
My Job Sucks

Examining Counterinstitutional Web Sites as Locations for Organizational Member Voice, Dissent, and Resistance

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Counterinstitutional Web sites are often portrayed as publicizing the outbursts of disgruntled employees and customers. However, they also enable participants to take part in discussions normally discouraged within traditional work environments. These sites permit individuals to publicly and anonymously voice their concerns and frustrations with particular institutions with reduced fear of retribution or termination. A close examination of one of these counterinstitutional Web sites (RadioShackSucks.com) illustrates the dissent and resistance functions that such sites provide to a wide variety of stakeholders. The authors' analysis of 1,095 site postings during a 1-month period finds that participants use these sites to engage in voice and resistance efforts outside formal organizational boundaries. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: *resistance; voice; dissent; Web site; membership; boundaries*

Welcome to RadioShackSucks.com. Here we are providing a way for you, the consumer, the employee, and the ex-employee, to fight back. We do know that RadioShack is, in fact, monitoring this site, which is good. Maybe they might just learn something. . . . NAAAHH! . . . It'll never happen!

—RadioShackSucks.com (February 1, 2004)

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This message welcomes visitors to RadioShackSucks.com, a Web site providing voice to disenfranchised, intimidated, or otherwise ignored members of the Radio Shack community. RadioShackSucks.com is just one of a growing breed of counterinstitutional Web sites (also known as “gripe” or “sucks” sites) that provide a space outside the control of the target organization to oppose official institutional messages, policies, and practices. Counterinstitutional Web sites are often dismissed by the media and corporations as publicizing the outbursts of disgruntled employees and customers. However, in addition to providing a place for organizational stakeholders to vent their frustrations, these sites enable isolated or fragmented groups of workers to connect with each other and collectively organize.

Research examining the digital divide has found that access to computers and the Internet has increased dramatically across all demographic categories and that online experience is no longer the exclusive domain of the technologically and economically elite (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). Although various divides remain (Van Dijk, 2005), the availability of computers in schools, public libraries, and commercial venues enables a greater variety of people to communicate using Internet tools. With the increased accessibility of information technologies and broader experience with them, it is not surprising to discover that a wide variety of organizational members are turning to online forums to make sense of their work environments.

Counterinstitutional Web sites blur the boundaries between organizational insiders and outsiders; this enables a wide variety of individuals to share information and voice their concerns with specific firms or entire industries. Drawing on the RadioShackSucks.com Web site as an exemplar, this article examines the ways in which participation on counterinstitutional Web sites can facilitate member dissent and organizational resistance. The next section will construct a theoretical base for our analysis. Individual site postings from the RadioShackSucks.com Web site will then be drawn on to illustrate how dissent and resistance efforts function within this particular online community.

Literature Review

The Various Voices of Dissent

The concept of member voice was developed in Hirschman’s (1970) seminal monograph *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Hirschman argues that customers and employees have three primary options when faced with organizational

problems. First, they can choose to remain loyal to the firm and passively but optimistically hope for improvements to take place. Second, they can engage in organizational exit and leave the system. The third alternative requires these individuals to voice their concerns to others to initiate a corrective change (Hirschman, 1970; Kassing, 2001). Subsequent research has added the concept of neglect to Hirschman's typology (Farrell & Rusbult, 1992), which addresses circumstances in which organizational members might perceive a problem, but rather than taking action (voice or exit) or believing a situation will improve (loyalty), they passively watch the system collapse (neglect). Thus, the lack of active resistance against organizational policies is not necessarily a sign of member loyalty but might instead reflect member apathy or disengagement.

Scholars have used this four-part framework of exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect to explain why some members speak up against organizational practices and others choose to remain silent. Hirschman (1970) explains that voice might precede member exit from a failing organization

if deterioration is a process unfolding in stages over a period of time, the voice option is more likely to be taken at an early stage . . . but not vice versa; in some situations, exit will therefore be a reaction of *last resort* after voice has failed. (p. 37)

Graham and Keeley (1992) note that voice sometimes works in combination with exit, such as when departing members speak their minds as they are leaving (a "noisy" exit). Kassing (2002) argues that exit can also be used to add emphasis to voice, for example when a disgruntled member threatens to exit if his or her voice is not recognized. In these situations, the member uses voice as a way to avoid exit.

In some circumstances, leaving the organization is not economically realistic or even possible. Zhou and George (2001) propose that the lack of a viable exit strategy may prompt dissatisfied members into voice. In these circumstances, Hirschman (1970) observes that voice may substitute for member exit: "In this view, the role of voice would increase as the opportunities for exit decline, up to a point where, with exit wholly unavailable, voice must carry the entire burden of alerting management to its failings" (p. 34). In such circumstances, member voice may become increasingly strident and desperate if it is ignored because it is the only proactive option available. In these studies, exit and voice are presented as related but mutually exclusive behaviors. Once a member finally decides to leave, voice is no longer a viable communicative choice. Thus, voice has been conceptualized as a communication option limited by the temporal

and spatial boundaries of the formal organization and its current membership and not available to former or future stakeholders.

