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# Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web

Edited by  
Martha McCaughey



# Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web

Cyberactivism already has a rich history, but over the past decade the participatory web—with its decentralized information/media sharing, portability, storage capacity, and user-generated content—has reshaped political and social change. *Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web* examines the impact of these new technologies on political organizing and protest across the political spectrum, from the Arab Spring to artists to far-right groups. Linking new information and communication technologies to possibilities for solidarity and action—as well as surveillance and control—in a context of global capital flow, war, and environmental crisis, the contributors to this volume provide nuanced analyses of the dramatic transformations in media, citizenship, and social movements taking place today.

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# **Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web**

**Edited by Martha McCaughey**

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# Introduction

## Cyberactivism 2.0: Studying Cyberactivism a Decade into the Participatory Web

*Martha McCaughey*

Ten years ago, I wanted to assemble the chapters in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* to highlight the exciting noncommercial, activist uses of the Internet. Much of the scholarly work published back then had dealt with online communities and online identities, but not political and social change online. In 2003, *Cyberactivism* brought together essays that discussed the nature and significance of Internet use by activists, social-movement organizations, and grassroots groups seeking various forms of social transformation.

Much has changed since then, and *Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web* captures these recent changes. First, in the last decade a great deal more scholarship has been published about social-change efforts online. Second, the new technological developments themselves necessitate new studies of social and political action: Twitter, Facebook, BuzzFeed, and other social networking systems; wikis, YouTube, and other user-generated content; podcasting, blogging, vlogging, and e-books; geospatial technologies; artistic practices in digital media; the convergence of old and new media; mobile devices and their apps; and the intense battles over who should have what sorts of control over which technologies and which information. Third, new information and communication technologies offer scholars a wealth of new opportunities to study movement structures, participants, and tactics. Finally, the web itself is populated with far more people and thus more diverse opinions, languages, and approaches to the web than in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Today, the decentralized information/media sharing, portability, storage capacity, collaboration, and user-generated content we've come to expect from the web are not restricted to the die-hard computer nerds. As Ethan Zuckerman puts it, "Web 1.0 was invented to allow physicists to share research papers. Web 2.0 was created to allow people to share pictures of cute cats."<sup>1</sup> As Zuckerman notes, the tools used for "cute cat" purposes are being used by a smaller number of people for activist purposes. The developments and possibilities of Web 2.0 have also been exploited for commercial purposes because consumers help build a business online by "liking" or "pinning" something they find online, making promotional

videos go viral, and receiving advertisements targeted to their individual web-browsing activity. Yet, as in every era, activists are using whatever communication technologies exist to share their grievances with as many people as possible and to mobilize as many people as possible around those grievances.

Web 2.0 has facilitated the creation and spread of content, changing social-movement activism and organizing. That activism may be focused on digital rights themselves, on broad social issues such as economic inequality or identity-based rights, or on a very specific, local matter of concern. Whether they are Americans organizing the Occupy Wall Street protests or Egyptians tweeting in the streets during the revolution that same year, movement participants are recognizing and expressing grievances, and organizing resistance, through the information and communication technologies that are now widely available, portable, and participatory.

The essays in this volume show that the web is a standard tool for organizers, not a substitute for “real” action. Cyberactivism is typically combined with many forms of movement organizing and protest from the analog era, including donating time and money, talking to people, showing up to courts, demonstrating on the streets, clashing with police, and otherwise putting one’s body on the line. A decade ago, people were asking if online participation “led to” showing up to protest. It’s clear now that movements are hybrids of online and offline activity, and one does not cause, or prevent, the other. We therefore can no longer simply ask whether or not Web 2.0 impacts protesting or people’s likelihood to end up in a face-to-face protest. As the chapters here show, new social media impact social and political change by presenting new ways to make change and new ways to protest. They also show that the political environment in which digital activists find themselves shapes how activists will use digital technologies. Further, digital activism can be intensely specific, personal, and single-issue; yet it is also distinctly transnational. The theoretically nuanced studies in *Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web* capture changes in, and question outmoded assumptions about, activism, consumption, identity, and social change.

The chapters collected here also serve as excellent models of how cyberactivism is researched, theorized, and assessed. Whereas some of the contributors to the 2003 *Cyberactivism* volume who continue to work in this area have brand new chapters here, this volume includes chapters on topics that could not possibly have been covered a decade ago: the role of new social media in the recent democratic movements in the Middle East, the role of new media technologies in the global environmental justice movement, and the hybrid style of activism (face-to-face and digital) that now characterizes social movements. The studies in this volume also cover a variety of political perspectives from the radical right to the left wing.

Few would question the claim that activism is now just as tied up with participatory social media as activism in the 1960s was with print

media and television. Still debated, though, are questions about whether some single-issue or single-purpose digital activism misses the solidarity, mass-protest, and sense of interconnectedness that typified activism in the 1960s; questions about the role of linkages between activist groups; and questions about what makes a group a serious, effective political force. Each contributor to this volume speaks to such debates by pursuing a specific question and offering research to answer it. In doing so, together they raise new questions about trust, place, pluralistic movement structures, transnational connections and collaboration, and the governmental policies that open or control the communications.

