WEBSITES AS CIVIC TOOLS FOR ADVOCACY: AN EXAMINATION OF TWO CANADIAN ADULT LITERACY SITES

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Abstract

This research study explores how web-based technologies might enhance the ways in which not-for-profit adult education organizations engage in advocacy practices in the field of literacy education. Using postmodern policy analysis as a framework, it examines the affordances and limitations of the web-based tools used by two national literacy organizations in Canada, considering how civic agency and advocacy are represented, mediated, and discursively constructed. Discussion of narrative framing, persuasive technologies, and policy tactics offers potential insights into conceiving of how knowledge-dissemination and civic participation can be advanced in new ways. The paper concludes by exploring how particular online engagement strategies might advance the advocacy and policy work of these organizations, and more effectively realize literacy education goals.

Résumé

Cette étude de recherche explore comment les technologies à base de web pourraient améliorer les voies dont les organisations sans but lucratif de l'education des adultes se livrent aux pratiques de plaidoyer dans le domaine de alphabetisation des adultes. En utilisant l'analyse de politique post-moderne comme un cadre, il examine l'affordances et des restrictions des instruments à base de web utilisés par deux organisations Canadien de alphabétisation, en réfléchissant comment l'agence civique et le plaidoyer sont représentés, négociés et construits discursivement. La discussion d'histoire que les technologies encadrantes, persuasives et la tactique de politique offrent des pénétrations potentielles dans le fait de concevoir de comment la diffusion de connaissance et la participation civique peuvent être avancés de nouvelles façons. Le papier se termine en explorant comment les stratégies d'engagement en ligne particulières pourraient avancer le plaidoyer et le travail de politique de ces organisations et réaliser plus efficacement des buts de alphabétisation.

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Introduction

The field of educational policy studies has undergone some radical shifts and is moving away from formalized, rationally oriented models of decision-making. Recent studies have emphasized the social, political, and cultural complexity and the processes of engagement, including the central role of discourse(s) in influencing and/or shaping policy fields. Indeed, Ball (2006) argues that policy analysts must be sociologists and ethnographers of policy so consideration can be given to the interactions and tensions between social/cultural/political conditions and the discourses/texts that inform policy practices (p. 4). An emphasis on practices speaks to the complexity and social situatedness of policy work and a need to acknowledge the multiple and competing locations and spaces in which policy work is situated and policy agendas are played out.

The advent of the Internet and a subsequent focus on its civic potential (Anderson & Cornfield, 2003; Berman & Mulligan, 2003; Dartnell, 2006) offers another discursive space from which to consider how the complexities of policy are enacted and practised. In particular, this emphasis on civic potential offers a lens into how such policy texts might serve to advocate for or influence policy agendas and political decision-making. Of particular interest to this study are the ways in which a website and new media and social networking tools might either enable or constrain the work of an advocacy-based organization in its efforts to influence or shape public policy in adult literacy. Given the long history of adult educators as advocates for educational opportunity as a means for achieving emancipatory outcomes, the ways in which such policy advocacy roles might be enhanced through new communicative technologies is an important area for deeper inquiry and study. The very successful use of new media platforms by the Barack Obama presidential campaign serves as a very recent example of the dramatic potential of web-based tools for efficiently informing, mobilizing, and managing supporters (Haynes & Pitts, 2009; Norquay, 2008; Talbot, 2008).

There are important questions to consider in thinking about websites as policy texts. For example, if advocacy groups have taken up the new web-based communications and networking technologies and put them to use as tools for policy action, what are the possibilities and constraints of these technologies? Specifically, in what ways do the affordances of web-based texts enable or constrain policy work? And how might discursive analysis—that is, analysis focused on how particular texts convey, shape, or reproduce particular meanings—enable an alternative way to consider practices of advocacy and conceptions of agency?

In this collaborative research paper, we intersubjectively explore these questions by examining two national NGO websites devoted to the issue of adult literacy: ABC Canada and Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL). Adult literacy was chosen as an important policy field to examine due to its historical importance as a policy matter, but also because of the recently released (2007) Statistics Canada report that highlights the

marked decrease in adult participation in literacy initiatives in Canada.[1] Both ABC Canada and MCL focus on policy and programs that support adult and workplace literacy; their mandates also include advocacy work at the federal and provincial level. Tracing how advocacy is represented, conceptualized, and supported on these organizations' websites will provide a useful backdrop and context for thinking about how new policy texts may emerge in the context of Web 2.0.

Acknowledging Political Contexts and Organizational Limitations

Before beginning our discussion, however, we want to make clear that despite our focus on the possibilities for advocacy afforded through these organizations' websites, we have not considered the other forms and actions of advocacy these important literacy organizations pursue through more traditional forms of elite-to-elite representative forms of advocacy, and their successes in these arenas. We also note that both agencies have different capacities for generating funding, and, as a result, have differing capacities for investing in new technologies. Further, we want to acknowledge that in these times, advocacy efforts are not always appreciated; for example, MCL's direct and rigorous advocacy nearly resulted in its funding being pulled by the federal Conservative government. As well, ABC Canada, as a not-for-profit private sector charity organization, has a far greater capacity to generate funds that can be used for web-based tool design than does MCL. MCL, given its funding base, is forced to make difficult funding decisions that have likely resulted in its funding being directed to front-line literacy services rather than web-based advocacy tools.

