

The Era of Digital Activism

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Abstract

The world is in the midst of a digital revolution. The new tools of social media have reinvented social activism. The purpose of the paper is to provide a framework and terminology to use when referring to digital activism and to provide and understanding of the fundamental difference between traditional activism as it existed for decades and as it has now transformed itself into a sharper and more focused tool with the use of digital technology.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Social Media

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is in the midst of a digital revolution. The new tools of social media have reinvented social activism. Over the past decade, people around the globe have become increasingly aware of and interested in the expanding use of digital technologies, computers, mobile phones, and other Internet enabled devices, in the battle for social and political change. These practices, AKA "digital activism," have been approached by journalists, picked apart by bloggers, and enthusiastically studied by scholars, students, activists, and corporations who desire to understand and derive conclusions concerning such a controversial and disagreed upon topic. The subject of digital activism is often associated with stories and case studies: tales of political campaigns, like Barack Obama's, that used a social network to mobilize volunteers; inspiring

stories from Iran or Moldova about citizens broadcasting mobile phone videos on YouTube or giving protest updates on Twitter. These tales are analyzed, reported, and critiqued. And finally lessons are derived and best practices are imitated. The field, nonetheless, is fragmented. Thus, in order to properly depict digital activism, this paper will look into the fundamentals of digital activism as well as the practices, arguments, and effects associated with the field today.

The purpose of the paper is to provide a framework and terminology to use when referring to digital activism and to provide and understanding of the fundamental difference between traditional activism as it existed for decades and as it has now transformed itself into a sharper and more focused tool with the use of digital technology.

Digital Activism Defined

Traditionally, activism is defined as “the doctrine or practice of rigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goal, sometimes by demonstrations protests, etc.” (www.dictionary.com). Just as the field of digital activism is jumbled, so is the terminology. In fact, some would argue that “digital activism” is not even the proper term for the use of technology for activism. Although the phrase “digital activism” is challenged, we elected to use it due to the fact that it best describes the speed, reliability, scale, and low cost of the Internet. Factors such as these are precisely what enable the scale and scope of modern-day activism.

The term, digital activism, describes activities or practices that are both in-depth and exclusive. In-depth in that it encompasses all social and a political campaigning practice that use digital network infrastructure; exclusive in that it excludes practices that are not examples of this type of practice (Joyce, 2010). Therefore, because of its exhaustive and exclusive nature, “digital activism” is the best term to discuss all instances of activism that use digital network infrastructure.

2. The Digital Activism Environment

The environment of digital activism refers both to the digital technology that is used in a given activism movement and to the economic, social, and political context in which such technology use occurs. Digital technology infrastructure, the combination of networks, code, applications, and devices that make up the physical infrastructure of digital activism, is a starting point but not an ending point. Differences in economic, social, and political factors ultimately alter how activists use this technology. In view of the fact that this paper has to do more with the technology side of activism we only briefly touch on the economic, social, and political circumstances of digital activism.

Technological Infrastructure

The infrastructure of digital activism is centered on a digital network, an interconnected group of devices that use digital code to convey information. The advantage of networks is that connectivity is distributed. Networks do not only link us to the center, but they also connect us to

each other as well. Therefore, allowing large groups of people to easily link to one another, exchange content, and coordinate acts, in turn, aiding the ability to create an effective political movement. Several different physical materials are used in the production of networks. The materials used in one country are not necessarily the materials that are used in another. This is an example of how the interaction of infrastructure, economic, social, and political factors leads to different digital activism outcomes. Modern cable infrastructure, such as fiber optic, which transmits a signal more quickly, is more expensive than older and slower cable. Thus, those living in rich countries are likely to have a faster Internet connection than those who live in poorer countries (Joyce, 2010.) Politics contribute to this point as well. For example, in many developing countries, state-owned firms have historically monopolized Internet service, leading to higher prices. As a result, people in wealthier countries are usually more able to participate in digital activism because the cost and quality of Internet connections available to them.

