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The Effectiveness of Online Activism: Who It Is Effective for, What Issues It Is Effective for, and What Time Period It Is Effective for

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**The Effectiveness of Online Activism:
Who it is Effective For, What Issues it is Effective For, and What Time Period it is
Effective For**

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of Political Science,
University at Albany, State University of New York
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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graduation from The Honors College

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Abstract

The Internet is relatively new and constantly changing, which makes it hard for political organizations and activist groups to know how to mobilize via this medium. Online activism is the process of using the Internet to communicate, spread information, and organize traditional activism (Martin 2007); People who use this form of activism are usually thought of as only showing token support for a cause without being willing to engage in more meaningful support (St Louis 2014). In this paper, I will analyze under what circumstances online activism is effective. To answer this question, I must first determine who online activism is effective for, what issues it is effective for, and what time period it is effective for. I collected my information by searching the Internet, primarily using Google and Google Scholar, for what literature existed within the topic of online activism, and then sorted my findings into two categories: opinion-based and evidence-based. I decided to analyze these two different types of sources, opinion-based and experiment-based, as together they would provide a more all-encompassing understanding of online activism. Through my analysis, I found that activism is most effective for young people as well as women. There is a belief that individuals who engage in online activism are looking for an easy way out, however, I found that young people's preferences and skills are more in line with digital action so that is why they turn to it. Additionally, online activism is most effective in realizing short-term goals within a cause. This form of activism is highly effective at bringing attention to an issue as well as raising funds. Since the Internet is fast-paced, online support is quick to die out so online activism works best for quick, short-term campaigns. This understanding of who online activism is effective for as well as what goals and time period it is most effective for has important consequences for how political and activist groups structure their campaigns. Depending on who they are trying to engage and what goals they may have, these groups will have to present their mission in different ways.

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Introduction

The Internet, more specifically social media, has existed for a relatively short period of time. The emergence of online platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have significantly altered several processes: how people connect with one another, how employment agencies run background checks, and how activists and individuals engage in a cause or issue. Most political organizations and activist groups are in the dark about how to best mobilize people using these same platforms. Norms on social media platforms are constantly changing, so it is challenging to understand how people interpret social media content and online efforts (Howard et al. 2016). In this paper, I will analyze under what circumstances is online activism effective. To answer this question, I must first determine who online activism is effective for, what issues it is effective for, and what time period it is effective for. In answering these questions, I have discovered that online activism is most effective among young people and women, these groups are the most online and are more likely to turn to online platforms to express their activism. Additionally, campaigns are most effective when their goals relate to raising awareness and fundraising in the short-term, as online support tends to decline quickly. Participating in online activism has the potential to lead to subsequent civic action.

The practice of activism has been around for centuries, but with time the form it has taken and the issues it covers have changed. In the past, nearly all activist activities relied on in-person involvement, such as sit-ins, protests, and rallies, but today people can be involved by signing an online petition, donating on a website, or sharing a post (Martin 2007). Issues differ somewhat today as well, in the 1800s and early 1900s labor was one of the most pressing issues, but the 1960s brought along new social moments, such as student, feminist and environmental (Martin 2007). No matter the form or issue, activism is the greatest way that people can express

their support or opposition of a cause and demand action, either for something to change or remain the same.

For the purposes of this essay, I have separated activism into two distinct forms: traditional civic action and online activism. Traditional, or “real”, civic actions are in-person practices that have been used in the past, usually with some form of success. These practices include protests, community volunteerism, charity, etc. (Lee and Hsieh 2013). Online activism, also referred to as digital activism, is the process of using the Internet to communicate, spread information, and organize traditional activism (Martin 2007). Online activism is also thought of as slacktivism, a combination of the words “slacker” and “activism.” Slacktivism is defined by Urban Dictionary as “the self-deluded idea that by liking, sharing, or retweeting something you are helping out.” It is when an individual gives token support for a cause without being willing to engage in more meaningful support (“Activism or Slacktivism?”). Critics are quick to say that online activism, particularly slacktivism, is no substitute for offline activism and that slacktivism hurts “real” civic action, but emerging evidence suggests that there might be some merit to online activism (Fisher 2020; Lee & Hsieh 2013). New technology, such as social media, can be used to raise awareness and communicate with others about a cause, but it is not fully known if raising awareness translates into more meaningful and tangible benefits (Rotman et al. 2011).

