Advocacy and Social Media:
Explaining When and Why Interest Organizations use Social Media Tactics

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Abstract:
Social media has increasingly been recognised as an important and effective tool for advocacy. A growing body of research examines the use of social media in grassroots and social movements as well as issues related to civic engagement, social capital and voter engagement. The extent to which organised interest groups have adopted social media as an advocacy tool, however, has been relatively ignored. This article examines the determinants of the use of social media tools by interest organisations across a variety of venues and audiences. We argue that social media use is a function of four factors: group resources, adoption costs, issue area, and imitation effects. We test this argument using a unique data set of interest group advocacy in the European Union and present two central findings: first, that social media is rarely used to lobby decision-makers; second, that the use of social media is largely a function of imitation. Groups fear losing a competitive edge to their rivals and take advantage of the relatively low start-up and maintenance costs related to social media technologies.

Key words: advocacy, European Union, interest organizations, social media
Social media has changed the face of advocacy. Facebook and Twitter have played an important role in facilitating recent large-scale anti-government protests in Turkey, Brazil, Indonesia and Bulgaria. ‘Twitter revolutionaries’ incited powerful social movements and protest activities spreading across North Africa and the Middle East during the Arab Spring. In western democracies, the Occupy Wall Street Movement demonstrated the power of these new social media tools in organising and mobilizing protest activities on a global scale. For nearly a decade, WikiLeaks has provided an online platform for Internet activists to highlight issues related to privacy and the democratization of information posed by the Internet. Given these recent events, it is little wonder scholars have increasingly turned their attention to examining the effects of social media on advocacy activities. This growing research has variously examined the effectiveness of social media in fostering civic engagement (Boulianne 2009, Delli Carpini 2000, Jennings and Zeitner 2003), social capital (Hampton and Wellman 2003, Shah et al. 2001, Kobayashi et al. 2006), collective action (Lupia and Sin 2003), and social movements (Carty 2010, Ayers 1999, Petray 2011) as well as the extent to which it mobilizes and informs voters (Polat 2005, Bimber 2001, Dulio et al. 1999). While cyber-sceptics and cyber-enthusiasts are divided over the extent to which ‘Advocacy 2.0’ has levelled the playing field for activists and advocates of all stripes, there is little question that social media is now commonplace in most advocacy activities.

Largely absent from this growing literature, however, is the place of social media in the advocacy toolkit of organised interest groups (see for exceptions Obar et al. 2012, Karpf 2010). In other words, to what extent has social media been adopted by interest organisations as a tool for lobbying? Much of the research on lobbying strategies still tends to focus on a largely outmoded set of pressure strategies ranging from letter writing campaigns to phone calls (Mahoney 2008, Baumgarnter et al. 2009). The scant work that has acknowledged social media in
lobbying activities provides only cursory evidence that interest organisations are increasingly turning to these new tools in their advocacy work (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012, Edwards and Hoefer 2010). As a result we still know very little about the role of social media in the repertoire of advocacy strategies used by interest organisations. Have interest organisations embraced these new strategies? When do they use these new strategies and to what extent have they replaced older advocacy tactics?

The purpose of this article is to shed light on these fundamental questions. In particular, our aim is explain when, why and with whom interest organisations use social media as a tool for advocacy. Using a unique database of interest organisations lobbying at the level of the European Union (EU), this article presents an empirical analysis of the factors that account for the use of social media in the advocacy activities of over 350 interest organisations. This analysis presents a new theoretical framework for understanding the strategic choices interest organisations face in selecting advocacy tools and applies it to the use of social media. In particular, we argue that the choice of using social media tools is a function of four factors: (1) group resources, (2) adoption costs (3) issue variation and (4) imitation effects. Empirical analysis reveals two central findings. First, that social media is used only sparingly to lobby EU and national decision-makers mainly because of existing institutional ties and the suitability of these tools to specific advocacy tasks. Social media is instead used to engage with the general public as well as to create a media presence by generating awareness through the news media. Second, we find that social media use is primarily a function of imitation effects: interest organisations fear losing a competitive edge relative to other organisations and take advantage of the relatively low start-up and maintenance costs related to social media technologies. The cumulative effect of these findings sees interest organisations slowly adopting social media tools, but rarely using them in their direct efforts to influence policy outcomes.
Explaining the Choice of Advocacy Tools

