Salvaging Slacktivism: Why Awareness Counts in Social Media Activism

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The emergence of slacktivism, or easy online activism through social media, has been critiqued by some scholars who claim it fails to mobilize or effectively create change, while others contend it promotes awareness. In this essay, Holcomb assesses the claims of both groups, and while she agrees that social media activism is a problem when seen as an end result that prevents people from further meaningful support, it can function as a source of "value alignment." Because social media activism creates awareness, it can allow people to come into contact with a cause and to decide whether or not that cause is one that is in line with their values—thus getting more people involved in a more meaningful way.

On November 13, 2015, three terrorists bombed Paris, France, killing 130 people, injuring hundreds more, and creating international outrage in an organized attack by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Another explosion followed: that of millions of social media users spreading Twitter hashtags and modifying Facebook profile pictures with a temporary France flag filter created and promoted by Facebook. Blue, red, and white stripes blanketed Facebook feeds as thousands joined the movement within mere minutes. The effort, intended to exhibit "solidarity," became the subject of a recurring debate within popular media and academia alike: does social media activism actually create change?

Many, like one blogger for USA Today, criticized participants in the movement, claiming that making a difference "doesn't start with a Twitter rant or a Facebook photo" (Petrow). Some labeled participants as "slacktivists," who desire to "feel good without having to do anything substantive" (Skoric). This stance echoes Malcolm Gladwell's famous critique of social media in 2010 claiming that physical effort, not distant support, creates change (Gladwell). Proponents of the slacktivism critique, however, dismiss the value of social media activism too quickly, without acknowledging its ability to create awareness and foster advocacy, especially within the millennial generation. Social media activism may serve as a powerful and positive tool for promoting important issues, especially concerning marginalized groups; it only becomes harmful when participants view it as a substitute for further action, treating it as an end in itself.

In order to understand social media activism and the slacktivism critique, we must first distinguish between the primary categories of online activism and their corresponding goals. Martha McCaughey and Michael Ayers identify three types of Internet activism: "awareness/advocacy," which focuses on sharing information and creating a support base, "organization/mobilization," which seeks to organize

physical demonstrations, and "action/reaction," which concentrates on direct internet action like hacking (McCaughey and Ayers 72-75). For the scope of this paper, I will examine the ability of social media (focusing on Facebook and Twitter) to create awareness and facilitate advocacy through forms of online affirmation, such as the altercation of a profile picture for a specific campaign, "liking" an organization's Facebook page, or "retweeting" a hashtag.

Every day, Facebook adds a half a million new users, or six profiles every second (Regan). Given that social media sites boast more than 2.2 billion active users, which is over 30% of the world's population, these platforms play a pivotal role in informing people around the world and influencing public thought (Regan). Out of the 90% of millennials (ages 18-29) who use social media, 36% say that they are online "almost constantly," making social media one of the most influential ways in which young adults in particular connect and communicate (Perrin). The Pew Research Center discovered that during January 16-20 of 2014, when piracy legislation threatening online freedom provoked social media backlash, almost a quarter of millennials "followed the SOPA battle more closely than any other topic [that week], making it a bigger story among that youthful demographic than the presidential race" (Hitlin and Tan). This massive display of online interest and support demonstrated the power of social media to advocate causes as millions expressed their disapproval online and successfully "derailed" the bill (Hitlin and Tan). Social media clearly possesses a remarkable capacity for sparking public interest and conversation.

Many critics, however, dismiss social media activism too quickly due to flawed assessments. The first attack often brought against social media activism, as articulated in Malcolm Gladwell's article "Small Change," published in the New York Times, claims that because social media activism requires little effort, it is illegitimate (Gladwell). Gladwell contrasts a civil rights sit-in, which he terms "strong tie activism," to loosely organized online platforms, which he labels "weak tie connections." While the former relies on a network of dedicated individuals, the latter, "slacktivist," group is unlikely to be united

by the same level of conviction (Gladwell).

Gladwell's case, however, fails to make an important distinction between the different varieties of social media activism, namely awareness and advocacy-oriented activism and mobilization-focused activism. His argument presumes that legitimate activism must result in physical demonstration; he endeavors to show social media's ineffectiveness regarding protest organization in order to disprove its ability to create any kind of meaningful change. While Gladwell may be correct pertaining to mobilization-oriented activism, he misrepresents the value of awareness and advocacy-based activism by presuming a narrow definition.

Unlike mobilization-focused activism, the goal of awareness-oriented activism is not to organize a team or demonstration, but rather to promote a particular issue in order to shift public opinion or increase general awareness. We should not dismiss such activity as meaningless simply because its impact appears less overt; evidence shows social media activism to be a tool of empowerment. A study by Johnson and Kaye discovered "internet activity to have positive effects on political attitudes and suggests that the Internet may help diminish political detachment since it empowers those otherwise feeling marginalized" (Johnson and Kaye). This finding illustrates how social media campaigns can not only impact viewers through their messages, but also give a voice to those under-represented in policy-making or mass media.

