

UNDERSTANDING ONLINE ACTIVISM: THE DYNAMICS OF ONLINE SUPPORT
FOR A CAUSE AND THE ROLE OF SLACKTIVISTS

By

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ABSTRACT

With the overarching goal of effecting social change, activism is strongly linked to the progression and evolution of society. As online mediums have grown in use, questions have been raised regarding their contributions to the successful carrying out of activism efforts. This paper touches on examples that fall on both sides of the debate, highlighting the beneficial (It Gets Better Campaign) and negative (Kony 2012) results that online mediums can facilitate, and even those that fall in the middle (Josh Hardy change.org). After identifying key factors that contribute to the successes and shortcomings of activist efforts involved in such examples, this paper addresses the increasing issue of slacktivism that has surfaced out of this online realm.

Through discussing the recent findings of Kristofferson et al, the linking of slacktivist actions (requiring minimal displays of support for a cause, as well as a lack of desire to exert more significant effort to enact meaningful change) to the level of an act's social observability, as well as impression management, self-consistency, and moral alignment motives, works toward supporting a few propositions. Namely, impression management motives should translate to the online realm, given the public nature of participants' involvement; online public displays of support should lead to meaningful contributions if alignment between causes and participants is nurtured; and the potential for negative effects of slacktivism should continue to increase, given the online realm's growing presence and increased touch points. Amidst these propositions, it becomes clear that it is the job of key stakeholders to leverage online tools properly and implement them in such a manner that facilitates and aligns with a thoughtful, strategic plan.

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INTRODUCTION

Activism has played a major role in life for many years. Activism is essentially efforts to promote, interfere with or direct change— whether political (American Civil Liberties Union’s work surrounding police misconduct), environmental (1970 Earth Day, leading to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency), social (the 1963 March on Washington surrounding freedom and job issues and attended by over 250,000 people), or economic (the Boston Tea Party, in which colonists took measures to prevent British taxation acts from creating a monopoly on tea). These actions are directed to governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), nonprofit organizations and cause groups, special interest groups and corporations to name a few. Traditionally, activism has involved a physical act— sit-ins, strikes, marches, letter writing and so forth.

Recently, however, activism has changed as new mediums have quickly developed into major influencing forces. Online tools and the prevalence of social media have made connecting with like-minded people and increasing the awareness of a cause much easier. For example, consider the role that Twitter played in the 2009 Iranian uprisings. Twitter offered protestors and their out of country supporters a medium through which they were empowered to participate in a conversation, share street level information in real time, organize in-person meetings, and gain a sense of unity through widespread awareness (Grossman, 2009). Additionally, social media was instrumental during the Arab Spring, helping to spread information on the topics of liberty, revolution and freedom, influence revolutionary activity across the region, elevate the public’s sense of shared grievances and potential for change, and translate online participation into organized, offline actions (Joseph, 2012). And it is not simply major political movements

that are being affected. Social media and the Internet play a major role for large-scale activism efforts as well as individual or small-scale efforts, as with Aaker's example of creating a bone marrow database based on the efforts to save one man's, Sameer Bahtia's, life (2010, pp 1-8).

However, despite offering clear advantages, namely, its ability to connect and organize large numbers of people, this online realm has given rise to equally substantial challenges. Headlining these issues is the increase in seemingly costless support for causes through acts like sharing articles or favoriting statuses via social media. Actions of this sort have been identified as forms of "slacktivism," and have served as fuel for disputes surrounding the positive and negative effects of such participation on stimulating more meaningful contributions (i.e. money, time and high-risk activities) down the line. Specifically, it is the belief that performing costless acts of slacktivism is done in place of taking more substantial action, that has made this issue such a hot topic of debate.

Due to the growing efforts to promote and enhance transparency, as well as the rising volatility in the world brought about by the rapid rate at which changes are taking place, the future looks to be one that will increasingly host activist movements of different sizes and scale in response to this ever-shifting environment. This paper will outline how activism has changed and developed due to the increasing prevalence of the Internet and social media platforms. The paper works to examine the dynamics of online activism, clarifying when it creates and diminishes value to the respective benefit or detriment of a cause. It will then examine the concept of "slacktivism" that has risen out of this discussion, and aim to understand the underlying motivations of slacktivists.

Lastly, the paper will offer insights that can help stakeholders at various levels better leverage the tools and people involved in slacktivism to their advantage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activism

Activism, at its core, is simply “taking action to effect social change” (Jones, 2011). And while it can occur in “a myriad of ways and in a variety of forms,” and be led by individuals or collectively through social movements, at the end of the day activism is not about how activist groups define themselves, but rather, what they do— activism is about *doing* (Jones, 2011). In an effort to remove the constraints that have been placed on activism, Goodson (2012, pp 6-7) clarifies that the people involved in such movements are “not necessarily trying to change history or to change the world as we know it. They’re just trying to change the world as they know it,” supporting his notion that activist causes can be movements with a “capital M” (history-making in nature) or a “small m” (something based around the passions of a small group).