If materials are what differentiate digital networks, then codes, the series of the digits 1 and 0 that transmit all information on the Internet, are what unify them. Therefore, digital code is the universal medium of digital activism. If an activist in Gaza wants to upload a digital video, so that a college student in Texas can watch it, digital code is what transmits those images and sounds. Technology theorist Lawrence Lessig (2010) described the nature of digital as “perfect copies, freely made.” If you create any piece of content and upload it to a digital network, a copy of that content will become immediately transmissible to anyone else in the world with Internet access. The whole world speaking one language, that’s the power of digital code. Even though we use digital networks to transmit 0’s and 1’s to one another, digital activism is not thought of in terms of code but in terms of applications.

Applications are the software programs that decode those 0’s and 1’s into information we understand. Luckily, digital infrastructure is, according Jonathan Zittrain (2008), “generative.” People can easily develop applications that operate on top of the network and create content using those applications, both of which may not have been intended by their creators (Joyce, 2010). Take for example

the creators of Facebook, a group of US college students, most likely didn't see it as a worldwide activist tool, but it is in fact just that. Similarly, Twitter's founders probably did not envision that their service would be used to publicize protests in Moldova. Though committed activist applications and open source software do contribute, most digital activists select commercial applications such as Blogs, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook to do their work. It is through these applications that network infrastructure is defined. The visibility element that these applications bring to digital activism is the main reason so many books, blogs, and teachings concentrate on the use of such specific applications (AKA "apps") for political and social change campaigns. However, applications are a weak base for an analysis of digital activism due to the fact that they are constantly changing, gain popularity through media hype just as much (or maybe more) than does actual utility, and result in outcomes that are subject to location factors. With that being said, applications are just one part of the digital activism environment. The reason there is such a strong association with them is not because they are more essential than other factors, but because they are what defines our encounter of digital activism.

People base their assessment of such applications on "end devices," the piece of hardware that connects the user to the network. Today the most common end devices are the computer and mobile phone. Although this may soon change, computers currently allow for a wider range of applications than mobile phones because most mobile phones are restricted to Short Message Service (SMS) and calling, while the Internet allows activists to connect to all the applications on the Internet. With the release of digital technologies, such as the Apple's iPad and the rise of smartphones are prime examples of the narrowing line between these types of devices. This change has and will continue to produce more superior and less expensive devices for activists and thus a greater volume will be able to use digital infrastructure as a tool for political and social change.

Other Contextual Factors

Digital technology is the infrastructure of the digital activism environment. However, economic, social, and political factors are what

inevitably determine how and if people employ a digital infrastructure.

Economic: The economic power of digital activists, their ability to buy digital goods and services, affects their digital activism practices. For example, because more individuals in wealthy countries are able to pay for Internet services, these markets are more profitable for firms to enter, leading to greater competition and lower prices. As a result, more people can become involved in activism. Economics also affects the type of hardware activists can buy. The high price of computers, consequently, affects accessibility making these high-functionality devices more accessible to those with financial resources. This, in turn, greatly affects digital activism participation rates. Although, it does not directly prohibit citizens with limited financial means from taking part in digital activism, it does limit their ability. Luckily the growing worldwide digital phone use has increased the availability of such tools for effective digital activism in many parts of the world.

Social: Norms of a society can also significantly control whether and how an individual utilizes digital technology for activism. Just as there are expectations about how one should act or what one should wear, expectations concerning digital activism exist. These expectations will differ amongst social groups and are usually based on characteristics such as: age, gender, religion, education, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

Political: Political factors also influence activism. In democratic societies, where citizens have meaningful influence over the actions of their government, the political context of digital activism can be understood in terms of law and regulation. However, repressive and authoritarian governments do not limit themselves to legal channels when determining the digital activism environment. In these countries, even activists who have access to digital technologies have difficulties using them because of government-imposed limitations. For example, governments sometimes track online political speech and/or block applications used by digital activists. Often such online obstruction leads to offline persecution and even imprisonment.

3. Value of Digital Activism

The value of digital activism is not always crystal clear. For example, one case of digital activism might illustrate how digital technology is strengthening social movements by providing new tools and capacities, while another could exemplify a new world in which new tools not only assist but transform the way activists can interact with one another and with supporters. This inconsistency raises the important questions concerning the ultimate value of digital activism. The issue of whether digital activism does or doesn't have value has become a popular debate amongst several bloggers, journalist and scholars and in turn made a range of viewpoints and opinions obtainable. Every new technology, even those that are designed for lay-people, has a learning curve. It should be expected that the newest technologies will probably be used in a different way six months after their introduction than they were used on the first day of their introduction.

