

CLICKTIVISM, SLACKTIVISM, OR 'REAL' ACTIVISM
CULTURAL CODES OF AMERICAN ACTIVISM IN THE INTERNET ERA

by

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Clicktivism, Slacktivism, or 'Real' Activism?

Cultural Codes of American Activism in the Internet Era

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the normative meanings of traditional activism versus new, emerging online forms of activism by considering how “activism” and “activist” work as culturally coded folk terms in an American speech community. At the heart of this exploration is the question: How is activism communicated in the digital era? Examined is the metatalk of online commenters, who responded to a prominent American journalist’s claims that the Internet served no role in social protests and revolutions in Moldova and Iran in 2009, and later in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011. Talk of these current events offer a relevant jumping off point to examine discourses of activism, and, specifically, how people describe their own positions and sense-making of activism. These modern social movements also provide an interesting backdrop against which to consider new communication processes of activism, and how they create normative challenges to traditional views of activism and the appropriate actions and roles of activists.

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Introduction

Public discourse plays a central role in social change, defining norms and values, and solidifying and polarizing individuals in support or opposition of causes and social movements. In the pre-Internet world, persuasion in public discourse has often been privileged as “leader-centered” (Simons, 1970, p. 2) and “managed,” (Scott & Smith, 1969, p. 8). But in the largely unfiltered Internet world, the meanings of social movements, activism, and activists, as constructed in the everyday talk of ordinary people, may carry just as much—if not more—weight in how social change is made sense of and brought about. Such talk is happening around the clock, every second of every day, on media and other organizations’ websites, as well as social media and video sharing sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube, among other online “places.” If freedom is indeed “an endless meeting” as Polletta suggests, that meeting—during which “talk helps people consider the possibilities open for social change” (2002, p. 1)—is most certainly happening online, with the luxuries of anonymity and no egg timer limiting constituent input.

Academic researchers extensively scrutinize the role the Internet can and should play in public civic and social participation, and began doing so even before its popular emergence in the late 1990s. Yet understudied among scholars is how the Internet and the everyday talk (Tracy, 2002) that occurs online are disrupting the traditional communication processes of activism: Likeminded individuals can easily connect without the need for organizations; Mainstream media are unnecessary for spreading activist messages; Movement “leaders” may change day to day; And the voices—the unfettered words—of ordinary people may carry more consequence than ever.

Grassroots activists, who've devoted their lives to causes, are recruiting ordinary people, who, in many cases, were politically inactive before, to be "online activists" to advance myriad causes. Yet at the same time, activists—and scholars and watchers of activism—are also engaged in defining and critiquing what it means to be a "real activist" creating uncertainty in the connotations of activism. The purpose of this study is to interrogate the normative meanings traditional activism versus new, emerging online forms of activism by considering how "activism" and "activist" work as culturally coded folk terms in an American speech community. At the heart of this exploration is the question "how is activism communicated in the digital era?" which I explore through the frame of "how does online activism and its related communication processes disrupt normative meanings of activism?"

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on a review of traditional social movement theory and then shifts to considering how the Internet redefines activism to lay the ground work for the analysis that follows. The second chapter is devoted to methodological issues, including a general introduction to the ethnography of communication approach taken in this study, and a primer on the materials at the heart of this thesis, as well as a detailed description of how materials were chosen and collected. In the third chapter, the historic connotations of activism are discussed, leading into an analysis of the semantic dimensions of "activism" and "activist," and how the terms function as cultural codes in the U.S. In the fourth chapter, I present my interpretation of the findings, implications, and the conclusion. The interpretation is set within the larger conversation of civic engagement in America, which serves as a means to explore the implications of what these findings say about activist groups in society, and how Americans are making sense of appropriate social action and their potential to participate socially and civically in society.

CHAPTER ONE

Communicative processes of activism in the 21st Century

Social movements are defined as exhibiting specific characteristics that differentiate them from other types of collective action. As researchers study them, dating their emergence back to the late 18th century, social movements are distinguished from targeted campaigns, revolutions, trends and fads in that they must be at least minimally organized; they have members and followers, leaders and spokespeople, and affiliated organizations and coalitions. Social movements as a rule are grassroots efforts made up of many factions, offering conflicting ideologies, philosophies, and strategic ideas. New movements tap existing activist groups with similar leanings for support to build momentum rather than seek person-by-person support. Social movements have lifecycles and stages of progression from emergence to maintenance, decline to termination. But the rise of the Internet and its accompanying pervasive digital technologies are changing many of these accepted processes and “truths.” Perhaps, more than anything, these new channels of fast, cheap, and easily accessible communication are challenging traditional notions of what it means to be an activist.

In the 21st Century, the work of modern social movements can be solitary, anonymous, and take place on digital devices, through email, and social media campaigns often seek to mobilize supporters’ intellectual resources, as much as, if not more than their time and dollars. Many theorists argue that today’s activist doesn’t need to be well-connected, have much time or money, be smart, or even passionate about a cause. But this is far from a widely accepted concept outside the world of academia.

These developments in the world of social movements are especially prevalent and important when considering the pressing question of why movements form at all and theories surrounding social movement membership. The cost of participation (Olson, 1968) in social movements has been generally accepted as a motivator—or demotivator—of potential activists. Lower participation in collective action has been tied to large time and financial commitments. But the Internet has dramatically lowered participation costs and even allows for individuals to make smaller contributions that, when aggregated, account for a much larger whole. Aggregation works on a number of different levels in modern social movements, perhaps most significantly in that it serves as a way to demonstrate support for a cause, as backing by large numbers of people is widely considered to be at the heart of any social movement’s influence and ultimate success. One way aggregation occurs is through online social networks, which allow for individuals to quickly and without cost “click” their support, and, in essence vouch for a cause, often implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—asking for others within their networks to do the same.

Given this ability to mobilize via social networks and person to person, one is pressed to ask: What role or roles, if any, do social movement organizations serve in the 21st Century? Can movements exist and accomplish their goals without organized groups and leaders? Is it possible for the aggregated actions of disconnected individuals to bring about the same or better results than organizations have in the past for cause-based movements? Is the 21st Century the age of the dispassionate activist? For many individuals, particularly those who’ve devoted their lives to causes—and others in the U.S. who’ve participated in, or passionately believe in the power of collective action, protests, sit-ins or other traditional forms of activism—these are quite troubling questions.

Traditional collective action versus ‘smart mobs’

Until recently, social movement theory has demarcated collective action and individual action, as if they are two different things. However, contemporary social movement theory and the recent ‘Internet turn’ are recognizing the increasingly important role of the anonymous individual, both together with and independent from groups of people, in social movements.

Internet-age political participation can be categorized in three ways: activities that are only possible online; activities that are only possible offline; and offline activities that can be carried out online (Anduiza, Cantijoch, & Gallego, 2009). However, even the question of what counts as political participation has become fuzzy in the digital universe, and Anduiza, Cantijoch, and Gallego ask whether online participation can be considered participation at all. The Pew Charitable Trusts (2006) defines civic engagement, a basic concept of public participation, as:

Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic Engagement can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.

Online activities, particularly identifying issues of concern and organizing and mobilizing people to address issues, certainly fulfill this definition. Consider the possible effect of a well-crafted political argument posted to one’s Facebook page or a homemade video expressing a particular viewpoint uploaded to YouTube. If one’s message resonates with even one other person, regardless of an author’s ethos, digital media allows one to express an opinion that can be widely spread, far beyond word of mouth that might begin at a cocktail party or neighborhood barbecue, and with the author’s message as originally presented. The successes of once-anonymous

bloggers and even individuals posting short “tweets” on Twitter—some of whom were launched into fame with book and movie deals, and even TV show pilots—illustrate the possibilities that exist for not only raising awareness, but also prompting desired action (Gallagher, 2009; Lawson, 2010; NPR, 2008).

Social movement theory

Resource mobilization theory (Olberschall, 1973; Tilly, 1978; McCarthy and Zald, 1973; Gramson, 1975; Jenkins, 1981) anchors contemporary American social movement thought and centers on ‘how’ questions surrounding the formation of movements and engagement in collective action. These theories center on mobilization processes and practices that emphasize shared interests and political alliances; as a paradigm, resource mobilization theories hinge on the rationality of collective action. For instance, the prior existence of grassroots organizations (Putnam, 1993), such as parent-teacher organizations, church groups and educational organizations, are seen as something to be leveraged to get a social movement off the ground. In contrast, theories of new social movements are at the heart of European thought and focus on ‘why’ questions surrounding collective identity and social movements’ socio-political significance (Mellucci, 1989). Rather than seeing social movements as organizations with common interests, NSM theories consider them in terms of collective identities engaged in discursive struggles that transform how people view themselves and challenge the legitimacy of widely held cultural codes (Cohen, 1985). Under this model, groups are non-rational and seek distinct identities and autonomy. “American theory, with its insistence on instrumental rationality, tends to pass over these distinctive characteristics—feminist attention to ‘consciousness,’ for example, and black and gay ‘pride’—to which European theories of ‘new social movements’ direct attention,” (J. Gamson, 1989, p. 353).

Combining elements from both of these frameworks is the viewpoint of Reingold's "smart mobs," which bring together "people who are able to act in concert even if they don't know each other" (2002, p. xii). Because of this anonymity and autonomy, smart mob activism becomes less about the group or organization and more about the individual. Smart mobs are made up of anonymous individuals who become linked by pervasive digital devices, such as phones and computers, which connect them via the Internet and locative technology. Diverse people with overlapping interests can join alliances and come together in solidarity without having to negotiate postmodern identity politics, or acknowledge who they are beyond what they support. As a result of such possibilities, what it means to be an activist has become less certain.

The traditional American activist: stopped working to strike for workers rights; burned bras in solidarity for women's rights; and protested segregation in the South through whites-only lunch counter sit-ins and freedom rides on interstate buses into segregated states. However, the lines of activism have never been solid. Efforts that might otherwise fall under the guise of "civic engagement," such as volunteerism, get-out-the-vote campaigns, and community based efforts to enact local change for the public good, regularly bleed into activist territory. One might ask: Where does civic engagement end and activism begin? And, are there stages on the public participation spectrum that precede civic engagement?

These questions existed before the dawn of the Internet, but pervasive technologies and the possibilities they offer to the activist realm have brought them to the forefront of public discourse. People are asking: Does an activist need to be a passionate crusader? Or can an activist be anyone with an Internet connection, who shows support—regardless of how fleeting or sustained—for a cause?

Participation: Intellectual resources, time and money

Costs, whether that means time, money, or resources, among other things, represent an important element of resource mobilization research. Social movement success is also said to heavily factor on the availability of resources and opportunities for actions. The Internet facilitates each of these things, and, as a result, is thought to bring higher social movement participation. This helps illuminate why the Internet is such a revolutionary force in activism, especially for people, who haven't been politically active or civically engaged before. Marc Smith, former in-house sociologist at Microsoft, told Reingold:

Whenever a communication medium lowers the cost of solving collective action dilemmas, it becomes possible for more people to pool resources, and 'more people pooling resources in new ways' is the history of civilization in ... seven words (2002, p. 31).

On the Internet, information, and the ability to easily and quickly communicate it, is a resource that's as widely and cheaply available as air is on Earth. People don't necessarily contribute or share their knowledge with an end in mind. Often it emerges as part of an interactive process and Internet websites and bulletin boards serve as depositories where useful information is collected and stored and becomes a communal public good (Fulk et al, 1996), from which anyone can benefit. This sort of uncoordinated collective action conflicts with classic notions of freeriding (Olson, 1968), or sitting out on the sidelines benefitting from others' work because the costs of participation are too high. Knowledge, in many forms, is an important resource when social movements are brought online and comes into play in ways to flatten hierarchies (B. Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002). Digital technology provides flexibility that means more than one person's knowledge and skills can be brought to bear in getting a message out. Additionally, "communities of practice and learning are flourishing, as similarly-occupied

people share knowledge within and between organizations,” (Barry Wellman et al., 2006); and traditional leaders, who may have risen to the top based on connections, education, or speaking abilities, have been replaced by those who have special technical skills that allow them to better harness technological capabilities.

If large displays of support or aggregations of knowledge make up for deficits in other areas, the role of the individual activist becomes fore-grounded because it becomes possible for each person’s small contribution to add up to bring about change. The possibilities of knowledge aggregates are highlighted by Gamson, Fireman and Rytina’s (1982: 82-93) “threshold” model of resources, which argues that after a point, more resources don’t make any difference in a social movement’s success and resource deficits in one area can be made up by surpluses in another area. The threshold model is important to consider when measuring the effects of any resource in social movements. For instance, a deficit in organization doesn’t necessarily matter if there is a surplus in experienced leadership or knowledge. However, there is little, if any, agreement among researchers about the most important kinds of resources, but most—such as labor, capital, and technical expertise—have more than one use.

Aggregation versus organization

This rise of the digitally connected, individual activist brings into question the role of organizations. Social movement organizations (SMOs) have served as a means of maximizing resources and reducing participation costs. But in the Internet era, in which individuals are able to skip the middle man and become arbiters of action, or engage in “brokerage” (Tarrow, 2005), the need for formal organizations (Ganesh and Stohl, 2010) and “institutionalization” (Simons, 1970) are less clear cut and not necessarily a hallmark of a social movement’s success.

In fact, instead of thinking about how to incentivize people to support social movements—and not freeride—theorists have in recent years begun focusing on how pervasive digital technologies that have followed the rise of the Internet allow individuals to cross easily from private domains into public domains, and as a result, leverage private connections to bring about collective action (Bimber, Flanagan and Stohl, 2005). Similarly, Wellman, Boase, and Chen (2002) documented a societal shift toward “networked individualism,” in which the boundaries of tightly knit, largely homogenous groups have become more permeable to allow for interactions with “diverse others.” Personalization, “wireless portability, and ubiquitous connectivity to the Internet all facilitate networked individualism as a basis of community” (2006). The idea here is that the individual activist doesn’t need to gather with likeminded others in a physical space. Alone or together with others, perhaps at a crowded coffee shop or even in one’s own family room, the individual can “participate” through the sharing of one’s resources—whether they be intellectual or financial—or by expressing support for a cause with a click or more.

While in the past, a large protest may have garnered attention and raised awareness of a cause, today, in-the-streets protests occur regularly and, except in rare instances, receive little media coverage or recognition by American politicians. Consider large-scale demonstrations in 2002 and 2003 against the American war in Iraq (which continued to be waged in 2011, although the mission has changed to “advise and assist brigades”). On one day in 2003, more than 600 rallies were held worldwide, including in Chicago, Los Angeles, Gainesville, Ga., and Juneau, Alaska (CNN, 2003).

Sometimes, these forms of physical protest can bring about the ire of American politicians rather than desired policy changes or even increased visibility, as has been recently

demonstrated in the global AIDS movement (Stohlberg, 2010). A notable exception are the 2011 protests in Wisconsin, which began after Gov. Scott Walker put forth a budget bill calling for the end of collective bargaining rights for most public employees. Tens of thousands of people jammed the streets surrounding the state capitol; state Democratic leaders left the state so that a vote could not be taken; as of mid-March 2011, the protests continued and a district court judge issued a temporary order blocking the law from being implemented (Desk, 2011).

Can ‘clicking’ equalize class differences, motivations to participate?

Researchers are rethinking resource management theories and considering the ways in which people are using communication technologies to express support for social causes and, as a result, influence networked others to do the same. For instance, one might ask: Is conflict, a once necessary ingredient used to mobilize people (Schwartz and Paul, 1992, p. 213), still vital given that Internet movements have eliminated many of the costs thought to result in freeriding?

Does moral concern for the state of the world and the wellbeing of others play a role in motivating modern-day social movement participation? Resource management research largely ignores such arguments of postmaterialist values (Ladd and Hadly, 1978; Yankelovich, 1974, 1981; Inglehart, 1977) as influencing social movement support. However, there is empirical evidence to suggest the Internet has activated a “conscious constituency,” and it’s not just made up of the wealthy and affluent middle class, as one might assume. Fisher and Boekkooi’s (2010) study of the 2007 Step It Up National Day of Climate Action demonstrated how highly motivated people may seek out interests on the Internet: 60 percent of those who learned about the event online traveled alone to the event, as opposed 26 percent of those who organized via

face-to-face channels; and more than a third of all 454 survey respondents said they learned about the event via e-mail, an e-mail listserv, or Web site.

Even before the world went digital, Marwell and Ames (1979, 1980) tested the freerider theory in a series of experiments and found that more than half of participants were not influenced by incentives in their decisions to participate in collective action. They asked: “When will a collectivity act to maximize its collective interest even though such behavior conflicts with a course of action that would maximize the short-term interests of each individual separately?” (1979, p. 1335). The researchers’ experiments involving high schoolers in Wisconsin found that individuals were more willing to invest money toward the ‘public good’ than for individual gain. “There can be little doubt that subjects in our experiment do not fit Olson's description of rational free riders in this isolated, abstract, but financially real situation ... free riding probably does occur but only in the behavior of some subjects, and usually only to a mild, rather than strong, extent,” Marwell and Ames wrote (1979, p. 1350).