This viewpoint is elaborated on through a general breakdown of activist causes into a four-quadrant matrix, which defines movements as small or big in size, and personal or societal with regard to the level to which they affect the population (Goodson, 2012, p 9). For instance, the large-societal quadrant includes the likes of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War Protests, as they involved a lot of people and had far-reaching social implications. At the other end of the spectrum (small-personal), fall such movements as the push for bamboo bikes that promote the innovative use of natural and renewable resources, supported by a smaller population and enacting a more personal level of change. Regardless of what quadrant a movement falls into though, it can occur

in a variety of arenas (political, environmental, social, and economic), and often works in more than one arena over the course of its lifetime. These causes have implemented a variety of techniques and approaches when it comes to taking action, including such methods as sit-ins, protests, boycotts, civil disobedience, demonstrations, campaigning, lobbying, writing letters, signing petitions, and attending meetings. And just as movements are not restricted to the silos of specific arenas, these various methods of activism are not limited to specific causes. Rather, the context and circumstances surrounding a cause help determine which method or approach is put to use— often requiring the implementation of multiple, complementary tactics along the way.

While this four-quadrant matrix organizes movements into distinctive categories, when it comes to distinguishing the level of action undertaken via individual methods of activism, a couple of factors need to be considered. Ethan Zuckerman, director of the MIT Center for Civic Media and founder of Global Voices, introduced a typology that works to distinguish activism according to two key features: varying levels of participation and connections to levers of change. The two of these work to characterize specific activist actions as thin or thick (participation) and symbolic or impactful (connection to levers of change)— categorizing them across yet another four-quadrant matrix. Zuckerman defines thin participation as the type of activity that “takes place when people are asked to do no more than ‘show up’ or perform some pre-defined kind of activity,” and thick participation as the type that asks people to do more— “it requires their ideas, input and creativity” (Davies, 2013). On the other axis lies the symbolic-to-impactful spectrum, where symbolic activities, while about allying oneself with a cause or view, lack “an obvious mechanism for creating change” (Davies, 2013). On the other

hand, activities defined as “impactful,” while still about allying oneself with a certain cause or view, have mechanisms for facilitating change (i.e. the ability to organize a strike) beyond simply providing people an opportunity to loosely associate with something. Together, these defining features help identify the significance of specific activism efforts and the extent to which they can positively affect a cause.

Perhaps one of the most famous instances of activism done well involves the case of Rosa Parks, which incorporated the use of a variety of methods in coordinating an extensive plan to tackle segregation. Rosa Parks, a 42 year-old African American woman, was arrested on December 1, 1955 for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, demonstrating a form of civil disobedience in the process. The story of Parks’ refusal to comply with the Jim Crow practices carried out by the Montgomery city bus system, as most are well aware, did not end with her being jailed though. Rather, her quiet, individual act of defiance resulted in the Women’s Political Council (WPC), a group of black professionals founded in 1946, and the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) joining together to call for and publicize a boycott of the Montgomery city bus system.

As a result of the boycott’s day one success, with 90% of black citizens staying off of the busses, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was formed to coordinate and carry out an extension of the boycott, as was consistent with the vote conducted during a meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church. As elected president of the MIA, Martin Luther King Jr. steered the movement’s nonviolence approach and helped organize a carpool system of roughly 300 cars to take supporters and fellow activists where they needed to go, over the course of what ended up being a 13 month boycott.

The boycott finally came to a close with the ruling in *Browder v. Gayle*, declaring bus segregation as unconstitutional and removing laws requiring segregated seating on buses. Through the combined efforts of an individual's demonstration of civil disobedience (Rosa Parks' sit-in), the widely supported protest (boycott) that followed, and the nonviolence tactics that guided the participants' actions, justice was restored (Carson, 2008).

And examples such as this are scattered throughout history in various sizes and scales, and involving a host of different tactics, establishing this movement mentality as something distinct from an on-again, off-again fad. Rather, as Goodson points out, "The instinct to band together in groups is hardwired in all of us. From earliest times, humans' propensity to gather and work together to achieve a common purpose or goal was critical to our survival and advancement" (2012, pp 15-16). We as a species have long recognized the safety in numbers and potential to improve our well being through coming together and joining forces with others. However, until recently, forming these large groups in an effective and timely manner was a nearly impossible task due to significant barriers to both communication and organization. Yet, with the increasing prevalence and capabilities of technology, many of these barriers have been diminished or removed.

A Shift Taking Place

As discussed by Goodson, the tools available to people today to start and get involved in movements look drastically different than those associated with activism of the not so distant past. "Once upon a time, people had to hand out leaflets . . . [and] often, the transformation that occurred in an uprising would happen in a physical gathering space . . . where private knowledge would become public" (2012, p 85). For example,

Goodson cites the old practice of “Samizdat,” involving the printing of underground documents that were then distributed from one person to another, with the intent to help organize “dissident activity in the old Soviet bloc” (2012, p 85). Given their reliance on face-to-face meetings though, leaders not only struggled to efficiently and safely identify who their actual supporters were, but also found it burdensome to organize and provide updates in a timely and effective manner. Thus, these sorts of activist undertakings, while spearheaded by passionate and well-intentioned individuals, were severely hamstrung by the long and difficult nature of their processes.

For the sake of clarity, this discussion is not intended to minimize the positive results that such instances of activism are able to achieve, as there are countless examples of movements that successfully gained momentum and grew through this word of mouth and face-to-face manner (the spreading of religious beliefs, for instance). Rather, the point is to acknowledge the gap that newer, internet-based mediums and tools have worked to fill through the added capabilities and opportunities for activism that they can provide.

