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The 'popular' culture of internet activism

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Abstract

How does the internet contribute to changes in civic engagement in the USA? To answer this question we must examine the institutional context of US marketizing civil society and the cultures of good citizenship constructed online. Drawing upon the findings from a case study of ONE, a campaign targeting extreme poverty and the spread of AIDS, I demonstrate how the internet may function as a space of new divisions of labor between civil society organizational actors and lay activists. While organizational actors use Web 2.0 to make activism convenient and standardized, the public is asked to participate in what I term 'visual labor', creating and representing images of community online that legitimize the organization's claims. At the same time, volunteer action is understood largely as performative. Ultimately, the article confronts the understanding of the internet as a post-bureaucratic democracy and emphasizes its cultural role in communicative capitalism.

Keywords

civil society, communicative capitalism, digital labor, internet, visual culture

Since its early days, the internet has been considered a powerful tool for the connection and mobilization of citizens. The rhetoric surrounding its emergence is replete with nostalgic references to community, the power of 'the people' and grassroots democracy (Castells, 1996; Rheingold, 1993). The internet's democratizing potential has been lauded for its impact upon community (Hampton and Wellman, 2003; Zhao, 2006; Wellman et al., 1996), social movements (Juris, 2008), the public sphere (Gimmler, 2001; Papacharissi, 2004; Schneider, 1996) and social capital (Chayko, 2002; Ester and Vinken, 2003). It has been hailed for its ability to connect people, provide information on social issues easily and generate one's own personalized and more detailed news access

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(Smith and Rainie, 2008). Some suggest that the internet may have contributed tremendously to the civic renewal of American youth. Reports on the 'Millennials' – today's young people – applaud this generation on their increased participation and enthusiasm. Volunteering, collective work on public issues and campus activism are reported to be on the rise (Kiesa et al., 2007). As the authors of one survey write, 'While it would be overly simplistic to suggest that the internet caused this recent rise in student activism, it is clear that online communications have played an important role in facilitating activism, both domestically and globally' (Montgomery et al., 2004: 88).

While the potential of the internet for connection and mobilization is indeed immense, it is important not to bracket out larger institutional contexts where, even in its most interactive incarnations, such as Web 2.0, it is embedded. Cautionary accounts emphasize the importance of considering cyberspace as configured by the structures of power. If we only concentrate on individual interactions within the internet realm and omit seeing them as inscribed within the orders of capitalism, Beer warns, 'We could easily fall into … sociological amnesia' (2008: 524). Admitting the potential of the internet as a space for public interaction, Papacharissi (2002) doubts its potential for revolutionary social change, as it is a public sphere functioning in the existing structures of political institutions and economy. Agre notes, '[the internet] does not create an entirely new political order; to the contrary, to understand its role requires that we understand much else about the social processes that surround it' (2002: 314).

Following these suggestions, I analyze internet use within the organizational context of US civil society. Above all, I develop my analysis through approaching the internet as a domain of public representations. Specifically, I ask how the internet's potential for interactivity and visuality may be interpreted in an institutional context where non-profit groups increasingly turn to market strategies. I argue that unlike the public spheres of mass media, which emphasize a singular public persona – the celebrity – the internet creates the space for, and indeed almost necessitates, different forms of symbolic representation. The medium's potential for ease of large-scale public use allows organizational actors to forego external, commercialized symbols like celebrities and to shape a public image out of the ordinary, 'everyday' world. Citing the increasing 'marketization' of US civil society organizations, I assert that online social networks transform the division of labor online – organizational 'experts' take care of the mechanics of activism while lay citizens contribute what I term 'visual labor'.

Analyzing the case of the ONE campaign, I find that volunteers are solicited to create a representation of community – one that acts as a powerful legitimating resource for the organization. Essentially, volunteers perform on behalf of the ONE campaign. Seeing the internet as a domain of performative and symbolic representation not only complicates our understandings about its potential for democratic change, but also problematizes accounts of today's transformations in the practices of civic engagement and activism.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, I present in more detail the context of organizational and cultural transformations taking place in the institutional field of US civil society. In particular, I review the existing scholarly literature on 'labor' in the internet world and the marketization of advocacy and philanthropy, in preparation for combining the two concepts theoretically for my analysis. I then introduce the ONE campaign, elaborating its structure and culture and describing its primary actors and their

discourses. Following a discussion of how my findings about ONE's virtual mobilization strategies shed light on current transformations occurring within the US civil sphere, I conclude by outlining the broader implications of this case study and some suggestions for further research.