The effectiveness of social media as an advocacy tool is a contested topic. While some scholars see social media as a panacea for collective action problems and an effective tool for grassroots mobilization, others suggest that the benefits of these new technologies are overplayed, characterising social media strategies as failing to truly mobilise supporters and resulting in a type of apathetic ‘clicktivism’ and even ‘slacktivism’ (Morozov 2009, Gladwell 2010). Less contested is the fact that social media provides activists with an inexpensive new advocacy tool. In fact, scholars explain the adoption of social media tools primarily as a function of cost. Bergen (2009: 328), for instance, points out that ‘the Internet has made it cheaper for groups to form lists and easier for activists to join groups and contact legislators through email’. For Edwards and Hoefer (2010: 226), organisations can use social media ‘for effective advocacy efforts that require little staff time to maintain’. Social media, in short, not only reduces the costs of advocacy (Boulianne 2009), but has ‘low entry costs’ as well (Van Laer 2010: 406). Facebook, Twitter, Wikia, amongst others, are free to use, easy to maintain and have considerable reach.

The broader literature on more traditional advocacy strategies also explains strategy choices as a function of group resources and related organizational characteristics. A central distinction is typically made between specific interests and diffuse interests (Thrall 2006, Beyers 2002). Specific interests (i.e. socio-economic and producer interests) have well-circumscribe and concentrated constituencies, tend to have considerable financial, organisational and informational resources as well as privileged access to key decision-makers. Diffuse interests, like NGOs and citizen groups, lack a well-delineated and concentrated constituency, defend the interests of broad and general segments of society, have limited resources and are routinely denied access to decision-makers. How these characteristics relate to strategy choices follows a rather
deterministic logic. Diffuse groups are assumed to be ‘personnel rich,’ but poor in monetary resources and thus interact with decision-makers indirectly by reaching out to the public and mobilizing them on an issue. Specific groups are poor in personnel resources, but rich in monetary resources. Thus, they do not need to resort to outside strategies that involve the public and instead focus their resources on strategies that bring them in direct contact with decision-makers – namely, inside strategies (see Hojnacki and Kimball 1999, Kollman 1998, Gerber 1999). Recent research on social media tends to group these new technologies with more traditional outside strategies (Edwards and Hoefer 2010). Coupled with low start-up and maintenance costs, social media is argued to help balance the playing field between specific and diffuse interests in a game where players otherwise speak with a distinctively ‘upper-class accent’ (Schattschneider 1975).

More recently, scholars have taken issue with the rather deterministic nature of these assumptions, suggesting instead that the choice of advocacy strategy is much more fluid and complex. More specifically, recent empirical studies have shown that both specific and diffuse interests turn to outside strategies in their advocacy activities (Chalmers 2013a, Thrall 2006). For Beyers (2004) and Binderkrantz (2005), the more important distinction is between specific types of outside strategies. Empirical analyses show that while only a minority of groups use protest politics or ‘disruptive tactics’, it is far more likely for interest groups to turn to alternative outside strategies like media campaigns. The professionalization of lobbying has made banner waving and protests old fashioned and outmoded. Instead, outside strategies also involve sophisticated news media campaigns taken up by a broad range of different types of interest organisations (Lahusen 2002, Maloney 2008).

**Explaining the use of Social Media as an Advocacy Tactic**
Current academic research on lobbying strategies remains largely outmoded. The stocktaking seminal research of Scholzman and Tierney (1986) as well as Heinz et al., (1993) setting out to catalogue a list of tactics available to different interest organisations has hardly changed in the last three decades. Thus, the more recent efforts of Baumgartner et al. (2009) and Mahoney (2008) include phone calls, letter writing and even facsimiles among key advocacy tools, but ignore new advances in technology. In the rare cases that acknowledge ‘emails, websites, and other technological developments’, such as in Watson and Shackelton (2008: 107), the consensus is that these new technologies ‘are no substitute for old-fashioned face-to-face contact’.

Where the existing literature has dismissed social media or has remained silent, this article investigates. Part of our aim is to examine the extent to which social media tools are part of the existing catalogue of advocacy tactics already identified by scholars. Our larger goal, however, is to analyse the factors that account for when, why and with whom interest organisations use social media tools in their advocacy activities. To this end we develop a new theoretical framework explaining advocacy tool choice across different lobby venues. This framework draws on and expands assumptions set out in existing research on interest group choice of advocacy tools more broadly speaking. Specifically, we explain the use of social media tools as a function of four factors: (1) group resources, (2) adoption costs (3) issue variation and (4) imitation. In what follows will we provide details about each of these four factors and present hypotheses relevant to each of them.