Online Activism

Purpose

Online activism, as discussed by Jonathan Obar, is concerned with facilitating civic engagement and collective action. This first component, civic engagement, involves interacting with individuals in a process that works to help them develop “the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation [necessary to move them] away from disinterest, distraction, ignorance and apathy and towards education, understanding . . . and action” (2012, pp 2-3). At the other end, collective action refers to

“the pursuit of a single goal or multiple goals by more than one individual [that looks to bring] people together to effect political, social, and ideological change” (2012, p 3). Thus, as is also the case with traditional activism, online activism attempts to engage people, in an effort to gain the type of support and level of buy-in necessary to effect change. What differentiates online activism from traditional activism is not the overarching goal (i.e. bringing clean water to third world countries); but rather, the methods and means through which and by which stakeholders at all levels are enabled to participate. Put simply, the ways and extent to which civic engagement and collective action can be addressed and carried out have been drastically altered by the Internet.

Supporting Structure & Related Benefits

Social networking sites (SNS's), as described by Boyd and Ellison, are “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Obar, 2012). Serving as the foundation for SNS's, Web 2.0 is the “software platform whereby content and applications are no longer [strictly] created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion . . . [allowing for] the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Obar, 2012). SNS's provide a two-way channel of communication that can be used by organizers, current supporters, and potential participants alike. This system empowers people to interact with/react to content in a variety of ways (i.e. writing responses through blog posts or forming private groups

according to a specific stance on a matter), depending on what involved parties deem to be the most appealing.

This format is distinct from that of such mediums as television or radio, through which the flow of information from the source to the audience remains largely limited to this one direction. Take for example an interview conducted via a radio station or a television network. While an interview provides an opportunity for debate/voicing of a public opinion (perhaps even one of a renowned advocate for a cause), such mediums still restrict the timeliness, scale and ease with which people can have discussions surrounding the information presented to them. Thus, despite being able to broadcast to a large audience, and even engage some members of the public in a conversation, they alone are insufficient when it comes to connecting people with similar interests and enabling action in the most efficient manner possible. One only has to look to social networking sites to see information, originally spread through the likes of radio and television, inciting further investigation and debate via online platforms.

That being said, the potential benefits of engaging in this online segment do not stop at enabling people to participate in discussions through just another medium. By analyzing advocacy groups responsible for promoting causes and organizing public action around them, Obar's study found commonalities in a number of advantages that these groups identify with regard to using social media. For starters, organizations reference social media's ability to strengthen outreach efforts, allowing cause groups to "connect with a multitude of individuals ranging from [current] members and supporters to those who have never heard of the organization before" (2012, p 14). The extended

outreach enables them to not only gain attention at a larger scale, but also grow by attracting the younger generation (the future of activism) that frequents these SNS's.

Additionally, advocacy groups have pointed to the speed and interactive nature of these tools as important differentiators from traditional media. From a speed standpoint, social media enables people to engage in issues on the go and in real-time, as events are unfolding. This updating goes in both directions too, as organizations are able to provide their followers with the most current information and insights, just as their followers are able to provide news in the form of personal stories and related incidents that they have witnessed (helping give a face to these causes). With regard to interactivity, groups credit the medium's conversational nature with allowing them to "get feedback on the messages [they're] putting out, . . . adapt them and evolve to be more effective advocates for [their] causes" (2012, p 15). Social media not only helps causes optimize their messages, but also provides a community that participants can take part in building and nurturing. Lastly, overarching all of these benefits is the cost-effectiveness of using social media. As one of Obar's interviewed groups puts it, social media usage equals "more exposure, more time efficient, & less red tape" (2012, p 16). Together, these qualities work to paint a good picture of why the majority of surveyed groups said that social media helps facilitate both civic engagement and collective action (2012, p 13).

Types & Methods

Some of the more popular social media sites being used by those involved in activism consist of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, mobile apps, and listservs. As discussed by Obar, the "nature and nomenclature" (2012, p 8) of peoples' connections vary from site to site, as do the "various forms of media [used to facilitate this online

engagement], whether it be text, images, audio, video, or a combination” (2012, p 8). All this really means is that different social media sites allow people to connect and interact in a number of ways and to differing degrees (i.e. making and/or commenting on publicly accessible videos via YouTube vs. organizing/joining a group on Facebook to get involved in a cause alongside members of one’s online community).

Many of the methods used in more traditional instances of activism are still used via social networking sites, and are just adapted to the online world. For example, petitions transitioned over quite easily, as can be seen in one of the earliest instances of success in the realm of online activism. This incident took place in 1990, and had to do with the release of a product called Lotus Marketplace by a software company, Lotus, and a credit bureau called Equifax. The two companies came together to create the product under the belief that they would “revolutionize the marketing list industry” (Peters, 2011). However, public reception did not go as planned; rather, ended up upsetting customers due to increased fears surrounding consumer privacy that the proposed product release stirred up. As a result, “Concerned consumers organized through email and message boards with the primary goal of determining how to contact Lotus and opt out of the list,” (Peters, 2011) amassing 30,000 supporters in the process, and bringing an end to the planned release of the Lotus Marketplace.

