Transmit or Get Off the Net:
Apathy Versus Collaboration in the Internet Age

by Chelsea Palmer, 2015

> But that is not the world in which we live. We are flooded with data, much of it poorly labeled and promiscuously copied. We seek maximum speed and dexterity rather than deliberation and wisdom. Many of our systems, not least electronic journalism, are biased toward the new and the now. The habits and values of markets infect all areas of our lives at all times of day. And even after living intimately with networked computers for almost two decades, we lack understanding of what such complex information systems can and cannot do, or even how they work. We trust them with far too much that is dear to us and fail to confront or even to acknowledge their limits and problems.
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> (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p. 80)

Communication, Collaboration, and Participation in Online Communities

Julian Rappaport, a founder of the field of Community Psychology, echoed a central tenet of activism when he urged practitioners to "know the system before you try to change it" (1977, p. 154). Progress toward social change inevitably depends upon communities' ability to band together, collaborate, and engage in determined activism. In Community Psychology, social power is seen as an intersection of the ability to enact change and of access to opportunities to do so (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Ability, in this case, does not refer to an assumed innate strength, but to a degree of agency within the larger societal structure. Opportunities to enact change can arise from shifts in a society's political climate, or result from communities' deliberate efforts to forge such opportunities for themselves through activism.

Norms of communication and collaboration have changed drastically in the age of the Internet and computer technology. In order to effectively engage the new tools for digital activism, it is crucial to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these available strategies and platforms. The way individuals construct concepts of their own identities, and the way the larger online population "crowdsources" information, have changed the game for community-building (Lagos, Coopman, & Tomhave, 2013). After all, data transmission itself has always relied upon interpersonal

collaboration, since the origin of Internet peer-to-peer sharing networks (O'Hara & Stevens, 2006; Austin, 2009; McKinnon, 2012). Now, there are a wealth of web sites which rely upon the collaborative production of media and information, including a navigation of open-ended peer review for content submission and site philosophy (Deuze, 2006; Baron, 2009).

Respect for cultural diversity is a central value in Community Psychology, and is also prioritized in most activist movements (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Optimistic perspectives on the Internet's potential, especially those espoused in its infancy, have declared it to be an ideal realm for open dialogue and inclusivity which transcends demographic and ideological differences (Slack & Williams, 2000; Lindgrem & Lundström, 2011). However, much of the qualitative research that has focused on Internet users suggests that in-group preferences still dominate most people's activities and community membership online (Lingus, 2005; Sethi, 2012). This reality runs the risk that supposedly collaborative projects will become splintered and sequestered into echo chambers which reflect the opinions of self-segregated communities. A conscious effort to infuse activism with solidarity and inclusivity may prevent this from happening.

Community Psychology is deeply anchored in traditional social activism organizing principles, tied to local settings and hands-on, grassroots techniques (Trickett, 2011). These principles generally emphasize the maximization of activists' time and resources to gain media visibility, raise public awareness, and to raise the potential societal costs (both literal and figurative) for not changing unjust policies (Tatarchevskiy, 2010). One of the strengths of the sort of activism that prevailed before the age of the Internet is its tendency to form strong community bonds and relationships, since showing up in person and working side by side seems to forge more permanent social connections (Mattelart, 2002; Smith, Bellaby & Lindsay, 2010). Additionally, traditional activist strategies often work within, or parallel to, existing civic and political structures, and thus may have a greater impact on traditional legislative processes.

While the Internet has opened new avenues of visibility for activist causes, it has also ushered in an age of passive participation, sometimes referred to as "slacktivism" (Dixon, 2011; Fisher, 2015). Critics of this contemporary trend, which is rampant on social media, suggest that it can actually undercut participation in traditional activist movements. However, there are some serious weaknesses in the tactics of traditional activism itself, which may be leading it into incongruity with the digital age.

