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Citation
Fraussen, B., & Ackland, R. (2020). Which audiences engage with advocacy groups on twitter?: explaining the online engagement of elite, peer, and mass audiences with advocacy groups. *Nonprofit And Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *50*(4), 842-865. doi:10.1177/0899764020979818

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Article

Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly
1–24
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DOI: 10.1177/0899764020979818
journals.sagepub.com/home/nvs

Which Audiences Engage With Advocacy Groups on Twitter? Explaining the Online Engagement of Elite, Peer, and Mass Audiences With Advocacy Groups

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Abstract

Gaining an audience on social media is an important goal of contemporary policy advocacy. While previous studies demonstrate that advocacy-dedicated nonprofit organizations—what we refer to as advocacy groups—use different social media tools, we still know little about what specific audiences advocacy groups set out to target on social media, and whether those audiences actually engage with these groups. This study fills this gap, deploying survey and digital trace data from Twitter over a 12-month period for the Australian case. We show that while groups target a variety of audiences online, there are differences between group types in their strategic objectives and the extent to which particular audiences engage with them. Business groups appear to target elite audiences more often compared with citizen and professional groups, whereas citizen groups receive more online engagement from mass and peer audiences.

Keywords

social media, advocacy groups, Twitter, audiences, engagement

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Introduction

Well-functioning democracies require citizens to have information about politics. The mass media—newspapers, television, and radio—has long been considered the key channel in providing this information. Consequently, it matters which voices are given coverage in the mass media. Ascertaining the range of advocacy groups that appear in the news provides a key insight into the democratic quality of media systems (Binderkrantz et al., 2017).[1] Yet, the "political information environment" is changing (see Van Aelst et al., 2017). Social media platforms are altering the demand for and supply of political information. On the demand side, we see a "high-choice" media environment where consumers can easily choose to opt out of news or consume only what they wish (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2007). On the supply side, traditional media outlets are struggling for survival, as the volume of freely available information sources has grown rapidly and research shows that online media is becoming an increasingly important source of news across Western democratic countries (Newman et al., 2016).

Social media platforms offer advocacy organizations a means to interact in a decentralized manner with large audiences, and to generate attention on issues which may often be ignored by the traditional media (Guo & Saxton, 2014). Moreover, there is the heightened capacity for political actors to effectively "self-publish" their views without the need to work "through" media outlets. At the same time, social media is a very "noisy information environment" where gaining attention from key audiences is highly challenging (Guo & Saxton, 2018). These developments demand that scholars working on advocacy groups and the media consider how classic questions and theoretical frameworks developed in relation to the print or TV news media might be adapted to this emerging new social-media landscape. In this article, we take an initial step in that direction, focusing on a particular subset of nonprofit or voluntary organizations, namely advocacy groups.

In the literature, authoritative definitions as to what precisely constitute voluntary associations or not-for-profits (NFPs) remain elusive. Key authors, for instance, have noted that "definitions of voluntary organisations are contested, and the boundaries of the sector cannot be drawn with confidence" (Smith et al., 1995). In addition, scholars have counseled against straightforward recourse to legal definitions or categories to identify such organizations, particularly as these rarely apply seamlessly across countries (Martens, 2002). Thus, in this article, we seek recourse to the criteria deployed by Salamon and Anheier (1996) which is that voluntary association or NFPs are formal organizations, that are nonstate actors, nonprofit, self-governing, and voluntary (have members/affiliates). In our study, we examine an important *subset* of the NFP system in Australia, namely those that pursue policy advocacy as one of their *key* functions—what in the political science literature is referred to as interest, pressure, or advocacy groups (see Jordan et al., 2004).[2]

The social media activities of political actors and organizations have received much scholarly attention in a variety of research disciplines. Previous research has systematically mapped the use and effectiveness of social media by nonprofit advocacy

organizations (e.g., Chand, 2017; Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Guo & Saxton, 2014, 2018; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Sounman & Nadler, 2016). Work demonstrates that non-profits are increasingly using social media and that the time and resources being expended are ratcheting ever higher (Guo & Saxton, 2018). Furthermore, much work in political science has focused on Twitter use by elected officials (Gainous & Wagner, 2013; Grant et al., 2010; see Whitesell, 2019, for a recent overview) and in the context of election contests (Jungherr et al., 2015; Van Aelst et al., 2016). Group and political communication scholars have started to examine the utilization of social media platforms, especially Twitter, by individual organizations (Brown, 2015; Chalmers & Shotton, 2015; Karpf, 2010; Obar et al., 2012; Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino, 2017; Van der Graaf et al., 2016). Most work on advocacy groups and social media has focused on the *use* of Twitter and similar platforms. Work has involved observations (often via website coding) regarding the use of Twitter or other social media platforms (Van der Graaf et al., 2016) or group surveys about social media use (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016; Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino, 2017). It has convincingly highlighted how social media is becoming an increasingly important focus for groups in communicating with different audiences, including the public, policy makers, other advocacy groups, their constituency, and journalists.

Still, there has been little exploration as to precisely which specific audiences these organizations seek to target on social media, and no work (to our knowledge) that attempts to directly measure whether these different audiences actually engage with advocacy groups in the online arena. This is a question of high relevance in the current media environment, where public attention—often garnered via social media—is crucial for advocacy strategies, and offers a quick measure of success (Guo & Saxton, 2018). In their work on the social media use of nonprofits, Guo and Saxton distinguish three communicative functions of these tools: "reaching out to people," "keeping the flame alive," and "stepping up to action": information, community, and action (2014, see also Lovejoy et al., 2012). Whereas the information function relates to using social media to provide "information about the organization's activities, highlights from events, or other news . . ." the community function aims to "interact, share and converse with stakeholders." Third, the action function, relates to encouraging followers to "do something," like donating to a particular cause or participating in events.