Flash forward to 2014, and online petitions are still alive and well, as demonstrated by the success of sites like change.org. Change.org has amassed over 65 million users across 196 countries, and works to accelerate campaigns through the mobilization of people when it comes to gathering support for a cause. After learning about issues through the main website, supporters are then able to share links and

information through their personal SNS's (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, blogs), helping to further amplify the voices and stories behind individual causes in the process. Such an easy, far-reaching and cost effective tool has proven especially helpful in smaller, more individual-focused cases that would otherwise struggle to garnish the sort of attention necessary to enact change.

Take for instance the case of Josh Hardy, a 7-year old boy battling a life threatening adenovirus. After all available FDA-approved treatments failed to help Josh, Josh's family appealed to a drug company called Chimerix to try one of their drugs, Brincidofovir, that was still in trial form. However, due to the added time and costs it would take to provide people like Josh with treatment, as well its potential to interfere with the drug's speed-to-market, Chimerix denied Josh the trial treatment (Cohen, 2014). This decision set off a firestorm of push back through the likes of Twitter, Facebook, and change.org (which alone, amassed almost 20,000 signatures in favor of Josh getting treatment), resulting in the reversal of Chimerix's decision and the addition of Josh to a new trial.

Another recent example arose with the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Preventing Real Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act (PROTECT IP ~ PIPA) bills in 2012, surrounding issues relating to Internet freedoms (free speech). "Hundreds of sites including Reddit and Wikipedia held temporary blackouts to protest the two bills, [which], despite...being backed by the entire U. S. entertainment industry...[were directly affected] by millions of individuals on the Internet" (Bregstone, 2012). By gaining the support of web browsers, search engines and social media sites, "techies" who brought the potential consequences to the public's

attention in the first place, helped table a major issue that might otherwise have been quietly pushed onto the public by key influencers/lobbyists in Washington.

Social media's capacity for effecting change does not stop at helping get petitions signed though. In 2010, a columnist and author, Dan Savage, posted a video on YouTube with his partner, encouraging people in the LGBT community and spreading the message that "It Gets Better." Savage's video quickly gained attention, inspiring over 10,000 user-created videos and being viewed more than 35 million times over the course of a couple of months. By "offering many LGBT kids something they've never had before: the ear of a sympathetic adult who understands what they are going through," (Goodson, 2012, p 121-122) Savage and other supporters helped spread hope among a group that previously felt discouraged and isolated in their situations.

Online platforms have the ability to free people from the limitations of physical meeting spaces of old and one-way methods of communication, opening up new doors through which conversations can be extended and action, initiated. These platforms have shown their capacity to help accelerate the dissemination of information, and at the very least, contribute to the creation and fostering of awareness that is critical to the success of most causes. However, while it is clear that social media and other online tools can positively contribute in the realm of activism, this is not to say that they are always successful or without their share of flaws.

Criticism

In addition to all of the benefits touched on, Obar's study also revealed a set of drawbacks to social media use. For starters, several organizations cited a gap in digital literacy among their supporters and members, making communication difficult at times.

Communication issues have also been exacerbated by the large number of individuals trying to speak on behalf of individual organizations, which has sometimes resulted in the lack of a single, unified voice. This lack of structure and understanding of the tools has left some organizations incapable of successfully leveraging the connections that their networks have to offer.

One such instance of miscommunication can be seen on the flipside of the change.org case involving Josh Hardy. Failure to convey the full scope of the decision (to allow vs. to not allow Josh to test the trial drug) resulted in the public oversimplifying the debate and hastily picking sides. This blind anger led to people threatening Chimerix executives and tweeting out the e-mail addresses of board members (Cohen, 2014). As explained by bioethicist Art Caplan, the public's view of the matter was not fully informed. "It's not just the \$50,000 per patient that might make investors squeamish . . . Compassionate cases [like Josh's] can make a drug look bad" (Cohen, 2014). Companies like Chimerix have to report all poor outcomes of drugs to the FDA in their application to take a drug to market, regardless of the patient's level of health. Therefore, negative outcomes (i.e. if Josh were to die) could seriously inhibit the drug's ability to gain approval, and prevent it from being administered to other patients who are significantly less susceptible to negative side effects than the highly vulnerable Josh's of the world. While this information does little to alleviate the clear moral dilemma at hand, it does bring some of the dangers of online activism to light.

Aaker adds to this debate, stating that the benefit in using such tools as Twitter and Facebook "lies not in the technology itself but in the people who use it. Movements that begin online must be backed by real-life action; otherwise, there is no point" (2010, p

158). Users of these social media tools cannot allow themselves to stop at simply accumulating a lot of followers or likes—a concept that was a driving force in UNICEF Sweden’s campaign to raise money for polio vaccines, as they rallied around the notion that ‘Likes don’t save lives,’ “in response to the great focus on collecting Facebook likes, among both businesses and organizations, over the last few years” (Grummas, 2014). As Aaker goes on to say, “The final goal is not to just get 100,000 people . . . rather, now that you have the attention of 100,000 members, your goal is to inspire people to take action” (2010, p 158). Unfortunately, there are far too many causes that overlook this key component, and fail to tap into the full potential of their audiences/supporters in the process.

One example in particular that a lot of activist movements could learn from is KONY 2012. In March of 2012, the Invisible Children organization released a video, titled “KONY 2012,” whose mission was to make Joseph Kony’s name known by bringing attention to the atrocious acts that he committed during his time spent as the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. While the campaign achieved historic levels of success with regard to the exposure and initial support it was able to attract, (accumulating over 99 million views to date, being shared and posted across countless social media platforms, and enjoying a long stint in Twitter’s trending hash tags) the movement quickly received heavy criticism for its tactics.

