

Activism or “Slacktivism?”: Digital Media and Organizing for Social Change

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Abstract:

Courses: Popular Culture and Media, Communication and Community, Critical/Cultural Studies, Organizational Communication, Rhetoric and Public Advocacy, other courses with a focus on the use of digital and social media to organize groups
Objectives: In this single class activity students will (a) analyze notions of activism and “slacktivism” from scholarly and popular sources to apply these concepts actively to critical theory; (b) enhance their understanding of how digital media—specifically social media—influences contemporary efforts to organize people through digital media for social change; and (c) critically reflect on their own participation and perceptions of activism in advocacy groups.

Keywords: Social media | Social justice | Social movements | Activism | Slacktivism

Article:

Introduction and Rationale

The influence of social media and technological developments has changed how groups and organizations advocating for social change generate awareness and participation in their causes (see Diani, 2000; Meyer & Workman Bray, 2013; Van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). Using Kony 2012 as a case study allows students to examine how its popularity in social media, coupled with lack of mobilization, illustrates changing norms and definitions of participation regarding the use of digital media in addressing social problems. Students will examine popular and academic sources to critically examine digital forms of activism and “slacktivism” to connect critical theoretical conceptualizations of agency and social change to contemporary movements. Additionally, this provides a concrete, contemporary exemplar to help them critically reflect upon their own participation (or not) in efforts such as these.

The term “slacktivism,” a combination of the words “slacker” and “activism,” has increasingly been used to describe the disconnect between awareness and action through the use of social media. This illustrates a departure from “traditional” conceptualizations of activism, such as during the 1960s, associated with interdependent groups mobilizing through tangible resources, including space, to organize protests, rallies, and boycotts. Knibbs (2013) characterizes slacktivism as “feel-good back patting” through watching or “liking” commentary of social issues without any action. It requires minimal time and effort, often without mobilization and/or demonstrable effect in solving a social issue. Although this term has a more negative connotation, others view it more positively because it allows groups to expand their reach across geographic locations in ways that are more cost-effective and environmentally friendly. Kony 2012 provides an exemplar to examine the potential benefits and drawbacks to utilizing digital media in social movements, as well as understand how media changes traditional notions of organization for social change.

Overview of the Kony 2012 Case Study

Invisible Children, Inc., strives to foster awareness of Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, in central Africa utilizing social media and other digital forms of organizing. The organization's ultimate goal is to capture Kony and stop the use of child soldiers in war. One of the efforts to achieve this aim included the creation and release of the video “Kony 2012” on their Web site and through YouTube, a popular Web site for video clips. This video advocated for viewers to support the cause by sharing the video and ordering “action kits.” These kits contained materials, such as posters, to distribute and display in public places in April 2012 to generate awareness in the United States and to apply pressure to government officials to capture Kony. This video quickly went “viral,” receiving an incredibly high amount of views, and was also circulated through Facebook, a popular social media site. It has been watched more than 99 million times on YouTube and received almost 1.4 million “likes” on Facebook (Kony 2012). Through the use of the Web and social media, the organization obtained more than 3.5 million supporters for the Kony 2012 event (Invisiblechildren.com). Many of the supporters, however, took no action after watching the video and ordering action kits. The “What Happened to Kony 2012?” (2013) update clip released in 2013 was only viewed just over 174,000 times. The popularity and (lack of) reaction to Kony 2012 has generated discussion on the influence and impact of new digital media on contemporary social movements.

The Activity

Part I: Preparation and Theory

Prior to completing this activity in class, instructors should introduce the concepts of digital activism and “slacktivism” in conjunction with or after covering course content on critical theory and/or activism. Suggested reading from the references include Kellner and Kim (2009), Meyer and Workman Bray (2013), and Knibbs (2013). Kellner and Kim (2009) provide reflections on

the use of YouTube in various ways, including social activism, from a critical perspective. Meyer and Workman Bray (2013) address how traditionally aged college students engage social media in their efforts to participate in activist causes. Knibbs (2013) defines and discusses “slacktivism” in an opinion piece featuring short YouTube clips to support her arguments. These three pieces together provide a balance of theoretical and applied perspectives of new media and activism, as well as analyze how and why college students use social media for activism in their daily lives.