Scholars have long recognized that resources matter. Organisations that have greater finances and staff tend to have a considerable advantage when it comes to advocacy activities. Their superior finances, staff and administrative support make them better positioned to monitor policy changes, research and develop policy options as well as disseminate policy messages.
Group resources have also been linked to tactic choice. As noted above, while resource-rich groups tend to opt for inside-tactics, resource-poor groups tend to use less expensive outside tactics. Social media, as an inexpensive new advocacy tool and, insofar as it specifically has an effect on an organisation’s budget-line, would be well suited to resource-poor organisations. This leads to our first hypothesis:

\textit{H1: the fewer resources an interest organisation has at its disposal, the more importance it will place on using social media advocacy tactics.}

Social media present interest organisations with new and, as of yet, largely unproven advocacy tactics. At the same time, most groups already have a well-established repertoire of advocacy tools that may have presented considerable adoption costs, whether in terms of investing time, energy or finances. While social media tools are inexpensive, using them might mean diverting energy and resources away from an organisation’s existing and proven set of tactics. This type of trade-off could be risky and act as a major deterrent for adopting new social media tactics. Adoption costs therefore refer to an organisation’s existing set of traditional inside and outside lobbying tactics. Adoption costs related to using social media tools increase as traditional tactics become more entrenched and more important in an organisation’s existing toolkit of advocacy tactics. This leads to our second hypothesis.

\textit{H2: the lower the adoption costs an interest organisation faces, the more importance it will place on using social media advocacy tactics.}

The type of issue at stake is also an important determinant of an organisation’s choice of advocacy tool. A central distinction made in the literature is between redistributive and regulatory issues (Lowi 1969, Broscheid and Coen 2007). Regulatory issues are large in scope and engage many different interests in a typically conflictual, zero-sum manner. These issues tend to be technical in nature and are best suited to inside lobbying tactics. By contrast, redistributive issues
are narrower in scope, less technical in nature and, most importantly, have a high level of salience amongst the general public and organisation members. As such, organisations would tend to use outside tactics, engaging the public, members and the news media alike to advocate over highly salient redistributive issues. Social media, with its wide-reach would be well suited to advocating on redistributive issues. This leads to our third hypothesis.

**H3: the more an interest organisation places importance on redistributive issues, the more importance it will place on using social media advocacy tactics.**

Interest organisations do not carry out their advocacy activities in a bubble. Lobbying is an intensely social, but also competitive process (Heclo 1978, Chalmers 2013b, Klüver 2013). The actions of one organisation result in an imitation effect from other organisations. Early adopters can gain an important competitive advantage on latecomers. Scholars of sociological institutionalism, for instance, explain how rational behaviours can spread through ‘mimetic processes’ leading to a convergence or isomorphism in behaviour. Various scholars describe this as a ‘contagion’ (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) or ‘bandwagoning’ effect (Abrahamson 1991). For this analysis, the choice to use social media tools might be a function of imitation. Fear of a loss in competitiveness and the perception that other organisations are using social media amounts to considerable pressure to adopt these new tools. Further, seeing that others are already using social media tools might have the effect of reducing uncertainties about the value and risk associated with these new tools. This leads to our fourth hypothesis.

**H4: the more other interest organisations are perceived to be using social media, the more importance an interest organisation will place on using social media advocacy tactics.**

**Research Design**
Data for this analysis was collected primarily via a large-scale online survey of interest organisations lobbying in the EU. Our survey population of 5484 individual interest organisations was drawn from the European Union Transparency Register.\(^5\) From this population, we drew a random sample of 1300 organisations for the survey. After eliminating certain organisations based on missing contact information, we ended up contacting 1219 organisations. A total of 358 responses were collected, putting the response rate at about 30%. To ensure reliability of responses, we made every effort to contact organisation presidents, directors or upper-level management. The survey was made available to respondents in the three working languages of the EU: English, German and French. Table 1, below, organises responses by interest organisation type following the Transparency Register’s classification scheme (due to missing data we were not able to code seventeen organisations, reducing our ‘n’ to 341). The distribution of responses roughly mirrors previous empirical work on the EU interest group population (Greenwood 2011, Wonka et al. 2010). Specific interest groups (especially trade, business and professional associations) and NGOs appear to be the most prevalent types of groups in the EU. By contrast, public authorities, trade unions, religious organisations, academic organisations and law firms, all with low response rates, are typically less prevalent. On balance, the representativeness of the sample of interest groups used in this analysis does not seem to differ greatly from existing research.

