

Study shines light on what makes digital activism effective

November 21 2013

Digital activism is usually nonviolent and tends to work best when social media tools are combined with street-level organization, according to new research from the University of Washington.

The findings come from a report released today (Nov. 20) by the Digital Activism Research Project run by Philip Howard, UW professor of communication, information and international studies. Founded by Howard in 2012, the project applies rigorous empirical social science methods to the study of global digital activism.

"This is the largest investigation of digital activism ever undertaken," Howard said. "We looked at just under two thousand cases over a 20-year period, with a very focused look at the last two years."

Howard and coauthors Frank Edwards and Mary Joyce, both UW graduate students, oversaw 40 student analysts who reviewed news stories by citizen and professional journalists describing digital activism campaigns worldwide. A year of research and refining brought the total down to between 400 and 500 well-verified cases representing about 150 countries. The research took a particularly focused look at the last two years.

Howard said one of their main findings is that digital activism tends to be nonviolent, despite what many may think.

"In the news we hear of online activism that involves anonymous or

cyberterrorist hackers who cause trouble and break into systems," Howard said. "But that was 2 or 3 percent of all the cases—far and away, most of the cases are average folks with a modest policy agenda" that doesn't involve hacking or covert crime.

Other findings include:

- Digital activism campaigns tend to be more successful when waged against government rather than business authorities. There have been many activist campaigns against corporations, but they don't seem to succeed as well as having the governments for a target, Howard said.
- Effective digital activism employs a number of [social media](#) tools. Tweeting alone is less successful, Howard said, and no single tool in the study had a clear relationship with campaign success.
- Governments still tend to lag behind activist movements in the use and mastery of new social [media tools](#). They sometimes use the same tools, Howard said, but it's always months after others have tried them.

Howard said these factors, taken together, "are the magic ingredients, especially when the target is a government—a real recipe for success."

Edwards is a doctoral student in sociology; Joyce is a doctoral student in communication.

Howard added that, in time, the data gathered for this work might yield more insight into the world of digital activism.

Unanswered questions include why there are regional disparities among digital tool use, why phones are prevalent but SMS messaging is rare in digital campaigns, and whether external political, social or cultural

phenomena influence patterns and the effectiveness of digital activism.

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Study shines light on what makes digital activism effective (2013, November 21)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-11-digital-effective.html>

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