

## Chapter 26

# Civic Cultures and Skills in European Digital Rights Campaigning

**Yana Breindl**

*Georg-August University Göttingen, Germany*

### ABSTRACT

*Technical skills are increasingly necessary to successfully intervene in policy-making, especially when dealing with technical matters such as Internet or telecommunications regulation. Skills are rooted in experience and cultural practices. Dahlgren's concept of civic cultures is used in this chapter to investigate the cultural underpinnings of the emergent European digital rights movement that has repeatedly targeted EU legislation on copyright enforcement, software patents, and the Internet. The values and identity of the movement are investigated along with the way knowledge and information are processed and trust established through repeated practices in a variety of online and offline spaces. The analysis illustrates how digitally skilled actors can substantially affect policy-making by disrupting the course of parliamentary law-making at the European level. However, technical skills need to be complemented by social and political competencies to gain access and provide convincing input to political institutions that increasingly rely on extra-institutional expertise.*

### INTRODUCTION

Technical skills are increasingly necessary to successfully intervene in policy-making, especially when dealing with technical matters such as Internet or telecommunications regulation. The Internet does not automatically empower all of its users. Jensen (2006) points out that online involvement remains shaped by traditional factors (resources, education, social capital and prior political engagement) that are complemented by new “digital factors” such as access, competences and motivation to use information and communication technologies (ICTs). Skills are rooted in experience and cultural practices. The case of the emergent digital rights movement illustrates how technological know-how can play an empowering

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3929-2.ch026

role in terms of political agency. To understand current digital rights campaigning one needs to investigate its origins, values, and the wider culture it is part of. Political agency is always culturally embedded. Dahlgren's (2006; 2007; 2009) concept of civic cultures is used to explore the values, practices, spaces and identities that underpin digital rights activism.

Digital rights activism has emerged as a new political movement that increasingly interferes with various levels of policy-making. The recent protests against two US copyright bills, SOPA and PIPA, which included the highly mediatised Wikipedia blackout, and led to the stalling of both legislations, or the recurring attacks by hacker groups such as Anonymous or Lulzsec on corporate or governmental websites around the world are manifestations of a much larger political movement of loosely-associated individuals and groups whose objective is to defend the open architecture of the Internet and to protect civil liberties in the digital realm.

We consider the historical roots of digital rights activism in hacking and free and open source software. These origins help understand the three tenets characterising digital rights activism. First, it is specialised in that it requires a certain set of skills and techniques, a combination of technological know-how, legal expertise and resources to provide decision-makers with what they most crucially need: specialised information. Second, digital rights campaigning is networked, as it mobilises a cluster of individuals, associations and more or less formal structures who communicate intensively through computers for developing shared interpretations and analysis of legal texts. This distributed nature allows the cluster to reconfigure itself to rapidly adapt to new situations and provides spaces of autonomous action. Third, it is recursive: the values defended as well as the tools used are deeply rooted in what is to be defended: the Internet. It is because activists inhabit the Internet and use it in a certain way that they stand up to defend their conception of an open and free Internet.

An analysis of the civic culture underlying two digital rights campaigns carried out at the European Union level is carried out, investigating the particular set of values and principles that shaped the actions, the mobilisation of knowledge and trust through particular practices in a series of online and off-line spaces that altogether underpin the movement's identity. For each dimension of Dahlgren's civic cultures, we focus on the technical, social and political skills that were essential for engaging as political agents in EU policy-making.

## **POLITICAL AGENCY IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

Political agency refers to the possibilities for political action a person holds. It constitutes the point of departure for political participation. For Dahlgren (2007; 2009), political agency contrasts with formal and state-centred notions of citizenship that insist on rights and obligations that should be universally and equally received by all citizens. The concept of political agency considers that differences are the point of departure for civic participation. It resonates with tenants of radical democracy who believe that conflict is an inherent part of democracy in that different groups are continually negotiating positions while remaining committed to democratic values and procedures. Political agency embodies thus the notion of "achieved" citizenship (Dahlgren, 2009).

Civic agency refers to the perception of oneself as a "participant" as being able of "meaningful" engagement and capable to act "in accordance with a coherent sense of self, or identity" (Dahlgren 2009, p. 138). Such agency is always culturally embedded. Cultures are affordances. They offer possibilities for action and underpin social, civic and political agency. Civic cultures are cultural patterns acting as the

22 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/civic-cultures-and-skills-in-european-digital-rights-campaigning/192637](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/civic-cultures-and-skills-in-european-digital-rights-campaigning/192637)

## Related Content

---

### A Technological Solution for Communication With Deaf Students in the Institutions of Kuwait

Wadhah A. AlKhaldi and Muhammad Sarfraz (2020). *Innovative Perspectives on Interactive Communication Systems and Technologies* (pp. 140-156).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-technological-solution-for-communication-with-deaf-students-in-the-institutions-of-kuwait/255303](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-technological-solution-for-communication-with-deaf-students-in-the-institutions-of-kuwait/255303)

### Intersemiotic Translation of Subliminal Messages in Brand Logos: A Qualitative Experimental Research

George Damaskinidis and Loukia Kostopoulou (2021). *International Journal of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric* (pp. 1-14).

[www.irma-international.org/article/intersemiotic-translation-of-subliminal-messages-in-brand-logos/272965](http://www.irma-international.org/article/intersemiotic-translation-of-subliminal-messages-in-brand-logos/272965)

### Rule Flouting as Argumentation Strategy: A Case of the South African and Zimbabwean Parliaments

Owen Tendai Chikara and Collen Sabao (2019). *Argumentation and Appraisal in Parliamentary Discourse* (pp. 59-77).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/rule-flouting-as-argumentation-strategy/225333](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/rule-flouting-as-argumentation-strategy/225333)

### An Efficient Approach for Ranking of Semantic Web Documents by Computing Semantic Similarity and Using HCS Clustering

Poonam Chahal and Manjeet Singh (2021). *International Journal of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric* (pp. 45-56).

[www.irma-international.org/article/an-efficient-approach-for-ranking-of-semantic-web-documents-by-computing-semantic-similarity-and-using-hcs-clustering/272968](http://www.irma-international.org/article/an-efficient-approach-for-ranking-of-semantic-web-documents-by-computing-semantic-similarity-and-using-hcs-clustering/272968)

### Brand Storytelling in Christmas Commercials of Large Supermarket Chains: El Corte Inglés as a Case of Study

Belén Moreno-Albarracín (2022). *Cases on Developing Effective Research Plans for Communications and Information Science* (pp. 215-234).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/brand-storytelling-in-christmas-commercials-of-large-supermarket-chains/306490](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/brand-storytelling-in-christmas-commercials-of-large-supermarket-chains/306490)