Employee Activism and Internal Communication

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On September 23, 2020, Sam Anderson, a senior training specialist at the social media management platform Hootsuite wrote a series of tweets drawing attention to the company's deal with the controversial United States federal agency, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE hereafter; Moreno, 2020). Anderson claimed that the three-year deal between Hootsuite and ICE had been signed over the objections and protests of over a hundred employees, including some in Mexico City who reported having been harassed by ICE officials (Sandler, 2020). The internal concerns about the deal quickly spilled over to Hootsuite's external environment, with several social media managers, Hootsuite's client base, announcing that they would be reconsidering their use of the platform (Moreno, 2020). What followed was a swift and public policy reversal from Hootsuite. Within 24 hours of Anderson's tweets Hootsuite's CEO issued a public statement, acknowledging that the deal has "sparked a

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great deal of internal conversation" and that the company would no longer be going ahead with the deal with ICE (Moreno, 2020).

Hootsuite's capitulation to employee pressure is only one of many recent examples of heightened employee activism. The last few years, in particular, have seen the rise of employees giving voice to their opposition to organizational policies, particularly related to controversial social issues, and mobilizing to form social movement organizations within their employer organizations to sue for change (Scully & Segal, 2002). From the Wayfair walkout to protest the company's dealings with ICE (Hames, 2019), the multiple employee walkouts, and organized protests at Google against their handling of sexual harassment cases in 2018 (Wakabayashi et al., 2018) and then to protest what was viewed as retaliation against two employees who were activist organizers (Ghaffrey, 2019), to Amazon (Wingard, 2020) and Walmart (Gurchiek, 2019), recent instances of employee activism abound. Indeed, a 2019 report by public relations agency, Weber Shandwick found that 4 in 10 employees (38%) say they have "spoken up to support or criticize their employers' actions over a controversial issue that affects society" (Gaines Ross, 2019). Weber Shandwick's executive chairman, Andy Polanksy, attributed this finding to the increasing number of Millennials in the workforce who believe it their right to criticize their employers on controversial issues (Wingard, 2020).

Such activism stemming from within an organization presents an internal and external communication challenge, as organizations' leaders try to balance mindfully addressing employee activists' demands before and after they become public with the organization's own values and interests. Public relations nightmares resulting from poorly handled employee activism, as was the case with Google and Wayfair's employee walkouts, remind us of the important role played by public relations functions in communicating and negotiating between organizational leaders and internal activists (McCown, 2007). The present chapter presents a review of the literature on activism and employee activism within public relations scholarship and beyond, followed by industry perspectives on employee activism. A theoretically driven and practically sound definition of employee activism is advanced, followed by recommendations for future research on employee activism and internal communication.

Activism in Public Relations Scholarship

The study of activism enjoys a long history in public relations scholarship. Defined by L. A. Grunig et al. (2002) as "a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics, or force" (p. 446), activist groups are important constituencies for public relations practitioners to consider when formulating their communication strategy (Grunig & Grunig, 1997). However, too often in public relations scholarship activists and activism have been cast in a negative light, as efforts that inhibit public relations practice (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000) and therefore need to be limited and controlled (Dougall, 2005). Dozier and Lauzen (2000) criticized the "intellectual myopia" associated with public relations scholarship which is dominated by former practitioners at large organizations, who see activists as the "other" and thus a force to be thwarted (p. 7).

Since then, scholars have embraced Dozier and Lauzen's (2000) call to understand activism, helping build a robust body of literature understanding organized activist groups and their communicative strategies (e.g., Anderson, 1992; Reber & Kim, 2006; Taylor et al., 2001; Werder, 2006), as well as individual-level activism (e.g., Krishna, 2017). However, much of the public relations scholarship on activism tends to focus on external activists, particularly organized activist groups and their relationship building efforts to advance their agenda (e.g., Taylor et al., 2001). Few studies have focused on the role of internal activists (e.g., Curtin, 2016; McCown, 2007) in bringing about organizational change and even forcing changes in organizational policy. With employee activism on the rise (Gurchiek, 2019) and becoming a crucial piece of corporations' employee engagement efforts ("Employees Rising: Seizing the Opportunity in Employee Activism," n.d.), it behooves public relations scholarship to examine employee activism and its impact on internal communication and corporate strategy. The next section presents a review of the literature on internal and employee activism, in public relations and beyond, to unpack the differences between external, internal, and employee activism.

