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11-1-2016

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# Taking Food Fights Online: Analysis of Chipotle's Attempt to Cultivate Conversation with *The Scarecrow* Video

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**Abstract:** This study examines Chipotle's use of *The Scarecrow*, an animated YouTube video, to initiate conversation about food sustainability issues. Results illustrate publics were highly engaged in conversation with one another, even though the organization did not directly engage with publics or employ principles of dialogic communication. We highlight the importance of network approaches to studying online interaction *between* stakeholder groups for public relations scholars interested in dialogical theory frameworks.

**Keywords:** Online public relations, Dialogue, Relationship-building, Sustainability, Environmental communication

## 1. Introduction

Public relations scholarship on dialogic theory has focused on conversations between an organization and its audiences. Dialogical features of conversation include visits, engagement, and dialogical loops, as well as debate ([Piecicka, 2011](#)). This interaction and responsiveness can support organizational-public relationship-building ([Avidar, 2013](#)). This research extends dialogical theory by focusing on debate from stakeholder to stakeholder that was activated by organizational content. By doing so, we illustrate the importance of examining how public relations strategies not only cement cooperative alliances, but also push some stakeholder groups to detach.

This study examines reaction to Chipotle's "Food with Integrity" sustainability campaign, and specifically *The Scarecrow* video. Aggressively positioning itself as a leader in environmental sustainability, Chipotle has stated that it hopes to use its campaigns to "spur curiosity" and start conversations with consumers regarding food industry practices. This online initiative speaks to notions of two-way communication because Chipotle's rhetoric implies it wants to engage customers in dialogue about food issues. However, while Chipotle's recent online video, *The Scarecrow*, received more than 12 million views and 15,000 comments on YouTube, little is known about what is actually being said in those conversations, and whether the company is, in fact, engaging consumers in dialogue. The video, released by Chipotle in September 2013, tells the story of a dystopian world dominated by evil industrial agriculture, only to be saved by a lone scarecrow farmer (representing Chipotle) who offers a better alternative of naturally raised and sustainably produced food.

## 2. Method

This study used sentiment analysis, framing analysis, and questionnaire data to examine participation in *Scarecrow*-related conversations, the substance of those conversations, and potential implications for Chipotle's relationships. Research questions include:

**RQ1:** *What dialogic features are present in YouTube comments regarding The Scarecrow video? Is there evidence of dialogical loops between the organization and its stakeholders or from stakeholder to stakeholder?*

**RQ2:** *What key sentiments, themes or frames can be identified in YouTube comments?*

**RQ3:** *How did commenters interpret Chipotle's attempt to 'spark a conversation'? Was there evidence of an impact on Chipotle's reputation?*

NVivo "NCapture" software was used to download 1000 comments posted to YouTube within the first three weeks of *The Scarecrow* video's original upload. This sample was examined for frequency of posts by user, characteristics of comments and replies, and sentiment levels. "SentiStrength," an online sentiment strength program validated by information science scholars and designed to classify short, informal texts, determined basic polarity and strength of sentiment in each comment ( [Thelwall et al., 2010](#)). After examining dialogical features, we conducted a qualitative framing analysis on comments with strong positive or negative sentiment measures to more closely examine themes expressed. We used a grounded theory approach by coding the sample of comments for concepts, grouping categories, and using axial coding, collapsing categories until major themes and frames emerged. Finally, an in-depth questionnaire was shared with highly involved YouTube users who commented on *The Scarecrow*. For the questionnaire, 119 individuals who had posted at least two comments were invited to an online questionnaire via the YouTube messaging system, yielding a 16% response rate.

