Social media and activism:  
A literature review

Bradley Allsop

THERE HAS BEEN an increased interest in the role social media plays in facilitating activism, particularly since the wave of protest that erupted in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, embodied in the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, student protests in the UK and several popular protests in Spain, Greece and Ukraine (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014). The Moldova 2009 protests and the 2009–2010 Iranian election protests have been collectively referred to as the ‘Twitter Revolutions’ in the popular press and the academic literature, prominent journalists such as Paul Mason have written extensively on the their first hand experiences of witnessing the organisational capacity of social media in civil disobedience (Mason, 2013) and a former aide to George W Bush, Mark Pfeifle, has even suggested that Twitter ‘should receive the Nobel Peace Prize’ for the role it played in some of these movements (Khan, 2009).

Yet the academic community remains deeply divided on the issue. The debate that currently dominates research in the area is whether social media augments existing, more traditional forms of activism or whether it opens up a new realm of separate, ‘virtual’ political behaviour detached from the more traditional forms (and whether this is a good thing) and whether social media represents a revolution of sorts in political behaviour and engagement. The field is roughly marshalled into three camps; the ‘slacktivists’ that see social media as encouraging relatively ineffectual actions that supplant, rather than supplement, more traditional forms of activism; the ‘paradigm shift’ crowd that see social media as empowering individuals and communities and challenging existing power structures in society in new ways and finally the ‘facilitating’ crowd that view social media as embedded in and complementary to other forms of activism, rather than being fundamentally new or separate. Below we shall focus on each of these camps in turn, briefly reviewing the evidence and argumentation they provide.

Slacktivism

‘Slacktivism’ combines the words ‘slacker’ and ‘activism’ to create an epithet that suggests that online political actions that require relatively little time or commitment often act to supplant, rather than supplement, physical, ‘real world’ activism, have little political impact and only really serve the egotistical needs of those participating in them (Christensen, 2011). Popular science writer Malcolm Gladwell is a champion of sorts of this position, stating that effective social change requires hierarchical, ‘military-like’ social structures (Gladwell, 2010). Following the work of sociologist Doug McAdam (1993), Gladwell argues that social media is great for a variety of things such as dispersal of knowledge and logistical functions, but for ‘high-risk’ activism, social media is unhelpful as it only promotes ‘weak ties’, whereas activism, for him, needs stronger bonds of unity between participants. For Gladwell, without fostering strong ties, social media is incapable of propagating effortful, sustained, impactful political activism, because effective social movements are driven by the relationships between participants. As well as McAdam, the weight of influential sociologist Robert Putnam is behind Gladwell’s theorising, with Putnam arguing that the introduction of a variety of communicative technologies, including TV and the internet (amongst other things), far from bringing us closer together, has led to a decline in social capital in the American population (Putnam, 2000).
Yet some see the weak ties and fragmentary nature of social media-induced activism as one of its greatest assets. Lievrouw (2011) terms the small actions taken online (such as joining a group on Facebook or sharing an article online) as ‘micro-contributions’ and draws on the theory of Garrett (2006) that suggests that such potential actions lower the barriers of participation and places activism as part of a wider lifestyle, making political mobilisation easier, more diverse and more accessible. This echoes a defence of Twitter’s ‘revolutionary’ role by one of the site’s co-founders Biz Stone, partly in response to Gladwell’s criticisms, with his piece centring on how Twitter can lower barriers and cross the usual social and physical boundaries found in political action (Stone, 2010).

Rutledge (2010) sees the strong/weak ties debate as a non-starter, arguing that even if not all of the ties in social media activism are strong they don’t need to be: the ‘emotional’ ties to the issue will still be strong, and social media helps find others that care about these issues too. In subsequent writing, Rutledge (2011) has also highlighted the importance of the psychological impact of simply being aware of another’s plight, of relevant information, or of other people with shared beliefs or views – an awareness that she believes social media excels at spreading. Instead of attempting to demonstrate the possibility of strong ties in social media, Rutledge simply dismisses the relevance of it in facilitating activism and thus one of the core strands of slaktivist argument.

There is, however, some evidence for the unsuitability of weak ties to political activism. Research by Lewis et al (2014) into the large amount of ‘likes’ garnered by pages such as the ‘Save Darfur’ Facebook page, contrasting these with the tiny percentage of ‘likers’ that actually go on to give their time and/or money to the cause, led them to conclude that slacktivism may be more common than other researchers are willing to admit. However, whilst evidencing the lack of broader engagement within the Save Darfur Facebook campaign, the study far from settles the matter of social media’s role in activism, with the results of a variety of different social media actions, types of campaign and ways of using social media and posting on pages not being evidenced in the paper or, indeed, any others.

