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### Activism and Emerging Media

The Internet has had a turbulent and rather short, but monumental, influence on our culture's history. Specifically, the Internet has changed many aspects of our daily lives in regard to politics and activism. Activism has been something our country has prided itself in, and with the Internet the reach has become endless. As Rushkoff discussed in *Media Virus!* "the datasphere is only limited by the number of ways a person can be exposed to or iterate viruses. As the datasphere grows, each of us comes into contact with more of our viral culture. The media promotes a new kind of intimacy, and no one can escape the flood." (Rushkoff, 47) Social media platforms have enhanced the more traditional activism means and have amplified them in a viral fashion through the Internet, helping infiltrate a wider datasphere.

To get a full picture of how the Internet has changed activism, we will jump to the current millennium to examine the hacktivist culture that was birthed through the Internet. In *Hacktivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a Cause?* Taylor and Jordan describe hacktivism as "the emergence of popular political action, of the self-activity of groups of people, in cyberspace. It is a combination of grassroots political protest with computer hacking." (Taylor and Jordan, 1) The Internet allowed hackers to gather in an online and faceless community, where they could almost become anonymous to do their bidding. Social media platforms helped give the hackers a place to gather on the Internet "to mould their offline life." (Taylor & Jordan, 1) This new tool of hacktivism helped a group of activists feel more private on the Internet, because it utilized tools

that require more in-depth computer knowledge than the casual user may possess. It also gave the new users a feeling of superiority over the people that they were “putting in their place” with their hacktivism. Computer hacking plays an important role in the way viral activism affects our current society, as shown by the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement began by the hacktivist group Anonymous.

The emergence of the hacktivist group Anonymous was a game-altering moment in the world of viral activism. Anonymous glorifies the hacktivist lifestyle and is the most notable among the hacktivists currently working in a political playing field. Anonymous is a group of hackers that are known for their work on the IRC channels and DDoS attacks. The first signs of Anonymous began with their emergence onto the image board 4chan. According to Gabriella Coleman, the Anonymous campaigns began with trolling on 4chan, which was done for the “lulz,” a pluralization and bastardization of laugh out loud. (Coleman) In 2008 this group of anonymous hackers conducted a “now-legendary wave of trolling” on the church of Scientology. This was just the beginning of the hacktivist group Anonymous getting their hands dirty with political interest.

Once Anonymous focused their efforts on exposing Scientology, they began to coordinate their attacks in a different way. At some point in the war on Scientology the group Anonymous organized a global day of action. “On February 10, 2008, over six thousand people protested across North America, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia, many in front of Scientology Churches.” (Coleman) This was the first time that Anonymous rallied people together through the means of the Internet. In their later efforts to help out Tunisia, they used what is now one of the most popular means for Anonymous to rally troops, the IRC. Using

DDoS in Tunisian tourist websites, Anonymous sent a “care package” to the protesters in Tunisia after their government had cut off all ties to Wikileaks. Inside this care package their message was, “This is *\*your\** revolution. It will neither be Twittered nor televised or [sic] IRC’ed. You *\*must\** hit the streets or you *\*will\** loose [sic] the fight. Always stay safe, once you got [sic] arrested you cannot do anything for yourself or your people. Your government *\*is\** watching you.” (Coleman)

Anonymous isn’t the only group of people that has been able to gather in an online setting to create change in the world surrounding them. The Arab Spring in 2010 was a huge uprising of people from many different countries from North Africa to the Middle East. These rallies of people led to a domino effect across the entire Middle East. The use of the Internet and viral media caused “a cascade of civil disobedience to spread among populations living under the most unflappable dictators, it has made for unique new means of civic organizing.” (Howard) The Arab Spring was interesting because the protesters used Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate them, and YouTube to tell the world. (Howard) Overseas, unlike in America, the government has more control of the content that people use on the Internet. The difficulty of organizing through the Internet was overcome by using their new tools of social media and participating in a cyber utopian fashion. So naturally organizing through social media seemed to be a way to get around the oppressive government that they were trying to protest. What was not originally anticipated was the way that their actions would spread virally to other neighboring countries.

As the protesters had wanted, they published their information on the Internet, hoping that their voices would spread via the Web. However, what they may not have originally

anticipated was that neighboring countries would see the success that Cairo had and follow in their footsteps, utilizing the same tools. Many people that are involved in activism will continue to use practices that have worked for other people in the past, much like the theories that Martin Luther King Jr., Mohammad, Gandhi, and Malcolm X all practiced. The same can be said for the standard object of the viral media activism movement. As people in neighboring countries saw the success from the Arab Spring uprising, they began to use the same tools to hopefully overthrow their own oppressive regimes. “Tunisia and Egypt is to say that tech-savvy activists made effective use of social media to catch their dictators off guard, build opposition solidarity and out-manuever the security services in the “ground game” in a dense urban center.” (Howard)

While the Arab Spring was a monumental moment for viral media activism, the effects of that significant event are not over. As Oldstone suggested about the HIV/AIDS virus, viral activism has some of the very same characteristics. “Distinct from acute infections are persistent infections in which the immune response fails to completely remove viruses from the body, and those remaining viruses then persist for months or years.” (Oldstone) Just within the past week the US government was warning the Russian government that they may have an “Arab Spring” uprising on their hands. The use of social networks is not going away; and with the increasing technological advancements in our phones, the threat of viral media activism is still very real today. As of Friday, December 9, 2011, over 300,000 people have signed up online for a Moscow demo this weekend where tens of thousands of young people will go out in the streets of Russia to voice their discontent. (RT)

Though social media is an important part of viral media activism, the hacktivist group utilizes other tools as well. Anonymous is known for the hacker mentality, and they did not lose

sight of that when they began their most recent campaign, called Occupy Wall Street.