Social media, in particular, allow loosely structured groups to “operate without managerial direction and outside the profit motive” (Shirky, 2008, p. 47). The individual activist can be anybody surfing the Internet or casually cruising Facebook or other social media, who stumbles upon an issue or cause that interests him or her. Again, this opens the door for anybody to be labeled an “activist” without knowing many people or the “right” people, having much time or money, or needing to be well educated. Does she need to even care about a cause to make a difference to earn this title in American society in the digital era?

The rise of the dispassionate activist: People who care a little can do a little

Why does someone get involved in activist efforts? Who you know has long been a gateway to social action. He or she might have a parent or family member or friend who is involved in a cause; a person might have wealth and philanthropic interests; or the issue hits close to home in some way, which then again gets friends and family involved, too. In the Internet era, knowing someone still serves as a gateway to social action as it has in the past, but it is no longer the primary way people become involved in social movements. Online social networks, such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and video-sharing site YouTube, serve as communication channels to easily and inexpensively spread the word about social movement issues to friends and acquaintances. Individual recruitment is as easy as “bloc recruitment” of the past (Oberschall, 1973; Snow, Zurcher and Eckland-Olson, 1980; Jenkins, 1982), in which the most efficient form of recruitment was to solicit the support of existing activist groups. Social movement activists have always struggled to convince others to invest time and money toward important efforts. Thanks to social networks, “instead of convincing people who care a little to do more, you can convince people who care a little to do a little” (Shirky, 2008, p. 181).

The Internet as a channel for joining social movements lowers the cost of involvement because it allows for the aggregation of “microcontributions,” (Garrett, 2006) spreading leadership and responsibility among large numbers of people. Strong relationships among SM membership aren’t necessary; Hampton (2003) showed that even weak ties among organizational members can be sufficient to sustain a movement and effectively convey messages.

Given this ability to snowball resources and people, what is mobilization in the Internet era? Historically, mobilization has been seen as a way to create solidarity and moral

commitments to the “collectivities in whose name movements act” (Jenkins, 1983, p. 538). Mobilization is a process, often led by an inspirational leader (Payne, 1995) that brings together people and resources to voice opposition or support for a cause, a way to effect social change. In the 21st Century, however, can’t that be achieved individual by individual, thanks to digital technologies that collapse constraints of time and space? Websites allow people to access information and seek out answers to questions at any time. Such characteristics allow greater autonomy to individuals who seek to organize and mobilize themselves (Sunstein, 2003; Ward and Lusoli, 2003). Even—or especially—the disaffected can participate in movements in their own ways (Frau-Meigs, 2002, cited in Anduiza and Gallego, 2009). In fact, Anduiza and Gallego posit that “electronic identities” formed online will be brought into political activities and result in new forms of participation, which contrast with traditional hierarchies and conventional formulations. In the digital realm, some people argue that being aware, concerned, and willing to talk about social issues is, at a minimum, a form of activism (Kerwin, 2010). In fact, one could ask: Is the role of the individual in social movements more crucial than ever, even if who the individuals are, as a group, is of little consequence, as long as the aggregate of their resources and commitments can get the job done?

**Digital Activism in popular culture:
Clicktivism, slacktivism and armchair activism**

He would have been writing statements and sending them out to the world as a blogger and a tweeter. –Yoko Ono on John Lennon if he were alive for his 70th birthday on Oct. 9, 2010.

In exploring the questions of activism’s meanings and how Americans make sense of what makes somebody an activist in the digital era, one can begin with mainstream conversations surrounding political calls to action made online. One example that sparked significant debate as

to whether it constituted activism was this Facebook request related to “the fight against child abuse”:

Change your Facebook profile picture to a cartoon or hero from your childhood. The goal? To not see a human face on Facebook until Monday, Dec. 6 [2010]. Join the fight against child abuse and copy and paste to your status to invite your friends to do the same.

This request, which people copied and pasted into their Facebook status updates, went viral around the world and prompted millions of people to replace their profile photos with images of Wonder Woman, Fred Flintstone, and the Tasmanian Devil, among many other whimsical cartoon personas. But what did it accomplish? Many mainstream media critics called the campaign worthless, a prime example of feel-good “slackivism,” (a combination of the words “activism” and “slacker”) defined by UrbanDictionary.com, as:

The act of participating in obviously pointless activities as an expedient alternative to actually expending effort to fix a problem. Signing an email petition to stop rampant crime is slacktivism. Want to really make your community safer? Get off your ass and start a neighborhood watch!

Indeed, the *Boston Herald's* Lauren Beckham Falcone wrote of the Facebook child abuse campaign, “Armchair activism only goes so far. Changing your status doesn’t change anything.” Yet, Falcone reported the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children saw a spike in visits to its website following the Facebook campaign and received 17 new donations the weekend of its debut. Also, many of the visitors to the MSPCC site clicked through to its How to Get Involved page. Imagine if no Facebook campaign was launched: Would the MSPCC be better or worse off? While not a social movement per se, such political campaigns—even about such noncontroversial issues as child abuse—engage individuals, even if just for a moment, in thought about an important societal issue or cause. In order to participate, a person doesn’t need to know many people. A family member could have posted such a call to action.

Changing one's profile photo doesn't require a financial commitment and takes less than five minutes of one's time. How passionate do you need to be about fighting the scourge of child abuse to get involved? Perhaps not at all, but such a call to action may likely inspire curiosity in some people, who within a few keystrokes can learn that 1,740 children died in the U.S. as a result of abuse or neglect in 2008, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). While some people changed their profile photo and did nothing else, others most certainly took further steps. At a minimum, people thought about child abuse, when they would not have otherwise.

Because of this ability to quickly garner attention for a cause, such requests are not unusual. Others have been aimed at raising awareness for cancer:

Some fun is going on....just write the color of your bra in your status...just the color, nothing else, and send this on to ONLY girls no men... it will be neat to see if this will spread the wings of cancer awareness. It will be fun to see how long it takes before the men will wonder why all the girls have a color in their status...thanks ladies!

A simple formula is this: "If you believe _____, paste this as your Facebook [MySpace/Twitter/ or other social networking site (SNS)] status update," which allows people to post such messages to raise awareness for a host of other causes, from supporting the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq to calling for bans on puppy mills. Andrea Rader, a spokesman for Susan G. Komen For the Cure, an organization that raises funds for breast cancer research, praised the cancer-awareness raising Facebook status updates, which coincided with October's Cancer Awareness Month. "It's a terrific example of how little things get started on the Internet and go a long way to raise cancer awareness," she told ABC News.

Taking slacktivism a step further are campaigns that ask people for donations. What differentiates these online political campaigns from others of the past, is the amount of money

they ask for: starting at only \$5. This kind of small-dollar, modern-day fundraising was virtually unheard of before the rise of social networking. U.S. presidential candidate Howard Dean pioneered this brand of everyman Internet money-raising in his 2004 campaign, and as a result was the top Democratic rainmaker early on in the campaign. In the years since, social causes have leveraged new media tools to take advantage of small donors and the power of aggregation. Following the devastating Haiti earthquake on Jan. 12, 2010, more than \$5 million was raised within the first 48 hours following the quake through digital media donations, by texting HAITI to 90999; each text generated a \$10 donation. The pervasiveness of this technology seems to have aided in this sort of fundraising. Consider that following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when 66 percent of adults in the U.S. had cell phones, only a fraction of \$5 million—about \$417,000—was raised by text message, versus in 2010, when 93 percent of adults had cell phones. The ability to instantaneously give money upon learning of a disaster “is great,” Lucy Bernholz, president of Blueprint Research & Design, a philanthropic consulting firm, told *BusinessWeek*. “It is the perfect tool for the Twitter generation ... people lose interest [in disasters] really quickly.” Beyond disasters, text donations have been used to raise money for a number of other causes, including to fight HIV/AIDS in Africa and India. In late 2010, a number of celebrities, headed by songstress Alicia Keys, banded together to “sacrifice” their “digital lives” on Twitter and Facebook, to raise \$1 million for the HIV/AIDS charity Keep a Child Alive. The Buy a Life website described it like this:

How many real lives can be saved by sacrificing a few digital ones? MILLIONS. Starting December 1 - World AIDS Day - the world's most followed celebrity Tweeters are sacrificing their digital lives to help save millions of real lives affected by HIV/AIDS in Africa and India. That means no more Twitter or Facebook updates from any of them. No more knowing where they are, what they had for dinner, or what interesting things are happening in their lives. From here on out, they're dead. Kaput. Finished. But they don't have to die in vain. And they don't have to stay dead for long. Just watch their Last Tweet

and Testaments, and buy their lives back. Every single dollar helps Keep a Child Alive fight this terrible disease. And when \$1,000,000 is reached, everyone will be back online and tweeting in no time.

The successful Buy a Life campaign, which began on World AIDS Day, Dec. 1, 2010, involved texting ALIVE to 90999, which sent a \$10 donation. Another option for giving to the campaign was to use a smartphone application, such as Stickybits or WiMo, to “scan” or take a photograph of a bar code to make the transaction. Bar codes were printed on T-shirts, adding a new twist in digital donating. Donations then helped “buy back” a celebrity’s presence on Twitter and Facebook. Until the campaign met its goal, Keyes, Lady Gaga, Lenny Kravitz, Justin Timberlake, Elijah Wood, Jennifer Hudson, among others, “went dark” on social networking sites. Fans raised \$500,000 and a philanthropist matched with another \$500,000 to meet the goal within a week. Donating is no doubt a good deed: The money will put toward meals, shelter, healthcare and education for victims of HIV/AIDS in Africa and India. Activists of this sort—if you’re willing to call them that—don’t have to give up much: \$10, the cost of a movie ticket to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster on a Saturday night. A person supporting this cause could even build one’s consciousness cache, by posting their donation on Facebook or Twitter or buying a bar-code T-shirt to wear. Anybody with an Internet connection can participate. The same could be said for anyone who chooses to support any other person who solicits them using online fundraising portals such as Crowdrise, which facilitates the quick and easy creation of personal fundraising pages in exchange for a small percentage of the money raised. More than 1.5 million people have created such fundraising pages since Crowdrise’s inception in September 2009.

Beyond social causes, such as child abuse, disaster relief, and HIV/AIDS, in recent years, digital activism has been brought to bear in countless instances of political decision making. In

2007, Canadians expressed their collective displeasure at a proposal that would have allowed people to place digital “locks” on their copyrighted content; within days, 20,000 people joined a Facebook group in protest of the legislation, resulting in its delay. Eventually, the number of online protestors grew to 90,000 and the bill was tabled and later died.

Digital petitions have pressured private industry to pull products, such as was the case when Apple decided to stop selling the "Manhattan Declaration" application, which was critical of same-sex unions, after receiving petitions with nearly 8,000 signatures in 2010. To sign, all that was needed was a belief that it's wrong to condemn same-sex unions and a “click.”

Socio-cultural political movements have been born and responded to online here in the U.S.: In February 2009, CNBC commentator Rick Santelli ranted on cable TV about the Obama administration's \$787 billion economic stimulus package. His outrage sparked likeminded individuals to post their support via Twitter and Facebook for Boston Tea Party-inspired protests, which were soon realized all over the U.S. A few months later, in response to the fledgling Tea Party Patriot movement that emerged, frustrated activist and documentary filmmaker Annabel Park vented on her Facebook page about mainstream media coverage that portrayed Tea Party backers as “representative of America.” Her posts were met with widespread support and within two weeks, an opposition movement, the Coffee Party, was not only born—more than 75,000 people had pledged their support via Facebook and organized local “coffee parties” around the U.S. Again, in each instance, digital “activists” needed to do little, care little, and know few if any people to become involved.

Social media activism and social revolutions

Microblogging site Twitter, in particular, has been credited with having an important role in social revolutions. In June 2009, Twitter and YouTube posts were said to be instrumental in uniting hundreds of thousands of Iranians to protest the landslide election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Social media—often in 140 characters or less—allowed protestors to quickly organize despite the government’s attempt to squelch communication by disabling the nation’s telephone system. Similarly, in spring 2009, people used Twitter to help mobilize 10,000 protestors who marched in Moldova in protest of their country’s Communist government. “Without Twitter the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy,” Mark Pfeifle, a former U.S. national-security adviser, wrote in *The Christian Science Monitor*, in a call for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Less than two years later, in January 2011, as many as hundreds of thousands of protestors flooded the streets of Cairo, Suez and other Egyptian cities to demand an end to Hosni Mubarak's 30-year autocratic rule. Police cut off Internet access, yet protestors—armed with mobile devices—worked around the shut-down and organized themselves by Twitter and word of mouth. Similarly, Twitter and social media site Facebook were credited with facilitating mobilization efforts in Tunisia, where a Democratic revolution coincided with Egypt’s uprising.

Wael Ghonim, Google’s marketing manager for the Middle East and Africa, was arrested and held for 12 days for creating a Facebook page memorializing a victim of the Egyptian regime's violence. The Facebook page was credited for helping to spark the Democratic revolution, but why? Ghonim said the social media sites functioned as virtual pub or living room, where people could share their views and not feel like they weren’t alone in their beliefs. He said

in a video posted to TED Talks, “The Internet played a great role helping these people to speak their minds, to collaborate together, to start thinking together” (2011).

In these instances, social networks were used to mobilize individuals in protest. What should a person call that kind of action? Armchair activism? Those who did not march, and watched and perhaps commented from afar, could arguably be said to have contributed to the causes, simply in their support. Some theorists have coined new terms for this form of political awareness and participation. Marichal (2010) calls it *microactivism*. Examples, he writes, “include the formation of political Facebook groups, re-tweeting of articles of political interest and sharing politically relevant videos on YouTube. These acts reflect micro-level intentions and are not necessarily geared towards mobilization like more traditional forms of digital activism” (p. 1). But should such acts, as often-criticized as they are (Gladwell, 2010), be given weight because of their potential to help cultivate political identities?

Overview and Questions

The events in Moldova and Iran in 2009, and later in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, provide an interesting backdrop against which to consider new communication processes of activism, and how they create normative challenges to traditional views of what constitutes activism and the actions and roles of an activist. As a result of the role digital media played in mobilizing protestors and shedding light on the oppression that prompted these revolutions, a wide range of people—from activists to technologists to ordinary Americans (many of whom now find themselves clicking for causes)—began talking about what it means to be an activist.

The flames of this conversation were fanned, in large part, because of an article published on Oct. 4, 2010 in *The New Yorker* by best-selling author and social commentator Malcolm

Gladwell, who critiqued, in great detail, the notion that true activism can occur online. Instead, he wrote of online activism, in the 4,000-plus word article, that “it makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact” (p. 9). Gladwell disputed the validity of the words of former national-security adviser Pfeifle, who called for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Instead, using the research of Stanford sociologist Doug McAdam on high-risk activism to back his claim, Gladwell argued that the relationships on which online activism is based are too weak to bring about substantial social change. Why? “Activism that challenges the status quo—that attacks deeply rooted problems—is not for the faint of heart,” Gladwell wrote (p. 4), and McAdam’s research shows over and over again that strong relational ties among activists are a key component to success in movements ranging from the desegregation of the American South in the 1960s, to bringing down the Berlin Wall in the 1980s. And, he says, Twitter had little, if anything, to do with the demonstrations in Moldova, or in Iran, where in June 2009, Twitter and YouTube posts were said by many in the mainstream media to be instrumental in uniting hundreds of thousands of Iranians to protest the landslide election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Gladwell’s argument, published in a well-respected liberal magazine with a readership of more than 1 million subscribers, provides one perspective in a far-ranging conversation surrounding online activism in the early 21st century.

In this thesis, Gladwell’s *New Yorker* article provides a particularly relevant jumping off point to examine discourses of activism, and, specifically, how people describe their own positions and sense-making of activism. Because the *New Yorker* piece was published nearly four months before the work of social media activists was again credited for touching off the Democratic revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, I look at texts that span that period, beginning in

the fall of 2010 and ending on Feb. 21, 2011. My analysis considers more than 200 online comments, posted by the readers of online blogs and publications including the *New Yorker* blog, *TheAtlantic.com*, the *Celebrity Circuit* blog on *CBSNews.com*, *The Huffington Post*, *Boingboing.net*, *GigaOm.com*, and the blog for activist organization, She's the First. All comments are written in response to articles that directly address Gladwell's original *New Yorker* article.