The internet as a site for labor

One way to analyze the internet as inscribed within institutional ecologies has been to consider it an element of capitalist economy. 'Far from being an "unreal" empty space, the internet is animated by cultural and technical labor through and through, a continuous production of value that is completely immanent to the flows of the network society at large', writes Terranova (2000: 33–34). The labor of people participating in the maintenance of mailing lists, open-source programming, creation of blogs, posting videos on YouTube, checking their emails, etc., is invisible, and yet, in contributing to the maintenance of websites, also very tangible – for example, in the amount of revenue such labor generates when successful.

There are myriad ways that the internet can be used to extract value. SNSs (social networking sites) such as Facebook solicit data that is easily marketed to advertisers. On interactive websites such as YouTube, people form profiling communities around certain products, which makes the work of studying tastes and population groups much easier (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009). Furthermore, metadata derived from users' profiles allows companies like Google to establish links between advertisers and their target audiences more easily (Vaidhyanathan, 2007). The concept of 'Web 2.0', coined in 2004, expanded internet-based applications in ways that were more participatory, establishing infrastructures for online as well as offline collaboration (e.g., wikis, blogs and databases). At the same time, Web 2.0 fostered an even stronger case for those concerned about the exploitative nature of the medium. As Van Dijck and Neiborg find in their study of manifestos calling for businesses to go Web 2.0, such rhetoric essentially represents a new way of defining relationships between producers and consumers, 'Mass creativity, by and large, is consumptive behavior by a different name' (2009: 861).

Beyond the ease of connection and interaction, online social networking allows for their visualization; indeed, visibility is inherent to the definition of an SNS. 'What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks …. The public display of connections is a crucial component' (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Such capabilities turn social networks into sites for the creation of particular symbolic representations, reminiscent of the logic of celebrity commodification and production. Other media – film, music, television – have long used celebrities as symbols that generate revenues. The role of the celebrity is to serve as a metaphor for the type of individual and collectivity valued in a consumer society (Marshall, 1997). It is this metaphoric potential, to address and at the same time represent the collectivity, which makes it especially suitable for commodification. Superficially democratic, celebrities are a language through which the regimes of capitalism communicate their ideologies; promising their audiences an equal chance for fame, independence, and belonging, all while placating their critical impulses (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2006; Marshall, 1997). The internet's potential for

mass connectivity and visualization of phantasmagoric connections would suggest it is the perfect venue for creating celebrities. But interestingly, these processes in the virtual world seem to eschew celebrities and instead, provide the space for images of the (non-star) public, often without any inter-mediating symbolic work. Arvidsson (2006) studied the popular dating website, Match.com, and noticed that part of its branding process is to create a visual fantasy that would mobilize thousands of subscribers to join. The website insists on attracting 'quality' singles, thus purifying its pool of people seeking intimacy, making it more attractive and highly marketable for its customers. It has transformed subscribers into a vehicle for its branding process. Other websites with social networking features have demonstrated or often, like Match.com, solicited such implicit labor. A classic example from the early days of the internet is the plethora of online communities that contributed to the rise in popularity for AOL in the 1990s (Arvidsson, 2006). Similarly, Facebook has created a family-friendly fantasy of intimate ties and communities out of the people joining in. Another popular social networking website, Meetup.com, actually attempts to bring people together offline, creating a vision of people living in solidaristic community by using the pictures of their subscribers' successful, warm gatherings.

Thus, the potential of online social networking (and of the internet in general) for not only making connections, but also displaying connections, transforms it into a sphere with a unique division of labor. Businesses emerging around SNSs such as Facebook or MySpace establish themselves as privileged actors, facilitating social ties via the ease of connectivity. The product they offer 'manages' the reality of modern, fluid social connections by simplifying and facilitating interaction within what has previously been a largely non-mediated domain – intimacy and friendship. While the websites' business models refashion social ties, making them easier and more convenient, the job of their clients is to participate by reconfiguring their private lives around these websites, not only bringing in advertising revenues or even direct donations, but also creating the image of a warm, friendly community.