In this article, we focus on the community function, and address three related questions: Which audiences do advocacy groups target on Twitter? Do these particular audiences actually engage with groups online? And, third, what explains variations in the online engagement of different audiences with different types of advocacy groups? We pursue these questions by combining survey data and digital trace data to clarify which specific audiences groups target via Twitter, and to analyze the extent to which these audiences respond to these efforts and demonstrate online engagement with groups.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss existing work on group appearances in the conventional news media and transpose these frameworks to the world of social media. Second, we examine the general approach of groups and nonprofits to social media. Using responses to a survey of national groups in Australia, we probe the

extent to which Twitter is deemed important to group communication strategies, and the audiences they *target* through this medium. Third, using a unique data set composing of digital trace data of all tweets from this population (and trace data of engagement by a variety of users), we consider whether these targeted audiences also engage with the groups. Subsequently, we assess the variation among different types of groups in relation to the engagement they receive from different audiences through a multivariate analysis. We clarify the key insights from our article in the conclusion, which also provides a discussion of the limitations of our approach and suggestions for future research.

Groups and (Social) Media: Transposing Frameworks and Adapting Expectations

The study of nonprofits and voluntary sector organizations has noted for some time their tendency to engage in policy advocacy (e.g., Buffardi et al., 2017; Chand, 2017; Guo & Saxton, 2014, 2018; Fyall, 2016, 2017; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Minkoff, 2002; Schmid & Almog-Bar, 2014). For Guo and Saxton (2014), "advocacy is a core nonprofit function," whereas Fyall (2016, p. 1) notes that despite barriers, most nonprofits do engage in some public policy activities (see also Buffardi et al., 2017, p. 1228). These authors also clarify that advocacy has become important to a variety of nonprofit organizations, including service providers and charities (see also Fyall, 2016, 2017 on how nonprofits frequently combine the role of policy implementer *and* policy advocate). That is, they engage in efforts—on behalf of their members or client groups—to influence public policy and decision-making.

In this work, both the nonprofit literature and the political science field have demonstrated that a chief challenge for such groups is gaining political attention in a crowded landscape. This is assumed even more challenging with the advent of social media, which many such organizations use to create a profile and engage with key audiences (such as supporters, journalists, and politicians). We combine insights from both literatures to examine how they might build recognition and engagement via social media (specifically Twitter).

From "Media Appearances" to "Audience Engagement"

Advocacy groups value the media as an important political arena and media strategies are commonly deployed to enhance advocacy efforts (Beyers, 2004; Binderkrantz, 2005). Such findings motivate the growing literature on group appearances in the mainstream media. Existing work on groups in the media has enumerated the distribution of appearances in newspapers, and on radio or television (Binderkrantz, 2012; Binderkrantz et al., 2017; Danielian & Page 1994; Thrall, 2006). The literature suggests that group appearances in the news are mediated by the conventions of journalism and news production (Bennett, 1990; Cook, 1998; Tiffen et al., 2014). As Binderkrantz et al. (2017) put it, "interest group access to the media largely depends on media preferences." Media professionals select groups as sources and mention

them in stories where they are viewed as legitimate, authoritative, and trustworthy (Thrall, 2006). By extension much previous empirical work has effectively been explaining variation in *journalistic* attention to groups. From there, we assume that once the activities and messages of a group are covered in mainstream media, other audiences such as policymakers and citizens will pay attention to this and possibly respond by taking a political initiative or deciding to join the group.

A variety of social platforms (think of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) are increasingly used by advocacy groups and nonprofit organizations (e.g., Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2013; Van der Graaf et al., 2016). In this study, we focus on a particular social media platform, namely Twitter. While this platform is most relevant given our focus on advocacy work (see also Guo & Saxton, 2014) and our specific research questions, the exclusive focus on Twitter means that we cannot address potential platform effects related to differences between social media platforms (for a discussion of differences in adoption and use of Facebook and Twitter, see Nah & Saxton, 2013; Van der Graaf et al., 2016).

As McGregor et al. (2017) explain, Twitter "provides a platform for the media, political actors, and the public to communicate while also providing fodder for their communication—information is simultaneously, yet differentially, relayed and received by all parties" (p. 155). Twitter is considered a key tool for political communication, as posts are visible to every user, and messages can be shared easily and spread quickly. Furthermore, the combination of hashtags and mentions facilitates the creation of issue-publics, and every user can follow other accounts without requiring permission from the owner (Colleoni et al., 2014, p. 3). Previous research has also demonstrated that core Twitter users do not engage in "broadcasting" and showed a great tendency to interact and engage with other users (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013); this platform also enables researchers to trace the interactions of specific segments of an audience with group communication.

Importantly, there is no journalist who functions as gatekeeper and chooses who gets attention and "appears." Instead, it is the attention of audiences that is limited. The task is for groups to *target particular* audiences, and make sure that their messages capture their attention, and have them *engage* with their message, implying that they provide a reaction or a response. Consequently, groups self-author or "appear" on a platform like *Twitter*. Yet, they then face the task of finding their audiences in the vastness of the Twitter-sphere. Whereas audiences might have a "go to" newspaper or media outlet, with journalists having already decided what sources (or in this case advocacy groups) matter, on Twitter audience members have direct access to a multitude and diversity of sources and choose themselves whom they follow and engage with.