The Digital Activism Debate

There are three basic perspectives on the value of digital activism: optimists, pessimists, and persistents. The first two categories entail a basic positive or negative viewpoint on the potential of digital technology to alter the distribution of political power. While optimists believe that digital activism will change existing political hierarchies and empower citizens, pessimists believe that digital technology is just as likely to be used to put forth illicit authority or promote chaos. Like optimists, pessimists also believe that digital technology will have an impact on the world, but they see the technology as morally impartial, uniformly useful for constructive and destructive motives. Pessimists use the moral neutrality argument to underline the possibility of destructive behavior and to counter the optimists, who tend to be more optimistic about human nature in general and view the moral nature of the Internet as a reflection of the moral nature of its users. The third category, "persistent", refers to those who see neither deliverance nor damnation in digital technology, but instead believe that little will change and previous political power distributions will "persist." Persistents can be optimistic or pessimistic about digital technology, but they feel it doesn't matter much for activism. Thus, they differ from the other two groups as their optimism or pessimism about digital activism's outcomes is less important in defining their intellectual identity than is their opinion about

what author David Weinberger calls "web exceptionalism." Simply put, they do not believe that the Web, and by extension digital activism, is exceptional. The same rules of politics still apply and technology will not change existing power structures, either for good or for ill (Weinberger, 2010).

Optimistic Perspective: The optimistic view, as put forth by such scholars as Yochai Benkler, Clay Shirky, and Graeme Kirkpatrick, is founded on two basic principles. First, according to Benkler (2006), the networked nature of the digital world allows for people to communicate and take action outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, traditional hierarchical power structures. In a hierarchy, those at the top have power over those at the bottom; networks have a much latter power distribution, with authority defined by peer-to-peer relationships. The hope is that the nature of power in the digital network will change the nature of power in the real world as digital networks become ever more integrated into our lives. The second principle of digital optimism, as put forth elegantly by Graeme Kirkpatrick (2008) is that technology is "socially constructed." This means that users construct the value and meaning of technology by how they use it, for example, choosing an entertainment platform like YouTube and using it to transmit alternative political content. In this way, the optimistic view proposes a more just and egalitarian future, along with a means of achieving this future that empowers the ordinary user to create meaning.

Pessimistic Perspective: Many of the pessimistic views of technology, on the other hand, hinge on the fear of anti-democratic control of technology. The journalist and blogger Morozov (2010) is one of the most well-known proponents of this view. He points out that digital technology provides new methods of control, surveillance, and persecution for repressive governments, as well as the ability to empower destructive individuals like hackers and terrorists to coordinate their actions and use the network to attack targets that would previously have been beyond their reach. This argument is substantial. The physical infrastructure of the Internet exists within territorial boundaries, even if its capacities are virtual. It is at the level of physical infrastructure that governments can block access to content and track the online actions of citizens. Networks also enhance the effectiveness of surveillance as all content can

now be directed through the same gateways and "read" as it passes by, a convenience unavailable in the days of paper notes and whispered messages. Following this logic, digital technology may endanger activists more than it helps them.

Persistent Perspective: Similar to the pessimists, the persistents are not too impressed by digital activism. They believe that networked technology signals a change in the degree of activism practice. It simply makes existing offline tactics like mobilization, organization, and message dissemination more effective. Persistents like Marshall Ganz, an architect of President Obama's grassroots organizing campaign in 2008, focus on the fact that digital tools facilitate activities that were already possible offline, only more slowly or at greater cost. For every e-petition, a paper petition could also have been circulated. For every Facebook group, a house party could have been held. We can all acknowledge that, because institutions of political and social power exist offline, all digital campaigns must at some point make the leap into the real world if they are to be successful (Ganz and Kohn, 2010). Persistents take this logic one step further. They do not believe that the cumulative digital effect of bigger, cheaper, faster, and further will lead to fundamentally different kinds of activism, only to potentially improved versions of current ones.