My interest here lies in how Americans are grappling with what counts as appropriate social action and productive modes of engagement in the digital era. It is my contention that through such talk, norms and values surrounding activism and the public good are weighed, debated, and, constantly redefined.

In examining these texts, I focus on the meanings of “activism” and “activist,” in the everyday talk of Americans and how they work as cultural code terms. However, this study is limited by the scope of the texts, which were published in a range of online publications that cater to specialized audiences. While *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* have large readerships, as do several of the blogs from which comments were gathered, readership of these publications reflect a middle – to upper-class demographic. Readers tend to be college educated; readers seek out such literary and technical publications to be educated, entertained, and, ultimately, engaged in cultural conversations. Ideally, I would have been able to gather more comments from readers of more mainstream publications, but I was able to find very few—posted to a celebrity blog of a CBS TV affiliate—even though many newspapers, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*, carried stories about Gladwell's article and the controversy that followed. At this point in time, interest in this conversation appears to be confined to smaller, less mainstream American audience. This perhaps is not surprising given the newness of the Internet and digital

activism as a concept and a set of practices. That said, these texts provide a wide sampling of American metadiscourse on the topic of activism, allowing for the interrogation of normative meanings of and the tensions between traditional activism and new, emerging online forms of activism. In exploring these tensions and normative challenges, I hope to shed new light on activist groups in society and their evolving communicative processes.

In summary, this thesis is an attempt to better understand, (a) normative meanings of social movement activism, particularly shifting beliefs about the role of the individual versus the historical role of the collective in activism; (b) the communicative processes of individual activism and engagement online; and (c) how average Americans not only view themselves and others as civic and social participants and make sense of the activist identity, but also act on these perceptions.

This study begins with the guiding research questions:

- 1.) How is activism communicated and what meanings does it take on in the digital universe?
- 2.) How are people in the U.S. making sense of the normative communicative processes of traditional activism and those of new, emerging forms of online activism in relation to one another?

CHAPTER TWO MATERIALS AND METHODS

This chapter describes the materials being examined for study within this thesis, as well as the methods that will be applied. I begin with an overview of the ethnography of communication approach taken in the analysis that will follow in Chapter Three, and then provide background on the history of online commenting, as well as a sampling of online comments and the texts to which they are written in response. Following this orientation, I discuss the specific methods used and provide examples as to how the analysis will proceed.

In every moment of talk, people are experiencing and producing their cultures, their roles, their personalities (Moerman, 1988, p. xi).

At the heart of the guiding research questions for this thesis is everyday talk and how it is people are making sense of digital-era activism in their performances of culture and who they believe activists—and themselves as activists or potential activists—to be. To get at these questions, I take an ethnography of communication (EOC) approach as informed by Katriel and Philipsen (1981) and consider patterns of meanings as embedded within the metadiscourse of activism. “A primary aim of this approach is to guide the collection and analysis of descriptive data about the ways in which social meaning is conveyed,” wrote Saville-Troike (2003, p. 13). Douglas explained the approach as beginning with the question, “What is being communicated?” and seeking an answer that provides, “Information from the social system,” (1971, p. 389). In studying conversation, Carbaugh called everyday talk “metasocial commentary” on what we do, “who we are, how we are related to each other, how we feel about what is going on, and the nature of the situation,” (2005, p. 1). Embedded in these ideas is not only how things are believed to be, but how individuals perceive they ought to be. Given this, it is my contention that

‘activism’ and ‘activist’ are culturally coded folk terms, deeply tied to cultural action and identity.

In EOC, language is a socially situated cultural form, representative of the culture itself. Language serves many functions at the societal level, and what words people choose often reflect political goals, and function “to create or reinforce boundaries in order to unify speakers as members of a single speech community and to exclude outsiders from intragroup communication” (Saville-Troike, 2003, pp. 12-13). A primary interest in EOC is how words can be used to create and maintain power. It is asked: How are words used as vehicles to segregate and divide people into social categories? In this case, it appears words are used to divide activism from nonactivism, and activists from nonactivists, based on cultural beliefs and values, which carry with them certain assumptions about meanings and rules for acting. What does it mean to be an activist? What rules does one perform or enact as an activist?

In examining the talk of more than 200 commenters to online articles and blog posts, a spectrum of views on and metatalk about activism are presented: from those individuals who talk about “real” activism and disregard new forms of digital activism to those people who applaud online efforts to enact or influence social change. These online conversations provide a portrait of how activism is understood by one American speech community in 2011, more than 15 years after the mainstream emergence of the Internet. I also consider the context from which the texts were born, and the original texts, which both prompted and kept the online discussion about activism going on American magazine websites and blogs.

How does this study of Internet comments qualify as an ethnography? To be clear, this study is not a traditional “thick description,” as coined by Geertz (1973). Instead, given the questions at the heart of this inquiry, I look to the idea of “ethnographic reconnaissance,”

meaning “preliminary examination or survey, usually followed by a more detailed inquiry” and a “necessary fact-finding stage of action” (Wolcott, 1999, p. 187). Ethnographic fieldwork techniques have been borrowed and adapted to fit the limited scope of this study of online talk.

Hymes (1964) identified eight factors important to ethnographic accounts. Each is key to this study:

(1,2) the various kinds of participants in communicative events-senders and receivers, addressors and addressees, interpreters and spokesmen, and the like; (3) the various available channels, and their modes of use, speaking, writing, printing, drumming, blowing, whistling, singing, face and body motion as vis-uually perceived, smelling, tasting, and tactile sensation(4) the various codes shared by various participants, linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesic, musical, and other; (5) the settings (including other communication) in which communica-tion is permitted, enjoined, encouraged, abridged; (6) the forms of messages, and their genres, ranging verbally from single-morpheme sentences to the pat-terns and diacritics of sonnets, sermons, salesmen's pitches, and any other or-ganized routines and styles; (7) the topics and comments that a message may be about; (8) the events themselves, their kinds and characters as wholes-all these must be identified in an adequate ethnographic way. (p. 13)

Commenters’ texts were mostly anonymously authored, but frequently included author-provided descriptions as to why the person was commenting. Authors include activists, who both do and don’t use the Internet to get their messages across; academics who study the topic and were following the conversation started by Gladwell with his initial Oct. 4, 2010 article, “Small Change”—to which the chosen articles and blog posts and their corresponding comments were written in response; and finally interested laypeople, who as cultural observers, have a stake in understanding their roles as potential activists. Many commenters confessed to being fans of Gladwell, who is the author of three bestsellers that each ranked No. 1 on the *New York Times* list, “The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference,” (2000), “Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking” (2005), and “Outliers: The Story of Success” (2008). A fourth book, “What the Dog Saw” (2009) is a compilation of stories published in *The New Yorker*.

Gladwell's star power and voice as a public intellectual certainly brought an element of interest to the topic that may not have existed for some commenters otherwise.

The channel, setting, and genre of communication are all closely related in this instance. All interaction occurred online and comments were crafted on computers, meaning that that interlocutors were not face to face, and their digital "conversation" was not held in "real-time," allowing for large pauses and gaps that lasted days and weeks in some instances. Commenters had as much time as they wanted to carefully (or not) consider their words before responding and were also able to easily reference other commenters' posts, as well as hyperlink to other relevant articles and materials. Commenters may or may not have known one another.

Online commenting

The genre of online commenting was born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when print publications began offering their content online and online-only publications and blogs were first launched. At that time, publishers also began providing readers the option to "comment," allowing them to offer their opinions and reactions, much like a letter to the editor. Readers could also to interact with the author of the original text and with one another, adding a dialogic element to a medium that has historically functioned on a univocal or conduit model of communication. Comments sections are frequently as much of a draw to readers, as the original article, and allow people from all walks of life a chance to engage in a dialogue with others who are also interested in the topic at hand. Little research has been done on online commenting as a genre. However, in a study of the online practice of "flaming," one graduate student at the University of Twente in The Netherlands, distinguished online commenting from face-to-face discussion by length of engagement (Moor, 2007). Comments come in bursts, sometimes with

large gaps of time in-between responses. Also, conversations occur among many commenters, with few returning to comment more than once.

As online commenting has evolved as a practice, many publications have declined to provide online space for it, as a number of journalists have questioned the value of commenters' contributions. *The New Yorker* does not allow readers to comment on online articles also published in the print magazine, but it does offer space for comments to readers of its blogs. Commonly, commenters may be anonymous, but many commenters provide their names.

Uniting the commenters in this study are two things: an interest in the writings of Gladwell and the topic of activism, to which commenters each felt compelled to add his or her voice to the conversation at hand.

Online commenters as a speech community

EOC is concerned with speech communities, which are formed through patterns of interaction and are organized as systems of communicative events. What speech community do these commenters' posts represent? This speech community is one of online commenters, in the U.S., who share a common interest in defining the meaning of activism in the digital age. They were brought together by an ongoing public discourse about activism, ignited by a number of international events involving digital activism, and a controversial argument made by one high-profile journalist.

Saville-Troike (2003) wrote that in defining speech communities, a key question ought to be whether

our focus in initially defining communities for study should be on features of shared language form and use, shared geographical and political boundaries, shared contexts of interaction, shared attitudes and values, regarding language forms, shared sociocultural understandings and presuppositions and even shared physical characteristics – skin color, etc. – may be considered a requirement for membership in some communities. The essential criteria for “community” is that some significant dimension of experience be

shared, for “speech community” that shared dimension be related to ways in which members of the group use, value, or interpret language. (p. 27)

The shared dimension is how members of this American speech community of online commenters interpret activism and activist. My interest is how these interpretations work as codes and thus bound the speech community along lines that separate, unify, and stratify the individuals within the community (2003, p. 27). The opportunity to debate topics is a draw for online commenters, as well as a defining feature. What is the purpose of commenting? To elicit other views and, in the process, help further refine one’s own beliefs and perhaps influence others’ perspectives, on a particular topic.

Context of comments

I discovered this particular speech community of commenters by way of Internet and library database searches, using Google, LexisNexis, and Academic Search Premier, for articles about Gladwell’s original *New Yorker* piece. Following the essay’s publication on Oct. 4, 2010, it was nearly impossible for media watchers to ignore the bevy of new blurbs, tweets, and blogs from public intellectuals and journalists, who weighed-in on the meaning of activism nearly every day. Even six months following the article’s publication, a Google web search for the words “Malcolm Gladwell” and “activism” brought 263,000 results. However, based on an exploration of these articles and blog posts, while much was written about the topic, few articles drew large numbers of commenters, which was the group that best offered “everyday talk” about activism. While comments are crafted on keyboards, they are untouched by professional editors and offer an aspect of “conversation” that articles and blog posts do not. Commenters respond to the article’s authors, as well as to one another, directly referencing—and often challenging or agreeing with—other commenters’ posts.

I chose to focus on comments to articles and blog posts that exhibited certain characteristics: 1.) The article drew a large number of comments (nine or more), which offered rich, deep metatalk about the meanings of activism and activist, sometimes with commenters responding to one another multiple times; 2.) The article was published in an outlet that attracted a nontechnical or layperson audience. This criterion was meant to capture talk by people who may or may not use social media; However, because this issue is important to individuals in the technology world, I did include articles written by authors hailing from that field; 3.) Articles were to have been published during the span of time before and after the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia; and finally, I sought a diversity of voices, so I chose articles that were published in different kinds of venues, i.e. an activist’s blog versus a literary magazine.

Comments varied in length: some were a few words, some were several paragraphs. It was typical for commenters to reference other texts, including Gladwell’s original article and other authors’ opinions. While about a quarter, or 25 percent, of comments strayed away from the topic to poke fun at Gladwell or make a snarky comment about something another commenter said, the majority of the 212 comments—3 out of every 4—addressed the topic of activism and the meanings it held for the commenter.

In all, comments were written in response to seven online articles and blog posts. They include:

- “Exclusive: Biz Stone on Twitter and Activism,” by Biz Stone, published in *TheAtlantic.com* on Oct. 19, 2010. A group of prominent writers including Harriet Beecher Stowe and Ralph Waldo Emerson founded *The Atlantic* in 1857 as a literary and cultural magazine. The print edition has 400,000 subscribers, and the online edition

boasts 4.2 million unique visitors per month. This article was of particular appeal because it was written by the co-founder and creative director of Twitter; 57 comments.

- “How Malcolm Gladwell Misses the Mark in His Recent *New Yorker* Piece on Social Revolution,” by David Helfenbein, published Oct. 2, 2010, on the *HuffingtonPost.com* blog. The *Huffington Post* is a liberal online publication that attracts 9.8 million unique visitors a month. This article was of interest because of the large lay readership. Additionally, Helfenbein has a history of activism, as he founded Kids 4 Hillary, and worked for the Secretary of State during her time as First Lady; 15 comments.
- “Memo to Malcolm Gladwell: Nice Hair, But You Are Wrong,” by Matthew Ingram, published on Oct. 19, 2010 in *GigaOm.com*. Ingram is a technology journalist and *GigaOm.com* is ranked as a Top 50 blog by Technorati, an Internet search engine for blogs. It has an audience of more than 500,000 readers; 32 comments.
- “Letter to the Editor: ‘Small Change’ by Malcolm Gladwell,” by Tammy Tibbets, published on Sept. 27, 2010, on the blog for She’s the First, a nonprofit that supports girls’ education in the developing world. Tibbets is a 28-year-old activist, who has only operated in an Internet-enabled world, providing her with a unique perspective. Her blog primarily reaches supporters of her nonprofit; 10 comments.
- “Internet-Enabled Activism Versus Malcolm Gladwell: Snarkypants Edition,” by Cory Doctorow, published on Jan. 28, 2011 on *BoingBoing.net*, which attracts 2.5 million unique visitors per month and about 10 million pageviews. Fast Company called *BoingBoing* “one of the most popular blogs on the planet,” if not the most popular; its themes are cultural in nature. Doctorow is co-editor of *BoingBoing.net* and is an activist, who has worked on behalf liberalizing copyright laws in Canada; he also created the

popular #WeLovetheNHS campaign on Twitter after American Congressional Republicans attacked Canada's system of socialized medicine in August of 2009; 27 comments.

- “Malcolm Gladwell Blasted for Comments on Social Media,” published on Feb. 21, 2011, on CBSNews.com's *Celebrity Circuit* blog. This article was published on an unauthored celebrity gossip-style blog; 9 comments.
- “Does Egypt Need Twitter?” by Malcolm Gladwell, published Feb. 2, 2011 on the *New Yorker* blog. This blog post by Gladwell broke nearly four months of silence on the topic of activism after his original *New Yorker* piece; 61 comments.

While the majority of authors took a pro-digital activism stance, as was typical of the responses to Gladwell's article, commenters were divided and, even among those who had favorable things to say about digital activism, many commenters were nuanced in their endorsements of defining such efforts as true activism. This provided a good mix of metatalk about what is and isn't activism, and who are and who aren't activists.

The data included 212 comments and 152 total commenters, (with 60 commenters posting more than once). Seventy percent of comments offered a clear position on whether digital activism constituted “real activism.” Within that 70 percent, the majority, 55 percent (81 comments), came down on the side of digital activism, and argued that digital efforts contributed substantially to social causes; 45 percent (67 comments) disputed digital activism's merits. An additional 10 comments saw merit in both perspectives.

Typical comments

To provide a sense of what typical comments to each article or blog looked like, I offer a few examples and discuss how comments were analyzed for their use of the words “activism” and “activist” and descriptions closely related to those terms. The excerpts appear as they were posted, with no corrections for spelling, grammar, or punctuation, to give a sense of each author’s style and voice.

Excerpt #1, CBSNews.com *Celebrity Circuit* blog, by fantomas

God, I'm so tired of hearing about how this was a "facebook revolution". It wasn't. The revolution had very little to do with any influence from facebook whatsoever. All that social media did was to help bring attention to a revolution that was already occurring based upon the fact that the cost of living for most Egyptians had reached unacceptable levels. The people of Egypt made this happen, not Mark Zuckerberg or tons of pompous tweeters and facebookers. If anything, this whole ordeal pointed out just how out of touch most American media outlets are. Malcolm Gladwell was right.

A reply, posted by pippofin

Actually it did help a lot especially Facebook. Wael Ghonim (<http://twitter.com/#!/Ghonim>) from Google create the Facebook group where people would see where to protest (Watch his 60 minutes interview). Of course it was the will of the people a computer cant overthrow a government. However without social media these people would have no idea where to meet and how to get organized. Maybe they would have found another way to meet but the didn't. That's the reason Mubarak shut down the internet so people couldn't find a way to organize but he failed because people still found a way to get online. So to say social media had nothing to do is wrong. Of course Mark Zuckerberg didn't create the revolution nobody thinks that its absurd but social media had an important role in it.

