

THE CASE FOR DIGITAL ACTIVISM: REFUTING THE FALLACIES OF SLACKTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the importance and value of digital activism. We first outline the arguments against digitally mediated activism and then address the counter-arguments against its derogatory criticisms. The low threshold for participating in technologically mediated activism seems to irk its detractors. Indeed, the term used to downplay digital activism is slacktivism, a portmanteau of slacker and activism. The use of slacker is intended to stress the inaction, low effort, and laziness of the person and thereby question their dedication to the cause. In this work we argue that digital activism plays a vital role in the arsenal of the activist and needs to be studied on its own terms in order to be more fully understood.

Keywords: activism; resistance; protest; slacktivism; online activism.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Within liberal democracy the goal of political and civic engagement has always been held in great esteem; however, participation entails a number of barriers that must be overcome. Through the internet the ability of individuals to reach out and interact has radically changed and, consequently, social media has become a popular tool of anyone attempting to engage in political and civic discourse. This ability has impacted the ways and the paths into political participation and led, arguably, to an increase in participation (Bimber et al., 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012; Matich et al., 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; Milan & Barbosa, 2020; Minocher, 2019; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). However, the lowering of communication barriers has brought with it a criticism of those who use social media as a tool to affect societal change. This criticism can collectively be categorized under the portmanteau of slacktivism. Slacktivism refers to the idea that by attempting to carry out political acts online the individual is not participating politically but rather engaging in a form of meaningless, self-serving, and narcissistic acts. The use of the term ‘slacker’ in slacktivism is intended to denigrate the user, and through this, the term slacktivism is intended to discriminate against technology-based activism.

The goal of this paper is to provide a counter-argument against the derogatory criticisms of slacktivism. Our position is specific to western democracies in the northern hemisphere, and our argument is informed by and situated within critical media studies. The paper is organized into the following sections: Section 2 situates digital activism within internet-based politics; Section 3 provides a historical context of slacktivism and provides examples of how slacktivism is applied broadly to digital efforts; Section 4 presents the main arguments against digital activism found in academic and popular literature and our brief counter-argument for each; Section 5 is a discussion of the broader use of slacktivism and its need to be understood and studied as an important part of digital political activism.

In this paper we argue that the pejorative use of slacktivism is an attempt to demean digital activism and, furthermore, that digital activism is treated with undue harshness since those critiquing make no distinction between different forms of digital activism. When discussing political and civic engagement in the physical sphere, most are prepared to accept a wide range of activities and actions that more or less promote an overarching goal. The same is not true for digital activism. The term slacktivism therefore is used as a method for delegitimizing nascent political participation by attacking the intentions and actions of those involved.

2 POLITICS ON THE INTERNET

The internet in general—and the web in particular—has fundamentally changed the public sphere by allowing a wide-ranging popularization in production, dissemination, and access to political knowledge (Chadwick, 2013; Christensen, 2011; Fraser, 1990; Hogben & Cownie, 2017; Matich et al., 2019; Mendes et al.,

2018; Milan & Barbosa, 2020; Minocher, 2019; Mossberger, 2008). The internet-supported public sphere becomes both a hybrid space where the physical and virtual coexist, as well as a representational space accessible from anywhere connected to the internet. In the former we see how people in cities can augment their physical experience using internet connected devices, and in the latter we can see the experience of presence at a distance. In the context of a protest, the first can be exemplified by a protester transmitting a recording of police activities to the internet and in the second is the video being watched around the world and having the power to spark outrage and protest. The representation of the space is no longer within the power of those who control the space but rather “the process of formation and exercise of power relationships is decisively transformed in the new organizational and technological context derived from the rise of global digital networks of communication as the fundamental symbol-processing system of our time” (Castells, 2009, p.4). Arguably there are two processes at work: one where non-digital tools are being replaced by the digital and enhancing previously existing power norms, and a second disruptive process where the tools are disrupting established power relationships and forcing a redefinition of established concepts (Milan, 2015; Peña-López, 2013).