One of the biggest issues is that it's hard to get people to show up for real life events, protests, and meetings anymore, and many people will commit to participation in voice alone (Petray, 2011). As far as organizing strategies themselves, traditional activism moves painfully slowly in comparison to the swift trends and media cycle of the online world (Rosenau & Johnson, 2002; Pickard, 2006). In terms of societal visibility, it is easy for mainstream media to provide selective coverage of activist events, or to provide an incomplete or biased account of the protesters' message and vision (Dunbar-Hester, 2009; Lester & Hutchins, 2012). The Internet age has undermined some of these roadblocks, while creating entirely new ones in their stead.

Slacktivism and Surface Participation in Online Movements

Slacktivism revolves around the notion that clicking "like" or vocalizing support online will have an impact on real life problems, and it employs the virility of social media networks to increase awareness of political causes (Fisher, 2015). Though some denigrate this online activity as useless, others argue that it is a crucial component of awareness-raising, and a vital first step toward true social change (Sutter, 2013; Fisher, 2015). In 2012, research illustrated that individuals who were active online participated more frequently in local community politics such as contacting their political representatives (Xie, 2013). Indeed, a Georgetown University study showed that Internet users who participated in slacktivist actions were also twice as likely as the average citizen to become involved with real-world activism (Dixon, 2011). However, there is a significant economic class gap in slacktivism participation, which is traceable to apparent disparities in technological literacy (Xie, 2013).

It is crucial to maintain vigilance regarding the motives and machinations of the platforms upon which we establish these networks of action and communication. Facebook continually presents as the largest online social media gathering space (D'onfro, 2015). Therefore, Facebook increasingly dominates users' interactions with the Internet, and it is becoming one of the largest origin points of traffic for external news sites (Lafrance, 2015). In fact, recently the site has started the process of internally hosting various news sources, providing the original publishers a portion of ad revenue in exchange (Fitts, 2015). When users never have to leave the platform of Facebook to access the news, the site gains more and more control over what they read. The site has gotten exponentially better each year at enticing its users to get more deeply absorbed in its platform, to freely provide all their information and thoughts, and to trust Facebook's interface and perceived political neutrality.

In reality, Facebook is a for-profit company, not a public town square. Given the available information about Facebook's manipulation of its user platform, the appearance of neutrality which some users take for granted is a misconception. Facebook consistently and purposefully promotes specific content from general pages that users have "liked" in the past, presenting the false impression that the users are specifically endorsing those announcements or posts (Bott, 2012). The site also consistently bows to government requests to block user posts and contents that may be seen as offensive or dissident in their country of origin, although Facebook claims to follow a strict set of guidelines when making these decisions (Roth & Herszenhorn, 2014).

Additionally, Facebook's censorship guidelines are enforced by automated filters, and when information is incorrectly censored, it can be incredibly difficult to have it restored (Rowland, 2013). Although the site's monitoring and removal of content currently seems to be limited to incredibly controversial global issues, their opacity about both their guiding algorithms and internal policies ensures that this censorship could shift or extend at any point. Another reason for concern is that the decision-makers behind the scenes belong to a largely homogenous and privileged demographic group, which may subtly guide judgments on content censorship and exclusion.

Diversity and Inclusion in the Internet Age

Information technology companies have come under fire for a perceived lack of diversity in their hires and workforces. For example, Facebook's internal review reported a workforce that was overwhelming white and Asian males, particularly in technical and administrative roles, and Google and Yahoo have reported similar statistics (Johnston, 2014; Machkovech, 2014). Fan (2014) suggested that those who argue that Silicon Valley has no hiring bias often emphasize the field's significant representation of Asian males, overlooking the fact that a two-factor monoculture is still basically a monoculture. Though the progress beyond an entirely Caucasian male workforce is a positive thing, the majority of participants still represent a self-replicating "cultural fit." Significantly, within the comment sections of the news articles cited above, self-reported white males bemoaned what they consider "affirmative action" hiring, claiming that the existing demographic statistics likely reflect the pool of qualified candidates for these jobs.