(table 1 about here)

The purpose of this analysis is to assess when, why and with whom interest organisations use social media tools. We argue that the use of social media is a function of four factors: (1) group resources, (2) adoption costs (3) issue variation and (4) imitation effects. In what follows
we will provide detail on how each factor was operationalized using survey data or data collected in follow-up coding using the Transparency Register.

*Importance of using Social Media Tools*

Survey data was used to measure the use of social media tools in the advocacy tactics of individual interest organisations. Social media can be defined as a Web 2.0 technology and thus distinguished from those tools defined as ‘traditional’ (pre-ICT or pre-1990s) or Web 1.0 (electronic versions of ‘traditional’ tools) (Kaplan and Haenlein 2009). Kaplan and Haelein (2009) make a distinction between the tools on the basis of their technological underpinnings as well as their degree of interactivity. We have made a similar distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies. In the context of the survey we simply define social media very broadly in our instructions to respondents: ‘Social media refers to such things as Facebook, Blogger, Twitter, Wordpress, LinkedIn, Google Plus+, Tumbler, Wikia, Pinterest, MySpace, YouTube, foursquare, Reddit, etc.’

A central insight of this analysis is that interest organisations strategically use certain advocacy tools for certain audiences or in certain venues. Following the extant literature, outside tactics, like protest activities, public events, and media campaigns, are commonly used with outside audiences, like the general public or organisation members. Inside tactics, like face-to-face meetings and phone calls, are commonly used with inside audiences, like decision-makers (Beyers 2004). Mahoney (2008: 149) makes a further, important distinction between EU-level and national level openness. Outside tactics are more likely to be employed in ‘open and accountable’ venues ‘where officials are driven by the re-election motive’, as is the case at the national level. Lacking a pan-EU media and genuine European public space, organisations would place less emphasis on using social media at the more closed and restricted EU-level of decision-
making. To control for this variation across different audiences, we assessed the use of social media tools with the following survey question: How important is it for your organisation to use social media tools when interacting with (1) European Union decision-makers, (2) National governments in the Member States, (3) members of the interest organisation, (4) the general public and (5) the news media. Importance was measured on a 1-5 Likert scale, ranging from 1 = ‘very unimportant’ and 5 = ‘very important’.

Group resources

Group resources play an important role in the choice of tactics. Expensive tactics require considerable resources while inexpensive tactics require fewer resources. The choice to adopt social media tools in particular has been explained as a decision based largely on an organisation’s budget line. We examine the effects of resources in using social media in two ways: (1) in terms of an organisation’s resources and (2) in terms of the perceived potential for social media to reduce advocacy costs.

We measure group resources using three indicators: finances, staff, and Brussels office. All three indicators were coded using data from the Transparency Register. Finances are measured as the estimated yearly costs of ‘representing interests to the EU institutions’ and are indicated on a scale of 1-52 ranging from less than 50,000 euro (1) to more than 10,000,000 euro (52) per year. Staff is measured as the number of persons in a given organisation engaged specifically in lobbying activities. Initial analyses of finances and staff indicated that both variables were highly skewed and were therefore logged to normalise distribution. A third proxy for group resources relates to organisations having a Brussels-based lobbying office. This is a commonly used proxy for interest organization resources. As Mahoney (2004: 452) argues, ‘a Brussels base is a prerequisite for any interest seeking a role in the EU and for whom the stakes
involved in European public affairs are significant’. A Brussels office also demonstrates both a commitment to and financial investment in lobbying at the EU level. Brussels office was coded as dummy variable (1 = Brussels office).

In addition to resources, we also assessed the extent to which reducing costs is an important factor explaining the use of social media. To this end, we measured the perceived potential to reduce advocacy costs by asking respondents about how important (measured on a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 being ‘very unimportant’ and 5 being ‘very important) ‘reducing costs’ was in their decision to adopt social media tools for their advocacy activities.

