

# E-Activism



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## INTRODUCTION

The use of sophisticated technology to promote social change has developed over the past three decades from tentative beginnings to an expected part of the arsenal of movement organizations and advocacy groups. The development of practical politics throughout the world has made more and more use of ever more sophisticated technologies in order to pursue their goals. This article will discuss the nature of e-activism, the development of electronic social change activities, the organizational and practice issue, the research base and the potential future developments in the field.

## BACKGROUND

For the purpose of this review E-activism is defined as the use of high technology by activists for addressing issues and social problems. E-activism is also called Cyberactivism (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003), Cyberadvocacy (Bennett & Fielding, 1999), Electronic Advocacy (West & Francis, 1996; McNutt & Boland, 1999), Cyberprotest (Van De Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004), Liberation Technology (Diamond, 2010) and digitally enhanced social change (Earl & Kimport, 2011). The important components are that it is technology enhanced, issue oriented and used by activists for policy change. E-activism might deal with issues such as immigration, poverty, civil rights and shortages of health care. It might be considered a brand of interest group politics although it has a role in other

E-activism is strongly related to other concepts such as Cyber campaigning and Electronic Democracy, but there are important differences. Partisan political campaigning refers to efforts to change office holders, while E-activism looks at changing issues or problems.

E-democracy (also e-participation and civic technology) often refers to the part of e-government that encourages citizen participation and involvement. The dividing line between these activities is often indistinct.

The techniques that e-activism uses to address issues or problems are often combined with the more traditional methods historically used by advocacy groups and interest organizations. These traditional methods include community organizing, lobbying, administrative advocacy, petition campaigns, lawsuits and so forth. While less visible than the intervention tools, social change efforts have always dependent on research and information gathering activities. There is a well-established toolset for these activities that can supplement or replaced by technology tools.

Activists can combine community organizing, demonstrations, lobbying and electoral strategies with e-mail campaigns, social media efforts and sophisticated data analysis. Campaigns can also be waged completely online. This creates a situation where you have online only efforts (pure e-activism), hybrid efforts using a mix of technology tools and traditional social change tools and finally, efforts which are nearly completely traditional with small amounts of embedded technology.

E-Activism is used by a wide range of organizations in a variety of situations. These include traditional advocacy organizations, social movement organizations, political organizations and other types of associations and organizations. There is some evidence that the growth of technology and its capacities to reduce transaction costs have promoted the growth of virtual advocacy organizations and leaderless organizations (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Brainard, Boland, & McNutt, 2012). Recent experience with the U.S Tea Parties, Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring Demonstrations appears to support this idea. In any case, technology is moving many organizations away from those described in the political science literature on interest groups or

the sociological literature on social movement organizations. One illustration is the role of socialization of movement actors. Some of the activists who use these technology enhanced tools are amateurs while many are highly skilled political operatives. Conventional wisdom in social movements was that people worked their way into leadership positions through long hours of work at lower levels. They then became qualified to lead movement groups and organizations. This is also reflected in the political participation literature in discussion about civic skills and the value of associations (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995—See also Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). The work of Earl and her colleagues demonstrates that technology can change this dynamic in important ways, creating the opportunity for new activists to conduct campaigns without previous experience (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Earl, 2007; Schussman & Earl, 2004).

Technology changes organizations in important ways. It makes them flatter and often changes the economics of productions. In terms of social change organizations, it can minimize the need for the bricks and mortar facilities that older organizations found essential and make distributed work possible. This creates issues for theories, such resource mobilization theory in sociology, which assumes that these needs are essential.

While technology is essential to E-activism, it frequently requires a set of techniques to make the technology useful in political situations. While there is technology specifically written or developed for political applications, more often, activists use technology developed for another reason. It then becomes the task of a thoughtful person to adapt the technology to the new use. Sometimes this means modifying the technology in some fashion but usually it means changing the way it is used. This might be thought of as a new technology in its own right.

## THE EVOLUTION OF E-ACTIVISM

Many people think that technology in activism evolved in the past few years. While it is true that the growth of this practice grew quickly in the recent past, there were efforts in the 1980s that blended technology to social change activities (Downing, Fasano, Friedland, McCollough, Mizrahi & Shapiro, 1991; Schuler, 1991;

1996). Most of the technology that was used during this early period would be considered primitive by the standard of today's cutting edge efforts. These included Bulletin Boards, newsgroups and early mapping systems. The overwhelming majority of the technology used was developed for some other purpose. It should be noted that many potential users did not have access to the Internet or other technologies at this point.

The growth of technology, along with the accumulated experience of the social change community, led to more capable and robust efforts. The used the emerging World Wide Web, more and more sophisticated e-mail efforts and the beginnings of online fundraising and online petitions. This phase also saw the development of advocacy oriented technology. In the related area of political campaigning, major political parties started using technology in earnest. While it paralleled their face to face and mass media strategies, technology had made a foothold in the land of partisan political campaigning. This technology augured well with the managed politics that placed control of campaigns in the hands of political professionals and consultants. It allowed for a high degree of message control, a touchstone of both electoral and issue advocacy at the time.

In the early part of the last decade there was change afoot. New technology, often called Web 2.0 or Social Media (Germany, 2006; Madden & Fox, 2006) began to develop a larger following in both society at large and the political system. These techniques promote user generated content, the development of collective intelligence, networking and a high degree of interactivity. They were a poor fit with message control and professionalized politics. There was some experimenting, however, with new forms of campaigns. The Howard Dean Campaign in 2004 experimented with a variety of Web 2.0 tools including Blogging, Meetup and computer gaming (Trippi, 2004; Cornfield, 2004; Teachout & Streeter, 2008). While Dean eventually lost, his campaign demonstrated how these new technologies could be used. In 2008, Barak Obama took what Dean had learned and developed a campaign that ended in victory. His technology actively involved supporters in his campaign, rejecting the logic of a more managed campaign. Other campaigns throughout the world moved toward this approach (Davis, 2005, 2010). These developments in cyber campaigning were complemented by a similar evolution in issue advocacy

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