ONLINE IMPULSE ACTIVISM AT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Social media have emerged as an important tool to spur political commitment, civic engagement, and different forms of political activism. Previous research characterizes online activism as very ad hoc and formed on political ties through spontaneous and temporal affinity networks. We extend this work by examining online activism through the theories of impulse behavior and social movements. We advance hypotheses on the relationship between the characteristics of petition and petition signing. The characteristics of petition that appear to be associated with online impulse activism include proximal referents, legitimacy, and violations of dignity. We theorize about a number of mediating variables, including social identity, perceived efficacy, and injustice. Future research will examine the role of the mediating variables between the characteristics of the petition and signing of petitions as part of a larger scale study involving nearly 40,000 Amnesty International members.

Keywords: Social Media, Online Activism, Amnesty International, Impulse Behavior
Introduction

Social media have emerged as an important tool to spur political commitment, civic engagement, and different forms of political activism (Bennet and Segerberg 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; van de Donk et al. 2004; Wattal et al. 2010). Recent examples include the successful Internet and social media presence in the 2008 U.S. presidential primaries campaign by Obama (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasques 2011; Wattal et al. 2010) and, perhaps even more recently, the “Arab Spring” in the Middle East and North Africa (Iskander 2011). Although our cumulative knowledge of the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in citizen participation and activism—so-called online activism—is growing (see, e.g., Diani and McAdam 2003; Garrett 2006; van de Donk 2004; Wattal et al. 2010), the effects of social media on political engagement are not well understood, and the limited anecdotal evidence is inconsistent. On the one hand, social media is seen as bringing unprecedented opportunities for collective action (Shirky 2008), facilitating both democratic participation (Wattal et al. 2010) and increased social capital (Shah et al. 2001), well beyond what is possible in offline communities (Kane et al. 2013). On the other hand, opponents raise concerns about the effect of these digital protests, the consequences for inequality, and the ideological and collective strengths in social media networks (Garrett 2006; Norris 2001). The 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, for example, created a flurry of activity on social media sites such as Twitter, but the wave of energy quickly dwindled (LA Times 2013).

The traditional bases of collective movement have been stable and long-term memberships in social and political groups (Simon et al. 1998; Sturmer and Simon 2004), but the emerging literature on online activism suggests that the new media have contributed to bases that consist of rapidly changing forms of association. In particular, online political engagement is less about ideological claims than about instant behavior and loosely coupled networks (Christensen 2011; van de Donk et al. 2004). In fact, the fluid forms of association have been suggested to be one of the most significant political factors of the increasingly digital society (van de Donk et al. 2004). Today, online political engagement is typically formed on political ties through temporary affinity networks (Dahlgren 2004; van de Donk et al. 2004), and movements can be easily transformed by the exit of old, and influx of new, members (Brunsting and Postmes 2002). Ephemeral and structural indeterminacy no longer represents risky or irrational organization behavior, but is a way to deal with the high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity in political intents, information, allegiances, and norms.

In this paper, we aim to critically explore and analyze online political activism as a form of impulsive behavior, using Amnesty International as a setting for our study. Amnesty International’s legacy, magnitude, and great political impact make it an excellent case for examining the role of social media on political activism. Today, Amnesty International is increasingly a user of social media services, disseminating information about appalling conditions, torture, and human rights violations throughout so-called online petitions on a daily basis. The spread of online petitions over social media allows for temporary groups to form around a shared belief and purpose (e.g., the release of a specific prisoner). This form of online impulse activism is what we seek to explore further to build knowledge that reconciles contradictory evidence and anecdotes. Against this backdrop, we pose the following questions: Why do individuals collectively organize around some digital petitions while they do not around others, and for that matter, what seem to be the mechanisms that facilitate impulse activism?

Besides the theory of impulsive behavior, our theorizing is also informed by the literature on social movements (see McCarthy et al. 1977; Morris 2000; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2010; Sturmer and Simon 2004) and on online political activism (Garrett 2006; van de Donk 2004; Wattal et al. 2010).