One such critic is Michael Wilkerson, a freelance reporter for Foreign Policy’s blog. Wilkerson argues that Invisible Children misled the public through the ill-informed nature of its approach, pointing out that Kony had not been in Uganda for six years and that the LRA was much less of a threat than it was made out to be, due to rapidly

declining numbers from a manpower standpoint (Watson, 2012). As a result of misinformation of this sort coming to light, and despite being able to gain so many views and so much initial support, the cause failed to mobilize the public as few people followed through with Invisible Children's "Cover the Night" movement that called for supporters to hang posters around their cities to bring attention to Kony's crimes. Instances such as this have gone on to draw claims arguing that these online tools do not cultivate actual, meaningful activism, but rather cheapen activism down to something much less than it was intended to represent.

A key, early champion of this belief is Malcolm Gladwell, a journalist for the New Yorker, who addresses the gap between meaningful offline activism and online attempts at activism (2010). Gladwell demonstrates his argument by contrasting two main features of the two mediums. First of all, he criticizes the inefficiencies and limitations of social networks, given their lack of the sort of functional hierarchies as those more prevalent in offline movements. Gladwell argues that instances of significant activism succeed due to their "carefully demarcated division of labor, with various standing committees and disciplined groups" (2010), all under the leadership of centralized organizations and formal authorities. For Gladwell, social media tools build networks "opposite in structure and character of hierarchies" (2010) and without a central authority, which is instead replaced by decision through consensus. The subsequent lack of leadership results in the failure to mobilize this mass of members to the effect of anything beyond increased awareness, online discussion, and passive participation.

Secondly, Gladwell differentiates between the strong ties that bind people involved in meaningful activism (traditional methods) and weak ties that exist in social

networks, defining these strong ties as close friendships and weak ties as more along the lines of acquaintances. For Gladwell, a tool like Facebook helps manage acquaintances, enabling individuals to keep up with people they otherwise could not. However, as a whole, these online relationships foster very limited connections between individuals, resulting in substantial limitations when it comes to trying to leverage such a group in the facilitation of meaningful action. On the other hand, the strong ties of personal relationships (i.e. those between classmates, teammates and friends) establish a sense of connectedness and unity that “help us persevere in the face of danger” (Gladwell, 2010).

Now Gladwell does not completely strip away the benefits of weak ties, agreeing with observations by sociologist Mark Granovetter that “Our acquaintances—not our friends—are our greatest source of new ideas and information, [which] the Internet lets us exploit with marvelous efficiency” (Gladwell, 2010). However, he holds that weak ties rarely lead to the sort of high-risk activism responsible for challenging the status quo and attacking tough problems, such as the type tackled head on by the initiators of the Greensboro Sit-in, made up of strong ties that inspired courage and resolve in the face of incredible adversity.

This gap in risk and costliness of involvement in online activism is best demonstrated in Gladwell’s retelling of the story of Sameer Bhatia, originally analyzed by Aaker in “The Dragonfly Effect.” After being diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia, a disease that requires a bone marrow transplant, Bhatia leveraged his personal networks and those of friends and other extended connections to encourage people to register as donors. News spread quickly over a number of social media sites that worked to facilitate the organization of bone marrow drives across the United States. These

efforts resulted in Sameer finding his rare match, along with helping to add nearly 25,000 new registrants to the bone marrow database in the process.

While at a glance, this appears to refute Gladwell's claims that these weak internet ties limit the ability to incite meaningful change, upon further examination, it becomes clear that his point is rather, to establish this example as the threshold of weak ties' potential to effect change. Although "Donating bone marrow isn't a trivial matter . . . it doesn't involve financial or personal risk," (Gladwell, 2012) making it a low cost action that, given this perfect circumstance, was able to highly benefit a cause. This sort of activism "succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice. We are a long way from the lunch counters of Greensboro" (Gladwell, 2012).

Counter Criticism

However, critics of Gladwell's stance would argue that he fails to consider online activism in the context of working in cooperation with offline, traditional forms of activism. In the minds of such critics, there does not have to be a strict divide between the two or a one versus the other framing of their relationship. Rather, the degree of participation being called for should not matter, as long as civic engagement and collective action are being adequately fostered to enact change. And even if online efforts are not sufficient in and of themselves, methods of online activism can, at the very least, supplement what activists are doing in the physical realm.

Maria Popova works to further correct Gladwell by pointing toward the existence of online hierarchies—"Hierarchies do exist online, and while the top of the pyramid may often be represented by an offline eminence . . . the bottom of the pyramid, which

supports the entire movement, is composed of online authorities with [varying] degrees of influence,” (Popova, 2010) highlighting the connection between online and offline participators in the process. Popova goes on to state that, “While the social web . . . may do little in the way of assigning responsibility, it has a monumental effect on awareness” (Popova, 2010). In providing the public with access to information and channels through which they can further engage, educate themselves, and challenge their networks, the “Domino effect of awareness, empathy and action” (Popova, 2010) can be set into motion. This idea that online participation can trigger more substantial involvement down the road has big current and future implications, especially when considering the increasing role that the online realm is playing in charitable giving.