A fundamental question is how group activities in the social media arena can be analyzed in a meaningful manner, and whether assumptions that have been applied to a context in which traditional media dominated are also valid in the new social media environment. Social media platforms open up new opportunities to examine these questions. These tools are cheap and unmediated, meaning that they potentially provide all groups with a useful means of building and fostering relationships with key

audiences, and "facilitate(s) an easy and continuous discourse free from the constraints of official (and unofficial) gatherings" (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013, p. 292). Rather than focusing on what drives journalists to view groups as reliable sources by enumerating appearances of groups in the news, we see great promise in plotting the extent to which different audiences on social media follow and engage with groups. We concur with Guo and Saxton (2018) that social media are "used for a variety of strategic purposes, yet the achievement of each purpose is dependent on the public paying attention to what the organization is saying." Therefore, we are suggesting that in the shift to social media data, scholars might pay attention to "audience engagement."

Which Audiences Do Groups Target on Twitter?

Advocacy groups generally seek to reach a variety of audiences. The phrase "target" implies that groups deploy platforms—like Twitter—to reach particular audiences (see also Guo & Saxton, 2018). In other words, we use target to recognize that groups often strategize over their communications activities and aim to ensure that key audiences pay attention to their (policy) messages.

In this regard, research has often stressed the distinction between a focus on members and a focus on policymakers (e.g., Ainsworth & Sened, 1993). Other scholars consider a broader range of audiences, including journalists and other public intermediaries (Berkhout, 2013). Social media potentially provides groups with a useful means of building and fostering relationships with *all* these audiences. More specifically, scholars have argued "social media allows interest groups to build communities and engage in direct conversations with their supporters in a personal and cost-efficient manner" (Van der Graaf et al., 2016, p. 2). Likewise, work on nonprofits has emphasized how Twitter facilitates interaction with a variety of stakeholders. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) refer to this as the second function in their hierarchy of engagement, "community," which involves "dialogue and community building," which emerges "when networks are developed and users can join in the conversation and provide feedback" (p. 350). In addition to membership or supporter-centered, such forms of communication might also be focused on political advocacy. Groups may well use Twitter to engage with legislators—which research has shown are themselves becoming increasingly active on the platform (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012)—or try to shape the media agenda by using Twitter to communicate toward and engage with journalists.

In the context of this article, we distinguish between three distinct *types of audiences*: elite audiences (which we consider to include policy makers and journalists), peer audiences (which we consider to be other advocacy groups), and mass audiences. This latter term refers to all other Twitter users that for some reason might engage with a particular group. While this would certainly include members and potential members, it also encompasses any other individuals and organizations that have a presence on Twitter.

Surprisingly, scholars have rarely asked advocacy groups why they see the media as important, and whom they seek to *target* via the mass media. The media is assumed

crucial as it provides a way to reach a variety of audiences—such as political elites, members, and the general public. While not often spelt out, we can see some rules of thumb emerge that might guide expectations. The existing literature on groups and the media tends to build expectations based on distinctions along group type. The rationale here is that each of these group types have different constituencies, and as a consequence, their organizational characteristics and behavior will also be different (e.g., Binderkrantz et al., 2014; Dür & Mateo, 2013). We follow the same approach, distinguishing between "business," "professional," and "citizen" groups (see Chand, 2017 for a similar distinction, focusing on nonprofit lobbying in the United States). Business groups represent interests of businesses and mostly have firms as members, Professional groups represent interests of professional groups, who organize individuals engaged in a specific trade (e.g., doctors, lawyers), and citizen groups represent social groups (e.g., based on their identity) or focus on a broader cause of public interest (e.g., environment). It is often assumed that groups representing citizens are more focused on agenda setting, interactions with journalist, and visibility in public arenas, as this is necessary to convince members or supporters to continue their subscription or give donations. Economic interests, such as business and professional groups, are assumed to possess higher levels of policy expertise, and therefore prioritize interactions with policymakers who are in need of tailored policy input. Below, we clarify these expectations in more detail and transpose them to the arena of social media.

First, it is often argued that groups see the media as a way to connect with policy elites—but indirectly through shaping public opinion. Media attention is assumed to raise issues up the governmental agenda and thus enhance the prospects of policy change (Kollman, 1998). Yet outside strategies—to which media tactics are said to belong—are often assumed to be the preserve of diffuse citizen interests (a "weapon of the weak"; Dür & Mateo, 2013). Second, it is argued that media coverage will assist in demonstrating to current and potential group members that the group is active on issues (Ainsworth & Sened, 1993; Berkhout, 2013). This is assumed a bigger issue for citizen groups, who draw support from the mass public and often rely on (financial) contributions from individuals (Binderkrantz, 2008).

In the social media realm, groups do not *need* to first convince journalists and newspaper editors of their value. Given the importance of media appearances and visibility to the organizational maintenance and political strategy of citizen groups, we expect that they target the mass public, members, and other groups more frequently than other possible audiences such as policymakers. Obar et al. (2012), for instance, note that groups value how social media help them in improving their outreach efforts. Several participants in their study emphasized how social media facilitates the creation of "awareness for organizational goals, messages and strategies," while they also noted the opportunities to increase their "visibility" and to "become part of wider conversations, not exist in a bubble." The growing literature on the use of Twitter by legislators leads others to surmise that groups might use the platform to engage with policy insiders directly (McGregor et al., 2017). In this regard, we expect business and professional groups to target elite audience, especially politicians and other policy makers, relatively more compared with citizen groups. Their political strategy

typically relies less on conflict expansion to the mass public, and they tend to focus more strongly on the governmental arena.

Evidence that journalists use Twitter as a source for generating and researching stories leads others to suggest that groups might primarily use the platform to try and shape the media agenda (Jungherr, 2014; Newman et al., 2016). As has been observed with respect to Twitter in the U.S. case, "Reporters of all types, including political journalists, increasingly rely on the platform and are often required to incorporate tweets into their coverage" (McGregor et al., 2017, p. 2). It stands to reason that groups would see engagement from political journalists as critical to both ensuring their issues are covered—and that their view point is reported. As scholars have claimed that many groups might see social media as simply another way to communicate with the news media, we expect all of them to target journalists (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016).

