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Political activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means?

by Henrik Serup Christensen

Abstract

The impact of the Internet on political participation has been a debated issue in recent decades. Internet activities have been criticized for being *slacktivism*, where the real life impact of the activities is limited; the main effect is to enhance the feel–good factor for participants. This article examines whether this accusation is valid. It does so by examining two aspects of Internet campaigns: Whether they are effective in affecting real–life political decisions, and whether Internet activism substitutes traditional forms of off–line participation. Although it is not possible to determine a consistent impact of Internet campaigns on real–life decisions, there is no evidence of the substitution thesis. If anything, the Internet has a positive impact on off–line mobilization. Accordingly, there is little evidence to support the accusation of Internet campaigns being *slacktivism*. It is at worst harmless fun and can at best help invigorate citizens.

Contents

Introduction

Political participation on the Internet is a debated current topic. Initially, the Internet was heralded as a potential remedy for the decline in political participation that had been observed in the literature (Ayres, 1999; Barber 1998). However, in recent years scholars have grown increasingly skeptical about the positive impact of the Internet on civic mobilization.

Some claim that the Internet does little to help mobilize citizens (Bimber, 2001; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002). However, most acknowledge that citizens are active through the Internet, but this activity is a pointless showcasing that does more to make the activists feel good about themselves than to address urgent political matters (Shulman, 2005; Hindman, 2009). As the recent creation of social networking sites such as Facebook has transformed the meaning of citizen activism and furthered what has recently been referred to as *micro–activism* (Marichal, forthcoming).

The derogatory epithet used for these activities is *'slacktivism'*, which refers to political activities that have no impact on real–life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel–good factor of the participants (Morozov, 2009). Worries have been expressed that these activities are pointless in that they are unable to achieve political goals and can derail political participants away from the more effective forms of participation in the activist repertoire that have traditionally been used (Putnam, 2000).

This calls attention to the fact that not all political activities are created equal. Some forms of political participation are suited for working within the representative democratic institutions to influence the decisions of the formal decision–makers. Other activities are more expressive and although they display willingness to participate, the effectiveness of these activities in achieving political aims is still in dispute.

This article examines whether performing acts of political participation on the Internet should be seen as *slacktivism* or as virtual activism. This involves examining whether Internet activities affect formal political decisions? And whether the Internet participants are more or less prone to be politically active in more traditional forms of participation.

This is done by examining the available data and surveying the academic literature. Through this, it is possible to determine whether Internet activism should be dismissed as *slacktivism*, or should be considered a genuine venue for citizens to vent their political preferences. Although it is not possible to strictly limit discussions on the Internet to a specific geographic region, the discussion mainly focuses on the impact in the established democracies. This is where there is mot data available, and

the accusation of *slacktivism* also typically focuses on well–off citizens in these countries.

It does so by first examining the purported effects of the Internet on political participation in the academic literature. Following this, *slacktivism* is introduced as one of the major critiques that have been launched against political participation via the Internet. Two central critiques are identified; 1) that online activism is less effective; and, 2) that the online activities replace traditional offline participation thereby leading to lower overall levels of participation. The third and fourth sections deal with these critiques to assess their merits. Finally, a conclusion sums up the discussion and evaluates whether participation through the Internet ought to be considered virtual activism or *slacktivism*.

Political participation and the Internet

The state of political participation has been a matter of concern in the established democracies in recent years. Most notably, Robert Putnam has argued that citizens are becoming "lonely bowlers" who no longer interact socially, and as a consequence no longer willing to take part in political matters (Putnam, 2000). According to Putnam, the media — particularly TV but also the Internet — have helped decrease stocks of social capital, and thereby also the willingness among citizens to engage in political activities.

Opposed to this, it has been argued that what is happening is not a uniform decline in participation, but a diversification of how citizens take part in political matters (Dalton, 2006). It is acknowledged that the traditional forms of participation — epitomized by voting — are not the only way citizens engage in political matters. Instead, an array of creative forms of participation has appeared transgressing the traditional distinction between private and public life (Micheletti and McFarland, 2011).

