'Slacktivism' that works—small changes matter

December 16 2016, by Jennifer Earl

In 2013, an online petition persuaded a national organization representing high school coaches to develop materials to educate coaches about sexual assault and how they could help reduce assaults by their athletes. Online petitions have changed decisions by major corporations (ask Bank of America about its debit card fees) and affected decisions on policies as diverse as those related to survivors of sexual assault and local photography permitting requirements. Organizing and participating in these campaigns has also been personally meaningful to many.

But, a nostalgia for 1960s activism leads many to assume that "real" protest only happens on the street. Critics assume that classic social movement tactics such as rallies and demonstrations represent the only effective model for collectively pressing for change. Putting your body on the line and doing that collectively for decades is viewed as the only way "people power" works. Engaging online in "slacktivism" is a waste, making what cultural commentator Malcolm Gladwell has called "small change."

This amounts to a debate over the "right way" to protest. And it's bound to heat up: The election of Donald Trump is pushing many people who have not previously engaged in activism to look for ways to get involved; others are redoubling their efforts. People have a range of possible responses, including doing nothing, using online connections to mobilize and publicize support and protesting in the streets – or some combination of tactics.

As a social movement scholar and someone who believes we should leverage all assets in a challenge, I know that much social good can come from mass involvement – and research shows that includes online activism. The key to understanding the promise of what I prefer to call "flash activism" is considering the bigger picture, which includes all those people who care but are at risk of doing nothing.

Most people are apathetic

Social movement scholars have known for decades that most people, even if they agree with an idea, don't take action to support it. For most people upset by a policy decision or a disturbing news event, the default is not to protest in the streets, but rather to watch others as they do. Getting to the point where someone acts as part of a group is a milestone in itself.

Decades of research show that people will be more willing to engage in activism that is easy, and less costly – emotionally, physically, or financially). For example, more than a million people used social media to "check in" at the Standing Rock Reservation, center of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. Far fewer people – just a few thousand – have traveled to the North Dakota camps to brave the arriving winter weather and risk arrest.

Once people are primed to act, it's important not to discourage them from taking that step, however small. Preliminary findings from my team's current research suggest that people just beginning to explore activism can be disheartened by bring criticized for doing something wrong. Part of the reason people volunteer is to feel good about themselves and effective about changing the world. Shaming them for making "small change" is a way to reduce numbers of protesters, not to increase them. Shaming can also create a legacy of political inactivity: Turning kids off from involvement now could encourage decades of

disengagement.

'Success' takes many forms

"Flash activism," the label I prefer for online protest forms such as online petition, can be effective at influencing targets in specific circumstances. Think of a flash flood, where the debilitating rush of involvement overwhelms a system. Numbers matter. Whether you are a high school coach, Bank of America, the Obama administration or a local council member, an overwhelming flood of signatures, emails and phone calls can be quite persuasive.

Further, all that 1960s-era street-style protest is effective only in certain circumstances. Research shows it can be very good at bringing attention to topics that should be on the public or policymakers' agenda. But historically protests are less successful at changing entrenched opinions. For instance, once you have an opinion about abortion access, it is fairly difficult for movements to get people to change their views. And, while the protests we are so nostalgic for sometimes succeeded, they also often fail where policy change is concerned.

The glass can be half-full

Online protest is easy, nearly cost-free in democratic nations, and can help drive positive social change. In addition, flash activism can help build stronger movements in the future. If current activists view online support as an asset, rather than with resentment because it is different from "traditional" methods, they can mobilize vast numbers of people.

Take, for example, the "Kony 2012" viral video campaign calling for the arrest of indicted war criminal Joseph Kony. Some hated the campaign; others highlighted its ability to draw attention to an issue many thought

Americans wouldn't care about. Think about the possibilities. Would Planned Parenthood be unhappy if 100 million Americans watched a persuasive short movie on abortion rights as civil rights today, and shared it with friends? Would the effort "matter"; would it help drive the direction of the public conversation about abortion?

And flash activism isn't necessarily just a one-time game of numbers; MoveOn showed that with a big enough membership base, you could mobilize large numbers repeatedly. People who participate in one online action may join future efforts, or even broaden their involvement in activism. For example, kids who engage in politics online often do other political activities as well.

Many hands make light work

Critics often worry that valuing flash activism will "water down" the meaning of activism. But that misses the point and is counterproductive. The goal of activism is social change, not nostalgia or activism for activism's sake. Most people who participate in flash activism would not have done more – rather, they would have done nothing at all.

Worse yet, when people denigrate flash activism, they are driving away potential allies. Critics of online efforts no doubt know that not everyone is willing to march or rally – but they miss the important potential for others to take actions that support and actually result in change.

Scholars and advocates alike should stop asking if flash activism matters. We should also stop assuming that offline protest always succeeds. Instead, we should seek out the best ways to achieve specific goals. Sometimes the answer will be an online petition, sometimes it will be civil disobedience and sometimes it will be both – or something else entirely.

The real key for grassroots social change is to engage as many people as possible. That will require flexibility on how engagement occurs. If people want larger and more effective social movements, they should be working to find ways to include everyone who will do anything, not upholding an artificial standard of who is a "real activist" and who is not.

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