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# Can Cyberactivism Effectuate Global Political Change?

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## **Abstract**

Targeted activist strategies propel social justice movements to devise creative mechanisms in an effort to gain momentum. This discussion paper will analyze if cyberactivism can effectuate global political change. Varying views will be illustrated demonstrating the efficacy and the lack of efficacy of cyberactivism in its attempt to impact global political change. Comparisons and data analyses will assess the impact of communication media and the Internet, Internet connectivity of people, and impact of online technology on social movements. Research studies will gauge online communication tools, benefits/wins and challenges of cyberactivism, and future assumptions. Examples of cyberactivism strategies will illustrate how online technology has impacted political change in different regions of the world. The available evidence suggests that cyberactivism has created new ways for people to connect for the purpose of change despite where they live or identity differences. Although researchers may disagree about the efficacy of cyberactivism on global political change, the Internet still provides the essential platform for debate and information sharing.

It is not uncommon to receive an emailed online petition through your cell phone. Within moments you are able to quickly e-sign the petition while thousands of others are doing the same. This act of cyberactivism took all of a matter of seconds. Cyberactivism uses Internet technology to engage individuals and groups to organize and mobilize for social change. Online tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, websites, and email are used to inform and persuade audiences to achieve a specific objective or goal. Technological access has become more widespread and individuals can mobilize globally with the click of a mouse without even meeting other activists face-to-face. The

contingent role of digital and social media has become vital to accomplishing global human rights work.

In this discussion paper, the following topics will be assessed to determine if cyberactivism can effectuate global political change: impact of communication media and the Internet, Internet connectivity of people, impact of online technology on social movements, groups of individuals that focus on social or political issues, citizen journalism, and cyberactivism. Additionally, this discussion will unpack online communication tools, benefits and challenges of cyberactivism, and future assumptions. Examples of cyberactivism strategies will illustrate how online technology has impacted political change in different regions of the world.

Soon and Cho (2014) state that when adopted on a large scale, Internet technologies have the capacity to create shifts in political engagement by enabling organizations and individuals to challenge traditional top-down flows of power and engage in issue-specific advocacy. Under-resourced and underserved communities historically have been silenced because of a lack of political prowess and access to crucial mobilizing information. As technology has become more accessible, online communication tools are empowering disparate groups of people across borders and despite regional barriers. However, these new cyber tools are not effective solely on their own merit. By engaging offline-based, traditional activities (e.g. protests, demonstrations, and contacting politicians), online-based movement activities (e.g. email bombs and virtual sit-ins), and online social media tools (e.g. organizational websites, blogs, and social media) now form the latest weapons in the arsenal in contemporary social movement repertoire (Soon & Cho, 2014).

### **Impact of Communication Media and the Internet**

Soon and Cho (2014) explain that marginalized communities have used the proliferation of Internet technologies to advance varied civic and political agendas. Technology is fast becoming an integral component of the social movement building as overlooked communities and individuals adopt the Internet and user-generated technologies to advance community awareness.

Valenzuela (2013) shows that using media for news acquisition and surveillance is positively associated with various forms of political activity, whereas patterns of use related to private entertainment and diversion have a negative or muted effect. As long as individuals expose themselves to current affairs and hard news through social media platforms, the participatory effects of frequent use of social media should be similar to those found for traditional news media (Valenzuela, 2013). Social media campaigns, in particular, can place democratic politics on the table in a highly engaging and entertaining way (Reilly, 2011).

However, a distinction exists as other scholars warn that the Internet may have a limited role in the creation and mobilization of social movements. Although the Internet is a tool capable of providing citizens with technical and moral support that may encourage mobilization, online tactics must be coupled with other (offline) techniques—such as the distribution of underground pamphlets, use of posters, and engagement in street activism—to achieve local mobilization (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013).