*Adoption Costs*

Social media is a new and largely unproven advocacy tool. Its use is therefore dependent on an organisation’s prior investment in other advocacy tactics. This prior investment increases adoption costs and lowers the chances of using social media tools. We examine the importance that organisations place on using (1) direct advocacy tactics (defined broadly as ‘face-to-face meeting, phone calls, emails, position papers, etc’) and (2) indirect advocacy tools (defined broadly as ‘public events, demonstrations, petition, etc.’). Importance is measured on a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 being ‘very unimportant’ and 5 being ‘very important’.

*Issue Area*

Redistributive issues, having greater public salience and being less ‘technical’ than regulatory issues, are well suited to social media advocacy tools. Redistributive issues are particularly salient in the EU. The EU’s Common Agricultural Policy and Regional Policy constitute the bloc’s central redistributive strategies and comprise over 75% of its total yearly budget (about 308 billion euro in the latest funding period). It follows that organisations that
place more importance on advocating on redistributive issues will also tend to place more importance on the use of social media tools. We assess this indicator by asking survey respondents to select the issue areas that are most important for their organisation. Respondents were given a broad list of 37 issue areas. We measured the importance placed on redistributive issues as those organisations indicating either or both ‘agriculture’ and ‘region policy’ as being the most important for their organisation.

*Imitation*

Interest organisations make choices about their advocacy tactics with reference to what other organisations are doing. Imitation is driven by the fear of losing a competitive edge against other groups and not being able to keep pace. Seeing others using a new tool also reduces the risk and perceived uncertainties about adopting new tools. We assess these imitation effects by asking respondents about the importance (on the same 1 to 5 scale) of the following two factors in ‘making the decision to use social media tools’ in their advocacy activities: (1) ‘other organisations were using social media tools’ and (2) ‘remaining at the cutting edge.’

*Control Variable: Interest Organisation Type*

This analysis also controls for interest organisation type. Much of the existing literature argues that tactic choice is largely a function of interest organisation type, making a primary distinction between specific interests and diffuse interests. Specific interests not only tend to have superior resources than diffuse interests, but are also better positioned by the largely technocratic and regulatory functions of the EU. As industry actors, specific interests have the type of informational resources that EU decision-makers, especially those in the Commission, find valuable. Scholars have also suggested that specific interests tend to turn more frequently to so-
called inside tactics, like face-to-face meeting and phone calls. By contrast, diffuse interests, having fewer financial and informational resources, are less likely to lobby at the EU-level. Instead, they turn more readily to outside tactics, like protests, public events and media campaigns. We control for these assumptions by introducing a dummy variable (1= specific interests) into our empirical analysis. We coded specific and diffuse interest using the group type classification scheme used in the transparency register. Specific interests include trade, business and professional associations, as well as consultancies and law firms. Diffuse interests include non-governmental organisations, trade unions and religious organisations.

Table 2, below, provides descriptive statistics for the indicators used in this analysis as well as the predicted effect of each on the dependent variable -- the importance placed on using social media advocacy tools.

(table 2, about here)

**Data Analysis**

Table 3, below, presents results of an empirical analysis of survey data and coded data using ordered logistic regression. The determinants of using social media tools are tested in five models corresponding to the five venues or audiences under consideration in this analysis. Importantly, the results provide little evidence for hypotheses 1 and 3. Resources measured as finances, staff and Brussels office show no significant differences in any of the models in table 3. Only resources measured as ‘reducing costs’ shows significant differences, but only in model 3 (using social media tools to interact with organisation members). Interest organisations placing greater importance on redistributive issues also seems to have little bearing on the use of social
media regardless of audience or venue. Interest group type (the control variable) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level or lower in models 3 and 4. Thus, using social media when interacting with organisation members and the general public does appear to be a function of being a diffuse rather than a specific interest group. This finding speaks the broader membership structures commonly associated with diffuse groups (like NGOs) as well as deeper links to the general public.

Regression results present two central findings. First, based on the explained variance in the different models, social media does not appear to be an important advocacy tool at the EU and state levels. Indeed, social media’s use appears restricted to lobbying efforts that engage the general public and the news media. Second, imitation and adoption costs appear to be important predictors of social media use, showing significant differences in most models (although for adoption costs in the opposite direction than expected). We will discuss both findings in detail in what follows.

