can influence perceptions of a political work environment. I first discuss the perspective of this chapter and review relevant aspects of existing literature. I then define social media and discuss relevant research on how it impacts worker communication and interaction within organizations. I then move on to discuss how social media can be used as a channel for political behaviors and how social media behavior could impact perceptions of politics. The chapter concludes by discussing potential future research questions.

GENERAL NATURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS

Organizational politics is a term that has been defined in many different ways, with varying elements included, as discussed by Gunn and Chen
Handbook of organizational politics

(2006). There are common elements across definitions, however. One major component of most definitions is the use of power to influence others in pursuit of goals (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006). Many definitions include the idea that such behaviors may be of an unsanctioned manner (Farrell and Petersen, 1982; Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010; Vigoda, 2002). Organizational politics has historically been discussed in a negative light, suggesting that it hurts organizational efficiency and fairness, but there is growing appreciation that organizational politics can have positive benefits, and the existence of politics in an organization is not only inevitable but desirable to some extent (Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010). Organizational politics can help in decision making and provide a medium for employees to influence decisions. For this chapter I build on existing definitions and define organizational politics as behaviors performed by an individual within an organization to influence others to take actions that support that individual’s organization-relevant goals.

Organizational politics has been examined in three main contexts: political behaviors; perceptions of politics; and political skill. Political behaviors involve the behaviors people use to influence others to support their goals. These behaviors are generally related to the application of influence or the building of potential influence (Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Vigoda, 2003). Perceptions of politics relates to the degree to which an individual perceives politics within the organization of which he or she is a part (Ferris, et al., 1996; Kacmar and Ferris, 1991). This involves whether decisions are perceived to be made due to political connections and actions over efficiency standards. Political skill is the degree to which individuals have social competencies that allow them to understand others in the workplace and use that understanding to influence their behaviors in support of their objectives (Ferris et al., 2007; Munyon et al., 2015). This chapter focuses on how social media impacts the first two categories, political behaviors and perceptions of politics, as political skill relates more to individuals’ general political relevant competencies.

Social media is conceptualized as a channel through which political behaviors are engaged in, rather than as a new category of behaviors. So, unlike much of the work on organizational politics, this chapter is focused on the medium by which political behaviors are expressed. For perceptions of politics, social media is conceptualized here as an information source, with actions taken on social media being viewed by workers as a guide to whether those behaviors suggest a political environment. Social media offers a more obvious means to judge whether behaviors could be construed as political in nature.

This chapter now reviews existing research on organizational political behavior and perceptions of politics.
Political Behaviors

To offer a full definition of all organizational political behaviors is difficult, as individuals can differ in what they construe as political or not (Meriac and Villanova, 2006). Moreover, organizational politics are often defined as negative in nature, meaning that tactics that are neutral or positive may not be classified as political behaviors at all. Because organizational political behaviors are generally attempts to influence others, political behavior types are covered to a significant degree by models of general influence tactics (Yukl and Tracey, 1992). Specific influence tactics have been found to impact worker performance assessments and extrinsic success, among other work factors (Higgins et al., 2003).

There have been several attempts to classify types of political influence behaviors. Farrell and Petersen (1982) see political behaviors as varying across three dimensions. The first dimension is internal versus external behaviors. Internal behaviors are focused on workers attempting to gain resources within the organization (such as funding from a supervisor for a project). External behaviors are focused on gaining resources outside the organization (such as leaking information on a project to the press to gain favorable coverage and attention to the project). The second dimension is vertical versus horizontal. Vertical involves attempts to influence people at a different level of the organizational hierarchy (such as a supervisor), while horizontal involves attempts to influence people at a similar hierarchical level (such as a co-worker or person in another organization at a similar level). The last dimension is legitimate versus illegitimate. Legitimate political behaviors are those that are seen as normal and generally accepted, while illegitimate political behaviors are those that are seen as more extreme and violating the established “rules of the game” (Farrell and Petersen, 1982). The legitimate versus illegitimate distinction is inherently perceptual; what is considered legitimate can vary significantly from group to group.