The volume opens with Laura J. Gurak's chapter, "Trust and Internet Activism: From Email to Social Networks." Gurak examines the use of Facebook during and after the 2010 tornado touchdown in Minneapolis and the 2012 campaign to defeat a proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage in Minnesota, demonstrating some important differences between the text-based online activism of the 1990s and today's organizing over new social media. At the same time, Gurak shows that the sense of trust among participants that needed to be established in order for the action to be effective 20 years ago remains an important element of digital activism today. Gurak also points out that, because the web is no longer occupied by a relatively elite group (mostly academics who shared common values about computer privacy), trust must be established differently and amidst (mis)information overload.

John Logie's chapter, "Dark Days: Understanding the Historical Context and the Visual Rhetorics of the SOPA/PIPA Blackout," examines the visual strategies employed in the 2012 SOPA/PIPA online protests, which successfully blocked overreaching U.S. legislation that could have shut down websites for alleged copyright violations. Major sites like Wikipedia used foreboding visuals to spark protest of web censorship. Importantly, Logie situates this web blackout in the context of early online protests, namely the 1996 Black World Wide Web protest and the 1999 Haunting of Geocities. A key component in all of these online movements for digital rights was the harnessing of visual opportunities that helped spread the message virally.

In addition to exploring what makes social-movement participants trust movement leaders they've not encountered in person, this volume raises related questions about *place*. Do movement activists identify or project themselves onto a particular place? Do online organizers need one specific online "place," or are they multimodal, and multi-placed? Jennifer Terrell's chapter, "The Harry Potter Alliance: Sociotechnical Contexts of Digitally Mediated Activism," argues that a new identity based in a sense of placeless online community can create a successful activist campaign. The young fans of Harry Potter novels come together in a virtual community for a variety of social actions. Terrell shows how new social media make the Harry Potter Alliance distinct from previous types of fan activism, as the technology

combined with the culture enable fans to identify with people and causes in distant communities of grievance.

In his chapter, “Dangerous Places: Social Media at the Convergence of Peoples, Labor, and Environmental Movements,” Richard Widick argues that place is still a central motivator for digitally mediated activism. Suggesting that new media make new identifications possible, Widick develops a theory of the importance of digital media for creating a social imaginary around dangerous places—places into which people project themselves and organize for change. Activists, he argues, now reach through new social media to create a social imaginary that makes sense of climate justice, abuses on Wall Street, and local struggles like deforestation. Like Gurak, Widick situates contemporary movement activism in a historical context to show similarities and shifts across media technology platforms.

The so-called “Twitter revolution” is as young as 2009. But Twitter earned the reputation as a key player in democratic movements before we knew exactly what role it played in on-the-ground organizing, creating solidarity among geographically dispersed groups, or connecting people across language barriers. “The Arab Spring and Its Social Media Audiences: English and Arabic Twitter Users and Their Networks” by Axel Bruns, Tim Highfield, and Jean Burgess addresses these questions through an analysis of Arabic, English, and mixed-language tweeting activity focused on Libya and Egypt in 2011. This study shows who was tweeting during the uprisings, from which locations, and in which language(s)—offering a nuanced picture of the roles Twitter played in the Arab Spring. Notably, the relative lack of local tweets from inside Libya compared to those in Egypt during the uprisings shows how regional and national conditions influence the role new social media will play in and during protest activity.

Alexander Halavais and Maria Garrido’s chapter, “Twitter as the People’s Microphone: Emergence of Authorities during Protest Tweeting,” examines the impact that microblogging had during the G20 protests in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, offering a method for studying tweets to determine which organizations’ and individuals’ tweets have the most influence in a social movement context. Like Widick’s chapter, this chapter shows us how new communication technologies help shape the meaning of a political event or social issue. And like the chapter by Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess, this chapter also offers keen insights into new methods for the analysis of large-scale Twitter data. Moreover, Halavais and Garrido’s study concerns itself with authority, credibility, trust, and influence over new social media platforms.

The chapter by Jessie Daniels, “From Crisis Pregnancy Centers to Teen-Breaks.com: Anti-Abortion Activism’s Use of Cloaked Websites,” also concerns credibility and trust in online activism. Daniels examines the cloaked websites of anti-abortion activist groups. While conservative groups are not the only ones to use cloaked websites, Daniels shows the ways in which the political agenda is hidden behind websites laid out to appear moderate and

informative so as to deceive and misdirect women seeking abortions. In doing so, she shows the parallels to the deceptive practices of the brick-and-mortar Crisis Pregnancy Center movement. Further, like Gurak's contribution, Daniels' chapter highlights the extent to which struggles over facts, truth, and trust are fundamental to both digital activism and critical Internet literacy.

