

Relationship between social media and activism



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In recent years, technology and the internet have allowed us to communicate in ways we've never been able to before; it's possible to post one's opinion online with the click of a button, or to talk to someone all the way across the globe. With new technology also comes social media, applications or websites that allow users to connect with each other and share their own stories. Whether it's Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram, the shared connection that exists through social media has completely changed how society communicates and receives information. In recent years, social media has begun to become a large topic of conversation among scholars. There is very little research on it because of how new it is, but as more and more people begin to form relationships online, it has become increasingly important to examine how these means of connection shape our daily life; Communications studies, for example, has grown to encompass these new platforms as well as traditional journalistic studies as a result of social media. Specifically, an important shift that social networking has been a part of is the shift towards social media news and activism online. However, many people have started to criticize online activism, or as some call it, 'slacktivism.' They claim that by allowing people to just click to support a cause or share an article, activism is becoming less involved and its participants are therefore less passionate about their causes. Whether or not there is truth to this sentiment, is it not better that social media still brings attention to these important issues, even if people are less involved? Despite the argument that social media and the internet have made it too easy to contribute to social causes, research shows that, in fact, activism has just broadened its scope rather than completely changed the process.

Due to the lack of research that exists about social media, it's difficult to analyze the trends and long term effects of its use. The internet itself was only invented in the 1990's, so social media did not become a widespread phenomenon until much more recently. Regardless of its age, though, social media has completely changed journalism and the way people receive news, at least in the United State. Specifically, within certain demographics, social media can be an extremely effective tool for spreading information. With platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, anyone can post their opinions or share sentiments in a matter of seconds, a process that makes news interactive and has changed who is important in the public sphere. For example, as teenagers are large users of social media, their participation in it has grown exponentially in the last decade. According to a survey conducted starting in 2006 until 2012, teenage usage of social media increased from 55% to 83% (Seo 884). In fact, as social media has grown, so have the opportunities that come with it. It's now a job to be an 'influencer,' or someone who gets paid based on what they post on Instagram and the number of followers they have. The most significant change, though, is perhaps the way people receive their news. In my own survey conducted at the University of Michigan, I found that 20. 3% of respondents (mostly first year students) reported seeing information pertaining to activism or news on social media " almost every time" they go on (Palmer). The two are becoming more and more interconnected, making social media a main disseminator of news. In fact, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that " 67% of Americans report" getting a portion of their news from social media websites, " two-in-ten" doing this " often" (Shearer and Gottfried). Therefore, it's no surprise that social media has become a

valuable tool for influencing and spreading information, and it's because of this that activists have taken to these social networking platforms in an effort to gain more momentum for their causes.

It's not just news that is easily translated through social media: activism is now becoming more and more widespread on the internet. Through the use of social media, it's much easier to complete tasks like crowdfunding, raising awareness, and actually finding participants than it has been in the past, and these functions are necessary in order to be a successful movement.

Specifically, websites such as Facebook have become "crucial" to mobilize large groups of people, "according to Eva Galperin, director of cybersecurity at the Electronic Frontier Foundation." Because Facebook has over "one billion" users, activists have a built-in network of friends and peers to reach out to (Larson). What's most notable about this is exactly how apps like this have changed the "organizing landscape" forever. Whether or not people know each other prior to joining in, advocacy as a result of social media creates a "sense of belonging" based on a shared passion for a specific issue (Farhi). This is not a surprising discovery, as "participatory culture" is the very foundation of social media; networking via these applications is no doubt an important tool for activists who wish to make their presence known online. Specifically, this idea is especially apparent when observing teens' behavior. The type of coordination made possible from social networking suggests that in the future, "Teen behavior will become increasingly unmoored from their very local geography" (Seo 898). In fact, location is becoming extremely less important, because with the internet, people are now able to connect from different corners of the world. The participatory

nature that is the foundation of social media itself is what makes these platforms especially conducive to activist behavior. Connections made through social media can be used to create social advocacy groups with the click of a button.

Despite this presence of activism on the internet, and specifically social media, many argue that the value in activism is lost now that it has become so easy to participate in. The idea of online activism is simple: one can be a participant simply by digitally signing a petition or sharing a post. With this ease of participation, though, also comes 'laziness.' In fact, online activism has "earned a reputation for being 'slacktivist,'" meaning it allows people to participate without actually doing much (Hendrick). One of the main arguments against this type of advocacy on the internet is that the type of conversation-- more like the type of comment-battles-- that occur largely as a result of 'slacktivism' are not productive. Simply updating one's profile picture or status doesn't actually do much to help anyone or participate in a cause, and this practice is definitely something that exists all over the internet. One can claim they support a cause just because they liked a post relating to it-- and this type of 'empty' activism is especially apparent in young people. In a survey I conducted at the University of Michigan, 45.7% of respondents said they never share a post about current events, but only 8.6% said they never like those types of posts. Essentially, people show their support through likes, but often do not actually care enough to actually share something, even if they believe in the cause. Although this survey was completed by a small sample of largely University of Michigan first or second-year students, this data is still powerful because it shows that many

people will do little more than just like a post about news or events, despite the overflow of information and event invites coming at them on all social media platforms. With the newness of social media, we do not know if these trends are long term or not, however, it's clear that slacktivism is a real thing. Whether or not you believe it's helpful or not; the debate is not how prevalent it is, it's whether or not it matters.