Theoretical Perspectives on Employee Activism

As noted in the previous section, much of the public relations scholarship on activism has focused on external organized activist groups, such as environmental groups (e.g., Taylor et al., 2001) as well as organic, issue-specific activism (e.g., Krishna, 2017; Vardeman & Sebesta, 2020). Relatively understudied, however, are instances of internal activism, particularly those initiated and carried out by employees. Although McCown (2007) noted that "…employee activism should inform future public relations practice" (p. 47), theoretical explications of employee activism and internal activism in public relations scholarship are few and far between and tend to be primarily qualitative explorations of specific instances of internal activism in the form of case studies. For example, Luo and Jiang (2014) interviewed employee activists at a large multinational food company in China to understand the various empowerment strategies they adopted to force the reversal of an unpopular policy. Similarly, Curtin (2016) adopted a case study approach to understand the discourses adopted by internal activists, in this case, Girl Scout members, to pressure the manufacturer of Girl Scout cookies, the Kellogg Company to use only palm oil from responsible sources.

In organizational studies and management literature, however, internal activism has received more attention. Briscoe and Gupta (2016), for example, articulated the different types of social activism experienced within and around organizations and differentiated between "insider" and "outsider" activists (p. 671). Whereas "outsider" activists or external activists exist outside the organization as non-members, such as social movement organizations like Greenpeace, "insider" activists are members of an organization. Briscoe and Gupta (2016) further differentiated between types of insider activists by envisioning a continuum of activist types, i.e., an insider–outsider continuum, with non-members or external activists at one end and employees as full members of the organization at the other. Such envisioning of activist types on a spectrum helps account for partial members of organizations, including students, as internal members of their schools and institutions, and shareholders, who although have an interest in the organization do not enjoy the level of access that employees do. Two key factors, i.e., resource dependence and target organization knowledge, characterize groups' classification into activist types (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). For example, employee activists experience a high level of resource dependence with their organization,

particularly as they risk retaliation and career damage (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). At the same time, they also enjoy knowledge not only about informal social structures in the organization that may facilitate organizing and the strategic deployment of activism efforts but also of internal culture (Baron & Diermeier, 2007). Shareholders, as partial members, are highly resource-dependent on the organization but lack the requisite knowledge of internal culture and social structures to effectively organize and drive change from within. The insider–outsider continuum, a function of resource dependency and target organization knowledge, thus, helps distinguish between employee activists and other types of internal and external activists.

Early theorizing on employee activists described these individuals as "tempered radicals" (Meyerson, 2001; Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 585), who must balance their commitment to their chosen social cause, and thus critique their organization's policies and practices, with their commitment to the organization and the rewards and benefits that ensue when the organization succeeds. Historically, labor unions tended to be cast as protagonists in the fight for workplace equality and equity (Western & Rosenfeld, 2011), fighting for fairer wages and income equity within their organizations as well as lobbying legislative bodies. However, with union membership on a steady decline (Maiorescu, 2017) an alternate form of employee activism has recently gained traction. Specifically, scholars have noted the emergence of issue-specific employee groups that have been able to successfully lobby their organizations to take concrete action on issues ranging from LBGT policy and activism (e.g., Githens & Aragon, 2009; Maks-Solomon & Drewry, 2020) to environmental issues (e.g., Skoglund & Böhm, 2020). Recent upheavals in the tech industry, including employee protests and walkouts at Google, Amazon, and Wayfair (Gautam & Carberry, 2020) in response to what the employees considered inappropriate corporate policies regarding controversial social issues point to a more organic form of employee organizing and activism in response to perceived corporate missteps on crucial socio-political issues. Such employee activism is even more evident in instances when employees perceive there to be a disconnect between organizational values and organizational action (Stuart, 2020).

Scully and Segal (2002) posit three reasons for the manifestation of employee activism in the workplace. First, given that many of the issues that form the target of social activism can be directly attributed to corporate (in)action, such as inequality, injustice, and discrimination (Baron,

1984), employees experience the effects of these inequalities firsthand, and thus are more motivated to address them. Second, as noted earlier, having an intimate knowledge of the internal culture of the organization and the informal (power) structures that characterize it facilitate the mobilization and distribution of information and attitudes. Third, the proximity afforded by a workplace as well as the shared experience of inequity may also facilitate the mobilization and organizing of groups, as well as the recruitment of new members to help address the issues faced by the collective.