Many readers of this journal will be aware of the massive funding cuts made by the federal government to national literacy organizations in 2006. As the National Adult Literacy Database's (NALD) *Brief to Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology* (2007) noted:

> Solid and comprehensive infrastructure support provides a vital foundation leading to improved resource availability and facilitation of practical applications of current research. Infrastructure support enables the engagement of the private sector in supporting literacy activities both financially and with in-kind donations, and raises awareness . . . In short, the supporting infrastructure serves as a track on which the literacy train carries the needed training to the learner in the most effective and cost-efficient manner possible. (pp. 5–6)

Additionally, like other scholars, we note the culture of funding fear (Ostrower & Stone, 2007) as a limitation on the forms and qualities of the policy advocacy taken up by many agencies—among them, literacy organizations such as those studied here. We draw attention to this funding crisis and the culture of funding fear in order to ensure that the type of e-advocacy we describe in this paper is not interpreted as a call for replacing vital government funding with private fundraising efforts, nor to redirect advocacy efforts into

1 The report notes that Canadians had the lowest level of adult participation in informal and formal education, and those with the lowest level of participation came from low literacy backgrounds. For more details, see http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/071012/d071012b.htm

exclusively web-based methods; rather, we seek to describe models that could expand the civic networks available for the vital advocacy work of Canadian literacy organizations, including ABC Canada and MCL.

This intersubjective qualitative research paper begins by providing a brief overview of the centrality of advocacy to the policy process, and how such notions of advocacy have been impacted by the advent of new media and Internet-related technologies. The paper then considers postmodern policy analysis, and discusses how this framework informs the approach we have taken. This is followed by a review of the methodology of the study and its findings, and we conclude by offering a brief discussion on potential implications. Readers should note that as a standard check on the interpretations and findings of this paper, the analysis of the ABC Canada and MCL websites was completed independently by the two authors. Price conducted his evaluation independent of McGregor's analysis of the websites utilizing the theoretical frames described. After the independent completion of their analyses, the authors met on a number of occasions to discuss, compare, and contrast their findings. The final analysis and conclusions are a collaborative reflection of an intensive intersubjective analytical process.

Background

An Advocacy Tradition

The tradition of literacy organizations in Canada suggests strong ties between conceptions of education as a public good and the work of educators, favouring approaches that characterize literacy educators not simply as pedagogues but as transformational change agents. Advocacy work is part of that tradition; as policy actors in federal and/or provincial jurisdictions, literacy organizations have sought to influence and shape policy decisions that determined how literacy program were to be developed, implemented, and funded. The first organization whose website was examined, ABC Canada, began its mission as "Canada's private-sector voice," and was launched in connection with International Literacy Day, September 8, in the International Year of Literacy in 1990, with the express purpose of "raising public awareness of the literacy cause, urging government, business and labour leaders to develop policies and practices to actively promote a literate adult population" (ABC Canada, 2008).

Social movements have also been organizing tools used to support adult literacy in Canada, as evidenced by the creation of organizations like the Canadian Association for Adult Education (founded in 1935) and World Literacy of Canada (founded in 1955), which helped establish MCL (founded in 1977), the second organization of interest in this study. MCL has been politically active in lobbying for a national approach to issues of literacy; for example, in the 1980s, MCL's Learner Action Committee actively sought to have a Canada Literacy Act passed in Parliament.

Advocacy and Policy Analysis

Advocacy is important work that requires a deeper understanding of how policy decisions are influenced or shaped through the application of power. Policy analysts have long

acknowledged the central role that organizations can play in setting policy agendas and working with government bureaucrats to design policy frameworks for government decision-makers. As such, they are credited with significant forms of influence as agenda setters and policy advisors (see, for example, Sabatier's 1988 seminal work in advocacy coalition theory).

Traditionally, policy analysts have portrayed the process of policy development as being a linear project in which policy actors (those who seek to influence policy directions) have emerged from agencies or organizations immersed in the day-to-day work of a particular policy field. In the case of this article, adult literacy organizations create formal texts with the intention of influencing decision-makers, including taking actions such as lobbying and producing policy papers, action plans, and briefs, all tools of what Stone (1988) describes as the "rationality project" (p. 4). Such rationally framed and linear models rely on institutional conceptions of power. By this we mean that organizations are seen to have capacity to influence decision-makers given their status and formal roles as service providers and agencies immersed in the work of literacy.

Alternatively, Stone (1988, 1997) asks us to consider how policy is really a matter of "strategically crafted argument," a process of creating narratives, texts, or discursive frames that seek to define the problem and persuade to a course of action. From the perspective of power, this model instead adopts Foucault's (1980) notion that power is productive—that is to say that it can be exercised in social and political spaces where interactions occur; at the same time, such a model posits that traditional practices of power can be resisted, although our subject positions and the interplay with and among other social actors must also be accounted for in such considerations. How such power can be conveyed discursively—through metanarratives or Discourses, or more locally produced discourses[2] (Gee, 1999)—becomes the central point of analysis for understanding how policy is understood and enacted. And in unpacking how these D/discourses operate within particular social and cultural locations, consideration should be given to how the affordances or features of the texts may either enable or constrain advocacy work. This discursive approach—one that focuses on the production of texts and their attributes and semiotic construction, as well as on how such texts are socially and culturally situated and how networks of power operate to privilege some texts or representations of policy—can be termed a postmodern approach to policy analysis.