Zanzi and O’Neil (2001) focus on the last dimension, seeing political tactics as generally either sanctioned or non-sanctioned. Sanctioned tactics are part of organizational norms and thus seen as acceptable behavior. Non-sanctioned political tactics are those that deviate from organization norms and thus are ones an employee does not want others in the organization to know he or she is engaging in. Discovery could lead to severe punishment or even dismissal. So, for example, blaming someone else for one’s own mistake might help a person politically, but if the deception was discovered the negative impact might be significantly worse than taking responsibility for the mistake in the first place. Since non-sanctioned tactics are so negatively viewed, a worker may try to hide
his or her involvement in such behavior. Thus such tactics will more likely be engaged in by secret or private means.

Later I describe how social media can be used as a channel for various political behaviors. For types of behaviors I draw on Farrell and Petersen (1982) and Zanzi and O’Neil (2001), as well as the influence tactics offered by Kipnis et al. (1980) and Schriesheim and Hinkin (1990). I also apply some of the results of the growing research area on influential tactics in virtual teams, as actual social media interactions take place in a virtual environment (Elron and Vigoda-Gadot, 2006; Steizel and Rimbau-Gilabert, 2013). I now highlight those political behaviors that are most likely to use social media as a channel.

Rationality
Organizational political behaviors related to rationality influence a person’s behaviors or attitudes through the use of logical arguments and the presentation of factual evidence (Kipnis et al., 1980; Yukl and Tracey, 1992) and relate positively to worker performance assessments and extrinsic success (Higgins et al., 2003). The user of the tactic convinces the target that the behavior is the best course of action to take, based on the strength of the argument. The use of facts and argumentation is likely to be seen by workers in an organization as sanctioned and appropriate (Zanzi and O’Neil, 2001). Research by Elron and Vigoda-Gadot (2006) suggests that rationality is the most common tactic used in virtual teams.

Ingratiation
In ingratiation tactics the user gets another person in a good mood or feeling favorable toward the user before making a request (Yukl and Tracey, 1992). Ingratiation tactics have been found to be successful in increasing ratings of user performance assessments and extrinsic success (Higgins et al., 2003). The idea here is that a person in a good mood is more likely to say “yes” to a request and that people are more likely to agree with an individual towards whom they have positive feelings.

Exchange
In exchange tactics the user tries to gain compliance by offering the target a particular benefit for doing so, or recalling previous times the user has helped the target as justification (Kipnis et al., 1980). Thus compliance is rewarded with a particular benefit or as a way to pay off previous debts.

Coalition building
Coalition building is an influence tactic in which a worker obtains the support of other workers for a request he/she is making (Kipnis et al.,
1980). The target is swayed because other people agree with the request and see it as something that should be done (Yukl and Tracey, 1992). Thus the action is seen as supported by others within the organization.

**Impression management/self-promotion**

The image others have of an individual will often have a significant impact on the power of that individual (Drory and Zaidman, 2006). A worker with a positive image will often have greater influence than one with a neutral or negative one. Managing a person’s image is thus potentially valuable.

In impression management and self-promotion techniques a worker creates a favorable impression with those who hold power in an organization (Zanzi and O’Neil, 2001). A worker engaging in this tactic wants supervisors to see him/her as contributing and central to organizational success. This could include taking credit for such successes, showing high levels of work-related effort and highlighting the worker’s good character. For example, a worker who always comes to work before his/her supervisor, and always leaves after the supervisor could be doing so to suggest that he or she is putting in significant work-related effort. The appropriate types of behavior to engage in for impression management and the amount of impression management that is desirable will vary by personal, group, organizational and country context (Drory and Zaidman, 2006).

**Intermediation**

Intermediation is an influence tactic that Steizel and Rimbau-Gilabert (2013) suggest is unique to virtual teams. In intermediation a worker finds an intermediary who is well connected to the proposed target of the influence attempt, and has that person help in determining the best approach to influence the target. So, for example, if an employee needs to persuade a supervisor to take a particular action, then he/she first could talk to another worker who has significant experience in working with that supervisor. That intermediary’s experience with the supervisor could help the worker to know what arguments or actions are likely to influence the supervisor.

