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Slacktivism: Social Media Activism and Its Effectiveness

Abstract

"Engagement is costly in terms of time and often money."

Posting about the pros and cons of slacktivism from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/slacktivism-social-media-activism-and-its-effectiveness/>

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in things

November 13, 2018

Slacktivism: Social Media Activism and Its Effectiveness

Abby Foreman

“Look, if you make a Facebook page, we will ‘like’ it—it’s the least we can do. But it’s also the most we can do,” cracks Seth Meyer on *Saturday Night Live* in 2012. Research articles, which are notoriously dry and dull, almost never open with jokes from SNL, but a 2013 article on slacktivism did.¹

I appreciated the joke. It is also a perfect example of the suspicions many have towards social media activism. Kristofferson, White, and Pelozo define slacktivism as “a willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change” (1149). Think here of cause-related Facebook or Instagram frames and filters, #campaigns, retweets, shares, likes, favs, changing your profile “pic” to indicate support, and the list goes on. The term is also used to describe other types of off-screen “activism” such as wearing pink or buying a piece of jewelry where portions benefit a charity. However, this activism requires minimal effort and can often even assuage our guilt about being overly consumeristic—by being consumers—but for a good cause.

We are all “slacktivists” to some degree if we have any presence on social media that goes beyond posting selfies and pictures of our dogs, kids, and trips. I click a button and feel like I have done something to express solidarity and raise awareness for at-risk kids; I share information that I think others would find interesting, or I might share a post to indicate that I care about the issue. If this social media support is viewed from the perspective of a public education campaign on an issue, there is real value in engaging in these efforts. We have seen how certain campaigns like #metoo or #churchtoo—at their best—have helped to start discussions and shift the conversation about sexual abuse and assault. The rising momentum of a cause or campaign can change public opinion and build a sense of urgency that something must be done *now*. Such momentum can lead to awareness of growing political pressure that may bring about policy change or greater funding to address problems like hunger, poverty, or human trafficking.

It is, however, a mistake for “slacktivists” to view their clicks, shares, and tweets as comprehensive, meaningful, intentional engagement of an issue. Engagement is costly in terms of time and often money. Laura Seay, in her 2014 *Washington Post* article, discusses the link between slacktivism, effort, and what organizations might be hoping for when it comes to social media campaigns:

Slacktivism don't have to spend a Saturday doing hard labor to build a home or sacrifice a portion of their monthly entertainment budget to a cause. They don't have even have to move from behind the screens of their electronic devices... [even so]... advocacy organizations are convinced that asking new participants for token forms of support is a strong path to deeper engagement for activists.²

A group of researchers tested the premise that token support leads to deeper engagement. In their experiment, they found that those who engaged first in a highly observable, public token expression were less likely to engage in a subsequent activity than were those who first engaged in a more private exercise like writing a letter to an elected official (Kristofferson, White, and Pelozo). This may suggest that these highly observable, public activities are akin to praying on the street corner where everyone can see you—the reward is more about the people seeing your support than it is about engaging intentionally in the cause. The study calls this “impression management.” In the same way that we can be tempted to craft the image of the perfect family, house, or lifestyle of health and wellness on Instagram or Facebook, we can also be tempted to craft an image of an active, socially conscious person. The researchers also found, however, that if the cause aligns closely with the values held by the individual, the individual was likely to engage further even if their first activity was highly socially observable. They found that people have both impression management and value consistency motives when engaging in activities. Organizations, the authors suggest, should be diligent in connecting the cause to the underlying values to speak to the values of the individual in order to entice them to further engagement (Kristofferson, et. al). It is part of our sinful human nature to consider our own reward, even when doing something for others.

As a former organizer around issues of hunger and poverty, I know full well that the goal of a cause-related advocacy organization is to pull these types of activists into deeper engagement. Deeper engagement can mean giving money or direct volunteer time, but it can also be about developing effective voices to advocate for a specific cause. For those of us dismayed by this increasingly divided partisan culture, it may be a relief to know that there is a difference between partisan activism and political activism. Cause activism is not equated with partisan activism. A few causes are seemingly “owned” by certain parties, but most causes do not align solely with one party.

In this age of so much digital noise, effective advocating towards elected officials in particular is increasingly important. In the old days, communicating with an elected official about an issue required a written letter or, at the very least, a phone call. Now we can email, @ someone on Twitter, sign multiple petitions, and do all the slacktivist activities discussed above. From the perspective of the target of this activism, it is increasingly difficult for elected people to

determine the authenticity of these messages. To ensure messages are viewed as authentic, take time to craft the message and personalize it. The visible effort put in to the message is important. Old school handwritten letters show effort as do personal emails. Include your mailing address so that they can verify your residence in their district.

Elected officials are interested in hearing from their constituents, which requires basic political literacy on the part of an activist. To do this well, here are a few tips to advocate effectively with elected officials: Be timely with requests, stay focused and targeted on the issue, be specific about desired action, and be respectful and civil. Share stories of faith commitment or experiences as they relate to commitment to the cause. Work to establish a relationship with the elected official and staffers. Collaborate with others who are also committed—there may not be agreement on all things, but there may be common ground on this one issue and its importance. Find trusted organizations like **Bread for the World** that can inform about advocacy opportunities and can offer training and guidance in effective advocacy.

For those of us active in social media it is important that we approach it—as in all things—from a reflective posture in which our identity as a disciple of Christ guides our every typed word, clicked button, and comment. The presence of a screen does not allow us to be able to check the Fruits of the Spirit at log-in, only to pick them back up again when we log back out. Deception, mockery, slander, and scorn have no place in a Christian’s toolkit for engaging in the world or with each other. Our passion for a cause can result in idolatry in the cause itself or in our identity, and this idolatry can cause us to lose our commitment to civility in public.

God requires all Christians to do good: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly (Micah 6:8). For some of us, that may take on a more public face than for others. Social media offers a tool to encourage engagement and to learn more, and these can be useful tools. However, just as we recognize that public engagement on social media can be useful and important, we must also recognize that it is no more important than the quieter, less visible expressions of faithful obedience towards change and reconciliation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Kristofferson, Kirk, et al. “The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action.” *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 40, no. 6, April 2014, pp. 1149-1166. [↩](#)
2. Seay, Laura. “Does Slacktivism Work?” *The Washington Post*. 12 March 2014. [↩](#)