When member voice is directed at organizational leadership, it is classified as an articulated form of dissent (Kassing, 1998, 2001). Although this strategy can be an effective mechanism for creating change, it also exposes the vocalizing member to organizational scrutiny and possible retribution (Bok, 1989; Lewis, 2001; Miethe, 1999). Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) found that members do not exercise voice when they think their efforts may not result in change or when they think there will be negative repercussions for speaking up (incurring damage to important relationships, being labeled a trouble maker, or being retaliated against). Other studies point to situational or organizational barriers that limit a member's willingness to engage in voice, such as a lack of coworker support (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Mears, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004; Young, 1998) or unreceptive management (Saunders, Sheppard, Knight, & Roth, 1992; Withey & Cooper, 1989).

The personal costs associated with articulated dissent suggest that weaker members might seek out alternative methods for voicing their frustrations. For example, Kassing (1998, 2001; Kassing & Dicioccio, 2004) found that some members voice their concerns through informal networks rather than directly through the hierarchy. This latent form of employee dissent occurs when "employees resort to expressing their contradictory opinions and disagreements aggressively to ineffectual audiences across the organization or in concert with other frustrated employees" (Kassing, 2001, p. 445). Although sometimes dismissed as a coping strategy, latent dissent can offer marginalized members a protected space for organizational critique. Taken as a whole, the research indicates that member voice is difficult to predict but is more likely to occur when conditions decrease the personal and organizational costs of speaking up.

Voice as a Form of Organizational Resistance

In addition to examining forces that fuel member dissent, scholars have examined voice's potential for organizational impact. Deetz (1998) argues that voice is a political act within the organizational environment that "opens both the corporation and individuals to learning through reclaiming differences and conflicts overlooked or suppressed by dominant conceptions or arrangements" (p. 159). By openly articulating their concerns, dissenting members provide an oppositional discourse that can challenge the dominant narrative and provide an alternative for making sense of the organization.

Although conventional definitions of resistance privilege organized and collective opposition to managerial practices, contemporary resistance scholars suggest extending the research focus to include “forms of opposition that are more inconspicuous, subjective, subtle and unorganized” (Fleming & Sewell, 2002, p. 863). This is because marginalized or subordinate organizational members often lack the resources or power necessary to engage in open political activity within the workplace and instead must rely on “less visible and less direct forms of workplace confrontation” (Prasad & Prasad, 1998, p. 226). Rather than directly oppose managerial directives, workers might seek out opportunities to discuss and debate their frustrations in private (with coworkers, family members, etc.). This strategy enables workers to oppose the values and practices of the organization without threatening their membership within the larger system. Research on these subtle acts of organizational resistance has examined members’ use of underground publications such as cartoons, newsletters, and zines to critique the actions of management (Daisey, 2002; Dundes & Pagter, 1992; Fleming & Spicer, 2002; Levine, 1998). Other studies have examined ways in which workers privately deconstruct master organizational narratives to create alternative identities, understandings, and spaces for action (Collinson, 2003; Gabriel, 1999; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Murphy, 1998). Finally, scholars have studied how employees use irony, cynicism, and humor to discursively distance themselves from their organizational systems (Fleming & Spicer, 2002, 2003; Hodson, 1995; Prasad & Prasad, 1998). Dissent scholars have largely dismissed peer-focused voice as unproductive because it “does not directly reach effective audiences (i.e. supervisors, management) that can properly respond to disagreements or concerns” (Kassing, 1998, p. 25). However, Fleming and Spicer (2002) caution that these private and subtle acts of resistance should not be seen as mere coping devices or safety valves, particularly “when the very hearts and minds of workers is the terrain of struggle” (p. 80).

Emerging Opportunities for Research

Scholars often have difficulty gaining access to research sites to conduct studies of member voice and resistance. As Graham (1986) notes, “Researchers interested in studying the ‘dark’ side of organizational life, such as political behavior in the workplace, are not generally welcomed by organizational gatekeepers” (p. 46). By their very nature, member dissent and resistance are discursive acts that organizations wish to deal with quickly or prevent from even being expressed. Because they are usually not embraced by the formal organizational

network, actively dissenting members may need to find alternative sites and methods for interacting with one another. In addition, contemporary organizational forms (distributed companies, outsourcing agencies, independent contractors, multinational corporations, and virtual firms) force employees to find informal spaces other than the traditional water cooler or office hallway. As organizational structures become increasingly fragmented, so do the acts of member dissent and resistance.

Counterinstitutional Web sites can provide an important mechanism for overcoming discursive barriers within the organization and enable members to take part in discussions that might normally be discouraged. It has long been recognized that, in collapsing time and space, computer networks provide an ideal environment for special interest groups to develop critical mass (e.g., Correll, 1995; Fung, 2002; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Mitra & Watts, 2002; Real & Putnam, 2005). They may also reduce institutional and economic barriers that have formerly restricted the ability of individuals to voice their concerns and connect with one another. As Mitra (2001) notes,

The traditional means of communication have for long been co-opted and captured by the dominant, but the [I]nternet presents the potential of seizing and re-aligning the cultural and speaking capital as well as the public sphere within which the speaking occurs. (p. 45)

By sharing information on counterinstitutional sites, employees are able to escape the restriction of the traditional organizational environment and create a space in which they can connect with their coworkers.