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1 Although the term “online petitions” may be familiar to most readers, one example of such a plea could be the so-called “urgent actions” digitally distributed over Facebook and Twitter by Amnesty International. An urgent action is a public document that carries a digital plea for a specific purpose, spreading information and summoning the activist to digitally sign the petition.
This paper seeks to contribute to the larger research agenda in the field of online digital activism. Online digital activism can be seen as an extreme case of networked organizing.

**Social Media and Online Impulse Activism**

Social media shape online behavior by inviting, but also constraining, use. Most significant, perhaps, is how social media increase social identity by revealing social ties and personal associations (Boyd and Ellison 2007). By enabling an articulated list of relations that users can view and traverse, social media explicitly expose the relationship between individuals, as well as the relationship between individuals and opinions (Treem and Leonardi 2012). Based on this exposure, social media often use algorithms to recommend content and access to peripheral (and similar) others in terms of perceptions and opinions. By facilitating information flows among nodes that are not directly connected (a person can follow topics on twitter regardless of his or her relationship to the initiators of the discussion), social media allow people to organize and form associations that were previously impossible or much more effortful to establish, particularly on a large scale (Kane et al. 2013).

In addition, social media afford a high degree of visibility to users’ behaviors, political preferences, and communication networks as users create and share content (Treem and Leonardi 2012). Social media allow users effortlessly to become conveyances of published material (e.g., online petitions) as they push the information forward in their social networks. In so doing, individuals might themselves create temporal organizations spreading and disseminating information (Shirky 2008). This ability challenges traditional hierarchies and “modifies to an important degree traditional imbalances of power between elites and protesters” (Dahlgren 2004 p.14). Besides the affordances often associated with social media, such as visibility and association (Treem and Leonardi 2012), social media also afford immediateness by allowing for a high degree of accessibility, information availability, and large volumes of opinions. This temporal aspect of social media invites quickness in use. As suggested by Kaplan (2012 p.132), impulsiveness is a key explanation to online contributions: “People might be willing to post status updates and upload videos on their way to work for exactly the same reasons they would purchase a candy bar at the drugstore check-out, although it is incompatible with their plan to live a healthier life.” In fact, the very inherent structure of social media facilitates in situ discussions and actions (see Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012). Such discussions typically are ad hoc, centered on single issues rather than broader social changes, and very much temporary (Bennett 2004). For example, in a recent article, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) discuss the emergence of the “citizen journalist” during the protests in Tahrir Square in Egypt. They demonstrate that social media, and Facebook in particular, allowed people (activists as well as non-activists) to convey critical information through their postings on social networking sites.

The theory of impulse behavior describes impulse and/or compulsive behavior as involving thinking and acting spontaneously, unreflectively, and immediately (Beatty and Ferrell 1998; Hooch and Loewenstein 1991; Rook and Fisher 1995). However, as suggested by Rook and Fisher (1995), to have an impulse is not necessarily to act on it; on the contrary, impulse individuals make normative evaluations and judgments based on appropriateness in particular situations. In the marketing literature, Rook and Fisher (1995 p. 306) further explain that we might falsely have interpreted impulse behavior as an irrational behavior. They suggest that acting on impulse might be much less problematic and that “…in other hypothetical situations, normative influences might even encourage acting on impulse as the right thing to do.” This perspective suggests that impulsiveness depends on inferred social legitimacy. If the person acting believes that the behavior is socially acceptable, she would act on the impulsiveness; but if she believes the behavior to be socially unacceptable, she is less likely to act on it. We suggest that online activism may be understood as impulse behavior that also includes normative evaluations of appropriateness. Moreover, the literature on impulse buying behavior suggests that impulse behavior requires relatively little reflection, is prompted by cues of proximity, and stems from appeals to strong emotions and the expected gratification of being part of a meaningful response (Rook and Fisher 1995). Similarly, we theorize that impulsive activism is greatly determined by similar cues embedded in the petition. We next build on the social psychology of protest to advance hypotheses on online impulsive activism.
The social psychology of protest

The number of social movement studies has grown rapidly during the past two decades. The rapid rise in studies and their interdisciplinary character have created a fragmented patchwork of related theories and operationalizations of key concepts and constructs (Roggeband and Klandermans 2010). Klandermans (1984) expanded and integrated the elements of social movement theory and social-psychological theories of collective action into the theory of “social psychology of protest” (Klandermans 1984; 1997). This theory, which combines socio-structural (objective) and attitudinal (subjective) predictors of collective action, emphasizes the interaction between political systems and people’s subjective (emotional) responses to factors, such as disadvantages, injustice, grievances, and the sense of efficacy in engaging in protests (Klandermans 1997; Simon et al. 1998; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2010; van Zomeren et al. 2008).

