

The Impact of Web 2.0 on Social Activism

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Abstract:

The past few years have seen the Internet used more often and more widely as a tool for social activism. As a resource, digital technology provides a platform for information collection and publication, a site for dialogue and debate, and a venue for lobbying and fundraising. In addition to using the Internet as a practical tool, a number of organisations have begun employing the Internet as a space for staging activism. Known variously as virtual activism, net protest, hacktivism, and cyberjacking, online activism is a rapidly growing and evolving field.

Previous work has suggested that the development of tactics for online activism relies on flexible, well resourced, and technically adept specialist groups. These small, less cause-driven groups with critical and technical expertise (such as Electronic Disturbance Theatre and ®TMark) produce digital means of activism that expand the 'electronic repertoire of contention'. These tactics can then be used by larger, less technically skilled groups.

The advent of the Web 2.0 paradigm has significant implications to the development of the electronic repertoire of contention. Within the Web 2.0 approach, the web is seen as a platform for service delivery - a model that emphasises user control, architectures of participation, and emergent behaviour. With an increase of re-mixable, collectible, hackable systems of loosely joined pieces, the web has the potential to become an even more critical tool for social movements.

Online services such as Google, Flickr, and BitTorrent - as well as more general trends such as blogging, wikis and semantic tagging - empower less technical organisations to become more active in the digital space. This has two implications for online social action. The first is an increase in the use of the Internet as a tool or resource - BitTorrent provides an ideal platform for sharing media assets globally between chapters of an organisation, while wikis enable organisations to cost effectively build grass-roots knowledge bases.

The second implication of Web 2.0 is that these online services create digital spaces that movements may seek to subvert as part of their actions. When online services and content become core to many people's daily lives, they offer a unique opportunity for social protest. One documented examples of this is Google-bombing, where individuals or movements have sought to manipulate the Google search ranking system as a form of activism.

This paper surveys the technologies underlying Web 2.0, and illustrates how emerging online services differ significantly from previous digital content. Several examples are provided of the use of these services by social movements - both as resources and as sites of contestation. A model for the expansion of the electronic repertoire of contention is presented, and modified to encompass the potential impact of Web 2.0 services. A number of observations are made on the implications this will have for social movements that wish to extend their activity to digital media.

Key Words:

sociology; social movement theory; new media; social activism; web 2.0; repertoire of contention

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Social movements play an important role both at the societal level and the level of the individual. These movements are many and diverse, from environmental and feminist groups to neo-conservative religious sects. With much early research into social movements drawing on Marxist foundations, recent approaches have included New Social Movement theory (Buechler, 1995; Lentin, 1999) and Resource Mobilization theory (Buechler, 1993; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Broadly speaking, social movements may be seen as collective groups that mobilise around specific issues. This mobilisation (or activism) draws on a set of behaviours that are termed the 'repertoire of contention' (Tilly, 1986; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001). In most cases, a movement will draw on existing modes of contention from this repertoire as they are well understood both inside and outside of the group. In this way, recent anti-war movements leveraged an existing repertoire of tactics that included marches and rallies. On occasion, the repertoire will be expanded through innovation which is then passed on to other groups through a process of 'diffusion' (Ayers 1999). This article looks at the impact that recent trends in digital media have had on social movements and their repertoires of contention.

The past few years have seen the Internet used more often and more widely as a tool for social activism. The low cost of involvement, the global nature of the medium, and the absence of gatekeepers (such as publishing or distribution companies) make it an ideal tool form many activist groups. As a resource, digital technology provides a platform for information collection and publication, a site for dialogue and debate, and a venue for lobbying and fundraising (Diani, 2001). For many organisations, a website has become a critical part of their existence.

Beyond its organisational role as a resource, digital technology has become a venue for activism. The expanding social space created by the Internet and other technologies can provide a suitable forum for the contestation of the issues around which social movements have been formed. In addition to using the Internet as a practical tool, a number of organisations have begun engaging with the Internet as a space for staging activism. Known variously as virtual activism, net protest, hacktivism, and cyberjamming, online activism is a rapidly growing and evolving field. (Denning, 2001; Jordan, 2002; Lasn, 2000; Meikle, 2002)

The 'repertoire of contention' model was extended into the digital space by Sasha Costanza-Chock, who proposed the notion of an 'electronic repertoire of contention' (2003). Combining this with the notion of 'cyber-diffusion' (Ayers 1999), the present author has written previously on the role of 'innovative hothouses', small technically adept groups responsible for digital innovation within the electronic repertoire of contention (Rolfe, 2005). The need for these hothouses was driven largely by the complexity of technical development in the digital space. As a consequence of this, most movement organisations were not equipped to create and deploy digital activism outside a previously established set of tactics. Larger, more mainstream groups tended to follow in the ground-breaking path of fringe micro-groups such as the Electrohippies (1999) and Critical Art Ensemble (1996). Recent changes to digital technology suggest that this may be changing.