Although they operate outside the formal boundaries of the organization, counterinstitutional Web sites represent a unique and potentially powerful tool for member dissent and resistance. For example, Taras and Gesser (2003) studied a Web site that allowed lawyers to publicly and anonymously discuss the wages and benefits offered by their firms. This online forum enabled junior legal associates to share information and apply pressure to their employers in ways that would be nearly impossible through traditional organizational channels. In another study, Real and Putnam (2005) documented how dissatisfied members of a labor union used an oppositional Web site to campaign against an agreement being championed by the leaders of their organization. The union's leadership failed to fully appreciate the persuasive power of this renegade Web site and, as a result, suffered an overwhelming defeat at the hands of this splinter group. Finally, Baum (2005) identified several Web sites created by

soldiers who were frustrated by their inability to get the practical information they needed through official military channels. Successfully operating outside the traditional military framework, these Web sites enabled soldiers to help each other resolve problems and cope with the unique challenges of the Iraq War. In each of these examples, the ability to communicate with peers outside the formal boundaries of the organization provided the resources and support these individuals needed to accomplish their goals.

Counterinstitutional Web sites can also be important resources for individuals who want to voice their concerns but may not feel safe enough to engage in articulated dissent or overt acts of resistance. Although it is difficult to determine exactly how many of these Web sites exist, there are currently more than 7,000 corporate-focused sites on the Internet with “sucks,” “sux,” or a similarly derisive slang verb in their Web address (Olian, 2004). These Web sites give voice to individuals who might normally be rendered silent because they lack formal representation (through a union or professional association), have low organizational status (labor and staff-level employees), or possess a limited ability to collectively organize (geographically dispersed workers). In sum, counterinstitutional Web sites provide a wide variety of individuals with the opportunity to engage in organizational dissent. In addition, these sites provide researchers with access to populations and topics of discussions that are often difficult to locate within the traditional organizational environment.

To more fully examine the potential power and impact of these Web sites, we turn our attention to RadioShackSucks.com with the following research questions in mind:

Research Question 1: In what ways does a counterinstitutional Web site such as RadioShackSucks.com enable participants to engage in member dissent?

Research Question 2: In what ways does a counterinstitutional Web site such as RadioShackSucks.com enable participants to engage in organizational resistance efforts?

Method

Case Description

RadioShackSucks.com is a particularly good example of a counterinstitutional Web site because it possesses a clear institutional focus, a large social network of individually registered participants, an active bulletin

board, and an extensive archive documenting its history. Founded in 1998, this site has survived several changes in Web site leadership and multiple attempts by the Radio Shack Corporation to shut it down. As such, RadioShackSucks.com provides a particularly strong case to consider when examining the ways in which counterinstitutional Web sites might enable organizational dissent and resistance efforts.

RadioShackSucks.com was initially created by a disgruntled Radio Shack customer as a place for consumers to compare their experiences and frustrations with the company. Although the original focus might have been on consumer issues, it quickly became clear that site visitors also included current and former employees. As a result, Web site topics began to cover a wide variety of issues concerning company policies and practices. Reacting in a manner similar to other corporations, Radio Shack made several attempts to silence the voices on RadioShackSucks.com. In 2003, Radio Shack pressured the Web site's internet service provider to suspend access to it while the company took legal action against specific participants for information they were posting. In the press and in legal documents, Radio Shack argued that the site portrayed the company in a negative light and was devoted to publicizing "confidential information or suggesting corporate sabotage" and as a result caused the company "incalculable harm" (Malone, 2004b, para. 11).

In addition to these legal challenges, Radio Shack tried to prevent its employees from accessing the Web site. The company made participation on RadioShackSucks.com (even off the clock) a terminable offense. One site participant stated, "My boss threatened to fire me if I ever went on this site. He said the DO [District Office] would do it, no questions asked" (Shackchick, January 4, 2004).¹ Another poster claimed that he or she "waited until I left to visit it, but I've been reading this board for about three or four months right now. Chicken soup for the Shackled soul, for sure" (Endless Shackrifice, January 4, 2004). Although the threat of termination might have discouraged some workers from visiting the Web site, a former store manager revealed how openly others disregarded the policy:

When i use to be a manager all i did was visit this site on my breaks (which wasn't very often). LP [Loss Prevention] even knew that i allowed my employees to visit this site, but never said anything to me. But i've heard a bunch of others being threatened by LP to be fired if they visit this site. Oh well it's just so nice to be out of the Shack for over a year now. Everyone should join me if you haven't already. (Rent-A-Shack Manager03, January 5, 2004)

Despite Radio Shack's efforts to discourage its employees from participating on RadioShackSucks.com, the Web site remained popular. As of February 1, 2004, there were 3,661 registered members and nearly a million hits to the site every month (Malone, 2004b).

Data Collection

The data reported in this article are part of a larger study examining the communicative functions and features of counterinstitutional Web sites. We created a digital archive of RadioShackSucks.com by downloading and saving all accessible pages on February 1, 2004, using Metaproduct's Offline Explorer. This archiving process preserved the links, animation, and other interactive aspects of the Web site, allowing us to navigate through the site as if it were online but frozen. All of the examples and data reported in this study reflect this February 1, 2004, archive date.

Although there were a number of different features on this Web site (including satirical images, a T-shirt store, and a forum for customer complaints), we focused on postings contained on the Against Radio Shack forum. This was the location designated for the discussion of organizational concerns and where we observed issues of member dissent and resistance most readily expressed. To maintain a manageable scope for this analysis, we focused on discussion threads active from January 1, 2004, to February 1, 2004; this resulted in a data set of 139 different discussion topics, with a combined total of 1,095 individual postings from 244 different site participants.²

Data Analysis

The RadioShackSucks.com Web site was designed to protect the identities of its participants, with all members writing under self-created pseudonyms such as Shackchick, RadioShackled, and Endless Shackrifice. Unless a participant revealed the information, it was impossible to know his or her sex, age, location, or organizational status. A careful examination of all 1,095 postings revealed that only 9 of the 244 participants made direct reference to their sex (5 women and 4 men), and none made specific reference to his or her age or race. Participants were more forthcoming about their relationship with Radio Shack. Although identification of a specific store was discouraged by the site's manager to preserve member anonymity, references to managerial districts (e.g., mentioning "the Detroit region") or store types (e.g., franchise or corporate owned) were common. In addition, employment status was a frequent topic of conversation: 55 site participants

indicated that they were current employees, 62 claimed to be former employees, one poster stated that he or she was a customer, and the remaining 126 failed to provide any specific information about their relationship with Radio Shack.