Some researchers have offered a more nuanced theory. Kristofferson et al. (2014) for example found that whether or not social media activities led to more substantial action depended upon the motives behind the initial online engagement: if an individual was driven by the desire to be seen as engaging in prosocial behaviour then this was unlikely to lead to more ‘offline’ action. Conversely, being driven by a desire to be consistent with one’s own values was much more likely to produce subsequent offline actions. Assessing the motivations and psychology behind individual’s choices, coupled with evidence of what ordinary social media users actually go on to do feels like a smarter approach to take than simply suggesting the inevitability of a type of technology on behaviour – a prescription other areas of the literature could benefit from, as we shall see.

**Paradigm shifters**

The defining trait of paradigm shifters is a belief that social media is fundamentally changing political behaviour and challenging existing power structures in society in a potentially revolutionary way. Whilst the focus for these researchers is on the consequences of the kinds of action social media facilitates, rather than whether this is born out through a virtual realm detached from traditional activism (as the slacktivists believe) or augments existing activist behaviours (as the facilitators believe), the language of many paradigm shifters tends to betray an assumption of social media usage resulting in a more separate realm of virtual communication and aggregation (although the impacts of this on more traditional forms of activism is not wholly absent from their work either).
Author of Twitter fetish piece *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky (2009), believes that social media’s key selling point is that it empowers the public sphere, allowing it to be a check against the otherwise unlimited rule of the state. He draws on the two-stage process of public opinion formation first laid out by Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) that suggests that media first transmits ideas, but for something to take hold it must then get echoed by friends and family. Shirky (2011) sees social media as directly intervening here, allowing other voices to be raised that might otherwise not be and for conversation between citizens to be much less constrained, stating that information is ‘politically less important’ than conversation (Shirky, 2011).

Further to this, numerous researchers (Lievrouw, 2011; Bennett, 2003) suggest that social media has blurred the once firm line between mass media and personal communication, with information being easier to disseminate online but also individuals now being able to have conversations with much greater ease and for ordinary voices to become more public than they were previously able to. Gainous & Wagner (2014) go as far as to frame social media as ‘Congress 2.0’ and ‘Public Opinion 2.0’, referring to how social media can now directly order the flow of information and provide a new source of ‘social capital’ to users, also describing social media as the new ‘dinner table’ around which political issues are discussed. This is a direct challenge to Putnam’s fears of new technologies eroding social capital; instead for Gainous & Wagner (2014) social media is a positive force that represents an ‘entirely new paradigm’ and a ‘fundamental shift’ in how people communicate, interact and engage with one another.

Bennett (2003, p164) examines what he believes this flexibility means for the future of activist networks, suggesting that social media-based campaigns are now ‘able to sacrifice ideological integration for pragmatic political gain… [they have] capacity to continuously refigure itself around shifting political issues’. His vision for the sort of politics social media is slowly edging us towards is worth quoting at length: ‘it seems that the ease of creating vast webs of politics enables global activist networks to finesse difficult problems of collective identity that often impede the growth of movements… Perhaps the next step is… boundaries of different issues… become more permeable, enabling ordinary citizens to join campaigns, protests, and virtual communities with few ideological or partisan divisions’ (Bennett, 2003, p164). Whilst Bennett broadly sees these permeable and loose coalitions as positives, he does have some words of caution about such a phenomenon, suggesting that ‘ideological and identity thinning’, as he calls it can lead to intellectual contradictions and failure for specific solutions and outcome demands.

Some researchers argue that there is an upward spiral to the changes that social media brings about, suggesting that activists have absorbed the ‘cultural logic’ of networking and online communication, with it filtering into their ideologies and lifestyles – fostering anarchist/libertarian, self-organising, democratic and emergent forms of politics and engagement (Juris, 2008). Castells (2009) takes this further, suggesting that the democratic, ‘horizontally organised’ and collaborative nature of social media makes it fundamentally ‘post-capitalist’ in organisation. Whilst disagreeing on the impact social media may be having, the authors so far mentioned in this section share with Putnam and Gladwell a lack of empirical backing for their claims: much of the work in these two camps stem from untested theorising and ideological extrapolations, rather than surveys or observations.

Yet others have compiled observations on the impacts of social media usage, notably Harfoush (2009) who has written extensively on the role Twitter played in propelling Barrack Obama to presidency in the US. Harfoush (2009) highlights how central social media was key to Obama’s success, such as the use of ‘MyBo’, the official campaign website that allowed supporters to have their own account and interact with other campaigners around the country, and the campaign’s innovative use of YouTube channels and blogs to give their campaigning a personal, interactive feel. Throughout her account, however, Harfoush is keen to stress the
way the campaign used this to raise up ordinary Americans and give them greater access to the democratic process than previous elections may have given them. The question here is, is the innovative use of social media by savvy politicians an example of current power structures being challenged by grass roots movements and ordinary citizens, or simply an elite adapting to a new technology and remaining fundamentally unchanged?