As briefly discussed, online activism and slacktivism are contested issues. On one hand, critics do not see online activism as being as effective as offline activism and believe that it can do nothing more than raise awareness, not actually create societal change. On the other hand, supporters believe that online activism can raise awareness while also inspiring people to engage in other forms of activism to further the cause. As we transition into an increasingly online world, understanding the effectiveness of online activism is imperative to be able to continue

fighting for causes as well as to engage younger generations. By determining who online activism is effective for, what issues it is effective for, and what time period it is effective for, I will be able to provide recommendations for how political and activist groups can best harness these new platforms to support their message. Only by having this knowledge can we understand the potential online activism holds and how it can be better utilized in the future.

Literature Review

The literature on activism focuses on traditional forms of involvement within the political system—voting, election campaigning, contacting representatives—or forms developed outside the political system designed to bring about major changes (e.g., social movements). However, we do not know much about contemporary forms of activism based on participation through social media platforms.

Progress is Not Inevitable

There is an idea that progress is inevitable, that it is akin to the passage of time in that it is bound to happen regardless of any action or inaction taken by humans. However, this inevitability is just a myth. In reality, progress, especially in terms of social change, is usually a long, hard fight. There is no doubt that humans are better off today than they were in the past: better medicine and increased food consumption have led to longer life expectancies, literacy and education rates have soared, and less people live in poverty (Surowiecki 2007). While these improvements have been, in part, thanks to economic growth and technological advances, just because a country becomes richer and more technologically advanced, that does not mean that

improvements or progress will happen naturally. Change is often the result of political struggle that could have easily gone the other way (Surowiecki 2007). This struggle is known as activism.

So, what is activism? Merriam-Webster defines it as, “A doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.” That action goes beyond what is conventional or routine and is typically used by activists to challenge policies or practices (Martin 2007). What counts as activism is typically determined by what is conventional; if a type of action already exists within the political framework—meaning within traditional political channels, such as voting, election campaigning, and contacting representatives—then that action does not go beyond conventional politics. While activism and conventional politics often work side by side, activism also operates outside of conventional politics—including areas such as neighborhood organizing, and protest marches—and, sometimes, operates outside what is legal. For example, if a country does not guarantee its citizens free speech, speaking against the government could be activism (Martin 2007). The most critical goal of activism is, “...to change the hearts and minds of the public, and effect real change” (McCafferty 2011).

Activism is for people both formally and informally excluded from traditional politics. Typically, these are people who want bigger, more radical change than what the traditional system can afford them. Therefore, the activist route would be taken over forms of conventional politics, such as voting, because other forms are not always possible or effective. In the case of the Woman Suffrage movement, the female supporters had no choice but to protest because, as was the point of the movement, women were barred from voting, although they could and did lobby. The movement utilized tactics such as staging large demonstrations and parades, for example the march held in Washington, DC, on March 3, 1913; The National Woman’s Party

(NWP) organized the first White House picket in U.S. history on January 10, 1917 in which members, "Silent Sentinels", demonstrated in silence six days a week for nearly three years; When the Sentinels were arrested and jailed, they went on hunger strikes and endured forced feedings ("Woman Suffrage"). The Civil Rights movement used tactics outside the traditional political system as well. Organizers of the movement initiated lawsuits to secure equal treatment for Black Americans; boycotts, such as the Montgomery bus boycott, and sit-ins were staged to disobey racial segregation rules; mass protests and marches—including the one which culminated on August 28, 1963, in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—were also utilized ("American Civil Rights"). Most would agree that these movements, and the actions taken within them, were forms of activism, and those who participated were activists. The progress that these movements were able to make—such as the ratification of the 19th Amendment and the prevention of segregation—were made, not because those in power had a sudden revelation, but because of the work of the social movements during those times ("Tactics and Techniques"; "Civil Rights Movement").

Activism is about people, specifically people who show up (McCafferty 2011). It only works if it is able to engage people, so it is crucial to convince people that forms of action are acceptable because if a particular form of action alienates people, it is not worth using (Martin 2007). Therefore, activism has to adapt and adhere to the passage of time to continue to engage people.

