

CYBER ACTIVISM

Cyber activism (a.k.a. Internet activism, web activism or Online activism) emerged in the early 1990s in the USA and later spread very quickly to all developed countries. It initially consisted of mass email and E-bulletin board campaigns. Later, organisations such as Avaaz, Change.org, MoveOn.org and 38 Degrees brought civic engagement to a new level and put Cyber activism at the centre of political and business decisions. Cyber activism via petitions and campaigns has become an effective way to raise awareness about important political, economic, cultural and social problems and challenges society is facing. Cyber activism can be used for advocacy or awareness purposes, to collect donations, as a means to foster coordination and mobilization of activists and supporters of a cause, and as an expression of collective unrest and protest.

Some governments and parliaments are also creating online petition sites. Here, citizens have a more direct way to influence policy-making. Wikileaks and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists can be considered different examples of Cyber activism. By revealing thousands of classified documents, these sites are contributing to transparency and shaping public opinion and governance. Moreover, online political activism is helping to tip the balance in some contested electoral campaigns.

In many cases online petitions and campaigns work and manage to raise awareness, funds and push governments to introduce regulation. However, most of the petitions and collective initiatives launched on the Internet don't manage to fulfil the expectations of the activists that created them. Moreover there are cases in which cyber activism produces mixed results. For instance, between the summer of 2014 and start of 2015, social media users helped to make the Lou Gehrig's disease or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) ice bucket challenge viral. As noted by many commentators, the social media users lack any awareness of the condition of ALS, nor displayed obvious empathy with those suffering from ALS. Yet, a report by the Guardian noted that it managed to fund important breakthrough in ALS research.

Clicktivism And Slacktivism

While Cyber activism is growing in popularity, the rejection of this type of activism generates among people also increases. The informal and derogatory terms "clicktivism" and "slacktivism" are increasingly used as synonyms of cyber activism. "Clicktivism" refers to the use of social media and other online methods to promote a specific cause by simply clicking on an endorsement or signature button. Similarly, the term "slacktivism" refers to a half-hearted form of activism, usually by posting links, comments, images in support of a cause on social media, but without further action. These terms capture a frequent critique by "traditional" activists or advocates. They think that Cyber activism is simply encouraging people to passively click in support of a cause rather than take concrete action, which may have a greater impact in bringing about change.

Cyber Activism Pros And Cons

Pros of Cyber activism:

- Cyber activism is cost efficient. It requires low effort from the organizers and supporters of a cause.
- Digital activism is democratizing activism. Previously, broadcasting a message was costly so only relatively big organizations could afford to undertake big campaigns and mobilize many people. Social media has made it much easier.

- Cyber activism is demonstrating the transformational impact of internet on society. There are many examples of online petitions that have worked.
- As many viral campaigns can attest to, it is an extremely effective means to raise funds if social media campaigns become viral.
- It generates significant debate and awareness amongst people. "Clicktivists" and "slacktivists" who are simply sharing a link or a post or clicking on a button to endorse a petition, often learn about problems through this process. Some of them will later on find out more about that issue or cause and may end up becoming "fully-fledged activists."

Cons Of Cyber Activism:

- Clicktivists are usually passive slacktivists rather than activists. They demonstrate poor understanding of these causes, and usually get involved only because of the hype on social media.
- Cyber activism can become a hypocritical way of getting peace of mind when we know that we are not doing anything substantial to solve the problems we may be indirectly contributing to.
- Cyber activism has transformed the way social and political campaigners communicate their message. Often, messages are being overly simplified and there is less room for public deliberation and exchange of views than in traditional activism.
- Although the potential to transform society is real, sometimes the impact of Cyber activism is negative for society. For instance, terrorist groups and xenophobic parties are also using Cyber activism to achieve their goals.
- Cyber activism can be misleading. Despite having a large showing of force online, democratic movements often falter. Clicks of supports and shares do not always translate into a large force outside the Internet. Activism is being banalized and being transformed into a sort of entertainment.

The Tools Used For Cyber Activism

Online petitions: Websites such as Change.org and MoveOn.org are hubs of Cyber activism, where people can communicate with others worldwide regarding their cause. MoveOn.org initially grew from a small petition that two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs sent to some family and friends in the late '90s, asking for their support in telling the White House to "move on" from the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal to more pressing issues facing the country.

Social Networks: Sites with high usage numbers such as Facebook and YouTube have proven beneficial in spreading a message, garnering support, shining information on a subject that might otherwise be overlooked by mainstream media. Protests in 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt against their respective governments were in part organised and promoted via Facebook.

Blogs: Essentially a form of citizen journalism for the masses, blogs provide an effective means of non-filtered communication with an audience about any topic and have been used in numerous online campaigns.

Micro-Blogging: Micro-blogging sites such as Twitter are used to help spread awareness of an issue or activist event. Twitter's hashtag function, which allows people to have their tweets contribute to a multi-user conversation by typing a keyword or phrase preceded by a hashtag, is used frequently as a digital tool for spreading a message. The Chinese equivalent to Twitter,

Weibo is subject to scrupulous government censorship however people circumvent this blockade by using code words when writing about issues that might be government-sensitive.

Mobile Phones: Controversy surrounding the 2007 presidential elections in Kenya led to the introduction of Ushahidi Inc., a company which developed a piece of software that allowed people to send texts and pictures of violence following the elections which were plotted geographically on a Google map. The software has since been used to plot activity in disaster zones following earthquakes in Haiti and New Zealand and flooding in Australia and the USA.

Proxy Servers: As a means of circumventing government intervention when it comes to online protesting, many people employ proxy servers, which act as intermediaries between a user and a site, thus essentially circumventing national restrictions on any site. In 2009, student protesters in Iran took to social media to voice their concern over the contentious re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This led to a cat and mouse game of the government trying to identify which media were being used by the protesters to communicate (social networks and then eventually proxy servers) and shutting them down.

VTM NSS COLLEGE LIBRARY