Industry Perspectives on Employee Activism

As is evidenced by extant theorizing on employee activism reviewed so far, such efforts are conceptualized to be inwardly directed. That is, employee activism is considered to be efforts organized and negotiated by individual employees and/or groups of employees directed toward organizational leadership to change organizational policy or direction. However, outside of the academy in the practice, employee activism is defined more broadly than just inwardly directed. For example, Rouse (2020) defined employee activism as "actions taken by workers to speak out for or against their employers on controversial issues that impact society" and noted that it is characterized by "actions performed intentionally to generate social change" (para. 1). However, such activism is not necessarily inwardly directed. Instead, "employee activists use various social activism methods, including social media campaigns, staged walkouts, and protests, to make their actions visible and generate social change" (Nataros, 2020, para. 4). In other words, unlike extant theorizing, industry understanding of employee activism involves not only lobbying for change within the organization to top leadership but also the use of public relations strategies to garner external attention and support for the employees' agenda. Indeed, Peachey (n.d.) attributed the recent increase in high-profile instances of employee activism to the advancements in technology that allow individuals and employee groups to reach large audiences easily, thus adding external social pressure on organizations in addition to the internal pressure.

Additionally, whereas theoretical accounts of employee activism tend to focus on employees campaigning against organization action (e.g., Luo & Jiang, 2014; McCown, 2007), or to urge the organization to implement changes in existing policy and action (e.g., Curtin, 2016) in practice

employee activism may also involve employees speaking out for or in support of their organizations. For example, in the wake of Nike's controversial ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, the equally controversial activist quarterback, Nike's employees reported having "more respect for our company than we have in the past" and feeling "a big swell of pride that we stood up for something meaningful" despite fielding a volley of abuse from upset customers (Saincome, 2018, para. 6). Indeed, an industry study found that over 87% of employees want their organizations to take a stand on social issues that are relevant to its business (Bryan, 2019), and such corporate advocacy shown to foster employee engagement.

Advancing a Theoretically and Practically Sound Definition of Employee Activism

Taken together, the academic and industry perspectives on employee activism offer insights into elements that characterize the concept. Combining these perspectives, a definition of employee activism is advanced in this chapter. Employee activism is defined as *goal-oriented efforts organized and negotiated by individual and/or groups of employees to internally and/or externally advocate for or against organizational policy and/or decision making to generate social change*. This definition captures the various features of employee activism as discussed earlier. First, it acknowledges that employee activism encompasses organized and negotiated efforts (Gautam & Carberry, 2020), undertaken by formal, organized groups such as unions (Western & Rosenfeld, 2011) or by individuals motivated about an issue (Krishna, 2017). Second, per industry perspectives on employee activism is conceptualized as being internally directed as well as externally focused, such that employee activism may involve making use of social activism tactics to garner external support for their agenda, thereby exerting both internal and external pressure on the organization. Third, this definition positions employee activism as an act of *advocacy*, such that it may manifest in the form of support for or opposition to organizational policy or action. Whereas most academic discussions on employee activism center on it being an oppositional force against the employer, this definition refocuses the potential of employee activism as also being a positive force for the employer, where employee activism may manifest in the form of employee advocacy and external promotion of organizational action for positive social change.

Employee activism, then, may be divided into two sub-concepts depending on the valence of employees' actions and attitudes vis-à-vis the organization's policy. When employee activists' efforts are aimed against or criticize organizational action or decision that the employees believe to be against social good, they may be considered *adversary activists*. On the other hand, when their efforts seek to support or praise an organization's stance or position that does generate positive social change, employee activists may be termed *advocate activists*. This typology of employee activists follows and complements discussions of employees' communicative behaviors during crises as discussed by public relations scholars (e.g., Lee, 2019; Mazzei et al., 2019). Just as employees may act as external advocates or adversaries for their organizations in times of crises, so too may they engage in advocacy or adversarial activism, and act as advocate activists or adversarial activists when trying to encourage the organization to behave in certain ways regarding controversial social issues. It is important to note, however, that whether employee activists are advocates or adversaries may be situational, rather than static.