Adapting to the 21st Century: A Case of Slacktivism

The creation of the Internet in the late 20th century and its constant advancement in the 21st, has led to an expansion of online platforms that allow people to share details of their life

with a much larger audience. A study published by Pew Research Center (2021) found that one-in-seven Americans (72% of the public) use some type of social media. With the popularity of social media continuing to rise, new channels of civic engagement have emerged in the form of online, or digital, activism. “Activists are making full use of blogs, social media sites, mobile apps, and other tools to promote their message and gain support” (McCafferty, 2011). The use of online platforms to support a cause brings into question what makes someone an activist in the digital era (Butler, 2011). Traditional forms of activism require in-person work—in part because there was no “online” yet—significant commitment of time and resources, and a strong connection to the cause, as there is potential personal risk involved (Morozov 2009; Butler 2011). On the other hand, online activism asks people for smaller donations, to change their profile picture, or to “like” something on a social media platform, such as Facebook, while only requiring participants to be somewhat committed to the cause (Butler 2011; “Activism or Slacktivism?”).

In the argument over whether online activism should be constituted as actual activism or not, examples of modern movements have been used to show support for and to criticize online activism. One such example is that of ‘Blackout Tuesday’ as part of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the killing of George Floyd in 2020. The campaign was created by two Black musicians using the hashtag #TheShowMustBePaused with the goal of bringing awareness to the music industry’s history of profiting off of black artists. It was commandeered almost immediately. Instagram users began posting solid black squares with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, occasionally using #TheShowMustBePaused as well. Before the movement took off there were 11.9 million posts under the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, within several hours there were a million more, which were mostly black squares (Jennings 2020). Black Lives Matter

activists criticized these posts as being unhelpful and counterproductive as they provided no information or resources; These black squares were so overwhelming, they even pushed out posts that did have useful information (Heilweil 2020). Many critics cite ‘Blackout Tuesday’ as a classic example of slacktivism.

Slacktivism, a combination of the words “slacker” and “activism,” is defined by Kristofferson et al. 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” (2014, 1149). This definition recognizes peoples’ willingness to put in some effort, but qualifies it by addressing that that effort exists only if what is being asked of them is relatively costless. The staunchest critic of slacktivism would agree with Morozov’s (2009) definition of it as, “an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact,” which is ideal for a “lazy generation”. Morozov dismisses any possibility of slacktivism being useful, reducing it to something that is only done so that people can “feel-good.” By determining that slacktivism is perfect for a “lazy generation”—presumably meaning younger generations—he is insinuating that what is most important to newer generations is their own pleasure and how others view them, and that they do not care about political or social issues, at least not enough to *really* do something about it.

In this paper, I will examine what constitutes online activism, who participates in it, what effects it has (if any), and what the implications are for organizations that seek to engage young people in their cause. I posit that no form of activism, whether online or offline, is intrinsically valuable or meaningful. Through analyzing cases of proposed slacktivism, I will determine under what circumstances online activism is effective.

Methods

I collected my information by searching the Internet, primarily using Google and Google Scholar, for what literature existed within the topic of online activism, and then conducted an analysis on the information I found based on guiding questions. Through regular Google searches, I was able to find articles that, although they held some facts as they did reference studies, were by large opinion-based pieces. Through Google Scholar and scholarly websites, I was able to find academic pieces in which researchers conducted experiments to determine the effectiveness of online activism. Taking both types of resources together, I created different categorical questions, or buckets, through which I analyzed the pieces. The questions included, who is online activism effective for, what issues is it effective for and what time period is it effective for. I decided to analyze these two different types of sources, opinion-based and experiment-based, as together they would provide a more all-encompassing understanding of online activism. The opinion-based pieces gave insight into the reputation of online activism as well as defined what the public actually perceives as slacktivism. The experiment-based pieces, however, gave insight into what the academic world defines as online activism or slacktivism as well as provided a scientific backing for its effectiveness. The definitions that each author and researcher provided helped me in determining what exactly constitutes online activism, and, more explicitly, slacktivism. Through analyzing the literature, I can understand what demographics are believed to engage in slacktivism and what implications this has on activism as a whole. I decided to conduct a critical analysis of the literature, both academic and not, as this approach would provide a holistic examination of online activism.