This inequity represents a pervasive misunderstanding in Silicon Valley of how unconscious and systemic biases about race and gender can pervade corporate culture (Mitchell, 2014; Nocera,

2014). During the hiring process, this implicit bias often takes the form of a focus on "culture fit," which leads to hiring workers who look and behave like the majority of a company's existing employees (Williams, 2014). A 2013 study showed that even when potential employers only had information about candidates' appearances, both men and women were twice as likely to hire a male candidate over a female for a math-based task (Reuben, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2014). The effects of unconscious bias do not end with the hiring process: women and people of colour report experiences of alienation and judgment within the workplace, from being vocally stereotyped to having their ideas discounted or co-opted by other employees (Diallo, 2015; Sandberg & Grant, 2015).

When Eric Schmidt, the Executive Chairman of Google, continuously interrupted his female colleague during a public panel on diversity, it shone a spotlight on this tendency to discount the contributions of women and people of colour in Silicon Valley (McDonough, 2015). Eric Schmidt's unconscious misstep had a positive outcome: when his mistake was pointed out, he apologized. This was a crucial public message sent by a powerful player in the industry, and contrasted significantly with the statement by Linus Torvalds, founder of Linux, that efforts to increase diversity in the field amount to nothing but a quest for "niceness" (Machkovech, 2014). Although there is certainly no expectation that Torvalds, who has deeply committed his life to maintaining and improving the technical core of Linux OS, should devote his own time to fighting against industry discrimination, his expression of apparent disdain for those who do highlights the uphill battle for workplace diversity.

There are efforts to combat the deep-seated nature of these diversity issues, though, such as Intel's recent pledge of $300 million which will primarily be applied to support more women and people of colour in the pursuit of technology-related degrees (Cunningham, 2015). Significant effort has been put forth to ensure that women have a fair chance to access education and employment opportunities in this sector. Additionally, Google has devoted significant efforts to building an internal culture which is more aware of unconscious gender bias (Baer, 2014; Manjoo, 2014). When viewed pragmatically, these efforts to increase diversity are not merely an attempt at social justice, as companies with a more diverse workforce consistently demonstrate greater equity and profits (Surowiecki, 2014).

"Intersectionality" refers to the complexity of our social locations, embodied by the combination of ways in which we are each privileged and those in which we are each marginalized (Lutz, Vivar & Supik, 2011). In relational terms, no single person holds complete social power, just

as no individual is completely powerless in every social context (McIntosh & Hobson, 2013). Acknowledging this reality creates new opportunities to build allies across categories of difference, and invite people with relative privilege to explore what they share in common with marginalized people. This fosters an attitude of inclusive diversity, and overcomes the misconception that campaigns for increased diversity represent a focus on liability rather than strength (Lykke, 2010).

They Who Build the Stage Choose the Speakers

Individuals' roles shift in the informational age, as their opportunities for work, education and self-expression become increasingly self-directed (Webster, 2007). Once, an individual would have to go through many levels of authority to get a headline carried in the newspaper; with the internet, formerly unheard perspectives can spread across the world (Lipschutz, 2005; Lester & Hutchins, 2012). These public negotiations of individual identity and ideology have moved from abstract functions to literal, concrete interaction within computer networks. However, this new source of agency has a learning curve, and requires people to understand how to wield technology to accomplish their own aims. Kevin Kelly (2007) pointed out a more ephemeral aspect of the existing digital divide, explaining that "there are those alive for which we haven't invented their technology of self-expression." In other words, some of the people who would benefit most from online communication may not yet have access to desirable platforms for such opportunities.

Why are the representative demographics of Silicon Valley relevant to the aims of activism in online communities? It would be easy to try to draw a line and claim that the business world is its own, separate realm, insulated from the morality and aims of the grassroots crowd. However, it is not necessarily the corporate status within companies like Google, Yahoo, and Facebook that are crucial to structuring a fairer future for all Internet users. It is the technological aptitude and influence upon shaping the online landscape which is crucial to social change.

