

Slacktivism: A Critical Evaluation

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(Received 28 May 2020; accepted 26 June 2020)

Abstract

We are currently the beneficiaries of the aspirations of our predecessors, who ardently pursued ideals such as safety, access to quality medical care, social justice, and an effective life. Significantly, and particularly pertinent to our discussion here, we have been granted the power of expression. In today's world, virtually anyone can articulate their views on a wide spectrum of social and political subjects. This fundamental right has been so comprehensively realized that even various unelected authorities have been compelled to devise alternative methods to suppress the freedom of speech. On a theoretical level, one might assume that everything is ideally aligned with the visions of our forebears. However, practical reality paints a more ambiguous picture. Some scholars have employed the somewhat disparaging term "slacktivism" to argue that the impact of online engagement in the public sphere may not be as transformative as initially anticipated. While individuals undoubtedly possess the means to voice their opinions, the question arises as to whether online activism has produced substantial change. In this scholarly inquiry, we undertake a critical examination of the efficacy of activism through social media channels and explore strategies for maximizing its potential.

Keywords: activism, clicktivism, slacktivism, social media.

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Introduction

Human society constitutes an intricate and multifaceted entity. The natural world does not inherently embody democratic principles, and our journey from primitive existence to the establishment of robust democratic systems has been a lengthy and intricate one. Consequently, the fragile construct of this extraordinary phenomenon necessitates consistent preservation and vigilance.

Historically, it has been substantiated that the continual oversight of governmental activities by the populace serves as a reliable instrument for the advancement and endurance of democratic societies. This principle finds its roots in the early history of the United States, where the founding fathers and early presidents recognized the paramount importance of sustained citizen engagement within the democratic framework. They held, whether with genuine conviction or other motivations, that an active and informed citizenry stood as a linchpin for the prosperity and durability of the fledgling nation.

For instance, George Washington, the inaugural President of the United States, underscored the significance of citizen participation in governance in his Farewell Address in 1796. Within this seminal address, he emphasized the necessity for a populace well-informed and vigilant, articulating, "It is important, likewise, that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire caution in those entrusted with its administration, to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres, avoiding, in the exercise of the powers of one department, to encroach upon another" (Washington, 1796). Washington's words cautioned against the perils of excessive partisanship and regionalism, advocating instead for a unified nation where citizens actively partake in the political process.

Thomas Jefferson, the eminent figure who served as the third President of the United States, held steadfastly to the fundamental importance of the citizenry within the framework of a democratic society. His fervent belief revolved around the idea that for democracy to thrive, it was imperative to have an enlightened and well-educated populace. Jefferson ardently championed the concept of "popular sovereignty," asserting that the very source of governmental authority emanated from the people themselves (Jefferson, 1816). In his perspective, ongoing and active engagement by citizens stood as a linchpin for the preservation of liberty and justice within the nation.

James Madison, widely recognized as the "Father of the Constitution," emerged as a resolute proponent of popular engagement in the governance process. In Federalist No. 10, Madison delved into the perils

of factionalism, contending that a diverse and actively engaged citizenry could more effectively counteract the potential tyranny of the majority (Madison, 1787). He underscored the pivotal role of sustained citizen participation in upholding the tenets of democracy.

Furthermore, President Andrew Jackson, a prominent figure credited with advancing democratic participation in the United States, pioneered the notion of “Jacksonian Democracy.” His objective was to expand political involvement beyond the privileged elite, advocating for the extension of voting rights to white men irrespective of property ownership (Remini, 1984). Jackson firmly believed that an increased participation of ordinary citizens in the realm of politics would yield a government that was more responsive and accountable to the needs of the populace. It’s noteworthy that the early American presidents lived in an era devoid of the communication technologies that we now take for granted. In fact, these modern technologies hold the potential to fulfill the very aspirations that these presidents held dear.