### **3. Findings**

#### *3.1. Dialogue between stakeholders*

Evidence indicated multiple visits, engagement, and dialogical loops between commenters, even with no evidence of Chipotle's participation in the conversation. Frequency counts of YouTube posts per user were generated to determine if commenters were posting once and moving on, or if they remained on the site to engage in conversation. The sample of 1000 comments was posted by 590 individuals, and 20% of this group posted 2 or more comments. The number of comments posted per person ranged from 1 to 70. About 6.6% of users were 'engaged' posters with 4 or more comments, while 1.7% of users were 'heavy' posters with 8 or more comments. These

two groups were responsible for 39.5% of all posts in the sample. To assess Chipotle's level of organizational engagement, we followed Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) and operationalized dialogic loops as Chipotle's participation in discussions with stakeholder groups (e.g., posing a question in the comments, sharing information, stimulating dialogue among posters, or responding to user comments). There was no activity by Chipotle within the sample; individual viewers made all posts. There was some evidence of dialogic loops among posters, however. Of the 1000-post sample, 43% of posts were original comments while 57% of posts were replies. While Chipotle did not participate in the conversation it created on YouTube, the frequency of user interactions and replies showed that *The Scarecrow* succeeded in creating dialogue from stakeholder to stakeholder.

### *3.2. Sentiment and debate*

Dialogue requires some difference in opinion and emotional engagement among participants; dialogue cannot occur when all people engaged in discussion feel the same way or do not have emotional connections to the subject (Pieczka, 2011). This study found that commenters became deeply involved, often engaging in multiple conversations and conveying strong opinions about Chipotle's video and the food production industry. Sentiment analysis revealed that comments in the sample were more negative (48%) or neutral (39%), than positive (13%), and allowed us to identify and closely examine comments with strong positive or negative sentiment, which were used for the framing analysis. In conducting the framing analysis, close attention was paid to how commenters discussed food and agricultural issues, groups responsible for current challenges, and potential solutions to the food crisis. Conversations were found to focus on three main solutions: **vegetarianism or veganism** (debate focused on ending all animal agricultural practices); increased **agricultural literacy** (debate focused on increasing public knowledge about, and respect for, current farmer efforts); and support for more **sustainable food production practices** (debate ranged from conversations for or against genetically modified organisms [GMOs] to decreasing farm size to using organic production methods). Dialogue — sustained with statements and counter-statements — did occur among audience members, as online discussions surpassed surface, emotional reactions

or attacks on the video or other users. Users engaged in discussions that addressed a diverse set of issues, potential solutions, and responsibility for food challenges, and they framed these problems in competing ways.

### *3.3. Organizational reputation*

Chipotle did not emerge unscathed in its attempt to spark a conversation about food practices. Some commenters described Chipotle as a manipulative organization that cannot be trusted and expressed anger at Chipotle for presenting misleading information about agriculture practices and insulting farmers. Alternatively, other commenters celebrated *The Scarecrow* video as a bold move and applauded company efforts to take a strong stance on food production issues. These commenters believed Chipotle was authentically trying to “cultivate a caring, compassionate world” and wanted other businesses to do the same. Respondents also noted Chipotle set high expectations for what “food with integrity” means. They interpreted the video as endorsing a vegan lifestyle and local, organic produce; a vision Chipotle cannot deliver on completely, given meat offerings on its menu and supply limitations of sustainably sourced ingredients. Users acknowledged these limitations and questioned Chipotle’s authenticity and motives.

## **4. Discussion**

Online response to *The Scarecrow* offers evidence that Chipotle has, at least in some part, successfully fulfilled its goal of “starting a conversation” about food. Many people became deeply involved, often engaging in multiple conversations and conveying strong opinions about Chipotle’s video and the food production industry. This research found that, while Chipotle did not participate in discussions on YouTube, there was evidence of significant engagement among publics. This may add insight to Bortree and Seltzer’s (2009) finding that organizational participation is necessary for high rates of engagement. The high level of online engagement is likely due to pre-existing, entrenched ‘food wars’ attitudes; this research suggests organizational participation might not be as necessary for high rates of user engagement when content is polarizing and emotional.

With *The Scarecrow* video Chipotle was not only working to build relationships; it also detached itself and broke ties with agricultural stakeholders. It is a unique relationship-building strategy: Chipotle ultimately provoked one stakeholder group in order to cement alliances with another group. This has implications for relationship-building, especially if alienated stakeholders are part of the supply chain. Chipotle did not emerge unscathed in the conversation it sparked, as evidenced by high negative sentiment scores and competing frames present in discussions, as well as the conclusions from many commenters that Chipotle was perpetuating myths and “bashing” the agriculture community. This study suggests there is danger in simply talking about dialogue rather than actually engaging in it. The complete study is available and can be requested from the authors.

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