(table 3, about here)

*Social Media Use Across Venues*

Differences in the explained variance in the five regression models indicate that the factors influencing an organisation’s decision to use social media varies across venues. About 12% of the variance is explained in models 4 and 5, where we assessed the use of social media with the general public and with the news media. Considerably less variance is explained in models 1, 2 and 3, estimating the predictors for the use of social media tools with EU institutions, national governments and with an organisation’s own members. It seems that social media tools vary considerably in terms of their importance in different venues. Graph 1, below, provides additional support for this argument. It organises mean values of the dependent variable across
the five venues and disaggregated by specific and diffuse interest groups. It is clear that for both types of interest organisation very little importance is placed on using social media at the level of the EU and at the state level. This finding provides support for Edwards and Hoefer (2010: 229), who found that while groups might use social media to ‘facilitate communication’ with decision-makers, they rarely (2% of their total sample) use social media to directly interact with decision-makers. Social media appears to be a tool reserved for interacting with members, the general public and with the news media.

(gra...h 1, about here)

How can we explain the limited use of social media at the EU and national levels? We offer two explanations: existing institutional ties and tool suitability. Lobbying at both the European and national levels is a highly regulated and institutionalised practice. In the EU, for instance, interest organisations operate through a whole host of variously regulated channels to influence policy outputs (Kohler-Koch and Finke 2007). Social dialogue and the European Economic and Social Committee provide unique channels of access for employee, employer and consumer associations. Committee of the Regions provides a similar platform for sub-state interests. NGOs and private interests are integrated into the EU decision-making process via online, formal and informal consultation processes. For some scholars, the highly institutionalised and regulated nature of EU-level lobbying even typifies a type of neo-corporatism (Czada 2004, Michalowitz 2004, Greenwood et al. 1992). At the national level is also ‘still the century of corporatism’, to speak with Schmitter (1974). Interest intermediation at the state is often organised around select peak organisations that in turn provide regulated channels linking interests and decision-makers.
A second explanation is that social media tools are not well suited to lobbying decision-makers, whether at the EU or national levels. A growing consensus in the literature is that lobbying is less about pressure and purchase tactics and more about a type of informational exchange between interests and decision-makers (Hall and Deardorff 2006, Potters and van Winden 1990, Bouwen 2002). Providing highly technical and expertise-driven policy recommendations is the coin of the realm when it comes to lobbying decision-makers. Social media is simply a poor platform for communicating this type of policy relevant information. To speak with one survey respondent providing additional details in an open field question: ‘Social media are not well suited to the types of content and messages on which we work. The complexity and depth required for policy analysis we do cannot be reduced to format required by social media [tools]’. As another respondent put it: ‘Twitter is very powerful – we have 2,000 members and 12,000 followers. But it does not appear that Twitter helps us to communicate with EU or national government institutions’. Very little, let alone technical details on specific policy issues, can be easily expressed in 140 characters or less!

Social media are much better suited to different audiences – namely, the general public and the news media. Our results therefore provide additional support for a growing body of literature on the primary use of social media as a tool for engagement and mobilization. As graph 1, above, demonstrates, both diffuse and specific interests are using social media to these ends. Social media tools provide options for so-called ‘user generated content’, effectively establishing a dialogue between organisations and the general public. These new tools do not simply disseminate information but seek to generate dialogue. This dialogue does not yet appear to exist with decision-makers, but the use of social media to interact with the news media does appear to be particularly important. As existing research suggests, news media coverage is ‘critical to success or failure of social movements and interest group efforts’ (Thrall 2006: 408). This is
something that is not lost on our survey respondents, who reported that the most important functions of social media use where to ‘shape their public image’, ‘bring issues to public attention’ and to ‘generate media awareness’.

_Imitation Effects and Adoption Costs_

A second central finding of this analysis is that resources do not appear to play an important role in an organisation’s choice of social media advocacy tools, showing no significant differences in any of the five models. This particular finding challenges the idea that organisations would use social media because it is an inexpensive advocacy tool (Thrall 2006, Bergan 2009, Edwards and Hoefer 2010). Groups with fewer resources, whether measured in terms of finances, staff or Brussels office, are not more likely to place greater importance on the use of social media tools than their resources-rich counterparts.

Far more than resources, imitation effects and adoption costs appear to be key predictors of social media use in most models presented in table 3, above. Organisations appear to imitate other organisations both as a result of a simply contagion effect – because others are doing it – and out of fear of losing a competitive edge to their rivals – to remain at the cutting edge. For instance, with one unit increase in adopting social media tools to ‘remain at the cutting edge’, the odds of using social media to interact with the general public and news media are about one and half times greater. Also, the results show that with one unit increase in adopting social media tools because ‘other organisations were using social media tools’, the odds of using social media to interact with the general public and news media are at least 1.28 times greater.