Postmodern Policy Analysis

Postmodern approaches to policy analysis stress the discursive construction of identities and how policy texts mediate our understandings of ourselves and others in social, cultural, and political contexts (Schram, 1993). This conception of mediation is important in that it situates policy texts as tools that recursively construct and/or shape our subjectivities—including civic subjectivities (McGregor, 2007)—while simultaneously seeking to represent these understandings in politically meaningful ways that seek to influence other

2 As Gee (1999) notes, there is a difference between Discourse and discourses: the capital letter signifying those metanarratives that circulate broadly, and the lower case letter signifying more locally constructed discourses.

social actors. Conceptions of mediation invite us to think about the differences between the reproduction of social/political/cultural texts and their production, and to consider how some tools mediate more successfully than others in achieving political goals or outcomes. In other words, some civic tools enable the development of civically informed subjectivities among their users, while others limit or constrain how such agency might be exercised or understood. In the case of adult literacy policy work, then, enabling particular understandings about literacy and activating the agency of current and potential literacy advocates using web-based technologies could offer more effective forms of policy activism.

Discursive analysis, as described here, is an important feature of postmodern policy analysis. However, the discussion would be incomplete without attention to how both image and technological elements of the Web also shape and mediate meaning-making. How power operates discursively through texts, including the written and the visual, as well as intertextually—using interactive icons and linked texts—therefore becomes important work for the postmodern policy analyst interested in understanding how advocacy and influence operate.

The importance of the visual in today's ocularcentric society should not be underplayed. Kress (2003) posits that "the dominance of the mode of image and the medium of the screen [including web-based screens] ... will have profound effects on human, cognitive/affective, cultural and bodily engagement with the world, and on the forms and shapes of knowledge" (p. 1). The rise of new technologies and the predominance of new media in contemporary society have accelerated the understanding that communication and representation—processes of signification—can no longer be attributed only to written or spoken texts. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe, visual images have sign systems, or grammars, that signal to the reader of the image particular meanings, all of which are socially, culturally, and historically situated. These conceptions of image mean that the process of reading an image/photograph and/or video/film is:

> rich and complex and cannot be described simply in terms of "seeing" what is "there"; the visual field is organized for us and by us according to codes and conventions that give us an orientation, that allow for recognition as well as for active intervention in terms of meaning. (Peim, 2005, p. 73)

Why is this important to discussions of advocacy and its relationship to policy? Earlier we spoke to the notion of policy practices, arguing that the operationalizing of policy is always socially, politically, and culturally situated, problematizing the traditional policy science models of the past. By situating our analysis in sites of practice—such as in the operation of policy texts on a website—we open ourselves to better understanding the dynamic nature of policy representation, its relationship to reproduction of particular D/discourses, and its productive (that is to say, authentically interactive) qualities, and how the interplay of texts, discourses, and practices might shape advocacy efforts. Finally, such an approach also offers new insights into how engagement with processes of advocacy—the creation of civic subjectivities—is as important to policy work as the more structured or organized forms of lobbying and influence that have more typically been part of formal advocacy.

Conveying Policy Intentions: Narrative Forms

As the above discussion has suggested, postmodern policy analysis offers careful consideration of how meaning is constructed as key to the operation of policy practices. A central feature of such meaning-construction is the use of narratives or stories to convey particular understandings about policy effects or lack thereof. Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, and Vig (2000) consider this narrative construction using the conception of advocacy frames: a means of communicating policy so as to "seek to control how an issue ... [is understood and how it] is described or portrayed in the media" (p. 806). They suggest that some frames can have persuasive effects with audiences who view them, and that the persistence of the argument can be, at least in part, attributed to the power of the advocacy narrative (pp. 815–816). They go on to suggest that "some frames may map easily onto what is accessible to audiences" and conclude "that what news audiences bring to the exposure situation has an important influence on the impact of the frames they encounter" (pp. 819–820). Understanding the features of a policy narrative that may enhance the narrative's receptivity among particular audiences, therefore, becomes a matter of some interest to policy actors, particularly those who seek to advocate in particular fields of policy, such as literacy educators. This includes attention to the fields of the visual, the written, and other technological features that may contribute to how particular policy matters are characterized and interpreted.

Policy Narratives as Readerly or Writerly Texts

Roe (2006) argues in a similar fashion by suggesting that contemporary literary theory—including analysis of metanarratives and other discourses—provides the basis for how policy is discursively constructed and socially and culturally enabled. In particular, he draws upon Barthes's (1974) characterization of "readerly" or "writerly" texts; that is, how some texts invite readers' interpretation (a readerly text) while others are structured in ways that try to limit the scope of how the text is interpreted (a writerly text). His application of these ideas to the field of policy has important implications, particularly when one considers that advocacy work is a matter of influencing political actors. For example, should policy advocates such as the ones discussed in this article focus on creating readerly or writerly texts? A more readerly text would be one that better enables personal meaning-making, hence potentially shaping civic understandings and commitments to a matter of personal and/or public interest.