Online activism helps democracy

In the contemporary era, characterized by the pervasive utilization of the internet and social media, online activism has emerged as a potent instrument for fostering civic engagement and catalyzing social change. Digital platforms have ushered in novel avenues for individuals to actively participate in political and societal matters, thereby exerting a profound influence on the global democratic landscape (Shahghasemi, 2021). Online activism has significantly expanded civic engagement by diminishing the barriers to entry for political involvement (Dahlberg, 2001). Notably, social media platforms have played a pivotal role in facilitating connections among likeminded citizens, enabling the dissemination of their viewpoints, and stimulating discourse on critical political and societal subjects (Loader & Mercea, 2011). The seamless sharing of information and the organization of events on digital platforms has precipitated a surge in virtual protests, online petitions, and campaigns, thereby furnishing citizens with more accessible channels through which to express their perspectives and advocate for change (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

Illustrative instances of this phenomenon can be observed in the Arab Spring, a series of pro-democracy uprisings that swept across several Arab nations, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, among others. Notably, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter played instrumental roles in the orchestration and mobilization of protestors, information dissemination, and the coordination of collective actions

during these transformative movements (Howard & Hussain, 2011). Similarly, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, dedicated to advocating against racial discrimination and police brutality, has harnessed the power of social media to amplify its message. Through the dissemination of personal stories, the organization of protests, and the vocal demand for accountability in cases of racial injustice, #BlackLivesMatter has leveraged platforms like Twitter and Facebook to galvanize widespread support and engagement (Adegoke & Mahtani, 2016).

The #MeToo movement represents a global crusade against instances of sexual harassment and assault. Its ascendancy was propelled by the far-reaching influence of social media, which served as a platform for survivors to disclose their experiences and coalesce in solidarity. This collective effort, in turn, yielded heightened awareness and prompted policy alterations across various industries. The Hong Kong protests, also recognized as the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, bore witness to mass demonstrations in opposition to a proposed extradition bill. Notably, social media platforms were extensively harnessed for purposes of communication, coordination, and garnering international support throughout the course of these protests.

In the case of #EndSARS, a grassroots movement rooted in social media, Nigerian citizens united against police brutality. This movement, distinguished by its globally trending hashtag, drew substantial attention to the issue and culminated in nationwide demonstrations as well as governmental responses.

The active participation of K-pop enthusiasts, renowned for their formidable online presence, emerged as a novel form of activism. These individuals disrupted hashtags employed by law enforcement agencies during protests in the United States, thereby underscoring the transformative potential of digital platforms in shaping socio-political discourse.

The Fridays for Future movement, spearheaded by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, has galvanized millions of young individuals worldwide in advocating for climate action through global climate strikes. Social media has been pivotal in disseminating information, stimulating participation, and exerting pressure on governments to address climate change issues.

These exemplars offer a glimpse into the efficacy of online platforms as indispensable tools for activists and organizers seeking to mobilize, disseminate information, and galvanize collective action on a global scale. Their utilization has made substantial contributions to significant societal and political transformations.

Online activism has emerged as a pivotal means through which historically marginalized or minority groups, frequently underrepresented in conventional media, can effectively voice their concerns (Lievrouw, 2011). Leveraging the capabilities of social media and digital platforms, these communities now possess the tools to communicate their experiences, champion their rights, and spotlight issues impacting their respective constituencies (Chadwick & Howard, 2009). This empowerment of marginalized groups through online activism signifies a notable stride towards fostering a more comprehensive and diverse public discourse. In doing so, it contributes substantively to the enrichment of democratic deliberation (Shahghasemi, 2020).

The pervasive global reach of the internet bestows upon online activism the unique capacity to surmount national boundaries and cultivate solidarity among individuals and collectives across disparate countries. Online campaigns and movements propagated through social media channels exhibit an exceptional propensity for swiftly amassing international recognition and support, thereby facilitating collective action on a global scale (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This interconnectedness engenders intricate networks of activism, uniting individuals hailing from diverse backgrounds under the banner of shared causes, effectively transcending the constraints imposed by geographical, cultural, and linguistic divides.

