

Activism Vs. Slacktivism

Today's activists are highly plugged into social media, mobile apps, and other digital tools. But does this make a difference where it matters most?

IF YOU NEED convincing that the state of activism in the digital age is alive and well, look no further than the Web site for the Program on Liberation Technology at Stanford University.

On the program's high-profile email list group, a consumer advocate gives updates about the California Public Utilities Commission's investigation into a proposed merger of AT&T and T-Mobile. Another user promotes a letter-writing campaign to urge federal lawmakers to protect funding for the Directorate for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences at the National Science Foundation. And a third offers cautionary advice to fellow organizers: "Don't type anything you wouldn't want snooped on your iPad. Someone has developed software which uses computer vision to do keylogging."

Other postings focus on the Arab spring, environmental sustainability, and a host of other progressive causes, which is understandable since the Stanford program's stated purpose is "to understand how information technology can be used to defend human rights, improve governance, empower

No one disputes that activists' online efforts draw greater attention to a cause, but opinion varies with respect to whether they make a significant, lasting impact.



Engaged or disengaged? A pair of protesters with their smartphones at an anti-Al Khalifa protest last February in London, England.

the poor, promote economic development, and pursue a variety of other social goods."

Of course, there's plenty to find on the right-leaning side of the ideological table. At TeaPartyPatriots.org, for example, you can use a locator to track down events scheduled in your city or state, buy a Tea Party Patriots coloring book, and join a Government Accountability Project group.

The upshot is no matter what your cause is, you can find a great way to connect these days. Activists are making full use of blogs, social media sites, mobile apps, and other tools to promote their message and gain support. Nothing grabs the heartstrings like video, and participants are producing streaming content to take advantage of this. It makes one think of how effective technology could have been through history. Consider how the U.S. founding fathers would have tweeted Paul Revere's famous cry as "Brits R Coming," post real-time video of his nighttime ride on Facebook, and solicit the French and other sympathetic European supporters for financial and

participatory support through Facebook, Kickstarter, and other sites.

Yet, while no one disputes that online initiatives like these draw greater attention to a cause, opinion varies with respect to whether they make a significant, lasting impact. A number of respected thinkers say technology does not really advance activism to achieve its most critical goals: to change the hearts and minds of the public, and effect real change.

On the other side of the debate are activists and other influencers who counter that the impact on hearts and minds cannot be measured. What can be measured are user-traffic numbers generated, e-petition signatures delivered, Facebook "like" counts, and other metrics that convey growing support.

A Contrarian View

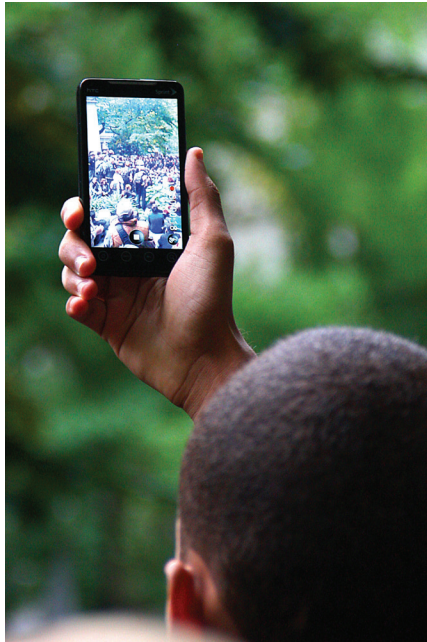
The conversation here is essentially positioned as a debate over activism versus slacktivism. The latter term refers to people who are happy to click a "like" button about a cause and may make other nominal, supportive ges-

tures. But they're hardly inspired with the kind of emotional fire that forces a shift in public perception. A telling, supportive anecdote: A popular technique of organizers on all sides of the political spectrum is an online letter-writing campaign in which supporters are encouraged to simply copy and paste from a template form of the letter. Participants aren't asked to come up with their own words. It's not even clear if they read the entire content of the letters they send. Does a simple "copy/paste/send" act constitute activism at its finest?