The data from the individual postings were then analyzed using a version of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method. Both authors reviewed the data set and jointly developed a coding scheme for analyzing the Web site postings. Through this inductive process, five primary themes emerged: (a) members using the site to share information and opinions about Radio Shack, (b) members using the site to complain about Radio Shack, (c) members using the site to act against the interests or policies of Radio Shack, (d) members managing and maintaining the Web site, and (e) members using the site for non-Radio Shack related discussions. These categories were refined and subcategories developed until all of the postings in the data set were classified (see the appendix for a complete summary of the inductive coding scheme developed for this study).

Through this classification process, issues of member dissent and organizational resistance emerged as central topics of concern. More specifically, there was evidence that some RadioShackSucks.com participants used the site to overcome communication barriers within the Radio Shack organization that limited their ability to share information directly with coworkers or with the corporate office. Beyond merely providing the opportunity for member voice, the data revealed that participation on the Web site enabled people to take action against Radio Shack, both as individuals and collectively. In the remainder of this article, we examine these key findings and discuss their implications for theory and practice.

Analysis and Interpretation

A Space for Dissent

Research Question 1 asks, in what ways does a counterinstitutional Web site such as RadioShackSucks.com enable participants to engage in member dissent? At their most basic level, counterinstitutional Web sites provide a place for interested parties to come together and critique a particular organization or industry. In the case of RadioShackSucks.com, many of the site participants reported being former employees (or in the vernacular of the Web site, employees who had been "promoted to customer"). The active participation of former organizational members on RadioShackSucks.com highlights an important characteristic of counterinstitutional Web sites. These

Web sites blur the physical and temporal boundaries between organizational insiders and outsiders; this allows a wide variety of organizational stakeholders to come together and make their concerns public. In our data set, 62 (25%) of the site participants indicated that they were no longer employed by Radio Shack. In the current exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect literature, exit is thought to close off a member's discursive options. Yet even after exiting the firm, these former employees maintained their connection to the organization by participating on RadioShackSucks.com, sharing their stories and opinions with fellow "shackers" and actively critiquing the policies and practices of the organization.

Although the Radio Shack Corporation expressed concern that the site promoted sabotage and publicized confidential company information, our review of the postings did not support these allegations. We found that the majority of the postings could be best defined as either individuals sharing job-related information and rumors (34% of coded data) or members engaging in work-related gripes and complaints (27% of coded data).

With respect to the sharing of job-related information, discussion topics included debating the pros and cons of a new bonus plan, former employees trying to understand how to file for unemployment, and members sharing rumors about store closings. Participants also used the Web site to troubleshoot technical and organizational problems. For example, under the discussion topic "Kameleon Remotes," several employees turned to the Web site with their product-related problems because they could not elicit answers from the company-approved technical support service. One employee posted to the site, asking, "Has anyone attempted to call the 800 support line yet? I have been trying since Dec 24. . . . I have made my 15th call today and, you guessed it, busy signals" (Ween101, January 7, 2004). Another employee reported having trouble with both the product and the support line: "I know I had one that would do everything but raise the volume and when I called tech support they said I needed to reprogram" (Secular Juan's, January 8, 2004). Iron Magnus then answered Secular Juan's post with, "Secular was by chance its volume lock on for say a receiver and they were trying to change the volume on the TV?" (January 8, 2004). In this way, participants used the Web site to overcome communication barriers in ways that were helpful to the effective functioning of Radio Shack, in a manner similar to Julian Orr's (1996) work on the informal exchange of tacit knowledge among photocopy repair personnel at Xerox.

Discussion topics that fit into the griping category included full-timers complaining about working with seasonal help during the holidays, employees venting about particularly frustrating customers, and members

criticizing the ethics or logic of specific company policies. For example, in a discussion thread entitled “Here’s the scam,” members debated the company’s staffing and stocking practices:

With the current turnover rate of both new and veteran managers (at least in my old district), they no longer have to pay their “higher” wages and salaries. They just bring in some newbie who will do the same work for lower pay . . . that sounds familiar . . . AND they convince these rookie managers to work anywhere from 60-80 hours a week, and when they burn themselves out, district just brings in a new rookie. They’ve been doing this for years. (TruGreen316, December 28, 2003)

This posting about the ethics of Radio Shack’s hiring practices prompted another member to critique the company’s method of stocking products: “I’ll get yelled at for numbers but [it is] hard to sell something that isn’t there. . . . We need a list of things that CAN be ordered not CANNOT be ordered. Grrrrr” (TastyRSgal, January 5, 2004). This manager continued to describe frustrations with both the product ordering system and being reprimanded for not having items in the store to sell.