Kimberly Bryant (2013) explained that black women comprise 3% of the information technology industry, while Latina women represent less than 1% of that workforce. She also shared the fact that across the board, women's involvement in IT has plummeted since the earliest days of the Internet. As discussed above, the subtle emphasis on "cultural fit" within corporations encourages a mirror effect, in which the demographics of the company are replicated in their hires. However, this is not the only issue hindering the participation of diverse demographics. Bryant (2013) agrees that the supposed "pipeline" problem of diversity in hiring, the claim that there is a

limited pool of applicants for these jobs who are female or people of colour, is a reality.

Therefore, in order to enable equal representation in the digital age, it is necessary to redefine discussions of race, gender, and their intersectionality in terms of the digital divide (Bryant, 2013). A focus on empowerment through self-determined participation would pave the way for underrepresented communities to make their mark on the Internet. An excellent example of the utilization of different spaces and platforms by traditionally marginalized groups is the phenomenon of "Black Twitter." This colloquial phrase refers to the the comparatively large, and politically vocal, African American community on the social networking site Twitter (Smith, 2014; Ramsey, 2015).

This phenomenon may indicate that for the African American community, the interface and functionality of Twitter may feel more accessible and empowering than other platforms. This community's widespread participation on Twitter has led to the successful establishment of activist campaigns which challenge systemic racism and highlight the distressing levels of violence against people of colour in the United States (Ramsey, 2015). With this successful utilization of Twitter as a tool for activist visibility and communal solidarity, we can only imagine what will happen when there is a higher representation of people of colour in the programming and technology startup industry, designing the next platforms for social communication.

Memes, Social Networks, Hyperlinks: Balancing Entertainment With Action

There are useful things about the tactics that make up slacktivism: it takes advantage of the fast-paced transmission of memetic concepts, and the Internet's ability to cross barriers of space and demographics. There is also a stunning amount of collective time spent online, often on sites like Facebook or social media. Additionally, activist movements do not often acknowledge the vast reserve of online gamers who utilize problem solving skills in their daily leisure and collaborate in massive group efforts (McGonigal, 2010; Schaaf, 2014).

The greatest flaw of slacktivism is literally encapsulated in its name: it seems to represent a pattern of passivity in which people want to exchange minimal participation for a feeling of instant gratification. Social media is also notorious for its short attention span, and the constant turnover of the "next big scandal" which is often rooted in shock tactics and a superficial analysis of what has occurred (Sicha, 2014). Therefore, like many activists before them, online slacktivists need to learn how to organize infrastructure to pursue meaningful and lasting social change, rather than relying on

short-term and reactionary campaigns (Xie, 2013).

Foucault's (1970) The Order of Things postulates that from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, Western society transitioned from primarily utilizing representations based on analogy, to using representations based on analysis (p. 55). Perhaps in many ways, the shifts we see in the norms of Internet communication are now further transforming those representations based on analysis into representations based on memetic networks. In the context of the Internet, "memes" are usually image-based, often humorous, little snippets that are easy to post and spread widely across the Internet (Gleick, 2011; Jurgenson, 2012). With online communities' fluid colloquial communication, as well as the speed and widespread range at which things "go viral," it makes sense that we could engage these trends to involve the larger population in activist movements.

There are strengths in the hypnotizing, memetic speed of what we call slacktivism. Yes, we love watching exciting videos, playing games, and devoting huge amounts of time to social media, and there's no reason to feel guilty about that. The next important frontier in social change will rely upon who is making those videos and games, and who is designing and controlling the growth of those social media platforms where we devote so much of our time. Malcolm Bell (2013) suggested that we can translate our desire to share things about ourselves and indulge in entertainment to make a real impact in the world, and leave behind a lasting legacy.

So, the big question around slacktivism remains: can we save both the element of gratification and the desire to make a difference, while compensating for the "slack?" Can we engineer and orchestrate efficient infrastructures for viral activism that requires low levels of commitment but yields effective returns on a global scale? That will depend entirely on who designs these networks, sites and services in the near future, and where their values and priorities lie.