In one of the more widely discussed articles casting doubt, *New Yorker* contributor Malcolm Gladwell maintains that successful efforts must engage participants by convincing them that they have a great personal stake in the consequences. Traditionally, highly effective movements evolved from within parties built upon "strong tie" personal connections, such as those among classmates and church members. Activism associated with social media, however, is dependent upon "weak tie" relationships, writes Gladwell. Organizers seek involvement from Twitter followers they have never met or Facebook friends with whom they would never otherwise stay in touch, according to Gladwell. These are loose networks, whereas meaningful activism requires strong, robust organizational structure.

Even in the case of the Arab spring—arguably the political movement most enhanced by multiple digital means—those casting doubt upon the influence of technology contend that the events would have mattered little if old-fashioned principles of activism were not applied: effectively planned mass assemblies in which passionate pleas for change were expressed. The fact that the Arab spring demonstrations got YouTubed, Facebooked, and tweeted is simply a logical progression in the continuing advancement of multimedia, just as broadcasting civil rights demonstrations on TV news during the 1960s at one time seemed novel in its ability to connect a cause with a nationwide audience.

In the end, activism has always been—and will always be—about people. Specifically, people who show up in person. Just witness the pro-



A protester captures the scene at an Occupy Portland rally in Portland, OR last October.

tests over collective-bargaining rights for state union employees in Wisconsin, as the liberal public-policy group MoveOn.org led a solidarity day in which 50,000 supporters turned out in all 49 other state capitals and raised more than \$3 million to support Wisconsin Democrats.

"The Wisconsin protest was old-school organizing, with a digital edge," says Dave Karpf, an assistant professor in communications/information at Rutgers University and a leading researcher on political blogs and Internet-mediated activist organizations. "Angry citizens felt their rights were being trampled, so they showed up and demonstrated. It was the largest extended labor action in a generation, and it was led by labor organizations, fighting for collective bargaining rights."

Similarly, the Tea Party isn't a new social movement either, according to Karpf. It's traditional conservatism that intelligently embraces new-media technologies. "The Tea Party's biggest successes—disrupting health-care town hall meetings, winning Republican primaries—were a boots-on-the-ground affair, with people arriving and causing a ruckus," says Karpf. "Web sites and Twitter were useful in helping activists identify those meetings more easily. But they're basically acting as

much more efficient phone trees."

Some of those downplaying the impact of online activism will even argue that its ability to generate "boots-on-the-ground" user engagement is overstated. Tufts University sociology professor Sarah Sobieraj likens modern efforts as more of an infatuation with technology with little to show for it. For her book, *Soundbitten: The Perils of Media-Centered Political Activism*, Sobieraj researched the methods of more than 50 different groups focused on shaping discourse—including United for Change, Pre-Born Protectors, and the Freedom and Equality League—and concluded that their Internet strategies have done little to influence the public.

Perhaps the greatest irony? As much as these groups enjoy beating up the mainstream media or claim that their use of new media is infinitely more effective than traditional media, these same groups covet coverage from major journalism outlets. "They're very old-media-centric," Sobieraj says. "When they talk about strategies, they're most focused on broadcast TV and even newspapers. If they get mentioned in a *New York Times* or *Boston Globe* feature, that's what they're really after."

Committed to Tech

People both involved with and supportive of online activism concede that they really cannot measure how much technology inspires people to "do something." But they say any kind of attention generated—either by mainstream press or otherwise—increases the opportunity to change minds and instigate action. The Internet has established platform upon platform to present a position in multiple formats. It allows for the exchange of views on a said position. It increases the capability for calls to action and pure organizational logistics. In other words, if the new techniques of activism serve to amplify and even help better organize the old, what is wrong with that?

Besides, technology and activism are a perfect match, says Brie Rogers Lowery, a contributing strategist for FairSay, an eCampaign consultancy. The very founding principle of Web 2.0 itself is based upon the same ideas that fuel efforts toward change. Those

principles include the need to interact, share, and pursue goals.

“Technology offers huge potential to connect,” says Rogers Lowery. “An obvious example is Obama’s election campaign, which was mobilized primarily online and utilized the full range of new media. But the use of technology in activism extends to all kinds of campaigns, such as the use of SMS in South Africa to report cases of child abuse in remote communities.”