Both Klandermans (2002) and van Zomeren et al. (2008) refer to protest participation as incorporating the attitudinal and emotional support for the protest, as well as the protest intentions or behaviors of members. Social psychologists have developed models and measures to better understand the underlying causes for the activists’ perceptions (Roggeband and Klandermans 2010). Although the measures differ to some degree, research on the social psychology of protest typically centers around three main subjective variables that motivate participants in protest behavior: (1) social identity, (2) perceived injustice, and (3) perceived efficacy (Klandermans 1997; Simon et al. 1998; van Zomeren et al. 2008). All three variables are suggested to have unique predictive values on collective action, but van Zomeren et al. (2008) theorize that social identity is the most prominent factor for understanding and predicting collective action and protest.

According to Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2010 p.6), the decision to take part in protest is not made in social isolation. Social identity refers to peoples’ subjective sense of identification with a particular group and the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (van Zomeren et al. 2008). Simon et al. (1998) examined the role of collective identification in the decision to participate in collective actions. They found that willingness to participate in collective action and protest increased with collective identification. Even more importantly, they found that identification with the particular movement (e.g., identification with the gay movement rather than with gay people in general) was a unique predictor of the willingness to participate in collective action. Thus, the more politicized the group members are, the more likely they are to engage in protests. Research suggests that the Internet might accentuate the effect, even when group members are physically separated (Brunsting and Postmes 2002). However, in impulse online activism, the social identity would not necessarily be constructed in terms of an enduring membership in a political group, but would be triggered by visible identity markers in the online petition that prompt crude but emotionally driven social categorization that can instigate spontaneous, unreflective, and immediate action.

The theory of impulsive buying behavior argues that “although impulse buying transpires quickly and without extensive deliberation, this does not preclude the possibility that [individuals] make on-the-spot evaluations of a prospective [choice]” (Rook and Fisher 1995, p. 308). Proximal referents, such as shared nationality or shared location (here referred to as proximity), can serve as an apparent social category, a salient perceptual cue, to which individuals can relate to (Polzer et al. 2006). Such identity markers prompt familiarity, positive biases, and vivid imagery, whereby individuals project themselves into the scenario presented in the petition. Proximity increases the likelihood that the individuals view themselves as part of the same in-group as those whose rights are violated (Brewer and Brown 1998). Hence, we hypothesize that petitions that focus on victims who are proximal in nationality or geographical space increase immediacy and promote impulsiveness. Proximal causes can intensify normative expectations that mediate the spontaneity of political activism, or in our case, of signing a petition.

1. H1: Proximal references in the petition increase petition signing.
*Efficacy* relates to the degree to which people believe that participating in collective action improves the collective’s possibilities of reaching its goals (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2010). In the social movement literature, the efficacy concept, although subjective, points to the importance of the collective. It relates to the strength of the collective to transform a situation, and to the sense of power and strength (van Zomeren et al. 2008) resulting from that transformation. The more likely the goals are achieved, the more likely individuals are to participate and protest (van Zomeren et al. 2008; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2010).

In impulse activism, the efficacy marker of an online petition can be media exposure, which itself is highly ephemeral, but also visible and viewable and hence not requiring deep deliberation. For example, Pussy Riot’s performance in Christ the Saviour Cathedral on February 21, 2012, led to a wide debate on blogs, social networks, and other media, about the freedom of expression in Russia. We know from previous studies that the interplay between online public opinion and media coverage is considerable (Zhou and Moy 2007; Wattal et al. 2016). Zhou and Moy (2007) suggested that in the early stages of coverage, online media has a predictive effect on traditional media. That is, the online discourse might set the stage for coverage by the off-line press. In some situations, media exposure can be seen to provide guarantees of adequate resources and can reinforce expectations of a successful outcome. In impulse activism, media exposure might also increase interpretability and meaning making (Jones and Siller 1978), but more importantly, it might render the petition credible and trustworthy and hence worthy of resources.