The status of these new activities is contended [1], but it has nonetheless become commonplace to regards them as expressions of political preferences. Even if they do not aim to influence the state and they do not necessarily take place within the formal political sphere, they are compatible with the commonly used definition of political participation offered by Brady [2]: *action by ordinary citizens directed towards influencing some political outcomes*. In line with this view, political participation has become somewhat ambiguous, as it includes a number of new citizen activities.

One of these new forms of participation involves the use of the Internet for political purposes. Participation on the Internet may involve electronic versions of traditional forms of participation, such as electronic and online voting or online petition signing, but also new forms of cyber involvement such as politically motivated hackings (Jordan and Taylor, 2004).

Another possible impact of the Internet on political participation is enhancing traditional participation by easing the dissemination of information on activities and events to a broader public and making coordination easier for activists (Ayres, 1999; Bennett, *et al.*, 2008).

Marichal (forthcoming) uses the term micro–activism to refer to the small scale, many–to–many forms of politically oriented communication. Even if it is hard to find exact numbers on the extent of the phenomenon, there is little doubt that the possibilities on the Internet has exploded in the last few years. New platforms for social networking such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook have provided hitherto unseen possibilities for distributing and redistributing information on ongoing campaigns and expressing political preferences to friends and family.

Initially, the most optimistic scholars expected the Internet to change the functioning of democracy profoundly by increasing mass participation (Barber, 1998). However, the purported positive effects of the Internet on political participation have not been without its critics. Some question there is any effect at all, since it merely makes it possible for previously active citizens to engage in online activities as well (Bimber, 2001). According to this critique, the Internet merely provides another tool for the already active; it does not help mobilize previously passive citizens.

A related line of critique sees the Internet as creating a digital divide (Norris, 2001). According to this critique, the Internet has an effect on participation, but this may exacerbate existing differences among citizens in their level of activity, since it is the well–educated and politically interested who take advantage of the technological possibilities.

Another critique claims that even if the Internet does activate citizens, it does so in a pointless way, since the activities do not have any impact on political outcomes in the real world (Shulman, 2005). And this brings us to the accusation of *slacktivism*.

The Internet and *slacktivism*

Slacktivism has become somewhat of a buzzword when it comes to demeaning the electronic versions of political participation. The origins of the term *slacktivism* is debated, but Fred Clark [3] takes credit for using the term in 1995 in a seminar series held together 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 used. In their usage, the term had a positive connotation.

Today, the term is used in a more negative sense to belittle activities that do not express a full–blown political commitment. The concept generally refer to activities that are easily performed, but they are considered more effective in making the participants feel good about themselves than to achieve the stated political goals (Morozov, 2009). *Slacktivism* can take other expressions, such as wearing political messages in various forms on your body or vehicle, joining Facebook groups, or taking part in short–term boycotts such as Buy Nothing Day or Earth Hour.

Although not necessarily restricted to Internet activities, the critique is frequently linked to the possibilities for participation this medium offers, sine it enables citizens to participate in relatively easy forms of political participation [4]. Taking online petitions as an instructive example, the Internet has made it much easier to arrange campaigns, spread the word, and even signing them. Although signing a petition is hardly complicated offline, they are now easier to find and the signature can be given with the simple click of a button.

However, this ease of access does not necessarily lead to an improvement in the overall level and efficacy of political participation. Worries over the efficaciousness of certain online political activities have been espoused by scholars (Hindman, 2009; Shulman, 2009).

Although Internet activities are particularly prone to this accusation, *slacktivism* does not include all political activities performed on the Internet. The phenomenon excludes online activities such as Internet hacking, since these activities require more effort and are therefore generally considered valid examples of political participation (Jordan and Taylor, 2004). Although it is not always possible to make a neat distinction between easy and difficult activities, for most purposes this is unproblematic.

