

Vox Digitalis

Entry #001 – Social Media as a Tool for Empowerment.

In the following few blog posts, I will be conducting research on whether online activism can produce real-world effects on the planet's political landscape. I will use these blogs as "status-updates" on my progress, with the final entry being a summary of my main findings and my personal conclusions based on the research.

When I first considered the topic of "online activism", my mind went to the most immediate Western examples that have hit the headlines in the last few years. Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, caught the public consciousness for months in 2020 and 2017, with their wider effects still being felt today. This initial thought led me to dig deeper, into the science of these movements and their success. I sourced studies relating to how, in the past decade, social media has become an important forum for minorities to discuss politics and organise campaigns, both online and on the streets.

A December 2020 report by the Pew Research Centre is one of these studies. The study was conducted in June and July 2020, very soon after the killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, meaning questions of racial injustice and systematic oppression were prominent in the public dialogue. This study sought further clarity on the relationship between online activism and political movements on the streets. According to the study, "About seven-in-ten Black, Hispanic and Asian users say social media are at least somewhat effective for changing people's minds about political or social issues, compared with half of White users who say the same". This shows that social media activism (regardless of whether it manifests itself in tangible political change) serves to empower marginalised groups, and provides an easier way for activists to organise political action. The study states that "across Pew Research Centre surveys, Black social media users have been particularly likely to say that these sites are personally important to them for getting involved with issues they care about or finding like-minded people". This is a common theme I identified in my research, with social media's wide-ranging networking possibilities serving as the catalyst for many social movements.

"#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice" by Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey and Brooke Foucault Welles explores how Twitter has become "a platform for historically disenfranchised groups". The book describes how in the 2010s, the rise of hashtags challenged the conventional understanding of gendered violence (#WhyIStayed), violence against transgender women (#GirlsLikeUs) and racial discrimination (#BlackLivesMatter). The authors identify how social media has affected what conversations are being had, how these issues are discussed and the level of reach these movements can have. With loud public discourse on issues of social injustice, legislators are forced to respond and address these issues. In a webinar held in 2021 by the Council on Foreign Relations titled "Social Justice Movements and Twitter: Digital Revolutions in the United States and Abroad", CFR Associate Meighan Stone claimed that "online activism is finally translating...since these movements in Brazil, women were winning first ever legal victories, they were spurred by the movement, women are running for office for the first time".

However, there are limits to online activism. According to a 2020 article by Sunita Toor for Open Global Rights, 41% of the planet still does not have access to the internet. This means that billions are denied the opportunity afforded to those in the west to use these modern tools to broadcast their plight and achieve any progress toward a political solution. Toor sums this up, saying; "whilst such movements demonstrate the power of solidarity and collective digital action, they also reveal that feminist activism isn't a monolithic and collective movement with a shared mission". The demands of women in Iran are different from those in the UK or Ireland. A study conducted in 2022 by professor Innocent Chilwa also identified that the drawback of digital campaigning, however, is that the same tools can be used for hate speech and misinformation. The creation of this large, international forum has both empowered those who previously went unheard and given a platform to those who wish to spread hate.

This of course, links very strongly to the media chapter in your Politics and society course. Noam Chomsky admires the internet's potential to disrupt the hegemony of a handful of companies that had controlled American media for decades ("The Internet does allow us to overcome the impact of the concentration of media"). With the evidence provided above that shows how online activism can empower minority groups, Edward Said may have been encouraged, seeing an opportunity for Arab people to take control of their own perception instead of the perpetuation of a harmful "orientalist" stereotypes. Sylvia Walby identifies the media as one of the main patriarchal institutions, and the recent social media movements could be seen as steps in the right direction, not only for feminist action but also for female political agency and involvement.

Vox Digitalis

Entry #002 – Online Activism in Ireland and the UK.

In preparation for this blog entry, I focused my research on examples of online activism in Ireland and the UK. Ireland's recent relationship with digital activism displays how it can be used for social movements across the political spectrum, from its effective use during the 2018 Referendum regarding the 8th amendment on abortion. The referendum was an online event from its early days. Though demand for a referendum had existed for a number of years, the catalyst was the #TwoWomenTravel hashtag from 2016. This shows how one online post can have the power to incite political change, and how an online presence is vital to any social movement in this day and age. Abortion Rights Campaign spokesperson Linda Kavanagh echoed this in 2017, saying that "it would be foolish for anyone to assume they can operate outside of the social media sphere and stay relevant".