It might be easy to dismiss the postings on RadioShackSucks.com as evidence of member neglect or latent dissent because employees complained to each other rather than bringing their concerns to the attention of organizational leadership. However, participation on the Web site may not be a sign of member apathy but rather an indication that the communication mechanisms within the organization are ineffective. On RadioShackSucks.com, several of the participants indicated that the organization’s official communication channels failed to meet employee needs (e.g., the technical support line example described earlier). Attempting to resolve problems within Radio Shack was typically framed as an exercise in futility. For example, one member claimed to have used official channels to complain about security after a rash of robberies in the store’s parking lot:

I must have asked management a dozen times “if these people are in the parking lot and waiting for their victims, how long can it be before they notice the pattern of single coverage at RS and associates leaving the store with deposit bags headed for the bank with no escort?” No help came—they still insisted on leaving the store with our inadequate coverage. (Parttimer88, January 18, 2004)

If members attempt to use official organizational channels and receive an unsatisfactory response, they may decide that these channels do not exist in a meaningful way.

Beyond being unresponsive, other participants warned that Radio Shack would retaliate rather than reward employees who voiced complaints, making such actions equivalent to career suicide:

You could fall on your sword and challenge it officially, requesting to complain about it up the chain of command. That, of course, would make you a marked man (or woman). The concept of an open door policy at RS is hysterical. (Dodger, January 12, 2004)

Another participant agreed with Dodger, stating, "I can almost guarantee you'll get fired for rocking the boat. The 'open door' policy is a joke in most places" (ShackStudent, January 14, 2004). The lack of member dissent within official organizational channels may not be indicative of a disengaged workforce but rather evidence of a system that denies its members safe, easy, and effective ways to make their voices heard.

Participants on RadioShackSucks.com frequently stated their desire for Radio Shack's corporate leadership to pay attention to their postings. In a discussion thread entitled "How to fix RS," 17 participants brainstormed ways to improve the company during a period of 2 weeks. In one of the final contributions, a former Radio Shack employee commented that the suggestions were "probably one of the best reads on this site in [quite] some time. Everything was dead on. I honestly hope that someone in corporate read this, and didn't dismiss it as a post on 'that board'" (Postmortem, January 13, 2004). In a thread entitled "My Story," Shackchick specifically indicated that she wanted Radio Shack to pay attention to her posts:

Boy, I hope someone up in one of those offices actually reads this stuff. It would be nice if they would learn a thing or two about what pisses off their employees, instead of threatening termination to those who speak their minds. (January 4, 2004)

Finally, one former employee expressed disgust with Radio Shack's refusal to embrace the Web site:

Why is it that with all the high-paid jackasses in the towers [the Radio Shack corporate headquarters] they can't figure out that this site should be a do and don't list for them? If people complain, there might be a problem, so the solution would be to try to fix it. I wish I could get paid that much to sink a corporation like the shack, they've certainly done a good job of it. (Asto, February 1, 2004)

Recall the welcoming statement from the RadioShackSucks.com Web master, declaring, “We do know that RadioShack is, in fact, monitoring this site” (February 1, 2004) and the frequent termination threats reported by participants; members of the RadioShackSucks.com community clearly assumed that the corporate office was paying attention to their postings. This knowledge suggests that participating on RadioShackSucks.com allowed current and former employees to actively engage in organizational voice and communicate with corporate leadership. Thus, RadioShackSucks.com served as an upward-focused channel of articulated dissent for these participants, despite the fact that it operated outside the traditional boundaries of the corporation.

A Mechanism for Member Resistance

Research Question 2 asks, in what ways does a counterinstitutional Web site such as RadioShackSucks.com enable participants to engage in organizational resistance efforts? Increasingly, corporations are monitoring the online behavior of their employees and taking action against those who contribute to oppositional forums (Joyce, 2005; Olian, 2004). Although the First Amendment may protect a worker’s legal right to share his or her opinions on the Internet, it does not prevent companies from terminating employees who speak against them or their interests. Given this stiff penalty, merely participating on a counterinstitutional Web site might be seen as an act of employee defiance. This seemed to be the case for the Radio Shack employees, who frequently discussed the risks they were taking to participate on the Web site. However, our analysis of the data revealed that the participants on RadioShackSucks.com also used the Web site to strategize more overt individual and collective acts of resistance (25% of coded data).

One common topic of discussion was whether or not to simply leave Radio Shack, that is, to choose exit rather than voice as a method for dealing with unsatisfying work conditions. Active in these discussions were former employees who often encouraged current workers to explore other job opportunities. For example, one member claimed,

I left the shack. Best move I have done in years. . . . I decided to go into Real Estate, and it is great. I work my own hours, take my wife out to lunch and make 10 times more than at R\$. (Iceman, December 28, 2003)

These narratives appeared to have an effect, with several employees claiming that reading these stories motivated them to leave:

I would just like to say thank you to all those out there who have continued to encourage me to get off my butt and change my life. There is no better feeling then waking up knowing you will no longer be stuck in RS He**. (Secular Juan's, February 1, 2004)

Participation on RadioShackSucks.com enabled employees to reevaluate their relationship with the organization and consider employment alternatives, a direct threat to Radio Shack's ability to motivate and retain its workforce.