WEB 2.0

The need for innovative hothouses has been challenged by a number of developments that have been grouped under the name 'Web 2.0'. Rather than being a specific technology or product, Web 2.0 describes a paradigm shift from the web as a 'passive information resource' to the web as a 'platform for the delivery of engaging services and experiences'. Popular examples of Web 2.0 services include Google, Google AdSense, Flickr, YouTube, BitTorrent, and Wikipedia.

In one of the more prominent early discussions of Web 2.0, Tim O'Reilly identifies a series of implications of the shift - though he does not suggest that this is an exhaustive list (2005).

The Long Tail - now discussed in detail by Chris Andersen (2006). The mechanics of the Internet allow for applications that service a very small sector of the total audience. Businesses no longer need to concentrate on providing services for the populous 'head' of a distribution curve (as in the case of a small town bookstore being forced to stock bestsellers), they can now cater to the 'long tail' (as is the case of Amazon.com offering a massive range of niche titles).

Data is the Next Intel Inside. As services become more complex and interactive, they rely more and more heavily on data. Competitive advantage is now tied to a business's data assets, such as the historical behaviour of their customers.

Users Add Value. The increasing prominence of 'beta' releases indicates a greater willingness to involve users as more than customers. Facilitating the contributions of users through an 'architecture of participation' enhances the system and builds on the data asset it represents.

Network Effects by Default. Even when given the opportunity, most users will not actively assist in improving an application. Many applications can now use the aggregated behaviour of users to improve the system, creating a form of passive user involvement.

Some Rights Reserved - an idea central to Creative Commons. In many cases, businesses are realising that traditional intellectual property approaches are inappropriate in the digital space. Where benefits can be realised through the use of services in ways traditionally outside the realms of copyright's 'fair use', new approaches are needed. As a consequence, systems are beginning to embrace hackability, remixability, and mash-ups.

The Perpetual Beta. As software is often used directly rather than packaged and distributed through retail channels, it becomes feasible to employ development cycles of continuous improvement rather than large, rigid 'releases'. This model supports the engagement of users as key stakeholders in the development process.

Cooperate, Don't Control. With many services relying on data shared between systems, the philosophy of cooperative engagement is often more appropriate than hostile segregation.

Software Above the Level of a Single Device. With the emergence of a range of IP enabled devices beyond the PC, applications are becoming platform agnostic. By

being available through multiple touch-points, the value of the service is increased.

For many activist organisations, services built around these Web 2.0 philosophies dramatically increase the viability of digital media as an enabling technology. The internet is no longer about 'building', with services like these it is about 'using'. This has an impact both on the use of the Internet as a resource, and as a venue for contention.

The emergence of services (both free and paid) that use the web as a delivery platform is resulting in more flexible tools for finding and storing information, as well as sharing and communicating within a group. Architectures of participation and the associated 'hackability' support manipulation of services with less technical skills, enabling movements to innovate with limited technical proficiency. As a consequence of this, the 'innovative hothouses' discussed previously are becoming dramatically less relevant. The role of innovators in this space can be adequately played by groups much closer to the non-digital 'cells' described by Critical Art Ensemble (1996).

The core technologies and approaches that underlie Web 2.0 have only existed for a few years. At this point, many of the conclusions as to their impact on social movements are conjecture. Over the coming years, the adoption of Web 2.0 services by these movements and associated experimentation will occur primarily as a result of the 'diffusion' of germinal instances of their use. For this reason, papers such as this stand with one foot each in the camps of research and praxis - both documenting instances of the use of these technologies and stimulating their further adoption.

To this end, three brief case studies are presented examining Web 2.0 services that have been used by one or more activist groups. The sites discussed are the Google search engine, content sharing services (Flickr and YouTube), and virtual social environments.

SEARCHING - GOOGLE

Following its launch in 1998, the Google search engine rapidly expanded to become the most popular Internet search tool, becoming a publicly traded company in 2004. Its success has spawned a range of non-search innovations including Google Earth and Gmail. (Google, 2006)

The popularity of Google as a search tool has been demonstrated by the Oxford English Dictionary's inclusion of the word 'Google' as a verb meaning to search the internet using Google (OED Online, 2006). It's ubiquity as a resource for locating and retrieving information globally makes it a powerful tool for many organisations - including social movements. This utility is important both for organisations wishing to find information as well as those wishing to make information easily available. Engines such as Google have resulted in a major shift in the cost and complexity of both publishing and sourcing information.

Beyond its role as an information resource, Google has become a ground for contestation. As the number of people using Google to locate information increased, the subversion of that search process became a form of activism. By developing an understanding of the algorithms Google used to rank pages, activists were able to manipulate page rankings based on their own agenda. One key tactic

was creating a highly ranked page by linking to that page from other locations using specific search terms. In this way, activists were able to create artificially high rankings for target websites, a process that became known as 'Google-bombing' (Kahn and Kellner, 2004). In the most famous example of this practice, searching for 'miserable failure' still returns George W. Bush's homepage as the highest ranking result at time of writing - apparently the result of a campaign by anti-Bush activists.