Digital activism can also demand, and be, business savvy. Constance Kampf's chapter, "Art Interrupting Business, Business Interrupting Art: Re(de)fining the Interface between Business and Society," shows how digital artists' activism can effectively create change because they create projects with media reach and actual financial consequences. Offering as context an explication of 1990s art-activist groups like etoy, @TM ark, Yes Men, and UBERMORGEN, Kampf shows how ToyWar, Vote-Auction, and Google Will Eat Itself disrupted business as usual through strategies that are at once business-savvy and media-savvy, creatively questioning, for instance, Internet domain ownership, the role of big corporations in elections, and the negative effects of Google's AdSense model. Similar to Daniels' contribution, Kampf's chapter makes the case for critical Internet literacy by showing how digital artist activism exposes deceptive business practices to public scrutiny.

Manuela Caiani and Rossella Borri's chapter, "Cyberactivism of the Radical Right in Europe and the USA: What, Who, and Why?", examines the online activism of extreme right-wing groups in seven Western democracies. Interviewing 45 people in extreme-right political parties, political movements, and subcultural youth groups, as well as doing a content analysis of right-wing websites, Caiani and Borri show how far-right groups use the Internet to foster a group's identity, raise money, stage web-based events, and avoid government infiltration. Although both resources and features of an organization influence the specific approach to online activism, radical right-wing groups are using online communication tools to produce political information and, potentially, link transnationally.

As the cases of far-right activism and the global environmental justice movements demonstrate, a vast number of social movements connect and grow through digital media. Solidarity can quickly become transnational, not just because the issues are more clearly related to one another than ever before but because capital flows, war, and environmental destruction are global. Just as computer-mediated communications enable our awareness of these issues, they enable people to make the connections with those around the world variously impacted by violence, environmental disaster, and repression. Our awareness, identification, and organizing can be transnational—and instantaneously so.

Dorothy Kidd's chapter, "Young Chinese Workers, Contentious Politics, and Cyberactivism in the Global Factory," offers an analysis of the activism of young migrant workers in China, revealing a sporadic and localized set of protests with no clear leadership or unified political direction. Although



such movements have been deemed failures by some, Kidd's chapter reveals the urgent need to reassess what counts as movement success and how movement goals are articulated and achieved in the shifting climate of the participatory Web.

Megan Boler and Christina Nitsou's chapter, "Women Activists of Occupy Wall Street: Consciousness-Raising and Connective Action in Hybrid Social Movements," similarly argues that the recent hybrid activism can be effective. This study of the women in the Occupy movement shows that new social media are shaping political organizing and changing how the movements are led—and, significantly, which people end up empowered through the organizing process. The hybrid social movements that typify collective action today are horizontal and therefore relatively "leaderless." The structure of these new hybrid movements thus demands a rethinking of movement leadership and movement success.

Just as the newest technologies enable the passionate pursuit of a single issue, while also enabling people to symbolically and strategically link issues together globally, the technological accessibility and portability that make participation possible also make new forms of surveillance possible. What is the line between participation and surveillance? If Web 1.0 blurred lines between community and commerce, purpose and profit, Web 2.0 blurs the line between participation and control. The volume concludes on a cautionary note with Lee Salter's chapter, "Emergent Social Movements in Online Media and States of Crisis: Analyzing the Potential for Resistance and Repression Online," on state repression through new social media. Drawing on a range of examples from both the Arab Spring as well as protests in liberal states, Salter shows how social media have in some cases become dragnets through which activists can be monitored and pursued.

## NOTE

1. Ethan Zuckerman, "The Cute Cat Theory Talk at E-Tech" (2008), last modified October 20, 2013, [www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etech/](http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etech/).

# 1 Trust and Internet Activism

## From Email to Social Networks

*Laura J. Gurak*

In the time of the first edition of *Cyberactivism*, the use of the Internet for protest, activism, and organizing had only just begun. Technology was changing at a rapid pace, shifting from text-based to web-based, with the coming dominance of Facebook and Twitter still far off on the digital horizon. The earliest documented online protest, the case of Lotus Marketplace,<sup>1</sup> was effective but limited to the text-only environments of email and Usenet newsgroups, where participants tended to be part of a small, elite group of computer users that shared similar values and were to some extent part of established online communities. In later cases, such as the Yahoo/Geocities protest,<sup>2</sup> the use of web pages that combined textual as well as visual information was fast becoming the norm.

Today, social media in all of its ubiquity and simplicity is the standard approach for online activism. Gone are the days when organizers needed to understand how to code in HTML or run a listserv. A few simple keystrokes, and organizers are able to create blogs, Twitter feeds, or Facebook pages, which are easy to use and require no special technical knowledge either for the organizer or users who want to participate. These platforms combine text, visuals, sound, video, and other content in ways hard to imagine even 10 years ago. In addition, online spaces today typically blend the virtual and the physical, supporting, for example, a movement with a strong physical presence such as the Occupy movement,<sup>3</sup> the so-called “Arab spring,”<sup>4</sup> or the peace movement.<sup>5</sup> While email still plays a role, especially in targeting particular groups of constituents for fund-raising purposes, the prevalence of social media has changed the face of cyberactivism.