Civil society actors may also benefit from the highly expressive dimension of the internet. Recent technological advances in mobile and picture-taking technologies make it ever easier for one to enter the virtual public sphere and to make claims through symbolic representations. Bimber et al. (2005), in emphasizing the ease of individual online publicity, suggest that we even need to reconsider the terms of traditional social movement and mobilization scholarship. Such concepts as collective identity, free riding and opportunity structures, to name just a few, may no longer be relevant when all that is needed to bring a given concern into the public eye is simply the click of a mouse. Often, just by interacting in an online discussion, individuals may contribute to the public good (e.g., spreading information and awareness about an issue). Maratea (2008) makes a similar point when describing how online discussion communities formed around blogs may indirectly contribute to the visibility of social problems raised by bloggers. What I would like to emphasize here is the need to analyze further the *symbolic* nature of such individual claims-making emerging in the institutional contexts surrounding the internet. With commercial websites, we have seen how the medium's ability to combine connection and self-presentation creates an infrastructure of exchange where all – audiences, content-producers and owners – are involved in the production of images, fantasies,

revenues and legitimacies. When we talk about today's transformations in civic engagement, we must consider this representational dimension of the internet, which is so prone to commodification. One of the ways in which to explore these types of changes is to examine how civil society organizational actors – in this case, from a non-profit charitable group – interact with the lay public in managing this resource of easy publicity.

The marketization of advocacy and philanthropy

The neoliberal policies transforming America's social landscape since the 1970s have touched upon the institutions of civil society as well (Skocpol, 2004). As the federal government was reducing its funding of the non-profit sector and leaving behind many of its social welfare responsibilities, not-for-profit (NFP) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) stepped in to fill in the void (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009). As the demand for their services grew, NFPs sought more stable revenue sources, which resulted in the increasing turn to employing market strategies and actors. Despite cuts in federal funding, between 1977 and 1992 the number of non-profits in the United States had doubled, to 1.03 million institutions (Eikenberry and Drapal Kluver, 2004: 134). Revenues also grew, and today, it is a multi-billion industry, with 2008 donation levels reaching $76.2 billion, according to a survey done by the Chronicle of Higher Education. Eikenberry and Drapal Kluver attribute the ability to attract donations from multiple sectors to the increasing marketization of philanthropy and advocacy organizations, an 'increased reliance on commercial income, such as fees for services, product sales and other profit-making ventures (product sales, publications, mailing lists, etc.)' (Eikenberry and Drapal Kluver, 2004: 134).

While non-profit charity and advocacy organizations use various means to maintain a constant stream of revenues, such as government contracts, venture capital or partnerships, perhaps the biggest battles for funding take place on the symbolic front, as they devise ways to make social justice and welfare marketable. Organizational actors rely on media campaigns with carefully crafted and calculated socially conscious messages. For example, while in the 1970s and 1980s international aid advocates used images of starving African children to draw the public's attention to their plight, today messages do not embody shock value, but rather make humanitarian aid appealing. As Cameron and Haanstra explain, 'the strategic emphasis of awareness and fundraising initiatives has shifted from guilt about scarcity in the global South to a celebration of abundance in the global North' (Cameron and Haanstra, 2008: 1476). Furthermore, international development agencies increasingly seek star power to represent them. More and more TV and other mass media feature 'goodwill ambassadors' from Hollywood representing major UN-affiliated organizations. In what is becoming a lucrative business, special agencies match celebrities with social causes (Foreman, 2009).

While it is the role of celebrities to 'act' on behalf of the global good, the role of citizens is to consume. Various media charity campaigns – often in collaboration with corporate sponsors – ask the Western public to contribute to social causes while shopping. Music, organic food, chocolate, gift cards, any sort of object may become involved in the economy of 'doing good' (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009).

At the same time, making the message of social justice more appealing, even entertaining, raises questions for some about the democratic potential of such culture of popularized charity and advocacy. They emphasize the danger of equating practices traditionally conceived as driven by altruism and critical thinking with the consumption of leisure products and mass culture. For example, as Nickel and Eikenberry imply, having celebrities as symbols of advocacy action confounds activism with a calculated publicity stunt:

> Celebrity philanthropy is not the celebration of philanthropy, nor is it a political statement; [it] is an uncritical celebration of celebrities and their production of an elite society that can only be philanthropic by virtue of its ability to distance itself from poverty. (2009: 981)

Furthermore, consumption as a form of activism can obscure the complexities underlying the actual social problem, '[T]he result is that consumption philanthropy champions those causes that stabilize the current system, reducing the distance between the problem and the reaction to the extent that the problem is no longer visible' (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009: 979). What is more, creating a brand out of a social problem may in fact stifle the political and critical debates on the issue, as King (2006) demonstrates with the example of the breast cancer movement.

