Chapter 11

Occupy Rhetoric: Responding to Charges of “Slacktivism” with Digital Activism Successes

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ABSTRACT

By examining three major digital activist events—the Arab Spring, the indignados movement, and Occupy Wall Street—the authors illustrate that digital activism motivates and facilitates real offline behaviors beyond slacktivism by reviewing successful strategies and outcomes that were part of each movement. Moreover, in examining the issue of slacktivism, the authors demonstrate that slacktivism is not always digital, and that the power of weak ties has demonstrable effects in protester behavior and coordination. Finally, the rhetorical situations and exigencies of these major digital activist events are examined; this is an area ripe for more direct analysis and commentary. Understanding the rhetorical situations and exigencies involved in successful digital activist events allows researchers and practitioners a better understanding of integrated approaches to public involvement using social media.

INTRODUCTION

As a driving factor in recent protest actions around the world, digital activism has increased dramatically in recent years, to the point that Time magazine named “the protester” its 2011 Person of the Year (Valenzuela, 2014; Tremayne, 2014). Digital activism is the process of using digital tools to publish texts or perform actions that challenge the status quo using various media tools across different Internet platforms (Gainer, 2012). Recent research has argued that digital activism has observable effects in areas ranging

from news dispersion to peer-to-peer messaging to coordination of offline organizations, resources, and protests (Valenzuela, 2014; Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014; Tremayne, 2014; Vie, 2014). Given the increasing use of online social media tools for activist purposes, there is a growing need for researchers to assess the dynamic range of issues, behaviors, and rhetorical decisions that digital activism facilitates.

In discussions of digital activism, one controversial issue has been the question of whether online political participation results in meaningful change. As the literature review in this chapter illustrates, some scholars argue that digital activism is ineffective, merely serving to make so-called digital activists feel good about their actions without affecting meaningful change in the world (Morozov, 2009; Morozov, 2011). Others critique the influence of governments and major corporations who own, influence, and surveil social media tools used for digital activism (Bakardjieva, Svensson, & Skoric, 2012). On the other hand, some researchers are optimistic about the potential of digital activism, noting multiple successful online protests facilitated by the abilities of citizens participating in these debates to help shape public opinion and thus influence offline political response through the use of social media tools (Hepburn, 2012). Other studies of voting, for example, illustrate that online tools facilitate increased rates of voter participation, mobilizing citizens who might not otherwise participate (Spada, Mellon, Peixoto & Sjoberg, 2015).

Clearly, digital activism remains an area of study ripe for further discussion, particularly given the possibilities for social media tools to help participants align with interest groups, form collectives, and mobilize for online as well as offline action. Aligning with others around shared identities and forming collective identities are both highly rhetorical activities that rely on understandings of individual ethos (or background and credibility), collective ethos, and the problem or issue that the collective thus responds to (what rhetoricians define as the rhetorical situation and its exigency). This chapter therefore adds to the literature on digital activism by studying the rhetorical situations and exigencies that emerged in three successful digital activism campaigns. We argue that effective digital activism requires an understanding of the rhetorical situation and its exigencies to facilitate a collective’s success; digital activists should have a clear end goal in mind for their campaigns and carefully choose which social networks will be used to diffuse their messages, as these messages are more often successful when diffused through networks that are committed to those goals. Digital activism is more than just pushing messages out through tweets or Facebook posts. As Van Es, Van Geenen, and Boeschoten (2014) have noted, simply arguing for one social media tool over another (Facebook versus Twitter, for example) in digital activism campaigns ignores the socio-cultural and technological forces at play in these channels that impact the success or failure of digital activism campaigns within them.

In this chapter, we first briefly address the divide between digital activism and slacktivism to set the stage for a review of successful behaviors and actions from prior digital activism demonstrations. The three digital activism campaigns outlined in this chapter include the Arab Spring protests (2010-2011), the M15 anti-austerity movement in Spain involving the indignados (2011-present), and Occupy Wall Street protests inspired by the anti-austerity movement (2011-present). These campaigns were selected because of their worldwide impact, their significant use of social media and digital tools for activist efforts, and their interconnectedness—the later campaigns, such as the Spanish indignados anti-banking marches and the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States, were partly inspired by the successful use of social media for mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring protests.
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