While these concerns are valid, the argument can be made that slacktivist kind of activism is still important and helpful to society, and that although social media has increased this kind of activism, it has only really changed the tools for activism, and not people's actual beliefs. Experts on social media and activism warn the public not to dismiss the importance of the presence of advocacy on the internet. Oded Marom, PhD student in psychology, argues that "once someone feels like an activist... the person may be more likely to do something else that requires greater effort because he or she doesn't want to lose the identity of being an activist" (Hendricks). What he means is that, although a person's original action may lack passion or belief, the culture that exists around online activism often causes people to continue their actions for fear of losing their 'activist reputation'. Whatever the reason for a person's original action, the internet and social media are still important tools for expressing one's opinion, and this is exactly what the result of 'slacktivism' is. At the very least, people are still drawing attention to important causes. Marom puts it well when stating that, even though social media essentially has the potential to "lower the bar for what constitutes 'activism,'" it still has the power "to incite meaningful change" (Hendricks). Not only is this type of advocacy important, but social media

does give others a chance to speak who usually would not have been heard or taken seriously. In terms of the recent shooting in Parkland, Florida, victims are being taken more seriously than ever before. All over Twitter, people are “ listening, liking, retweeting and responding to students' messages” (Newcomb). In addition, in governments with more authoritarian governance, social media platforms are becoming more and more useful for citizens to “ organize and spread information about the events to the outside world” (Cuthbertson). Despite the growing number of people who participate in click activism, it's still an effective practice as it involves many more people, and by doing so they can still make a change.

The effectiveness of activism on the internet is becoming more and more apparent, even to those not participating directly, specifically in the United States. As stated above, in my survey at the University of Michigan, a large chunk of respondents reported seeing activism related posts almost every time they logged onto social media; meaning information and news is always present on the internet. With the constant presence of news and information, it's easier to bring social causes into the spotlight, a phenomenon shown perfectly through the Parkland, Florida victims. In this case, students were able to go against politicians and voice their opinions, as social media “ lowers the barriers of social exchange” (Hwang). These survivors used social media platforms to “ amplify their voices in a way the world hasn't seen before,” and they've been “ effective in pushing back against pro-gun activists” and by using Twitter to put themselves on the same level as politicians (Newcomb). This is one of the most effective uses of activism on the internet: it has essentially allowed these students to make their voices

heard when other forms of mainstream media might not necessarily listen. And it's not just this event that has utilized social media to its advantage-- events such as the Women's March in 2017 were immensely successful due to their organization. From the start, journalists described this march as a "social media phenomenon" rather than a "mainstream-media one." In fact, the "Women's March on Washington and its many affiliated 'sister' marches were perhaps the largest single demonstration of the power of social media to create a mobilization" (Farhi). If these events prove anything, it's that social media is largely a tool for *beneficial* activism, despite how easy it is to support a cause online-- social media gives people the power to enact social change who might not have had the chance otherwise.

Despite claims that activism has only become diluted with the introduction of social media, it's actually becoming effective. Although it's true that social media platforms allow users to more 'lazily' participate in social movements, there are far more benefits to its use. Since the introduction of social media, more people have begun receiving news online from these platforms rather than mainstream media outlets, and while this is not always a good thing, the access to information that exists due to social media can be extremely beneficial. In addition, more and more people have to power to be influencers through social networking applications-- they don't necessarily need a PhD to have 'valid' opinions on a subject, an idea that is only very recent. We've been able to see how this idea takes shape in several protests and movements that have taken place in recent years, specifically the Parkland shooting and the Women's March; social media gave people voices and allowed them to connect and stand together for what they believed in.

Now, Parkland's teenagers are respected and listened to, while also having served as an example for effective activism on the internet. The Women's March proved just how useful a tool applications like Facebook can be. So while it's true that sometimes the internet can be used to participate in what some call 'slacktivism,' its benefits are much more important: the type of collective action and change that can occur just by the click of a button. Because of this, people should not be so quick to discredit online activism, as it's proved to be extremely effective, but they instead should call for *more* participation, so as not to give people a reason to dismiss its validity.

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