Online activism defines our current era, where individuals, armed with multimedia digital devices and internet connections, are active participants rather than passive observers. This is aptly captured in the title of an article authored by Sabbar and Matheson (2018): "Mass Media vs. the Mass of Media." The article aptly portrays the evolution of the information landscape, shifting from the era of mass media to the age of social media, where individuals have outpaced the influence of traditional media outlets. Online activism has evolved into an indispensable instrument for overseeing governmental activities and advancing accountability in the contemporary digital landscape (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). The rapidity and seamlessness with which information is disseminated over the internet empower citizens to promptly document occurrences of corruption, human rights transgressions, and governmental shortcomings (Castells, 2015). Of particular significance, social media platforms have played a pivotal role in expeditiously circulating real-time information, especially in times of crises or emergencies. This capability has spurred swift responses and galvanized collective support, underscoring the transformative potential of digital activism (Dencik & Leistert, 2015).

Digital platforms have forged a path toward participatory governance, a paradigm in which citizens assume a direct role in the decision-making processes (Smith & Smyth, 2018). Mechanisms such as e-petitions, crowdsourcing of ideas, and online consultations with policymakers have provided governments with invaluable channels for collecting public input and fostering engagement with citizens on policy-related matters (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Online activism, as a conduit for these participatory initiatives, endows citizens with the means to be active contributors to the democratic machinery, thus serving as a bridge that narrows the divide between the governed and those entrusted with governance.

Online activism has indisputably arisen as a formidable catalyst for the advancement and fortification of democracy on a global scale. Its impacts are multifold, encompassing the augmentation of civic engagement, amplification of marginalized voices, cultivation of international solidarity, bolstering of government accountability, and facilitation of participatory governance. Online activism, in essence, empowers citizens to assume an active role in the transformation of their societies and the pursuit of constructive change.

Nevertheless, scholars and analysts concurrently acknowledge the existence of potential challenges. These encompass issues like the proliferation of misinformation, weak critical thinking and easy acceptance among social media users (Saeedabadi & Sabbar, 2020), and the persistent digital divide. These challenges warrant ongoing research, scrutiny, and proactive measures to ensure that the vast potential of online activism continues to be harnessed for the betterment of democratic processes and societies. In the realm of activism in the age of artificial intelligence and chatbots, there is an additional challenge: distinguishing human activism from what Nosrati and colleagues have termed bot-activism: “chatbots have been programmed to mimic human activism, creating a more significant impact or generating a false impression of the level of support for a particular cause – a phenomenon we can refer to as bot-activism” (Nosrati et al., 2020).

Slacktivism

The advent of the digital era has catalyzed profound transformations in how individuals participate in social and political causes. A notable phenomenon to have emerged in this context is “slacktivism,” a term coined through the fusion of “slacker” and “activism.” Slacktivism encompasses ostensibly minimal and effortless online actions taken to express support for various causes. It is important to note that

the term “slacktivism” is sometimes interchangeably referred to as “clicktivism,” both of which connote actions that require minimal effort and occasionally carry implications regarding the overall efficacy and utility of such politically engaged behavior.

Scholars have engaged in discussions regarding slacktivism, with some contending that it represents a form of superficial, low-level participation that primarily serves individual self-interest rather than offering substantial practical value. This critical perspective posits that the disposable and non-committal nature of slacktivism can inadvertently promote political complacency. It suggests that individuals who primarily engage in slacktivism may be fulfilling a personal desire to participate without committing to more high-risk approaches, such as active involvement in social movements. Within the realm of political organizations, researchers have undertaken efforts to assess the significance of slacktivism by scrutinizing its operational outcomes. When employed as a critique of slacktivism, it casts doubt on the legitimacy of these actions in comparison to more traditional modes of engagement, such as physical protests. It is essential to emphasize that this questioning of legitimacy does not inherently imply an intrinsic connection between politics or significance and a broader concept of legitimacy. Instead, it underscores their pertinence within the sphere of political discourse.

