

Online civic activism: Where does it fit?

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Zuckerman raises a number of important points in his essay “New Media, New Civics.” This response will focus on one of its central concepts, online activism, as it relates to civic engagement and activism broadly writ. Zuckerman’s formulation of “participatory civics” reminds me of several similar concepts that have been developed over the past two decades or so. These include “actualizing citizenship” (Bennett 2008), “autonomous citizenship” (Coleman 2008), “engaged citizenship” (Dalton 2008), “new politics” (Dahlgren 2005), “postmodern politics” (Inglehart 1997), “sub-politics” (Beck *et al.* 1994), and the civic tendencies of “Generation DotNet” (Zukin *et al.* 2006) and “Generation Digital” (Montgomery 2007). Each of these differs somewhat from the others, but all share in common the argument that the loosely-defined “youth” of the late-modern era tend to favor individually-motivated, issue-specific “activism” over government- and mass-media-focused “politics.” Zuckerman spends most of his essay attempting to set the agenda of the participatory civics debate, contributing in the process a helpful two-dimensional typology with which different civic acts may be compared.

Zuckerman’s essay begins with a quick recap of the debate over whether online activism is worthwhile, but quickly shifts to a broader discussion of participatory civics. He slides back and forth between them, creating the impression that they are, if not identical, at least very strongly correlated. But although much youth activism today does occur online, much does not, and non-youth (and non-participatory) engagement also has its digital versions. Having established the Venn-type relationship between online activism and participatory civics, I would like to offer a conceptual clarification that was perhaps implicit in the essay but deserves clearer expression. To wit, if our main concern is participatory civics, online activism should be incorporated into the discussion as one specific category of engagement options among a broader repertoire. Zuckerman touches on this when he mentions the performative and expressive aspects of public protest, but the distinction needs to be drawn more sharply in order to clarify what we mean by “effective civic actors” (Zuckerman, this issue, p. X).

Efficacy in Civic Activism

The issue of efficacy in activism lies at the center of these debates. Young people opt out of formal political life largely because they believe their attention and participation make no difference. The ongoing online activism conversation is at bottom about whether such tactics are effective at bringing about change. More generally, the hope that inspires every activist presumes at least the remote possibility of success—otherwise, why bother mobilizing in the first place? With the importance of efficacy firmly in mind, the next step is to specify exactly what activists want to be effective at accomplishing. Zuckerman’s voice/instrumental axis is helpful in this regard as a broad means of differentiating between different kinds of activism goals. This division invites the question of whether online tools are better at furthering instrumental goals or contributing to voice. While the facile answer here is the latter, the two categories are diverse enough to warrant further investigation. Not all types of voice are the same and neither is all instrumental action, and the same tactic may not serve each equally well. To properly evaluate

the role of online activism within the broader remit of participatory civics, we need to simultaneously consider as wide a range as possible of activism goals.

This reply is far too brief to fulfill this end comprehensively, but I can make a small contribution to it. My exceedingly modest objective here is to assemble a rudimentary taxonomy of mid-range activism goals that positions Zuckerman's instrumental/voice distinction at the highest level of abstraction. The purpose of this exercise is to prompt readers to start thinking about online tools in terms of which activist goals they contribute to most and least effectively. Where online tools are not an apt fit, alternative means should be considered.

Table 1 presents the taxonomy, none of whose categories is unique to or dependent on the Internet. It is intended to be demonstrative rather than exhaustive: there is enough variation between the categories to establish the point that online tools will not work equally well for all of them. Each category is probably a complete research program unto itself, but for the moment we can use prominent examples and existing literature to get some sense of the Internet's role in each.

[Table 1 here]

Voice

The power of digital tools to further goals of voice has been a popular research topic of late. As one of the least labor-intensive kinds of voice, symbolic action (derided by some as "slacktivism") immediately connotes the Internet, although activist bumper stickers and T-shirts serve analogous functions offline. If online tools afford anything remotely related to activism, they certainly afford this, though of course there's no guarantee that any particular movement's call to symbolic action will go viral. Similarly, activists may have more or less success convincing media outlets to cover their concerns and activities, a critical task in any contemporary activism strategy. Recently, social movements' use of social media has become a major news story in itself (Freelon *et al.* in press), as the gentleman in Zuckerman's Tahrir Square photograph clearly understood. The Occupy movement has been credited with inserting income inequality onto the US media and policy agenda (Dreier 2011), although the specific contribution of the Internet here is difficult to isolate. But even when a movement can get the media, politicians, and ordinary citizens to discuss their pet issues, there is no guarantee that they'll adopt its preferred frames. Gitlin (2003) devotes much of *The Whole World is Watching* to documenting the many unflattering frames the US mainstream press used to denigrate 1960s leftist and antiwar movements. Tufekci (2013) suggests that social media may have altered this situation by facilitating the distribution of movement-friendly frames that can be adopted by media outlets or transmitted directly to bystander publics, though empirical evidence on how often this occurs is limited at present.

Aday *et al.* (2010) suggest that digital media may contribute to activist politics by helping to teach activists new skills of resistance. The use of censorship circumvention technologies is a prime example: as I write, the prime minister of Turkey is fending off criticism for his decision to ban Twitter on grounds of abetting anti-government defamation. Turkish activists have taken to spreading instructions on how to circumvent the ban both online and offline, and use of the anonymity network Tor increased by 60% within a week of the ban's imposition (Peterson 2014). Distinct from this type of individual-level learning is the process of recruiting new members at various levels of commitment. On this point, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) found that

Facebook was one of several major communication channels through which Tahrir Square protesters learned of the protests. Facebook has also been observed to “recruit” sympathizers for the Occupy movement (Gaby and Caren 2012), though the main dependent variable for this study was Facebook likes, which do not signal the same level of commitment as attending a street protest. The role of online media in planning collective action is closely related, although some claim the fact that protests can be planned without the Internet as proof of its irrelevance (Gladwell 2010). Bennett and Segerberg take a more sophisticated approach that considers communication as organization, by which they mean that “technology-enabled networks may become dynamic organizations in their own right” (2013, p. 8). But here again we see that the *possibility* of technology serving a particular function implies little about how frequently it will do so successfully.