Using social media also appears to be a function of adoption costs. However, the results contradict our expectation (and hypothesis 2) that organisations with entrenched existing repertoires of advocacy tools would face higher adoptions costs when it comes to using social
media. Instead, it appears that, at least in case of using indirect advocacy tools, organisations facing higher adoption costs also place more importance on using social media tools. Regression results show significant differences for this indicator at the EU level, national level, and in interacting with news media. One explanation is that social media tools are, for most interest organisations, a form of indirect advocacy. Those groups already using indirect tools are also more likely to use social media tools. However, this would suggest high levels of collinearity between using indirect tools and the dependent variable, something that pre-tests assessing variance inflation factors of social media, direct, indirect and news media advocacy tools did not find. What we have gathered from respondents’ open field question results is that there does not appear to be a categorical trade-off between using an existing repertoire of tactics and adopting social media tools. To speak with one respondent: social media tools are ‘additional, tier 2 type approaches’ that are ‘complementary to traditional communication approaches […] and does not replace those tools in any way’. This comment not only helps explain regression results but also gives purchase to Baumgartner and Leech’s (1998: 148) observation that ‘the most effective groups may not be those that are the best at a given strategy but rather those that have the greatest repertory of strategies available to them’. Given the low start-up and maintenance cost of social media tools, it stands to reason that organisations only face a small trade-off between existing tactics and new ones. Indeed, these organisations may be establishing a social media capability in anticipation of a greater future relevance of these tools for their activities.

Conclusion

This analysis has shed light on the factors that explain when, why and with whom interest organisations use social media tools. While a growing literature suggests that social media are important advocacy tools for grassroots and social movements, interest organisations have only
rarely been examined. This analysis brings together insights from the existing interest group literature to explain strategies related to how groups choose advocacy tools in the EU. How generalisable this framework of tactic choice is beyond the EU – to national European or United States lobbying contexts, for example – is something that might be taken up in future research.

The two central findings presented in this analysis suggest that, while social media tools might have been adopted by many interest organisations, they are being used only sparingly to lobby decision makers. This has two implications. First, that social media simply do not currently represent suitable tools for lobbying decision makers and that there are many existing institutionalised channels of access that make social media less suitable. Second, it might also be the case that many groups have adopted social media, but are still not using it effectively. A growing body of empirical research makes similar findings, suggesting that the potential of social media, to speak with Kenix (2007), is largely unrealised (see also Edwards and Hoefer 2010, Fine 2007). This analysis, focusing on when and why interest organisations use social media in their advocacy activities can only speculate as to issues of effectiveness.

Where we do see interest organisations using social media is in their interactions with the general public and the news media. Social media tools are admittedly well suited to advocacy activities that target these specific audiences. To a certain extent, social media helps interest organisations disseminate information and mobilise supporters. However, the unique features of Web 2.0 technologies, namely user generated content, is particularly relevant in engaging the public. The use of Twitter and Facebook in recent protest activities around the globe attests to this fact.

A central insight of this analysis is that the presumed differences between specific and diffuse interest groups with regard to the choice of advocacy tactics do not hold up to empirical scrutiny. The marginal differences between specific and diffuse groups in the importance they
accord to using social media across different venues (as presented in graph 1) do not reflect the type of deterministic logic linking group type to tactic choice prevalent in the literature. In fact, this analysis provides further support for the growing literature suggesting that tactic choice is a much more fluid and complex process (Chalmers 2013; Beyers 2004; Binderkrantz 2005). Indeed, as our analysis suggests, adding social media tools to the advocacy toolkit is far less about resources, issue areas and even adoption costs than it is about imitation. The low start-up and maintenance costs of social media make these new technologies particularly suitable to certain contagion or bandwagon effects regardless of the otherwise rigid and inflexible organisational characteristics that typically define and differentiate interest organisations.
## Tables & Graphs