A reply by btlsivr

To say everyone who's on Facebook is pompous is completely ludicrous and I'd say even heartless. There are people on there who have cancer or other serious illnesses who wanted to get in touch and keep in touch with old friends. Don't be so sure of yourself and closed-minded, especially if you've never even been on it in the first place.

In this exchange among three posters to the CBSNews.com *Celebrity Circuit* blog, the first commenter uses the word “revolution” as a substitute for social movement activism, which is something Gladwell does himself. The subhead of his *New Yorker* article was: “Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted.” The commenter equates “the people of Egypt” with activists, who made the revolution possible, and positions them as the opposites of Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, people who use Facebook, aka “Facebookers, and people who use Twitter, aka “tweeters.” He calls them “out of touch” and “pompous;” they are not “the people of Egypt.” Given these things, they are nonactivists. The commenter notes that social media “brought attention” to the “revolution,” but that does not make it activism.

The second commenter, pippofin, replies that it was the “will of the people” that resulted in “overthrowing the government,” or the revolution, not a computer or Mark Zuckerberg. She, too, equates the revolution with social movement activism. Yet she gives agency to “social media,” writing that it “had a role” in the revolution beyond shedding light on it. The role is defined as being necessary to enact the “will of the people,” because otherwise they would have had “no idea where to meet and how to get organized.” Revolution, or activism, she says, can’t happen without organization. She pointed out that the Internet is powerful enough that Mubarek sought to disable it to stop people from organizing.

And the third commenter equates social media such as Facebook as vital to keeping people in touch, especially those who can’t get out of their homes to enact with others face to face. To dismiss it as important or powerful, is “pompous” and “ludicrous.” The third commenter picks up on the first commenter’s use of the word “pompous,” and turns it around on the commenter, saying that no, people who use Facebook are not the arrogant ones; in fact, the first commenter is the snob.

Taking all three commenters' posts together, the word "revolution" was coded as a definition of "activism;" the "people of Egypt," was coded as "activists;" Facebookers, tweeters, Mark Zuckerberg, and computers were coded as "nonactivists;" "social media," "organization," and "will of the people" were coded as "allowing activism." Facebook was additionally coded as "keeps people in touch" when face to face contact isn't possible. "Pompous" and "out of touch" were coded as qualities that are antithetical to activism and activists.

These posts and the following short analyses provide a snapshot of how each of the 212 comments was analyzed for patterns of meaning within the metadiscourse of activism. While in these comments, neither the word activism, nor the word activist was used, both were implied in the commenters' posts. Activism was also the central focus of the blog post to which commenters wrote their posts, although it is possible some commenters skipped the article and may have read only one or even none of the comments before adding a post. (Even in that case, it is assumed here that commenters were drawn to the article in the first place because of the original Gladwell article, which was about activism.)

In coding terms, I sought to explore the following questions: How were words used to divide activism from nonactivism, and activists from nonactivists? What cultural beliefs and values were at work? What assumptions about meanings and rules for acting are present, or, in other words, what does it mean to be an activist; what rules does one perform or enact as an activist?

Through this coding process, I created a semantic framework based on Katriel and Philipsen's "Semantic Dimensions of Communication" (1981), in which the authors' ethnographies of two American women were read as texts and the speech of their informants was analyzed for metalinguistic patterns. Their study focused on the use of the word

“communication” and its localized meanings. Communication in their research is conceptualized as a cultural code that carries with it values, beliefs, and rules for appropriate social behavior. (I go into this in more detail below in a review of speech codes theory.)

Similarly, I coded the ways in which commenters talked about activism and activists to discover how this speech community made sense of modern activism in light of recent world events in which a mix of digital and traditional activist communicative processes helped bring about dramatic social change. As part of this, I investigated how the words “activism” and “activist” functioned as cultural codes.

Speech codes theory

Just as the English language is found in many places, and just as many people speak more than one language, so it is with cultures: Culture refers to a particular system and not to the geographic or political unit in which it is found—Gerry Philipsen, (1997, p. 125).

Bernstein’s coding principle (1972) asserts that within society, communicative practices vary among people of different social groups and classes, and codes in interaction govern what to say and how to say it within a given context. This foundational idea helps form the basis for speech codes theory, which contends that speech codes not only influence how people talk, but also how they act. According to Bernstein, the ways in which people talk shape and reinforce how they understand themselves, as well as guide their feelings and attitudes toward themselves, other people, and social life.

Equally important to speech codes theory is the work of Hymes (1962), who developed the ethnography of speaking as he studied the culturally distinctive communication practices of people in a range of societies. While Bernstein was interested in making links to socioeconomic differences (what speech was absent or present in the speech of people from different social

classes, for instance), Hymes privileged the meanings of communicative practices to those engaged in the practices. An example used by Philipsen (1997), who further developed speech codes theory, is of use of the word “brow” (as in “highbrow” and “lowbrow”) in English life.

While Hymes’ work would focus on what discourses might reveal about the use of the word and its meanings to people, Bernstein’s approach would consider who used the word and how.

Bernstein’s work paved the way for the study of context-dependent speech:

A study of the ways of speaking of a particular speech community can proceed by an investigator’s formulating in advance that certain phenomena will be attended to, and the nature of the phenomena can be formulated quite explicitly according to some pre-formulated scheme,” (Philipsen, 1997, p. 125)

Meanwhile, ethnography of speaking placed an emphasis on exploring discourse with the assumption that, “it will be found to house discursive particulars (ways of speaking and resources for producing and interpreting communicative conduct) that are locally distinctive” (Philipsen, 1997, p. 124). Philipsen brought the two together in his approach to speech codes theory, in which he argues that culture can be found in codes, represented in systems of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules. Culture, as defined by Philipsen, is: “a socially constructed system of symbols, meanings, premises and rules” (1997, p. 125). Symbols, he writes, citing Geertz, are “tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs;” conceptions are, “meanings, notions, definitions, and so forth, which symbols express” (1973, p. 91).

Premises “express beliefs of existence (what is) and of value (what is good and bad). A rule is a prescription for how to act under specified circumstances,” (Philipsen, 1997, p. 125).

People study differences across codes; they also study the substance of codes, which is of most interest here. “Speech codes are distinctive thematizations of the ends and means of social action. Each implicates a distinctive conception of what goods humans should aim to secure,

how to secure those goods, and how to judge efforts to attain them (Philipsen, 1997, p. 139). Another way to think about this concept is offered by Scruton (1979), who conceptualized a speech code as a culturally distinctive “social rhetoric,” which provides members of each shared culture with rules for how to feel and what to do. Additionally, speech codes help members of cultural communities determine what connections or relationships can be appropriately sought between self and other and what symbolic means can be used to achieve those ties (Philipsen, 1987, 1989, 1992).

In the online commenting speech community at the heart of this study, activism and activist are examined as speech codes. They are represented by meaning-filled symbols, with beliefs or premises tied to them, and they are governed by rules for how to feel and act.

Limitations of the study

Interpreting the speech of online commenters presented several challenges. While a majority of comments (70 percent) directly addressed the topic of activism and/or what it means to be an activist, the word “activism” was used only 35 times and “activist” 18 times. Instead, commenters described activism in terms of how it is enacted, how it is embodied, and what meanings it holds for them. Similarly, what it means to be an activist was debated in terms of personal attributes, as in what *kind* of people they are, as well as the *kind* of devotion they must have to a cause. For instance, activism might be described as being, “carried out by revolutionaries who are too busy to Tweet.” Activists are “busy,” they don’t “tweet,” and they are “revolutionaries,” so activism must also be revolutionary.

Additionally, the speech of commenters was constrained in a number of ways. Most commenters only posted one response. Comments were in conversation with a number of texts—Gladwell’s original article, the blog or article to which they posted, and/or other texts on the

topic—as well as with one another. Recipient uptake and tone were not always clear. Comments were typed and not spoken, meaning they are crafted on a computer, allowing for a level of self-editing that face-to-face conversations do not. I could not read the texts for intonation, prosody, pauses, and repairs, among other characteristics of speech.

In order to interpret comments contextually, I created a table and organized coded comments into columns for each of the seven articles and blog posts. I also left comments unedited so that they could be read for emphasis. This, too, was tricky. If a commenter capitalized a word that is not a proper noun—as was the case of “Tweet” in the example of, “revolutionaries are too busy to Tweet,” I had to decide whether the capitalization was a mistake or intentional.

A surprising number of comments (54) were tangential or off-topic altogether. For instance, one commenter used the word “ferment,” as in, “a government was so afraid of what social media had already done/would do to *ferment* revolution that they cut off the Internet,” prompting a side conversation about whether the poster really meant to use “foment.” I set these types of comments aside and instead focused on comments that clearly spoke to the topic of activism.

Even with the excluded comments, I decided that the sample of talk was more than sufficient to interrogate how people were making sense of activism in the digital era. The sample provided talk from people who described themselves as activists; people who had participated in digital activism; people who worked in digital media and technology careers; and people who were simply interested in weighing in on the conversation. There was a variety of opinions and viewpoints represented, but much of it overlapped, allowing for the analysis of patterns.

I conclude this chapter by acknowledging that this study of online commenters treads into relatively new territory. Few, if any, communication researchers have considered online commenters as a speech community. The boundaries of online speech are unclear, and such talk is difficult to study. Inferences and leaps of logic had to be made: One was that these commenters were American, even though the Internet has no borders. But none of this diminishes the fact that people are talking online. The Internet, social media sites and blogs, in particular, offer discussion forums that encourage debate on all manner of topics. This talk is increasingly shaping culture and American culture is shaping online talk—here and elsewhere in the world. For communication scholars, the growing influence of online talk makes it worthy of our attention.

CHAPTER THREE MAKING SENSE OF ACTIVISM IN AMERICA

This chapter sets the scene for what resources Americans draw from to make sense of activism locally, and considers how the term ‘activist’ functions as a culturally coded identity, before the chapter concludes with the analysis of data.

Native meanings: Activist as identity

As a word in a living language, activism has no one single meaning in the U.S. How people make sense of it is a cultural process. Just as Katriel and Philipsen (1981) asked, what does it mean to “communicate” in a relationship, and what is the difference between “really talking” and “mere talk,” I seek to ask similar questions about how “activism” and “activists” are locally categorized. Instigating this investigation is an emergence of discourses on activism in American literary and technological magazines and blogs, rising from disputes over the role of digital activists in political revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, and in Iran and Moldova in 2009. These discourses suggest that “activism” carries local meanings, tied to historical events in the U.S. and around the world. While activism is not as pervasive in everyday talk as is “communication,” it still carries “moral freight” for users and is “an important term in an American symbolic universe and vocabulary of motives” (Katriel and Philipsen, 1981, p. 302), making it worthy of study. Additionally, the term “activist” is of considerable importance because it serves as a way to define one’s identity, which is seen here “as an accomplishment, not a thing” (Tracy, 2002, p. 17). Identities, according to Tracy (2002), “are best thought of as stable features of persons that exist prior to any particular situation, *and* are dynamic and situated accomplishments, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion to the next” (p. 17). A

person has four different kinds of identities: master identities, such as one's gender, ethnicity, and country of origin; personal identities that reflect one's character and attitudes (a dog person, versus a cat person, for instance); relational identities, which negotiate the power distance between people (friends interacting versus manager and employee); as well as, distinct interactional identities, such as one's profession. Being an activist is an interactional identity because it is situation – and relationship-specific.

The word 'activist' connotes "action" and involvement in matters of civic and social concern. In this study, I argue the term exists on a spectrum of civic engagement, defined by the Pew Charitable Trusts as, "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern." Additionally, I contend that being called an activist, self-labeling as an activist, or describing another as an activist implies certain understandings, actions, and attitudes.

This study is examining "activist" and "activism" as cultural codes and categories; activist as a contested interactional identity is important because it is a political type of person, and as meanings shift for this category, so do characteristic behaviors, activities, and rules for belonging to this group. In grasping a better understanding of the shifting meanings of a political identity, one is also able get a sense for how individuals envision themselves as political participants.

How individuals describe themselves, provides insights as to how people connect their identities to appropriate associated activities. I argue that how one categorizes him or herself appears to be one of the first steps, if not the first step, of the civic engagement process. To see oneself as a "good neighbor" prompts a person to engage in what he or she believes to be "good neighbor" behaviors, such as shoveling a sidewalk when the neighbor is away during a

snowstorm, or checking on a neighbor when you haven't seen him or her engage in routine behaviors. Similarly, to self-identify as an activist, gives a person license to act on that identity. But the norms of that identity have been challenged with the development of digital activism, and this study will consider how differing interpretations may affect Americans views on their potential to be activists, on - and offline

Katriel and Philipsen (1981) problematized the meaning of communication in their seminal study of the word's semantic dimensions. They considered, for instance, what is meant when a mother says of her daughter, "she don't communicate with me anymore," even though they talked all the time; and the meaning of a theater director's description of a play as being about, "contemporary humanity's failure to communicate to reach love" (p. 302). Similarly, I am interested in making problematic the meanings of activism and activist, and as part of this, examining conflicting ideas about the activist identity.

For example, what is meant by the differentiation between, "real people," and "keyboard activists," such as is described by commenter 'adamfisk' to Gladwell's Feb. 2, 2011 *New Yorker* blog post. The commenter wrote, "This [Egyptian] revolution is being carried out by real people bleeding on the ground they stand on and not by keyboard activists tweeting while they go about their daily routines." How ought activism be enacted, and what qualities define activists, when one considers commenters' assertions that: "Real change takes work and sacrifice. Gladwell's piece is a needed reminder to activists not to get lazy;" and "People tend to feel that merely commenting or retweeting or adding a ribbon to an avatar is actually doing something. Real change in the real world requires risk-taking action, but it's now possible to feel part of an activist movement without risking anything."

These questions are among those explored in the following analysis of online commenters' posts to articles and blogs about Gladwell's piece, "Small Change."

The semantic dimensions of activism

In the texts analyzed for this study, three distinctive groups of terms for "activism" and "activist" surfaced. The first includes terms such as "real activism," "face to face," "hard" and "commitment." A second group is distinguished by the use of words such as, "slacktivism," "effortless," "anyone can do it," and "low-risk." A third group involves descriptions that challenge the portraits painted by the first and second groups. Terms include: "resilient," "hard to censor," "expedites and galvanizes," and "grows consciousness."

"Real activism," "slacktivism," and "resilient," are organized in a framework of three semantic dimensions, which were arrived at through analysis of the body of texts. They are: *easy/hard*, *low-risk/high-risk*, and *undermines/supports*, which help define the normative meanings for "real activism," "slacktivism," and "resilient" activism.

The first dimension *easy/hard* suggests the amount of effort that activism and being an activist ought to involve. This dichotomy gets at classic notions of freeriding (Olson, 1968), which theorizes that when people find the costs of activism too high, they choose instead to simply benefit from others' work. This concept, the bedrock for resource mobilization theories, supports the idea that lower costs for participation and mobilization—which can include time, money, and knowledge, among other things—result in better participation. Activist efforts that are perceived as "hard" are equated with and defined as "real activism." Activist efforts that are seen as "easy" are dismissed as "slacktivism." Commenter 'charliebernstein,' in response to Stone's article in *The Atlantic*, wrote:

There's no good substitute for deep, constantly reinforced face-to-face relationships. Organizing is *hard*, arduous, multi-decade (even multi-generational) work, and the

assertion that so-called social networking is organizing is just plain insulting to skilled organizers and their organizations.

Commenter 'JulieBeeDavis,' articulated a similar position from the perspective of what's easy to do, in posting to Helfenbein's *Huffington Post* blog:

As for the legitimacy of social media activism, the medium begs for the free-rider issue of movements. The work has been done. Elsewhere. Probably not online. Simply clicking Like, ReTweet or Send Message requires less from each of us. The difference between this and the free-rider issue is only that instead of assuming that "someone else will get to solving the problem," we act effortlessly, carelessly because it's that *easy* to benefit from the cause.

A commenter representative of the third group, JebInNYC breaks free of the *easy/hard* dichotomy and suggests using the metaphor of building a house for activism, in this post to Gladwell's *New Yorker* blog:

You can build a house with wood screws and a cordless power drill, or with the same screws and an old-fashioned hand drill, such as my father had, or with only hammer and nails; there was a long period before nails were invented in which totally different methods had to be used to join wood. Nonetheless, houses have been built. The debate over Internet use in the Egyptian uprising is losing sight of the important thing, which is what's happening--the nature of the house the protesters are trying to build— and why, rather than the tools being used.

The commenter references tools, but he was also speaking to effort. Using a hammer is tougher than using a cordless power drill; imagine joining wood before there were nails? It is unlikely that building a house was as easy as with them. In essence he asks: Why not use tools that make a job easier? The house won't be any worse for the lack of effort.