Instrumental

As Zuckerman suggests, there is a tendency to assume that online tools are less useful in the instrumental domain than for voice. This charge has been leveled against a number of digitally-enhanced movements, including Kony2012, which spread awareness about its eponymous target but did little to bring him to justice; and Occupy, which quickly became a household name but for months refused to articulate specific policy demands. Of course these outcomes cannot be attributed solely to the Internet, but among others Tufekci (2013) has noted that the “social-media fueled protest style” seems better suited to opposing individuals, regimes, and policies than to supporting or replacing them. While donations can support movements of both opposition and support, they are clearly instrumental and unequivocally enhanced by the Internet (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010, Penney and Dadas 2014). Some donations also serve a vocal function in the form of public donor lists or other acknowledgments. The remaining instrumental goals are drawn from a typology compiled by Burstein et al. (1995) and closely involve government. As mentioned earlier, Occupy claims credit for the fact that proposals to extend unemployment benefits and raise the national minimum wage are wending their way through the US Congress as of this writing. This shift in the national policy agenda may well end up as Occupy’s longest-lasting legacy, especially if one or both of the bills become law. But whether it would have happened absent digital media will be impossible to answer, and more generally it is very difficult to draw straight causal lines between online tool use and legislative priorities. This is even more true of policy change, although since the vast majority of members of Congress hold both Twitter and Facebook accounts (Glassman *et al.* 2013), their constituents can certainly pressure them to vote one way or the other through those channels. It remains to be seen how social media and other digital tools will match up against the traditional determinants of legislative change, which include money, ideology, public opinion, other nations’ actions, and many more.

Policy enforcement offers a unique opportunity for net-savvy activists. While only governments can enforce laws, activists can use online tools to document lapses in enforcement. A prominent US example is the Maryville, MO rape case, in which the local prosecutor dropped charges against a politically-connected high school student accused of raping a 14-year-old girl despite strong evidence against him (Filipovic 2013). When the hacker collective Anonymous learned of the case, members began stirring publicity by publicly releasing relevant information and demanding that prosecutors reopen it. The defendant was eventually convicted of a minor charge of child endangerment, but the episode illustrates the power of online activism to fulfill

some of the functions of investigative journalism. Similar methods could be used to evaluate policy impact, long a mainstay of the investigative tradition. Unfortunately, not all major policy failures will inspire online activism campaigns, nor will the powers that be always respond as hoped in those cases that do.

Finally, structural change is a major goal for many activists. It is here that technology's impact is perhaps most difficult to measure conclusively: of all the potential causes that lead to a structural change, how can such effects be isolated? The visceral reactions of white Northerners to the televised violence waged against US civil rights protesters in the 1960s have been credited with helping to end racial segregation by turning public opinion against it. While similar claims have been made about social media in the contexts of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions (Howard *et al.* 2011), the task of quantifying the role of online tools in structural political change is probably quixotic in most cases. Their role may be best understood through the other goal categories where relationships are easier to measure—for example, if we can conclude with some confidence that the Internet helps set the public agenda, and the movement goes on to achieve some of its structural goals, we might argue that the Internet likely had some indirect effect.

Conclusion

The key themes of Zuckerman's essay are spelled out in the title: new media and new civics. I have argued that the relevance of the former to the latter is best understood in terms of the specific activist goals to which they most fruitfully contribute. The various formulations of "new" civic tendencies on offer are all fundamentally about means; the ultimate end of all activism is always some change in the prevailing power structure. I submit this response in the hope of helping shift the online activism conversation from the simplistic and reductive question of *does it work or not* to the more illuminating question of *where does it fit* among a broader repertoire of tools and tactics.

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Table 1: Goals and examples of vocal and instrumental activism

Voice/ Instrumental	Activism goal category	Examples	Sources
Voice	Symbolic action/ “slacktivism”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing one’s social media profile picture in solidarity with a movement 	Tufekci 2012
	Agenda-setting/ external attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media writes stories about the movement • Policymakers discuss the movement on social media 	Aday et al. 2010 Burstein et al. 1995 Gamson 1990 Tufekci 2013
	Framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media and/or public adopts movement’s preferred frame(s) 	Tufekci 2013 Gitlin 1980
	Individual transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement members learn new skills, e.g. how to circumvent online censorship 	Aday et al. 2010
	Attracting followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New members join the movement 	Gaby & Caren 2012 Tufekci & Wilson 2012
	Organizing collective action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement plans and executes activist actions 	Aday et al. 2010 Bennett & Segerberg 2013 Tufekci & Wilson 2012
Instrumental, sometimes voice	Donations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monetary or in-kind contributions to the movement 	Penney & Dadas 2014 Van Laer & Van Aelst 2010
Instrumental	Policy agenda-setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislative body votes on a policy favored by the movement 	Burstein et al. 1995
	Policy change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favored policy goes into effect 	Burstein et al. 1995 Gamson 1990
	Policy enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy is enforced to the movement’s satisfaction 	Burstein et al. 1995
	Policy impact Structural change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy has desired impact • System changes to allow for more movement influence 	Burstein et al. 1995 Burstein et al. 1995