Stephanie Vie's research examining the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) logo corroborates this argument. The HRC logo was viewed more than 50 million times on Facebook, creating record-breaking traffic for the campaign's website, as participants used it to modify their profile pictures in support of marriage equality. Vie answers the question "what kind of lasting effects can be felt from seeing someone change their Facebook profile picture to a particular image for a short time?" by arguing for the power of online support to combat microaggressions, or ongoing discriminatory encounters, which produce a host of negative effects like poor self-image, lower health, and inferior access to opportunities (Vie). Ultimately, she concludes that the value of participating in a profile-changing

campaign "lies in [its] ability to draw attention to issues and causes worth our interest" (Vie). Her study illustrates that even small actions such as changing one's profile picture, when visible on a powerfully popular platform such as Facebook, can inform a large audience, garner advocates, and demonstrate support and/or sympathy.

Recent social media campaigns have followed a similar pattern of calling attention to those who are marginalized by race, gender, or sexuality as evidenced by campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter, #HeForShe and #LoveWins. Furthermore, the Georgetown Center for Research shows that ethnic minority groups, as well as women, place greater value on social media within activism, which emphasizes the importance of social media activism to marginalized or underrepresented groups (Georgetown 20, 23). Gladwell's restrictive idea of legitimate activism excludes the individual, low-cost actions that still possess the ability to make a difference in the lives of others, whether to a single victim or an audience of millions.

The other main critique of social media activism, as voiced by Evgeny Morozov, targets the motivations of so-called slacktivists, claiming that they participate selfishly, for the sake of popularity, laziness, or constructing a personal online identity, with little to no actual political interest (Morozov 186). Morozov particularly associates millennials, which he terms "the lazy generation," with the slacktivist profile (186). This seems logical since millennials are digital natives who, according to Lance Bennet, professor of Communications at Washington University, "prefer participating in looser and less hierarchical networks" (Bennet). Morozov uses this concept of misguided motivation to argue that social media activism's power has been vastly-over estimated.

While the need for online support to translate into tangible, meaningful action is clear, Morozov's analysis overlooks important distinctions between traditional activism and the activist efforts of the younger generation. While Morozov criticizes online identity-making as selfish, studies show millennials often pursue social change through "building common identities" (Teruelle 203). By constructing an image of what he or she stands for as an individual through publically supporting causes of personal

interest, a millennial may seek to establish his or her own platform for advocacy. Coffé and Chapman write in their study "Changing Facebook Profile Pictures as Part of a Campaign: Who Does it and Why?" that the most commonly cited motivation of young adults participating in social media activism is to "spread awareness" (Coffé and Chapman 18). They note that "the ability to change one's Facebook profile picture can thus be seen as a prime opportunity to create a (political) identity. It allows Facebook users to show their friends political issues they care about and in that process construct an identity which corresponds with how they wish to be perceived" (9-10). This finding reveals that identity construction may not be a narcissistic distraction, but instead a customary component of activism for younger generations. In addition, the study revealed that those who were already "politically engaged offline," participating in events or protests, were significantly more likely to change their profile picture as part of a campaign, demonstrating that many social media activists already care about the causes which they support (17). Therefore, Morozov's critique fails to validate millennial patterns and preferences in activism engagement and creates an inaccurately narrow profile of the typical participant.

In addition, this argument fails to discredit social media activism because it places too much emphasis on the role of the individual participant, analyzing personal motivations and contributions while the power of awareness and advocacy-based activism primarily lies in the convergence of mass messages, such as the 18 million Facebook users who changed their profile pictures to support the Human Rights Campaign (Vie). While small exhibits of individual support such as changing one's Facebook profile picture may sometimes be misplaced, they nevertheless serve as visual symbols that may yield productive results (Vie). For instance, applying a pink breast cancer awareness profile filter on Facebook may not raise more money for research, yet it can still serve as a reminder to women to schedule a mammogram or to investigate her cancer risk (Skoric). Regardless of the user's intentions, the message can still create a positive effect.

Awareness and advocacy therefore serve as powerful tools that should not be overlooked by

proponents of the slacktivism critique. Nevertheless, this observation does not mean that the quality of "slacktivist" support is equal to that of volunteering for an organization or offering financial support. We must distinguish "token support," or affiliation with little to no effort, from "meaningful support," or significant effort (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza). Wearing a pink shirt to raise awareness for breast cancer or reposting an article online are both examples of public token support, while donating time or money and physically reaching out to those affected creates more meaningful support. A study conducted by Kristofferson, White and Peloza found that participants who offered public support (such as sharing a Facebook post publically) were less likely to contribute subsequent meaningful support than participants who offered private support (such joining a private online group). These results illustrate that some who offer public token support, including through social media activism, deem the act of affiliating himself or herself with the cause in public to be an end in itself, and this problem must be addressed. While this finding does not discredit social media's ability to promote advocacy, it highlights the need for strategic engagement that drives further involvement.