If we apply these notions of how policy is mediated through a range of policy texts and acts to construct both civic subjectivities and influence readings of policy texts, then the true work of advocacy is to create readerly, discursive texts (narratives). These texts can be shared and taken up among allies in order to interrogate or disrupt status quo representations of knowledge and the policy texts that maintain them in order to influence political action and outcomes in the broader public policy sphere, while simultaneously recognizing the complexity of how policy texts are taken up differently based on discursive position(s), histories, and subjectivities. An important outcome of such work suggests that these readerly policy texts act as mediational civic tools (McGregor, 2007) that may afford enhanced opportunities through which to actively enable the production of activist identities and concomitant civic commitments.

E-Advocacy: The Tools of Web 2.0

In this final section of background to this study, we want to review briefly the ways in which some scholars have considered the specific attributes of the Web or web-based technologies in order to comprehend how these features may supplement our understanding of how advocacy operates in such online sites. A website, when considered through the frame of postmodern policy analysis, needs to be understood as both a product of discursive enactment, shaped by competing policy discourses, and, in turn, a civic tool through which to shape or influence policy discourses and outcomes. This makes the study of the affordances (and constraints) of websites as policy tools of great interest to those in the role of advocacy and influence in policy arenas. It is, therefore, as important to consider that policy texts can illustrate how discourses and policy narratives are represented, and how they may enable new or altered forms of advocacy.

Fogg (1999) and King and Tester (1999) have argued that the attributes of some technologies are persuasive in that they have been designed to mimic certain social or cultural practices, making them acceptable forms of interaction that are then easily integrated into our daily lives. One example that Fogg (1999) uses in making this case is through the study of a specific interactive technology, the "HIV Roulette" kiosk, which allows people to "explore various options . . . and observe the results for themselves—a powerful way to persuade" (p. 28). Khaslavsky and Shedroff (1999) also argue that some technologies are seductive: "seduction involves a promise and a connection with the audience or user's goals and emotions . . . [and] seem to espouse values or allude to connections with what a person wants to have or to be" (p. 46).

The propositions of these scholars suggest that some affordances of technology—such as those that access our emotions or social/cultural habits—have implications as tools that help enable our construction as civic subjects, a topic broached earlier in this article. As such, these technological features or affordances have significant potential to mediate civic agency and enable the enactment of particular beliefs or understandings. For the organization that seeks to advocate, such tools are powerful means of generating political and social influence.

Berman and Mulligan (2003) lay out the four salient benefits of the Internet/web-based technologies to advocacy organizations: (1) they offer a way of creating a decentralized, flexible, and fast method of communication; (2) they permit instant global communication; (3) they are relatively inexpensive; and (4) they make allowances for both interaction and user control. They argue that the ability to customize features to match the goals of the advocacy organization is considerable. For example, an interactive site can afford a web visitor, based on his/her postal code, access to voting records, policy positions, and statements of a legislator. It can have inter-site connectivity, linking to blogs or petitions, as well as e-mail capability (pp. 78–81). These technological features also offer important tools for web-based policy groups, and the use of them can help realize advocacy goals.

The semiotics of how web pages are constructed and read are also important elements that need to be considered in understanding how meanings are transmitted through socially and culturally mediated symbols. Such analysis needs to consider not only which

discourses are represented or evidenced in the linguistic texts present, but also the aesthetic design elements and the ease of navigation, and how these grammars shape perception and reflect social norms, ideology, beliefs, and understandings. Web-based policy texts have the advantage of providing a platform from which many modes may be used: visual images, both still and video; podcasts of oral lectures, music, or other verbally represented texts; flash animation and streaming media technologies; hyperlinks, which can take a viewer to related locations like blogs or social networking utilities in order to evidence some point of discussion or to illustrate connectedness with other groups or organizations; and icons or textual links, which can connect layers of organizational analysis or documents so a range of ideas, issues, or activities can be easily accessed. Everett and Caldwell (2003) describe this connectivity as a type of "Digitextuality," a term designed to capture the ways in which multiple layers of texts, symbols, and interactive protocols serve as signifying practices. These signifying practices not only convey the differences between traditional and new media, but help illustrate how the shaping of subjectivities is accomplished in the framing of the policy issue around particular discourses. Digitextuality also emphasizes the interactive and emergent nature of how advocacy might work using web-based technologies; Berman and Mulligan (2003) studied such a process in tracing the success of the "paint the web black campaign." This was a decentralized, grassroots initiative in which web masters from across the United States set out to deliberately replace websites with black screens in an effort to protest a 1998 federal government website regulatory bill. Supplemented with an e-mail campaign as well as talk radio and print media coverage, the campaign was successful in defeating the regulation (p. 83). It is important to note here that the action emerged from online discussions—an affordance offered by its technological structure—as civic actors took up the tools afforded by the Web. There was no grand plan or centralized instruction to use a black screen as a symbol of the punishing regulatory effect of a government bill, yet this action demonstrates the ways in which advocacy and civic engagement emerge as both a product of the technology itself and the semiotic meaning construction of its readers. This emergent quality is as much a feature of the social and cultural situatedness of the act (in this case, a response to a proposed regulatory change) as it is the technology. It is the interaction between policy actors, technology and its affordances, and the social capital/power of various actors that generated these new trajectories of action. Digitextuality then, not only offers promise as a tool for communicating information necessary for advocacy work, but, as noted in the examples above, also provides opportunity for the production and enabling of civic agency through the production of readerly texts.