Organically created online platforms may offer individuals the capacity to organize, campaign, and increase political participation; however, it is possible that these platforms may encourage civic privatism resulting in fragmented and dispersed groups unlikely to galvanize enough power to influence the changes they seek (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). Despite the criticisms of impact, researchers believe there is ample evidence that the Internet has resulted in a significant shift in communication capacity and potential for political organizing. Information and communication technology consists of new and social media. The abundance of mass-media has dramatically changed the way information is sent, received, and accessed, resulting in a new culture of self-empowered investigators and storytellers. Consequently, the ability of the media, cultural, and political institutions to ensure dominance has lessened and has led to increased Internet connectivity. (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013).

### **Impact of Internet Connectivity Between People**

The Internet has become globally effective at serving as a technical means of connecting people and by providing an easy way for individuals as well as groups and organizations to adopt peer-to-peer communication (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Linking with friends, family, and society, and gaining interest in collective issues are all considered the mainstays of digital connectedness (Valenzuela, 2013). Historically, connectivity between like-minded, socially conscious individuals has been limited by a number of factors including socio-economic status, gender, and distance (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Valenzuela (2013) states that through online presence, technology can facilitate access to a large number of contacts, thereby enabling social movements to reach critical mass and impact political policy. Connecting people globally to rally around social justice issues has helped human rights activists to empower marginalized citizens. Their once silenced voices are now raised to participate in and influence existing decision-making processes and power structures (Tayebi, 2013).

The impact of communication media can also promote personal and group identity construction—key precursors of political behavior by allowing multiple channels for peer acceptance, interpersonal feedback, and reinforcement of group norms (Valenzuela, 2013). Researchers have discovered that individuals who join online political groups and social movements can receive mobilizing information unattainable elsewhere and thus receive more opportunities to engage in political activities (Valenzuela, 2013). This increased participation in online social networks helps to build trusting relationships among members resulting in enhancing the potential of social media to increase protest engagement and other political behaviors.

### **Impact of Online Technology on Social Movements**

In their research, Olorunnisola and Martin (2013) emphasize the ability for worldwide participation in social movements, by stating we have the right to plug in and participate, even if it's not technically our revolution or geographically near us. Haythornthwaite (2005) asserts that this technological mobilization has been exhibited recently in cases of online activism. He notes that web-based community network initiatives influence smaller communities to become connected to the larger population as a whole. Technology-mediated communication networks can create communities based on interest to mobilize rather than by geography, prior acquaintance, and social position, leading to global impact (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

Khamis and Vaughn (2011) state that the impact of online technology supports different phases of revolution for activists through the following: (a) increasing international awareness, news dissemination, creating motivation in the pre-revolutionary phase; (b) mobilizing and coordinating protests, inspiring political activism, and exposing brutality and violations of human rights during the revolutionary phase; (c) democracy-building and consensus-building in the post-revolutionary phase.

Yet some communities continue to feel powerless with government regulated censorship. In this case, governments still control traditional and Internet content to limit public will and grow community-based dissatisfaction. Wu and Mao (2011) reveal that Chinese government-controlled media once demonstrated a negative impact on HIV/AIDS education and outreach by only releasing select information about contraction rates. Public discourse had been limited, yet claims-making physicians used blogs and emails to circumvent controlled media and offered problem solving solutions. Effective mobilization yielded success and the government eventually recanted its denials. Western media attention caused the Chinese government difficulty in denying the HIV/AIDS problem. These informational cascades, such as those in China, can make it difficult for regimes to maintain their control of information hegemony (David, 2013).

### **Components of Cyberactivism**

According to Illia (2003), cyberactivism is a burgeoning phenomenon, growing out of activism but increasing the pressure on corporations and governments. It can consist of a protest of a single individual or a group of individuals. Online communication has enabled new dynamics of issue selection and influenced different aggregation within groups. Spontaneous relationships and organizing through cyberactivism has spawned a network of individuals seeking global change (Illia, 2003). Traditional organizing no longer requires substantial amounts of time to bring people together, for now instantaneous responses and actions can take place with the click of a mouse to apply pressure and reach public policy results. With movement-building actions taking place off-and online, visibility is reached due to a mass media coverage that contributes to the increase in pressure (Illia, 2003). The following illustrates the aspects of activism and dynamics of cyberactivism: (a) cyberactivism originates from society's complexity and pluralism; (b) originates from the heterogeneity of society; (c) grows from an issue selection caused by failed expectation related to corporate social responsibility; (d) a tendency to rise and focus around an issue; (e) activism consists of a protest of two or more individuals; (f) activism expresses and reaches a situation of pressure on a corporation into a movement of protest or an organization; (g) visibility is reached due to a mass media coverage that contributes to the increase in pressure.