Google-bombing also provides an excellent example of the cyber-diffusion of tactics. While George Bush is the first search result for 'miserable failure', the second is Michael Moore. This is clearly the work of a group at odds with the anti-Bush group, a demonstration of oppositional groups adopting tactics that have become part of the shared electronic repertoire of contention.

SHARING - FLICKR AND YOUTUBE

One of the most significant trends in user behaviour over the past several years has been an increase in the sharing of 'user generated content'. Photo-sharing sites such as Flickr (flickr.com) - and more recently video-sharing sites like YouTube (youtube.com) - have begun to compete seriously with more traditional media publishers.

While much of the use of these sites is personal, they are also an excellent resource for sharing media content between organisations. Activist organisations can share anything from training videos to campaign materials. One example of content sharing is Adbusters supporters' use of Flickr to exchange material (flickr.com/groups/adbusters/).

As traffic to these content-sharing sites has increased, they have also become a valid space for contestation of issues. They form an ideal venue for activists to post 'propaganda' in an attempt to influence the opinions of others. One of the members of Stormfront (a neo-nazi group) makes the following observation about YouTube;

I've seen many videos from this site and this is definity a tool that we should be using to our advantage. Making little clips for comic relief are amusing, but I think if we (Stormfront members) were really serious about securing our exisistence we could really wake up the walking dead, who have yet to be awakened to our plight.

Simply by making videos of the truth and getting our message out there. People don't want to scroll through countless threads reading everything, this is the "You've got 30 seconds to impress or the channel is changed" generation.

(sic) Vindicator66, 2006

Beyond opinion-forming, these environments can be a place for members of movements to be 'mobilised' - that is to be galvanised into action. A number of YouTube 'groups' have been created to invite contributions from sympathetic individuals, including 'Stupid Bush' (youtube.com/group/bushsucks) and the pro-Ned Lamont 'NedHeads' (youtube.com/group/nedlamont).

Through creation of content, shared media spaces provide a forum for encouraging members of an activist community to become more active. In response to the promotion of the Hummer 2 as a suburban vehicle, environmental activists have extended the 'Fuck you and your H2' campaign into Flickr. Individuals are encouraged to take digital photographs of themselves 'flipping the bird' at a Hummer 2 and to post the result on Flickr tagged as 'fuh2'. At time of writing there will be 427 images on Flickr tagged in this way (flickr.com/photos/tags/fuh2/).

SOCIALISING - MYSPACE & SECOND LIFE

As more time is being spent online, environments are appearing that allow users to interact socially in the digital space. These range from social networking sites such as MySpace (myspace.com) and Orkut (orkut.com) to immersive virtual worlds such as The Sims (software required) and Second Life (secondlife.com).

Social networking tools are an excellent way for members of an organisation to retain contact with one another, as well as to find new members. MySpace profiles have been created around a number of prominent causes, including Greenpeace US (myspace.com/gpus), Rock The Vote (myspace.com/rockinthevote), and the immigration bill HR4437 (myspace.com/sanantomexa for example). Each of these profiles has connected 'friends' numbering in the thousands, representing virtual networks of connections for communication and mobilisation.

The powerfully immersive and social nature of virtual environments provides what may prove to be one of the richest spaces for digital contestation. Environments like Second Life allow a wide range of social interactions in a spatialised world. Users will often invest extensive amounts of time and money in creating a virtual life within such a world. Consequently social action within these worlds can have a dramatic impact on the participants.

The pseudo-reality of these environments creates an opportunity to import elements of 'real-world' repertoires of contention into the digital space of virtual worlds. One of the first instances of this (outside of online fantasy games) was a recent action by the Second Life Liberation Army (SLLA, 2006). The SLLA is a virtual group protesting the lack of democratic decision making in the running of Second Life (which is managed by corporate entity Linden Labs - lindenlab.com). The group believes that those involved in Second Life should be democratically involved in decisions.

To apply pressure to Linden Labs, the SLLA has created a virtual activist group. The group is militaristic, led by Marshal Cahill - a Second Life character. The SLLA's first 'in-world' action was targeted at an 'in-game' American Apparel store. The US clothing chain had previously opened the virtual store to sell virtual clothes that can be worn by Second Life characters. The store has been covered in the real-world media, making it a desirable target for social action. A number of SLLA volunteers entered the American Apparel store and prevented customers from making purchases. At the time of writing there has been no response from Linden Labs - in the real or virtual world. (Vedrashko, 2006)

While the validity of an in-game protest over the suffrage rights of players is an area of potential debate, the example underlines the shifting capacities of the digital space to sustain meaningful contestation. As technologies change, the way

we engage with these technological spaces can alter rapidly. The consequences of these changes for activist organisations are difficult to predict, yet they can often be dramatic.

With the advent of Web 2.0 and other shifts toward more social, more 'everyday' digital spaces, their role for social movements can only increase. This appears to be true not only with regard to the pragmatic uses of these technologies for managing information and communication; but also with regard to activist opportunities for mobilising individuals and contesting issues.

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