Results and Analysis

Who Is Online Activism Effective For?

Online activism, under the right circumstance, can be effective for almost everyone as most Americans (72% of the public) uses some type of social media (“Social Media Fact Sheet”). However, it is most effective for young people. Although there has been a rise in social media usage among older adults, young people (18-29) use social media more than any other age demographic; 84% of young adults in the U.S say they use at least one social media site (“Social Media Fact Sheet”). Since younger generations are online more, they are more likely to engage in online activism.

Younger Generations

Besides being online more, the online activism model best fits the tastes of younger generations. Since the 1990s, citizens, particularly young people, have preferred to participate in loose and less hierarchical networks, and in lifestyle-related mobilization efforts (Skoric 2012). Online activism is less hierarchical as it relies on “weak-tie” relationships; weak-tie relationships are where individuals might not know each other that well and interact infrequently, such is the nature of relationships between acquaintances or strangers. Traditional, in-person forms of activism, however, rely on “strong-tie” relationships, which require an established or close-knit relationship and frequent interaction (McCafferty 2011). Therefore, at least structurally, online forms of activism appeal more to younger generations than traditional forms do.

There is a perception, particularly among older generations, that, although young people might participate politically, their degree of participation is low (Skoric 2012). This view primarily stems from studies of voter turnout, which find that young people vote at lower rates than older people do (“So Much for ‘Slacktivism’”). As mentioned earlier, Morozov (2009), a fellow at the Open Society Institute who runs the blog Net Effect, describes in his scathing

review, slacktivism is “the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation,” with “lazy generation” meant to be understood as the younger generation. In addition to low voter turnout, young people are typified as being lazy or disengaged from the political process because of the type of actions they engage in. As mentioned, young people prefer to participate in less hierarchical networks built on weak-tie relationships. The types of actions that weak-ties lend themselves to are usually considered easy and low-cost. These activities include signing a petition, wearing a bracelet or pin in support of a cause, or liking a post (Skoric 2012; Kristofferson et al 2014). Given their easy and low-cost nature, proponents of traditional activism tend to look down on these types of action as they believe that they do nothing for the cause, whatever that may be.

Online activism does have an important function. Since online activism has a low participation bar, it allows people, particularly younger generations, to practice civic skills without having to commit a lot of time or effort (Skoric 2012). Younger people tend not to have as much excess resources or time as older people do, which might bar them from traditional forms of activism, but online activism gives them the opportunity to participate despite these limitations. Additionally, as young people are the most online generation, and their participation preferences are more in line with the types of activities slacktivism provides, they are more likely to participate in and engage with online activism.

Women

Beyond young people, online activism is likely to be more effective for women than for other demographics. In the U.S., 78% of women say they use at least one social media site, compared to only 66% of men (“Social Media Fact Sheet”). In addition to being online more in general, women, more so than men, choose online and social media outlets as their activism platform of choice (Foster et al. 2019). This is in part because online platforms provide a space

for women to discuss politics and the issues they are facing that does not exist in traditional media or political spaces.

Feminist scholars describe social media as a “counter-space” for activism among women. “The term counterspace had originally been in reference to university students facing racial discrimination; they created safe spaces for themselves to function without fear and anticipation of stereotypes and racism, in contrast to what they faced in traditional spaces (e.g., classroom, dorms, traditional fraternities/sororities)” (Foster et al. 2019, 3). Social media allows women to call attention to and spread information on issues that have historically been disregarded by traditional media such as news channels, newspapers, and radio. One way that this is done is through hashtag feminism (Foster et al. 2019). In India, hashtag #BoardtheBus was used to raise awareness about the lack of safety on public transportation. Similarly, the hashtag #MeToo movement, which began in the United States, was used to bring attention to sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape culture with many participants sharing personal stories of abuse or harassment (Foster et al. 2019). Online platforms provide a space for women, as well as other marginalized groups, to advocate for themselves on their own terms.