Today, the internet represents a new frontier where NFPs and NGOs develop new forms of communication with their donor and volunteer base. New definitions of good citizenship are negotiated in an attempt to account for growing discontent with the (perceived) elitism of celebrity actors and passivity of citizens. At the same time, the fact that organizational actors operate according to the principles of the market dictates a certain logic for their mobilization on the internet. For example, many non-profit advocacy and philanthropy organizations now utilize SNSs, allowing Web 2.0 to do the work of connecting people that share a passion for a social cause. In return, they ask their constituency for their visualized *presence*. In fact, the internet often incorporates 'ordinary' citizens into the same roles celebrities would have played in the past: drawing attention to a particular cause, making non-profit organizations seem legitimate and their claims visible. Such an ostensible democratization of a sign overall may in fact seem a positive development; however, whether the medium actually increases civic engagement remains to be seen.

In the following section, I present the ONE campaign. I have analyzed the ONE campaign's website, paying attention specifically to how it (1) presents itself to the public; and (2) addresses citizens or activists. I elaborate the campaign's institutional base and explore the symbolism of its online messages, which have moved away from a master narrative of 'celebrity' to a celebratory story about grassroots activism. This case highlights some of the ways in which the cybersphere fosters the reformulation of relationships between organizational actors and the public. It also reveals the particular meanings of civic participation and engagement created in the contexts where media and capitalism come together for the purposes of advocacy and social justice.

Research context: the ONE campaign

The ONE campaign to end global poverty was started by Paul David Hewson, better known as Bono, the lead singer of the world-famous British rock band U2. Initiated in

2005, the campaign pulled together corporate money and celebrity endorsements. The goal of the campaign has been to persuade Western governments to forgive the debt owed by poor countries to international financial organizations like the World Bank and to push the US government to allocate one percent of its budget (approximately 25 billion dollars) for aid to Africa. The campaign has promoted its message on two mass mediated levels: on television it solicits public support through celebrity power, while on its website it seeks to mobilize grassroots power.

'One by one, they step forward, a nurse, a teacher, a homemaker, and lives are saved.' These are the opening lines of the campaign's first major TV ad. The line is broken up into smaller portions as we see a slideshow of recognizable faces each delivering a small part of the message. Brad Pitt, Susan Sarandon, Penelope Cruz, Cameron Diaz, Benicio Del-Toro and others came together in this ad to address 'the average viewer' in order to make her pay attention to the problem of global poverty. The cast of participants even features Pat Robertson representing the campaign's attempt to appeal across political divisions. 'We are not asking for your money. We are asking for your voice,' culminates their message, as the viewers are directed to visit the campaign's website One.org.

The campaign has often been criticized in the media. The cause was seen as too vague and broad to account for the reality of politics, corruption and the cultural contexts of particular African countries. The campaign's reliance on celebrities to address the humanitarian crises throughout Africa, as well as its use of rock concerts and TV ads as principal venues for its claims-making was seen as too frivolous to deal with the issues that belong to the domain of politics (Cowell, 2005). In fact, in 2008, congressional Republicans introduced a resolution urging members of Congress not to deal with the campaign's lobbyists. The official reason for the resolution was that since Bono is a foreign national, the law prohibits US politicians from accepting contributions from his organization. The press described this measure as Congress's attempt to defend itself against 'a dream effort by do-gooders to spend huge sums of money on poverty and disease around the world' (Hallow, 2008).

Countering these criticisms, campaign representatives pointed out that celebrities are those who are listened to in our society. In one interview, the spokesperson for the campaign said:

> Brad Pitt was on television for 50 minutes last week talking about AIDS orphans and children out of school in Africa. That's approximately equal to the total amount of time broadcast networks devoted in their newscasts to Africa last year ... If hunchbacks and second-grade spelling bee champions were who our society listened to, we would use hunchbacks and spelling bee champions. (Braiker, 2005)

Findings: ONE for all and all for ONE

Because of its initial association with Bono and other superstar-powered TV appearances, the campaign has become associated strongly with celebrities. But looking at its website today, one sees a completely different face of the campaign. The front-page features not celebrities but rather 'ordinary people'. The website celebrates the democratic values of community and the power of the people – and does it through elaborate visual

and textual symbolic language emphasizing authenticity and the organic grassroots level. A prominent photo on the 'Who We Are' panel boasts a group of young, smart and 'cool' looking people – men and women of different ages and looks – wearing white t-shirts with the ONE logo on it. The description of the campaign reads:

> ONE is a grassroots campaign and advocacy organization backed by more than 2 million people who are committed to the fight against extreme poverty and preventable disease, particularly in Africa. Cofounded by Bono and other campaigners, ONE is nonpartisan and works closely with African policy makers and activists.[1]

The story of community members making up the backbone of the campaign is established throughout the website, which is configured with Web 2.0 interactive features. When the reader is taken to the page 'ONE Members', she does not see well-groomed recognizable celebrities but rather sees a list of pictures and short bios of 'common folk'. In the pictures, each of the volunteers is wearing a ONE logo t-shirt to emphasize how local people are tied to the larger campaign. The capture runs:

> ONE members are a powerful force in the fight against global poverty. Coming from every walk of life, they work to achieve change through grassroots campaigning in their local communities and by putting pressure on elected leaders.[2]

The spotlight on volunteers emphasizes their ordinariness, their entrenchment in local communities and their willingness to give. Here is how ONE describes one of the volunteers, Danielle from Miami/Pembroke Pines, Florida:

> Danielle [last name omitted] is highly committed to the fight against extreme poverty and preventable disease throughout the world. As an English teacher at Pines Charter High School, she is always encouraging her students to give back to the community and reach out to their elected officials in an effort to make a difference in the fight against global AIDS and extreme poverty. Inspired by Danielle, her students began a ONE club, which has grown to become one of the school's largest clubs with a membership of over 200 students and faculty. Danielle is a strong advocate and an integral part of the grassroots movement in South Florida to end poverty throughout the world.

Emphasizing the campaign's embeddedness in the local, the site introduces models for action that volunteers can take. These again signal that the members are working on behalf of the campaign as indeed 'one'. Under the 'What you can do' section, the reader finds the following description emphasizing the communal initiative at the grassroots level that gets things done:

> Grassroots Mobilization
>
> ONE members affect change through a broad range of actions, from educating and organizing others in their communities to urging their elected leaders to support the policies and programs making a concrete difference in the poorest parts of the world. During the 2008 US presidential election, for example, ONE members engaged in an unprecedented effort to get the presidential

> candidates to go 'On the Record' with their positions on fighting global poverty and disease. ONE members signed petitions, called offices and tracked the candidates down at coffee shops and town hall meetings to make their case. As a result, all of the major candidates from both parties shared their plans with ONE and some made impressive new commitments to fight global poverty and disease.[3]

This passage is notable for the way in which it describes communal action: 'Tracking down candidates in coffee shops' has a strong allusion to the good old-fashioned public spaces, as does participating in town hall meetings, invoking a pastoral, Tocquevillean America. It is not that people are asked to join ONE merely to send donations; rather, they are asked for their 'voice' and their legwork, in order 'to help in the movement of people and organizations working to end poverty throughout the world'.[4]

Besides these metaphors, the website utilizes visual symbolism to promote the image of community and ordinary people's solidarity, adding to the authenticity of the message. A page featuring a petition calling upon the leaders of the G20 to hold their next meeting in an African country has a Flickr slideshow feeding pictures of what appear to be ONE volunteers. Consumed by painting a large mural with a globe, young and old volunteers are working together, dressed in the same t-shirts, covered in paint stains and looking tired and messy. Another page features a video – not trendy, stylish close-ups of celebrities, but a simple YouTube job of two college kids, visibly nervous and unskilled on camera, making the pitch formerly made by professionals. This further demonstrates the down-home authenticity that is the foundation of ONE's campaign. Like a star-studded endorsement, their image helps the campaign gain visibility, legitimacy and public support – but in a very different fashion.

While emphasizing their power, the website at the same time provides volunteers with advice for countering all possible questions or issues. There are helpful hints throughout on how to organize, what information to use, whom to contact and so on, all features that make participation in the campaign maximally easy and convenient. By doing this, the campaign routinizes and standardizes the volunteers' participation. For example, on the 'Act Now' page there is a tab for 'Urgent Action', where with a click of a mouse one is invited to 'Ask the leaders of the G20 nations to host an upcoming summit in Africa, and focus the attention on how Africa can and must be part of any successful global economic recovery'. There is a yellow ribbon sitting in the right top corner of the tab, marked with the word 'Urgent', making it visually easy to identify the most pressing issue. The page further breaks down one's steps in signing the petition by enumerating what one should do next with the text of the petition and the tabs to insert one's contact information and name conveniently provided.