The Research Study: Analysis of Two Canadian National Literacy Sites as Policy Texts

We began this study by identifying all of the major literacy websites; this was accomplished by using the Canadian National Adult Literacy Database (www.nald.ca/litweb/nation/national.htm), which listed eight such sites. After examining each site and considering the descriptions of each organization's goals and purposes, we determined that only two of these could be truly considered as national in scope and had literacy advocacy as a central tenant of their work: ABC Canada and Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL). Importantly, as noted earlier in this paper, both organizations have a stated purpose and history of advocacy work in Canada on behalf of adult literacy policy.

In designing the analytical framework, we began by considering the work of Krehely and Montilla (2001), who had developed a framework for considering how non-profit organizations engage in advocacy work, including direct lobbying tactics, policy development, capacity-building among similar or related agencies, research (as a means of influencing), and communication of key messages as a way of public-positioning the organization and growing public support. Additionally, however, we considered how the website design, content, structure, ease of navigation, and social networking and media features might afford enhanced efforts in these categories, or if, indeed, the site's mode and forms of texts might offer new forms of advocacy. In doing so, we drew upon the theoretical positioning outlined earlier in this paper to consider the ways in which web-based texts might in fact enable or enhance advocacy as well as construct civic subjectivities. Bringing a discursive lens to these features, we also considered how these attributes might fit within a framework of either representing a readerly or a writerly policy text, as Roe (2006) suggested. Our goal was to illustrate how a writerly policy text might better promote a civic engagement genre rather than the more traditional policy text, one that might be better described as fitting within a classical rhetorical genre. Further, we considered the ways in which websites might reflect these differences, and offer an explanation of how the features of the policy site might enhance advocacy. The features we considered are contained in Table 1.

Table 1

Writerly and Readerly Policy Texts: Elements Compared[3]

Writerly policy texts: Classic rhetorical genre	**Readerly policy texts: Civic engagement genre**
1. Formal publication final goal	Publication a means to an end
2. Fixed texts to convey information	Texts invite continued activity, engagement
3. Archival and historical	Actions identified: future-oriented
4. Self-contained	Linked to other texts
5. Static	Hyperlinked or layered
6. Regulatory	Invites comment, strategic

3 This table was inspired by Rude's (2004) comparison between publication and social action genres from within the field of writing studies. Her table included items 1, 3, and 4; items 5 and 6 were modified from her original description. The other components were added. Finally, it is important to note that while this is presented as a table, its boundaries are less fixed than would otherwise be suggested by its binary frame.

7.	Formally prepared	May be formal or informal
8.	Discourse of science, empirical measures, instrumentally focused	Experiential narratives, emotive, politically and socially connected
9.	Policy systems: formal, direct practices of advocacy	Policy tactics: responsive, resistant, often in flux and open to redesign, including cyber forms
10.	Technology design: control of information author; usually one-way communication	Technology design: shared and/or by self-selected information flow; two-way communication
11.	Mode: written (most often), visual (usually conceptually crafted photos or illustrations); sometimes oral	Written, visual (usually narrative forms of photo and video) or oral
12.	Addresses specific audiences (most often local discursive communities)	Addresses multiple/new audiences (transnational discursive communities)
13.	Uses formal elements of visual design that mimic book/report-style written texts	Uses features of web technology to create playful texts

Finally, we examined each website to consider what dominant discourses were evident both in written and visual form, focusing particularly on representations of advocacy and literacy, and how features of the website either enhanced or supported these messages. Each of these elements (discursive analysis and web feature analysis) was placed on a data grid to facilitate the analysis of each website.

ABC Canada

ABC Canada's attractive, feature-filled website is professionally designed and includes many features of well-constructed websites (Hong & Kim, 2004; Kim & Stoel, 2004). The homepage for this non-profit collaborative of business, education, and labour leaders is well-composed, with lots of open space and bold, easy-to-notice links across the graphically attractive page header. The site's fundraising campaigns are prominently featured at the top and bottom of the homepage, along with a sidebar advertisement of the co-sponsored Family Literacy Day attempt at the Guinness World Record for the most children reading with an adult. It should be noted here that the site did not appear to be regularly updated, as evidenced during the period of analysis by the prominent advertisement of the long past Robert Munsch at Home contest that ended in December 2008. The use of photos of adults and children across the bottom of the homepage and as headers to links to the four major foci of the organization (e.g., adult literacy, workplace literacy, and family literacy, along with a picture and link promoting the annual Peter Gzowski Invitational golf tournaments for literacy fundraising) helps situate the work of the organization. A common textual and architectural layout with clean lines, fonts, and borders on a white background organizes the

written texts and makes them more readable. The site's sidebar is well-organized, appears on all opened site pages, and includes prominent links that allow readers and interested supporters to sign up easily for RSS feeds (basically short news alerts), the electronic newsletter *Literacy at Work*, and ABC Canada's Facebook group, which currently has just under 300 members. The sidebar also includes links to ABC Canada's official media releases and a YouTube portal to its current public service announcement video—a professionally produced video with high production values. The sidebar also contains a prominent and inviting link to ABC Canada's current strategic plan in the form of a well-designed PowerPoint presentation. Each of the page links across the top of the homepage have independent heading links that make navigation of the site intuitive and easy. These links are organized to include three consistent and important components for users looking for facts, research, and resources.