Niamh White details the impact that online activism had on the "Yes" campaign in a 2021 research report. She speaks on the importance of how the Yes campaign took control of the visual aspect of the referendum online; "perhaps the most notable success of online campaigning was its ability to reclaim the visual terrain of the abortion debate, shifting it away from stereotypical (and often jarring) medical imagery of fetuses and toward representations of feminist solidarity". I believe the common techniques seen by online activists (the hashtag #Repealthe8th was the number one trending hashtag in Ireland in 2018) along with simple aim was the winning formula for the repeal campaign. It is a great example of intense positivity and the creation of a community spirit through online activism. White sums it up by saying: "there was a sense that even if we weren't in that waiting room or couldn't make it to that rally, we could still touch and be touched through our screens".

The abortion referendum was an Irish event. However, there are also examples of how movements started abroad that, through the power of today's interconnectivity, made an impact on our shores too. I discussed the Black Lives Movement in the previous entry, but its reach is not limited to the US. In June and July 2021, BLM protests were organised in Dublin, as the strength of the message had travelled across the ocean, and forced Ireland, as well as every nation, to have a conversation about race. In 2020 and 2021, many events and initiatives sprung up across the island addressing the demand for change in the societal understanding of race in Ireland. Similar to the movement in the US, one of the main goals of the social media campaign was to give people of colour a platform to share their own experiences. BLM held an event in Galway in September 2020 that provided black Irish activists with a public forum to discuss where they as victims of discrimination want the movement to go.

On the other side of that coin has been the rise of right-wing groups online in Ireland, namely The National Party. Across the West, the internet has been used for inducting people into conspiracy-theorist groups. In Ireland, this has mainly been concentrated in the anti-lockdown and anti-immigration movements. Contingencies of protestors have met online and organised protests in person. The Journal's 2021 report of the rise of the party noted the link between social media and groups like The National Party and The Irish Freedom Party. The report states that "Professor Dolores Cahill, the party's deputy leader and the thought leader of the small but vocal Covid scepticism movement in Ireland, has ... made numerous false or misleading statements about the virus".

The E-Petition system is particularly popular in the UK. This has become the most directly effective manner of online political engagement and activism. In Jack Blumenau's 2020 Study, entitled "Online Activism and Dyadic Representation: Evidence from the UK E-Petition System", the writer conducted research into the relationship between only petitioning and political action from elected Members of Parliament. Blumenau says; "By making it easier for citizens to communicate their preferences, online forms of political participation have the potential to strengthen the representational link between politicians and voters". The study finds that MPs were more likely to participate in debates relating to issues raised by their constituents through e-petitions. Though many factors determine what issues an MP concerns themselves with during their time in parliament, e-petitioning can mean that MPs are more likely to engage and speak in a debate that has been shown to be important to their constituents through e-petitioning. Blumenau concludes, saying, "my findings suggest that e-democracy initiatives can significantly strengthen representational ties between citizens and politicians, but that the effects of such initiatives are also likely to be mediated by existing political incentives". This study shows that even the legislative (and less glamorous) side of politics has been greatly influenced by the internet.

Vox Digitalis

Entry #003 – Online Activism in the Global South.

As my research process progressed, I found myself more interested in how people in the Global South have appropriated social media and achieved to create significant movements that in some cases, have contributed to political change. One thing I found is that the internet has become the great equaliser, providing opportunity to those under democracies and autocracies alike. The following entry includes evidence from Argentina, Iran and China. Another discovery I made (drawing on the previous entry that focused on Ireland and the UK) is that the political side of the internet looks the same no matter you are in the world. In other words, techniques like the sharing of visual media and hashtags have become universal methods.

Speaking of hashtags, a very important example from Argentina stood out to me in my research. For decades, femicide had plagued the country. In 2015, a fourteen-year-old girl was killed, and her murder led to the #NiUnaMenos (not one more) movement on social media. Feminism spread and developed on Argentinian social media, eventually evolving into the #AbortoLegalYa movement, calling for the legalisation of abortion (similar to the #Repealthe8th movement in Ireland). Not only did this lead to the successful legalisation of abortion in Argentina in 2020, it also, (in the words of a 2022 report by Feminist Digital Justice entitled “Diversifying Strategies for Feminist Digital Activism in the Global South”) “inspired hope and a sense of possibility in feminist movements fighting for decriminalization and legalization of abortion in other Latin American countries such as Ecuador where activism and networking took place under the hashtag #AbortoPorViolación, and in the Dominican Republic, under the hashtag #LasCausalesVan”. This is a great example of a pattern I’ve identified across different online movements; none of them exist in a vacuum. Due to the internet being something that transcends borders, the politics prioritised by users can often become universally applicable.