Low-risk/high-risk are terms Gladwell used in the original *New Yorker* article, "Small Change," which ignited the debate surrounding the meaning of activism. A large number of commenters picked up on these terms and incorporated them into their arguments about activism.

Theoretically, levels of risk fall into resource management theory's costs, and Gladwell's use of the terms stemmed from the research of Stanford sociologist Doug McAdam, who saw a correlation between whether an activist had a personal connection to a cause—often close friends who were also involved—and a willingness to participate in activist efforts that put them in danger of bodily harm and even death. Gladwell told stories from the Civil Rights movement to underline his point. Among them: During the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964, volunteers were kidnapped, beaten, shot at, and killed, black churches were set on fire, and safe houses were bombed; additionally, four black college students were called racial epithets and threatened with violence when they dared to conduct a sit-in at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C. Without strong relationships, Gladwell argued, these dangerous protests could have never been possible. *New Yorker* blog commenter MCubed agreed, "It takes more than a tweet to get someone to stand in front of a tank, or face down water cannon." Gladwell makes several assumptions here: one is that those connected through social media don't have strong relationships with one another; another is that what counts as activism, no matter what the context, should be held to the same standard as the lunch-counter sit-in, and nothing less; and yet another is that dangerous activism looks the same everywhere, and that it is not culturally situated.

BoingBoing.net commenter W. James Au noted that the comparison between digital activism in Egypt and lunch counter sit-ins was unfair, by responding, "I usually love Gladwell, but for that piece, he was basically saying, 'Haha Twitter activists you're pussies compared to folks in the Civil Rights movement,' which would be a really lame thing to claim today." But he was quickly challenged by commenter 'mn_camera,' who wrote, "People with 'true commitment' are the ones facing police and the troops." A large number of commenters equated

the level of risk with the embodiment of how activism was communicated: keyboard embodiment equaled low-risk, while taking to the streets equaled high-risk. Only two commenters (out of 212) were adamant that social-media activism can be “high risk.” Each pointed to an instance in which Canadian activist and citizen journalist Bryon Sonne was jailed on June 22, 2010 for tweets he made before the G20 Summit. As of spring 2011, he was still being detained (Freebryon.org, 2010). Activist Tammy Tibbets, founder of She’s the First, a nonprofit that supports girls’ education in the developing world, pushed back against the very notion that all activist efforts fall into categories that must involve risk. In her blog post about Gladwell’s article, she wrote:

My activism is peaceful and a lot of the time it involves the color pink. But you know what, it’s working ... No kidnappings, no killings, no houses burning down, no bomb scares, no beating of volunteers, no arrests, no sit-ins. My question to Mr. Gladwell is, ‘When did violence become barometer for the strength of activism?’

The dimension of *undermines/supports* refers to perceptions of how the different communicative processes of activism affect the long-term outcome of activists’ goals. Digital processes are frequently described as being detrimental to the foundation of social movement efforts, as they are seen to have the potential to chip away from a body of support that may have expressed more “commitment” if these other, easier options weren’t available. This goes along with the line of thinking that if individuals are willing to get involved in a social movement, they will do what is asked of them. However, this goes against the logic that people set limits for what they’re willing to contribute, which is central to resource mobilization theory. Gladwell summed up the “undermines” position in much more black-and-white terms: He said too much agency is being placed on technology, when indeed only people are necessary for social change, and people have forgotten what power they have to effect change. He wrote:

The marvels of communication technology in the present have produced a false consciousness about the past—a sense that communication has no history, or had nothing of importance to consider before the days of television and the Internet. But there is something else at work here, in outsized enthusiasm for social media. Fifty years after one of the most extraordinary episodes in social upheaval in American history, we seem to have forgotten what activism is. (2010)

About 45 percent of commenters agreed, calling digital activism “pseudo” activism, arguing that it “discourages strong ties,” and leads to “weaker, shallower organizing” and “big losses on important issues.” Additionally, a large camp of commenters within this ‘digital activism isn’t real activism’ group, agreed that engaging in acts of digital activism, “convinces people they’ve done something, when they haven’t.” Even those supporters of digital activism hedged on this point, and differentiated between “proper” and improper levels of engagement. Consider this interaction between a commenter and Tibbets, of *She’s the First*, who illustrate the *undermines/supports* dichotomy. The commenter, Kermit, wrote:

Mm...sorry, but I’ve gotta play devil’s advocate here. Because I think your entire letter is based on a false pretext. You say:

“Why are we pitting offline action against online action?”

We’re not. Gladwell isn’t. No one is. His point is simply that for most people, social media activism is their excuse not to get up and actually do something in the physical world – the kind of action that has always been required to make a substantive difference.

He did give some examples of where social media’s alleged impact was overblown – and it was, and it continues to be – but that is not to say that it is entirely useless, or that there aren’t real success stories out there, like your experience with STF.

But there are millions, if not billions, of people utilizing social media. If even the number of people following Lady Gaga (I think it’s what, 9 million now?) were to commit themselves bodily to ANY cause. If all of them, say, were to march on Washington and demand Universal Healthcare or military intervention in Sudan, or any of numerous worthwhile causes.

If those 9 million people were to each donate a dollar to form some group to lobby Congress for any major issue, it would be a hell of a lot more useful, more powerful, than

“re-tweeting” the latest diatribe by Activist X, or “Liking it” or commenting on it in Facebook from the comfort of their livingrooms or local coffee houses.

Your success here, and others like yours, are the EXCEPTION, not the rule. For the most part, social media is one massive distraction, just another movement in the direction of immediate gratification instead of real sustained effort towards anything.

Tibbetts responded:

We can’t let ideals discount the amazing work that can be achieved when charging forth with the audience we do have engaged properly on social media. .. the same frustration could be said for the millions who sit in front of a TV screen and could be volunteering instead! Rather than talk about what people “should” do, we choose to hit the ground running with those who WILL do something.

These dimensional contrasts outlined here help make explicit the semantic tensions among the local terms “real activism,” “slacktivism,” and “resilient” activism, which have emerged with the development and evolution of pervasive digital communication technologies and their role in social movements and activist efforts. The analysis suggests that for American participants in this conversation—activists, technologists, public intellectuals, and interested laypeople—that “real activism” refers to efforts that are high risk, hard to accomplish, and support the long-term goals of social movement organizations; “slacktivism” refers to efforts that are low risk, easy to accomplish, and undermine the long-term goals of social movement organizations; and “resilient” activism refers to a hybrid of these dichotomies, which pushes back against the idea that activism has been reified into one definable thing, and that there is a “right” kind of activism for all causes. This resilient activism is “hard to censor” and gives voice to all people, especially the oppressed and underrepresented; it “expedites and galvanizes” social movements, and “grows consciousness” among large numbers of people, who may not have otherwise been exposed to a social movement’s messages.

These semantic dimensions provide a foundation to further interrogate the guiding research questions of this thesis, which are:

How is activism communicated and what meanings does it take on in the digital universe?; and

How are people in the U.S. making sense of the normative communicative processes of traditional activism and those of new, emerging forms of online activism in relation to one another?

Let us first consider the question: *How is activism communicated and what meanings does it take on in the digital universe?*

Symbolically, activism is coded in the talk of commenters in such “tangible notions” and “embodiments of ideas” as protests, facing police/arrest, and the possibility of being shot at. Commenters were clear to distinguish *where* activism and activist activities take place: out in the streets, in meeting halls, basements, churches and other houses of worship, and living rooms; *when* it takes place: slowly, sometimes spanning decades and generations; *by whom* it is enacted: hierarchical leaders, who provide vision, cohesion, and structure to groups of volunteers, who do anything that is needed; and *what* channels of communication are most important: face-to-face interaction is privileged.

However, such symbolic codes were not universal in the talk of commenters. Activism was also represented as: tweets, Kenya’s Ushahidi, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and flash mob protests; *where* it takes place can also include: online petitions, social media websites, keyboards, and mobile phones, which were said to help mobilize people ‘to the streets’; *when* it takes place: immediately, around the clock, and with urgency; *by whom* it is enacted: anyone with a computer or mobile phone; and by *what* channels of communication: mediated channels were noted for ‘giving voice’ (and a large audience) to people who might not otherwise be able

to be heard, especially the oppressed. An example of this viewpoint is illustrated by commenter 'bc_slim' wrote in response to Gladwell's *New Yorker* blog post:

Twitter, Facebook, and the internet in general, removes these barriers and erases the borders of communication. The "how" becomes the key part in the ability for people to get their message out.... Just like this comment here that I write. My disagreement (and possibly others) with this article, and my belief that Gladwell is misguided with how social media changes the fabric of communication, along with the remote chance that someone will read this and have a new perspective would not be possible if I would have needed to resort to preaching this from my rooftop or collecting my friends and marching down to the city hall in Gladwell's town. No longer is the message coming from the top down, from the corporations and government entities down to the people. My voice is now heard and all who read are welcome to agree with me, disagree with me, like me, hate me or maybe even build on my ideas to create new ones. It doesn't matter - what matters is that this platform has given me a voice where there wasn't one before. This is what social media does and this is why Egypt, and the rest of the world, needs "Twitter".

The meanings expressed by these conflicting symbolic codes were often implicit and embedded with references to historical events. The history of protests in the U.S. stretches back before the turn of the 20th century, yet these early demonstrations—such as those that brought about the creation of labor unions—are not likely to come to mind for Americans in 2011.

It is not coincidental that Gladwell, in his *New Yorker* article, contrasts digital activists with activists of 1960s-desegregation efforts in the American South; modern notions of protest in America are closely linked to the Civil Rights Movement, which was a fight for freedom and equality, two core ideals anchoring the American ethos. All American students learn about the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King, but they do not necessarily learn about the Labor Movement and Samuel Gompers, for instance. The Civil Rights Movement has been well-documented in popular American films—from *Malcolm X* starring Oscar-winner Denzel Washington to *Mississippi Burning*, which bears the subhead: 1964: When America Was at War with Itself.” American pop culture is flooded with images from 1960s protests, sit-ins, and freedom rides. Protests are easily captured on film for newspapers to print or TV stations to

broadcast. They are active and emotional. As a result, protests—and other 1960s-style processes of activism—have become imbued with meaning beyond what they are on the surface: gatherings of people demanding change. These symbols represent attitudes, judgments, and beliefs about activism. Protests become *high-risk*: you could be arrested or shot; they become difficult or *hard*: you've not only got to exert physical effort to protest, but you've got to stand up ideologically to others who oppose your views and look them in the face when you're doing it; and protests are seen as *supportive* of social movement's long-term goals: they are one step in a social change process that could take months or years. It might be assumed that if a person has enough commitment to protest, than he or she will stick along for the long haul. Why? To some degree, because this is how 1960s activism has been portrayed. However, such beliefs are simply assumptions based on one's experience of cultural practices, as is the idea that if you're serious about something, you make your demands in person. Questions of where activism takes place, how it exists temporally, who takes part in it, and its communicative channels are similarly imbued.

These elements are illustrated—and challenged—in the following exchange among commenters to the *BoingBoing* blog, in which the following post sparks a conversation about whether digital activists would have left their keyboards to take to the street if the Egyptian government hadn't shut down the Internet during the January 2011 revolution:

Commenter 1 (anon)

I'm not sure I understand. Egypt turned off the Internet. Anything happening afterwards did so without the benefit of Twitter. This seems to support Gladwell's contention that Twitter can't make these things happen.

Commenter 2 (Tonky)

I love to hate Gladwell as much as the next guy, but his New Yorker article "Small Change: Why the Revolution Won't Be Tweeted" was brilliant. He acknowledges the

influence of social media, but points out that people have been rising up without it since the beginning of time.

Insofar as Egypt is concerned, I heard an NPR reporter speculate that the younger tech savvy generation took to the streets precisely because Twitter and Facebook were shut down in anticipation of unrest. (see above ANON #5). So in other words without a BBS on which to collectively complain they went analog. Just read the article dude.

Commenter 3 (ogvor)

For the people saying 'well they just turned off the Internet so that proves Gladwell right' are kinda ignoring the fact that a government was so afraid of what social media had already done/would do to ferment revolution that they cut off the Internet.

Commenter 4 (Dave Faris)

a government was so afraid of what social media had already done/would do to ferment revolution that they cut off the Internet --- According to the conversation about the situation on tonight's [NewsHour](#), the protests were much smaller pre-internet shutdown. The numbers exploded after they shut it down

Commenter 5 (Steven Cook)

This -- what transpired on Tuesday and continued on Wednesday was essentially flash-mob protests. It was done through social media. It was done through Facebook and blogs and Twitter, in which people were communicating with each other where to go, where people were meeting up, and then suddenly...

Commenter 6 (Judy Woodruff)

And now that's been shut down, a lot of that.

Commenter 5 (Steven Cook)

And now that has been shut down. So -- but that was a much smaller crowd. Now you have a wider and deeper section of Egyptian society out on the streets. There isn't real need for coordination.

This exchange is among six American commenters, who are seeking to make sense of the premises and rules for activism. None of the commenters has personal experience with the situation in Egypt, and each is making judgments based on what he or she has learned through news accounts. The central question is: What role, if any, did social media play in the Egyptian

protests and social revolution? In this, the premises of what happened and what is good or bad are contested; additionally, commenters assess what they believe to be appropriate action under the circumstances.

The first commenter concludes that because the Internet was shut down, it's clear that social media played no role. To this, the second commenter adds that, actually, digital activists joined in, but only after the Internet was shut off and they didn't have a BBS, or bulletin board system, "on which to collectively complain," so they "went analog" and in essence became "real activists," as they took to the streets and joined the protests. In this instance, the poster equates digital activist efforts with "complaining," which in the semantic framework lines up with the dimensions of *easy to do*, *low risk*, and *undermines* long-term efforts of social movement organizations.

Subsequent posters go back and forth between arguing that social media was of little consequence and even detrimental to the Egyptian revolution, and claiming that, no, actually social media played a major role, and in fact was the tool that helped protestors organize and mobilize. The latter set of commenters' contentions falls into the semantic category of "resilient" activism, in that they upset the dichotomies of easy/hard, low risk/high risk, and undermines/supports. Digital activism becomes "both/and," in that it is both easy and hard, low-risk and high-risk, and undermines and supports.

Furthermore, commenters are divided as to *when* the digital activists became "real activists": when they left their houses to join on-the-streets protests or when they began organizing the protests using social media tools; and *how* they demonstrated their activism: through online organizing or by joining in physical solidarity on the streets of Egypt. Commenter 2 asserts that nothing resembling activism occurred until individuals left their screens and

keyboards behind to take to the streets; Commenter 5 resists this interpretation and asks: What brought people together in the first place? In fact, with pervasive digital technologies, protestors in all likelihood brought their keyboards/Internet- and text message-enabled mobile phones with them.

Coded within this talk are the rules guiding “real” activism. Normatively, activists work as a collective, guided by a leader. They protest in the streets and risk bodily harm. They’re “committed” and engage in activities that demonstrate they’re “in it for the long haul,” such as protests, marches, and face-to-face meetings in basements, meeting halls, and houses of worship. They give time, money, and “blood, sweat, and tears.”

How do these normative rules function in the digital age? For some organizations, they are perceived as being adopted wholesale and are only supplemented with social media. Commenter ‘Norah’ to the *GigaOm* blog, held up Lance Armstrong’s Livestrong campaign to improve the lives of people with cancer as an example of “real activism.” She wrote:

Lance Armstrong uses Twitter to publicize the Livestrong organization. But he also has a hierarchical leadership team in place, and Livestrong’s success depends on people donating time and money and working their butts off (literally, when we’re talking about bike races) for a cause they care very deeply about. Here in Toronto, Dave Meslin uses social media to keep people informed about electoral change initiatives. But he still needs those people to show up to meetings, and to sign up as volunteers and get involved in politics. Real change takes work and sacrifice. Gladwell’s piece is a needed reminder to activists not to get lazy.

The commenter’s final sentiment that “Gladwell’s piece is a needed reminder to activists not to get lazy,” is an important rule of American activism. Lazy people are not activists, and lazy people don’t act beyond posting tweets, Facebook status updates, and clicking for causes. How a person uses knowledge is discounted if that person does not engage his or her body in protest or other activist efforts. Typing doesn’t count.

For others, social media is seen as a powerful force that has transformed the possibilities of activism. Commenter Heidi Massey implicitly named philanthropy as a form of activism in her response to the She's the First blog, and told a story to illustrate how modern activism doesn't need to follow old norms. She wrote:

There are many of us who are enthusiastically embracing social media because we understand just how powerful these new platforms truly are. Just this past August, Citizen Effect helped coordinate nation-wide efforts to raise funds for fishermen in the gulf. Cities across the United States held benefit events on August 25th and together raised over \$10,000. We held absolutely no face to face meetings and most of us met via twitter. Those families in the Gulf who will benefit from that money certainly believe in the power of social media.