This chapter presents three micro-cases: Lotus Marketplace (1992), a tornado touchdown in Minneapolis and the use of Facebook during disaster recovery (2010), and the campaign to defeat a proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage in Minnesota (2012). The two later cases demonstrate some characteristics of early online activism, especially the sense of trust that must exist among participants in order for the action to be effective. But other features, especially ways in which the later situations have sustained and become community resources, in large part due to

the use of social media, demonstrate important differences between 1992 and today.

### TEXT ONLY: THE CASE OF LOTUS MARKETPLACE

The earliest documented social action on the Internet is the case of Lotus MarketPlace. Described more fully in the previous edition of *Cyberactivism*<sup>6</sup> and elsewhere,<sup>7,8</sup> the case involved the use of email and Usenet newsgroups to protest a commercial product. This protest was successful in that the product was canceled before it was ever released. On April 10, 1990, Lotus Development Corporation announced a product called MarketPlace: Households, a CD that would contain the names, addresses, and spending habits of 120 million U.S. consumers from 80 million different households. (The market for this CD was people who wanted to do direct marketing from home and did not want to pay the high fees that were then charged to work with a direct market mailing house.) In today's low/no privacy environment, where people readily share everything about themselves in high contact settings (e.g., on Facebook), it is hard to recall that in 1990, the idea of providing such information to a potentially vast audience, without user permission, was seen by many as raising serious concerns about personal privacy and large data sets. Privacy advocates were concerned in particular about the ability of someone to crack the CD's encryption scheme and match salaries and names with local addresses. There was also concern about not being able to correct the data once the CDs were released.

The product was discussed in a November *Wall Street Journal* article of that year, and this article generated much discussion on the Internet. Specifically, Usenet news and email, the only two games in town at the time, were at the center of the initial conversations. At that time, the Internet was dominated by academics, particularly computer scientists and other IT specialists. Even at large companies like Lotus, regular employees did not use email. So when the online discussion began advocating for people to contact the CEO of Lotus via email, it took no time at all for the message to spread. Trust was high in this case: Those writing and forwarding the email and Usenet messages were of a common core of like-minded computer privacy advocates. One of the most widely circulated messages is signed by its author, and even though most recipients didn't actually know him, they trusted him because at that time, the Internet was a small club, full of people-like-us, who shared common values about what "cyberspace" should be.

The messages that circulated about Lotus MarketPlace contained some truth and some fiction. Yet the high-trust environment created a powerful environment, and in January 1991, the CEO of Lotus Corporation announced that it would cancel the product before it was even released. Most observers acknowledged the role of the Internet in the demise of Lotus

MarketPlace. To an observer today, the lack of visual media, web pages, smart phones, Twitter, and so forth might make such a case seem impossible. Yet in this case, we see the core of online social activism as trust-based and established through the rhetorical dynamics of the message (especially the role of ethos as a rhetorical appeal), the speed of delivery, and the like-mindedness of the participants. These features are described in detail elsewhere<sup>9</sup> and provide the basis for examining our next case.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CASE OF NORTH MINNEAPOLIS POST TORNADO WATCH**

Every spring, residents of the U.S. upper Midwest look forward to the end of a long, dark, cold, winter. Yet along with the joy of spring, there can also be a sense of fear and concern. Major spring flooding, due to rapid melting of a deep snowpack, can be devastating to both urban and rural communities. Spring also brings with it a clash of warm air from the south and cold air from the north, as the seasons do battle with each other and the northern hemisphere shifts from winter to spring. This unsettled situation is the perfect breeding ground for strong storms, many of which bring wind damage from hail, lightening, strong winds, or, worse, tornadoes.

People often believe that significant tornadoes do not touch down in urban areas. Yet on May 22, 2011, a tornado touched down in northeast Minneapolis, devastating one of what was the most economically disadvantaged parts of the city. The impact was so severe, so fast, and so unexpected, that initially everyone was in a state of shock. With no electricity and no phone lines, the only technology available for communication was the cell phone, for those who had one. Hearing about the situation on the news and from his friends and family in the area, a man named Peter Kerre who had lived in Minneapolis but was based at that time in New York city, was able to quickly set up a the North Minneapolis Post Tornado Watch Facebook page. The ensuing story offers an interesting comparison about the similarities as well as differences between Lotus MarketPlace and activism in the early stages of social media.<sup>10</sup>

