Book Review

Chao Guo and Gregory D. Saxton. 2020. *The Quest for Attention: Nonprofit Advocacy in a Social Media Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Reviewed by **David A. Campbell**, Department of Public Administration, Binghamton University, Binghamton, New York, USA, E-mail: dcamp@binghamton.edu

If the level of activity I see on my Twitter timeline by fellow academics is any indication, new research on the quest for attention on social media should be of particular interest to many pandemic-constrained scholars like me, whose recent work and personal lives have been defined by social distancing, working and teaching from home, conferences made virtual, and related frustrations. For those of you so defined, the arrival of *The Quest for Attention: Nonprofit Advocacy in a Social Media Age,* by Chao Guo and Gregory Saxton may prove valuable, even though its focus is organizations not individuals. The book addresses how nonprofit advocacy organizations use social media and whether it generates the attention they seek. I recommend the book wholeheartedly. It makes important advances in our understanding of nonprofit organizations' social media behavior, particularly the effectiveness of different tactical choices used in the practice of advocacy. The work has many features valuable both for scholars in the growing field of nonprofit social media research, as well as for faculty who teach courses in nonprofit management, policy advocacy, and communication strategy, for which it would be an accessible classroom resource

While there is a growing body of research about the social media practices of nonprofit organizations, the primary focus of much of it is the extent to which nonprofit organizations are present on social media and how they engage with the public (see, for example, Campbell and Lambright 2019; Lovejoy and Saxton 2012; Young 2017, among many others). The value of this book is that it moves beyond that important first phase in our learning to a next level set of questions, and begins to get at the consequences of the social media choices organizations make. In essence, it is an initial effort to assess effectiveness, in one specific context and subsector: advocacy and advocacy organizations. This move is a welcome development. While the field has benefited from the growing understanding of the social media choices nonprofit organizations make, that work has had limited ability to inform practice, one of the most critical benefits of nonprofit management research. While we may understand the choices organizations make, we do not know whether those choices advance goals that are important to those organizations. Guo and Saxton's book not only elevates the effectiveness question but it

accomplishes two other important goals. It advances our understanding of the adaptations in strategy advocacy organizations have made in response to the emergence of social media, and demonstrates the use of methodological innovations of value to the field more broadly.

The authors organize the book into six parts. In Chapter One, Social Media and Nonprofit Advocacy: Beginning of a New Paradigm, the authors identify the main themes of the book, introducing overviews of nonprofit advocacy and research on social media and advocacy. The chapter also introduces "attention" (as in "getting attention") as a primary goal of social media advocacy, and the focus of the book's analysis. Chapter Two, The Context of Social Media Advocacy, provides the conceptual foundation for the book's analysis of social media, including the multiplicity of forms and how they function as a tool for advocacy. The third chapter, Getting Attention, discusses the authors' model accounting for why organizations do or do not receive attention on social media. Chapter Four, Building an Explanatory Model, extends the model developed in the third chapter, moving from organizational level analyses of attention to message level analyses of attention, in an attempt to deepen understanding of the factors contributing to attention, by assessing and adding variables to their model. The fifth chapter, Beyond Clicktivism uses three case studies to move from the model predicting attention, to discussions of the methods by which advocacy organizations can build on the benefits related to the attention they generate. The final chapter, the Future of Nonprofit Advocacy in a Data-Driven World, summarizes the work that precedes it and discusses implications for practice.

While the context for book is the advocacy role of nonprofit organizations, social media is the lens through which they examine it. The idea they are most interested in is "attention," as the result nonprofit organizations seek when they engage on social media, in particular, those organizations that specialize in advocacy. The authors' use Robert Bellah's famous quote that "democracy is paying attention," (p. 154) to frame the discussion of advocacy organizations' interest in "*getting* attention"; this framing is a valuable reminder of the essential role nonprofit advocacy organizations play in democratic processes.

The book defines what attention is, what determines whether organizations get attention, and the implications of those determinants for our understanding of the role social media, particularly Twitter, can play as an influencing strategy for nonprofit advocacy organizations. In simpler terms, the analysis seeks to understand "what drives the public's attention to an organization and its cause," (p. 18), and what the audience's reaction is to the tools the organizations use. How the public reacts to the social media activity undertaken by an organization refers to actions such as retweeting, favoriting, and commenting, which are indicators of attention and, as such, effectiveness.

The authors discuss relevant social media research, and introduce the conceptual framework that provides the basis for their analysis. They consider first the development and evolution of the Internet, and then provide a conceptualization of the different ways in which social media makes it possible for organizations to get attention. They note that organizations can use a variety of "connecting actions," to relate to their audience, both through their own messages (user mentions, hashtags, and hyperlinks), as well as through their "interactions with other users' messages," by replying, liking or sharing content (p. 39). In addition, they note the role of the social network organizations create and of which they are a part. They use the idea of the "attention economy," arguing that it is "zero sum," that is, that organizations are in competition with each other for attention, and that the size and scope of social networks are critical components in that attention competition (p. 48).

