
From Slacktivism to Activism: Participatory Culture in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), microblogging services (e.g. Twitter), and content-sharing sites (e.g. YouTube and Flickr) have introduced the opportunity for wide-scale, online social participation. Visibility of national and international priorities such as public health, political unrest, disaster relief, and climate change has increased, yet we know little about the benefits—and possible costs—of engaging in social activism via social media. These powerful social issues introduce a need for scientific research into technology mediated social participation. What are the actual, tangible benefits of “greening” Twitter profile pictures in support of the Iranian elections? Does cartooning a Facebook profile picture really raise awareness of child abuse? Are there unintended negative effects through low-risk, low-cost technology-mediated participation? And, is there a difference—in both outcome and engagement level—between different types of online social activism? This SIG will investigate technology mediated social participation through a critical lens, discussing both the potential positive and negative outcomes of such participation. Approaches to designing for increased participation, evaluating effects of participation, and next steps in scientific research directions will be discussed.

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Social media, activism, slacktivism, participation, design, change

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H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

In 1997, 122 countries signed an international treaty to ban landmines. One of the key drivers of the treaty passage was the work of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). The ICBL is touted as one of the most successful international efforts to promote and achieve humanitarian goals. The success of the ICBL would not have been possible without the use of Internet technologies and computer-mediated communication [9]. Fast forward a decade. In 2010, during the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake that devastated Haiti, the International Red Cross (IRC) launched a campaign asking people to donate money towards relief efforts, via text message. Four days after the quake, \$7 million dollars had been raised. A cellular carrier spokesperson explained that the ease of using text messages to donate to charities has “opened up a whole new world for philanthropy.” [6]

We know technology can be used to help raise awareness and create change. But does the rising use of social media to produce meaningful change echo the same success experienced by the IRC and the ICBL? Does “greening” a Twitter profile picture (Figure 1) have the same effect as an email campaign to stop the spread of landmines? When people partake in activism via social media, are they doing anything meaningful?



Figure 1. Greening of Twitter profile picture to support democratic election in Iran.

Most people might agree that social media participation raises awareness of, if not knowledge about, social issues; however, it is less clear whether raising awareness translates into more meaningful and tangible societal benefits.

Technology mediated social participation has been harnessed for social welfare in a number of novel ways. Twitter use during mass emergency situations to gather and distribute timely, relevant information, or creating a platform for guidance and support of gay and lesbian teens on YouTube are examples of the potential value of social media use by large numbers of people that might lead to wide-scale progress. These, and similar phenomena, introduce new research opportunities in the social and computational fields for the development of methods, analytic tools and metrics, design approaches and theory.

There is a need for scientific research that examines the effects of participation through social media at an individual and collective level, and for design directions that support social participation in new ways [7]. These understandings will lead to the development of social media tools that can work to increase the motivation and ability of users to participate in social change. The goal of this SIG is to discuss and debate the merits of social participation through social media.

Topic 1: Characterizing Online Participation

In 2009 and 2010, awareness and social activism campaigns flourished via various social media. They ranged from changes made to users’ online representation (posting suggestive Facebook statuses about the location of one’s purse in support of breast cancer awareness) to acts that extended beyond the online presence (wearing particular clothing on a

particular day as a symbolic support of a cause). They also involved efforts that used social media as a vehicle to distribute information (e.g. YouTube campaigns) and offers of social support (e.g. Facebook groups). Figure 2 represents the activity flow that leads to activism or “slacktivism¹”, and highlights the role of social media as a facilitator of action. Across these contexts, a number of questions emerge:

- What technologies have successfully motivated or enabled “practical activism?”² Are certain types of technology, specifically social media, better suited to support practical activism?
- What is the relationship between “practical activism” and activism via social media?
- In what ways does slacktivism promote awareness? Does awareness translate to further action or productive outcomes?
- How is virtual civic-disobedience occurring?
- How should social media participation be handled when activism goes “rogue” as in the case of WikiLeaks?

Finally, why do people participate in social issues using social media? Some possible reasons could be ease of access, speed and efficiency of online mediums, affinity for a particular cause, observing support from friends and peer groups, and a positive feeling about oneself through participation. There is little research examining these questions. One of the goals of this SIG is to bring

¹ We define “slacktivism” as low-risk, low-cost activity via social media, whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity.

² We define “practical activism” as the use of a direct, proactive and often confrontational action towards attaining a societal change.

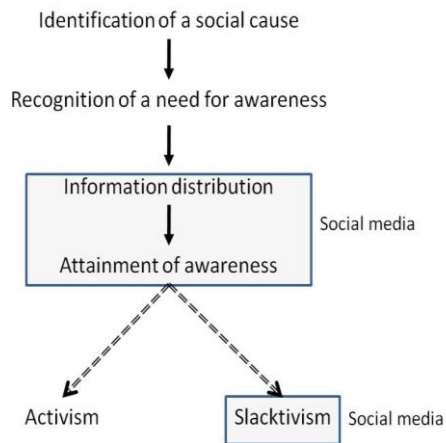


Figure 2. A process diagram of social media based activism and slacktivism

together researchers and practitioners to brainstorm future directions in participatory culture research.

Topic 2: Research Directions

In October 2010, Malcolm Gladwell published a provocative article in the “The New Yorker,” [4] arguing that social actions on social media sites are nowhere near “practical activism” (e.g. Tiananmen Square or the civil rights movement in the U.S.). Most might agree that sending a tweet or changing a profile is not the same as a lunch counter sit-in or a bus boycott; however, what social media can provide is a way to facilitate awareness of issues at a much larger scale which may translate into further action. The goals of this SIG are to promote a scientific agenda around technology mediated social participation. Such goals include aligning this agenda with national and international priorities such as health, disaster relief, and climate change, and developing directions for research on the effects of social media participation. Research questions may include the following:

- How does social media use for activist purposes compare to use for non-activist purposes?
- How are attitudes towards movements impacted by social media activism?
- In what ways are users motivated to promote activist movements through online or offline participation?
- In what ways are the process and outcomes of activist movements impacted by social media?

Topic 3: Theoretical Implications and Evaluating Effectiveness

New theories or refinement of existing theories are needed to better understand the design and evaluation

of participatory technologies. This might involve theories about motivation and persuasion [1, 3] to encourage participation. Theories about risk and cost [8] might also help understand motivation to participate in slacktivism, and how that may or may not lead to activism. We should also consider where theories about strong and weak ties [5] work well and where they fall short. Finally, activism can involve aggressive struggles to attain rights, establish equality, or balance power [2]. Social media has proven to be a useful tool in distributing information that creates and enhances awareness, giving rise to the following questions:

- How can we gauge and evaluate effectiveness? e.g. do more women get tested for breast cancer due to a Facebook campaign?
- How does online participation relate to participation in high-risk, high-cost social participation?
- How can we design and evaluate online tools for effective participation?

Expected Outcomes

This SIG will create a network of researchers who share an interest in designing and evaluating technologies for social change. Topics for discussion will include (1) instances of technology-related activism, slacktivism, or other social participation; (2) whether these instances were successful or not, and alternatively - how they could have been improved; (3) ideas for design, theories, methods, or toolkits to measure and evaluate online social participation and how we might extend evaluations to related practical activism.

We welcome participants who have experience in designing or researching and evaluating participatory

social media as well as interested newcomers. Our goals are to initiate critical discussions of the role of social media in online activism and generate ideas for next steps in research on technology mediated social participation. We expect to produce: case studies of successful online activism, tools and techniques for measuring outcomes, theoretical frameworks for understanding online activism, and design ideas for increasing social participation.

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