As Sztompka<sup>11</sup> has noted, trust is often established in relation to social proximity, thereby creating “cultures of trust”—in the case of Lotus MarketPlace, what we might call “Internet social proximity”—and a culture of online trust was clearly a reason why like-minded users circulated the messages so heavily. In the case of the tornado relief, Peter’s background as a person with strong ties to the neighborhood had the same effect. Although he was not living in the area at that time, Peter was hearing from friends that no one knew where to turn or how to access resources. Recognizing that on each block, there seemed to be at least one person with a smart phone, Peter set up a Facebook page called “North Minneapolis Post Tornado Watch.” This page, as the local paper suggested, quickly became “a sort of virtual

public square to share tips, dispel rumors, report suspicious characters and, most of all, get help to the people who need it quickly.”<sup>12</sup>

As with the Lotus MarketPlace case, in this situation people tended to trust the online information (Facebook page) more than official city and state resources. In part, this feature was due to the high-trust context of a personal connection versus the low-trust context, especially for people in this neighborhood, of dealing with government bureaucracies. Social proximity and trust were not affixed to location but rather to a known individual. Many people did know Peter first-hand, but many did not, trusting instead in the collective belief that comes when others who are like you trust in something. Also, the Facebook platform made the information easy to access: When there is no electricity and your house and computer have been damaged, but your phone still works, Facebook was simply an easier way to find information.

In our current era, state and city governments, federal agencies, and non-profits have gotten better about using social media in situations such as this. (The aftermath of Hurricane Sandy is just one recent example.) Yet in 2011, Facebook was still primarily a platform for individuals, not organizations. According to Kerre, these organizations (government agencies and disaster relief agencies, among others) were curious to know who he was and why he was setting up a Facebook page (and, for that matter, what a Facebook page was).

In addition to the Facebook page, Peter also set up a Google site, where people could add information, links, and other resources. Because of these concerns from formal agencies, the site offers this disclaimer:

This page does not represent or/and is not part of any emergency or law enforcement agency or organization. It is a 100% charitable cause initiative created by a joe nobody;) and is people driven. Thank you! For immediate attention and emergencies, dial 911 to get to your local law enforcement and emergency responders.<sup>13</sup>

Official concerns were partially justified: Often, after a disaster, victims are targeted by sham contractors and relief agencies. Yet as with the Lotus case, this situation demonstrates again the clash between structured organizational communication, where those in power who rely on more traditional communication structures wish to retain that power and status (even with the best of intentions), contrasted with the nonhierarchical, democratized nature of online communication, which may be messy and unstructured and not as carefully edited for content, but which often has a better chance of reaching more people with greater speed.

Although these issues about trust and organizational structure were similar between these two cases, a major difference is the technological conditions of social media that allow a site such as this to remain a resource for the community. In the Lotus case, once the product was canceled, the

discussion all but ended. In the tornado disaster case, the Facebook page still as of this writing is serving as a resource for this community, with 3,453 “likes” and many postings about events, activities, and resources. The site also appears to be more closely connected with government and other organizations; for instance, in spring 2013, after another series of spring storms, the site posted information from the City of Minneapolis and the local power company about estimated wait times for power to be restored.

This feature, of how social media functions not only to support an immediate urgency and types of activism but also to provide a sustained space to become something beyond the immediate exigency, is demonstrated in the next case.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA PLUS: SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IN MINNESOTA**

In May 2011, the Republican majority Minnesota legislature passed a bill proposing an amendment to the state constitution limiting marriage to one man and one woman. Although the Governor, a Democrat, vetoed the bill, his actions were strictly symbolic, since in Minnesota, constitutional amendment legislation cannot be vetoed. Thus, the amendment was slated to appear on the November 2012 ballot, where it was defeated by the voters by just over 52%. The events that took place between the introduction of the amendment and voting day provide a most interesting case for anyone interested in cyberactivism.

As noted at the end of the previous discussion, social media can play a powerful role in the initial set-up and activity for a specific situation or cause. Yet because social media is so well structured, ubiquitous, and broad-reaching, once the initial exigence has come to a conclusion, there is often tremendous value and efficiency in using the existing platform to continue as a community resource; or, in this case, as a powerful mechanism to take up the next leg of the political issue.

During the November 2012 election, the Minnesota House and Senate turned into democratic majorities. With that plus Democratic Governor Mark Dayton, who had vetoed the original legislation, still the Governor, organizers used the tools, data, and resources they had so carefully cultivated—email lists, Twitter feeds, websites, Facebook pages—to press forward and in the end, turn the tables on those who had sent the initial constitutional amendment forward. In June 2013, Minnesota became the 12th U.S. state to approve same sex marriage.