### **Cyberactivism Impacting Mobilization**

According to Khamis and Vaughn (2011), cyberactivism differs from mobilization because of the latter's focus on planning, execution, and facilitation of actions. The two are closely interrelated, since cyberactivism can help to foster and promote civic engagement. However, research has found that the social media platform Facebook attracts many sympathizers online but is sometimes unable to organize them well offline (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). Mobilization encourages collective consensus about how the problem can and should be ameliorated.

Mobilization can erupt, through coordination of resources and collective resolve, into social action (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

Traditional media have limited capacity to transmit mobilizing information, as most journalistic operations perceive that this type of content violates norms of neutrality. However, social media are considered free from norms of objectivity and were built around personal connections, not overtly political purposes (Valenzuela, 2013). Some researchers assert that social media cannot be considered an automatic mobilizing vehicle. A video posted on Facebook or YouTube, for example, would need to contain mobilizing information to fall under social media use for activism. In contrast, commenting on the video would be an act of opinion expression. Yet, if an audience is unaware of the issues discussed in the video, it would be considered a source of news acquisition (Valenzuela, 2013).

### **Citizen Journalism**

Years of alleged bias, sensationalism, reporting limitations, and censure have motivated individuals to empower their own voices. Often viewed as a labor of love, citizen journalists typically possess no formal journalism training (Fanselow, 2008). These blogs and local news sites evolve into online communities where citizens regularly comment, report on community issues, or encourage a call to action among community members. Fanselow (2008) believes that community blogs are having a sizable impact on traditional journalism as many serve a watchdog function. A 2008 Zogby survey revealed that 70 percent of Americans say journalism is important to maintaining community quality of life. However, nearly as high a number—67 percent—say traditional media are out of touch with what citizens truly want out of their news. One reason why the numbers of community blogs continue to increase is that local newspapers continue to cut staff. The need for news will not cease. Citizen journalists can give back to their community through media participation. They are citizens who are paying attention to their communities and are helping others pay attention (Fanselow, 2008).

Community-generated run and led media tools are making dissent more obvious by opening up channels for its expression. These online communication tools enable people to sidestep traditional state media by accessing citizen journalism disseminated online. Strategies using new media and the ability to enable open citizen-created journalism can encourage much needed democratic activity (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013).

### **Unpacking Online Communication Tools**

Studies state that although the development of online communication provides an opportunity for activists to gain attention for their causes and empower voices, it has limitations. Tayebi (2013) reports that online communication tools, such as instant messenger, email, and voice/video chat are limited to private person-to-person or person-to-group communications and audiences are specified as individuals rather than grouped by interests. Broadcasting online tools, such as podcasts, weblogs, and YouTube may be in danger of becoming lost due to the volume of information produced online.

Posting brief political narratives using video or images on Facebook has been effective in identifying others with similar political views and mobilizing and planning protests. It impacts social movement organizations by catalyzing deliberation, information sharing, and mobilization despite geographic location (Mercea, 2013). In contrast, Twitter has proven to provide an instantaneous feed of brief commentary and it is quite beneficial to cyberactivism. According to Davies and Razlogova (2013), Twitter posts documented recent major political upheavals such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous leaks. Individuals witnessed the recent mobilization of activists during Occupy Wall Street protests and upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt—all using Twitter.

In contrast to researchers who deem YouTube a vast clearinghouse of random videos, Vraga, Bode, Wells, Driscoll and Thorson (2014) state that with the medium, activists are reaching a substantial portion of the public with their message, enabling a range of tactics beyond appeals to the established media and raising questions of whether traditional social movement theories can adequately explain these protests. According to Fanselow (2008), community blogs produce a considerable political impact on traditional journalism by serving a watchdog function, just as traditional investigative reporters do. Scholars state that the utilization and combination of cyberactivism tools have created an undeniably strong communication network, often difficult to break. Cyberactivism is not the cause of a revolution, but serves as a widespread vehicle for empowerment (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). These new media technologies help to advance organizational goals and advocacy tactics such as: research; direct lobbying; media advocacy; grassroots lobbying; public events and direct action; public education; judicial advocacy; coalition building; administrative lobbying; voter registration and education (Obar, 2014).