Online Resistance in Palestine

In general, the perception around online action is that it is nothing more than a short-cut for individuals to feel-good about themselves without actually doing any “real” work to further a cause. As mentioned above, critics like Morozov (2009) are of the opinion that online activism is for a “lazy generation,” and that slacktivism does not produce any meaningful outcome. In Palestine, young people, particularly young women, have turned to social media platforms as a form of activism and resistance against settlers. Young women have posted videos of themselves

painting the Palestinian flag onto their nails or face. This case illustrates how online action, even when it appears wholly performative, can be meaningful.

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has gone on for decades, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, and is far too complicated to fully discuss in this paper. What is important to know is that part of the conflict is about the question of Palestinian self-determination and self-governance (“Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.”). Since online platforms allow people to communicate outside physical boundaries, social media has been able to reconnect Palestinian society, construct Palestinian diasporic identity, and provide a center for political activism. It also allows Palestinians to articulate their personal experiences and spread their narratives and political claims to a global audience (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022).

TikTok is the app most used by Gen Z. It allows for a lot of customization and creativity, giving young people the ability to fully express themselves. Young Palestinians, through the hashtag #freepalestine, have used the app to tell their stories and allow global audiences to “experience” life under occupation as well as to transform aesthetics into political statements as a way of identity politics (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022). Through their research, Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2022) found that female creators tend to use body art to embody resistance. Women will tell their stories by painting bloody tears or bloodying the Palestinian flag on their body as a way of symbolizing the suffering of the Palestinian people. Painting one's body might seem performative as it is hard to imagine what change these videos will make, but it is a highly political act. “Nonetheless, as feminist media scholars (Chae, 2021; White, 2018) have already pointed out, content producers often use cosmetic instructions as means of interrogating gender norms and oppression, unveiling how feminism and beauty can be collaboratively deployed as a critical language (White, 2018). Therefore, a young woman using her body to convey a message

is already, and *per se*, a political act” (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022, 423). Body painting allows these women to change the dominant stereotyped narrative of the grieving Palestinian through this different, more cheerful way of endorsing Palestinian identity.

This subversion of the narrative also allows Palestinian creators to showcase and promote *sumud*, a politically meaningful concept to all Palestinians. *Sumud* is an Arabic word referring to steadfastness or perseverance, and in Palestinian culture it is often considered synonymous with resistance. This practice is rooted in the refusal to surrender and manifests itself in acts of everyday resistance (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022). Social media allows young people to share their everyday experiences while being in full control of the narrative, allowing them to promote *sumud* to the world. Online activism can draw more attention to the Palestinian resistance while using the creative social media skill sets that young people feel confident in (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022).

Who is Online Activism Effective For: Opinion v. Fact

In sum, online activism works best for young people as well as women, groups who tend to be on the outside of traditional forms of involvement. Since these groups are often on the margins, social media gives them the space to build their political identity and advocate for themselves in a way that they are not allowed in the conventional political framework.

While many critics are quick to label young people as being “disinterested” or “disengaged” from the political process, and do not hold back from claiming that people who engage in online activism are lazy, the evidence does not fully support this claim (Morozov 2009; “So Much for ‘Slacktivism’”). According to the Pew Research Center (2021), young people and women are some of the most online demographics. Gen Z and younger, and even some Millennials, have grown up with smartphones and social media, which gives them a

different perspective than older generations who were exposed to this technology at a later age. Young people are more confident in navigating new technologies, including social media, than older people are, which might explain some of the resistance older generations feel toward these platforms. As was shown by the youth in Palestine, it is not that young people do not care about political issues, but they are able to engage with them in ways older generations never could. Younger generations feel confident in the creative skill sets that are valued by social media and will use those skill sets further a cause (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022). Not everyone who engages in online activism is looking for an easy way out, rather young people's preferences and skills are more in line with digital action so that is what they turn to.

What Issues Is Online Activism Effective For? And For What Time Period?

Although I had originally separated these two questions, I have decided to discuss them both here as they go hand-in-hand. Online activism can be utilized for any issue or cause but is most effective in realizing short-term goals within a cause. Its effectiveness depends on what is trying to be accomplished.