The central cultural processes of late modernity identified by Dahlgren (2007; 2009) are the value of personal autonomy, the erosion of traditional institutions, and an increasing cultural plurality in society. These processes are increasingly supported by the ready access to technology, the ease in which it supports personalized media choices, and algorithmic segregation through echo chambers and filter bubbles (Flaxman et al., 2016; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2009). Private preferences and individual choices, supported and shaped by technology, are increasingly a part of social identity and relationship management (Schmidt, 2011; Shirky, 2009).

These processes of the reduction of the personal physical social network with its reduction of strong ties and increasing plurality of values (e.g., Putnam, 2000), supported by the wider array of information and choice, have disrupted the traditional distinction between public and private behaviors (Boyd & Ellison, 2010). The arena for political discourse has shifted from primarily face-to-face to online discussions (Wang, 2010).

In addition to these concerns, the platforms upon which digital political participation occurs should not be misunderstood to be neutral spaces. While they are publicly accessible, they remain privately owned platforms created for the purpose of generating profit for their owners and stockholders. This profit is made through the algorithmic analysis of large amounts of user generated data and subsequently turned into what Zuboff (2019) has called ‘prediction products’ that anticipate what users will do now, soon, and later. In her analysis of surveillance capitalism, Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism is more than a marketplace for prediction products; it ultimately has the goal to change people’s actual behavior by rewarding or punishing behaviors deemed profitable or not for the platform

owner. Similarly, in his study on content moderation, Gillespie (2018) demonstrates that the platforms make important decisions about the information that is available and therefore shape public discourse. Additionally, the users of these platforms internalize the platform norms and practices and create content aimed at succeeding in the specific environment of the platform (Klang & Madison, 2016; Gillespie, 2018).

For Couldry and Mejias (2018) these processes should be likened to processes of colonialism and are the foundations for a new social order “offering unprecedented new opportunities for social discrimination and behavioral influence” (p. 336). This data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2018) entails the exploitation of people through the control of their data and, like Zuboff, they argue forms the basis for a new stage of capitalism, built on the control over personal agency.

However, this pessimistic view of technology should be tempered with the understanding that digital technology supports those who have an interest in political and civic discourse and through its reach has the potential to engage those who are disinterested (Asen, 1999; Bennett et al., 2009; Bimber, 2000). The ability to engage is provided by the ability of the internet to support niche discussion. Political participation must not be limited to a small set of actions but includes “any activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action, either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38). It is important to maintain that not all political activities are equal; some political acts are better suited to our established physical practices while others are better suited to the digital milieu (Christensen, 2011).

Indeed, the technologies that form the basis of surveillance capitalism and data colonialism also provide an intuitive and low barrier access to a large part of the global population (Gerbaudo, 2012; Matich et al., 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; Milan & Barbosa, 2020; Minocher, 2019; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). The platforms are arguably the only viable way in which massive scale activism and resistance can communicate. Therefore, digital activism plays a vital role in social movements, resistance, and activism. Taken from this perspective, the term slacktivism is used to discriminate against this form of activity in order to minimize the importance and impact of digital activism. It is a form of techno-pessimism that has become a common discourse within the study of online political communications (Fuchs, 2012). It is an attitude that discriminates against the technology and attempts to prevent an in-depth study of the efficacy of the technology before it begins.

3 SCOPE OF SLACKTIVISM

The term slacktivism lacks clear meaning or precise definition. The term didn't catch on until it was used pejoratively for the ineffectual forms of activism and

techno utopianism connected with Silicon Valley futurists (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2011). Therefore, to the supporter of digital activism, the term is pejorative for a legitimate form of activism. For those who criticize digital activism, slacktivism is the epitome of lazy, self-serving digital acts conducted by a narcissistic, tech obsessed millennial (Stein, 2013). Digital activism is all about reaching out, creating awareness, garnering support, and enabling asynchronous political discourse. Slacktivism is the belief that ‘liking’ a post on Facebook or changing one’s profile picture constitutes a form of activism (Golsborough, 2011; Landman, 2008). In other words: slacktivism refers to an ignorant, low level participation which is more self-serving than of practical use (Halupka, 2014; Jovicevic, 2016; Landman, 2008).