Throughout the ABC website, many words and phrases are hyperlinked in red to other related topics and themes. Virtually all linked pages, however, are the product of ABC Canada's web master; only the very occasional link was to other organizational sites, most notably the Learn Campaign, where the role of ABC Canada is highlighted. As a result, we can call this website more of a closed than an open design model. It may be that such design features are meant to keep readers engaged in the substantive and important work of ABC Canada, and that the website is seen as a tool for building specific alliances to this specific literacy organization rather than to the broader literacy movement in Canada.

Readerly or writerly design?

In the main, ABC Canada's website is more of a writerly than readerly text. Several features support this conclusion: for example, the ways in which the site is designed to engage its readership in advocacy or material support for the organization and its programs are more prevalent than those features that might engage readers in more focused advocacy work in the area of literacy. Viewers are invited to donate funds; sign up for programs; purchase ABC publications; sign up for newsletters, the ABC Facebook group, or RSS feeds that are organizationally created; or enter contests like the past ABC Canada-sponsored Family Literacy Day, which boasted an impressive 104,000 documented participants nationally, or the 2008 Munsch at Home contest. All interactions are controlled by the website's design, which does not invite the creation of new texts or narratives about literacy (with the very notable exception of the linked Facebook group), but instead reinforces the key messages of the organization and its work.

In relation to the advocacy features that Krehely and Montilla (2001) describe, direct lobbying tactics and policy development are not overtly supported; however, capacity-building among similar or related agencies was in evidence on the site. The site does contain links to ABC Canada research as a means of influencing policy decisions. In its website, ABC Canada frames its advocacy work within what it refers to as awareness-raising, and defines its organizational mission as "we incite debate, raise public awareness, convene leaders, and drive meaningful change in literacy policy and practice" (ABC Canada, 2008.

In great evidence is what Krehely and Montilla (2001) call the communication of key messages as a way of public-positioning the organization. One cannot help but be convinced by the volume of program-related work represented on this website that ABC Canada is prominently involved in high-profile work in the fields of adult, workplace, and family literacy, with a primary focus on workplace literacy among adults. A number of written narratives about the work of ABC support these claims, as well as contemporary written narratives titled "Profiles in Learning," which are designed to illustrate the power of literacy in changing the lives of Canadians without basic literacy skills. Indeed, advocacy narratives are strongly focused on how individuals can alter the economic and social contexts of their workplaces, families, and communities through philanthropically (morally) framed service.

Also evident are the national/international Discourses of individual rights and human resource development, the predominant perspective promoted by organizations such as the OECD, in which notions of literacy have been narrowed to ones of instrumentalism and vocationalism (Hamilton, Macrae, & Tett, 2001, p. 31). Such models of literacy are "driven by a market ideology and vision of the needs of global economic competitiveness" (p. 36) rather than embracing "the central role of culture and relationships of power in determining literacy needs and aspirations" (p. 24). The program descriptions, organizational goals, and visual and written texts support these discourses. Yet given the dominance of this Discourse in popular culture and literacy debates in Canada and other OECD countries, the use of these market-driven conceptions about literacy may be viewed as a means to an end, with the ultimate organizational goal being the ability to keep engaging with disenfranchised communities and designing programs that meet their identified needs.

Movement for Canadian Literacy

The Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) website is much less sophisticated than ABC Canada's in its design features and in the way it takes advantage of the attributes of the Web: it is more of a written text-based knowledge-sharing tool. A few icons are used as markers to identify the organization symbolically, largely through the use of the black and red pencil that appears on each page. Very simple graphics, such as clip art available through Microsoft Word, are occasionally inserted on newsletter pages that are then posted on the website. It is a well-organized and easily navigable site, with hyperlinks serving to connect the elements of the website easily for users. On the homepage, nine red bullets are prominently featured down the left side of the page, drawing attention to the primary activities of this organization, including government relations and literacy action (both functions of advocacy), as well as sections for literacy learners, statistical information, and members of MCL.[4]

This written text-based format fits within the practices of early adopters of electronic forms of communication, who typically use web-based technologies as a way of organizing and advocating on behalf of their policy interests (Cukier & Middleton, 2003, p. 107). This is in contrast to the more technologically sophisticated and more expensive to produce and host website of ABC Canada.

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4 These pages were not reviewed for this paper as they were password-protected.

Readerly or writerly design?

MCL's website also represents more of a readerly than writerly text, although on a continuum of "readerly-ness" it appears to more frequently seek to find ways to invite its readership into the work of the organization. It does this in several ways: first, by openly acknowledging its coalition roots—directly on its homepage—and the purpose of that coalition work, which is to advocate publicly for literacy. Secondly, a central focus of the website's purpose is to provide access to resources, documents, reports, kits, and other strategically focused policy tools so that its readers can take up the discourses of advocacy for literacy. Several examples serve to illustrate this: literacy action day, scheduled annually, is an event organized by MCL for the purpose of directly lobbying federal politicians on the importance of literacy and, in particular, on the need for a national strategy for literacy. Other policy tools are an electoral voting kit that includes specific questions for addressing matters of literacy for those seeking election, as well as a series of white papers that set out policy options for decision-makers to consider in developing/supporting literacy activities at the national level.

However, all of these actions fit within the realm of the strategic; that is to say, they rely on traditional forms of advocacy, such as direct lobbying, electoral planning, and policy papers, as the tools through which to influence public-policy decision-makers in order to bring about systemic change.