Other ways to become more involved are also listed and detailed. For instance, a volunteer can lobby Congress or contact local newspapers. Each of these actions is further supported by a barrage of tips for writing a successful letter, links to identify one's local member of Congress, quick facts and even video clips on how to schedule a congressional meeting or meet with one's representative. This way the website takes care of what would have been a lengthy (costly) mobilization pre-internet – the learning process of finding information, coming up with ideas about what to do with it and finally, to realize concrete action. Now such questions are answered in advance and solutions are

prefigured. The website has organized and packaged resources that before would be sought through face-to-face social ties. Despite the fact that it solicits for volunteers and emphasizes 'people's power', the website also attempts to reduce their efforts and maximize efficiency.

This is not to say that there are no 'real', on the ground volunteers working on behalf of the campaign; indeed, the website works as a hub to communicate with college campus chapters and local volunteer groups. At the same time, the action sought in communal efforts is often performative or eventful, with 'raising awareness' about the ONE campaign being presented as the major task at hand. Here's a representative piece of advice:

> Recruit others. While writing your own letter is a great way to let your member of Congress know you care about fighting extreme poverty, getting everyone you know to do the same is even more powerful. Ask your friends or family to write letters, or start a letter-writing campaign in your community. Consider making the writing process a social event so you can do it together.[5]

Moreover, the visual labor of representing the campaign is something one can easily do. Student groups are asked to enter a contest to compete for which school has 'the most effective poverty-fighting campaign'. There are points for various actions that students can take, such as posting an update in the Facebook profile or Twitter, or even submitting a photo of a pet: 'Pets are cute. Cute gets attention. Dress your pet in ONE gear and take a picture to help raise ONE's visibility'.[6]

While working to create the image of a grassroots mobilization and to establish the means for active volunteer participation, the website also mentions another level of advocacy, 'High-level Engagement' or 'Direct Engagement with Policy Makers', which involves the campaign's paid staff, professional lobbyists and case experts. Interestingly, even this form of expert and professional engagement is further portrayed as impossible without grassroots support:

> As an example of how direct engagement complements grassroots mobilization, during the 2008 presidential election, while grassroots activists were talking to the candidates on the stump, ONE's policy staff was sharing information with the candidates' staffs on the programs making a difference on the ground and what more would be needed to accelerate the pace of progress.[7]

On one level, such a division of labor is nothing new. A classic example is Greenpeace, sometimes dubbed a 'protest corporation', which would differentiate between the virtual support of its multi-million constituency and the 'real' business carried out by organization's paid staff. This was an intentional move, since increasing actual participation would in fact be detrimental to its overall operation (Lahusen, 1999). Unlike Greenpeace, however, the ONE campaign opens up a very concrete participatory space for its volunteer base. But the labor that is asked of this broader ONE community emphasizes performance and visual representation (online), which complements a mediated fantasy of community created by professionals and disseminated via the website.

To sum up, the ONE campaign's website works to create a space for action and, at the same time, representation. By setting up an online domain for easy activist involvement, the campaign is creating new forms of division of labor: while the organization takes charge of logistics and strategizing, what is asked from citizens is to show up, to call, to become a representative image of citizenry rather than to be an entity for transcendent action. Lay activists are summoned to participate in the performative labor. ONE creates more and more outlets for activism, but it codes activism in a very particular way – it is an organizational culture that equates success in activism to the extent that it is *visualized*. In other words, one is 'active' if her actions are visible through certain collective symbolic representations. How to explain this attempt to exploit the internet's potential for the representation of the commons? And what does such a reformulation of the meaning of activism actually mean?

Discussion: post-bureaucratic democracy or communicative capitalism?

Surveys demonstrate that online social networks are becoming increasingly popular among non-profits (NTEN et al., 2009). The annual study on online fundraising by the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports that in 2009 55 percent of the survey participants, among which are 400 US charities that raise money from private donors, used Facebook for fundraising; other new technologies – such as blogging and text messaging – were used by 41 percent of the surveyed charities, up from 7 percent in 2006 (Wasley, 2009). While the effectiveness of SNS fundraising is still debatable, what is unquestioned is the clout that a non-profit may acquire through the channels of a social network. In fact, non-profits' trade literature is full of advice about how to capitalize on the 'personalization' function of Web 2.0. It urges non-profits to create 'a personal donor experience' or set up 'brand communities', to establish 'online relationships with potential donors' and foster 'the quality of interaction on the site'. Non-profit marketers urge philanthropic organizations to position themselves as allowing people to actualize their urge for doing good (Kriegel, 2009: 2). Bringing together organizational players and ordinary citizens the internet is seen as a tool for the creation of a 'megapublic', in the words of Ben Rattray, founder of Change.org (Watson, 2009).