Issues

I have not found that online activism is intrinsically more useful for one issue over another, but rather it is more effective for certain types of goals. Despite the effectiveness of online activism being hotly debated, one aspect of it that is agreed upon by most is its ability to raise awareness; Online activism is effective in spreading little-known or non-mainstream ideas and notions (McCafferty 2011; Rotman et al. 2011; Muslic 2017; Fisher 2020). As discussed in the previous section, social media, in this case TikTok, allows youth in Palestine to share their experience of life under occupation with a global audience in a way that traditional media—

newspapers, radio, television—might not cover. In addition to spreading awareness, online platforms also excel at fundraising as they can streamline the process and reach a larger audience. Since these fundraisers reach more people, it allows individuals to make small donations that, when combined, make a larger total (Butler 2011). Most campaigns start donations at around \$5, some even less, which makes it easier for those in a low-income bracket to donate without feeling guilty about not being able to give more. In 2010, a number of celebrities went dark on Twitter and Facebook to raise money for the HIV/AIDS charity Keep a Child Alive, which worked to fight HIV/AIDS in Africa and India. The goal was to raise \$1 million for the charity. By texting ALIVE to 90999 participants could make a \$10 donation which would be used to “buy back” a celebrity’s digital presence. The goal was met in a week as fans raised \$500,000 and a philanthropist matched the other \$500,000 (Butler 2011).

Online support is quick to die out, so online activism works best in one-time fundraising campaigns, such as the ALS Ice Bucket challenge, and disaster relief efforts, like the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti (Rotman et al. 2011; Blevins 2016; Muslic 2017). The ALS Ice Bucket challenge, which gave the participants the choice of either dumping a bucket of ice water on their head and make a small donation or to skip the ice water and make a larger donation, was wildly successful and raised over \$100 million dollars in funds which were put toward ALS research (Blevins 2016). In the case of the earthquake, the International Red Cross (IRC) asked people to donate money towards relief efforts, via text message. After four days, \$7 million dollars had been raised (Rotman et al. 2011). In a very short period of time, both campaigns were able to raise millions of dollars by using online platforms to ask people to donate. Although not every campaign will be able to raise such large amounts of money, for causes that are looking to raise awareness or funds, online activism is the most effective form of activism to achieve such goals.

Time

Social movements go through cycles; There are times where a movement will be rising and times when it will be in decline (Martin 2007; Butler 2011). Since people have a limited amount of time, money, and care that they can give to a cause, they must pick and choose which ones they are able to support. If people are already at their threshold when a new issue emerges, they might have to drop one of the causes that they are already supporting to support the new one (Blevins 2016). Because people are quick to drop one issue in order to support another, social movements usually have a very short “peak” time. Changes such as implementing or augmenting a policy or changing social traditions can take time and require continual support, which does not always lend itself well to online activism as online support dies out quicker (Muslic 2017).

Consistency Leads to Subsequent Action

While online activism is effective at spreading information and raising funds, and works best for short campaigns, it has the potential to lead to subsequent civic engagement. Work on self-consistency, particularly the consistency assumption of cognitive dissonance theory, supports the argument that the low-cost nature of online activism attracts people who would have otherwise not participated, and that experience of action could encourage further action (Lee and Hsieh 2013). “Cognitive dissonance theory posits that people have an inner drive to keep one’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors consistent,” (Lee and Hsieh 2013, 3). This need for consistency is best utilized in the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique; if a person agrees to a small request, in order to remain consistent, they are more likely to agree to a larger subsequent request even if it demands a greater cost (Lee and Hsieh 2013; Kristofferson et al., 2014). Work on self-consistency, specifically on the FITD technique, leads to the predictions that engaging in small, token support will lead to an increased likelihood of making future meaningful contributions to

the cause (Kristofferson et al., 2014). Online activism, which is primarily built on simple and low-cost actions, presents the right circumstances for self-consistency to lead to subsequent action. Slacktivist action is effective at bringing people into a movement through small tasks, which might entice them to stay and become more involved with the cause by triggering their need to be consistent.

What Issues and What Time Period is Online Activism Effective For: Opinion v. Fact

In short, the effectiveness of online activism is not confined to any one cause or issue but works best at achieving short-term goals within a cause. As mentioned, social media is highly efficient at raising awareness as well as funds. However, the Internet is also incredibly fast-paced, so support for campaigns is usually short-lived (Muslic 2017).