The report goes on to speak about the innovation found in digital feminism in China. In China, the “Me Too” movement is called the “rice bunny” movement, as the words for “rice” and “bunny” are “mi” and “tu”. The report shows why this is significant; “[the movement’s] action does not merely echo the global #MeToo movement – decentralized and controversial by itself – but also makes a unique and context-specific contribution in a very challenging political environment”. This has shown how political and societal success from online movements in one country can result in that movement crossing borders and languages. This story also shows that online, the exact wording of a hashtag or slogan is not what matters, what matters to users is the sentiment behind the words. In a country where protest is discouraged and the societal structure is particularly rigid, these women have emerged as standard-bearers for other countries who suffer from dramatic gender inequalities.

In September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman, was killed while in police custody. She had been arrested and beaten by the “morality police” for “improper use of the hijab”. Amini’s murder sparked riots that killed hundreds over the following months. Protestors used social media to organise demonstrations, with public figures contributing the public anger at the government. The government attempted to quell these demonstrations by restricting internet usage. Shabnam von Heim of DW reported on the story in November; “during past protest waves, the regime cut off access to the internet entirely to prevent demonstrators from communicating with each other”. The social media aspect of the protests was also considered essential for getting word of the situation in Iran out to the wider world; “social networks also play an important role in making protest actions visible and getting demonstrators’ messages out to the wider world”. For me, the fact that the Iranian government tried using internet blackouts as a method of suppressing protest provides insight into the fact that the internet is extremely powerful as a tool for effective political action.

An interesting perspective that this provides in regards to the Politics and Society course is that it mirrors Benedict Anderson’s apprehension of nations as “imagined communities”. In 2020, South Korean director Bong-Joon Ho said (in regards to why he thought his film “Parasite” had attracted an international audience) that “we all live in the same country: capitalism”. The internet and its potential for political action affirms Anderson’s view of national identities as fragile and more similar to than different from one another. These examples of online activism also link in with the topic of globalisation. Thomas Hyland Erikson describes globalisation as “the annihilation of distance”, and on the internet, distance is of no concern. Anyone can engage in any movement from anywhere on the planet.

Vox Digitalis

Entry #004 – Slacktivism.

The loudest criticism facing the online activist phenomenon is the label of “slacktivism” (or “clicktivism”). Some consider it to be pointless, and believe some who engage in it are only keeping up appearances and are “virtue-signalling”. I turned the final leg of my research to this question – a question of authenticity, a question of the degree of harm that slacktivism causes the movement at large, if it even does at all. What I found was that critics of slacktivism were missing an important point; it doesn’t matter if you’re sharing something out of genuine passion for the matter at hand or for self-interest,

you're still sharing it. It will still reach an audience. Who knows what that audience will do with that information/opinion? Slacktivism is activism, and, at the very least, it gets people thinking about the topic at hand.

In 2010, the Guardian published article by Micah White entitled "Clicktivism is ruining Leftism". It is a scathing piece that laments the loss of activism's authenticity. The piece opens with; "A battle is raging for the soul of activism. It is a struggle between digital activists, who have adopted the logic of the marketplace, and those organisers who vehemently oppose the marketisation of social change". The article, in hindsight, comes off as melodramatic, with the author stating that "the end result is the degradation of activism into a series of petition drives that capitalise of current events. Political engagement becomes a matter of clicking a few links... clicktivism is to activism as McDonald's is to a slow-cooked meal". The author predicts that there will be some sort "trade-off" between real-life protest and online slacktivism.

Similar concerns are raised in the 2020 Vox article called "How Social Justice Slideshows Took Over Instagram". As an 18-year old, who spends a lot of time on Instagram, this was a side of social activism that I was aware of and I wanted to examine it further. Instagram social justice collages are everywhere on the app. The author of the article considers these Instagram posts to be another form of the "marketisation" of online activism. The article quotes graphic designer Eric Hu, who says that: "A lot of this stuff, you can swap the text out for anything, and it'll completely change the message. There isn't much of a relationship between content and aesthetics; if anything, the content is just interchangeable like an ad, for better or for worse". However, the author does believe that these creators have noble intentions and are more intelligent than they're given credit for. "Many creators acknowledge that posting on social media itself is an inherently performative act; yet, the scale and scope of Instagram's reach make it irresistible, especially during a time when coalition-building and encouraging solidarity is crucial", in the words of Terry Nguyen, the article's writer.