They test their model in two ways, at the organization and message levels, discussed in the third and fourth chapters respectively. Given their focus on determining what accounts for the attention advocacy organizations get on Twitter, the authors build on the model they presented in a 2018 *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* article (Guo and Saxton 2018). The model includes both the size of organizations' social media networks as well as three elements related to the messages themselves: the "timing and pacing" (p. 62) of messages, or when they tweet and how often; their "targeting and connecting strategy" (p. 63), that is the devices organizations embed in their tweets such as hashtags, or tweeting at specific people; and finally the message "content" (p. 66), the kind of language or information organizations include in their tweets. Using a sample of 216,127 tweets from 167 Charity Navigator rated advocacy organizations, the authors find some support for each of the elements in their model, and identify the particular value of some elements, including network size, frequency of tweets, use of hashtags, and visual content, such as pictures and language that conveys values. Each of these variables contributes to attention. Other variables, notably, the volume of public reply messages were negatively associated with attention. I found this latter result particularly compelling, given the interest of early nonprofit social media research on its dialogic potential for organizations (such as Bortree and Seltzer 2009). Audiences may be less interested in direct conversation with users, than they are in engagement through hashtags that supply them with information and the opportunity to take action.

The authors move from a discussion of organization level to message level predictors of attention. Guo and Saxton's goal is to develop a more parsimonious model of what drives audience attention. To accomplish this goal, they note that they cannot assume predictors are the same at the organization and message level. To identify predictors that previous research may have ignored, they employ

machine learning techniques, that are relatively new to nonprofit studies. The use of these techniques, and the role they play in expanding Guo and Saxton's models is one of the notable contributions of this volume. I like that they provide a detailed appendix that describes the techniques they use, so that the methods discussion does not interrupt the flow of the narrative. Nonetheless, the description of methods that they provide in the chapter is clear, and should be accessible to most readers. These techniques facilitate the effective use of big data. They discuss three primary steps, "feature engineering," which enabled them to identify 133 possible variables for inclusion in their model; "feature selection," by which they narrowed the initial 133 down to 24, in seven categories; and finally, testing the model (p. 85). The results of this analysis align closely with the organization level analysis, but add three new categories, to the four identified as part of the organization level analysis that affect attention: "tweet sophistication," "account features," and "organizational sophistication" (p. 110). Variables in each of these categories were significant, though the most prominent drivers of attention appear to be organizational level and network characteristics, and as the authors conclude "*who* is doing the speaking appears to play a crucial role in determining the level of attention and advocacy organization's message receives" (p. 111).

The authors end the book with case studies of three advocacy organizations. The case studies focus on two sets of analyses. The first considers the tweeting activity of each organization to identify patterns related to when organizations had the most tweeting activity and generated attention among the public. The second derives themes from six interviews of leaders of the three organizations. These analyses allow the authors to identify six social media advocacy strategies and six broad themes elaborating those choices taken from the interviews. The interviews capture the adaptations nonprofit organizations have made to integrate social media into their advocacy strategy. While long-established elements of advocacy strategy persist, such as employing a multiplicity of tactics in concert, mobilizing citizens, and coalition building, social media complements and enhances those tactics, and has the potential to make them more powerful.

The use of interviews here is notable and strengthens the book considerably. The voices of nonprofit leaders are infrequently heard in nonprofit sector social media research. The vast majority of recent research use quantitative analyses to infer what organizations are doing and why. The reliance on quantitative methods is not surprising, given the ready availability of data. The absence of qualitative data, however, often lead to speculation about the thinking behind organizational behavior. Mixed methods approaches, such as those used here, provide researchers with an intimate view of organizational decision-making and contributes to a more nuanced and complete understanding of the choices organizations make.

As compelling as I find this book, it does leave me with some questions, which I see more as challenges based on the limitations of their data and areas for future research. Guo & Saxton use a sample of advocacy organizations rated by Charity Navigator. It is a reasonable choice given the research questions. However, the sample does have shortcomings. Charity Navigator is a nonprofit rating organization, and it evaluates a relatively small subset of all United States charities, about 9000 in total (Charity Navigator 2020). The criteria it selects for rating organizations limits its reach to larger, more established organizations; in fact, the youngest organization in the sample used for this book was 11°years old. Using a set of established organizations captures the practice of the largest, and perhaps most active organizations; however, that group may not be fully representative. I wonder whether including younger, smaller, more grass-roots organizations might change the findings and model in any meaningful ways. Similarly, while many nonprofit organizations engage in advocacy, not all of them are "advocacy organizations," so defined. It is worth considering how other nonprofit organizations engage in advocacy and whether the same factors affect their ability to generate attention, given that membership and community-based organizations may have closer connections to their constituents. Finally, while the authors provide a valuable summary on the use of a cross section of social media platforms by nonprofit organizations, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, in addition to Twitter (p. 31), their analysis considers only Twitter. This choice, too, seems reasonable, but may reflect the different role Twitter plays as a social media platform when compared to others, particularly as a setting for advocacy. In the case study section of the book, the authors note the coordination of advocacy across multiple social media platforms. It would be useful to know more about how Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube are used as advocacy tools, in large measure, because it is clear that nonprofit organizations already use each of them as part of their strategy to generate attention on social media. As such, it is worth considering whether the phenomenon the authors are studying is about the relationship between advocacy organizations and Twitter, or whether the findings and conceptual framework they have developed is generalizable across social media settings.

The Quest for Attention makes a needed contribution to our understanding of both social media and advocacy in the nonprofit sector. Guo and Saxton continue to be leaders in social media scholarship. They both advance knowledge and demonstrate the effective use of a multiplicity of methodological tools to accomplish that goal. Their work is eminently readable, and of value to both scholars and students.

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