### Table 1. Survey Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest Organisation Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-governmental organisations, platforms and networks and similar</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>36.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade, business &amp; professional associations</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>28.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional consultancies</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Think tanks and research institutions</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Companies &amp; groups</td>
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<td>5.57</td>
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<td>Trade unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other similar organisations</td>
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<td>2.35</td>
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<td>Local, regional and municipal authorities (at sub-national level)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed consultants</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic institutions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisations representing churches and religious communities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other public or mixed entities, etc.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law firms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>100.00</td>
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</table>

### Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Predicted Effects (logged values in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Predicted effect on DV</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group resources</td>
<td>Finances (log)</td>
<td>2.91 (0.54)</td>
<td>4.40 (0.86)</td>
<td>1(0)</td>
<td>31 (3.43)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff (log)</td>
<td>23.3 (1.73)</td>
<td>128.90 (1.08)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1600 (7.37)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brussels office</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption costs</td>
<td>Reduce costs</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of inside tactics</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of outside tactics</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issue area</td>
<td>Importance of redistributive issues</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>Other organisations</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
using social media
Remain at cutting edge

| 3.56 | 1.53 | 0 | 5 | + |

**Graph 1: Social Media Use by Specific and Diffuse Interests (mean values)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>(1) EU Institutions</th>
<th>Odds ratios</th>
<th>(2) National Governments</th>
<th>Odds ratios</th>
<th>(3) Organisation Members</th>
<th>Odds ratios</th>
<th>(4) General Public</th>
<th>Odds ratios</th>
<th>(5) News Media</th>
<th>Odds ratios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finances (log)</td>
<td>.17 (.16)</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.16 (.15)</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>-.11 (0.16)</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>-.00 (0.15)</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.00 (.15)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff (log)</td>
<td>.04 (.12)</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>-.12 (.12)</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>-.05 (.11)</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>-.04 (.12)</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.01 (.12)</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brussels office</td>
<td>.01 (.29)</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-.30 (.29)</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.16 (.28)</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>-.08 (.28)</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>-.00 (.27)</td>
<td>.99</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce costs</td>
<td>0.15 (.09)</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.08 (.09)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.18 (.09)*</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>.13 (.09)</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>.06 (.09)</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct tools</td>
<td>-.19 (.22)</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>-.21 (.22)</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>-.44 (.22)*</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>-.14 (.21)</td>
<td>.86</td>
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<td>Indirect tools</td>
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<td>1.69</td>
<td>.39 (.15)**</td>
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<td>.10 (.13)</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.19 (.14)</td>
<td>1.22</td>
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<td>Others using social media</td>
<td>.20 (.11)</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>.21 (.11)*</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>.13 (.10)</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>.26 (.10)**</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.43 (.11)**</td>
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<td>Cutting edge</td>
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<td>1.25</td>
<td>.24 (.11)*</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>.34 (.11)**</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.43 (.11)**</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.34 (.11)**</td>
<td>1.41</td>
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<td>Redistributive issues</td>
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<td>1.32</td>
<td>.05 (.25)</td>
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<td>.03 (.25)</td>
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<td>-.05 (.25)</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.24 (.25)</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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<td>1.25</td>
<td>-.03 (.25)</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>-.72 (.25)**</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>-.84 (.26)**</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>-.10 (.25)</td>
<td>.89</td>
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<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-275.34</td>
<td>-302.18</td>
<td>-331.10</td>
<td>-310.33</td>
<td>-315.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>LR chi2 (10)</td>
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<td>90.94</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>pseudo r2</td>
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<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
References


Gladwell, M. (2010) 'Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted', The New Yorker, October 4,


Endnotes

1 Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden.
2 Academy of European Studies and Communication Management, The Hague University, Johanna Westerdijkpl 75, Postbus 16880, 2500 BW The Hague.
3 We use a functionalist definition of interest organisations as any formally organised group that seeks to influence policy outcomes but which is not a policymaker (those who seek office or governmental bureaucrats). Importantly, this excludes broad social movements and waves of public opinion (see Beyers, J., Eising, R. and Maloney, W. (2008) 'Researching Interest Group Politics in Europe and Elsewhere: Much We Study, Little We Know?', West European Politics, 31(6), 1103-1129.).
4 Of course, as Baumgartner et al. (2009: 194) argue, despite considerable research ‘scholars have found no smoking gun’ linking resources to influence.
6 Translated by the authors: ‘Les médias sociaux ne sont pas adapté aux contenus et messages sur lesquels nous travaillons. La complexité et la profondeur nécessaire à chaque analyse ne peuvent être réduites au format des réseaux sociaux.’