No matter the position taken on slacktivism, scholars agree that the low barriers to entry, low transaction costs, and an easily navigated communication infrastructure has made an array of political acts more popular among youth (Neumayer & Schoßböck, 2011). Yet, the reality regarding digital activism is complex. There are studies that support the theory of the lazy generation of disingenuous slacktivists, and studies that show the practice leading to a better informed and more politically engaged population (Hogben & Cownie, 2017). Certainly, digital technology has altered the way in which activism is conducted.

A 2013 UNICEF campaign in Sweden referenced slacktivism and attempted to shame those who practice it online. With the text: “We have nothing against likes, but vaccine cost money”, their campaign reminded consumers that it isn’t enough to only like or share information (UNICEF, 2013). This form of slacktivist shaming has been rising. Since political campaigns increasingly use social media as arenas to reach their intended audiences, they actively compete with all other forms of information on these sites. As such, they must increasingly improve their production formats to gain attention (Klang & Madison, 2016). The success of campaigns such as the ice bucket challenge and KONY (Dennis, 2019; Herman, 2014) demonstrate that the message is not enough to break through the noise on social media. Conversely the right format can reach unexpected new audiences. There are fears that in the drive to gain ever-larger rates of participation the message will be lost (White, 2010) and activism will become fundraising and nothing more. We argue this view of digital activism is fundamentally flawed. Even without digital technology there have been attempts to streamline the process of activism into simple monetary transactions, such as pink ribbons for breast cancer or red poppies for veterans. The introduction of technology into the mix did not create slacktivism; rather, it allowed for a renewed and louder criticism of those attempting to participate in low levels of political and civic process.

The technology also creates new avenues of political participation. In their study of the use of WhatsApp for digital activism in Brazil, Milan and Barbosa (2020) argue that the technology affords the development of a new political subject they term the WhatsAppers, whose comfort with their technology in other areas allows them to develop their political identities and agency. Milan and Barbosa state

that users’ “engagement with political activism emerges gradually in this intimate and familiar context and is facilitated by an omnipresent, personal device like the smartphone” (2020, para. 15). In this way the app enables the creation and expression of the activist identity in an accessible way to the individual.

WhatsApp operates as a facilitator of political participation, able to involve also previously inactive people, bypass traditional movement organizations and break the correlation between a movement’s material resources and its ability to mobilize people (Milan & Barbosa, 2020, para. 16).

The digital activism surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016-17 provides an excellent illustration where technology allows for innovation in the forms of political participation. DeAtley (2019) demonstrates how protesters used Facebook check-in feature to sign-in at Standing Rock in order to jam police surveillance. This feature, developed as an attempt to create safety for the physical protesters, became a tool of political protest and signaling. In 2020, the organizers of a planned campaign rally in Tulsa were fooled into believing that attendance would overwhelm the 19,000-seat auditorium when 800,000 registered for tickets, but less than 6,500 showed up at the event. The discrepancy has been explained as digital activism carried out by TikTok users and K-pop fans (Andrews, 2020).

Considering the examples provided, ignoring acts such as these would ignore the political potential of technology, and dismissing them as unworthy of activism fails to take into account the reality of digital life. Slacktivism labels everyday digital political and civic acts the same even when those acts would not be designated as such in the physical space. By allowing a blanket criticism of all digital activism as slacktivism the whole discourse is harmed. Instead of allowing this weak term to be used, each act should be evaluated on its own terms.

4 CRITIQUES AND COUNTER ARGUMENTS

In this section we present the main arguments against digital activism found in both academic and popular literature, and provide a brief counter-argument for each. These arguments not mutually exclusive and often share similar attributes; however, we have identified six distinct critiques. These are presented as an introduction for further discussion.

Digital activism is futile: This argument suggests digital activism has no impact, or even potential, to bring about social change. For Morozov (2011), slacktivism is an expression of techno utopianism and as such has zero political or social impact. Either the digital environment, through its very design, lacks the hierarchy and strategy necessary to succeed (Gladwell, 2010; McCafferty, 2011; Morozov, 2011; Skoric, 2011), or any effect it could have would only be minimal (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2009a; Morozov, 2011; Shulman, 2009).