This could be particularly crucial in virtual environments where the subordinate may not have much personal contact with the supervisor, and thus needs help from others who have had such contact to better understand the supervisor. Steizel and Rimbau-Gilabert (2013) focused on the influence of a supervisor but noted that it could be used for co-workers as well.
PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICS

Perhaps the most researched area of organizational politics is an individual’s perceptions of politics (Chang et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2008). When discussing perceptions of politics, it is important to note that it is an individual perception rather than an objective evaluation of politics that is relevant. What one person versus another sees as political can vary greatly (Meriac and Villanova, 2006). A worker who is seeking promotion and gives a rational argument for why he/she deserves it, and reminds the supervisor of his/her previous contributions, might see such behavior as non-political, while a different worker might see this as an application of tactics such as exchange and personal appeal. Thus two workers might have very different ideas of how political their organization is, and the organizational context will also play a role in how particular behaviors are perceived (Drory and Zaidman, 2006).

Traditional definitions of perceptions of politics often focus on negative aspects, such as how politics are not formally sanctioned and lead to conflict and disharmony among workers (Ferris et al., 1996). One recent definition was offered by Abbas et al. (2014), who defined perceived organizational politics as a worker’s perceptions that others are engaging in self-interested acts often through manipulation of organizational policies and coercive tactics. With such a focus it is not surprising that meta-analytic work has found perceptions of politics to relate negatively to job satisfaction and commitment, and positively to job stress and turnover intentions (Chang et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2008).

Why Organizational Politics Might be Engaged in through Social Media

An important question is why individuals might engage in organizational politics through social media rather than simply in face-to-face interactions. There are a number of reasons that politics might play out through social media. One major one is the existing connections among workers found on social media. Weidner et al. (2012) found that for study participants, 60.5 percent were connected with at least one co-worker and 40.5 percent were connected with a supervisor on a social media site. When a worker wants to make an influence attempt they will often have a ready-made connection to the target through social media. Such a medium, where co-workers communicate, is probably one where organizational politics will take place.

Social media also offers tools and features that may facilitate organizational political tactics. Elron and Vigoda-Gadot (2006) found that, in virtual teams, email communication seemed to facilitate political actions,
helping in the forming of coalitions and controlling who was given information. Like email, social media can provide control over who receives information, and social media features like “groups” allow areas for members of a coalition to organize and share information. Social media has tools that can pinpoint who receives messages and content, allowing users to choose to use the social media feature that fits with the nature of their tactic.

I now discuss the nature of social media and how it is used.

Defining Social Media and Social Networking Sites

Social media consists of Internet applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). User-generated content includes people’s own creative work, knowledge, opinions or even content created by others deemed relevant. A site such as YouTube allows users to post their own created videos as well as videos of others they have access to. Blogging platforms allow individuals to share personal opinions on a wide range of topics as well as personal knowledge they may possess. Many of these sites will also allow other users to comment, discuss or even modify the user-generated content of others.

We might expect that some social media is more or less applicable to the organizational politics process, and this research will concentrate on social networking sites as their focus is the interactions between and connections among users. Examples can arise from a wide range of sites, however, as potential tools for engaging in political behaviors. For example, a virtual game world like Worlds of Warcraft, where users primarily engage in combat with computer-controlled monsters, might seem to have little possible connection to the workplace, but if a worker is playing the game with his boss and/or co-workers, it could be very much akin to the ingratiating cliché of playing golf with the boss. The posting or sharing of a YouTube video that offers a critique of a plan supported by a rival may function as an attack on that plan or act as a persuasive element when seen by other workers.

Social networking sites are social media that generally have three major characteristics: (1) they allow users to create a public or semi-public personal profile within a system with some boundaries; (2) there are lists of the connections a user has with other users of the site (e.g. Facebook’s “friends”); (3) users can view their lists of connections and the connections of others (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). The list of connections is a crucial aspect of social networking sites. Other users can see what professional or personal connections a person has. The profile aspect also highlights the individual in a way that is not as prevalent for other social media sites like
Wikipedia or YouTube, where the content or information shared is the focus. Social networking sites are some of the most trafficked sites online and include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn (see http://www.alexa.com/topsites for up-to-date online traffic information).

Social Networking Site Features

Social networking sites have a number of common features. The default terminology used will be that used for Facebook, since it is the most trafficked current social networking site. These features will be the mediums by which individuals engage in organizational political behaviors. For example, political behaviors that are seen as non-sanctioned and negative seem likely to be engaged in more often through features that allow privacy (so that only a select few see the information).