Between the legislation’s introduction (May 2011) and election day (November 2012), a group called Minnesotans United for All Families became the primary force in organizing what became a historic campaign to defeat the proposed amendment. In all states where similar constitutional amendments had been put on the ballot, 100% of these had passed to become part of that state’s constitution. Minnesotans United learned valuable lessons

from those states. In particular, according to a story by Minnesota Public Radio,<sup>14</sup> a report that was written after the passage of Proposition 8 in California was influential in shaping the approach of Minnesotans United.<sup>15</sup> The report<sup>16</sup> makes many key points, but two are of special interest to this discussion of cyberactivism. First, the report's finding #5 provides evidence that the Vote No on 8 campaign did not offer a clear, concise message. This finding is especially important in our digital age, where sound bites, tweets, email, and Facebook postings, as well as streams of information from traditional media, make long or complicated arguments probably the worst possible choice. Our current media environment simply is not conducive to detailed, complicated discussions. The report's author identifies six different arguments made in the Vote No on 8 campaign, whereas he identified only one clear message (about children) in the Vote Yes campaign.

More to the point, however, is the report's Finding #9, which discussed the key importance of fundraising (something the Minnesotans United campaign did extremely well). The report notes that in October of that year,

[O]nline fundraising was turned over to an entirely new group of former and current experts from Google, Facebook, and Yahoo. Volunteering their considerable talents, they added a substantial functionality to the Web site and drove traffic to the website. They developed easy ways for the campaign to measure the yield of each fundraising appeal and approach. They put the campaign in a position to track the ways in which people were finding their ways to the No on 8 Web site. With this additional information—updated within hours—the campaign could determine which experiments were working and which weren't. Then it could focus on replicating and rolling out more fully the successful experiments. The much quicker ascension of the learning curve that came from this over data-driven approach—iterative learning is the term that best describes it—greatly increased online fundraising productivity.<sup>17</sup>

Minnesotans United for All Families took these ideas to heart, creating a well-focused, concise message. The message was simple: Don't deny people the freedom to marry. The last three words, "freedom to marry," fit nicely on a t-shirt, in a tweet, or in the subject line of an email. They created a theme and were easy to remember. The campaign also asked volunteers to tell their stories, talk with their neighbors, and connect with one another as people, fellow citizens, and neighbors. In a state that has typically prided itself on neighborliness and a live-and-let-live attitude (sometimes called "Minnesota nice"), this one-on-one approach made sense. The campaign referred to this approach—having conversations—as their "secret weapon."<sup>18</sup>

Yet these efforts on their own would not have succeeded without the incredibly effective, sophisticated use of the web, email, Twitter, and Facebook, not only to raise funds but also to zero in on people who might serve as volunteers at public events (such as the Minnesota State Fair), do some

phone banking, or volunteer in dozens of other ways. Thus, social media were woven into a fabric that included a physical campaign. As with the tornado recovery example, the Minnesotans United example illustrates the power of using social media to connect to physical events.

I participated in the Minnesotans United campaign, and my observations are from this experience. In 2012, my partner of 22 years and I decided to go to New York to marry. We did so knowing that Minnesota could very well pass a constitutional same-sex marriage ban, yet we still felt it important to have this legal recognition and knew we could always move to a same-sex marriage state if the ban were passed. It was an interesting year, to be married but then return back to a state where legally it meant nothing. Because of my personal interest, during the year as the campaign ramped up, I began making financial contributions. I noticed that with each contribution, the email messages became more targeted. With each visit to the website or with each item I “liked” or shared on Facebook or retweeted, I became part of a more focused data set. Then, I volunteered for an evening of phone banking and for outreach at the Twin Cities Pride festival and later, at the State Fair. I continued to give money, responding in particular to those email messages that had a strong personal appeal.

As a researcher of new media and online social actions, it was interesting to observe my reactions. I knew that the friendly, personal messages signed by the campaign manager, or a famous football player, or another volunteer, or the mother of a gay son, that were directed at me (Hey Laura, Dear Laura) weren’t *really* directed at me, one-to-one. But the rhetorical appeal was strong, and the trust factor was high. The campaign’s use of techniques garnered from ecommerce and Facebook—data mining, recommender systems, behavior matching, demographic and giving patterns—were at once sophisticated and personal. These systems and their approach to data matching are based on the algorithms originally developed for what are called “recommender systems,” most familiar today on sites like Amazon and Netflix that carefully track and analyze you and your habits and match you with other people and products. Recommender systems work in large part based on the development of trust;<sup>19</sup> for example, as these systems continue to match you with ideas, people, and products that fit well with your habits and values, you as the recipient gain more trust in the recommendations. In the case of the emails I was receiving from Minnesotans United, as these messages became more and more personalized to me, my values, and my concerns, the trust factor increased, which in turn increased my financial contributions and my active participation in the campaign.

Numerous other techniques and approaches contributed to the defeat of the constitutional amendment in November 2012, especially the way in which organizers engaged religious and faith community leaders and the focus on individual conversations.<sup>20</sup> But the use of digital communication to engage, raise funds, and circle in on trusted volunteers who in turn placed high trust in the organization’s message, was certainly one of the key factors.