In a similar vein, some scholars have begun to talk of the 'post-bureaucratization' of formerly hierarchical organizations. When talking about such groups as Moveon.org and Millions Mom March, Bimber (2003) notes that such post-bureaucratic institutions may be more flexible – in terms of what issues they address, their organizational structure and mobilization of members, what kind of contributions donors can make, and so on. He describes members' participation through such websites as events-based, rather than based on a more substantive collective identity, and this idea is certainly supported by many examples of spontaneous mobilization via the internet (Juris, 2008). On the other hand, the appeal to post-bureaucracy may in fact obscure the divide between organizational players or experts and lay participants whose value resides in being the means of image production and legitimation. In a context of increasing marketization of charity and advocacy, de-bureaucratization still does not exclude exploitation, albeit symbolic.

When we think about such forms of advocacy becoming increasingly mainstream, we must consider them within the context of 'communicative capitalism', according to Dean (2003). In a democratic, consumer society, political goals cannot be achieved without the employment of systems of media and entertainment; communication thus becomes a commodity exchangeable for the obtainment of political goals (Dean, 2003). The internet joins in this system through its perpetuation of a mythology in which its public sphere is full of potential and unequal accumulations of wealth and power are masked. Its capabilities for easy access to publicity offers a dream of the renewal of democracy, but in reality, there is a disconnect between actual political decisions and the potential of voices circulated via the internet. What emerges is the clutter of information that does not equal democracy, as Dean asserts: 'The intense circulation of content in communicative capitalism occludes the antagonism necessary for politics, multiplying antagonism into myriad minor issues and events' (2009: 24). Even contentious messages do not have a particular addressee; their sender is irrelevant, their content is not important, their main purpose is not to elicit action but to add to the existing circulation of messages (Dean, 2009: 26). Whether the message is successful is defined primarily by its longevity. What matters in this unstoppable stream of communication is not goal oriented message, as envisioned in the conception of Habermas' public sphere, but rather circulation, visibility and recognizability embodied in such devices as brands, celebrities, catch phrases (Dean, 2009: 27). Message in such context is commodified in a sense that it extends what essentially is economic exchange – it should be coined, tested, sold and essentially generate revenues (economic or political) to those on whose behalf it operates. This is reminiscent of Adorno's analysis of the entertainment industry, where cultural products are turned into fetishes – empty signifiers, always standing for 'something else'. The ONE campaign's construction of activism works along the same logic – it capitalizes upon the symbolism and mythology of the internet as a democratic public sphere and a space for communal gathering – branding its members as symbols of ONE.

In the crowded public spheres of communicative capitalism, where messages cost little or nothing, establishing their legitimacy becomes an ever-important task. In fact, contests over visibility in today's media environments concern not only the legitimacy of a message's content, but also that of the sender. It is not the message that manifests authenticity, but the medium through which it was sent. Bimber cites research that demonstrated how members of Congress learn to distinguish messages based on their authenticity: the presumed amount of work applied to develop and send a message made certain petitions seem more valuable than others. Aware of this, interest groups work to 'elevate' the value of the message, often training their constituencies to use the phone or to write personalized letters to Congressmen (2003: 108). It can be suggested that the terms of politics in communicative capitalism involve exchanges in authenticity, ever more crucial in a context and culture of abundant publicity promulgated by new media.

ONE's website tactics for expanding its constituency base are dictated in part by this environment, where spreading the word is easy and communication is valued, purchased and manipulated for political gain. Under such conditions, however, the value of the message must be boosted through the legitimacy and authenticity of its sender. Visual representations, not through celebrities, but through 'ordinary' community, add value to the public claims of the campaign. The logic of internet-based interactions between

socially conscious organizational actors and their constituencies is reminiscent of the cultural production described by Bourdieu. Its 'double logic' is based on the production of items that may bring – due to their worth – economic value, but at the same time, it disavows the fact that profits are being reaped. The (ostensible) disinterest in profit, Bourdieu argues, creates the symbolic capital of artwork: it exists above the mundane, in the realm of the sacred (Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993). The same cultural processes occur in the interactions between the market and civil society institutions fueled by Web 2.0: instead of asking for donations now, these interests are downplayed, in favor of personalized relations between an organization and its volunteers and the appearance of grassroots mobilization, an organic, solidaristic community base and people's power.

