



London School of Economics and Political Science

REPORT

Reinventing Digital Activism from Within: From Reach to Impact through Megashouts.org

Silvia Masiero, London School of Economics and Political Science¹

In the long and deep-rooted history of social activism, entrenchment with digitality is a relatively recent phenomenon. Over the last 10-15 years, ownership of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has spiked in developed and developing countries: between 2000 and 2010, the number of mobile subscriptions in low- and middle-income countries increased from 4 to 72 per 100 inhabitants (World Bank 2012), allowing mobilisation on numbers that were unthinkable before. Enmeshment of digitality with the world of social activism has brought to a vision of social media as inherently transformative and capable, *per se*, to revolutionise how activism works, and maximise the impact of campaigns (Joyce 2010).

But as it often happens with ICTs for development (ICT4D), all-enthusiastic accounts may not fully reflect reality. Enthusiasm needs to be conciliated with data revealing, for example, that 1/3 of ICT-based development projects worldwide are still classified as failures, whereas partial failure affects at least 1/2 of the total (World Bank 2016). Lumping ICT adoption with greater impact may be problematic, and lead to wrong conclusions: this makes it important to understand what works, and how digitality can be used for the achievement of development objectives. Explanatory questions, focusing on the “hows” of ICT4D, matter to the impact we can make in practice (Qureishi 2015).

Digital activism, involving the use of social media and other ICTs for civic engagement, makes no exception. The uptake of technology for social/political mobilisation has marked recent history, making it an integral part of today’s lived experience of public commitment. Yet, critiques on effectiveness of digital engagement persist, questioning the extent to which it may yield positive, measurable results or the campaigns conducted. Once again, it is causal questions that matter: in particular, *what* may lead digital activism to be transformative, and *how* is greater reach converted into tangible impact for campaigns?

Transformativity & Digital Activism

The rich, and quickly expanding, literature on digitality is predicated on the notion of transformativity. The idea that digitality “transforms” how we live, work and think has been articulated into multiple accounts: these include reflections on big data (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013), mobile access (Donner 2015), and the global effects of a “digital revolution” which is in continuous progress (Giddens 2015). As arguments on transformativity are constructed, critiques on them proliferate too: the gist is that technological determinism, too promptly lumping adoption of ICT with positive outcomes, may not be an accurate representation of reality. Before pointing to a “revolution”, it is important to understand *what* digitality is really changing, and what it is simply translating in new technological terms – leaving the substance of things unaltered.

The same holds for the world of digital activism. The translation of social commitment into digital campaigns, virtually accessible and joinable on a global scale, surely has revolutionary features, but hides a deeper reality: digital activism stems from something that was there long before, namely civic engagement in its original, non-digital form. In a nutshell, ICTs amplify the potential of pre-digital forms of activism, transforming existing pledges into campaigns diffused globally

¹ Silvia Masiero is a Teaching Fellow in International Development at LSE, can be contacted at s.masiero@lse.ac.uk. Article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Department of International Development @ LSE, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Author is indebted to Marco Camisani Calzolari, Maria Petrescu, Ekaterine Dolidze, and all the staff of Megashouts.org for making this study possible.

on social media. Digital amplification, whose value added can only emerge through ICTs, creates the two building blocks of digital activism, namely the notions of *reach* (as the number/relevance of users reached) and *impact* (as the extent and nature of effects sorted).

Digital activism, it is argued here, has a potential transformative value, but that doesn't consist solely in the possibility to reach greater numbers of users. As argued elsewhere, technology may be non-transformative by choice, for example by embodying discriminatory political decisions taken by governments (Winner 1980). If there is a transformative value in digital activism, it should not be sought in the platform alone: again, activism and mobilisation were conceived and conducted way before the advent of ICTs. It should be sought, instead, in the indivisible unit created by social media platforms and the actors governing them, qualified as a *sociomaterial* unit due to the indivisibility of its components (Orlikowski & Scott 2008).

Let's unpack this notion more clearly. In pre-digital activism, diffusion came *after* elaboration of a message, which came logically and chronologically prior to divulgation. But in digital activism, the message is shaped *within* the platform through which it is diffused: it is on the platform that a campaign is created, participated, and acted upon in a grassroots way (Joyce 2010). Accounts of the Arab Spring are indivisible from Twitter's role in it, the humanitarian response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines is indivisible from crowdmapping: sociomateriality, as the unification of platform and message, arises as the defining feature of digital activism, and the one in which transformativity should be sought.

Thanks to its sociomaterial nature, digital activism expands the frontiers of pre-digital mobilisation, allowing to reach untapped users and hence enabling significantly greater numbers. But is this the heart of the matter, or should the deterministic link between reach and digitality be explored in greater depth?