Part II: Watching Kony 2012

At the beginning of class, the students answer the following questions on their own:

1. Have you watched the Kony 2012 video? If so, when? How would you describe the main points? If you haven't seen it, what (if anything) have you heard about it?
2. What organization produced the video? Why did they create it?
3. If you've seen Kony 2012 when it debuted online, what action (if any) did you take after watching it? Why (or why not if no action was taken)?

After the students answer the questions (about five minutes), I show the Kony 2012 video (duration of about 30 minutes), which is available on YouTube.com and InvisibleChildren.com. Also available on this site, if time permits, consider showing the short, eight-minute clip “What Happened to Kony 2012?” (2013) that updates the results of this campaign in 2013.

Part III: Application and Analysis

After watching the video, the students answer the following questions individually:

1. We've discussed definitions of empowerment, agency/activism, and awareness. Which of these does the Kony 2012 video and call to action embody? Provide examples.
2. Do you consider new media movements as newer forms of activism or “slacktivism?” Why do you think this?
3. If you watched the video prior to class, would you describe your response as more of “activism,” “slacktivism,” or neither? Why? If you hadn't seen the video, what

(if anything) does it motivate you to do now?

Volunteers share their answers, and then we transition to a class discussion. If time permits, I put them in small groups to discuss their perceptions and any actions steps they took before watching the video in class. I have at least one student who saw the video prior to class in each group discuss what perceptions he or she had when first watching the video and what, if any, action steps he or she took after watching it. They also discuss the video using the second set of questions to guide them. One person from the group shares the collective responses before we open the discussion to ideas students want to put on the table.

Debriefing

The students' responses range from viewing digital media as making forms of activism more adaptable to current lifestyles to eroding contemporary activism and encouraging slacktivism. Some students also believe that “traditional” forms of activism are outdated and that new forms of activism encourage awareness without action. One sample response supporting the use of digital media includes:

I have talked to a lot of people about this video after watching it because I was so fascinated, and my friends mentioned to me that they have sent money to organizations as well as went to Uganda for mission trips. Although they didn't go on the front lines and tackle Kony themselves, they provided more of an impact than a simple retweet or like on Facebook did ... I think the creators did an excellent job of targeting a wide range of people to influence as many people as possible.

Another student response viewing this as slacktivism states:

After reading the Slacktivism article, I think the original message is manipulated after being passed through the different networking sites and platforms. For example, when someone creates a tweet with facts that can fit in 160 characters or less, not too much information is being spread about an individual cause ... when campaigns create information boards or advertisements about a specific movement or idea, people generally only skim over and continue to tell people about what they saw. The downside to this is that they aren't sharing a majority of detail and the original message can therefore be way different than originally intended.

Appraisal

Class Variations

I have adapted and used this activity in a three-hour night graduate class and for an online class. In the graduate class, the students examine Invisible Children's Web site in more depth. They review their goals, timeline, blog, and current initiatives. We also connect this to aspects of media literacy, which incorporates concepts of analysis, advocacy, and access into the

discussion. Since the graduate classes have a wider distribution of ages and use of social media, we also discuss if heavy reliance on digital media, especially social media, misses a potential group of supporters who may participate in the efforts to mobilize. This also connects nicely to Habermas' (1989) notion of the public sphere. Students often debate if this increases voice and participation or decreases it through passive acts, such as “likes.”

For the online class, I develop a worksheet with pre and post-viewing questions using the questions above. Links to the clips are posted in Blackboard with the assigned readings. Classmates meet online in discussion groups of four to six to share their responses. I respond after they have made their initial posts and responses to their group members' comments.

Limitations

The popularity of the Kony 2012 video makes this an engaging activity for the class. Most of the students have heard of Invisible Children and Kony 2012 given the widespread dissemination of the video online. However, as interest in this event wanes, fewer students have watched it or “liked” it on Facebook. To keep the activity up to date, I have started asking about organizations and movements they follow (e.g., on Twitter) or “like” when I first assign the readings. I then review those online and use those as points of comparison to Invisible Children's creation and dissemination of Kony 2012. TOMS, which is also addressed in the Meyers and Workman Bray (2013) article, is a commonly named organization and connects well to the efforts of Invisible Children. The high involvement and interest in this activity makes it worth the investment of time. The open nature of the activity allows them to determine if new media advances activism or fosters “slacktivism” based on support they draw from the assigned readings and their lived experiences, further helping them make the connection between theory and application in contemporary forms of organizing for social change.

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