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Citizen groups target mass audiences (general public, members) and peer audiences (other groups) relatively more on Twitter than business and professional groups.
Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Business and Professional groups target elite audiences (i.e., policy makers) relatively more on Twitter than citizen groups.
Hypothesis 1c (H1c): All groups use social media to target journalists on Twitter.

Explaining Audience Engagement

In the previous sections, we clarified our expectations regarding which audience groups are likely to *target* with their communication efforts on Twitter, distinguishing elite, peer, and mass audiences. Here we shift our attention to the other side of the coin, namely the extent to which audiences actually engage with them. Here, engagement refers to what others have termed "public attention," namely extent to which multiple audience members (individuals and organizations) react to the messages sent by an organization on its social media platform(s) (Guo & Saxton, 2018, p. 6). Put another way, Twitter also enables us to assess the extent to which these different audiences respond to the messages of groups. By tracing the extent to which particular actors, such as journalists or policymakers, retweet or reply to the messages of groups (or mention their name—i.e., Twitter handle), we can assess and analyze to what extent these different audiences interact with groups in the Twitter-sphere.

In general, the group literature reports that journalists and editors pay attention to a small set of (mostly) economic groups, while the great majority of groups receive limited to no coverage, resulting in a highly skewed distribution of media attention (see Binderkrantz et al., 2017; Thrall, 2006). We transpose the expectations about journalists' "status judgments" onto elite audiences on Twitter: We assume them to be highly selective and strongly focused on particular group types. Thus, we expect that elite audiences—by which we refer to politicians and political journalists—make similar "status judgments" as journalists and news editors, and therefore we expect that they will engage more frequently with business and professional groups.

Different judgments might apply when considering engagement from other advocacy groups—what we refer to as *peer audiences.* The extensive work regarding the formation of coalitions offers insight into why groups might work together (Heaney & Lorenz, 2013; Hojnacki, 1997). One reason pertains to the particular societal interest that are being organized. Specifically, Hojnacki (1997) explains that "there is good reason to expect that groups representing social or public interests would be *more* inclined to engage in allied activity" (p. 70). These groups need to remain visible, yet often lack resources. Coalitions offer these groups a relatively low cost means of showing that they are active. Transposing this logic to the digital arena would imply that citizen groups also seek more connections with their (potential) allies on Twitter. In this article, we therefore expect that citizen groups are more likely to be engaged with by peers.

As regards engagement from the mass audience, we assume that these audiences do not make "status judgments." Considering that the mass audience on Twitter (even though not a representative sample of the general population[3]) is varied, we expect that citizen groups (who mostly advocate for diffuse interests) will more frequently be the focus of engagement by the mass audience, compared with business and professional groups (who mostly represent specific constituencies and therefore are likely to have a smaller attentive audience).

Hypothesis 2a: Elite audiences will engage more frequently with business and professional groups compared with peer audiences and mass audiences.
Hypothesis 2b: Peer audiences will engage more frequently with citizen groups compared with elite audiences and mass audiences.
Hypothesis 2c: Mass audiences will engage more frequently with citizen groups, compared with elite audiences and peer audiences.

Research Design and Data Collection

In this study, we explore the *use* of Twitter by groups, the audiences they *target*, and the *engagement* they receive from those audiences on Twitter. To identify our group population, we rely on the *Australian Interest Group* data set. The data set includes more than 1,300 national advocacy groups. We examine the Twitter use by these groups via two data collection processes: a survey and the collection of trace data on social media activity.

Group Survey

In 2015, the authors completed a survey of advocacy groups that are national in scope. The population surveyed drew from the *Australian Group Dataset*, which is an original data source compiled by the authors. The Australian Group Dataset includes all national membership organizations that are politically active, selected from the 2012 edition of the Directory of Australian Association (*n* = 1,353; for more background on the directory and establishment of the data set, see Fraussen & Halpin, 2016). Similar

directories exist in other countries, such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and have frequently been used to identify (sub)populations of nonprofit organizations (e.g., Johnson, 2014).

The Australian advocacy group sector comprises a variety of group types with a voluntary character, with economic interests having a numerical dominance and citizen groups being a minority, similar to group populations in many other democratic countries (e.g., Johnson, 2014). While in other countries a majority of groups have offices located in the national capital, in Australia, groups are spread between Canberra, Melbourne, and Sydney, a geographical diversity that is also observed in other federal systems such as Canada (see Fraussen & Halpin, 2016).

The political leadership of these groups (e.g., policy directors) was contacted to participate in an online survey, which contained questions concerning organizational structure, policy capacity, engagement with policymakers, and organizational agenda. It also included questions relating to the use of social media and Twitter. We received a completed survey from 373 organizations (a response rate of 28%): the distribution of respondents by group type was highly similar to the broader population. As discussed below, not all of our groups have Twitter handles. So, prior to our analysis of the full survey data set, we removed all groups that did not have a Twitter account. Of course, not all the groups with a Twitter handle completed our survey.[4] Thus, the data in the tables that follow are for this subset of our broader respondent population. We draw some of our independent variables for our multivariate analysis from this survey data set.