Slacktivism should also be distinguished from pranks veiled in a political disguise. Although satire is a valid political tool, also for the purported *slacktivists*, *slacktivism* should not be confounded with acts that have no other purpose than entertainment. Most critics acknowledge that there is a political core in *slacktivism*, even if it may be very well hidden. As the definition offered by Morozov makes clear, *slacktivism* does include an intention to affect political goals.

The problem are not the causes *per se*, it is the lack of desire to get more heavily involved in these causes that is the main nuisance for the critics. They hereby question that the activities reflect a genuine desire to affect political outcomes as required by Brady's definition of political participation outlined above.

According to the critics, the means and the outcomes used by *slacktivists* are insufficient to achieve political goals. Putnam (2000) already contended that the Internet was likely to have a detrimental effect on civic engagement, as the medium was mainly used for entertainment purposes. Although this is not necessarily the case today, the critique has not been silenced.

Shulman (2009) suggests that mass e–mail campaigns, which is a classic example of an online activity accused of *slacktivism*, are not necessarily able to produce the intended outcomes. He examines the efficacy of mass-generated e–mail from MoveOn.org sent to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). According to the results, only a small portion of these comments contains relevant new information. It therefore becomes easier for the authorities both morally and technically to screen and delete these messages without ever reading them. This can be a serious threat to the purported efficacy of these campaigns.

In this sense, the availability of electronic forms of "activism" may even lead to deterioration in the quality of participation, since people who would otherwise get involved through traditional means may instead opt for digital opportunities, believing that these activities are a sufficient replacement. Even if it is granted that online activities are a form of political participation, they may still be less efficacious ways for citizens to achieve desired political goals. In this sense, political activities over the Internet could have detrimental effects on the overall levels of political engagement and especially the effectiveness of engagement in achieving stated political goals.

Coleman and Blumler [5] sum up the difficulties by noting a number of problems that Internet campaigns face. The online networks are disconnected from institutional politics, which means they may be unable to control the authorities. Furthermore, the online activities are sometimes elusive and ephemeral, meaning they never reach the agenda of the formal decision–making. Finally, the different activities tend to involve a destructive and nihilistic quality, which can make it hard for them to be taken seriously.

To sum up the critique that dismisses certain forms of online activism as *slacktivism*, this critique is aimed at low effort activities that are considered incapable of furthering political goals as effectively as traditional forms of participation. Wearing badges is not enough, and neither is changing your profile picture on your Facebook account for

a day, a week, or a month. The *slacktivists* are seen as unwilling to get their hands dirty and do the efforts required to actually achieve these goals.

To some extent this critique is overstated. Many traditional acts of political participation do not necessarily require great efforts on behalf of the participants, nor are they necessarily efficient ways to further political preferences. It is hard to see why signing a petition or even voting in real life should be seen as a great sacrifice — at least in democracies where threats of retributions from authorities rarely occur — whereas doing it online is meaningless and effortless. Furthermore, critics assume a neat distinction between private and public expressions of political demands — a distinction that may not work adequately when it comes to the possibilities offered by the Internet (Papacharissi, 2010).

Nevertheless, there is a good reason to be skeptical when it comes to assessing the sincerity of some Internet campaigns, or at least the people that take part in them. This is all the more the case for acts such as joining Facebook groups, where the primary aim may be just to signal preferences to friends and family rather than achieving real–life political results. The chance that activities, such as joining a Facebook group, never transfer into other political activities to achieve the stated objective seems to be high for most, if not all groups.

As this discussion makes clear, the critique of Internet activism involves two central issues: 1. Internet activities are not effective; and, 2. Internet activists do not engage in other activities. These issues are the central issues in the remainder of this paper. Evgeny Morozov (2009) ends his discussion on *slacktivism* by citing a need to develop appropriate data sources for examining the phenomenon more thoroughly. The following presents a first step in this effort.