Many organizations heavily rely on public token support, which achieves a positive outcome in awareness, but fails to significantly raise donations of time or money. In 2013, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) launched a campaign titled "Likes don't save lives," followed by a campaign by Crisis Relief Singapore called "Liking isn't helping" to demonstrate the need for real volunteers and donations, not merely social media supporters (Miller 13-14). While we cannot disregard the positive ability of social media to campaign for important issues and to educate millions through awareness campaigns, social media activism should not be a substitute for other forms of activism. Unlike Morozov and Gladsow, however, I do not believe that social media activism must be rendered useless to create offline supporters, but rather that in order to contribute meaningfully, organizations and users alike must be intentional in how they engage with social media activism.

How, then, can organizations better harness

social media's platform to attract meaningful support? The study conducted by Kristofferson, White and Peloza sheds light on a potential strategy. When participants who offered public token support were required to reflect and evaluate the alignment of their own values with that of the cause through written questions, the amount of subsequent meaningful support they willingly extended increased. The researchers identify "value alignment between self and cause" as "a tool that charitable organizations can use to combat slacktivism and garner meaningful support from public token support campaigns" (Kristofferson, White and Peloza). These results suggest that by tailoring their marketing differently in order to match the values of various target groups, organizations may be able to increase meaningful support. Strategies such as creating an interactive ad or a banner containing a relevant, thought-provoking question might increase success for organizations. These steps may help to grow a potential supporter's involvement, establishing the connection between the viewer's own priorities and the mission of the organization more quickly.

The question of how to engage social media effectively for activism should also be of particular importance to millennials, as the largest and most online-active demographic in social media. While during the late twentieth century college campuses often served as the breeding grounds for young activists' efforts, the modern college campus has expanded into online territory; garnering support typically includes a digital component, such as a hashtag, link, or user handle, pointing offline viewers towards a website, Facebook page, online petition, or social media account. Here, value alignment may also prove helpful as a tool for the viewer, who must decide which causes are worth supporting, and what kind of support they will offer.

I suggest that when a student (or any online user) encounters a campaign on social media, he or she should first ask "to what extent do I care about this issue or do I want to learn more about this issue?" If the student already feels passionate about the topic, he or she should take steps to be well informed about the cause, and pass on the message via social media, perhaps noting why he or she believes the issue is important and why it should matter to others. This

initial effort should be thought of as a first step that should lead towards further tangible support, demonstrated through practices such as reaching out to those affected and/or marginalized, volunteering for an organization, starting local initiatives, or contributing financial or other assistance. If the student does not care about the cause, he or she should further consider why this may be the case, and ask whether becoming more informed about the campaign might be worthwhile. By self-reflecting and researching, he or she might either become engaged with the issue, or remain indifferent or opposed, which should dictate whether or not she or she should follow the previous guidelines. Value alignment provides a way to increase authentic support and avoid becoming the lazy and indifferent stereotypes mentioned earlier.

It is important to note that engaging in low-risk, easy ways to raise awareness for a cause, such as sharing a post on Facebook, or retweeting hashtags, still plays a vital role in the process of showing support. If a user had not originally been exposed to the campaign through the online activity of his or her contacts, he or she may have never become aware of the issue. By circulating the message, one continues to create an impact on the awareness front, even though it is not the most meaningful form of support. Marko Skoric suggests in his article "What is Slack About Slacktivism?" that "slacktivist activities should be developed as integral parts of the activism repertoire, and not simply seen as another, easier way to achieve political and social change. Slacktivists should not be scorned, but instead cultivated to take their actions beyond the social media sphere and into the real world" (Skoric). While it may be tempting to disqualify all low-risk efforts, as Gladwell and Morozov advocate, doing so would fail to utilize a valuable tool.

In summary, social media activism provides an important platform for awareness. While critics claim that it does not mobilize change and results from faulty motivations, these critiques ultimately fall short of discrediting its legitimacy. Online support should create further offline support, however, in order to lead to tangible change. Users and organizations alike can benefit from using value alignment to establish connections between the cause and the viewer and to

increase sincere support. As social media platforms continually evolve and expand, users, especially millennials, should seek to engage in social media campaigns intentionally, and organizations should work to create innovative and specially-tailored campaigns that not only grab the viewer's attention, but keep it.

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