Another frequent topic on the site involved employees strategizing techniques to wreck havoc in their stores. For example, in the discussion thread "Things one should NOT do on the last day," one participant suggested using remote control cars to set off a store's motion detectors after hours, forcing the store manager to return every time the alarm was triggered (DarkEntity, January 17, 2004). Another participant provided a whole list of things which employees "should not" do:

I have decided NOT to remove every price tag in the store on MY last day. . . . Nor will I break off the key in the cage padlock. I will NOT purchase a 'farting telephone' from the novelty store and put it on display. (ForceFeed, January 24, 2004)

Finally, one member suggested,

Whatever you do, DON'T go to the post office and put in a change of address card for the store, sending all store mail back to Fort Worth, care of/attention to Lenny boy [the Radio Shack CEO]. It'd take 'em WEEKS to figure out. Also don't go to the electric company and put in a request for termination of service, if they were to flick the switch during business hours, that's be a bad thing. (Dodger, January 27, 2004)

Although many of the suggestions were disruptive and quite possibly grounds for termination, most were pranks rather than grand acts of corporate sabotage. Despite the claims made by the Radio Shack Corporation, none of these proposed activities would seem to endanger the welfare of the company.

From a resistance standpoint, these narratives highlight the hidden power that store employees possess. Gabriel (1999) argues,

Fantasy offers to individuals and groups a third way, one that amounts to neither conformity nor rebellion, but a symbolic refashioning of official

organizational practices in the interest of pleasure, allowing a temporary supremacy of uncontrol over control and spontaneous emotion over the organization's emotional scripts. (p. 195)

The empowering narratives created through this discourse allowed workers to vent their frustrations and reinterpret the power dynamics of the organization. Although not overt acts of organized resistance, these counternarratives enabled site participants to break outside the boundaries of what was and imagine what could be. Kassing (2001) notes that coworker-focused, latent dissent may only serve to keep members compliant and prevent them from working toward material change. Yet the latent dissent expressed on RadioShackSucks.com encouraged some members to work toward real change within their work environment, even if that change involved ultimately leaving the organization. Although lacking a singular dramatic moment of impact, the activities described above brought the geographically dispersed members of the Radio Shack community together to question and evaluate their collective workplace.

These acts of resistance could be considered coping strategies for individual members; however, their importance for fostering larger acts of collective resistance should not be underestimated. Similar activities have been observed among other organizational groups. Murphy's (1998) study of flight attendants found that these workers gathered together and critiqued their employer in private, outside of formal organizational channels. Eventually these "hidden transcripts" gave rise to a collective act of resistance against the airline, forcing the company to change its weight requirements for flight attendants. Similarly, Fleming and Spicer's (2002) study of call center employees found that workers were initially brought together through humor and cynicism but later moved on to more material forms of resistance, such as considering the formation of a union. Both of these examples illustrate the power of latent dissent to bring members together and enable the emergence of more structured forms of organizational opposition.

We observed similar behavior on the RadioShacksSucks.com site. On October 31, 2002, the Touhy & Touhy, Ltd law firm launched a class action suit against Radio Shack, alleging that the company intentionally misclassified salespeople as managers to avoid paying overtime. Not surprisingly, the lawsuit was heavily discussed on RadioShackSucks.com. On the front page of the site, the Web master placed a link to the law firm and encouraged site visitors to "click here to see if you qualify." Beyond simply providing information, the front page of the Web site encouraged members to participate in the lawsuit.

Nearly 8000 notices sent to [category] Y Store Managers who may be affected by this class action. If you fall into this classification, please watch your mail for this notice to arrive. Read it carefully, and opt-in if it applies to you. Make NO mistake, you MUST opt-in to be included.

The class action suit was filed in December 2003 with nearly 50% of eligible employees, more than double the national average of 10% to 20% in other recent class action suits (Malone, 2004a).

The lawsuit's overwhelming participation rate provides an indication of the Web site's power. As one participant noted,

Wow! I dare anyone to say that this site makes no difference. It has obviously stuck a [major] nerve with the company. I had no idea that this site generated that much interest in the class action suit. [Truly] amazing. (Postmortem, January 28, 2004)

Without the social network formed by RadioShackSucks.com, it seems doubtful that more than 3,200 geographically dispersed employees would have come together quickly enough to take advantage of this \$100 million dollar class action suit. In fact, the firm filing the lawsuit specifically acknowledged the important role that RadioShackSucks.com played in mobilizing the participation of both current and former employees (Malone, 2004a).

Epilogue

Radio Shack sought and won a temporary injunction against Radio ShackSucks.com in the summer of 2004. The corporation accused the Web site of injuring the reputation of the company and revealing confidential information to the general public. In addition, Radio Shack

wanted the irreverent site to lay off a laundry list of activities it considers offensive, including providing links to a Chicago law firm that is pressing a class action damages lawsuit on behalf of workers who say they were wrongfully denied overtime pay. ("Static: Speech," 2004, para. 1)

Although the Web site had successfully withstood Radio Shack's attacks for more than 5 years, in July 2004 RadioShackSucks.com was removed from the Internet by court order. Yet even this action proved ultimately ineffectual: New Web sites such as "Radio Shack Sucks News & Information" quickly emerged to take the former's place. In addition, the RadioShackSucks.com

Web master created a new site at the *RadioShackSucks.org* address and threatened to move the whole operation to an offshore server (“Static: Speech,” 2004, para 1). On January 25, 2005, *RadioShackSucks.com* and the Radio Shack Corporation reached a settlement. *RadioShackSucks.com* was allowed to reemerge on the Internet but agreed to no longer permit participants to refer to Radio Shack individuals by name (only first names were to be allowed). This effectively limited the ability of members to share information about particular managers and coworkers. In addition, and remarkably, the Web master agreed to edit and/or delete links to any law firm involved in action against Radio Shack, thus limiting the site’s ability to help members collectively organize. Despite these communicative restrictions, the site is once again active, with more than 2,000 registered users as of November 2005.