Prevalence of the Online Realm

In looking at the statistics— 1.23 billion monthly active users on Facebook, 4 billion YouTube video views per day and 500 million Tweets sent per day (Smith, 2014), just to touch on a few social media platforms— it quickly becomes evident that social media sites are hosting a lot of people who in turn are engaging in a tremendous amount of online activity. And it is not just the growing numbers of people online and involved in these platforms that is of note. Money is also being exchanged and donated through this medium at an increasing rate, which is doing a lot to raise the need for stakeholders (i.e. nonprofits and NGO’s) to establish strong online presences if they hope to become beneficiaries of this growth. As follows, at the end of the day, nonprofits and other fundraising organizations are expecting online efforts to turn into some sort of action— ideally donations.

A 2012 Charitable Giving Report (Blackbaud Inc.) highlighted changes in charitable giving at both a total and online level. In all, 24 months of overall giving data from 3,144 nonprofit organizations (representing \$7.9 billion) and online giving data from 2,581 nonprofit organizations (representing \$512 million) was analyzed for the purposes of the report. While overall charitable giving in the United States increased by 1.7% from 2011 to 2012, giving increased at a lower growth rate than that from 2010 to 2011, pointing toward a continued slow recovery process caused by the 2008 recession. However, online giving grew by a substantial 10.7% from 2011 to 2012, demonstrating the Internet's growth as a giving channel. Blackbaud analyzed \$4.8 billion in total fundraising for 2,025 nonprofits and determined that online donations, on average, accounted for 7% of the fundraising total (or \$336 million)—an increase from the 6.3% mark achieved in 2011.

A lot of this online giving is closely tied to spikes in donations to disaster relief efforts (i.e. Haitian earthquake, Hurricane Sandy, and other emergency events in which funding is in high demand on short notice), as “The internet has now become the first-response channel of choice for donors during disaster and other emergency events” (p 2). Despite the upward trends in online giving though, traditional fundraising methods (i.e. checks, telephone calls, direct mail, and events) still bring in 93% of all charitable giving (2012). The report goes on to say that “Overall giving is not likely to increase significantly until there is sustained growth in new donors, nonprofits rebuild their multi-year donor base, and overall donor retention improves” (p 1). However, that 7% in online giving (\$336 million) is still a significant amount of money, and with there being a lot of room to improve how organizations are engaging the online population, there is more

than enough reason to increase focus on this segment. Once again, proponents of this online activity would say that at the very least, online fundraising can supplement offline, traditional streams of donations.

Blackbaud Inc. went on to introduce a second Charitable Giving Report for 2013 that further substantiates the online realm. In this report, the number of nonprofit organizations analyzed from a total giving standpoint was 4,129 (an increase by 985 from the 2012 report), representing \$12.5 billion in total fundraising. The number of nonprofits analyzed for online giving increased as well to 3,359 (+778), representing \$1.7 billion in online fundraising. Overall charitable giving increased by 4.9%, making 2012-2013 “The largest year-over-year increase in overall charitable giving since the recession” (p 1).

In addition to the rise in overall giving, online giving grew by 13.5%, pointing toward the continued upward trends in online giving. However, there was a decrease in the percentage of total giving that online giving accounted for, going from 7% in 2012 to 6.4% in 2013 (although, this 6.4% represents a larger sum of money than that listed in 2012 due to the added number of organizations analyzed $\rightarrow \$10.5 \text{ B} \times .064 = \$672\text{M} \dots$ p 7). Therefore, as is in line with the 2012 statistics, there is clearly funding for the taking. It is the job of nonprofits, NGO’s, and other stakeholders of the sort to figure how to best align people with their causes in such a way that they are encouraged to donate.

One recent cause that not only tapped into these online donations (supplementing offline efforts in the process), but also laid a bridge between online and offline contributions, is that of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. Obama’s 2008 victory was attributed to “converting everyday people into engaged and empowered volunteers, donors, and advocates through social networks, email advocacy, text

messaging and online videos” (Aaker, 2010, p 34). In addition to using popular and established social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), Obama’s campaign created MyBarackObama.com (MyBO), allowing supporters to “create a profile, build groups, connect and chat with other registered users, find or plan offline events, and raise funds” (2010, p 34). This Facebook-esque structure provided a variety of ways (conversations, article sharing, video creating...etc) for supporters to get involved and invested in Obama’s campaign. These different avenues gave people a sort of ownership over the election and helped participants see and feel the impact of their individual voices, consequently inciting them to join together to establish an even more powerful, impactful, and unified voice.

Obama’s campaign put on a “Dinner with Barack” fundraising event, where four donors of any size (amount of the donation did not matter) who had shared a personal story about why they chose to donate, were selected to dine with Obama and “discuss the issues that matter most to them” (2010, p 37). Hosting such events and then spreading the news about them through various social media platform helped “put a human face on [their] donations,” (2010, p 38) giving the everyday, typical supporters a feeling of significance. This feeling of significance translated into 25,000 new people contributing five-dollar donations apiece, which added up, is significant enough to not be ignored (\$125,000).

Through this thoughtful approach, the campaign addressed an element that so many online causes fail to properly connect on— doing more than simply capturing the attention of a large audience; but rather, empowering them to translate online participation into offline actions and become more meaningful contributors in the process.