Twitter Data

Our social media data come from the newly created *Australian Groups on Twitter* data set. It includes all the groups in the Australian Group Dataset that had a Twitter handle at the start of our study period. The data were constructed by tracking the Twitter activity relating to the 668 Australian interest groups over a period of 12 months (from September 2015 to August 2016).[5] We used the "Twitter Analytics Service" of Uberlink to generate data sets constructed from *two categories of tweets*, which are (a) all tweets authored by these groups (original tweets, retweets, which are akin to forwarding a tweet authored by someone else, and so-called "quoted tweets," where additional text is added to a retweet) and (b) all tweets which are either retweets of tweets authored by the groups or tweets that mention or reply to the groups. A total of 4,340,891 tweets were collected during the 12 months; 425,354 of these tweets were authored by the advocacy groups (236,989 or 56% of these were original tweets). Twitter profile data (e.g., number of followers and number of tweets ever authored) are also available for every author of a tweet, at the time when it was authored.

Variables for Multivariate Analysis

Our dependent variable is *Audience Engagement.* We conceptualize engagement as the number of unique actors who have "retweeted," "replied," or "mentioned" a group

during the time window of our study. It is a measure of how much the audiences we focus on engage with the tweets issued by our groups. In network terms, this is the "number of unique ties-in" for each of our group Twitter seed accounts, parsed out by each of our audiences: All (Mass), Other Groups (Peer), Journalists (Elite), and Politicians (Elite). Our approach resonates with conceptualizations of retweets and replies in the nonprofit literature. As Guo and Saxton (2018) state, "retweeting amounts to a form of connection in that sharing a message is an implicit endorsement of the user who originally posted the message, forging a 'message tie' between the originator and disseminator (Saxton & Waters, 2014)" (p. 8). As regards replies, we concur that these messages are also aimed at specific audience members, and thus "reflect an organization's explicit attempts at dialogic conversation with a specific user or set of users (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012)" (Guo & Saxton, 2018, p. 7).

The variables that relate to organizational features were taken from the *Australian Group Dataset.* Our main independent variable of interest is group type. There is a very strong research thread highlighting group type as a pivotal factor in many facets of group behavior. Here we create three corresponding dummy variables: *Citizen Group*, *Business Group*, and *Professional Group*. We also control for a number of organizational features. There are plausible reasons to expect that variations in resources will shape the prospects of groups online. As is generally the standard in the field, given the difficulty in finding reliable budget data, this is measured as number of staff. The variable is transformed by taking the log, as it is not normally distributed.

We also take into account the substantive policy focus of the group. To empirically assess policy identity among our groups, we coded the content of the tweets for each account into policy areas using the Lexicoder Topic Dictionary (Albaugh et al., 2013).[6] The code scheme provides a basis for allocating policy issues into 28 discrete policy areas, utilizing the Policy Agendas code scheme (see Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Of the 236,989 original tweets authored by the advocacy groups, 40% were assigned to at least one policy topic (we refer to these as policy relevant tweets).[7] Consistent with the literature on categories and identity, we measure the extent to which each group constructs an identity *across* categories. We utilize the standard measure within organizational social science to assess the complexity of an organizations identity, namely *niche-width* (Negro et al., 2010, 1412). The first step in calculating niche-width is determining the Grade of Membership (GoM) of each group in each category (for a given time period), which in our context is the proportion of tweets that were coded and assigned to a particular policy category. Niche-width is then calculated as one minus the sum of the square of the GoMs across all policy categories (see Negro et al., 2010).[8] Applied to our data, the niche-width measure captures whether each group has a simple or complex identity, and thus focuses on a small or large number of policy areas. The scores range from 0 to 1, with a more complex identity receiving a higher score.[9]

As regards variation in social media activity, not all groups will author the same number of tweets, have the same number of followers, or have been on Twitter for the same length of time. It is plausible that this will shape the overall engagement that groups receive from key audiences (see also Guo & Saxton, 2018). Thus, it is

Table 1. Groups With Twitter Accounts, by Type.

	Twitter handle?		
Type	Yes	No	Total
Business			
Freq.	235	304	539
Percent	34.81	45.92	40.31
Citizen			
Freq.	254	153	407
Percent	37.63	23.11	30.44
Professional			
Freq.	186	205	391
Percent	27.56	30.97	29.24
Total			
Freq.	675	662	1,337
Percent	100.00	100.00	100.00

important that we control for this variation in our models. Consistent with norms in the field, we measure the level of Twitter activity as the number of *coded* tweets authored by each account (see Van Aelst et al. 2016). Furthermore, we measure the number of years a group's account has existed, and include a count variable of number of account followers, which is considered a valuable indication of a group's social media capital (see Guo & Saxton, 2018). Both variables are transformed by taking the log, as they are not normally distributed.

Table 1 reports the distribution of groups, by group type, across those with Twitter accounts, those without, and the general population. In percentage terms, citizen groups are somewhat overrepresented in the set of groups that do have a Twitter account, and business and professional groups somewhat underrepresented.

What Audiences Do Groups Target on Twitter?

Whereas previous research points to the relevance of multiple audiences that can be targeted online, such as political elites or the general public, existing work has not had suitable data that enable a direct and systematic assessment of this question. To fill this gap, we asked groups in our survey to indicate how frequently they sought to target different audiences via Twitter (see Table 2).[10] We ask about six different audiences that all have the potential to be relevant to groups: the general public and members (mass audiences), (other) advocacy groups (peer audiences), journalists, government officials and Members of Parliament (MPs; elite audiences). If a group indicates that it very often/always targets a specific audience, we consider it to *target* that particular audience. Around 60% of all groups see members and the public as being very often/ always, the audience they seek to reach on Twitter. For journalists and other groups,

Table 2. How Frequently Do Groups Seek to Reach Different Audiences on Twitter?