Citizen Effect, a nongovernmental organization described as “Match.com for the international development world,” allows people to give directly—not to a cause they believe in, but to a project they believe in. Dan Morrison, the organization's founder, said an, “untapped market of ‘super activists,’” inspired him to create this online platform for giving. “They don't just want to give, but want to take control of the giving process and mobilize their social networks,” Morrison said (2009). Citizen Effect is one of a growing number of online organizations that facilitate fundraising for people who seek to tap their social networks to raise money for causes close to their hearts—or in this case, to raise enough money to fund specific projects, such as the construction of village wells for clean drinking water or relief for fishermen who lost income as the result of an oil spill. This adds a tangible element of ‘I made something happen’ to giving that is unusual. There are so many needs in the world; donating money to a cause can often feel like a discouraging drop in the bucket.

Morrison deemed the efforts of fundraiser-philanthropists like Massey ‘super activism,’ but raising money to benefit the fishermen devastated by the Deepwater Horizon Gulf oil spill of

2010 was not high-risk nor necessarily hard. Neither did it fall into the categories of supportive nor undermining of long-term activist efforts because it was a short-term campaign that did not seek to bring about social change. This leads us to consider this thesis' second guiding research question:

How are people in the U.S. making sense of the normative communicative processes of traditional activism and those of new, emerging forms of online activism in relation to one another?

Commenters' descriptions of activist efforts reflect their own experiences of activism, including how they've interacted with the concept in texts: spoken, printed, broadcast, and otherwise. Commenter Massey referenced her own philanthropy as an example of, "how powerful these new platforms truly are." Embedded in her comment was background information about Citizen Effect, an organization founded by an individual who conceptualized a certain type of philanthropist as "super activist."

Gladwell's article supported normative codes of activism, as he held up historic embodiments—protests and lunch counter sit-ins—as illustrations of what activism is and contrasted it against modern embodiments—a Facebook and e-mail campaign to sign up people to an organ donor registry or tweeting about the Iran election—as illustrations of what it isn't. While many commenters, 45 percent, agreed with Gladwell (and with very few or no caveats), many commenters—more than half, 55 percent—also struggled to reconcile their experiences within the boundaries set by him, and commenters who identified themselves as activists or as having participated in activist efforts pushed back the hardest against these semantic norms.

Commenter 'jesseluna,' wrote in response to Stone's article in *The Atlantic*:

It's true that the four college students at the lunch counter were engaging in a high-danger activity at the time. But that wasn't the case for ALL that were involved in the Civil Rights movement. There were people who drove cars to support the Montgomery Bus Boycott, there were people who mimeographed flyers to attend the March on Washington and there were others who spread the word at family functions. Those actions were all part of the movement and of massive change. Twitter allows for organization, action, and information sharing. The protesters in Iran who posted YouTube videos and secretly shared pictures and video links (via Twitter DMs) to ongoing news were literally under the gun and in harm's way. Some tweeters were on the ground, others did what they could and changed their avatars in solidarity.

A dialogue between 'jesseluna' and another commenter, 'Kendra Kellogg,' referenced a Twitter campaign that they both took part in. Its purpose was to support U.S. health care reform and honor the life of Eric De La Cruz, "who passed away after not being able to receive a heart transplant because of insurance red tape and pre-existing condition clauses." Commenter 'jesseluna' made a clear link between 1960s activism—albeit the kinds of activism that Gladwell did not foreground in his article—and modern efforts to bring about change. Commenter 'Kendra Kellogg' added:

Jesse, you were there also there for Veronica's fight to save her brother life. We met on Twitter through that process. I think that the circle of activists that came together for Eric shows that "weak-ties" and "strong-ties" are not black and white. Close to a million dollars was raised to save Eric's life on Twitter. The group moved forward to with Veronica in the battle for healthcare reform, showing up with signs of support when she spoke at rallies and protests. Social media is not as simple as Gladwell wants it to be.

Indeed, commenter 'jesseluna' pointed to the complexities surrounding modern activism in noting that posting YouTube videos and photographs placed digital activists "literally under the gun and in harm's way." Americans enjoy freedom of speech, as protected by the Constitution. But that is not the case everywhere, including in Egypt during the 2011 Democratic revolution. Additionally, 'jesseluna' pointed out that tweeters were "on the ground" too, and gave credit to supporters of the revolution who, "changed their avatars in solidarity," assuming that it was all

they *could* do, rather than all they were *willing* to do. In the 21st century, activists can and often do partake in both digital efforts and in-the-streets efforts. Gladwell, and others who support his argument, chose to privilege one type of activism as vital and deem the other as unnecessary.

The either/or dichotomy was again challenged by commenter ‘Kendra Kellogg,’ who spoke to the idea of strong and weak ties. Based on her experience with the Twitter health care campaign, she wrote, it was possible to develop strong ties with other digital activists, some of whom came together at rallies and protests. While she never met commenter ‘jesseluna’ in person, she expressed in her post that that because of their common experience, they shared a connection that couldn’t be defined in such “black-and-white” terms.

Commenter ‘Gideon Rosenblatt,’ addressed this issue in a post to Ingram’s *GigaOm.com* blog from the perspective of how to better address the divide that exists between online and offline activism:

I wonder if Gladwell had any idea what kind of storm he was going to create with his piece, but I, for one, am very thankful. Why? Because this question of how online activism effects real social change is long overdue.

I’ve just left a job, where I spent the last ten years working on how to make various technologies like Twitter, Facebook, email, etc. work for social change.

My conclusion: We need better bridges between the weak ties of the Internet and the strong ties connected with face-to-face relationships. It’s time to start looking concretely at how we better connect these important kinds of relationships – the strategies, the technologies and the organizational processes.

In this commenter’s assessment, there is a need to better “bridge” the digital and offline worlds of activism. But how? He offers no suggestions even though the commenter had spent a decade dedicating his career to using online tools to bring about social change. And perhaps it is this conundrum that is at the heart of Gladwell’s claim and Americans’ confusion surrounding what

counts as activism in the digital age. People's experiences and knowledge of the world provide them different perspectives of how activism has been and how it is now. In the digital era, these two things often come into conflict, forcing individuals into a state of cognitive disequilibrium and raising questions of conduct. If activism is a speech code or a type of "social rhetoric," that governs practical knowledge about "what to feel" and "what to do," how does one proceed when norms are challenged? Does one assimilate digital activism into an old schema, such as is suggested by one commenter's interpretation of the Livestrong campaign, or must one accommodate and create a new schema, as activist Tibbetts of She's the First, advocates? The results of this analysis suggest the latter.

In considering the question, '*How is activism communicated and what meanings does it take on in the digital universe?*' the analysis of online comments revealed three semantic dimensions of activism. The first equated activism with being *high risk, hard* to accomplish, and *supportive* of long-term social movement goals. The second discursively downgraded digital activist efforts to "slacktivism," or "pseudo" activism. Unlike "real activism," "slacktivist" efforts are *low risk, easy* to accomplish, and *undermining* of long-term social movement goals. The third dimension broke the dichotomies and suggested a new schema for digital activism that recognizes that it can be both *high risk* and *low risk, hard* and *easy, supportive* and *undermining* of long-term social movement goals. More than half of commenters, 55 percent, supported the view that activism in the digital era can be "both/and," signaling a move toward more flexible and inclusive connotations. In the digital universe, activism is made sense of as something that only happens "on the ground" and "offline," but more so, it is recognized as an enactment of an identity that supports advancing social causes, offline and online. Organizing a rally via social media can be just as much an enactment of activism, as is attending the rally. Additionally, it

appears the definition of “activism” is opening up to take on meanings previously given to other, perhaps less involved, forms of public participation. For instance, several commenters named philanthropy, which falls under the Pew Charitable Trust’s definition for “civic engagement,” as a form of activism. One wrote:

What seems striking to me is his assertion that activism must somehow fit into his window of what change must look like - that there can be no change without risk, and that historically relevant activism must remain capable of threatening mortality.

It would seem he is saying that those for whom participation in activism causes mortal risk are activists that are participating in an activism that is somehow more genuine or valid. Those who donate ten cents to help rebuild Haiti are not activists at all, it would seem, but rather just dupes who have continued their pattern of being duped into knee-jerk reactions that appear to cost little and therefore mean nothing.

Other commenters argued that posting photographs and YouTube videos in an effort to raise awareness of social and humanitarian issues constituted activism. Commenter ‘medinahair’ wrote in response to Gladwell’s *New Yorker* blog post:

twitter, facebook and youtube, which threw back the curtain in the most explicit way enabled the Tunisians and then the Egyptians to gather their courage and unite against the regime regardless of the consequences

However, not all comments were so clear cut, indicating resistance to loosen normative views of activism, and who can lay claim to the activist identity. Many commenters were willing to acknowledge that digital activists’ efforts serve a purpose, but they were unwilling to raise those efforts to the level of “real activism.” Commenter ‘MNMoon’ wrote in response to Gladwell’s *New Yorker* blog post:

His conclusion is correct but the point is that by using social media, the world bears witness. Imagine if twitter was around when the Nazis moved on the Warsaw Ghetto.

Gladwell correctly defines activism, but this commenter says he misses the point of social media: It’s a useful way to raise awareness of evils in the world and prompt people to action/activism. This commenter’s interpretation of activism nicely segues into the second guiding research

question: *How are people in the U.S. making sense of the normative communicative processes of traditional activism and those of new, emerging forms of online activism in relation to one another?* Commenters' descriptions of what counts as "activism" and who earns the title of "activist," reveal how interpretations work as codes and thus bound the speech community along lines that separate, stratify, and unify individuals within the community (Saville-Troike, 2003).

Commenters were separated by translations of activism that pitted "real activism" against "pseudo" activism or "slacktivism." These same commenters were unified by their normative interpretations, which defined activism and activists as exclusive constructs. Not everyone can do it, or as Gladwell wrote, activism is not for "the faint of heart." Similarly, those commenters in the majority, who challenged traditional meanings of "activism" and "activist" were unified in their interpretations, which defined the terms as emerging and inclusive; and, as a result, this viewpoint separated the commenters from those who denied naming digital efforts as activism.

But commenters were not all at one end of the semantic spectrum or the other. They existed along a civic engagement continuum, stratified by their codes. At one end of the continuum were individuals giving money to Haiti earthquake victims and changing one's Facebook avatar in solidarity with Democratic revolutionaries in Egypt; at the other end were revolutionaries willing to give their lives for their cause. In-between, were individuals posting consciousness-raising YouTube videos, people blogging about their causes, and people using Kenya's Ushahidi, an online crowd-sourcing application that allows people to report and map eyewitness reports of violence in Kenya via text message. While the Internet—and the communicative processes it facilitates—clearly disrupt traditional conceptions of activism, this definitional rupture (Schiappi, 2003) also appears to open up possibilities for individuals to adopt activist identities where none existed before.

Interestingly, online commenters stuck with “activism” as a way to name digital efforts, even if they did so in a derisive way, such as by using the term “slacktivism.” Instead of differentiating acts such as ‘clicking’ for a cause or giving money as being other or different kinds of civic and social participation, commenters deemed them to be *types* of activism or not activism at all. Also, there was very little recognition of people taking steps toward activism, i.e., where does it begin, and naming what those steps might be. For instance, philanthropy was offered as a form of activism, rather than a less involved form of civic engagement. Also, how and why a person becomes an activist largely was not addressed in commenters’ posts, as if to say that it’s implicit and obvious: everyone knows how and why.

CHAPTER FOUR ACTIVISM AS SOCIAL CAPITAL

In this chapter, I present my interpretation of the findings, and in doing so, consider what normative challenges to the meanings of activism say about activists and other groups in society and their evolving communicative processes. In particular, I will focus on how these differing interpretations affect Americans' views on their potential to be activists, on - and offline, and how these shifts in everyday talk offer implications for the larger state of civic engagement in America.

Americans, as a whole, are civically disengaged, or so they have been roundly critiqued for their lack of involvement and interest in politics and community. Putnam documented it in *Bowling Alone* (2000) and since a national conversation about how to reengage Americans has ensued, along with scores of national and local civic engagement initiatives and programs, including at schools and universities, from Harvard University's Saguaro Seminar (which Putnam leads) to the University of Colorado-Boulder's Institute for Ethical and Civic Engagement

Much of the focus of the so-called civic engagement crisis in America, particularly Putnam's work (1995, 2000), has been concerned with the disintegration of traditional social networks and this trend's impact on the social health of communities. I look to Putnam because he charts the nation's civic engagement crisis as beginning following the 1960s, a period of heightened social movement and activist activity. He writes:

Did the movements of those years represent the cresting of a long wave of rising civic involvement And did this cycle of protest then recede, leaving behind it only professionalized and bureaucratized interest groups, still bearing the banners of social movements but deployed now as a defensive light air force, not a massed infantry for

change? Is all that remains of the proud period of deepened citizenship now captured by the camp bumper sticker—‘Nuke the gay whales for Jesus’? Or instead did the sixties produce a durable and more advanced repertoire of civic engagement, leaving as its legacy many rich new forms of connectedness, a ‘movement society’ in which ‘elite challenging’ behavior becomes perpetual, conventional, routinely deployed by advocates of many different causes? In short did the sixties mark the birth of an era or merely the climax of one? (2000, pp. 154-155).

In 2011, the social movements of the 1960s remain as a yardstick by which activism is frequently measured. Putnam asks: Did the ‘60s “mark the birth of an era or merely the climax of one”? The answer seemingly falls into the category of the latter, and given the normative expectations for activism, why wouldn’t it?

Real activism: High risk, hard to accomplish

Semantically, an American speech community of online commenters found activism to take on meanings aligning “real activism” with efforts that are high risk, hard to accomplish, and supportive of long-term social movement goals. Given this definition, activism is an exclusive endeavor for only the most capable and committed. This definition also effectively dissuades individuals from engaging in activism. How much does a person have to care about a cause to not only give of one’s time and money, but also risk bodily harm? The desegregation of the American South and today’s Democratic revolutions in North Africa may call for this kind of commitment, but does every cause?

Activist efforts of the 1960s have been fetishized in popular culture, placing the activist on a pedestal that today is both revered and reviled. Loved are the iconic leaders of the civil rights and farm workers’ movements, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez. Hated are activists such as Earth Liberation Front environmentalists, who have been jailed for acts of “economic sabotage,” such as firebombing SUV dealerships and arson in protest of urban

sprawl ("Eco-violence: The record," 2002). Yet all are activists and no one questions that semantic status.

Alternatively, online commenters aligned digital efforts one of two ways: 1.) as easy, low-risk, and undermining of social movements' long-term goals or 2.) both easy and hard, low – and high-risk, and supportive and undermining of social movement goals. The first interpretation, nicknamed 'slacktivism,' is dismissed as feel-good, do-nothing fluff for the masses. Joe and Jane Average can 'click for causes' but such actions are simply gestures that add zero to social movements' agendas, and, in fact, may be counterproductive in the long-term. But 55 percent of online commenters applauded the efforts of the second interpretation of digital activism: 'resilient' activism, which was championed as "hard to censor," and a way to not only raise consciousness of important issues but also give "voice" to all people.

Digital activism: Low risk, easy to accomplish

Unlike 1960's activism, popular narratives of digital activism are less than 15 years old. For Americans, leaders of digital efforts are hard to name, let alone envision. Instead of bringing to mind an inspirational leader, an American might associate digital activism with whom and what they know of digital media: Facebook CEO and founder Mark Zuckerberg. Online commenters did just that. One wrote:

All that social media did was to help bring attention to a revolution that was already occurring based upon the fact that the cost of living for most Egyptians had reached unacceptable levels. The people of Egypt made this happen, not Mark Zuckerberg or tons of pompous tweeters and facebookers.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, popular media depict Zuckerberg as a brilliant, yet self-serving tycoon. He was the focus of a 2010 Oscar-winning film, *The Social Network*, in which greed—not activism or advancing the public good in any way—was the film's guiding theme.

Often overlooked is the history of digital activism, perhaps because it is not widely known. One of the first early examples of digital activism was the 1999 Battle in Seattle, which brought anti-globalization protestors to demonstrate against a World Trade Organization four-day meeting. Email was used to mobilize and coordinate efforts that brought more than 40,000 people to gather and engage in acts of civil disobedience—as well as vandalism and obstruction of commerce, prompting police to storm the streets with pepper spray and rubber bullets. Anti-globalization activists widely consider the anti-WTO protests to have been a success, as the summit ended without agreement on an agenda for future trade talks. Without the WTO demonstrations, activists said that the general public would not have learned about the many destructive practices of pro-globalization corporations. Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, told the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer*, "The allegedly unstoppable force of globalization just hit the immovable object called grass-roots democracy" (Paulson, 1999).