Counter: In order to accept this critique, the purpose of protest must be narrowed to an act that leads to a swift, clear, and direct solution of the issue. This

definition is not how success or failure is measured in social movements (Amenta et al., 2010; Bosi et al., 2016; Earl, 2016). Furthermore, this argument is focused on the ways in which digital activity is often dismissively seen as being ancillary to the real world and therefore less important (Morosov, 2009a; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Jurgenson (2012) points out that the prioritizing of offline is a recent ideology while in reality the physical and digital states are inseparable.

Feel good activism: In these arguments, critics point out that the real intention of slacktivists is not to bring about social change but to make themselves feel good [e.g., Jovicevic, 2016; Klafka, 2010; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Morozov 2009a, 2009b; Schumann & Klein, 2015). An illustrative example can be seen when Morozov (2009b) writes: “Those who participate in the effort are not driven by helping the world and have a very selfish motivation” (para. 14). Feel good activism is supported by the ease in which social networking sites support the sharing of information and images. The argument is that this is not activism since the underlying goal is not to affect change. There are findings that support the argument that some activists participate in order to make themselves feel better (Hogben & Cownie, 2017).

Counter: The motivations for taking part in a protest, working within a social movement, or conducting any form of resistance can stem from a heartfelt desire to create social change. Participants in all forms of activism may often benefit socially from these communal acts (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009; Schussman & Soule, 2005; Van Stekelenburg et al., 2011). This, however, does not change the fact that individuals participating in activism may be doing so to be social with others, to identify as an activist, as employment for political organizations to earn money etc. Suggesting that the feel-good benefits of participating in activism is different online unreasonably discriminates against the digital.

Narcissistic activist: A variation of the feel-good activism argument is the narcissist activist argument. The difference here is that those involved are all trying to focus the real attention back onto themselves by demonstrating traits about themselves or representing themselves in a better light. This argument builds on the ways in which the visual element of social media “rewards the skills of the narcissist, such as self-promotion, selecting flattering photos of oneself, and having the most friends” (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p.110). Some authors argue that the individualization and need for personal expression among those joining online causes is a form of narcissism (Schmidt, 2011; Shirky, 2009; Skoric, 2012; Svensson, 2011). This argument aligns with a general critique of the millennial as shallow, lazy, infatuated with technology, and disinterested in politics. In 2013, Time Magazine’s cover article about the millennial was entitled “Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation” and defined them as entitled, lazy, selfish and shallow (Stein, 2013). Morozov (2009a) states that slacktivism is the ideal form of participation for the “lazy generation.”

Counter: This is similar to the counter to feel good activism above, as it presupposes one form of motivation and behavior then applies a different standard

judgment on the digital. We do not ask of the non-digital activist if they are truly committed for altruistic reasons or if they may derive self-serving pleasure from their participation.

Barriers and transaction costs: For some, the arguments as to why slacktivism is widespread are due to the popularity and eases of the technology. Many points to the fact that users are already online in the spaces where the political acts occur and thus the marginal costs for this form of activism are low (Morozov, 2009b). Additionally, it takes little or no effort or knowledge to be able to participate in digital activism if all it entails is posting information, liking someone else's post, or changing a profile picture. In the research on mass mailing, Shulman (2009) discusses the downside to technology making political participation easier and warns that it will lead to an increase of "low-quality, redundant, and generally insubstantial commenting by the public" (Shulman, 2009, p.26).

Counter: These arguments could be summed up with the idea that political activism must come at a cost to be meaningful. While critics point out that low barriers mean low levels of personal effort on the part of the activist, it could also be argued that these low barriers are more important because they increase inclusion. This is explored further in Section 5 below.

No sacrifice: The no sacrifice argument is an extension of the low barrier and transaction cost argument. In this argument, critics tend to point out that in order to be considered an activist the participant must take a risk or at least make a substantial effort. McCafferty (2011) goes so far as to argue: "In the end, activism has always been—and will always be—about people. Specifically, people who show up in person" (p. 18). Skoric (2011) argues that the element of sacrifice "which has characterized traditional activism and which helps members persevere in the face of danger, is likely to be absent in most Facebook campaigns" (p. 68).

Counter: These reductive arguments not only significantly limit the scope of activism, and romanticize 'traditional' activism, but also fail to recognize the enmeshed nature of the physical and the digital. Furthermore, while online activity does not entail the same form of sacrifice of bodies in the street, digital activism still requires moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The deployment of these resources on an individual and group level is a choice to prioritize activism.