### **Case Studies**

Obar (2014) reports that global activists are using cyberactivism to facilitate civic engagement and collective action, including: (a) helping groups to strengthen outreach efforts; (b) increasing the speed of communication; (c) enabling engaging feedback loops; (d) being cost-effective. The following illustrates how online access allows for global news consumption, opinion expression, and mediates the relationship between frequency of social media use and protest behavior, all to uplift global political change. The use of cyberactivism in Chile, Egypt, Kenya, and Egypt are discussed to demonstrate recent instances.

#### **Chile**

During 2011, Chile reportedly experienced widespread demonstrations targeting several different social issues including the environment, education policy, and the pace of reconstruction after the 2010 earthquake. As a result, scores of varying interest groups began to mobilize and the government tracked social media metrics. Valenzuela (2013) states that with 60% of the population engaged in cyberactivism, Chilean activists were successful using offline and online engagement. The national government was led to launch a full-blown educational reform plan with more than \$4 billion in fresh public funds and HidroAysen, a major energy development was placed on standby (Valenzuela, 2013).

#### **Kenya**

The 2007 highly contested presidential re-election of Kenya's Mwai Kibaki resulted in privately owned radio stations being accused of fueling ethnic-targeted violence and being subsequently banned (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). The government closed traditional and social media forms of mass communication. However, prior to censorship, locally created Ushahidi (a geographically-based website engaging cell phone technology) and Mashada (a blogging website) identified the location and nature of riots throughout Kenya and voiced concerns regarding the contested presidential election (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). Cyberactivism enabled local community members to express their frustrations with the election results and to empower citizen journalists to shed a global light on local atrocities (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013).

## **Egypt**

The year 2011 marked a pivotal time for cyberactivism and mobilization in Egypt as it gained more than 600,000 new Facebook users between January and February of that year alone. The country experienced an 18-day uprising after an incident of police brutality on a young, allegedly innocent adult. Research statistics revealed 1.5 million Egypt-related tweets in the first week of January 25. An activist website brought awareness to the uprising, both in their native language and in English. The native language website became the most-accessed website in the country (followed by YouTube and Google), and aljazeera.net saw an incredible increase in page views and search attempts.

## **Challenges of Cyberactivism**

### **Latin America**

Despite notable successes in cyberactivism throughout the globe, social media tools can assuredly create challenges for global change. To even publicly proclaim same-sex love and seek legal status for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender communities are considered revolutionary acts in Latin America (Friedman, 2007). Although the arms of cyberspace are stretched widely, new challenges are presented for LGBT organizers in Latin America, such as social and linguistic barriers impeding virtual border-crossing. Studies show that the majority of the population has neither the 'digital literacy' to facilitate navigation nor regular entry into cyberspace. Therefore, lesbian activists, for example, from lower socio-economic conditions may have limited Internet access to feminist organizations and may also have difficulty entering virtual community spaces for political change (Friedman, 2007).

### **Egypt**

Although Egypt surpassed online expectations in 2011, its Facebook efforts alone did not yield desired results affecting political change on the ground. The phenomenon of cyberactivism is a necessary, but not sufficient factor in bringing about actual political change. It should best act as 'catalysts' and 'accelerators' for political change, but social media cannot be revered as a 'magical tool' that can bring about this type of change on its own (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

Aouragh and Alexander (2011) make a claim that when Egyptian authorities shut down the Internet on January 27, it severely disabled citizen journalists. This served a blow to the movement, but it



did not have dramatic consequences in terms of mobilization. Aouragh and Alexander (2011) believe that this action prompted online activists to join the street protests, adding to the growing numbers of protesters. Isn't the point that after a movement starts trying to curtail it by shutting down social media had the opposite effect?