This last aspect of employee activism discussed in the previous paragraph bears some similarity to the concept of *megaphoning* in public relations literature (see Kim & Rhee, 2011). Megaphoning refers to employees' external communicative behaviors about their employers. Similar to employee activism, these behaviors may manifest in the form of positive megaphoning or negative megaphoning. In other words, megaphoning refers to employees' sharing of positive or negative opinions about their organization to those outside the organization. Such opinion sharing about an organization by its own members has been shown to impact individuals' attitudes about the organization (Vibber & Kim, 2019). A similar concept to megaphoning is that of employee advocacy. Defined as "the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or its brands by an employee externally" (Men, 2014, p. 262), employee advocacy captures employees' actions to support and defend their employers against criticisms, not just promote or criticize them. Thelen (2020) clarified the concept of employee advocacy, defining it as "Verbal (written and spoken) or nonverbal voluntary manifestation of support, recommendation, or defense of an organization or its products by an employee to either internal or external publics" (p. 9). Much like megaphoning, employee advocacy is generally considered beyond the scope of an employee's job responsibilities and is not tied explicitly to rewards and job performance (Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018).

However, the key difference between employee megaphoning, employee advocacy, and the communicative dimension of employee activism lies in their respective goals of the two activities. Although both employee megaphoning and the communicative aspect of employee activism may involve speaking for or against the employees' organization, the goal of employee activism is to generate social change by either changing or reinforcing organizational policy. No such social change-based goal is conceptualized to underpin megaphoning or employee advocacy efforts. Indeed, megaphoning is conceptualized merely as employees' show of support for or against their employer with no other motive than to vent (Kim & Rhee, 2011), whereas employee advocacy serves to support or defend the organization against criticism regardless of context, and includes nonverbal actions (Thelen, 2020). Importantly, whereas the subject of employee advocacy and megaphoning is the organization, the subject of advocacy activism and adversarial activism is the organization's stance on a controversial social issue and the issue itself.

Employee Activism and Internal Communication

Several opportunities for theory development and future research related to employee activism and internal communication emerge from this review of the literature. Indeed, industry experts have acknowledged the crucial role played by internal communication in helping engage with employee activists to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes (Comcowich, 2019). This section offers scholars questions for future research to further explicate employee and workplace activism and to advance theory building on the concept. For example, scholars may want to explore the concepts of advocate activism and adversary activism, presenting empirical, theoretically driven explanations of the conditions under which organizations may encourage advocacy activism, and even adversary activism in certain cases. Would symmetrical communication and relationship cultivation encourage more advocacy activism and perhaps discourage adversary activism, as it does with positive and negative megaphoning, respectively, in times of crisis (Lee, 2020)? What other internal communication strategies and organizational factors encourage or inhibit employees' organizing and activism behaviors? Furthermore, what kinds of individual- and group-level activism may be expected when organizations engage in or attempt to take a stand on controversial social issues?

Additionally, a key question for public relations and organizational studies scholars to consider is this: is adversary activism inherently bad? Or perhaps is the answer more nuanced? Indeed, how adversary activism can help improve organizational decision-making and policies, and, eventually, contribute to the betterment of society, is also a worthy area of research. The strategies, discourses, and tactics used by adversary activism that have found success would help shed light on how other employee groups may also successfully organize for change in their own organizations, as well as build knowledge on activism and organizing. Such scholarship would contribute to and complement extant literature on employee organizing related to unionizing (e.g., Badigannavar & Kelly, 2005), change management (e.g., Goodall, 1992), and organizational systems and management (e.g., Hoogervorst, 2017).

Furthermore, for scholars interested in the intersection of internal communication, digital media, and social networks, employee activism as discussed in this chapter presents opportunities for research. How do employee groups and activists leverage their internal and external social networks to facilitate organizing and mounting external pressure on organizations? What role do digital media and social networks play in enabling the amplification and employee activists' agendas, thus facilitating the spillover of internal issues into external environments? Are there certain issues that garner more social amplification than others? These and other questions may be valuable areas for scholarship.