A major component of social networking sites is a “profile”, where an individual provides personal information about him/herself, such as name, a personal picture, place of employment and relationship status (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Users connect to each other through “friending”, which involves making another user a connection. Such connections often have greater ease of communication with that user. A user has no responsibility or requirement to confirm a friend request, although social pressure or feelings of reciprocity may lead them to do so. For work contacts, such as a supervisor, a user may feel obligated to accept a friend request; research by Peluchette et al. (2013) examined how people felt about being “friended” by a boss.

Interacting and sharing information are major functions of social networking sites. Status updates are one of the major ways individuals provide information or opinions; such updates can be text, pictures, video or web links. When a user has made a status update, other users will be able to respond to it, showing support for a post by pressing the “like” button or by making comments that will then appear after the original status update. The original poster of the status update and other users can interact through the status update comments. Other users see status updates and other behaviors made by their connections on a page that Facebook calls the “News Feed”. The News Feed updates in real time as connected users add content.

While status updates primarily go out to all a user’s connections, there are a number of ways to restrict access to particular user content. Users can use privacy settings to restrict who sees a particular piece of content. They can also contact individual users directly through private messages only seen by that other user, with private messages similar to email, instant messaging or texting.
One major way to facilitate particular users interacting is the “groups” feature. Through this, any number of users can interact and share content with other users who are members of the group, having their own page akin to a website. Groups have been used in a number of national political actions, including citizens of Columbia protesting against the actions of guerrilla group FARC (Kirkpatrick, 2010). The group pages allow small or large groups of people to communicate with each other and organize. Facebook also allows group founders to restrict access to the group; indeed, groups can be “secret”, with only members of a group or those invited to join able to see that the group exists. Unions have used such secret groups to communicate information to union members; the employer Jimmy Johns used a secret Facebook group in anti-union efforts during a unionization effort (Miller-Merrell, 2012). Such secret groups could be used in organizational political efforts to organize coalitions and discuss strategies without non-members even being aware of the group’s existence.

Social networking sites vary in how they deal with user privacy. Facebook users can decide who can see particular parts of the user profile and posts the user makes on site. The privacy settings available range from “public”, where any user or even anyone on the Internet can see the post or piece of information, to restrictions to single users. However, existing research on the use of privacy settings by Facebook users suggests that the majority of site users do not change from the default permissive settings for content sharing (Wilson et al., 2012).

The lack of use of privacy settings may be because social networking sites are built to encourage sharing of information and content between users. Research suggests that there are significant benefits for users who share more content and disclose more, with Burke and Kraut (2014) finding that greater communication through Facebook is associated with greater reported relationship closeness. Wang et al. (2014) found that user online self-disclosure related positively with user’s friendship quality. Thus tools are given to protect privacy but they work at cross-purposes to the goal of users to connect with others.

This lack of privacy setting use can be problematic when a user has social media connections who are personal friends and others who are professional contacts, as both groups are given the same information. Sharing personal information with professional colleagues could lead to work problems, as seen in cases where workers have been fired for their Facebook posts (Schmidt and O’Connor, 2015).
Why and How People Use Social Networking Sites

The reasons for using social networking sites fall into two major categories: developing/maintaining social relations and gaining or presenting information (Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 2010; Sheldon et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2012; Wise et al., 2010).

A primary purpose of Facebook is to develop and maintain social relations. Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010) looked at individual motives for using social networking sites and found that two of the three general factors of use were friendship and connection (the other being information). Facebook is a tool used in social relationships. It enables people to communicate with one another; individual profiles help users to recognize and identify other users they know in real life; and viewing lists of others’ connections helps users to make new connections.

Using social networking sites to develop and maintain social relations can help users feel they belong and are connected to others (Gangadharbatla, 2008; Sheldon et al., 2011). Sheldon et al. (2011) found that, on the contrary, social networking use related to relatedness needs satisfaction (feeling connected to others) as well as relatedness needs dissatisfaction (feeling disconnected from others). Across four studies Sheldon et al. (2011) found that the reason for this seeming contradiction was that greater use led to more feelings of connection to other people, while people who were feeling disconnected from others used Facebook as a coping strategy to reduce such feelings. Gangadharbatla (2008) found that a person’s need to belong had a positive correlation with a person’s positive attitude toward social networking sites.