Discussion

RadioShackSucks.com demonstrates some of the ways that counterinstitutional Web sites enable organizational members to engage in dissent and resistance efforts. Our analysis of this Web site illustrated that participants used it to overcome real or perceived communication barriers within the Radio Shack Corporation (Research Question 1). Participants also used the Web site to actively promote ideas that worked against the firm’s managerial interests (Research Question 2). In this way, *RadioShackSucks.com* transcended its online environment and affected the offline realities of the corporation it scrutinized.

In keeping with the standards of rigorous qualitative research (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001), we conducted a negative case analysis to determine if opposing interpretations might also be supported by our data set. Although not all postings related directly to issues of member dissent or organizational resistance, there were no examples that directly contradicted our analysis. None of the participants claimed that it was easy to communicate concerns or complaints up the organizational hierarchy. There was no disagreement that employees were threatened with termination for visiting the Web site. No one argued against the wisdom of joining the class action law suit. And no one tried to talk an employee out of quitting. There was some debate on the wisdom or ethics of certain acts of individual rebellion (e.g., outright theft was not widely supported), but no one argued against the general idea of playing pranks or creating problems for management. As such, we feel confident that the analysis

presented in this article reflects a reasonable and persuasive interpretation of the postings within our data set.

Some limitations of this study include the fact that our site access and archiving technique limited the date range of postings we were able to analyze. In addition, alternate means of accessing complete archives of the site were not available. Although some sites are preserved by a Web site called The Internet Archive, this online resource only saves a few pages from each Web site, which is insufficient for a thorough data analysis. As with all social groups, the culture of RadioShackSucks.com is dynamic and subject to external factors (e.g., layoffs within the corporation) and internal considerations (e.g., changes in Web site membership and management). Future research projects might compare site activity during different periods to assess changes in posting themes or participant attitudes. Another inherent limitation of this study was the anonymity imposed by the Web site's structure; this made it impossible to independently verify site participants' identities. However, the very high participation rate in the class action suit provides external evidence that the site reached a large number of current and former Radio Shack employees. In the end, the importance of this Web site is that it provided a safe space for organizational dissent and resistance efforts, available to anyone who wanted or needed such a resource. In this way, RadioShackSucks.com is similar to other counterinstitutional Web sites that provide an outlet for member voice outside the control of the organization.

Practical Implications

There are several practical and theoretical implications that result from this study. At a practical level, organizations may need to reconsider how open their "open door" policies really are. An absence of member dissent is not necessarily a sign of a loyal membership; it may simply be an indication that members are voicing their opinions elsewhere. The greater the divide between workers and management, the more likely it is that employees will seek out alternative outlets for their dissent rather than use company-sanctioned channels. This was the case for members of Radio ShackSucks.com, many of whom reported participating on the Web site precisely because the company's official communication channels were thought to be ineffectual or more likely to invite managerial retaliation than a productive response. Organizational members need a safe space to share their ideas, find solutions to problems, and have their opinions acknowledged. If organizations fail to provide these resources, workers may create their own. As such, organizational leaders should take the emergence of

an active counterinstitutional Web site as a sign that there are weaknesses within their own communication infrastructure that need to be addressed.

Rather than attempt to silence or dismiss the discussions taking place on counterinstitutional Web sites, organizations should consider these online forums valuable and unique sources of stakeholder feedback. Subtle acts of member resistance and latent dissent typically occur in spaces that management cannot easily access (underground newsletters, private conversations outside the office, etc.). However, counterinstitutional Web sites make these discussions public and enable organizational leaders to obtain information not normally shared through the formal network. By engaging these sites, organizations will be better able to identify and address member concerns when they first emerge, intervening before these individual moments of discontent coalesce into collective acts of open rebellion (strikes, lawsuits, etc.). It may be in an organization's best interests to work with rather than against these oppositional online communities.

Theoretical Implications

At the theoretical level, this study provides a number of valuable contributions to the voice and dissent literatures. Rather than limiting the study of member voice to the discursive acts within a particular system, the findings of this study urge scholars to also consider spaces outside the formal boundaries of the organization. As Gabriel (1999) argues,

Employee dissent must be sought at the margins—at the margins of organizations, at the margins of discourse, at the margins of experience. These are the unmanaged spaces in organizations, spaces which for certain periods of time are beyond the surveying gaze of organizational controls. (p. 195)

Counterinstitutional Web sites provide such a space, allowing marginalized, geographically dispersed, or transitory members to safely vent their frustrations and share their concerns with others. Rather than classify this discourse as evidence of member neglect or latent dissent, researchers should consider the ways in which external communication channels can also serve as mechanisms for member voice and articulated dissent. To this end, many of the participants on RadioShackSucks.com appeared to be using the Web site to share their opinions and concerns directly with the corporate office, that is, to engage in articulated dissent through the use of an unofficial channel. This finding may be of particular interest to the growing body of literature on organizational silence (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2003; Van Dyne, Ang, &

Botero, 2003). Members who appear to be silent within the internal confines of the organization may have instead selected an external channel for voicing their concerns, one where they have more control over anonymity and the structure of the discussion.