Obama made people feel connected and involved by keeping them up to date on milestones (through texts, emails, tweets) and empowered throughout the campaign and through a variety of touch points, making sure to take full advantage of all the mediums through which he had access to current and potential supporters. And this feeling of connectedness did not stop at symbolic/thin contributions to the cause. Come the end of the campaign, Obama had raised \$693 million from roughly 3 million donors, with volunteers on MyBO raising \$30 million and a majority of the \$639 million being raised through the Internet (2010, p 44).

Slacktivism

History

While Obama's campaign was clearly able to use online activism to achieve incredible levels of success, this level of effectiveness is not generally the norm. Instead, as an increasing number of people use social media as a platform for activism purposes, there have been more and more conversations about potential unintended consequences of these online campaigns. "Slacktivism" has become somewhat of a buzzword that has surfaced in growing discussions surrounding these side effects. The origin of the term is still debated, although Fred Clark takes credit for using it in 1995 in a seminar series held with Dwight Ozard. However, they used it to shorten "slacker activism," which refer to bottom up activities by young people to affect society on a small personal scale. As far as they were concerned, the term had a positive connotation (Christensen, 2011).

Over time though, the term has increasingly grown in association with negative repercussions tied to activities that do not express a full or high level of commitment to a cause, thus putting them more along the lines of Malcolm Gladwell's viewpoints. This

debate gave rise to a more encompassing definition of “slacktivism,” describing it as “a willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change” (Davis, 2011; Morozov, 2009a; Kristofferson et al, 2014). As a key component of this definition, “token support” is associated with activities that “allow consumers to affiliate with a cause in ways that show their support . . . with little associated effort or cost,” (Kristofferson et al, 2014) as is consistent with Zuckerman’s symbolic typology. This is in contrast to “meaningful support” which consists of contributions that require “a significant cost, effort, or behavior change in ways that make tangible contributions to a cause . . . [such as] donating money and volunteering time and skills” (Kristofferson et al, 2014)—Zuckerman’s “impactful” typology. This limited access to/use of levers of change, coupled with its call for thin participation, places Slacktivism in Zuckerman’s bottom left quadrant (thin-symbolic) where little tends to happen with regard to enacting meaningful change. On top of being accused of having minimal effect on the promotion of causes, slacktivist actions have also been framed in a selfish light, with people being accused of participating only in order to achieve some level of personal satisfaction.

Christensen (2011) goes on to approach the validation process of slacktivism by looking into two components of online campaigns: “Whether they are effective in affecting real-life political decisions, and whether Internet activism substitutes traditional forms of off-line participation.” Christensen (2011) touches on the political component of this question, bringing forth the term “micro-activism” in place of slacktivism. Various political petition sites use the term “micro-activism” in the promotion of their ability to mobilize citizens online to achieve measurable results. The issue with this claim though,

is that it is very hard to quantify what does and does not count as a measurable/significant result. Christensen goes on to later conclude that there is no evidence supporting the claim that online activism negatively affects real-life activism. Rather, “If anything, the Internet has a positive impact on off-line mobilization . . . It is at worst harmless fun and can at best help invigorate citizens.” However, more recent research has led the discussion in another direction, emphasizing the “accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change” (Kristofferson et al, 2014) half of the definition for slacktivism, and suggesting that such involvement might not be as harmless as Christensen makes it out to be.

Recent Findings

Kristofferson et al (2014) frame the discussion by contrasting Morozov’s criticism of slacktivism, which argues that “participating in token acts of support may not necessarily lead to a higher likelihood of engaging in more substantial support for the cause in the future” (Morozov, 2009a; Kristofferson et al, 2014) with that of other observers who “laud these token endorsements as a positive stepping stone toward more meaningful forms of social engagement in the future” (Center for Social Impact Communication, 2011; Fox, 2012; Kristofferson et al, 2014). In contributing to this discussion, Kristofferson and his colleagues work to test the influence of the level of social observability of an initial act of token support, impression-management theories in the context of different levels of social observability, and value alignment between a person and a cause, all as key moderators in influencing whether or not cases of slacktivism prove beneficial or detrimental to a cause.

With regard to the role of the level of social observability of an act, Kristofferson

et al (2014) found that private token support results in a higher percentage of subsequent donations than that from people who engaged in a public act of support (wearing a pin on their shirt). Through further testing, they were also able to show a strong connection between public token support and impression management motives. That is, people who publicly demonstrated their support for a cause were able to satisfy impression-management motives— “the tendency for individuals to be motivated by a desire to present themselves in a positive light to others,” (Kristofferson et al 2014, p 3) and hence, did not feel compelled to contribute more meaningful support after their initial token display. On the other hand, people who participated in initial support that was low in observability were shown to be more likely to contribute to a subsequent request, as they were more focused on remaining consistent with the values that had influenced their original behavior.

Research Propositions

The coming together of the studies and sources discussed thus far has uncovered points of intersection and crossover that have yet to be fully explored. Removed from their silos, and analyzed in the context of one another, these insights have shed light on gaps in the current research and literature, and can work to more holistically address the issue of slacktivism from both an understanding and problem-solving standpoint. Consequently, a set of propositions highlighting these potential and beneficial areas of focus, is addressed.