Narrative representations of literacy matters were less represented on the MCL site, although as noted earlier, there is reference to a press conference held in 2005 in which MCL and ABC Canada sought to influence the public debate around literacy budget cuts contained in the Conservative Party's first budget. This press conference offered "stories of success" from an adult involved in literacy programming, and operated, as Tewksbury et al. (2000) suggested, as a narrative frame from which to situate literacy as an important policy problem deserving of public attention.

Another means of narrative representation unique to the MCL site was its use of "policy stars"—that is, celebrities or public figures—who advocate for literacy. Two examples emerged from the documents on this site: Peter Gzowski, a popular and well-known national CBC commentator, who was asked to advocate for literacy at the federal level; and Frank McKenna, former New Brunswick premier, who appears to have been chosen given his commitment to literacy programming and how it could support economic goals and Canada's global competitiveness. The narratives of government inaction and its consequences, as well as these men's social, cultural, or political capital as civic and social commentators, offered a potentially powerful story through which to trigger a policy debate. Although this debate does not seem to have popularly taken off, MCL has played a substantive role in recent struggles against government funding cuts to literacy groups.

The discourses of literacy represented on the MCL site, as on the ABC Canada site, echoes the neo-liberal discourse of market-based and consumer-oriented literacy in which the individualized consumption of literacy is viewed as a commodity. In particular, the briefing and research documents on the MCL site embrace the cost-benefit rationality favoured by neo-liberal governments committed to a global competitiveness and market-driven ideology, particularly characterized in conceptions of workplace literacy.

For example, one of the policy documents developed for lobbying government reads: "Workplace literacy is needed to improve the ability of people to do their jobs and to learn new skills to help them meet the changing requirements of their jobs and advance at work if they so choose." Yet the same paragraph argues that, "At the same time, it is important that all stakeholders, including funding agencies, view workplace literacy not only as an economic and business necessity, but also as a part of the overall social fabric of literacy in our society."[5]

As this passage shows, there is an effort to embrace more openly a more inclusive version of literacy. In other locations on its website, MCL describes this orientation as "literacy is for life," emphasizing the intersections between literacy, civic life, and democracy, poverty, and social and cultural disadvantage of some populations such as Aboriginals or persons with disabilities. The prominence of these "literacy is for life" documents provides evidence of the organizational beliefs and values related to a more inclusive understanding of the many forms that literacy can take.

Like many successful organizations, MCL has developed a capacity for hybrid forms of discourse; that is to say, it has learned to shape its arguments in ways that bridge a number of discursive communities (Fish, 1980). Gee (1996) might describe this effort as "bi-discursive"; that is, MCL's efforts have focused on how it might achieve its organizational goals through participation in other competing narratives about how literacy benefits can be realized. One could say it has learned to play the political game well.

Findings and Implications

A full range of elements were in evidence on the websites that allowed for varying degrees of advocacy on the part of those who might visit the sites. Advocacy was characterized in two distinctive ways: advocacy *for* literacy or advocacy *in* literacy. These differences were attributed to two different but related discourses about the role of advocacy organizations: one that emphasizes civic action and the other philanthropy and service. The civic action advocacy discourse of MCL emphasized the political relationship between responsibilities and rights, and the possibility afforded through collective action, while the philanthropic volunteer service advocacy discourse of ABC Canada has been shaped by neo-liberal, market-based solutions that emphasized individual contribution, yet it seeks to maintain its orientation toward being an elite-to-elite voice for instrumental literacy, and an awareness and fundraising advocate of literacy. Indeed, both websites are composed of visual and written texts that carefully build a rational case for action on issues of adult, workplace, family, and youth literacy while framing literacy as a significant policy problem requiring action, illustrative of the neo-liberal policy shift occurring in education (Ball, 2006; Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007).

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5 Taken from: Ramsey, C., Burns, D., & Folinsbee, S. (2006). *Brief to House of Commons, Standing Committee On Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Re: The employability issue of workplace literacy.* Retrieved March 2008, from http://www.nald.ca/library/research/employ/brief/brief.pdf

In terms of how particular features were evidenced and their affordances for increasing levels of advocacy on behalf of literacy education, the two sites offered significant contrast. ABC's website is sophisticated in its design architecture and use of social networking and new media. It cleverly uses narratives as tools for engaging visitors in the "moral qualities of experiential narratives" (Conle, 2007), which offers the potential, as Dartnell (2006) suggests, for increasing its impact on the broader policy environment. It also reproduces the discourse of individual action (agency) as a kind of philanthropic will, naturalizing and reinforcing a personal connection to the cause of literacy, while simultaneously engaging in market-driven discourses about the economic and social consequences of illiteracy. The construction of a binary (comparing the literate and illiterate) helps to situate all web visitors as influential policy actors, enabled to act to correct these deficits, while simultaneously embracing the public good afforded through universalized literacy policies.

The second website (MCL) relied largely on descriptions of how to engage politically in more traditional forms of political advocacy, participatory engagement, and discourses of civil society (Bottery, 2000). This approach, while providing texts that reinforced discourses of democratic inclusivity and public goods, also failed to provide many opportunities for active engagement where new policy actors might be apprenticed into discursive communities that seek to redefine the literacy policy debate. One possible conclusion is that the website served as a placeholder for its primary organizational roles (including civic advocacy, dialogue, and debate), privileging particular forms of elite-to-elite advocacy. In doing so, its advocacy discourse may limit the policy spaces in which it works and its ability to influence the literacy policy environment and its discourses.