Anonymous uses relay chat channels to communicate to their participants, and in a non-hierarchical manner they formulate ideas and plans for their participants to put forth. Anonymous, through their IRC, said they wanted to flood the streets of New York with tents, kitchens, and “peaceful” barricades, and occupy Wall Street for a few months. (Stevenson) This began to move past just the normal Anonymous channels and push into social media platforms, like Facebook. A Facebook Occupy Wall Street page was created for participants to sign up and receive information about the movement. Here is where the movement began to spread like wildfire through the Internet social media channels. Not only was a Facebook page used, but a Twitter hash tag was also created, #occupywallstreet. Much like the Arab Spring movement, the Occupy Wall Street movement utilized YouTube to spread their message visually. Anonymous posted a video on their Website to show people some of the things their corrupt government was doing.

The Occupy Wall Street movement continued to use the Anonymous structure of a leaderless movement, and this helped create their slogan, “We are the 99%.” Unlike the Arab Spring movement, the Occupy movement did not receive any mass media attention in the United States. However, almost immediately after September 17, 2011, other cities’ Occupy movements erupted and eventually expanded outside of the United States. The majority of people and mass media still do not understand what the Occupy movement is about, and this is partially because “the messages in our media come to us packaged as Trojan horses.” (Rushkoff) The mass media has portrayed this movement to be an unorganized and unproductive movement full of people without jobs. “They may not have been allowed to assemble in public legally, but their alternative media allowed them to network, organize, and find other people who felt equally

marginalized by their leaders.” (Rushkoff) Occupy Wall Street did just what that statement by Rushkoff implies.

When the event was not getting enough mass media coverage, it lit a fire under the bellies of the individuals experiencing the chaos, which led to utilizing the one tool that mass media and the government do not fully control yet. They took to their social media tools and began to get other marginalized people involved in the movement. This helped spread the movement from New York to multiple cities across the United States, including Dallas. Specifically, waves of people took to their social media outlets, like Twitter, to update their followers about the injustice of the biased media coverage. Since Twitter is such an easy tool to use to pass along information from network to network, the information of Occupy spread like wildfire through the social media networks. We have now been unable to escape conversations on this movement, because the Trojan horses have implanted themselves in our datasphere. Even when the police began to kick the occupiers out of the “peaceful” protest spots, the group of people went back to their social media tools to update each other about when and how they would return to their protest space.

Many people who practice within viral media activism hold the belief of cyber utopianism, the belief that a utopia can be reached in cyberspace. There are many scholarly professionals like Henry Jenkins who believe in cyber utopianism. Jenkins most recently took to his blog to discuss why the Occupy Wall Street movement is so monumental for the cyber utopian. Jenkins points out the connections that Occupy has used through its activism spread by social media. “These activists have tapped into social networking tools in order to be able to quickly learn from each other, allowing images, messages, and tactics to evolve rapidly. If

traditional immigrant rights groups tended to observe ethnic, racial, and national boundaries, these young people have formed coalitions across different immigrant populations, and something similar is going on with Occupy, where many different ideological interests are organizing around the shared frame which Occupy offers.” (Jenkins) By tapping into their social networks, the Occupy movement has been able to reach their target demographic. Though the group has many different goals and no hierarchy, they are able to organize via the Internet. The Occupy movement is using the Internet to hopefully create a peaceful environment, one that the cyber utopian strives for. In many cases the Internet is key to their organization, and they utilize this tool to its full extent.

There are, however, people who do not believe in cyber utopianism and see it as a belief in the emancipator nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downfall. (Morozov, 176) Morozov is the leader in the community of anti-cyber utopianism, and he recently wrote a book called *The New Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, about all of the things that cyber utopiasts have been overlooking. Morozov compares the ideals and processes of the cyber utopian to that of the Cold War and the Berlin Wall. One of the largest flaws that Morozov points out is that using the Internet as their means to organize allows the government too much control. By using the Internet, the activist runs the risk of the government cutting off their means of communication, much like what happened in Tunisia. “Unbridled cyber-utopianism is an expensive ideology to maintain because authoritarian governments don’t stand still and there are absolutely no guarantees they won’t find a way to turn the Internet into a powerful tool of oppression.” (Morozov, 673) Since the digital activists are using a public tool to organize and plan their next moves, they not only endanger themselves

but others who are affiliated with them, if the government decides to look further into each of their backgrounds.

The idea of cyber utopia is hard to grasp when you analyze what has happened after Occupy Wall Street turned into a police outlet for brutality. As Morozov points out, the government can easily regulate what you are doing on the Internet, and they have done that with the Occupy movement. Many of the IRC channels are being monitored silently by government officials. While doing research for a different class, our professor warned us about being monitored while we lurked the IRC. Just this kind of monitoring can be done by anyone in a public datasphere, which could possibly create more unrest than intended. As Morozov asks, “What are the best ways for empowering digital activists without putting them at risk?” (Morozov, 673) Although, the Internet is still making strides toward changing activism, the participants must be aware of the additional visibility that the Internet provides to the government.

In conclusion, the Internet has changed many everyday processes for the people using this new innovation, and activism will be forever changed. While the datasphere grows, so does the reach of each message that the digital activist is preaching. Our new social media platforms have enhanced the more traditional means, amplifying activism in a viral fashion through the Internet, infiltrating a wider datasphere, which can be seen through the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Anonymous, and cyber utopianism.

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