4. Digital Activism in the Corporate World

In the previous sections we saw how the Internet can be an effective tool for activism, especially when combined with other digital technologies. It can benefit individuals and small groups with few resources as well as organizations and coalitions that are large or well funded. It facilitates such activities as educating the public and media, raising money, forming coalitions across geographical boundaries, distributing petitions and action alerts, and planning and coordinating events on a regional or international level. But what effect has digital activism had on corporations? What about brand image? Is it something managers should be concerned with?

Anti-Brand Consumer Activism: As a counterattack against capitalism, there has been a growing resistance towards certain brands and corporate globalization. Consumers online have increasingly begun to oppose global brands and express concerns about corporate practices

related to environmental issues and human rights. Through the use of digital technologies consumer activist have been able to form online anti-brand communities and grow online in record numbers. Anti-brand activists typically focus on one dominant brand or corporation and are non-geographically bound based on a structured set of social relationships. According to Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010) Anti-brand activists could oppose specific brands (e.g., Jeep, Marlboro cigarettes), but could also oppose corporate brands (e.g., Wal-Mart, Procter & Gamble). In anti-brand communities, consumers take on social activists roles by voicing their opposition towards corporations. Anti-branding demonstrations are emerging as a new form of consumer activism and these activist strategies have received more recognition in recent years as consumer rebellion is viewed as a worldwide social movement. Historically social movements have emerged in a geographical pattern, revolving around physical gathering spaces. Today social movements are transpiring in virtual space, which sets the stage for new forms of protest, organization, cooperation, and coalition building. In this way, digital technology plays a major role in the anti-brand activist movement by providing communication methods for people around the globe irrespective of geographical space or time.

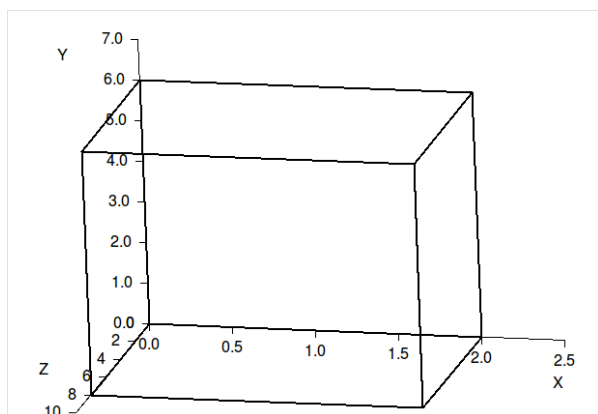
Pros and Cons for Corporations: From a negative point of view, participation in anti-brand activism does not require much time or energy. As a result, they serve as a powerful consumer agency and information resource. Consumers have instant access to an empathizing audience and to historical accounts of accusations against the firm. These communities also provide social benefits as the Internet enables one consumer to connect with a group of other likeminded consumers. Their common negative stance against the firm unifies members, and as a community, the group has more marketplace power. The Internet enhances marketplace power by providing members with a speedy, convenient, and anonymous means of communication. With easy access and widespread communication, anti-brand activists have the ability to damage a firm's brand name.

On the positive side of anti-brand activism for firms includes the notion that these activism communities serve as a means for rejuvenating business functions. The Internet provides an open forum for discussion about branding

activities and it also serves as a free marketing research tool. Activism communities can incite firms to recognize innovative branding opportunities. By viewing the communities as a natural occurrence in society, one of which provides opportunities to improve business functions, firms could turn a possible negative brand impact into a possible brand improvement. For example, Wal-Mart, is currently putting this idea into practice by demonstrating its dedication to local communities during store-opening ceremonies. As a creative means for building customer relationships, Wal-Mart invites the community to a grand opening that centers around personal testimonies from employees and retirees, greetings from local officials, and the giving away of prizes. This community-building strategy is aimed at winning the trust of local consumers and reversing the claims of anti-Wal-Mart groups.

The impact that technology has had on the business world is undeniable. New digital technologies have and will continue to impact corporations, and in the case of digital activism this is no different. From the public relation challenges presented by anti-brand activists to the creation of a new platform for improving business functions from feedback, digital activism is and will continue to be an important topic with the corporate world; one of which that definitely should not be overlooked.