Guthrie and Dutton (1992) have argued that policy intentions are embedded within the online technology choices made by agencies and organizations that are accessing the Internet as a tool for knowledge-dissemination and citizen participation; the policy intentions that these activities represent, we have argued here, are based in more typical and linear beliefs about the nature of policy change. How these websites might promote new forms of advocacy or activism, using online tools such as chat rooms, blogs, online discussion groups, and online lobbying—readerly texts—provides the mediational means through which agency for literacy can be both enacted and realized. In this sense, it is more than a commitment to an issue, but a remaking of or recommitment to the self as a civic subject or actor. In other words, they are, following Fogg (1999) and King & Tester (1999), both persuasive and seductive. ABC Canada's use of the social networking site Facebook (persuasive technology), an RSS feed, and an electronic newsletter (seductive moral stories) afford opportunities for users to commit to and interact with a community of concerned actors in literacy education, and to serve the informational role of advocate.

MCL, as an organization committed to advocacy for literacy, could easily benefit from applying such technology to its own policy efforts. For example, MCL could easily have video-recorded its 2005 press conference on literacy funding cuts, and then linked it to a site like YouTube, while simultaneously circulating it to its activist lists. MCL could also host a page on Facebook or MySpace where its local programs or events could be posted and profiled, which would allow for the real-time interaction of group members. Much like the black screen protest, or the successful use of new media by the Obama

presidential campaign described earlier, such platforms easily allow the posting of locally created events, providing sites for new activist strategies to emerge organically or new activists to surface. The importance of these persuasive web technologies is that they afford opportunities both for distributing and producing power and for capturing the civic potential offered as a product of the rhizomatic or emergent manner in which power operates within policy debates and discourses.

Limitations

While the decision to engage in discursive analysis of a website and consider its affordances for advocacy provides important information for adult educators and organizations interested in better understanding how advocacy works in web-based environments, this is a limited scope, particularly because it does not consider how the texts might be navigated or interpreted by a range of readers or users who access its features either on single or multiple occasions (Hong & Kim, 2004; MacGregor & Lou, 2005). Further, it looks at the websites in isolation from the other traditional approaches to literacy. In a sense, this study could be viewed as a needs assessment study of these key literacy organizations' current web-based advocacy capabilities and their potential. Subsequent studies should consider how users understand and interpret the advocacy discourses and their interest for engaging in advocacy work on the basis of the specific features that these websites offer. This goes to one of the important earlier points about the processes of postmodern analysis: texts need to be understood as socially and culturally situated, which means that readers' subjectivities are central to understanding how such texts might act to influence or persuade. While arguing that particular affordances of web-based texts can shape civic subjectivities and beliefs, this analysis is limited by its failure to consider that these texts are located within particular histories and trajectories of policy-making and civic knowledge(s). In short, web-based texts should not be conceived of solely as static artifacts, but rather as products of their temporality and production. The policy terrain—be it electronic or otherwise—is highly contested in the field of adult literacy in Canada. As noted earlier in this article, federal government funding cuts, the re-targeting of literacy policies to privilege particular types of literacy training that fail to address broadly the diversity of adult literacy needs, and the culture of fear such policy changes create, all have impacts on the ways in which advocacy can be practised and the resources any organization may bring to support its work. Such considerations need to be reiterated given the findings of this study that some of the new social networking tools offer valuable means through which to extend support of and advocacy for literacy work.

Finally, it is equally important to note that such texts may be taken up by policy actors in alternative, competing, or multiple ways that may conflict with the interpretations within this paper given the range of other contexts, policy texts, D/discourses and events that shape the ways in which these websites mediate understandings of advocacy and policy work.

Conclusion

Although Dartnell (2006) has argued that no political revolutions have been accomplished as a result of the Web and Internet-based organizations that seek to disrupt the status quo, the recent success of the Obama presidential election campaign has been attributed in large measure to the campaign's mastery of information technology and its understanding of social networking (Norquay, 2008). This article supports a finding that the goal of web-based texts should ideally be to activate and advocate on a micro scale, to use emerging locations, events, and features of websites and associated technologies in ways that will shape the social, cultural, and political landscapes in which policy operates. We believe ABC Canada's website and its use as a portal for new media and social networking technologies, public campaigns, and events have strongly positioned this organization as a key literacy actor in facilitating popular national awareness of workplace, adult, and family literacy and available programming, albeit within a neo-liberal instrumental construction of literacy education.

This article has suggested that policy terrains and texts need to be considered much more broadly, and that the Web offers an important site where the power to influence policy-makers can be both produced and distributed. As the Web becomes more and more integrated into the daily practices of people across the globe, its persuasive capacity as a policy tool is realized as it mimics well-established social networking practices. At the same time, its capacity to enable civic commitment through its seductive attributes points to the power that signifying texts—narratives and images—can have on a policy debate. It is this potential, we argue, that needs to be considered in thinking about how policy architects and social movements operate in new times. The examples offered by scholars in the emerging field of e-advocacy and this smaller case study point to this potential and the promise of new sites for civic engagement and advocacy work.

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