This case also illustrates how the digital infrastructure that was so carefully built during the initial event became a platform for a new action. With the wind at their backs, due in no small part to the powerful digital infrastructure already in place, organizers pushed forward to bring a bill to the legislature making same-sex marriage legal in Minnesota. As noted above, the result was that Minnesota became the 12th state in the U.S. to legalize same sex marriage.

Some might argue that this was a political campaign, pure and simple, not “cyberactivism,” as illustrated in the grassroots efforts of Lotus MarketPlace and the tornado recovery. Yet indeed, the Minnesotans United campaign was grassroots. The previously mentioned “secret weapon” of “a massive, one-on-one conversation drive”<sup>21</sup> was based on thousands of individuals talking with one another. Digital media played a key role, as noted, initially in creating a common message and location and then in raising funds, finding volunteers, and, importantly, matching volunteers’ demographic backgrounds with areas where these people could be most effective. For instance, citizens in the more liberal parts of the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul could be counted on to vote no in the majority. But I live in one of the northern suburbs right on the dividing line between the cities and the start of the more rural counties. I was contacted numerous times about the importance of doing phone banking in my district, and eventually, the customized emails and calls got me to participate.

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The three cases presented here illustrate a technological progression of cyberactivism, from the text-based Lotus MarketPlace action to the Facebook page of the tornado recovery situation to the full court press of all forms of digital and social media in the Minnesotans United case. It is worth examining both the similarities and the differences in these cases, not only for the sake of understanding the past but also so that we can think about how digital media will continue to be part of the future of social actions, protests, political campaigns, and more.

Elsewhere, I have argued that speed and reach are two of the key concepts of digital communication that span different media and different time periods.<sup>22</sup> The very earliest uses of email, for instance, made plain just how powerful it is to press “enter” and send a message far and wide, at lightning speed. These dynamics are key to understanding all three cases here. Messages, be they email, Facebook postings, or tweets, travel quickly and with amazingly wide reach. These features are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, reaching so many people so quickly can be critical, especially in an emergency. On the other hand, these same features allow for misinformation to spread just as easily; every day, we see countless examples of

Internet scams and hear about people who fall victim to these. Separating truth from fiction can be hard to do in a space where visual elements can look extremely convincing, identities are created out of thin air, and emotional appeals run high.

A concept from classical rhetoric, illustrated in all three cases, helps explain why, in fact, we need to be alert to both the potentials as well as the problems of online activism around this matter. Focusing on the character and credibility of the speaker and message, this concept is called *ethos*. It is one of the three traditional appeals used when making an argument. Although the other two—*logos* and *pathos*—are important, yet as far back as Aristotle it was observed that of these three, *ethos* was the most powerful in moving an audience.<sup>23</sup> A large reason why, of course, is that character and credibility are related to the trust that is placed in the speaker/message.

In his classic treatise on this topic, Luhmann observes that “[t]rust, in the broadest sense of confidence in one’s expectations, is a basic fact of social life . . . a complete absence of trust would prevent [a person] from even getting up in the morning.”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to describe the complicated relationship of trust to variables such as time, social relationships, past interactions, and so forth. In all three cases, trust plays a key role. In the Lotus case, participants trusted each other far more than they trusted the company. In the case of the tornado recovery, there was high trust placed in a known person, an individual with strong ties to the community. And in the same-sex marriage case, trust evolved quickly among those working to defeat the amendment based on a powerful combination of social media and email, combined with individual in-person conversations. Even though I realized that the “Dear Laura” emails were not written individually just to me, the custom message and tone was an effective technique in developing trust, at least for me, and presumably for the larger, more diverse group of people receiving these messages.

There are also some obvious differences in these cases as well. In the early days, online protests were typically about esoteric technical topics that appealed to a narrow group of sophisticated computer users. In the first edition of *Cyberactivism*, this point is very clear. The Lotus case, and soon thereafter, another technology protest, the Clipper chip case (discussed in conjunction with the Lotus case in Gurak 1999), were both about computer privacy, with Clipper focused on the even narrower and more technical issue of encryption. The GeoCities Yahoo! protest was also about a topic for the technologically informed: websites and copyright.<sup>25</sup> Today, however, with the ubiquity of the Internet, the broader user base, and the simplicity of interfaces for Twitter, Facebook, and even email, cyberactivism has become a part of broader social and political causes. Even when social media is not used as heavily, online petitions have become the *de facto* method of collecting signatures for most highly visible issues. For instance, in May 2013, 1.8 million people signed a petition advocating that the Boy Scouts of America change its policy banning gay youth.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION: INTERNET ACTIVISM GOING FORWARD

Going forward, we will be less and less able to discern “cyberactivism” from regular activism. As digital and social media become a part of our regular ways of learning, doing business, governing, conducting political campaigns, and various other forms of attempting to move people to action, cyberactivism will be more along a continuum than a special category. In some instances, such as the petition against the Boy Scouts of America policy, the power and reach of digital media is an obvious factor. In other cases, such as the same-sex marriage case in Minnesota, cyberactivism will be woven into the larger fabric of an effective campaign that also includes face-to-face contacts and phone calls as well as television and other traditional media ads.