5. Activism Impact Assessment Model



In addition to compressing time and space, the most important characteristic of information that

is transmitted through digital activism, is that it is not transmitted by the traditional media. It is not filtered, it is not edited, and it is not accompanied by a well-written script of a professional journalist. It is raw footage of video or text that is potentially broadcast live to the world. It is subject to interpretation and misinterpretation. It will need to be put into perspective nearly immediately after it is transmitted but it can have significant impact even before it is analyzed. Early reaction might be skeptical and sketchy as events unfold.

Given the examples that we have cited, we offer a model that can be used to assess the net positive impact of a digital activism effort. The model is a 3-dimensional view of the potential impact of a digital activism effort. In general the 3 axes represent the following:

X-axis: This is the most important/critical axis. The other two depend on it. Among other things, x- axis represents digital technology that is used for activism. If there is no digital technology present then the entire model collapses to nothing; there will be zero digital activism. X-axis includes all the digital resources that the activists can put forth to promote their cause. This includes the number of people engaged, the kind and volume of information technology used, how many smart phones, how many twitter accounts, how many Facebook accounts, how many computers, how many websites, blogs, etc. exist, pushing the activists' messages out to the rest of the world. The lower the value of x is, then the lower the impact of the activism effort will be.

Y-axis: This axis represents the physical or virtual geographic reach. This axis represents the physical or virtual geographic reach that the activists' message manages to get to. The revolution in Egypt might not have succeeded had it remained contained within Egypt. It is because it managed to transcend geography and reaching the entire globe that it succeeded in ousting Mubarak's regime. In many efforts, the scope of axis y can be delineated very well. In Egypt, the effort maximized its geographic potential. The messages coming out of Egypt reached the entire globe, regenerated and multiplied and bounced back into Egypt where they had the effect of becoming the norm because of the local and global support.

Z-axis: This axis represents the number of

people or high impact organizations (United Nations, NATO, Doctors without borders, etc.) that start empathizing or start reacting positively to the activists' messages. Axis z represents the total amount of "support for the cause," expressed near or far from the "hotspot" where the activism has its nucleus. The activism may start in a few cells in Cairo neighborhoods and quickly start receiving support from Egyptian immigrant neighborhood cells in Toronto Canada. The stronger the support given to the cause through the factors on axis z is then the stronger the possibility is that the activists' effort will be successful. But without the presence of the digital means from axis x to spread the activism, the possibility of success is diminished.

Measurement

One soft way that we can use this model to measure the effects of digital media used in the activism effort is to estimate the volume of the 3-dimensional rectangle created on the grid (see graph 1.) The volume can be indicative of the power of the activism, which may have turned into a full scale revolution in many cases. In many cases we can clearly mark the beginning of the movement and day the deposed dictator was ran out of town.

5. The Future of Digital Activism

When thinking about digital activism, focus tends to shift more to the technical characteristics. However, what is most important to keep in mind about digital activism is that it is first and foremost activism. Political, social, and consumer-driven activism are all practices that can be defined by individuals working collectively to achieve a common purpose. Therefore, group actions no matter whether activists organize face-to-face, over the phone, or via a social networking site, are all faced with the same group action challenges. Challenges such as: How to get people to join, how to coordinated action, how should we pursue our purpose, and who/what is your adversary and how will who/it be confronted. For these questions, technology is not the answer. Instead, these new technology should be used as tools to change the ways such issues are confronted, making some tasks easier, others more challenging, and leaving many unchanged. Thus, I believe the most important concern of digital technologies in activism will lie neither in

the creation of "digital activism" nor in a universal transformation of activism but in the integration of such new tools and the implantation of new and innovative practices.

6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Today we are living amidst a revolution in our communications environment. But, like all other revolutions, it is individual acts, some continuations of existing orders, others discontinuous and innovative, that when combined create change. Thus, in this digital world, where individuals have more capacity to learn, communicate, and collaborate than ever before, the ability of these individual acts of digital activism have more potential than ever before to create a real change.

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