Has globalization since become a nonissue in the world? No, in fact, neo-liberal policies that undergird globalization have become more widely embraced by world leaders in the years since. However, anti-globalization activists continue their efforts—on – and offline—and the fight persists, like so many other social movement campaigns. What's markedly different between 2011 and 1999, however, is that, "broad-based, populist political spectacles have become the norm, thanks to an evolving sense of the way in which the Internet may be deployed in a democratic and emancipatory manner by a growing planetary citizenry that is using the new media to become informed, to inform others, and to construct new social and political relations" (Kahn and Kellner, 2004, pp. 87-88). The Internet is commonly used as both a force to educate and mobilize across the globe.

Have activist efforts within the anti-globalization movement been limited to being defined as “digital activism” rather than “real activism” because so much of their organizing and consciousness-raising occurs online? No. Yet, fears persist that by endorsing the moniker of “activism” to be used for actions that take place on a keyboard, such support will dilute not only the term’s full array of meanings, but also its rules for enactment. Ethan Zuckerman, senior researcher at Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society and cofounder of Global Voices, an international community of blogger-activists, has said:

When activism is too easy, people understand that it doesn’t require much effort and therefore might not require much commitment. When someone joins the Facebook group or joins Twitter, are there other things they can do that show commitment, that shows seriousness, that show they’re being thoughtful about this? Getting people to write about your cause, get people to blog about your cause, getting people to do things in the real world as well as online, whether it’s making phone calls or sending letters or getting people to show up in person. These are all currencies that might be more valuable than online currencies (Francois, 2010).

While digital activism can be tied to events ranging from the Battle in Seattle to the political revolts in Moldova and Iran in 2009, and later in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, it continues to be greatly differentiated from activism’s historic communication processes. One reason may stem from digital activism’s link to online “cause” campaigns that ask Facebook friends to change their avatars to cartoon characters, or to celebrities that “sell their digital lives” to benefit a charity. What counts as “digital activism” represents a broad range of activities, while what counts as traditional activism represents a narrow range of activities. The old methods are tried and true, and the new methods are often held in suspicion because they represent what is largely unknown—and what is known (Zuckerberg, friending, liking, and retweeting) doesn’t fit into the cognitive schema of historic activism.

'Resilient' activism

New meanings of activism are represented in accounts of digital activism, both 'resilient' and 'slacktivist.' Many commenters were quick to slam so-called 'slacktivists,' but they did so without considering how one could progress from clicking for a cause one day, to pledging money another day, to volunteering for an event benefitting that cause on yet another day. Instead, "easy" activism was equated with laziness and with holding the potential to dilute and even undermine social movement goals.

I return to the definition of civic engagement by the Pew Charitable Trusts (2006) provided in Chapter One:

Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic Engagement can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.

This definition does not directly address "activism," yet based on online commenters' sense-making of activism, I argue that activism exists along a continuum. This continuum is represented in the above description of civic engagement's "forms," from volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation, among other things. Putnam asked whether 1960's activism left a legacy of,

many rich new forms of connectedness, a 'movement society' in which 'elite challenging' behavior becomes perpetual, conventional, routinely deployed by advocates of many different causes? (2000, p. 154-155)

Or did the era only leave behind, "professionalized and bureaucratized interest groups"? I look to what exists between those two extreme choices. Putnam theorized that joining social and civic groups is the gateway to civic engagement, as it helps build important ties that serve as a vital

social safety net for people. This idea is situated in social capital theory, which says that networks of acquaintances and friends have value, “just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective).” Similarly, social contacts can “affect the productivity of individuals and groups” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Why? Putnam wrote that norms of “reciprocity and trustworthiness” are built into relationships, or, in other words, people return acts of kindness and trust. As part of this, two subsets of social capital exist: bonding and bridging capital, which correspond to the strong and weak social ties so prominent in Gladwell’s *New Yorker* article. Bonding capital “reinforces exclusive identities and homogenous groups,” such as belonging to exclusive clubs, while bridging capital networks “are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Gladwell associated ‘real activism’ with strong ties; ‘slacktivism’ with weak ties. ‘Resilient’ activism is described as not being that clearly defined.

In Chapter Three, I quoted commenter, ‘Kendra Kellogg,’ who referenced a Twitter campaign in support of U.S. health care reform and to honor the life of Eric De La Cruz, “who passed away after not being able to receive a heart transplant because of insurance red tape and pre-existing condition clauses.” The commenter described the relationships she formed with other online activists:

Jesse, you were there also there for Veronica's fight to save her brother life. We met on Twitter through that process. I think that the circle of activists that came together for Eric shows that "weak-ties" and "strong-ties" are not black and white. Close to a million dollars was raised to save Eric's life on Twitter. The group moved forward to with Veronica in the battle for healthcare reform, showing up with signs of support when she spoke at rallies and protests. Social media is not as simple as Gladwell wants it to be.

Activism as relational social capital: Strong and weak ties

Activism as a set of communicative practices has historically been closely tied to interpersonal relationships. Activist activities aren't typically thought of as solitary, but as activities of solidarity with others, with whom one has friendships or interests in common. As it is portrayed historically, activism is about being a part of something special—with others, in shared experiences. In "Small Change," Gladwell described the relationship among the four black freshmen from North Carolina A&T College, David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair and Joseph McNeil, who "sat-in" at the Greensboro, N.C. lunch counter:

McNeil was a roommate of Blair's in A.&T.'s Scott Hall dormitory. Richmond roomed with McCain one floor up, and Blair, Richmond, and McCain had all gone to Dudley High School. The four would smuggle beer into the door and talk late into the night in Blair and McNeil's room. They would all have remembered the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, the Montgomery bus boycott that same year, and the showdown in Little Rock in 1957. It was McNeil who brought up the idea of the sit-in at Woolworth's. They'd discussed it for nearly a month. Then McNeil came into the dorm room and asked the others if they were ready. There was a pause, and McCain said, in a way that works only with people who talk late into the night with one another, "are you guys chicken or not?" Ezell Blair worked up the courage the next day to ask for a cup of coffee because he was flanked by his roommate and two good friends from high school.

Such interpersonal ties—strong ties versus weak—are credited with bringing people together to face adversity and bring about social change that could not be possible otherwise. Gladwell further illustrates this point by telling another story, this time about an instance of when social media helped solve a seemingly impossible problem: a Silicon Valley entrepreneur developed acute myelogenous leukemia and needed a bone-marrow transplant, but was unable to find a match among friends and family. Her business partner sent a chain email explaining the situation to more than 400 personal contacts. He asked them to sign-up for the bone-marrow registry database. Those contacts then forwarded it on to their contacts, who then posted it to their Facebook pages and created YouTube videos to help the woman in need. More than 25,000 new

people signed-up for the donor registry, and the woman found a match. Gladwell wrote that signing up for the registry was easy: all you needed was a cheek swab and to possibly spend two hours or so in a doctor's office. If you're a match, he wrote:

donating a bone marrow isn't a trivial matter. But it doesn't involve financial or personal risk; it doesn't mean spending a summer being chased by armed men in pickup trucks. It doesn't require that you confront socially entrenched norms and practices. In fact, it's the kind of commitment that will bring only social acknowledgement and praise. The evangelists of social media don't understand this distinction; they seem to believe that a Facebook friend is the same thing as a real friend and that signing up for a donor registry in Silicon Valley today is activism in the same sense as sitting at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro in 1960.

Angus Johnson, a historian of student activism and founder of StudentActivism.net, wrote of Gladwell's example of the national bone marrow registry:

Gladwell cites this as an example of an effort that go people to sign up 'by not asking too much of them,' and on one level, that's correct. It takes minimal effort to click over to a website and type in your address, and not much more to swab your cheek and return the kit they send you. It's easy – but most people still don't bother. Most people need a goad. And if that's all this had been, a goad to get people to do something easy and important, it would have been great. It was quite a bit more than that, though, because actually donating bone marrow *isn't* easy. It involves a doctor drilling a hole into your pelvis. It's usually done under general anesthetic. The pain can persist for several weeks. And in a not-insignificant number of cases, serious complications can result. Yes, of course, it's easy – or at least easy-ish – to get someone to fill out a web form, and yes, of course, online communities do an excellent job encouraging that kind of low-cost "activism." But as every true activist knows, that first contact with a like-minded soul is the beginning of the process, not the end.

Johnson calls becoming an activist a "process." A person doesn't magically transform from ordinary person to activist the minute he or she joins a protest on the street. Activism, according to Johnson's definition, exists along a spectrum of public participation. 'Resilient' activism, as digital activism was defined by a majority of online commenters, is part of this spectrum or continuum: It gives voice to people in a myriad of ways, which can lead to outcomes, such as was experienced by the Silicon Valley entrepreneur, who needed a bone marrow transplant.

Gladwell and supporters of his argument refuse to acknowledge that there can be many shades of activism, requiring different kinds of relationships and levels of involvement.

Why do such semantic tensions exist? Because activism is taking on new meanings that encourage other, and, perhaps, lesser levels of social and civic engagement that recognize the individual as well as the collective's contributions, and the pragmatic goals of activism as well as the dramatic, big-change goals. Every day, more is being learned about how the communicative processes enabled by the Internet are changing how we make sense of and, ultimately, live the world. One thing, however, is undisputed: Digital forums such as Facebook and Twitter expose people to an array of issues—including those involving politics and social causes—that individuals may not have otherwise considered. Is it “real activism” when somebody clicks to show support for a cause or enter these social and civic conversations, but does nothing else? Perhaps not—at least not yet. Meanings are constantly being reconsidered and revised in the everyday talk of people, whose discourses of activism shape normative meanings.

Currently, Americans are grappling with new uses of the words “activism” and “activist” and in doing so, they consider symbols representing these terms, what meanings they hold, the premises they're based upon, and rules for action they hold. In this process of sense-making comes an inevitable questioning of oneself's potential to be an activist or engage in activism. If it's “easy,” and “low-risk” why not show support for a cause you believe in? Costs, as resource mobilization theories argue, are a deterrent to activism. If an effort must be “hard” and “high risk,” that constrains an individual's ability and/or willingness to participate. I contend that when the definitions of activism are opened up to other possibilities, so are the opportunities for participation, and that these normative challenges shed light on how activist groups adapted to a digital world, as, in the course of doing so, a large number of them leveraged the term “activism”

rather than other less sexy terms—such as ‘civic engagement’ or ‘public participation’—to attract supporters and serve their particular interests.

Today’s digital activists

It’s perhaps not surprising that if you open an Internet browser and type in the phrase, “How to become an online activist” more than 3.3 million results are returned. Swap in the more popular term ‘digital activist’ and 23 million come back. Organizations from Greenpeace to American Majority solicit individuals to “get involved” and assist in online campaigns, ultimately with the hope begin their involvement online with eventually help in other capacities. American Majority, a “grassroots political training organization for conservative candidates and activists engaging at the state level,” tells potential online activists on its Web site,

While there’s *nothing* like face-to-face interaction with voters, sometimes not everyone can be reached. Supplementary reinforcements that help spread the word about a candidate or cause, such as online activism, have become increasingly important in today’s fast-paced, digital world.

Online activism is “increasingly important” people are told, but not as important as face-to-face efforts, or in other words: If online is all you can commit to, that’s fine, but not ideal.

Rootwork.org community organizer Ivan Boothe wrote, “The methods and tactics of online activists—be they individuals or international nonprofits with hundreds of staff—are drawn on social change movements and community organizing strategies that have been tried, experimented with, failed, tweaked, and tried again, long before the Internet was invented” (2010).

Yet, digital activism is realized in a number of ways that were not possible—or even conceived of—before the widespread use of the Internet. Additionally, the communicative processes of online activism are ever-changing and aren’t necessarily less effective than

traditional processes, according to new research. DigiActive.org, a volunteer-run organization that helps grassroots activists everywhere use the Internet and mobile phones to increase their reach, lists 18 digital activist “tools,” with corresponding case studies. Among them are social networking sites such as Twitter, which victims of the 7.0-magnitude Haiti earthquake in January 2010 used to instantly spread information, including video and photos, of the devastation and ultimately connect those in need of help with the right people and organizations; similarly, organizations such as the Red Cross employed text messaging as a means to quickly raise money for needy Haitians.

In countries, such as Cuba, where the Internet isn’t widely available—or is outlawed all together—flash drives have been used to share politically sensitive information from computer to computer. In a story about flash-drive activism, the *New York Times* reported in March 2008:

Last month, students at a prestigious computer science university videotaped an ugly confrontation they had with Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the National Assembly.... The video spread like wildfire through Havana, passed from person to person, and seriously damaged Mr. Alarcón’s reputation in some circles.

Something similar happened in late January when officials tried to impose a tax on the tips and wages of employees of foreign companies. Workers erupted in jeers and shouts when told about the new tax, a moment caught on a cellphone camera and passed along by memory sticks.

“It passes from flash drive to flash drive,” said Ariel, 33, a computer programmer.... “This is going to get out of the government’s hands because the technology is moving so rapidly.” (McKinley, 2008)

More commonly, activists use social networking sites to build online communities, which can be mobilized to participate in online and offline activities from fundraising to protesting; they blog and create videos to raise awareness of campaigns and causes; and they circulate electronic petitions and mass emails. These activities are not unlike sending direct-mail calls to action, posting fliers, creating phone trees, collecting petition signatures on the street, and writing letters

to the editors of print newspapers and magazines. The effectiveness and value of these methods are often questioned, and due to the newness of many of these techniques, it has been difficult to truly know which work toward advancing causes' missions and which don't. As a result, it has been easy for critics to discursively downgrade digital activist efforts, nicknaming them, "slacktivism," "clicktivism," "armchair activism," and "keyboard activism," calling their worthiness into question.

Definitional rupture

How words are defined is a political endeavor and a reflection of the social construction of reality. Schiappa coined "how we talk about particular definitions" as "definitive discourse" (2003, p. xi). Such talk defines terms, he said, "whether in an explicit discourse about a definition, discourse that argues from a particular definition or discourse that stipulates a view of reality via an argument by definition" (p. xi). While for the most part, words are defined by their dictionary or lexical definitions, "definitional rupture" can occur when a standard definition is rejected by a large number of language users; this can happen when "the dictionary is outdated" or the dictionary "doesn't know how people are using the word now" (Schiappi, 2003, p. 10). The communication processes being deployed to advance activist causes are evolving so rapidly, it is nearly impossible to keep up to date on what counts as activism in the digital era.

Activist organizations are most culpable for creating this "definitional rupture." They're creating Web pages titled "Become a Digital Activist" – not "Become an Engaged Citizen"—to recruit people to spread the word about their causes. They're using flash drives to spread messages from computer to computer. They're uploading videos to YouTube to document human rights abuses around the world, spotlight tensions between the Burmese military and

ethnic minorities, and raise awareness of persistent American social issues, such as homelessness (Raghavan, 2009). They're blogging, tweeting, and updating their Facebook statuses to inform and enlighten others about issues they care about—as well as to engage them in conversations about these issues. They send clicktivist email petitions and form letters. They're creating Facebook pages, where people gather virtually to share information and organize revolutions (Ghonim, 2011).

However, even if activists were the ones who started stretching the meanings of activism, now they're not the only ones shaping the word's evolving definitions. Individuals—with or without activist connections—are creating their own campaigns and contributing in their own ways. They're asking Facebook friends to change their avatars to cartoon characters to highlight the problem of child abuse; celebrities are “selling their digital lives” to benefit the AIDS/HIV charity Keep a Child Alive; they're clicking to “sign” email petitions and forms (and doing nothing else) *and* they're responding to other digital calls to action, including showing up at flash mobs, rallies, and protests.

What does it all mean? Ultimately, activist groups' and others' digital efforts are cultivating a new kind of activist identity that gives license to ordinary people to “click for causes” and, perhaps, even progress further along the civic engagement continuum in their shows of support. Some Americans will continue to dismiss so-called “slacktivist” activities as lazy, easy, low-risk and undermining. This demarcates activism as something exclusive, only for those who are not, as Gladwell wrote, “faint of heart.” But others, such as Tibbetts of She's the First, will continue to contest such clear-cut generalizing and promote that people who are willing to give a little, ought to do so, opening up activism's meanings to be more inclusive and flexible. Tibbetts' comment, “Rather than talk about what people ‘should’ do, we choose to hit

the ground running with those who WILL do something,” spoke to Shirky’s endorsement of social networks’ ability to aggregate and Garrett’s (2006) theory of microcontributions. Shirky wrote, “instead of convincing people who care a little to do more, you can convince people who care a little to do a little” (2008, p. 181). Indeed.