	Frequency to reach on Twitter?					
Audience	*Never*	*Rarely*	*Sometimes*	*Very often*	*Always*	Total
Public						
Freq.	8	18	56	56	58	196
Percent	4.08	9.18	28.57	28.57	29.59	100
Members						
Freq.	10	16	46	47	77	196
Percent	5.1	8.16	23.47	23.98	39.29	100
Groups						
Freq.	19	29	65	64	17	194
Percent	9.79	14.95	33.51	32.99	8.76	100
Journalists						
Freq.	19	33	68	53	23	196
Percent	9.69	16.84	34.69	27.04	11.73	100
Govt official						
Freq.	32	64	70	24	5	195
Percent	16.41	32.82	35.9	12.31	2.56	100
Members of Parliament						
Freq.	30	52	70	36	9	197
Percent	15.23	26.4	35.53	18.27	4.57	100

Note. Totals by audience (last column) vary between 194 and 197 as a handful of groups did not tick all boxes in the survey.

this figure is around 40%. Furthermore, we find that 15% of groups target government officials and 23% target MPs, "very often" or "always" on Twitter.

While we expect most groups to target several audiences, we expect considerable variation among different group types as regards the particular audiences they prioritize. Based on assumptions related to organizational imperatives (such as the need or objective to mobilize citizens), we expected that citizen groups were more likely to target the mass public, members, and other groups on Twitter (H1a), compared with business and professional groups, who would more strongly target policy makers (H1b). We surmised that all groups would target journalists given that research suggests they use Twitter as a way to generate attention for their topics of concerns in the news (H1c).

In Table 3, we report the audiences that the groups in our survey target, distinguishing between group types. Members and the general public seem to be targeted at the same high level by all group types, although the public is targeted slightly more by citizen groups, and members more so by professional and business groups (the *p* values are a long way from significant for these two audiences). This provides mixed support for H1a. This does make sense in that citizen groups typically adopt an "open" approach to membership (they have more diffuse and open membership), whereas

Table 3. Audiences Targeted, by Group Type.

Audience	*p* value		Group type			Total
			Business	Citizen	Profession	
Public	.34	Freq.	43	40	31	114
		Percent	59.72	63.49	50.82	58.16
Members	.23	Freq.	48	34	42	124
		Percent	65.75	54.84	68.85	63.27
Groups	.06	Freq.	29	33	19	81
		Percent	39.73	53.23	32.2	41.75
Journalists	.28	Freq.	33	24	19	76
		Percent	45.21	38.10	31.67	38.78
Gov. officials	.14	Freq.	15	5	9	29
		Percent	20.55	8.20	14.75	14.87
MPs	.06	Freq.	23	13	9	45
		Percent	31.51	20.63	14.75	22.84

Note. "Targeted" is defined as when a group seeks to reach that audience very often/always on Twitter. The *p* values are estimated for differences in targeting audiences by group type (χ^2).

professional and business groups tend to be closed (they have thresholds for membership [specific selection criteria] and often represent a rather specific constituency).

The differences are more outspoken for the other audiences. For instance, citizen groups seem to see peer audiences (other groups) as more important audiences, compared with other group types (and here the *p* value is close to an acceptable level of significance). This provides some support for H1a. Interestingly, business groups appear more likely to target journalists, government officials and MPs, compared with other groups. This latter finding is remarkable. Given the media's role in socializing conflict (Kollman, 1998), it is argued that media is more often a "weapon of the weak." Yet, our results show the citizen groups are less likely to prioritize interaction with elite audiences online, compared with business and the professions (support for H1b). While our expectation was that all groups would target journalists equally (H1c), our analysis shows significant differences between group types.

Using Digital Trace Data to Assess Which Audiences Engage With Groups on Twitter

To examine which key audiences engage with advocacy groups, we move from our survey data to our Australian Interest Groups on Twitter data set. How can we conceptualize and measure "online engagement"? There is no clear consensus on how to deduce "engagement" by audiences with accounts on Twitter. Some have sought to distinguish between activity—and visibility—related measures, where something like "retweets" is a considered a measure of "visibility" because it "acts as a measure of the extent to which other users have replied to or mentioned the user" (Bruns & Sieglitz,

Table 4. Levels of Engagement With Groups on Twitter by Key Audiences.

Engagement (Count)	All (Mass)		Other groups (Peer)		Journalists (Elite)		Politicians (Elite)	
	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent
0	6	0.89	207	30.85	538	80.18	416	62
1	3	0.45	101	15.05	58	8.64	85	12.67
2–9	39	5.81	264	39.34	68	10.13	138	20.57
10–19	42	6.26	58	8.64	6	0.89	24	3.58
>20	581	86.59	41	6.11	1	0.15	8	1.19
Total	671	100	671	100	671	100	671	100

2013, p. 6; see also Margetts et al., 2016). Some have, for instance, discussed "popularity" of Twitter accounts, referring to this in the context of MPs as a measure of "success" (Van Aelst et al., 2016, p. 5). Here a distinction is made between a measure like "followers," which is considered as "long-standing popularity" given that accounts grow followership over extended periods, and "retweets," "favorites," "replies," or "mentions," which are seen as indicative of "message popularity." Related, work on nonprofits has highlighted the community-oriented nature of retweets, as they create connections and seek to stimulate conversation (Guo & Saxton, 2018; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). In our study, we conceptualize engagement as the number of unique actors who have "retweeted," "replied," or "mentioned" to a group.

In this section of the article, we distinguish between four audiences that matter to groups: the general public, other groups, political journalists, and legislators.[11] Furthermore, we conceptualize these as three *types of audiences*, which we expect to approach engagement with groups differently: *elite audiences, such as political journalists and legislators*, the *mass public* and *peer audiences* (which in this context refers to other advocacy groups). To parse out these audiences, we collected the Twitter account details of the Canberra Press Gallery (the set of political journalists who focus on national political reporting, $n = 179$), the members of the Australia Parliament (House of Representatives and Senate, $n = 195$), other groups (all the other groups with a Twitter account from our *Australian Interest Group* data set, $n = 668$). We also retain the category of "All," which includes total engagement by all other actors in the entire Twitter-sphere.