**Facilitators**

A major issue in the literature currently on social media and activism is that much of it is abstract reasoning based on what Gerbaudo (2012) describes as ‘essentialist’ views of social media and political transformation, rather than concrete empirical evidence, perhaps most evident in the extremes of the slacktivist and paradigm shift arguments. Rigorous and empirical studies that document the explicit impact social media has on behaviour, let alone research that provides evidence for why this might be, are few and far between and have left the field swinging between Luddites and technological determinists.

Gerbaudo (2012) argues that conclusions can only be made by assessing the interventions social media makes in specific acts of activism. From such an approach he has identified social media as providing a ‘choreography of assembly’ – of the creation of symbolic occupations and physical manifestations that are then propagated across digital space. Decrying the tendency to view social media as creating a new ‘virtual’ realm, Gerbaudo argues, drawing on his own direct observations of the Arab Spring, that social media is very rarely its own activity in and of itself – that often it is utilised as part of a broader set of political activities, a direct challenge to the theories of the slacktivist and the paradigm shifter alike.

Although empirical work is still scarce in this field, Gerbaudo’s findings do not stand alone. Onuch (2015a), in interpreting her findings from a large-scale survey of Ukrainian ‘Maiden’ protestors, suggests that social media was an important tool for disseminating information about the issues catalysing the protests and in framing the discourse around such issues, but it acted as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, more traditional social networks and relationships when it came to actual mobilisation. In subsequent work (Onuch, 2015b) she has highlighted that social media was also useful in unifying otherwise disparate social groups behind one cause, but that it also at times had the negative impact of giving more radical fringe groups a disproportionate voice online, at times confusing and derailing the message and movement (remember Bennett’s points about the dangers of ideological and identity ‘thinning’).

Valenzuela’s (2013) results would agree. His research on Chilean activists found that frequent users of social media were 11 times more likely to attend street protests, and that this increased likelihood was still significant even after taking into account other common explanations for this type of activism. His data suggests that this relationship is mediated by using social media for expression and joining causes, suggesting that social media is a tool used for, but not a cause in itself, of political action. He also highlights that expression can be very important in opinion-formation, that political discussions can lower the costs of political learning and motivate individuals to participate and join social or political causes more often, and that social media also provided many opportunities for group identity formation (a key antecedent of political behaviour (Dalton et al., 2009)) by allowing channels for interpersonal feedback, peer acceptance, and reinforcement of group norms (Papacharissi, 2010). Valenzuela (2013, p936) concludes by remarking that: ‘social media are not so much creating new forms of protest but amplifying traditional forms of protest… social network sites and other Web 2.0 platforms can aid offline forms of citizen participation, rather than the two forms (online and offline) being separate, parallel worlds of activism’. 
Evidence is beginning to creep in too from elections from Brazil (Breuer & Farooq, 2012) to the Czech Republic (Stetka & Mazak, 2014) on how social media has played a role in mobilising voters and activists in offline action as well as online. As time goes on more data will begin to accumulate for social scientists to explore on how social media usage influences elections and campaigns: this task, whilst far from glorious will be vital in developing our understanding of the tangible effects social media usage is having on political actions and outcomes.

Conclusions
From Marx’s ever-divisive historical materialism that places the means of production available to a society as the driver of its history, to the debate over the role technologies such as the radio and television played in fostering a sense of national identity in 20th century America, to the modern debate between eco modernists and eco-socialists surrounding the most important issue of our age, climate change, the power of technology has always been a controversial issue. For our purposes here, acknowledgment of this wider, ongoing technological debate, rather than forcing us to accept defeat, serves to make us aware of the scale of our challenge and to highlight the need for detailed, rigorous empirical work to be done, both on the micro and the macro level to edge us closer towards understanding and unravelling the role of social media in a complex area of human behaviour. It should also encourage researchers to embrace a level of humility in reporting findings or extrapolating theories.

What does appear clear from what evidence we have is that social media does not exist in a separate, virtual reality, but rather is embedded in some way in more traditional forms of activism and helps facilitate and organise these actions, and that the impacts social media has on behaviour is impacted by the motivations that lie behind its use. Whether this will change in the future, whether social media will become a challenge to current power relations in societies across the globe and whether the nature of social media as horizontal and collaborative will bring about a broader psychological shift in its users remains to be seen. What is needed now is a sustained period of data collection on the tendencies of prolific social media users and activists to see how the two activities intersect, as well as an understanding of the differing motives behind social media usage (in the same vein as Kristofferson et al., 2014) as well as in-depth explorations of the ways social media is utilised in the midst of protests, demos and occupations as Gerbaudo (2012) recommends. Social media is now no longer quite the brand new phenomena it once was: the time of sweeping theories and speculation should be drawing to a close and our focus must now be on confirming the relationships it has on other behaviours and assessing its usage in real-world incidences of activism. That said, the debate between the slacktivists, the paradigm shifters and the facilitators is one that is likely to rage on for some time yet.

Bradley Allsop
Queens University Belfast

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