The Collective Action Problem & Online Petitions

As often reminded in information systems literature, complex problems are not solved by technology *per se*. Technology is, in the first place, a "carrier" of policy (Cordella & Iannacci 2010) that does not transform the status quo, unless political will is infused in it. If a problem was there before, the sheer computerisation of the process in point will not do much: technology needs to be built as the embodiment of a solution, to be then translated into automated terms. ICTs that replicate the status quo do not lead to transformative outcomes.

The world of digital activism experiences, indeed, the same two problems that pre-digital activism has struggled with for a very long time. Framing them through theory on public governance, these can be seen as two components of a collective action problem, as it is constructed by Ostrom (1990). A collective action problem arises every time the cost of collective action is perceived as lower than its benefit: for example, I won't go to a public demonstration or join a campaigning group, if I don't see tangible benefits in doing so. This involves two problems for creators of collective campaigns: not only does the cost of joining need to be perceived as reasonable, but benefits – visible, measurable, and proven whenever possible – should be made clear to potential new joiners.

These problems were there well before digitality, and readers who have been involved with campaigning before the advent of ICTs will surely remember them. But the digital world has created new levers to act on them, among which the world of online petitions, supported by multiple platforms worldwide, has constituted a breakthrough. Petitions lower the cost of commitment, equating users' effort to a signature on a public document: at the same time, they have played major roles in historical change. Economic sanctions, supported by petitions with a global reach, have been determinant to ending apartheid in South Africa, and to expose the oppressive action of dictatorial regimes in postcolonial systems on a global scale.

Online petitions make it easy for everyone to join a cause, and use digitality to lower the cost of commitment. In that way, the first component of the collective action problem – the perception of high cost – is factually solved, reducing cost to the few minutes needed to read a petition on the web and signing it. On the basis of that, great numbers of signatures can be reached, bringing problems to the attention of decision-makers and resulting in discussions that may mark the course of history. The petition for a second referendum on the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, signed by more than three million users in just a few days, is a case in point, and despite the negative response of the UK parliament to the request, it may be taken to show the power of digitality in the achievement of great numbers in a relatively short time span.

But what about the other component of the collective action problem? Online petitions lower the *cost* of collective action, but the extent to which they result in tangible *benefits* remain doubtful. There are different reasons behind this,

and one of them lies in verifiability – that is, ascertaining the identity of the user behind the signature, and the entitlement of that user to contribute to the petition. In the abovementioned example of the petition aimed to repeat the Brexit referendum, no proof of identity was required at signature, except for authentication from an email address. And no proof of citizenship/residency in the UK was required, making it virtually impossible to assess how many of the signatures collected really came from UK voters.

Along with verifiability, the capability of petitions *per se* to monitor impact remains problematic. Petitions are directed to a specific actor, but the action of the user is reduced to signature: the mechanisms flowing from collection of signatures to action, while potentially powerful, are not simple to monitor and convey. This explains why action is taken on a limited share of existing web petitions, and may result in forms of “slacktivism” that equate a simple contingent action to real commitment (Lee & Hsieh 2013). While the first component of the collective action problem, relating to cost, is engaged and solved, the problem of impact remains a serious one, leading to question the capability of online petitions to result in change.

Megashouts.org: A Reinvention of Digital Activism

These were some of the issues that preoccupied me over the last few years. On the side of my academic work, personal engagement with human rights activism has brought me across a set of fields, ranging from the refugee camps of Palestine to postwar Sierra Leone, now culminating with a 5-year research work on ICTs for food security in India. The question on the theoretical link between digitality and the effectiveness of activism has preoccupied me throughout this journey, especially when faced with the hardship of converting web-based commitment into tangible results. While mindful of the several cases of success of online petitions, I have been looking for mechanisms that committed to make impact more measurable, and to ensure users’ awareness of the effects of enrollment. It is in this context that I came across the notion of social media amplification, and its embodiment in digital platforms that build on the petition model and evolve it to design new mechanisms of impact monitoring.

My encounter with Megashouts.org happened in this context. When I visited the organisation’s office in June 2016, based on public web reports on the work of this small, but highly committed team, I did expect to see mechanisms that would lead to a tangible evolution of the world of online petitions. But was curious to see which channels would this promising platform imagine to solve the two parts of the collective action problem. And what I found can be summarised in a simple point: at Megashouts.org, action is *both* on cost and on benefit, so that low cost of commitment is matched by mechanisms dedicated specifically to monitor the impact of campaigns, making it tangible and observable.