The level of audience engagement—expressed as counts of a group's authored messages being "retweeted," "replied," or "mentioned"—by each of our audiences is presented in Table 4. Our findings show that in terms of engagement by "All" accounts, almost all groups have some kind of engagement online. Indeed, the average group has 779 individual instances of engagement with this audience on Twitter over the period of our data collection. However, for most groups, generating engagement with other key audiences is seemingly a difficult task. Our findings show that 69% of groups have some level of engagement with other groups, whereas only 38% of groups have engagement with politicians, and 20% of groups have engagement with journalists.

Very few groups have frequent interactions with these key audiences on Twitter. For instance, in the cases of journalists, only 1% has more than 10 interactions, whereas for politicians this number amounts to 5%. This count of engagement on Twitter, for each of these distinct audiences, constitutes the dependent variable in the multivariate analysis that follows.

What Explains Variations in Audience Engagement?

Table 5 presents the results of our multivariate analysis using the count of engagement by these four audiences as our dependent variable. Given that we are dealing with overly dispersed count data, we estimate negative binomial regression models of each of our four measures. We regress these measures of engagement against three sets of variables related to organizational attributes, policy identity, and Twitter profile. We utilize observations for all national interest groups for which we have complete information on all variables of interest. However, we remove groups who have not issued more than 50 policy-relevant tweets in our time period, which leaves us with 332 groups.[12] We apply this threshold to have a meaningful assessment of the policy identity of the groups. To provide an accurate picture of the online identity of a group (and its more specialist or generalist nature), it seems advisable to base this measures on regular activity on Twitter (say at least 4–5 tweets per month).

We see a range of effects from group type across our models. Citizen groups gain more engagement from the broad Twitter-sphere or the mass public ("All") and peer audiences ("other groups") at statistically significant levels compared with our reference category of business groups. This seems to meet our expectations (H2b and H2c). Yet, we find that this is reversed in respect to journalists: citizen groups receive significantly less engagement from media audiences than business groups (confirming H2a). This particular finding—and indeed our expectation H2a—goes against the expectation that citizen groups have a stronger presence in "outside" arenas, such as mainstream and online media. Yet, it is in line with our survey findings on their strategic intentions, which indicated that a greater proportion of business groups targeted journalists on Twitter, compared with citizen groups. It also fits the growing evidence that all group types frequently use media strategies (Binderkrantz, 2005). Interestingly, professional groups receive less engagement than business groups across the board—with results not statistically significant for "other groups" audience. In this respect we see no support for H2a as it relates to professional groups.

The effect of staff size is positive and significant across all audiences, except the mass public. This suggests that for this diffuse audience, the underlying organizational capacity of the group is not salient to the attention they pay to groups. By contrast, for elite and peer audiences (which could be considered "professional users" or Twitter users with a high level of political engagement and interest), their propensity to engage is shaped by the level of resources of the group. Put another way, it may well be "off-line" group attributes, such as the organizational capacity of a group, that lead elite audiences to engage with groups on Twitter. We reason here that such

Table 5. Negative Binomial Regression: Audience Engagement as Dependent Variable.

Variable Name	All (Mass)	Other groups (Peer)	Journalists (Elite)	Politicians (Elite)
Policy identity				
Niche-width	0.224 (0.21)	−0.634* (0.28)	0.448 (0.71)	0.296 (0.50)
Organizational				
Business group	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Citizen group	0.299*** (0.09)	0.364** (0.12)	−0.814** (0.26)	−0.071 (0.18)
Professional group	−0.232* (0.09)	−0.200 (0.13)	−1.755*** (0.35)	−1.287*** (0.24)
Staff (ln)_com	0.004 (0.03)	0.109** (0.03)	0.171* (0.07)	0.127* (0.06)
Twitter profile				
No tweets (ln)	0.441*** (0.05)	0.397*** (0.06)	0.362** (0.13)	0.416*** (0.10)
Followers (ln)	0.702*** (0.03)	0.440*** (0.05)	0.649*** (0.14)	0.416*** (0.10)
Yrs on Twitter	−0.046 (0.03)	−0.161*** (0.04)	−0.136 (0.10)	−0.043 (0.07)
Constant	−1.447*** (0.28)	−2.915*** (0.42)	−6.992*** (0.98)	−4.845*** (0.75)
lnalpha/constant	−0.912*** (0.07)	−0.641*** (0.11)	0.504* (0.21)	0.333* (0.14)
R^2	.1172	.1065	.1264	.0897
BIC	4,712.4	1,863.9	714.5	1,221.7
N	332	332	332	332

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

audiences follow and engage with groups that they consider prominent, and they gauge their likely value by their offline characteristics. In that sense, this supports the claims by others that social media do not seem to constitute a "weapon of the weak" (van der Graaf et al., 2016; Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino, 2017). Obviously, this tentative explanation would require additional data to establish, which we do not possess in this current data set.

As regards policy identity, we know from previous work that most advocacy groups are interested in multiple policy areas, yet when it comes to visible lobbying activity they tend to focus on a single or a small number of policy areas (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). In our present context, this implies that tweeting too broadly means key audiences will simply not be able to detect a group's relevance to them. We expected that groups that forged a narrow issue identity online (i.e., tweeted on a small number of topic areas) would yield more engagement (especially from insider audiences, such as other groups, journalists, and legislators). However, we see limited impact for our measures of online issue identity. The exception is for the peer audience, where we see confirmation of our expectation that the broader the policy identity, the less engagement the group received from other groups.