Using social networking sites to develop and maintain social relations can also develop social capital and ties to others (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2012). Ellison et al. (2007) found that student Facebook usage related to users’ perceptions of possessing bonding social capital (ability to draw on resources from closely connected others), bridging social capital (weaker ties to others that can provide information and new perspectives), and success at maintaining social capital (Putnam, 2000). Facebook enabled students to stay connected to both those closest to them and casual acquaintances. Ellison et al. (2011) found evidence that Facebook encourages students to convert latent ties to weak ties and Facebook tools help users broadcast requests for information or support from others.

The other primary use of Facebook is to gain or present information (Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 2010; Wilson et al., 2012; Wise et al., 2010). Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010) found that social networking sites were used to gain information, share personal information, inform others about
social activities, find out about events, gain academic knowledge, and to both post and look at pictures.

Wise and colleagues (2010) broke down information seeking into two main categories: passive social browsing and extractive social search. Passive social browsing means that a user simply looks at the News Feed, by which he/she can find the status updates of friends and other information. In terms of organizational politics, this information could be used to find out about a co-worker’s interests so as to help make a future ingratiation attempt more effective (e.g. inviting a vegetarian to a steak dinner might have a more negative than positive impact). The information gleaned could also be used to craft rational arguments that fit a co-worker’s values or to offer a more enticing exchange of benefits.

Extractive social search means that a user more directly searches for information on another user by looking at their profile, or by directly contacting a user (Wise et al., 2010). This constitutes more active engagement. In the context of organizational politics, a worker might be looking for a particular piece of information seen as valuable or directly talking to a co-worker for political benefit.

Social networking sites also have potential as a tool for impression management, sharing information that makes a user look more desirable to others. While this is a commonly expressed potential reason for social networking site behavior, the current research base suggests that in general users of Facebook portray a relatively accurate self-reflection (Back et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012). When social networking sites have been used for impression management, it has generally been due to specific personality characteristics such as narcissism (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008) or introversion (Zywica and Danowski, 2008).

Chiang and Suen (2015) looked at self-presentation specifically in a job selection context. They had job recruiters look at LinkedIn profiles and posts of users in a group for job seekers and recruiters. They found that the better the quality of profile argument (i.e. relevant content in profile and comments made in discussions), the more the recruiters perceived a fit between the person and the job and the person and the organization. So this study suggests that there is value in candidate social media self-presentation.

This self-presentation certainly fits with impression management strategies used in organizational politics. Employees who contribute relevant information to work-related social networking site conversations and have profiles that support the argument of their competency may ultimately succeed in gaining influence, power and promotion.
Existing Research on the Impact of Social Media on Work-related Outcomes

Increasing attention is being paid in the management and industrial/organizational psychology fields to how social media can impact work-related outcomes. I briefly review two areas particularly relevant to the organizational politics context: social media use in selection; and social media use for connecting workers.

There has been increased interest in how social media profiles can be used in the screening process for employee selection and in the potential issues that may arise (Brown and Vaughn, 2011; Davison et al., 2011; Roth et al., 2013). A Jobvite (2013) study found that 93 percent of recruiters are likely to look at a candidate’s social profile and 42 percent have assessed a candidate in a positive or negative way due to looking at a social media profile. This widespread use has led scholars to discuss benefits and pitfalls that could arise from such use, including legal and ethical considerations (Davison et al., 2011; Roth et al., 2013).

Empirical work looking at how social media is used in selection is a recent phenomenon, and support for its value is mixed. Kleumper et al. (2012) found that evaluator assessment of Big 5 personality ratings based on a person’s Facebook profile had convergent validity with self-report personality ratings and had correlations with job performance, hirability and academic performance in an undergraduate student sample. Van Iddekinge et al. (2013) had more negative results, finding recruiter ratings on the quality of the participants solely based on the Facebook profiles for job suitability, and ten knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics, including intelligence, work ethic and creativity had non-significant relationships with job performance and turnover intentions. An additional problem was that subgroup ratings in the Facebook profile ratings tended to favor women and white applicants, offering concern that using social media profiles could have an adverse impact (Van Iddekinge et al., 2013).

Viewing social media information does seem to impact recruiter perceptions regardless. Chiang and Suen (2015) found that social media content that was seen as job-relevant helped increase recruiter perceptions of applicant person–job and person–organization fit. Carr and Walther (2014), meanwhile, found that viewing social media information increased evaluators’ certainty in the attributions they made about applicants.