Finally, this study challenges organizational scholars to reexamine the relationship between organizational exit and member voice. We have traditionally limited our studies of organizational voice to the current members of a system (Hirschman, 1970). However, the active participation of former employees on RadioShackSucks.com complicates the relationship between these two concepts. In an era when individuals have boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), organizations may find themselves with boundaryless memberships. Volatile industries that frequently downsize and rehire the same workers (manufacturing, agriculture) and those with high rates of turnover (retail, customer service) may have employees who move in and out of a single organization several times during their career. In addition, the popularity of management strategies that encourage members to identify with the organization (Barker, 1993; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) may result in workers who wish to remain connected even after they have officially exited the system. These once and future employees may maintain a degree of loyalty to their former employer and seek out opportunities to improve a system for which they still care. These findings suggest that scholars need to reconsider the relationship between voice and exit because one may not preclude the other.

Conclusion

By the time you read this article, the voices on RadioShackSucks.com may be continuing on their reopened site, be silenced once again, or be in temporary digital storage, waiting to be reactivated in a more hospitable space. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that the Internet is increasingly becoming a place for workers to come together, share information, and engage in collective action outside the boundaries of the organization. In an era when our workplaces are increasingly fragmented and union memberships are declining (Nissen, 2003), counterinstitutional Web sites provide workers with the opportunity to connect with others who share their occupational or organizational affiliations. These Web sites are one example of a “new area of Internet organization marked by effortless and instant dissemination of information between similarly situated employees” (Taras & Gesser, 2003, p. 26). Organizational scholars and practitioners need to learn how these Web sites function to prepare for the communicative realities of the contemporary and increasingly boundaryless organizational environment.

Appendix Summary of Data Coding Categories

Category	Definition	Example	No. of Incidents
Radio Shack--Related Information			
Company rumors	Rumors or speculation about the fate of the company or specific people	Members speculating on the reasons that a district manager was fired	528 (34%) 69
Work-related information	Sharing info about company policies, products, and practices	Members sharing their stories about doing end-of-the-year inventory	103
Problem solving for Radio Shack	Information and suggestions designed to improve the Radio Shack Corporation or particular stores	Members discussing new products that Radio Shack should consider selling in their stores	84
Problem solving for workers	Information and suggestions for resolving employee-related problems	Members suggesting strategies for dealing with a sexually harassing manager	141
Questions	Participants asking for information or help with a problem	Posting a question about Radio Shack's tuition reimbursement policy	131

Complaints and Concerns About Radio Shack		427 (27%)
Radio Shack gripes	Complaints about Radio Shack's policies and practices	266
Communication barriers	Communication barriers or limitations to member voice within Radio Shack	41
Ethical concerns at Radio Shack	Discussion of the legality and ethics of company policies and practices	120
Resisting Radio Shack		397 (25%)
Resistance techniques	Suggestions for resisting Radio Shack's policies and practices	147
Voice	Participants discussing their desire to speak up or be heard by the company	33
Exit	Discussion about leaving Radio Shack	63
	Participants complaining about the company's staffing policies	
	Members being threatened with termination for visiting RadioShackSucks.com	
	Participants discussing the legality of certain cell phone sales techniques advocated by management	
	Ideas for pranks to play on Radio Shack managers and customers	
	Members claiming that they use the website to speak to management	
	Members making suggestions for other places to work	

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

Category	Definition	Example	No. of Incidents
Mocking Radio Shack	Making fun of Radio Shack's policies, people, or public image	Members rewording corporate slogans	128
Web site	Discussion about the power of the Web site and its ability to impact Radio Shack	Members debating whether or not postings on the site will impact the company's stock price	26
Web Site Community			135 (9%)
Member support	Statements of moral support made by one site participant to another	Members wishing one of the participants "good luck" with an upcoming surgery	80
Anonymity	Statements about the importance of protecting site participant anonymity	Participants being warned not to provide their exact store location in their postings	25
Site rules	Discussion of proper and improper site postings	Participants being warned not to personally attack each other in their postings	24
Blank	A site posting with no content	A posting that includes a participant's name and a title but contains no additional information	6

76 (5%)

Non-Radio Shack-Specific Discussion

Miscellaneous ethical discussion	Discussion about the proper way to behave on the Internet and within society	Participants debating whether or not theft is always wrong	3
Miscellaneous resistance techniques	Suggestions for resisting organizations other than Radio Shack	Participant provides information about a class action suit against another company	1
Miscellaneous gripes	General complaints and concerns	Participants complain that companies are increasingly hiring part-time rather than full-time employees	39
Miscellaneous information	Site participants providing information unrelated to Radio Shack	Members discuss minimum wage laws in different states	33

Note: The 1,095 individual postings generated 1,563 units of coded data for analysis, with many of the postings covering several topics and therefore fitting into multiple categories. For example, a single posting may include both a complaint about a store policy and also a question about filing for worker's compensation.

Notes

1. All quotes from the RadioShackSucks.com site are presented verbatim with errors included, although in some cases—such as this one—we have added explanatory text in brackets. Quotes are cited by the contributor's own pseudonym and the date of posting as identified by the site's automated tools.

2. Constraints posed by both our archiving technique and the Web site itself made it difficult to download and store older, inactive discussion threads. As a result, we archived and focused on the most recently active threads (January 1, 2004, to February 1, 2004) for our analysis. Although the earliest of these threads began on April 27, 2002, the vast majority (87%) of the postings were started between January 1, 2004, and February 1, 2004.

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