I have been fortunate enough to be guided by the enthusiastic team behind Megashouts.org across the steps of creation, diffusion, and impact monitoring of campaigns. Creation is a simple process, requiring very little experience of web activism: all that is needed is a clear and feasible objective, a decision-making recipient who has actual power on achievement, and a Twitter account that makes the recipient contactable. Having done so, the campaign can be launched and joined by users worldwide: yet, engagement does not consist in a simple signature. The gist of the “social diffusion” process, as enabled by this platform, is that of bringing the campaign to the attention of followers, on the basis of a combination of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus) automatically activated every time a campaign is joined. During diffusion, publication of the campaign’s message across the different social media is guided, but remains at all times conditional to user’s consent.

The core notions of *reach* and *impact* acquire a specific value in this model. Reach is calculated, in the first place, on the basis of the number of Twitter users reached by each campaign, strongly affected by activists’ capability to bring campaigns to the attention of social influencers. Campaigns supported and retweeted by Twitter celebrities gain greater visibility, and expand the reach of the message: this is coupled, as reported by the platform’s developers, with reputational capital added to the campaign in point. Using Twitter as a core means of social diffusion, supported and integrated by other social media, converts the notion of reach into observable numbers: besides, it is designed to solve the problem of verifiability, associating each supporter to an existing account.

The notion of impact also acquires a specific value, reflected by the monitoring conducted by staff at Megashouts.org on each campaign. Once again, use of Twitter as a core platform acts as an enabler of measurability: when a message is read by the intended recipient, it is marked as “read” on the website, and when an official response is given, this appears on the website, along with the “answered” mark. Success is reached when the action requested in the message is completed: successful campaigns, once action is verified, are marked with a green “success” status. This also results in email communication to all supporters of a given campaign, who can track its evolution at all stages on the platform and on the diverse social media connected to it.

A third notion that acquires new flesh – especially as the platform is about social diffusion rather than fundraising – is that of transparency, as mirrored by the management of the funds collected for each campaign. It is indeed possible for users to sponsor a campaign, through online donations that the staff reinvests in advertising that particular campaign on social media. While increasing visibility, sponsored ads are accounted for in the webpage reserved to each campaign: a breakdown of expenses, based on the funding received, is available for each of them. While campaigns can run on limited or even no dedicated funding, this follows the greater web transparency movement, in translating into digital terms the idea of accountability that preoccupied community-based organisations for a long time.

Needless to say, this is not without challenges. Conversations with the staff revealed limitations as well as strengths, starting from the intrinsic hardship (again, of pre-digital nature) of converting social action into positive outcomes: increasing measurability, they observe, does not automatically maximise chances of success. Campaigns can be online for long times before signs of change are observed, and negative responses – or indifference from recipients – are not deterministically eliminated by the digital diffusion of messages. As in the non-digital world, social pressure cannot ensure decision-making in favour of campaign objectives: however, digital amplification is made to increase the effect of people's voices, without requiring high knowledge of ICTs or the affordances of the Internet. The model launched by Megashouts.org has devised a way to do so, quickly and systemically turning potential supporters into digital activists.

Conclusion: The Possibilities of Social Media Amplification

Traditional models of digital activism, largely equated with the mechanism of online petitions, have obtained remarkable success on a global scale. The idea of mobilising public opinion through great numbers of signatures has marked a stepping stone in digital engagement, moving steps towards the “transformativity” that is largely advocated today. Petitions have lowered the cost of commitment, by reducing it to just a few clicks: at the same time, this has attracted critiques in terms of the actual capability of converting reach into impact. New models of digital activism, stemming from this, need to act on the benefits of commitment, hence openly facing the other side of the composite problem of collective action.

Among its specificities, where Megashouts.org strives to make a difference is in that its core mechanism has been designed specifically to address this problem. In doing so, it has dedicated its potential to transform abstract ideas into practice, making the link between reach and impact actually visible to users and supporters. Conceiving “social diffusion” as an ongoing process, cutting across platforms to maximise the attention of users and social influencers, this emerging platform reinvents the notion of reach, putting it in a finalistic relation with the objective of each campaign. This is what makes it capable to increase the impact of social diffusion, articulating a clear mechanism to monitor the real effects of its campaigns.

In the recent, participated debate on the “transformativity” of digital initiatives, Walsham (2012) brings to readers' attention the question on whether we are “making a better world with ICTs”, and devising practical strategies for doing so in sustainable ways. In an era characterised by the increasing diffusion of ICT access, the potential of social media amplification for the construction of a “better world” require full exploration. I hope to have contributed, with my reflections on the promising platform discussed here, to explore how this can happen in the world of digital activism, linking mobilisation to the achievement of tangible results in social campaigns.

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