Substitution: One of the larger critiques against digital activism is that digital participation will replace all other forms of activism and once the digital act has been conducted the individual will feel no further need to engage (e.g., Christensen, 2011; Jovicevic, 2016; Morozov, 2009b; Shulman, 2009; Skoric, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011). This substitution is framed using the theory of moral balancing which argues that the reward one feels from a good deed enables the individual to ignore other actions that require attention (Festinger, 1962; Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Merritt et al., 2010; Sachdeva et al., 2009; Shulman, 2009). Studies examining the moral balancing effect have shown that people who made a prosocial choice are less likely to perform a different, subsequent prosocial action (Khan & Dhar, 2007; Mazar &

Zhong, 2010). The substitution argument builds on the idea that we have a limited amount of energy and empathy to engage and using it online will replace other forms of engagement; therefore, slacktivism gives us the false hope of change while creating political apathy (Jovicevic, 2016; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Morozov, 2011; Schumann & Klein, 2015). Morozov (2009b) captures this criticism: “Paradoxically, it often means that the very act of joining a Facebook group is often the end – rather than the beginning – of our engagement with a cause, which undermines much of digital activism (para. 4)

Counter: The substitution argument may very well be valid and a cause for concern within the realm of activism. The challenges to our attention brought about by information overload through digital technology are undeniable. While information overload occurs broadly, it is not specific to digital activism; however, there are several studies that show that online participation does not decrease offline participation. Shah et al. (2002) concluded that time spent online leads to engagement, rather than vice-versa. Therefore, claiming moral balancing causes slacktivism is a form of digital prejudice.

5 DEFENSE OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Since the popularization of the term slacktivism there has been an increased interest in the study of the concept in order to provide data on the impact of digital technology on activism. In this section we present four distinct categories that illustrate the potential power of digital activism to surpass its non-digital counterpart in extending participation, edification, visibility, and transformation. These illustrations center the role of technology as a tool within the activists’ arsenal, as Peña-López (2013) suggested: “slacktivism does not define the activist, but, in general, the activist individually uses slacktivism as yet another tool to reinforce a much more comprehensive and collective strategy of political engagement” (p. 351). The digital and physical are deeply enmeshed and today it is largely impossible to think of activism without a digital component. Technology is viewed as a necessary element in organizing and documenting most forms of collective behavior and, as such, it would be strange if it were not part of the activists’ toolbox. Some activists go even further. In their interviews with activists, Uldam and Askanius (2013) record this quote: “You can’t have a demonstration without filming it. That makes it pointless ... If there are riots in Copenhagen, they’ll only go global if there’s video footage. Otherwise it’s pointless; you may as well not bother” (Thomas, interview, February 2010, p. 171).

Participation: Many who argue against slacktivism and for the use of technology in activism point to the low barriers to entry and the low transaction costs as an advantage (e.g., Castillo et al., 2014; Christensen, 2011; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Gladwell, 2010; Vitak et al., 2011). Since the political activity is happening in a space that is already comfortable to the users the ability to participate in political activity does not create a significant barrier to entry or to participating.

Within the area of social networking the barriers are further lowered since those communicating are already known to each other at some level (Ellison & boyd, 2013). The research by Milan and Barbosa (2020) on the use of WhatsApp in activism provides an excellent illustration of the ways in which everyday technology enables activism. As the users already have -and are familiar with- the technical and social infrastructure at hand, it becomes significantly easier for them to use it for activism than, for example, joining an organization or learning a new technology.

Edification: In their studies, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2009) show that digital activism is beneficial for all forms of political participation and that digital activism supports and promotes physical activism and civic participation. In this way the digital activism with its familiar surroundings acts as a safe space in which the novice can learn the norms, processes, and forms of activism. Vitak et al. (2011) support this conclusion and point out that the digital arena allows young people to be able to learn civic engagement with little time and effort. Vissers and Stolle (2014) found this to be true in their study as well, where they show that political Facebook participation fosters other forms of political activity. Several studies confirm the role of digital activism as a space of education in a wider civic engagement (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009; Boulianne, 2009; Breuer & Farooq, 2012; Dennis, 2019; Drury & Reicher, 2005; Hogben & Cownie, 2017; Jones, 2015; Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Mano, 2014; Obar et al., 2012; Saxton & Wang, 2014, Vie, 2014).