The effect of Internet activism on political decision–making

In order for Internet activities to be adequate replacements for off–line forms of participation, these activities should be efficacious ways to further political interests. An often raised critique against *slacktivism* is that the activities are incapable of achieving intended goals (Shulman, 2009; Morozov, 2009).

To counter this critique, many of the Internet sites aiming to mobilize citizens online through what Marichal (forthcoming) calls *micro–activism*, emphasize that they have achieved an actual political impact through their online activities. As it is not possible

to present all sites that make such claims, a few examples will have to do. These are from sites that specialize in creating easily accessible opportunities for using the Internet for political purposes. They open up possibilities for *slacktivism* — both effortless and ineffective activities — since they make it possible for a large number of people to be active without making a large effort. The examples are by no means representative or exhaustive; the intent is no more than to clarify why such claims are problematic.

The Causes application [6], available in Facebook, epitomizes the *slacktivist* portrayal of Internet activism. It pertains to provide an unprecedented opportunity to engage netizens in seizing the future and making a difference. It makes it possible for any Facebook user to leverage their network of real friends to effect positive change. And this is why an endless stream of political messages and good causes are transmitted via the news feed.

Petitionsonline.com (http://www.petitionsonline.com/), as the name suggests, is a Web site dedicated to providing free hosting for Internet petitions, thus making it easier to disseminate petitions to a large audience (today a number of similar sites exist). They cite a number of jubilant organizers, who claim to have been successful due to Internet petitions collected via the site [7].

Avaaz.org (http://avaaz.org/en/) is a Web site for connecting citizens and decision–makers around the world. In some sense it is unfair to label Avaaz.org as an example of *slacktivism*, since the site also try to mobilize users off–line and in this sense reaches beyond the virtual world. In this sense, the ambitions reach beyond the typical *slacktivist* portrayal of diminishing political engagement to effortless and to some extent meaningless activities. Nevertheless, the core of the project exists in sending newsletters on ongoing petition signings and trying to collect funding for the causes. In this, it resembles other projects accused of *slactivism*.

According to the claims of Avaaz.org, many of the campaigns launched have led to significant results in the real life by changing the outcomes of public decision–making [8]. They also include statements from the decision–makers that highlight the impact of the Avaaz users in getting the result they wanted.

Although these online platforms are eager to point their efficacy, the evidence they present is problematic and it is difficult to verify these claims. It is often impossible to substantiate the claims through independent sources and the platforms have an obvious interest in overstating their impact.

The sites can, and most likely do, cherry–pick the campaigns that worked while neglecting the many that were unsuccessful, which means this does not make it

possible to determine whether the success rate is 0.01 percent or 99 percent. For this reason, to give examples of successful campaigns is hardly compelling evidence in itself.

Even when they reproduce statements from decision–makers involved, this is not necessarily credible. These decision–makers have a vested interest in highlighting the impact of citizens after the fact. It is better for elected representatives or officials charged with serving the public good to pretend to be listening to public opinion rather than to acknowledge that no other result was attainable. This does not mean, however, that the same result would not have come about regardless of whether an Internet campaign had been launched or not.

Some research supports the notion that Internet campaigns can have an impact on political decisions (Bennett, *et al.*, 2008; Klotz, 2007). Nevertheless, most of these are case studies of campaigns, and although they can help mechanisms that can increase the success rate of Internet campaigns, they do not make it possible to ascertain the general impact of the Internet on democracy.

Although many of these projects may be sympathetic projects that support many laudable causes, their claims for success are unsubstantiated. This does not mean that efforts such as these are necessarily without an impact, but it is not possible to settle conclusively what percentage of Internet activities are successful and how important they generally are in reaching stated goals.

The activities of Internet activists

The second criticism launched against Internet activism is that effortless online activities supplant traditional forms of engagement, and the spread of online activities may therefore have negative consequences for both the extent of political participation as well as the efficacy of activities.

A number of studies have examined the impact of being politically active online on off–line political participation. By piecing together the results it is possible to gain a more complete understanding of how Internet activity affects political participation. The different measures and data sets used should make the findings more credible.