Transferability of Impression Management

For starters, these findings, while their supporting studies consisted of in-person token displays, suggest a level of transferability across mediums. Specifically, I propose

that the impression management motives translate to the online realm. This is largely due to the fact that social media platforms function around the sharing of information through a variety of public to semi-public communities, as touched on earlier in this paper. As a point of comparison, while Twitter is an open system that enables you to broadcast a message that can be read by any other member of the Twitter community, Facebook is a closed system that is limited to the people one chooses to add to one's network.

Regardless of the size of the community though, one's name is attributed to the videos one chooses to share, the fan pages joined, articles liked, statuses made, and so on and so forth, making one's support very public in nature (just to a variety of degrees depending on the specific system a platform operates under). Additionally, sociologists Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, found that people "might use token displays rather than explicit statements of views to construct and communicate positive identities to others [online]," (Kristofferson et al, 2014) adding to the relevance of the implications of this online impression management.

Furthermore, with so many of these profiles on major sites (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn) being linked to the publics' real-world identities, very little actually ends up being "private." And even in instances in which privacy is still supported, privacy does not serve as a detractor, as self-consistency motives can be expected to be enacted, resulting in meaningful contributions following such initial private displays of support. Yet still, as far as general platforms promoting public displays of support are concerned, as people engage with causes and forms of activism online, they can be expected to satisfy impression management motives, and cut their involvement short at these thin and symbolic gestures.

The Role of Strong & Weak Ties

Now this is not to say that initial public displays of support can never lead to more meaningful contributions down the line. For instance, in another study conducted by Kristofferson et al, providing people with an opportunity to align their values with a cause resulted in public displays being just as likely to incite further meaningful contributions as private initial displays of support. Put simply, allowing/helping people to identify “congruency between [their] own values and an organization’s values” (Kristofferson et al, 2014) helped people overcome the potential hindrances of impression management motives. Additionally, in cases in which people had strong connections to a cause, providing public token support led to a higher likelihood of further donations than both private and no-support cases. These two findings work to give hope to organizations when looking for methods to combat impression management motives that tend to reinforce the slacktivist nature of these public displays of support.

This proposition is in contrast to what Gladwell claims about the Internet’s inability to foster strong ties. By analyzing online and offline methods of activism in the context of a partnership (as called for by counter critics like Popova), it appears as though online actions, in the case where connections between people and causes are fostered, can and do promote an increased level of contribution to causes down the line. These online ties, as loose or weak as they may be, can still lead to increased actions in the offline realm, and serve as stepping stones to future activism along the way.

Move to Strictly Online

But despite these beacons of hope, the issue of slacktivism remains a viable criticism. These online social media platforms make it so easy to create the persona of

being an activist, without requiring people to actually do anything of substance, that people lack the incentive and drive to discover connections between themselves and causes on their own, consequently failing to encourage contributions in a way that requires something meaningful. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that people are not just involved on one site. Rather, they are involved and present on a number of such sites, providing them with a plethora of opportunities to enhance and substantiate their “supportive activity,” and contribute to the painting of themselves in a positive light that satisfies impression management motives.

With the increase in mobile platforms’ role in this issue, providing people with 24/7 access to alternative means of participation/activism, it is easy to imagine an extension of impression management’s influence on peoples’ inaction. A shift toward contributions over this medium, while it may result in an increase in the number of people participating online (as would be consistent with Blackbaud projections), also poses many additional threats relating to potential miscommunication and lack of serious investment in causes. Clicking a donate button, copying and pasting a status, and loosely associating with causes is only getting easier, and the subsequent stakes are only getting higher.

Conclusion

Implications

With these propositions in mind, it becomes increasingly clear that the online realm has dramatically changed the environment in which activism operates. Now this change is not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself. Much like money, the Internet and these online platforms are not inherently good or evil. Rather, they should be thought of

and treated as tools that have the capacity to both enable and inhibit meaningful action. It is the responsibility of organizations and people that are looking to use these tools, to leverage them properly and implement them in such a manner that facilitates and aligns with a thoughtful, strategic plan. Taking a step back to identify the role that social media is projected to play in one's cause, and how, piece-by-piece, implementation can be carried out, works to mitigate unfair expectations that people within and outside of a decision-making body place on online efforts. When stakeholders fail to adequately analyze their approach, methods, and end goals, they drastically increase the odds of these tools negatively impacting the work that groups set out to achieve. This places the burden on marketers, non-profits, NGO's, and the host of other groups trying to use this online arena to facilitate meaningful online action that extends beyond passive association with a cause.

Future Research

I believe this work provides key opportunities for further investigation in analyzing the dynamics of slacktivism with respect to the online platform in which it operates most heavily. Specifically, there is an opportunity to conduct studies that test the proposition set forth in this paper. Tests of this sort could more quantitatively substantiate claims currently supported by points of crossover in existing research, and extend the reach of current literature on the subject. Additionally, future studies should consider exploring the role that mobile devices are playing in the context of slacktivism, due to the rapidly increasing part that phones, tablets, and other such tools are playing in the public's day-to-day lives. Analyzing such facets of the issue will work to paint a fuller picture of the challenges that slacktivism presents, and how relevant stakeholders can address them

to the benefit of their respective causes. The more that can be done to minimize the potential negative effects of these new touch points for activism, the more stakeholders on all sides of the equation can benefit from involvement in activist causes.

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