Perverting Activism: 
Cyberactivism and Its Potential Failures in Enhancing Democratic Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the impact of new technologies on a range of practices related to activism. The first section shows how the functioning of democratic institutions can be impaired by scarce political accountability connected with the emergence of moral hazard; the second section displays how cyberactivism can improve the transparency of political dynamics; in the last section the authors turn specifically to cyberactivism and isolate its flaws and some of the most pernicious and self-defeating effects.

INTRODUCTION: 
POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND MORAL HAZARD

The word technoethics describes a will to understand the transformations of human beings’ moral life in a world radically modified by the massive presence of advanced technological artifacts: such distribution of the results of scientific advancements in everyday lifestyle is, in fact, likely to affect many established relationships between moral agents and moral patients. Considering the ever-growing rapidity of changes brought about by scientific and technological progress, the already often blurred distinction between descriptive ethics and normative ethics is all the more hard to implement as far as technoethics are concerned. Our analysis of how new informational media have been affecting a morally relevant socio-political behavior known as activism is an example of such stance: a careful description of cyberactivism’s moral implications (and risks) cannot, and in our opinion should not, be decoupled from a cautious prescriptive disposition. A philosophical attitude, as we will try to show in the following sections, is in fact fundamental to individuate, understand and protect the moral stakes set by the fulfillment of our digitalized era, in order to preserve one of the greatest acquisitions of our rather recent past: democracy.

As Popper (1945) argued, the appeal of democracy rests on the possibility of getting rid of those who rule without bloodshed, but through
general elections. Whereas in the other forms of government those who are ruled must make a revolution to dismiss who rules: that is, the force of the best army is the necessary condition to change the government. Indeed, democracy is not immune from malfunctioning. If one considers political accountability of government as the fundamental ingredient characterizing democracy, then it follows that democracy might not be working as expected when the various mechanisms to enforce political accountability – for instance, general elections – are impaired or weakened to a certain extent.

The problem of political accountability can be framed referring to the notion of moral hazard. Dowd (2009) defines moral hazard as the situation in which one party is responsible for the interests of another having an incentive to let his interests come first. Our take is that democracy is efficient insofar as moral hazard is unlikely to emerge, or remains under a threshold that can be disregarded. Conversely, the emergence of moral hazard increases the possibility to see democratic dynamics not working as they should. In a representative democracy, the relationship between represented and representing is captured by the principal-agent game (Alvarez, 2006). A principal-agent game arises whenever a person (or a group of persons), usually called the principal, delegates another person (or another group of persons), the agent, to accomplish a certain task that the principal is not able to accomplish. The principal-agent game – that basically concerns contractual relationships – brings two issues about. The first issue is related to what kind of person (or group of persons) one should delegate the task. The second is about how to control that the agent is actually doing what he is supposed to do.

In representative democracy, the first issue is handled by means of electoral competition. That is, those who want to be elected, namely, the politicians, compete on a platform consisting of campaign promises, which are those policies they will implement if elected. The electorate is, in turn, called to make their preference public by casting a vote for the candidate(s) whose platform they like or prefer. The second one turns into a problem as the principal and the agent may have conflicting goals. For instance, in democracy, politicians may be tempted to put their own interest’s first approving policies that are not in the citizens’ best interest.

Even though these two problems are treated separately, they are two faces of the same medal. According to Popper, democracy is more related to controlling those who gained the power than selecting them. In fact, he placed great emphasis upon the “replacing” character of general elections. If this interpretation is correct, we can easily see how the two issues are related: as a matter of fact, democracy is what gives us the chance to select politicians by replacing them. To put it briefly, the voters’ power is best represented by their ability to vote their deputies out, rather than voting them in. When and how such a power is weakened, in connection with moral hazard?

As already mentioned, in democracy the electorate are called to cast their vote in order to express their preference. It is worth noting that democracy leans on the one man, one vote principle, meaning that everybody has the right to vote for whoever he or she wants to. Every vote counts, whether it is formulated relying on emotions or more reasoned attitudes, whether one is right or wrong. Electors are sovereign citizens: there is no wrong vote. That being said, we are now interested in looking into a series of distortions that might happen in democracy.

The first question we should address is: how does the electorate formulate their preferences? Even though electors are free to pick the candidate they want, we assume that, if a person delegates another to accomplish a task, she is supposed to monitor that her choice was a good one.

For instance, in the research on the public control of the politician, there are two contrasting approaches about how to interpret political accountability: they basically diverge on whether politicians’ actions are observable or not (Dogan, 2010). Central to this issue is how the voter’s decision is framed: some maintain that electors base their decision to reelect the