At the heart of slacktivism lie complex motivations that compel individuals to engage in seemingly superficial online activities. One primary driver is the need for identity expression and value signaling, which, in turn, addresses the pervasive sense of isolation that has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. The advancement of technology, urbanization, and the prevailing individualistic ethos of modernity have paradoxically contributed to this heightened sense of loneliness.

Technological progress, particularly in the form of digital communication through platforms like social media, can inadvertently exacerbate feelings of isolation. These platforms often encourage the curation of online personas, potentially further distancing individuals from authentic connections (Turkle, 2011). Simultaneously, urbanization has the effect of dispersing families and weakening communal support structures (Putnam, 2000), while the anonymity prevalent in urban settings hinders the development of genuine connections (Oldenburg, 1989). Furthermore, the ethos of individualism discourages seeking help, thereby deepening the solitude experienced by many (Lasch, 1979).

Recognizing this paradox is crucial for nurturing authentic human bonds amidst the conveniences of modern life. Social media platforms function as digital stages where individuals can publicly align themselves

with various causes, signaling their beliefs and establishing connections with like-minded individuals. This not only serves as a personal assertion but also as a means to construct an online identity intricately linked to specific causes.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that slacktivism frequently serves as an initial step for individuals who are new to the realm of activism. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) introduced the concept of “clicktivism,” which posits that these lightweight online actions can act as gateways to deeper and more meaningful forms of participation. For individuals just beginning their journey into activism, these easily accessible, low-threshold actions provide an avenue to acquaint themselves with a cause and progressively transition into more substantial levels of engagement.

Critics of slacktivism contend that actions such as sharing a post or using a hashtag create a misleading sense of achievement without leading to tangible change. Morozov (2009), in particular, is highly critical of this phenomenon, suggesting that it nurtures complacency and undermines authentic grassroots activism. Nevertheless, a more nuanced perspective emerges from recent research. It has been revealed that passive online engagement can contribute to heightened political efficacy, which refers to an individual’s belief in their capacity to influence political outcomes. While on the surface slacktivism may appear inconsequential, it has the potential to empower individuals gradually. Over time, it can inspire them to become more deeply involved in political activities. From this viewpoint, slacktivism functions as an initial step that fosters a sense of empowerment and encourages individuals to transition gradually into more substantive forms of activism.

In addition to its influence on individuals, slacktivism also plays a significant role in shaping narratives and increasing awareness on a larger scale. Lotan et al. (2011) emphasize how activities like retweets, shares, and hashtags on social media platforms contribute to the rapid dissemination of information, especially during critical events such as the Arab Spring. These online actions have the capacity to swiftly amplify messages, driving public discourse and disseminating crucial information. This underscores the idea that even seemingly passive online actions can contribute to the flow of vital information and influence public opinion.

Nonetheless, it is essential to exercise caution when assessing the influence of narratives propelled by slacktivism. Halupka (2014) sheds light on the emergence of a “spiral of silence” effect—a phenomenon where individuals, influenced by the apparent consensus observed on

social media, may become reluctant to express dissenting viewpoints. While slacktivism has the potential to amplify specific messages, it may inadvertently stifle diverse perspectives, prompting critical inquiries into the breadth and depth of its influence. In the digital age, the phenomenon of cancel culture has become increasingly prominent. This sociocultural trend, exacerbated by digital platforms, involves the public condemnation and exclusion of individuals, often public figures or celebrities, who are perceived to have violated prevailing societal norms or values.

Emerging from the heightened activism prevalent on social media, which includes slacktivism, cancel culture has arisen as a means to enforce accountability through various tactics, including social media campaigns, boycotts, and public shaming. Advocates of cancel culture contend that it empowers marginalized voices, fostering demands for accountability and instigating cultural transformations. However, critics, such as Halupka (2014), have raised concerns regarding its potential to stifle freedom of expression, perpetuate cyberbullying, and impede constructive discourse. The intricate discourse surrounding cancel culture encompasses considerations of ethical responsibility, social equity, and the delicate balance between consequences and opportunities for redemption. This discourse reflects broader societal shifts in navigating ethical boundaries and collective values within the digital realm.