Visibility: An area where digital activism has a huge advantage over its non-digital contemporaries is achieving visibility. The activist has the opportunity not only to do activism, but to be seen doing activism by a potentially larger audience. This visibility is important in the creation of the activist's identity (Bobel, 2007; Milan, 2015). Melucci (1989) and Milan (2015) argue that this virtual participation -or "politics of visibility"- strengthens the 'politics of identity' of social movements. This increased visibility also increases awareness. The ease of transmitting information and the ability to provide spaces for discussion greatly enhances the awareness of political and social issues, which can lead to social and political change (Dennis, 2019; McCafferty, 2011). It is easy to argue that awareness is not the same as change; however, as Selleck (2010) points out in her study of the pink ribbon campaign for breast cancer awareness, the act of wearing a ribbon cannot cure cancer but it leads to women being more likely to get a mammogram. The same can be argued is true of digital activism; it may not be able to directly bring about change, but it will raise awareness, which is a precondition for change (Conway, 2012; Golsborough, 2011). Visibility and awareness can be powerful tools in changing social norms. For example, hashtags such as #metoo and #blacklivesmatter have been instrumental in drawing attention to -and consequently changing- social norms (e.g., Mendes et al., 2018; Taylor, 2016).

Transformation: If, as the proponents of slacktivism argue, the poster is sharing information without significant emotional or psychological buy-in, the theory of cognitive dissonance would suggest that the poster will, over time, begin to accept these positions as her or his own. The theory suggests that the poster will

be motivated to reduce dissonance by altering their behavior, or cognition, to be consistent (Khan & Dhar, 2007; Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Merritt et al., 2010; Sachdeva et al., 2009). Therefore, even the slacktivist posting to either feel good or for narcissistic motivations is likely to eventually internalize their posted ideas and begin to act accordingly. Thus, we see that posting in digital media has a corresponding effect on beliefs and interests, as well as on participation in physical space (e.g., Chang, 2006; Johnson et al., 2011; Wang, 2010).

6 DISCUSSION

As we have seen in the arguments presented above, slacktivism is used by critics of digital activism to downplay widespread political participation online. While they argue their points forcefully, they all too often cherry pick examples and critique situations for not achieving rapid social or political change. By doing so they expect more of digital activism than offline activism. For example, there is a difference in the social impact of changing a profile picture or sharing information when the person doing it has a large or small digital presence. A celebrity with a large online presence may have a bigger social and political impact than a full-time activist with a small online presence. Additionally, someone with the “right” contacts may not need as large a presence to make social change.

In her study, Bobel (2007) points to an important piece missing in the literature on social movements and that is the way in which the work mostly considers activists as a collective and that the individuals making up that collective identify as activists. By making this assumption, the literature of social movements creates a barrier and also raises the interesting question: at what point does a person doing activism become an activist? In her studies of people doing activism in the physical space, Bobel notes that there are many people who carry out acts of activism but would prefer not to label themselves as activists (2007). She argues that the identity or label activist is linked to a ‘perfect standard’ and as such many people who are indeed carrying out social and political forms of activism hesitate to define themselves or let themselves be defined as activists.

By raising the bar to an impossible degree, the designation activist, and in extension the right to openly do activism, falls out of the realm of possibility to most people. This is particularly interesting when the available digital tools are greatly reducing the barriers necessary for the participation in activism. If this overly perfect norm is to be applied then only those who can devote their lives to being activists will have the right to carry the designation and the rest of us must per definition be slacktivists.

The moniker of slacktivist is seldom applied to individuals who are involved in mundane civic and political acts in the physical world; rather, it has been used exclusively in the digital realm. What does it mean when someone buys a pink ribbon to raise breast cancer awareness? It is doubtful that many would consider the

people wearing these in public to be self-serving narcissists; however, a similar gesture on social media seems to awaken the ire of critics.