To answer these questions and more, scholars may consider adopting extant theoretical frameworks that have been successfully applied to understand activism and activists, writ large, and integrate these frameworks with internal communication scholarship. For example, the situational theory of problem solving has found application in explaining activists' communicative behaviors (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Krishna, 2017) as well as supportive behaviors in times of crises (e.g., Krishna & Kim, 2020). The anger activism model, which proposes that "anger facilitates attitude and behavior change when (a) the target audience is pro-attitudinal, (b) the anger is intense, and (c) the audience has strong perceptions of efficacy" (Turner et al., 2006, p. 3) has found use predicting rage-fueled donation behaviors (Austin et al., 2020).

Critical-cultural perspectives too have been advanced to further the scholarship on activism, as scholars have called for a shift in how activist public relations is considered in ways that "acknowledges alternative articulations and power as fluid" and not "rigidly hierarchical" (Ciszek, 2015,

p. 451). Curtin and Gaither's (2005) cultural-economic model provides one such model which provides a critical-cultural alternative to conceptualizing activism and public relations. Dialogic approaches to activism too have found use in identifying how best activists can harness information technology tools to advance their causes (e.g., Sommerfeldt et al., 2012). These and other theoretical frameworks on activism and conflict resolution may be useful in furthering our understanding of employee activism and internal communication.

Conclusion

Although research on employee activism is in its infancy, especially in public relations, extant theoretical and industry perspectives offer several avenues for future scholarship, as discussed in the previous section. The present chapter offered a theoretically and practically driven definition of employee activism and proposed two sub-concepts to describe both pro-organization and anti-organization efforts, i.e., advocate activism and adversary activism respectively. This chapter serves as a call to scholars across disciplines to further examine employee activism. The research questions as well as the definition of employee activism posited in this chapter serve as a starting for future scholarship, within public relations and beyond.

Employee Activism and Internal Communication

Practitioner's Perspective (Interview)
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Q: What is employee activism? What is the role of the modern-day communicator in addressing employee activism?
A: Today, employees are central to corporate strategy. They are a powerful force. As advocates, they can help companies gain strategic and competitive advantage. They can support and accelerate transformation, even enable companies to become disruptors themselves. Keeping employees engaged and building community and culture are a crucial part of the modern-day communicator's job. However, rapidly shifting social, economic, technological, and generational changes have complicated the

employee–employer dynamic, making the job of communicators complex. One key factor contributing to this complexity is employees' expectations of their employers. Gone are the days when an employee's relationship with their employer was limited to a transaction with an employee simply providing services in exchange for a salary. Instead, employees want their employers to behave in ways that match their own values and expectations—organizations that don't fulfill these expectations can end up facing employees as activists, even strong adversaries.

Q: What are some factors that have contributed to the recent rise of employee activism?

A: One factor that has spurred on employee expectations is the generational shift in the workforce. Millennials, who now constitute half the American workforce and grew up during the Great Recession of 2008, are witness to the income and social inequalities that persist around the world. They are acutely aware of the impending climate crisis and, as we all are, of the dreadful pandemic and its economic impact. They want more than just a job. They want to be part of organizations that stand for something larger. They want jobs that contribute to the greater good on issues such as health, social justice, diversity and inclusion, the environment, education, and labor practices, among others. And they are not afraid of speaking out when they are unhappy with their employers' actions. Their voices are fast becoming a force for social change, one company at a time.

Q: Are these developments and expectations new? How can employee expectations and employee activism manifest, particularly against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic?

A: This change had been coming to the workplace for quite some time. In the not-so-distant past, what happened inside a company stayed inside a company. Not anymore. Communication technologies have lowered the boundaries separating the internal and the external. Employees and their expectations and demands now resonate, often simultaneously, on the inside and the outside. Employees ask their companies to stand tall and lead, as have activist employee groups at Google and Facebook; they ask their companies to be moral leaders, and are unafraid to express their displeasure when they believe their employers have violated moral expectations, as Wayfair and Hootsuite found out. Today's workforce expects purpose with action and will engage actively if expectations are not met. The Covid-19 health crisis and the social justice movement have only intensified employees' expectations and demands of their employers' behaviors on both the inside and the outside.

Ray Kotcher is a professor of the practice, public relations, at Boston University's College of Communication, and the former CEO and chairman of Ketchum, one of the world's largest and most awarded public relations agencies.

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