Finally, as one might have expected, the basic Twitter profile of the groups has an impact on the audience engagement they receive. The number of tweets and number of Followers has a positive and significant effect on variations in audience engagement on Twitter. This effect is in place regardless of audience. We see a negative effect—but mostly not significant—for the number of years on Twitter for all audiences.

Conclusion

The use of social media—and in particular Twitter—by key political agents justifies scholarly attention. In respect of advocacy groups, research has hitherto mostly focused on the adoption and use of platforms like Twitter. In this article, we contribute to and extend this new line of research by asking what audiences groups seek to *target* on Twitter and using digital trace data to examine whether key audiences actually *engage* with groups. Specifically, we focused our attention on audiences that are generally considered important to advocacy groups.

Our contribution is threefold. First we take an initial step in conceptualizing group media strategy and access in the social media context. Whereas previous studies have asked how groups get into the news, we instead explore how groups use social media—like Twitter—to target and engage with key audiences, and formulate some basic hypotheses as to what we might expect. This conceptual focus on targeting, engagement, and audiences provides a sound foundation for future work.

Second, we take forward the nonprofit and group literature on use of social media from a focus on whether or not groups use specific platforms, to a focus on whether—using social trace data—they gain attention on such platforms, and from whom. There has been little exploration as to precisely which specific audiences these organizations

seek to target on social media, and whether these particular audiences actually engage with advocacy groups in the online arena. We fill this gap, and in so doing offer a methodology for future work.

Third, our substantive findings highlight the importance of distinguishing the different audiences that groups target and reach in their online communication. They indicate that groups aim to reach multiple audiences through Twitter, including not only their members, but also the mass public, other groups, and journalists. Somewhat surprisingly, business groups indicated a stronger preference for targeting elite audiences such as journalists and MPs, compared with citizen groups. Furthermore, while all groups receive some level of engagement on social media, engagement from elite audiences such as politicians and journalists is much harder to obtain. While citizen groups were more successful in obtaining engagement from mass and peer audiences, journalists were more likely to engage with business groups. Compared with citizen groups and business groups, professional groups were least likely to receive online engagement from these audiences.

Our approach has some obvious limitations. While our survey question indicated that communication with members is a key objective for most groups, we could not assess to what extent they reach members through their Twitter messages. The "All" category we utilize no doubt is predominantly the mass online public, but also includes members and other audiences. Parsing this down to locate the group membership was not possible given our approach. Future work might involve cooperation with groups to monitor and experiment with the levels of engagement with members through social media.

Furthermore, we present data from a single country, which raises the question as to whether our findings transfer beyond Australia, which is typically characterized as a more pluralist system of interest intermediation (e.g., Bloodgood et al., 2014). The answer is we do not know, and clearly comparative work is welcome. Yet, to the extent that use of platforms is similar to the Australian experience—and that seems likely based on other work (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016; Van der Graaf et al., 2016)—we have clear reasons to expect these broad findings to hold to other western democratic systems. Above all, in democratic settings, the audiences we examine will matter similarly, which leads us to surmise equivalent findings. Obviously, institutional variations—particularly in legislative context (where individual candidates have more autonomy from parties) and media (we think here of media system differences; see Aalberg et al., 2010)—might vary the degree to which audiences would see groups as worth engaging with. As such, future work would take our broad framework and explore it across multiple countries utilizing a most-different systems design, which would enable these considerations to be tested.

Authors' Note

An earlier version was presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting in San Francisco, Ca. (2017). Authors all contributed equally and are listed in reverse alphabetical order.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The paper is part of the AUS_IG project funded by the Australian Research Council grant [DP140104097] to Professor Darren R. Halpin at the Australian National University. More details can be found at http://interestgroupsaustralia.com/.

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Notes

1. Note that we use the terms “advocacy group” and “group” interchangeably.
2. In the Australian context, the tax authorities define NFPs as “. . . an organisation that is operating for its purpose and not for profit or gain (either direct or indirect) of its individual members.” Importantly, it further notes that most sporting and recreational clubs, community service organizations, *professional and business associations* and social organizations are considered NFPs (ATO 2020, italics added). It is also important to note that many legal structures are possible for NFPs in Australia, including unincorporated associations, incorporated associations, and companies.
3. In Australia, approximately 28% of individuals are on Twitter. Research shows that men, those living in urban areas and young people, are overrepresented among Twitter users (Roy Morgan Research, 2016).
4. Of the 373 completed survey responses, 203 had a Twitter handles and are thus in our survey-based Twitter data set.
5. This period covers the preceding 10 months and the subsequent 1-month period around the Australian Federal election (held July 2, 2016).
6. See details at http://www.lexicoder.com/download/
7. Scrutiny of a sample of unallocated tweets confirmed that these are not policy-related texts.
8. This conceptualization is consistent with a view of the space being partitioned by organizations as identity-space rather than resource-space (see the discussion in Halpin, 2014, Chapter 7). This was calculated in Stata using, Gen niche-width=1-(t_aboriginal_prop^2 + . . . t_transportation_prop^2).
9. As discussed above, for a group to be said to associate themselves with a policy topic they have to tweet into that topic 3 times or more across the time period.
10. The question was phrased as follows: “To what extent do you seek to reach the following audiences through Twitter?”
11. In the survey, we also distinguish between government officials and members. However, it was not possible to identify Twitter accounts that belonged to members of these two audiences, so we cannot assess their engagement using trace data.
12. Tweets that could not be related to a particular policy field were considered non-policy relevant.

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