In the context of slacktivism, another challenge emerges when individuals engage in online actions not to pursue anything valuable but simply because it aligns with the popular trend. This trend-following behavior can be referred to as “celebrity slacktivism”, where people mimic online actions merely because they see others, including celebrities, doing the same. It reflects a form of social conformity where the desire to fit in and be part of the current online wave overshadows genuine commitment to the cause. This phenomenon underscores the need to differentiate between authentic engagement and actions driven solely by the desire to be in sync with prevailing trends within online communities.

An intriguing development within the realm of slacktivism is the gradual dissolution of distinctions between superficial online engagement and more substantial forms of participation. Cho and Lee (2021) suggest that this demarcation is progressively becoming more fluid, as individuals experiment with innovative approaches that meld low-effort actions with deeper levels of involvement. Online platforms are being intentionally designed to facilitate this transition

by nurturing a sense of community, fostering dialogue, and even incorporating gamification elements into the user experience. The ongoing evolution of slacktivism defies the characterization of it as a static and one-dimensional phenomenon. Rather, it is a dynamic arena where individuals continually explore various levels of engagement, incrementally advancing from superficial actions to more meaningful contributions. This dynamic progression indicates that slacktivism is not a mere cul-de-sac but rather a potential pathway for individuals to shift from passive observers to becoming active agents of change.

Methodology

A systematic review represents a meticulous and exhaustive research methodology carefully designed to systematically collate and evaluate existing literature concerning a specific research query or subject (Green & Higgins, 2011). This methodological approach entails a rigorous process of identifying, selecting, critically appraising, and synthesizing pertinent studies drawn from diverse scholarly sources, including academic databases. The overarching objective of a systematic review is to offer a comprehensive and evidence-based overview of the contemporary body of knowledge (Higgins et al., 2019).

The foundational principle underpinning a systematic review centers on the unwavering commitment to minimizing potential biases and subjectivity inherent in the research process. This commitment is realized through the adherence to a predetermined and transparent protocol that explicitly delineates the research question, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the methodologies for both data extraction and analysis (Moher et al., 2009). This rigorous approach significantly enhances the transparency and replicability of the review process, thereby facilitating other researchers in their endeavors to replicate the study and authenticate its findings.

Through the consolidation and synthesis of data derived from multiple studies, a systematic review is designed to offer an impartial and exhaustive evaluation of the available evidence. This process is instrumental in discerning prevalent trends, patterns, and identifying gaps in existing research (Green & Higgins, 2011). Such an integrative approach holds significant value in facilitating evidence-based decision-making across a range of disciplines, including healthcare, social sciences, and policy development (Pollock & Berge, 2018).

Systematic reviews find particular utility in the examination of emerging research subjects, where a comprehensive understanding is yet to be fully established among researchers and the wider public. They

function as robust and methodologically rigorous tools for synthesizing extant research, thereby providing insights that contribute to a deeper comprehension of a specific area of interest. Additionally, these insights guide further investigations and hold practical applicability in both academic and real-world contexts.

In our endeavor, instead of conducting an independent survey of users, as is common in many research studies, we elected to perform a systematic review due to the wealth of research already available on this subject. Our approach involved a meticulous curation of existing research findings, with particular emphasis on studies conducted within the last two years. This decision allowed us to provide a more detailed and up-to-date account of the research landscape pertaining to our topic.

Findings

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) introduced a typology of activism that incorporated the concept of “clicktivism,” which bears similarities to the term “slacktivism,” but they asserted its legitimacy as a form of engagement. Their argument posited that seemingly lightweight online actions could serve as preliminary steps toward deeper involvement in social movements. This perspective effectively countered the prevailing notion that slacktivism lacks efficacy or impact.

In contrast, Morozov (2009) conducted a critical examination of slacktivism, expressing apprehensions regarding its potential to foster complacency and erode the foundations of authentic activism. His critique underscored the importance of avoiding an uncritical embrace of facile online actions. Morozov emphasized the imperative of sustained and substantive commitment to engendering meaningful societal change.