### **Future Assumptions of Cyberactivism**

As online tools multiply and the debate over the place of social media in advocacy work evolves Obar (2014) asserts that new empirical research must determine how social media technologies will continue to be capable of facilitating various forms of political communication. Technology advances regularly and activists will have to assess the effectiveness of new media tools to impact political change. Diverse forms of online communication impact people differently and result in varying types of consequential behavior. Activists will have to build more strategic plans for identifying and engaging a specific audience to effectuate global change.

The available evidence suggests that cyberactivism is not effective alone. The widespread access and instantaneous impressions will always require social interaction as a part of the mobilization process. Khamis and Vaughn (2011) believe that it is the combination of this unique blend of online and offline forms of activism that is capable of giving birth to a process of political change that is effective and enduring. Cyberactivism appears to represent a conduit for global communication, yet the subsequent phase should include physical organizing and mobilization for movement and relationship building. Connecting online can provide an entryway to organizing, but people require personal contact for deeper, more meaningful impact and sharing of experiences.

### **Conclusion**

To create actionable discourse impacting social justice issues, mobilization methods will have to remain innovative, engaging, and sometimes confrontational. Thus as long as there are human rights violations and marginalization, there will be a need for movement building and the benefits of cyberactivism. To enable grassroots mobilization, it is necessary to equip individuals and communities to resist forms of domination and in particular the colonization of the public sphere and public opinion (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). Political weaponry comes in diverse forms. Any bold, strategic move towards democracy facilitated through online and mobile communication is essential particularly when it involves politically and socially sensitive issues such as sovereignty (Wu & Mao, 2011).

Activist movements are crossing physical borders and globalizing networks of communication to effectuate political change. As movement building becomes more empowered, activist groups are harnessing online communication platforms to connect local issues with global publics (Pal & Dutta, 2007). Historically, marginalized and segregated voices have been forced into silence because of imposed communicative barriers. With Internet access, small or marginal groups with limited finances can gain global collective support for their views (Friedman, 2007).

As a benefit, cyberactivism allows for the globalization of intersectional social justice platforms. Our once singular issues are now becoming the concerns of others, so activists are creating collective change strategies. Soengas-Pérez (2013) believes that the absence of gatekeepers also

now allows activist publics to post alternative information, thus serving as a valuable tool in creating awareness about critical issues. This advantage provides greater access to collective activism and the ability for likeminded individuals to accomplish shared advocacy goals. The impact of the Digital Divide creates the inability for marginalized individuals to access the Internet and generates an unfortunate economic and competitive disadvantage in global competition. Societal development and social change are prompted by Internet access, thus cyberactivism empowers individualists and groups to identify common causes and engagement. Mentioned previously, in the future, activists will have to build more strategic plans for identifying and engaging specific audience to effectuate global change.

One future assumption for cyberactivism is that physical organizing and mobilization will never take the place of online engagement only. Individuals and groups gain access to networking, awareness, strategies, and storytelling. New, futuristic technological tools will have to become more accessible to low income and marginalized communities foremost.

Salmon, Post and Fernandez (2010) assess that future research should focus on developing a typology of the role of new media in different stages of mobilization and types of social movement. It should study how the use of new media can substantially increase the potential for interaction across borders with non-contiguous states and also to suppress interaction in nation-states threatened by manifestations of public will. It should also consider the reconstitution of borders in an era of information technology and global trade systems.

Additional research could analyze why the cost of Internet access is not the same around the world. While it is relatively inexpensive in the United States, it is not in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Further inquiry could address why under-resourced countries throughout the world experience high levels of political upheaval and human rights violations, yet they experience denial of political and technological access. In conclusion, cyberactivism can empower communities to effectuate global political change through the use of Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, and websites. With access to social media tools, individuals and groups can mobilize, organize, and tell their story in hopes of influencing others to do the same. What is also important to remember is that cyberactivist engagement singularly will not produce political or social change. To create efficacy and a results-oriented outcome, technological tools must be combined with action. Activist work can begin with social media, but it must be combined with actionable grassroots community outreach and organizing to create enough pressure for change.

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