We have moved into a time when all social actions have a digital component and where speed, reach, ease of use, low cost, and other factors will continue to have a democratizing effect, shifting increasingly away from hierarchical forms of communication as the sole source of information. As described in the tornado recovery case, maintaining a gap between official communication and grassroots, citizen-driven communication no longer makes sense. Just as professional journalists have had to learn to collaborate with citizen journalists and bloggers, so to do organizations of all types need to harness the power and potential of bottom-up communication and activism. Of course, each individual case will be different, based on the desired outcome and the topic at hand. Speed and reach remain key. The rise of visual communication, text reduced to small “info-bites,” and new trends in social media, will also continue to influence and shape these cases.

Trust, as it is established in these settings, is a major factor in what drives participation. Because people tend to trust what they already believe or trust in people they feel akin to, the nonhierarchical structure and wide reach and speed of digital communication also create numerous possibilities for deception. For example, Daniels, in this collection, describes the use of “cloaked” websites by opponents of abortion as a way to hide the site’s true identity (and thus, ideology) from readers. Although deception is not new, as Daniels argues digital media provides the ability to deceive in a way that is both easier and less traceable than previous media.<sup>27</sup> As mentioned previously, misinformation can spread quickly and easily online. Future studies of online activism should look at this issue as well.

It is useful to reflect on trust as expressed by Uslander: “[t]rust,” he claims, “is the chicken soup of life. It brings all sorts of good things . . . [y]et, like chicken soup, it appears to work somewhat mysteriously. It might seem that we can only develop trust in people we know. Yet, trust’s benefits come when we put our faith in strangers.”<sup>28</sup> This is an important statement for studies of trust and cyberactivism, for although I have claimed that the cases presented here illustrate situations where the speaker or message was trusted, this trust was not completely based on first-hand personal

knowledge by the reader/participant about the writer/organizer. In fact, to most observers, the person who wrote the email, or signed the email, or created the website, or wrote the Facebook posting or tweet, is unknown. As noted in the tornado recovery case, not everyone knew Peter first-hand, but people trusted in the collective belief that comes when others who are like you trust in something. This feature—how trust is established in digital settings, often very quickly via close networks and associations, with no true sense of who is behind the message—is something to pay close attention to in future instances of cyberactivism, digital campaigning, and so on. In some cases, strangers who remain strangers (such as the group Anonymous or the unknown authors of a Wikileaks-type project or even Wikipedia entries) may have stronger persuasive power than a known person or group.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, who can predict what new hardware and software, still in their infancy, will emerge in two, five, 10 years or more? Twitter and microblogging were not a part of our discussion of cyberactivism a decade ago. The line between everyday citizen and seasoned professional, between mainstream media and small productions, between the television and Twitter, continue to shape-shift. But the establishment of trust will continue to play a key role in successful actions. If we keep our eyes on using these tools to advance knowledge and human potential, balancing the democratizing effects with continued vigilance and education about misinformation, the future for all forms of social action looks bright.

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## 2 Dark Days

### Understanding the Historical Context and the Visual Rhetorics of the SOPA/PIPA Blackout

*John Logie*

The January 18, 2012, protests against two “anti-piracy” bills then before the U.S. Congress radiated throughout the Internet and—in some cases—into offline spaces as well. The two bills—the “Stop Online Piracy Act” (SOPA) and the “Protect Intellectual Property Act” (PIPA)—were both so broadly and crudely drawn that they prompted an unusual backlash. Whereas both bills announced themselves to be addressing widespread unauthorized downloads of copyrighted materials, the proposed counter-measures were onerous. In addition to dramatic criminal penalties for infringement, SOPA proposed blocking access to entire Internet domains by law enforcement. PIPA proposed stripping allegedly infringing sites from the Domain Name System, effectively rendering them invisible to Internet users. Distaste for the bills united a broad and diverse ad hoc coalition that mobilized against the bills in a range of protest actions. The clear center of these protests was the “SOPA/PIPA Blackout” in which thousands of popular websites either obscured or delayed access to their core content in order to raise awareness about the bills’ contents and—in some cases—drive further protest activities.

Leading Internet sites were driven to action by SOPA and PIPA because the laws—in their broadest interpretation—would have expanded the obligations of sites to ensure that no content within their sites was in violation of copyright and also would have established potentially severe penalties for infringement tantamount to “blacklisting” sites and making them unavailable to users.

#### APPROACHING BLACKOUT STATUS

The “social news” site Reddit was the first to announce a “blackout” in protest of SOPA. On January 10, 2012, the “Reddit team” posted an announcement reading, in part:

We’ve seen some amazing activism organized by redditors at /r/sopa and across the reddit community at large. You have made a difference