Lotan et al. (2011) conducted an investigation into the role of social media, including activities such as retweeting, in shaping narratives amidst significant events, such as the Arab Spring. Their study brought to the forefront the influential capacity of social media platforms in disseminating information and molding public perception. They put forth the idea that seemingly passive online actions can significantly contribute to the construction of collective understanding.

Conover et al. (2013) delved into the intricate intersection of social media and political participation within the context of the Egyptian uprising. Their research shed light on the mutually reinforcing relationship between online and offline activism, revealing that behaviors often associated with slacktivism coexisted harmoniously

with more conventional forms of protest. This revelation underscored the nuanced and multifaceted nature of digital engagement in political and social movements.

In a separate study, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) systematically evaluated the impact of online engagement, encompassing clicktivism, on the mobilization of political support. Their research effectively illustrated that digital actions could exert influence on political participation; however, the outcomes were contingent on variables such as prior levels of engagement and the dynamics of the platform used. These findings contributed significantly to a more nuanced understanding of the ramifications of slacktivism.

In the context of a rapidly evolving digital landscape, Cho and Lee (2021) introduced a comprehensive framework aimed at understanding the dynamic nature of slacktivism. Their argument centered on the idea that the boundaries distinguishing slacktivism from more active forms of online engagement are increasingly becoming blurred. Consequently, they posited that it is imperative to reconsider how we conceptualize and evaluate digital activism.

Conclusion

The concept of “slacktivism” has attracted a spectrum of criticisms that underscore concerns regarding its efficacy, the depth of engagement it fosters, and potential adverse repercussions. Prominent critiques against slacktivism encompass:

- 1. Superficial Engagement:** Detractors posit that slacktivism predominantly entails facile, low-commitment actions such as liking, sharing, or retweeting content on social media platforms. These actions are often perceived as symbolic gestures that lack substantive impact or a genuine commitment to effecting meaningful change.
- 2. Substitution for Meaningful Action:** A pervasive concern is that slacktivism might supplant more impactful forms of activism, such as active participation in protests, volunteering, or making financial contributions to relevant causes. This phenomenon, colloquially referred to as “armchair activism,” suggests that individuals may perceive online engagement as a sufficient contribution, thereby sidestepping tangible efforts to address underlying issues (Morozov, 2009).
- 3. Illusion of Accomplishment:** Slacktivism has the potential to cultivate a false sense of accomplishment among participants, leading them to believe that their online actions have made a

substantial difference, when, in actuality, the impact may be limited. This illusion of achievement can diminish motivation to engage in more substantial and enduring forms of activism.

4. **Dilution of Serious Issues:** Critics argue that the ease of sharing and participating in online campaigns can result in the trivialization of profound social and political issues. Complex problems may be distilled into simplistic slogans and hashtags, potentially oversimplifying intricate and nuanced discussions.
5. **Clicktivism vs. Real-world Change:** Some contend that the association between online engagement and tangible social change remains tenuous. Clicktivism, as a subset of slacktivism, may serve to raise awareness and amplify messages, but it often fails to translate into substantive real-world outcomes.
6. **Attention without Accountability:** Slacktivism may not foster the sustained attention and accountability that are essential for addressing complex issues over the long term. Effective activism necessitates ongoing commitment and collective efforts, aspects that slacktivism may fall short of providing.

Nonetheless, an alternative perspective emerges when considering the findings from studies reviewed within our research paper. In our analysis, slacktivism emerges as a concept and practice that encapsulates a nuanced interplay of motivations, impacts, and the evolving dynamics inherent to the domain of digital activism. Its capacity to function as an entry point for newcomers, enhance political efficacy, shape narratives, and potentially serve as a precursor to more substantial engagement underscores its multifaceted character. In navigating the constantly shifting terrain of online activism, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the potential utility of slacktivism as a foundational step towards more potent forms of advocacy and participation.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Conflicts of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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