In a society where the democratic codes of civil society run deep throughout its collective culture (Alexander and Smith, 1993), the symbolic power of 'community' cannot be overestimated. This symbolic capital works quite tangibly, ensuring revenues for NFPs and NGOs, as well as legitimating them within the public sphere as 'people-driven'. In the economies of authenticity that so many contemporary political actors seem engaged in, the genuineness of images of community action, people power and grassroots involvement remain a stable currency.[8]

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to broaden the terms of current understandings of the impact of the internet upon civil society by emphasizing the power of its symbolism. The internet is not merely an interactive device but also a site for visual representation. I have argued that the role of the internet as a cultural tool should be considered with an eye to the increasing marketization of institutions of civil society. Today's ease of publicity and a simultaneous need to be heard in the context of overwhelming amounts of communicative exchanges forces organizations to seek creative ways to become visible and legitimate. In the case of the ONE campaign, its website represents a means for creating visual representations of communal, grassroots action, with the concept of 'community' effectively transformed into the organization's own brand.

What are the implications for civil society? If ONE's symbols are caught up in capitalist processes (i.e. when authenticity becomes a commodity to ensure legitimacy of the message), what kinds of appeals are ultimately created in such a public sphere?

Indeed, the ONE campaign and other organizations tapping into online social networks for similar purposes may facilitate activism and make it much more compatible with the busy lives of modern individuals. Thus, on the one hand, a certain culture of civic engagement is pushed forward, perhaps even renewed. On the other hand, when community is commodified, activism itself is commodified. It is turned into exchange value and the use value of activism is reduced. What is normalized are the meanings of activism understood as performative action that do not require actual solidarity. They coexist alongside the professional players responsible for actual strategic action in civil society organizations, but their value is now reduced to a mere representation of activism itself. With the medium of the internet allowing for easy representational labor by ordinary people, the range of symbols that can be used to convey one's adherence to a cause has expanded exponentially. Civic engagement can be communicated with any sort of

action; the re-appropriation (and sometimes misappropriation) of signs is common. On other websites attempting to solicit the same visual labor as ONE, I have seen how a pie-throwing contest, for example, was understood as raising awareness and thus as a form of assistance for the victims of human trafficking in Thailand. In this context, grassroots activism is imagined as fun, convenient gathering, performative in nature, devoid of any critical or radical urge. As Dean describes it, 'Activity on the internet, contributing to the circulation of affect and opinion, thus involves a profound passivity, one that is interconnected, linked, but passive nonetheless' (Dean, 2009). This passivity, though, is further celebrated through the symbols that interpret it as active involvement.

The question remains – where is the potential for agency when these are the understandings of citizenship and civic-mindedness created in today's online communicative spaces? It is important to consider the possibility that agency may be turned into a symbol of itself, formulated for the benefit of communicative capitalism.

Accordingly, more research is needed on how these meanings are negotiated by volunteers offline. Perhaps, encouraged by organizations, but steeped into actual face-to-face associational ties, they may overcome the limitations of the online world. In fact, the associations generated by representations via the internet may be sites for the re-negotiation of the value of activism and civic participation as leisure. In this case, the question is essentially about the relationship between two political cultures: online and offline. What forms of civic engagement will actually be practiced under the conditions where performative and visualized engagement is solicited through a set of ready-made recipes under conditions of communicative capitalism?

As more and more political actors choose to travel regularly through social networks to communicate with their constituencies, it is important to understand the meanings and practices of citizenship emerging at the intersections of the resultant social ties, visual representations, unbound publicity and special interests.

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Notes

1 http://www.one.org/us/about/ (unless otherwise noted, all referenced Web links were last accessed on November 2, 2009).
2 http://www.one.org/us/about/ourmembers.html
3 http://www.one.org/c/us/about/902/
4 http://www.one.org/c/us/faq/
5 http://www.one.org/c/us/about/844/
6 http://www.one.org/campus/thepoints.html
7 http://www.one.org/c/us/about/902/
8 This is not to deny that the presence of a large constituency can be powerful leverage when dealing with elected officials. Lobbying on Capitol Hill with the support of 2 million members, the ONE campaign's political professionals lighten Bono's task considerably.

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