As it is not possible to present all of these studies in detail, the following presents examples of some studies that cast doubt on the purported positive effects of the

Internet on citizen engagement. In this sense, they are in line with the *slacktivist* account of Internet political activities, since they support the notion that being active on the Internet does not lead to off–line participation. According to this view, *slacktivism* may well be replacing traditional participation, and thereby lead to a lower overall quality of participation.

Bimber (2001) examines whether obtaining information from the Internet affects the likelihood of political participation in the form of voting and other activities such as discussing politics and attending rallies. His results suggest that obtaining information does not affect the likelihood of voting. He finds a weak link between obtaining information from electronic media and other forms of participation, which is mainly related to a higher propensity to donate money.

Bimber draws the conclusion that obtaining information does not necessarily increase the likelihood of participation outside the Web. He contends that political participation is not directed by the availability or cost of political information [9]. Nevertheless, for the present purposes it is valuable to note that there is no evidence reported of a *negative* link; or that Internet activity should decrease the propensity to be active.

In a similar vein, Scheufele and Nisbet (2002) find no evidence of a significant effect of Web use for various purposes and eight forms of traditional participation performed over the least years. When controlling for other factors, the independent effect of being active on the Internet is virtually zero and far from significant.

Jennings and Zeitner (2003) arguably provide the most elaborate statistical test of the impact of the Internet on political participation, since they have access to panel data making it possible to control for developments over time. They do find important implications of the Internet, but when it comes to political participation, the effect is negligent when considering previous levels of engagement.

All these studies question the existence of a positive effect of Internet activity on political participation. However, none suggest a negative effect from using the Internet for political purposes on participation in real life. This suggests that fears of Internet activities supplanting real life activity are unsubstantiated.

Other studies find a positive effect of Internet activity on political participation (Stanley and Weare, 2004; Tolbert and McNeal, 2004; Norris, 2005; Puig–i–Abril and Rojas, 2007), although it is not necessarily strong positive effects. It is especially emphasized that the Internet can help mobilize the young into off–line forms of political participation, which may suggest that the Internet effect can grow stronger over time.

This is even more so for more recent articles, which are generally more positive, although still cautiously so. A recent meta–analysis of studies of the impact of Internet use on civic engagement seems to confirm the positive impact of the Internet (Boulianne, 2009). The 38 studies span 1995–2005, and the results suggest that the Internet has a positive effect on civic engagement, although the strength of the impact is limited. Furthermore, it suggests that the impact is increasing over time, which suggests that the importance of the Internet may be growing.

Whether the stronger impact of the Internet on civic engagement over time is due to changes in theory, data, and analytical methods or is caused by a stronger effect of the Internet on participation in recent years is unclear. However, there is little doubt that the possibilities that the Internet offers have increased only the last five years. It seems fair to say that most evidence in recent years points to the Internet having a positive effect on off–line mobilization, even if it has by no means fulfilled the expectations of the most optimistic scholars.

Even if we modestly suggest that the precise impact of Internet activities on political participation is still a matter of dispute, there is no evidence for a negative effect of the Internet on off–line participation. Even the most skeptical scholars at most find a weak and non–significant linkage, but none find a negative impact.

Accordingly, there is no evidence to suggest that Internet activism is replacing traditional political participation. If anything, it is helping mobilize citizens by increasing an awareness of contemporary issues.

Conclusion

The relationship between the Internet and civic engagement has been debated both in public and among scholars. Initially, many commentators expected the Internet to have a profound impact on how democracy functions, transforming it into an ideal e–democracy with equal opportunities for all citizens. These expectations have so far not been fulfilled and are unlikely to be so in the near future.

This failure has lead many scholars to grow more skeptical when assessing the impact of the Internet, some even claiming that the Internet may have detrimental effects for the functioning of democracy.