Another Vox article tells the story of how social activists inadvertently turned the death of Breonna Taylor at the hands of police into a meme and a product. Throughout the summer of 2020, the phrase "arrest the cops that killed Breonna Taylor" turned from a rallying cry for Black Lives Matters activists into a punchline of memes. Eventually, Vox reported, "Indie merchant platforms like Etsy... have seen an explosion of for-profit merchandise exploiting Taylor's name. Breonna Taylor Face Masks are a particularly hot item on both websites. Of the 10 random Etsy merchants I browsed, only one promised to donate an unspecified portion of sales proceeds to the Taylor family's GoFundMe". This commodification and appropriation of online activist movements is worryingly common on the internet. Interestingly though, the meme also had the effect of spreading Taylor's name and story far and wide. "The online agitation seems to have helped people understand what happened to Taylor; in fact, Google Trends shows that searches for "Breonna Taylor" spiked sharply during the first week in June". Though the story of what happened to Taylor spread, the author claims that "It's likely that many people who are talking about Taylor's death now have little idea what ideas like... "defund the police" really even mean". Though this shows a downside of online activism, it isn't as clear-cut as the Guardian article would've had you believe.

Though the dangers of online activism are clear, they are ills that many things in our society suffer from (consumerism and laziness) and the problems of online activism do not stack up to the positive impact it has had. In the final entry of this blog, I will provide a summary of my research process, and propose several research findings, linking each of them to the Politics and Society coursework.

Vox Digitalis

Entry #005 – A Summary of Research.

As I wrap up my research and writing process, I look to summarise my research findings. I am now confident in my understanding of the topic and I hope that my understanding has translated into enjoyable and comprehensible blogs. My first, and most significant finding is this; online activism is intrinsically linked to offline demonstrations and protests. Modern movements have a presence in both the physical and digital realms. A great example is that of the 2017 March for Science. A 2020 article by EuroNews concerning "how 'clicktivism' has changed the way we protest forever" tells of the origins of the protest; "the idea to create the march was born from a single Reddit conversation surrounding a decision to remove all references to climate change from the White House website. As more and more Reddit users responded in support of the idea, it spread to Facebook, Twitter and even led to the creation of a website". The internet in this case study had been an essential tool of these activists to mobilise and achieve a successful, significant presence on the street. Surveys of participants from these marches in America found that up to 60 per cent had heard about them on Facebook

and a further 10 per cent from Twitter. This research finding is clear throughout my previous blog entries, and some of the most famous examples of recent online activism sheds light on this, of course with the “Fridays4Future” campaign, which started with a simple twitter post from Greta Thunberg, and “In just under a year, seven million students around the world were joining the Swedish teen to take part in the school strike for climate. Now Greta uses her massive online following to highlight all kinds of environmental causes - receiving thousands of likes, shares and comments on every post”.

My second most significant finding is that the internet has “annihilated distance” and made local movements global. The #MeToo and “BlackLivesMatter movements were effective not only for their messaging but also their universality. The internet managed to spread these movements far and wide and greatly improved their reach. The example used in the third entry of my blog of Chinese feminists’ “rice bunny” movement. According to the Black Lives Matter movement, there were “George Floyd protests” in 84 countries around the world in the summer of 2020. The internet removes constraints of time and space, and has not only introduced new ways to protest, but has enhanced those that have existed. In my view, it has provided the people, the common man, with immense power and immense responsibility. The internet seems to be the great equaliser. Yes, the gap between the people and the state is still great but it has been narrowed.

Another conclusion I reached is that the early criticism of online activism has proven to be false after many years of effective action. Their criticisms often included how online activism was ineffective and lazy. In “the psychology of online activism and social movements: relations between online and offline collective action”, a 2020 study by ScienceDirect, this is shown. The report states; “the formation of online activist communities is rarely isolated: The online and offline are typically closely integrated. Indeed, online activism facilitates offline protest by advertising and organising it”. This both affirms my first finding and disproves a common criticism regarding the effectiveness of online protesting. However, some criticisms stand, and have emerged with further, wider understanding of the phenomenon. The report notes how internet access and usage patterns limits who can be involved in movements; “other moderators are age (for older users online engagement is not sufficient) and network heterogeneity (homogeneity increases carry-over between online and offline activism through social support”. Also, through a Marxist lens, digital discrepancies match income level. The report states “for instance, working-class people are less politically active online because they feel less technology savvy. People self-censor opinions that they expect to be unpopular”. Additionally, the report finds that “social media characteristics (e.g. ease of ‘unfriending’) facilitate echo chambers, in which the same shared realities are echoed and socially validated, encouraging the formation of monocultures”, however it also acknowledges that this problem is possible in any political group in any medium.

For politics and society students, there is plenty of information and data in these blogs that can be used to help your studies. Taking information and relating it to the theory on the course is an important skill to have for this subject, and in places, when possible, I have tried to make some links. Of course, this topic mostly concerns itself with the media aspect of the course but the nature of political action, I have touched on many key ideas from the course in these blog entries. Feminism, identity, data collection and presentation, fielding opposing point of view and governance in democracies and autocracies have all been discussed. I hope it has been of use to anyone studying the subject in the future. Many thanks for reading.