New research on digital activism

With digital activism in its infancy, the debate over whether it carries the same civic weight and meanings as offline activism rages on. Even those who advocate digital activism remain reluctant to fully back its value, seemingly for fear of losing traditions, tried-and-true methods—and perhaps most of all, the “committed” activists of bygone eras and today, who are often characterized as selfless givers of time, money, and connections in contrast to the selfish clicktivists and slacktivists of the Internet.

Mary Joyce, founder of DigiActive.org and the Meta-Activism Project, seemingly would be a digital activism cheerleader. She worked behind the scenes of the successful 2008 Obama presidential campaign as new media operations manager, and has been a digital activism consultant for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as for the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, where she was a master’s student at its Kennedy School of Government. However, she carefully qualified the meaning of “success” in digital activism, in an interview published online at ReadWriteWeb.com:

In almost all of the famous cases of digital activism ‘success’—the post-election mobilizations in Iran and Moldova in 2009 or the 2008 general strike in Egypt— while activists did successfully mobilize using social media, they did not achieve their campaign goal, be it to overturn an allegedly fraudulent election result or the wide range of social and political reforms demanded by strike organizers. (MacManus, 2010)

While the means of activism are most discussed and contested, the desired ends are often left largely open to interpretation and assumption. Joyce spoke of Iranian and Moldovian digital activists' campaign goals, such as to overturn an election result or realize "social and political reforms." She deemed them unsuccessful because in the short-term, the goals have yet to be realized. One must ask: Were these the only goals of activists? Additionally, in the semantic framework of activism norms, activism is defined as a long-term *supportive* endeavor that can span decades and even generations. Why must public intellectuals set the bar higher for digital activists' efforts?

Joyce's voice join a chorus of those who, while embracing and studying how the Internet and pervasive digital technologies can be used to effect social change, also caution against *only* participating in civic life by way of the Internet. They say it is not "real activism" to support causes in this manner alone. This semantic norm, as demonstrated in the talk of online commenters, however, is facing increasing challenges. Until recently, there was little research to combat such claims.

Shulman (2009) was among the first to embark on a large scale review of a so-called clicktivism technique, the mass-email campaign, and ultimately critiqued it, arguing that such "low-quality" online mobilizations were less effective than other more traditional efforts and crowded out well-thought-out public comments to the detriment of the Democratic process. Such campaigns typically involve circulating a form letter via email, which advocate a certain position or cause. The recipient can choose to "sign" with a click, and the letter is forwarded to the email of the appropriate legislator. These form letters can be personalized, but most often recipients simply click and move on, lowering the costs of participation, as the recipient need not spend much time or effort learning more about the cause or penning his or her own letter. Karpf (2010)

has since challenged Shulman's claim using a new quantitative dataset—his Membership Communications Project, which consists of six months of email activity from 70 prominent advocacy groups.

Based on his research, Karpf argues that mass emails are little different than photocopied and faxed petitions and postcards of analog activism of the past. Additionally, he places the email campaigns in context of a social movement's constellation of strategies: it is but one of many, and leaves little room for predictions that such forms of activism cultivate apathy.

In direct opposition to claim that digital activism breeds apathy is a Pew Research Center report (Rainie, Smith, and Purcell, 2011) that links Internet use and civic engagement. Its results show 75 percent of all American adults—and a larger proportion of Internet users, 80 percent, versus 56 percent of non-Internet users—are active in some kind of voluntary group or organization. Social media users, as a group, are even more likely to be joiners, with 82 percent of social network users and 85 percent of Twitter users, citing their participation in groups. Another study by the University of California's Humanities Research Institute (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2011) found a strong link between Internet use and social and civic engagement. The study involved 2,500 high school students, tracking 400 of them over 3.5 years, and found that youth involved in online communities were more likely to volunteer, do charity work, and get involved in community issues. "Both in the U.S. and abroad, so much civic and political life is online. We've got to pay attention to new media when we think about civic learning," said Mills College professor Joe Kahne, the primary author of the study, in a press release from the MacArthur Foundation, which funded the research. "Research demonstrates that many youth are disengaged from traditional forms of civic and political life but are very engaged with new

media. Our study findings strongly suggest that there are ways to build on their engagement with digital media to foster engagement in civic life,” Kahne said.

Also challenging semantic norms are the communicative processes of activism, which continue to reflect changes brought about by the Internet. This thesis asks:

How does online activism and its related communication processes disrupt normative meanings of activism?

Fast, cheap, and widely available communication channels have changed the nature of ‘collective action’ so that it is no longer primarily situated in organized groups, but also can be characterized as ‘aggregated action,’ or expressions of support as demonstrated by disconnected aggregates representative of individual viewpoints. A rapidly changing mediascape allows individuals to communicate their messages with little or no filter, meaning that mainstream media is no longer necessary for spreading social movement and social movement organization messages or lending legitimacy to causes. Social movements have always been “out-groups,” working outside of institutions. The Internet, however, offers sanctuary for all voices, through social networks, organizational websites, alternative news outlets, and blogs. Additionally, the Internet facilitates interaction and feedback that traditional media have not been able to until the 1990s.

Traditional theory posits that social movements and social movement organizations must have leaders and these leaders emerge naturally, as they are best at articulating a movement’s cause. Gladwell quoted Aldon D. Morris, the author of “The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement,” (1984), who described how African American churches were at the center of the Civil Rights Movement. Ministers, Morris said, assigned groups and standing committees, and held individuals accountable for their duties. Hierarchy, like that which exists in the military,

was said to keep a social movement's momentum in check. Leaders planned and orchestrated actions, with a larger goal of systemic change in mind. They provided vision, lifted morale, and persuaded people to stick with the cause.

Yet neither strong ties, nor hierarchy are so cut and dried in the life of social movements. A commenter to Helfenbein's *Huffington Post* blog, referred to a recent *Wired* magazine blog post, in which the writer Jonah Lehrer looked to the work of sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) on weak ties. The commenter quoted from the blog:

While Gladwell argues that the flat hierarchies of online networks are a detriment to effective activism — he cites the leaderless P.L.O. as an example — Granovetter points out that leaders of social movements often depend on weak ties to maintain loyalty. He notes that organizations dominated by strong ties tend to produce fragmentation and cliquishness, which quickly leads to the breakdown of trust.

This suggests that part of the reason Martin Luther King was able to inspire such discipline among a relatively large group of followers was that he cultivated a large number of weak ties. As a result, people felt like they trusted him, even though they barely knew him. (2010)

In *Persuasion and Social Movements* (Stewart, Smith, and Denton, 2007), the authors wrote that leadership is “more structured than a naked power relationship and less structured than an authority relationship associated with an organizational position;” The leader, “at best controls an organized core of the movement (frequently mistaken for the movement itself) but exerts relatively little influence over a relatively larger number of sympathizers in its periphery” (pgs. 114-115).

In the digital era, networked individualism (Barry Wellman, et al., 2006) asserts that hierarchies of home, work, and elsewhere have been flattened to allow for the opinions and small contributions of many to accumulate. Social media allows loosely structured groups to operate without managerial direction and profit motive in order to mobilize and organize themselves,

blurring private and public boundaries and leveraging their own and others' private information. This recent flattening of hierarchies represents a significant change because no longer are movement leaders chosen for their public speaking and organizational skills. Often they are chosen as a result of their personal networks and technological skills, and they share their leadership responsibilities with many others. Instead of there being one prominent "face" of a movement, such as a Martin Luther King, Jr., for civil rights, or Gloria Steinem for feminism, movements are represented by several prominent figures, who may change day to day, rather than generation to generation.

Historical social movements have focused on making sweeping systemic changes, while contemporary American social movements have become more pragmatic. Tarrow (2005) argues that the Internet allows for middle-man skipping "brokerages," cutting out the need for organizations to connect and manage likeminded individuals. In the 21st century, connections are often made to people, not places—and mobilization, not organization, has become the name of the game. As a result, social movements have begun focusing more on practical accomplishments, such as the ability to mobilize resources and influence policy and elections, much to the chagrin of Gladwell, among others. Often, these are not high-risk propositions, nor do they typically call for large-scale structural or systemic change. But that doesn't mean they aren't part of a larger plan of smaller, more pragmatic actions to bring those kinds of "big" changes about.

Social movement theory has long focused on the problem of freeriding, yet in today's Internet era, (with few exceptions) there is little reason for individuals to stand on the sidelines of many American social causes, given the cost of participation is low, if non-existent. There are places and roles for "true believers," who put their reputations and livelihoods on the line by

marching and protesting for the causes they believe in. But how many people are willing to participate at that level?

Given evolving communication processes and the ever-expanding possibilities for social movement participation, one is pressed to ask: Must “real activism” carry meanings such as high-risk, difficult, and always supportive of long-term social movement goals, as Gladwell and others suggest, to preserve the historic moral weight and rules for acting that come with the term? Or is it also desirable for activism’s meanings to further shift into the semantic realm of “resilient” activism, which is interpreted as flexible and inclusive of many types of action?

The answer, based on this study of online commenters, supports a desire for activism to be more semantically inclusive. A majority of commenters took the view that if a person is *willing* to give of themselves—financially, intellectually, physically, or otherwise—it should be acknowledged as a *kind* of legitimate activism.

Limitations

Given its limited scope, this study of online commenters provides only a snapshot of how Americans are making sense of activism in the digital era. While Malcolm Gladwell is a *New York Times* best-selling author and well-known cultural commentator, his original article, “Small Change,” likely reached a limited audience of well-educated, mostly liberal Americans. As a result, the audience for the resulting online conversation about activism that followed the article’s publication was similarly limited to those who 1.) read the article 2.) read articles and blog posts written in response to the article. That said, the online comments provide evidence that some Americans are interested in engaging in a discussion about appropriate modes of civic conduct and activism, which demonstrates a value for these kinds of activities, if not a desire to engage in them.

The Internet and related pervasive technologies used for digital activism are new within the last 15 years. Digital media continue to evolve and offer individuals new ways to connect and engage with others across time and space. Because of this, communication researchers continue to grapple with how to best study online communication. Katriel and Philipsen, in their 1981 metadiscourse analysis of “communication,” spent a year observing the lives of several people to conduct their study. The lives of two women served as case studies and primary texts for the study; the researchers observed them and interviewed them. Katriel and Philipsen also reviewed diaries kept by the women. A more in-depth study of the meanings of “activism” and “activist” might also involve such research techniques, but adapted to account for online talk, which is significantly different than face-to-face conversations.

In the digital world, it is common for individuals to post only one comment. Online “conversations” among commenters involve an interplay of texts, and it is not always clear to whom a commenter is responding. Long pauses and gaps occur between comments, which may hold meaning or not. A person must make sense of other commenters’ words without the help of tone of voice, prosody, pauses, and other conversational markers. However, emoticons, capitalizations, and other written forms of expressing tone and meaning can aid interpretation.

You might ask: Why study online talk if it is so hard to decipher? Conversations are taking place online in a way that they aren’t offline. People who comment do so in order to engage in debate with individuals they may or may not know. Commenters are actively seeking out other people’s thoughts and feelings on topics, most likely in an attempt to refine or validate their own thoughts and feelings. Does that mean all research on online talk needs to take place in the digital world? I do not believe so. A more in-depth study certainly could involve interviews

with commenters and other face-to-face techniques to more fully investigate the semantic dimensions and cultural connotations of “activism” and “activist.”

Conclusion

In America and beyond, people are online: nearly a third of the world’s population has an Internet connection. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2011) noted in a speech on Internet freedom that “increasingly, we are turning to the Internet to conduct important aspects of our lives. The Internet has become the public space of the 21st century—the world’s town square, classroom, marketplace, coffeehouse, and nightclub. We all shape and are shaped by what happens there, all 2 billion of us, and counting.”

The Internet offers gathering places where people—representative of a wide spectrum of ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses—discuss what matters to them. These online “third places” allow individuals to reach likeminded others (as well as those with differing viewpoints) in ways never before possible. The Internet’s communicative powers account for why this medium and its associated tools have been credited for revolutions in Iran, Moldova, Egypt and Tunisia, as well as here on U.S. soil. Would the Tea Party exist in 2011 if Twitter hadn’t facilitated a lightning-fast, widespread backlash against the Obama administration’s \$787 billion economic stimulus package in 2009? Would the 2011 labor protests in Wisconsin have persisted without the aid of online campaigns and new media tools that mobilized supporters and kept them updated on the latest developments?

Without a doubt, the Internet is a revolutionary force in the world of activism and social movements. This study of online commenters’ metatalk adds to the conversation insights as to how public discourse is defining and reshaping the norms and values surrounding activist efforts in the 21st century.

While Putnam (1995, 2000, 2008) charted a decline in national civic engagement, this study suggests that Americans are not only interested in talking about what it means to be civically engaged, but they're also reconceptualizing what it means in the digital era. Public intellectuals such as Gladwell seek to guide and shape the national conversation on what activism is and isn't, but thanks to the Internet, the talk of ordinary people may carry just as much—if not more—weight in how social change is made sense of and brought about. The Internet's online forums give license to people to weigh in on issues of political importance, including how terms and identities ought to be defined. Polletta wrote that “talk helps people consider the possibilities open for social change,” (2002, p. 1) and that point is salient when considering the outcomes of this study.

A majority of online commenters rejected the notion that activism is always *high risk* and *hard* to accomplish. This normative framework constructs an activist identity that is exclusive and limited to the few people committed enough to risk jail and/or bodily harm for a cause. Putnam asked in *Bowling Alone* if 1960s activism left a legacy of, “many rich new forms of connectedness, a ‘movement society’ in which ‘elite challenging’ behavior becomes perpetual, conventional, routinely deployed by advocates of many different causes?” (2000, p. 154-155). Instead, perhaps, portrayals of 1960s activists constructed a legacy identity of activism unattainable for most Americans. Few people imagine they are as capable a leader as Martin Luther King, Jr., or as courageous as the four young men who staged the Woolworth's lunch-counter sit-in. Not everyone wants to engage in “challenging behavior,” as Putnam described activism. But should that preclude individuals from entering the realm of civic engagement from another point along the spectrum? A majority of online commenters conceptualized digital activism as more flexible and inclusive, a reflection of what people were

willing to give, rather than what they *should* give. This both conforms with and conflicts with theories of resource mobilization, which link lower costs to higher rates of participation.

Commenters recognized that costs aren't the only motivation to work toward a public good:

Many people want to give what they can. Commenter and healthcare activist 'jesseluna' wrote:

The protesters in Iran who posted YouTube videos and secretly shared pictures and video links (via Twitter DMs) to ongoing news were literally under the gun and in harm's way. Some tweeters were on the ground, others did what they could and changed their avatars in solidarity.

Interestingly, grassroots activists seemingly are at least partly to blame for the activism's definitional rupture. As they recruit ordinary people to "Become Digital Activists," traditional activists assist in the reshaping of activism's cultural connotations, despite caveats that insist that true activism cannot occur *only* online. Activists chose to use the word "activist" rather than "engaged citizen" or other, more nuanced terms to recruit supporters.

The rise of the Internet and its accompanying pervasive digital technologies are changing many of activism's accepted processes and "truths," perhaps most of all, who might consider themselves to an activist. Reingold's smart mobs (2002) allow diverse people with overlapping interests to join alliances, whether fleeting or sustained. Former Microsoft sociologist Marc Smith said, "more people pooling resources in new ways' is the history of civilization in ... seven words" (Reingold, 2002, p. 31). This study of online commenters' talk about activism illustrates that, indeed, people see the value in aggregating resources and that there's nothing wrong with people who "care a little" only doing "a little" (Shirky, 2008, p. 181). In fact, the majority of online commenters cared little about differentiating between levels of activism, or civic engagement, for that matter. While 45 percent of commenters were adamant that activism fit historic normative criteria, most commenters saw no point in strict semantic boundaries.

Fundraising, mobilizing volunteers, raising awareness of causes, as well as posting YouTube videos, photos and video links were all named as legitimate “activism” rather than shades of the less sexy “public participation” or “civic engagement.”

Seemingly, civic engagement and activism bleed together in the digital era, beginning with steps toward public participation, such as re-tweeting of articles of political interest and sharing politically relevant YouTube videos, acts which Marichal (2010) coined as *microactivism*. “These acts reflect micro-level intentions and are not necessarily geared towards mobilization like more traditional forms of digital activism,” he wrote (p. 1).

Ethnographers of communication ask: How are words used as vehicles to segregate and divide people into social categories? In this study, it appears the category of activism was made larger, encouraging individuals to enter the civic engagement continuum via their keyboards, perhaps first by engaging in political discussions, clicking for causes, and texting donations. In the digital era, time will tell whether such discourses and attitudes lead to greater civic engagement and thus support Twitter co-founder Biz Stone’s contention that, “Lowering the barrier to activism doesn’t weaken humanity, it brings us together and it makes us stronger” (2010).

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