One of the more recent critiques raised against virtual participation is that online activism is typically nothing more than *slacktivism*, that is, activities that may make the active individual feel good, but have little impact on political decisions and may even distract citizens from other, more effective, forms of engagement.

This paper has examined these two critiques against online activities to examine their relative merits. This makes it possible whether online participation in its most typical forms can be dismissed as *slacktivism* or should be taken serious as political participation by other means.

As concerns the efficaciousness of the online activities, there is a lack of reliable data to sustain the purported success of various Internet campaigns. For this reason, it is not possible to determine unequivocally whether Web sites actually have the impact they claim to.

Nonetheless, many of the campaigns accused of being *slacktivistic* are almost certainly never able to fulfill their stated goals, nor were they necessarily meant to. However, even if it is not possible to dismiss the skepticism about the effectiveness of online participation, it is premature to dismiss the impact of the Internet on political activism altogether. Online and off–line participation are not necessarily mutually exclusive forms of citizen engagement. This concerns the second aspect of the *slacktivist* critique, *i.e.*, that online activities supplant traditional forms of participation, thereby leading to a lower overall level of civic engagement.

Most evidence in recent years suggests that being active online promotes off–line participation as well. Although this link is not necessarily very strong, there is certainly no evidence of a negative effect from Internet activity.

This suggests that the fears raised that online *slacktivist* activities replace more traditional and more effective forms of participation are unfounded. Although most Internet users or *slacktivists* never develop deeper forms of involvement, there is no evidence that Internet activities are damaging civic engagement by replacing more effective forms of participation.

Instead, most recent research suggests a positive — albeit weak — link between online activity and engagement in off–line political participation. This suggests that being involved in effortless political activities online does not replace traditional forms of participation, if anything, they reinforce off–line engagement.

It is therefore ill–advised to dismiss Internet activism as *slacktivism* as opposed to genuine political participation. By expanding the number of potential activists and

easing the spreading of information, the Internet creates fertile ground for more direct involvement in political matters.

Doubtless, all purported *slacktivists* will not become active off–line as well, and the majority of the virtual activists may never progress beyond effortless forms of Internet activism. Nonetheless, the effortless Internet activities are at worst harmless fun (or an annoyance, but nonetheless harmless) without any effect on real–life politics. At best, they may help raise awareness about political issues and even mobilize citizens to take other forms of action outside the virtual world. Even if sending chain letters and joining Facebook groups do little more than raise awareness, they do at least that. In this sense, participation is more than just *slacktivism* and may promote engagement in a range of political activities.

There is still much research that needs to be done to assess the impact of Internet activism. As noted, there is a need to assess the effectiveness of Internet campaigns more systematically. Although a difficult endeavor, it is necessary to collect more data on the success rate of these endeavors to be able to thoroughly assess their impact on political decisions.

Additionally, there is a need to examine the factors that help activate the resource pool made up by the *slacktivists*. There is a need to explore what mechanisms turn *slacktivists* into activists, since clicking a button is rarely enough. This especially necessary since there is no evidence that the Internet can, nor ever will, provide a full good substitute for traditional activism. The best results seem to be obtained by using the means available, whether they are off–line or online.

In this sense, the efforts of Avaaz.org may be the most suitable path forward. Even if it is not possible to sustain their claimed instances of success, they at least pursue their political goals by any means possible.

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Notes

1. van Deth, 2011, pp. 149–156.

2. Brady, 1999, p. 737.

3. “Etymology,” (11 June 2009), at http://slacktivist.typepad.com/slacktivist/2009/06/etymology.html, accessed 1 February 2011.

4. Coleman and Blumler, 2009, p. 117.

5. Coleman and Blumler, 2009, pp. 135–138.

6. http://apps.facebook.com/causes/about, accessed 1 February 2011.

7. “Some PetitionOnline success stories,” at http://www.petitiononline.com/stories.html, accessed 1 February 2011.

8. http://avaaz.org/en/highlights/, accessed 1 February 2011.

9. Bimber, 2001, p. 64.

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