During 2016 it was very popular on social media to demonstrate support through changes made to profile images or posting articles of remembrance. The causes ranged from memories of a dead celebrity to offering condolences to a city that had suffered a terror attack. Predictably there were several media articles discussing the meaninglessness of public grief and the shallowness of support expressed on social media. The media, acting as gatekeepers of mourning behavior, criticized the ways in which people mourn in the digital environment and called out users for being disingenuous in expressing their emotions towards violent acts.

There is a tendency to quickly attack acts taking place online as being insincere or carried out for ulterior motives. This is true also for digital activism. As the slacktivist arguments have shown, these are critiqued as futile acts carried out to promote the needs of the narcissistic poster that have no effect on the real world. Furthermore, the critics argue, these efforts would not have been carried out if they entailed any form of effort, knowledge or actual empathy on the part of the poster. In addition to the meaninglessness of the act of slacktivism, the critique is often aimed at the slacktivist. A slacker is per definition someone who does not do something – a slacker is inactive. Conversely, the concept of activism includes the need to be active. So how active must an activist be? Our cultural ideas of activism and activists are largely shaped by grand movements. While it is easy for us to identify Gandhi and Martin Luther King as activists, the concept must include a spectrum of activity.

In his work on everyday resistance, Scott (2008) makes the argument that with our focus on the big event we forget the need for everyday acts of protest: “Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines... There is rarely any dramatic confrontation, any moment that is particularly newsworthy” (p. 36). By only evaluating the dramatic event we forget the ways in which everyday actions were necessary to build up to the point where change could occur. The critique of digital activism demands that individuals without power either bring about major social change immediately or simply stop any attempt at activism. In reality activism cannot be understood in this simple binary. Political participation comes in all forms and the simple acts of everyday resistance are important for the growth and development of a healthy political discourse that may eventually initiate political change.

Not all political engagement is associated with activism. Within modern society there is a great deal of lifestyle politics, which is the attempt to advance social change by fostering ethically and politically inspired lifestyle choices (Bennett, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Micheletti, 2003). For instance, there is both boycotting and buycotting as low-level forms of civic activism. Boycotting is the refusal to buy products or services from a company while buycotting is choosing to buy from a company we wish to support. In our attempt to make our social and political views known to the corporation— and hopefully by affecting their bottom

line— consumers aim to change policy in some form. Copeland (2014) posits that boycotting is about dutiful citizenship as it is punishment oriented, while buycotting is all about engaged citizenship norms since it is more reward oriented.

As we recognize political and civic engagement in other arenas we should also be able to accept a varying level of digital activity without resorting to name-calling. The slacktivist is no different from the politically and socially engaged consumer attempting to make ethical choices in their consumption. In this paper we demonstrate the need to be more nuanced in our understanding of digital activism and guard against criticizing it for flaws that are already present in the non-digital activism realm.

7 CONCLUSION

The term slacktivism was adopted in an attempt to denigrate everyday digital political and civic participation. Those who wished to argue the pointlessness of such activity used it as a pejorative moniker. The term designates those conducting digital political and civic acts as slacker activists even though they themselves may not be calling themselves activists. As the digital world was unable to instantly and decisively resolve issues in the physical world, the efforts of digital activism were immediately seen as having no real effect by its critics. The critics continued by calling out the participants as lazy, technocentric, narcissists who were either delusional about the ability of technology to support change, or whose real interest in digital activism was self-promotion. This criticism, however, seems to intentionally ignore the reality of the interconnectedness of online and offline environments. Digital participation is here to stay, it is an inevitable part of social movements, activism, and protest. Moreover, the technology brings with it a range of benefits for the organization and dissemination of activism in addition to innovative forms of protest. It is therefore harmful to dismiss this technologically mediated reality and it is vital to consider its strengths and weaknesses for any given movement.

As originally stated: *The goal of this paper is to provide a counter-argument against the derogatory criticisms of slacktivism.* This work has presented a wide range of arguments against digital activism as slacktivism. The work has shown that the critique of digital activism is unduly harsh and that this harshness may also be connected with a wider antipathy towards the general social changes brought about by the ubiquity of digital devices. This paper has shown that the term slacktivism is largely used as a pejorative in an attempt to demean all forms of digital activism. On the contrary, we argue that digital activism plays a vital role in the arsenal of the activist and needs to be studied on its own terms in order to be more fully understood.

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