E-Activism Development and Growth

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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 greater use of ever more sophisticated technologies. This article will discuss the nature of e-activism, the development of electronic social change activities, the organizational and practice issues, 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 technology tools by activists for addressing policy 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 of the practice are that it is technology enhanced, issue oriented and used by activists for policy change. E-activism as a strategy itself is issue neutral, rather it is a constellation of tools which may be applied to any social issue and similarly, it is also value and morality neutral, meaning champions on either side of an issue might employ the same strategy or tool to achieve radically different ends.

E-activism is strongly related to other concepts such a 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 growth of civic technology has further complicated these already faint distinctions.

The techniques that e-activism uses to address issues or problems are often combined with more traditional methods 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 these intervention tools, social change efforts have always been dependent on research and information gathering activities. Within the traditional advocacy arena, there is a well-established toolset for these activities that can be enhanced or replaced by technology tools.

Activists can combine community organizing, demonstrations, lobbying and electoral strategies with e-mail campaigns, mobile notifications using push technologies or short message services (SMS), social media efforts and sophisticated data analysis. Campaigns can also be waged completely online. This creates a situation where one may have online only efforts (pure e-activism), hybrid efforts

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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, BlackLivesMatter and the Arab Spring Demonstrations appears to support this idea. In any case, technology is moving many social change 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 makes distributed work possible. This creates issues for theories, such resource mobilization theory in sociology, that assume that these facilities are essential and the activities (such as fundraising) to support them are crucial. The rise of the so called sharing economy may push this further as activists become familiar with technology led collaboration. Scholars will have to reconcile these issues as knowledge building goes forth and new paradigms for organizing work are coming on line based on the ability of connecting workers to consumers via technology without a centralized or organizing core.

Increasingly technology is essential to E-activism, but it frequently requires a set of techniques to make the technology useful in political situations. While there are tech tools 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, e-mail 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