Despite online activism being effective at raising awareness and money, or perhaps because of it, it is debated on whether it can make a significant, lasting impact which creates tangible societal benefits (McCafferty 2011; Rotman et al. 2011). Online activism is thought of as less valuable than traditional forms of activism in part because spreading information and fundraising are not seen as doing enough; since these tasks are seen as easy, they are then misconstrued as being ineffective. There is a belief that activism only happens “on the ground” and “offline” so critics are quick to dismiss online action (Butler 2011). As shown by work on self-consistency, however, online, low-cost activism can lead people to make future meaningful contributions to the cause (Lee and Hsieh 2013; Kristofferson et al., 2014). Beyond what future meaningful action online activism might lead to, online activism itself can produce meaningful change. For example, for the victims of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the donations that people gave were imperative to their recovery from the event; Even if people only donated to make themselves feel good or to present themselves in a better light, the money that they donated was

useful and did a lot of good in helping the victims of the earthquake. Online and slacktivist actions do not “do nothing,” instead they can help provide initial information or relief and can even inspire individuals to participate in further action.

Conclusion and Implications

Online activism is most effective for young people and women, and for campaigns with goals related to raising awareness and fundraising in the short-term, but it does have the potential to lead to subsequent civic action. This understanding of who online activism is effective for as well as what goals and time period it is most effective for has important consequences for how political and activist groups structure their campaigns. Depending on who they are trying to engage and what goals they may have, these groups will have to present their mission in different ways.

Young people and women have historically been barred from participating in traditional forms of political participation, in particular voting. In the United States, women did not have the right to vote until 1920 and, currently, citizens under eighteen years old cannot vote. For these two demographics, online activism is most likely their first interaction with activism.

Since the Internet lowers the cost of participation and encourages non-traditional forms of participation, slacktivism can act as an entry point to political expression and engagement. It also helps individuals to build a political identity (“So Much for ‘Slacktivism’”). Given its low-cost nature, online activism has the ability to mobilize previously immobilized groups and might inspire individuals who haven’t been politically active or civically engaged to join (Butler 2011). Slacktivism only asks people to complete small tasks, so it is easier for individuals to become involved. Work on self-consistency has shown how these small, token acts can trigger a desire to

be consistent, leading to individuals engaging in subsequent civic action. Being able to engage in a small act might make people see themselves as an “activist,” prompting them to engage in “activist” behaviors (Butler 2011; Lee and Hsieh 2013; Kristofferson et al., 2014).

All social movements, no matter the cause, need to raise attention as well as funds to survive and continue their fight. Without attention it becomes difficult to engage new people in the movement; Without funds it becomes difficult to operate since even things like having a website cost money. If only for its effectiveness in these two goals, online activism does have a purpose. Depending on the movement, there might be additional goals, such as wanting a law changed or to be granted sovereignty, but it is unlikely that those additional goals will be met without their being interested in the cause and without proper resources.

Online activism might not be able to achieve every aspiration an activist organization or social movement has, but it can help further the process. Most modern campaigns require a multi-pronged approach, so online activism should be developed as part of the activism repertoire instead of being seen as separate from activism (Skoric 2012; Fisher 2020).

This analysis asserts that no form of activism, whether online or offline, is intrinsically valuable or meaningful. While proponents of traditional forms of activism have criticized online activism as “not doing anything,” some even going as far to say that it is not activism, I have shown the conditions under which online activism is effective. The ways in which online activism is effective might be different from the ways in which traditional forms are effective, but that does not mean that online activism is any less useful. Online activism’s ability to raise awareness as well as funds is important for social movements as greater support and resources can help to further the cause. Also, its ability to draw in people who had previously not been politically active into the political sphere has significant implications for democracy. Since

representative democracies are supposed to represent everyone within its borders, the more people there are engaged politically, the better it is able to fulfill its duty.

Future research should focus on how to integrate online activism into the activist process. Particularly on how to transition people who enter a movement or organization through slacktivism into partaking in action that requires greater commitment and involvement. In this case it might be useful to study more of the practical effects of self-consistency and how it can be harnessed.

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