While it is still unclear if looking at social media data is beneficial for making hiring decisions, looking at such data does affect recruiter perceptions, and there is significant evidence that companies look at such data regardless of effectiveness. An employee could modify their own social media presence so as to look good to evaluators within the organization,
How social media can impact the organizational political process

Helping to suggest person–job fit, as suggested by the results of Chiang and Suen (2015). An employee could also point out a rival candidate’s inappropriate social media behavior directly or through a surrogate, potentially damaging the rival’s chance of getting promoted. Both uses could fit an organizational politics context.

The other area of social media research with relevance to organizational politics is social media as a means for workers to connect with each other and their organization. Schmidt and Landers (2010) discussed specifically how social media could be a means by which industrial/organizational psychologists discuss field identity and values, with the tools of social media facilitating discussion among members of the field across different jobs, functions and parts of organizational hierarchies. Schmidt et al. (2016) found that workers with a greater percentage of their social media connections as co-workers perceived higher levels of organizational support and those workers reported higher levels of organizational spontaneity, meaning that they performed more optional helping behaviors at work. Having a higher percentage of social media co-worker connections seemed here to relate to workers feeling supported by their organization and helping others. From an organizational politics perspective, this suggests that social media connections may help strengthen bonds between workers, which could help in sustaining coalitions as well as facilitate helping behaviors that could act as exchange behaviors.

As a whole, existing research in social media related to the workplace has potentially significant connections to organizational politics, as social media involves making and strengthening connections and relationships between workers. These connections could be used for political means. While some suggestions of applications of social media to politics have been made above, this chapter now turns to discuss more directly how social media applies to organizational politics and offers particular propositions to test in future empirical research.

POLITICAL BEHAVIORS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

I now discuss how social media could be used as a channel for organizational politics behavior and offer testable propositions.

Rationality

Rationality is an influence tactic that could play out on social media in several ways. Articles or data that support a worker’s desired course of action can be shared through status updates or posted in a Facebook
group for discussion. Wadsworth and Blanchard (2015) discuss how, for virtual teams, informational technology can be used to track and generate data. Such data could be shared through social media or, if done as a collaborative project, other co-workers could share supporting data or corroborating results. Discussion through social media also allows other workers to share their support for a position and offer evidence for or against it. Private messages can also be used for exchanges with supervisors or co-workers to discuss why a course of action is in their best interest.

Rationality influence attempts can be made through social media in ways that vary in directness. A worker could post their opinion directly as to an organizational potential course of action in a general status update available to all friends or a subset of co-workers. A worker could also comment on an issue less directly by sharing information relevant to an organizational discussion but without direct reference to the organizational decision process. So, for one example, while a discussion of potential workplace drug policies is taking place within an organization, a worker could make a status update with an article related to evidence of drug policy effectiveness or a news story related to organizational drug user problems. The worker could alternatively send co-workers or superiors the same relevant articles through private messages without direct comment.

In relation to how a worker might use social media to engage in rationality influence attempts, the type of issue being discussed could have a huge impact on what social networking site feature is utilized. If the issue involves sensitive or confidential information, a worker is less likely to engage in open discussion on the issue through a status update. The worker might instead keep discussion to private messages or private groups. If the issue is more public, status updates make more sense as a way to share information and start discussion. Rationality does not have the negative connotation of some other tactics and thus can be engaged in in a more public manner.

Proposition 1  Rationality tactics are more likely to be engaged in through status updates than other social networking site features.

Proposition 2  For sensitive or confidential issues, rationality tactics are more likely to be exercised through private messages than status updates.

Ingratiation

Social networking sites offer ample opportunities to engage in ingratiation toward supervisors or co-workers. Liking the boss’s status update or putting a positive comment in response to it has the potential to increase
liking and put the individual in a good mood. Positive social interactions with the influence target are facilitated through the features of a social networking site. Social networking site posts could even act as a data source for the influence target’s mood, so the attempt is made when the person is in a good mood.

The nature of ingratiation suggests that when an influence attempt is planned, a worker should be engaging in more positive social networking site interactions with the target to put the target in a good mood and increase liking.

Proposition 3  When a worker is planning to make a request, he/she will make more positive comments and have more “likes” of the target’s social media content.