Rogers Lowery, who organized a digital activism debate at Oxford University earlier this year, says it is time to move the discussion from the “cyber-skeptic view” that online activism is somehow less legitimate and inferior to older approaches. “Instead,” she says, “there’s a need to show how ‘old’ and ‘new’ activism can work together to serve.”

It is not simply a matter of using technology in greater numbers. It is about everyday citizens finding creative ways to exploit it in ways previously not conceived to advance a cause, supporters say. Pachube.com, for example, links activists to data tools that can help establish, manage, and share the quantified basis of their positions.

“We’ve had a Brooklyn user who built an alert system to help monitor

The Tea Party isn’t a new social movement, says Dave Karpf. It’s traditional conservatism that intelligently uses new-media technologies.

sewage and other contaminants in an effort to get citizens to keep the harbor cleaner,” says Ed Borden, who oversees technology and business development for Pachube. “We have another New Yorker who’s collecting data to support his contention of noise pollution created by the Federal Aviation Administration. In Japan, the citizens crowdsourced to come up with radiation data after the Fukushima disaster in March, self-organizing

using Twitter, blogs, and wikis. Data drives activism. The dialogue has reached a deafening point online and everyone has a cause. So it takes hard evidence to turn heads.”

Whether those heads remain turned—and join the cause—is subject to continued debate. □

Further Reading

Durbin, P.T.

Philosophy, activism, and computer and information specialists, *Ubiquity*, November 2007.

GetInvolved.ca

Social Media: Politics 2.0—The Power of the Citizen, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vrczoLm7Es&feature=autoplay&list=PLE8382F8E085EFF12&index=3&playnext=2>, Jan. 21, 2010.

Gladwell, M.

Small change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted, *The New Yorker*, Oct. 4, 2010.

Karpf, D.

Wisconsin and the limits of web power, *The Guardian*, Feb. 25, 2011.

Land, M.B.

Networked Activism, *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 22, 9/10, Sept. 28, 2009.

Dennis McCafferty is a Washington, D.C.-based technology writer.

© 2011 ACM 0001-0782/11/12 \$10.00

Technology

Low-Cost Robots Could Transform Science

A new generation of inexpensive robots could make the machines ubiquitous, opening up robotics to new areas of research, says James McLurkin, assistant professor of computer science and director of the robotics lab at Rice University.

“I wanted to have something the community could use to do research,” McLurkin says. “In order for this to have an impact, it has to be low cost.”

McLurkin studies multi-robot systems in which swarms of robots work together to perform a task, like searching a building for earthquake survivors. Much of the work in such systems has been done through computer simulations, because building many robots is too expensive. But now McLurkin has built a robot for about \$280, compared to \$2,000 for the previous version. He

is hoping for funding to allow him to sell his R-one machines to researchers and educators at cost.

“I think what he’s doing is great,” says Rodney Brooks, professor emeritus of robotics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and McLurkin’s undergraduate advisor. Brooks thinks cheap robots could have the same effect on his field that moving from expensive mainframes to desktops had in computing. “Every student having a robot, and then being able to get them to work together, will unleash creativity on the physical world in the way that the PC did on the cyberworld.”

The robots are inexpensive mainly because the spread of smartphones has driven down the cost of sophisticated electronics.

They contain integrated radio communications, infrared sensors, motors, and an embedded Python interpreter for programming.

McLurkin is interested in physical data structures, using robots as elements in an algorithm. A robot’s position in space can be a unit of information that can be manipulated by moving it around or keeping it in a particular orientation. A simple bubble sort algorithm, which sorts a list into the right order, can be rendered physical with robots. “Their position in the world indicates the state of the sort,” he explains.

This approach could provide a new way of thinking about the behavior of multi-robot systems. Instead of modeling the individual motions of hundreds or

thousands of robots, a daunting computational task, he hopes a physical algorithm of a handful of robots can act as an accurate representation of a larger group. That in turn will let him write new algorithms so the swarms can perform complex tasks.

Going from a handful to a large number of robots can actually transform a problem, he says. Instead of four robots wandering through a building with laser scanners to make a map, for instance, he could send in hundreds and make a map simply by noting the positions of the machines.

Having many affordable robots will let him test his ideas. “Until you put your robots where your mouth is, you really don’t know if you’ve got something,” McLurkin says.

—Neil Savage