Proposition 4  When a worker is planning to make a request, he/she will visit a target’s profile and view social media updates more frequently.

Exchange

Social networking sites are a medium by which a worker can make offers of benefits or find out what benefits are desired. Such sites will include both personal and professional information that might increase the variety of benefits that can be offered and knowledge that can be gleaned about desired benefits. For example, if a worker wants someone to cover a future work shift, he/she can use a site to broadcast that need (“can anyone cover my shift on Friday?”) as well as to look for others for whom favors might be offered in exchange (“I can cover your morning shift on Monday if you cover my shift on Friday”). Thus a social networking site can be used as a marketplace where people look to exchange a benefit for something they want.

Social networking sites can also be used to find out information on what benefits might be desirable to others. A worker can see what supervisors or co-workers discuss or complain about, and tailor benefits to fit such needs. While it is unlikely that a work outcome such as a promotion would be exchanged directly for a single favor, a worker could do a number of favors over time and build up obligations and a feeling of personal connection. Exchange appeals could thus have a personal appeal aspect built in as well (Yukl and Tracey, 1992), potentially increasing the likelihood of compliance.

Proposition 5  Individuals who engage in more exchange of benefits tactics will respond to more supervisor or co-worker social media status updates related to the user having problems or needing help.
Coalition Building

Social networking sites offer a powerful means by which to organize and cultivate coalitions, as well as to show that an idea has the support of those in the coalition. A worker looking for support for an idea can post openly about it as a status update and see which other co-workers are supportive of the idea. A worker can private message workers directly to discuss the idea and gain other workers’ support. A Facebook group (public or secret) can be created where a coalition can discuss issues and strategies. Privacy settings can be used to determine who takes part in and can view coalition discussion related to the request made.

Social networking sites also offer an effective medium for showing that coalition support. A status update by a worker on the subject can be liked by coalition members and have comments of support posted under it. Coalition members can make their own status updates or comments in support of the idea. Coalition members can also respond to posts by non-coalition members that have some connection to the idea, with comments about it and arguments for its adoption. This proliferation of content on what the worker is requesting can be a powerful illustration of support for the request among organization members.

Proposition 6 Coalition tactics are engaged in through status updates, commenting and likes more than other social networking features.

Impression Management/Self-promotion

Impression management techniques can play out through how workers construct their profile and the content they share. Profiles can include professional-looking pictures and content chosen to highlight the user’s accomplishments and effectiveness. For celebrities, social media is often used to sell the “brand” of that celebrity, with Kaplan and Haenlein (2012) describing how Britney Spears uses multiple social media outlets to promote her personal brand. Workers could use social media in a similar way to promote their personal brand to others within an organization.

Workers can also use social networking sites as way to show others’ endorsements or support. On LinkedIn, users can solicit recommendations from other site users about their previous interactions. So a former supervisor can give a LinkedIn recommendation to a former employee and it will appear on that user’s profile.

For workers engaging in impression management we would expect very controlled and monitored profile content and social networking site behavior. Such workers will be more likely to use privacy settings to
restrict access to material that does not fit with the impression they want to cultivate. The social networking sites they use may be for professional purposes only.

*Proposition 7* The more frequently a worker with a LinkedIn account engages in impression management tactics, the greater the number of LinkedIn recommendations.

*Proposition 8* The more frequently a worker engages in impression management tactics, the greater the likelihood they use privacy settings on social networking sites.

**Intermediation**

Social media certainly has the potential to be used in the intermediation process. Looking at a person’s profile and activity could help identify aspects of their personality or interests that would impact what factors may influence them. So to some degree the social networking profile could act almost as that intermediary, giving the user information on how best to influence the target. Social media related data could also be used to determine which person is best to approach in relation to intermediation. Whom does the supervisor seem to respect and be influenced by? This information could help the user to identify which person has the needed knowledge to provide intermediation advice. With research on this tactic in its infancy, the propositions I offer here will be more exploratory in nature.

*Proposition 9* Social networking site profile and content review can act as a supplement/complement to intermediation.

*Proposition 10* For an influence attempt target, intermediation will be more effective the more the co-worker or former co-worker intermediary interacts with the target through a social networking site.

**PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

The subjective nature of perceptions of politics means that workers need to look at existing workplace events or behaviors and determine if they seem to be political and pervasive. Social networking sites are one potential source for such information, especially as they offer informal and less officially sanctioned behaviors and interactions between workers.
Worker friending behavior with co-workers and superiors could be assessed as a potential indicator of a political environment. Friending a supervisor in particular might be seen as political in nature. Being “friends” with one’s immediate supervisor could be seen as a personal tie that could impact organizational decisions. Peluchette and colleagues (2013) found that 45 percent of study participants said the friend request from a supervisor should be accepted, with some suggesting it could help job outcomes to be “friends” with the boss. Most of those who said that the request should be accepted recommended impression management strategies or using privacy settings to restrict the supervisor’s access to personal material (Peluchette et al., 2013). Being friends with a supervisor suggests the potential for a more personal relationship as well as the potential for a worker to engage in exchange or ingratiation behaviors, as discussed above. This can lead workers to see others connecting with the supervisor as a sign of political behavior.

Proposition 11  The greater percentage of employees at an organization “friends” with a supervisor on social networking sites, the greater the perceptions of politics.

Status Updates, Commenting and Liking, and Perceptions of Politics

The degree to which a co-worker engages with the social networking site posts of other co-workers or superiors can also be seen as an indicator of a political environment. For one example, when a post by a boss leads to a number of workers all posting to agree with what the boss said, others might perceive those worker posts as politically motivated. Frequent interactions between workers, especially at different levels, could be just friendship, but might also be construed as personal connections that will lead to biased future decisions. Posts by co-workers or supervisors asking for help in personal matters that are responded to by co-workers might be seen as personal help offered in exchange for future professional benefits. These factors could make workers feel that frequent social networking site contact between co-workers is not just for personal benefit or entertainment. The relatively public nature of status updates and commenting means that others in the organization can see that such behaviors or interactions are taking place.

Proposition 12  The more comments and “likes” made between co-workers, the greater the perception of politics.
Groups

In the context of organizational politics, groups could be used to discuss particular issues or political strategies. While some co-worker groups could be innocuous in nature (e.g. a group of co-workers discussing a fantasy baseball league), other workers might perceive these groups as potential avenues for coalition building and maintaining. For example, a group might be based on golf, but other co-workers might be concerned that work-related issues or matters are also discussed within the group setting.

Groups might be regarded suspiciously as political in nature when they are secret. If a worker knows a secret group exists made up of co-workers, he/she may assume it is secret because there is something to hide. Knowledge of such groups, or potential membership in one, might make workers think non-sanctioned political behavior is happening behind the privacy they afford. As such it is proposed that:

*Proposition 13a* The greater percentage of employees in an organization that is part of social networking site groups with co-workers, the greater the perceptions of politics.

*Proposition 13b* The relationship between the percentage of employees in an organization that is part of social networking site groups with co-workers and perceptions of politics will be moderated by the percentage that such group are secret groups, such that the relationship will be strengthened.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In order to best understand how social media is used in the organizational politics process, empirical research in the area is needed. The propositions above all offer testable hypotheses for future empirical studies. One potential fruitful avenue would be exploratory qualitative work such as that of Elron and Vigoda-Gadot (2006), with participants interviewed about their use of social media for organizational politics. This could help to discover elements of use not conceptualized in this chapter and to understand how people see their political behaviors through social media.

Survey research could be done to examine how often workers engage in different tactics through social media, as well as how often they see others do so. Research focused on perceptions of politics could have participants rate the frequency that co-workers and supervisors engage in particular social media behavior, and if greater use relates to higher perceptions of politics.
Longitudinal examination of social media use of organizational politics would be valuable. Examination could be done of how often tactics are used and in what contexts. Gaining enough access to social media actions might be difficult, however. One potential avenue might be companies that have existing internal social networking sites. In such a case the organization may have access to all user data and actions that they could share with researchers for analysis.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has begun the theoretical examination of how social media can impact the organizational politics process. Social media can be a channel through which to engage in political behaviors as well as act as a potential indicator of an individual’s’ perceptions of politics within an organization. As organizational politics is a major aspect of organizational life and social media a major means of modern-day communication, we need more understanding of their overlap and how they can impact each other.

REFERENCES

How social media can impact the organizational political process


How social media can impact the organizational political process