H2: Higher media exposure increases petition signing.

*Injustice*, and social justice theory at large, traditionally distinguish between two classes of justice judgments: (1) non-affective justice, which refers to the perceived fairness of outcomes and interpretations of inequality, and (2) affective justice, which includes feelings such as being treated with respect, dignity, and so on (van Zomeren et al. 2008; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2010). Van Zomeren et al. (2008) found that affective injustice is a superior predictor of collective action than non-affective injustice. Affective injustice results in anger, dissatisfaction, and resentment, while non-affective injustice involves perceptions of procedural and distributive fairness and relative deprivation (van Zomeren et al. 2008 p.512). The two are interwoven: Perceptions of deprivation and denial of human dignity might evoke anger and resentment that, in turn, might motivate protests and collective action (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2010). Human dignity is one of the fundamental features of human institutions and serves as the ground for human rights (Misztal 2013). Hence, violations of human dignity run counter to normative evaluations of appropriateness. Impulse actions are driven by a need to trump the violations and to restore a belief in humanity. Hence, we hypothesize:

H3: A violation of dignity increases petition signing.

**Research Methods**

Amnesty International (AI) is the research setting. Long known for its attempts to strive for efficient organizing among its activists (Myers 1994), AI has historically relied on so-called “letter-writing efforts” intended to influence specific leaders and to free prisoners of conscience. Now, AI searches for “letter writers” on social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Online petitioning aims to attract citizen participation in democratic and consultative processes (Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Sæbø et al 2007).

Our study follows the work of AI in Sweden and its distribution of digital petitions (so-called urgent actions) on social media sites. For AI, digital petitioning is a way to take action and add voices to put pressure on governments and decision-makers to stop human rights abuses. The urgent actions summon citizens to digitally sign a petition and to spread the information throughout their personal network. The number of gathered signatures for each urgent action measures the “success” of AI’s online petitioning. Each signed petition includes the name, country of residence, and email address (optional) of the activist. The urgent actions distributed by AI are usually “closed” after a roughly a week.
Data collection and analysis

Two main sets of data are used in our study. Date in the first set are already gathered and coded from 55 urgent actions sent out by AI in Sweden over Facebook during 2012 (41 in total) and 2013 (15 by April 2013). Seven of these urgent actions were eliminated from our data set either because of a lack of information or because of overlap with other campaigns.

With this data set, the coding process was based on our goal of forming an initial understanding of the “characteristic” content and structure of the urgent actions. The data collection and analysis of these urgent actions followed a coding process that involved naming and then taking segments of data apart, shaping the empirical frame from which we built our initial analysis (Charmaz 2006). This open coding process generated 119 codes that we clustered in five different “coding families” (see Charmaz 2006). These coding families were Country/Region, Family, Risk/Penalty, Accusation, and Crime. A typical example of our coding included both abstract codes and codes that were directly reflected in the data; to illustrate, women's rights movement and domestic abuse were abstract codes, and execution, media, prisoner were direct codes. We complemented this first set of data with internal AI figures on the number of digital signatures for each action. These figures spanned between 11,473 and 414. Table 1 provides a brief illustration/example of the coding for the five most successful petitions in terms of the number of signatures gathered.

Table 1. Example of Coding of Urgent Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signatures</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Key Codes</th>
<th>Risk/Penalty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7,175</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>Iran/Azerbaijan</td>
<td>[adultery]</td>
<td>violations of dignity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[international media]</td>
<td>stoning] [imprisoned][violated][threatened][lack of legal representatives] [mother][Iran]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,236</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>[moharebeh] [enmity against God][death sentence][Kurdish minority][executed][student] [Iranian authorities][no legal representation][violations of dignity]</td>
<td>Execution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11,473</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>[suffering]</td>
<td>[domestic violence][execution][death][murder][violations of dignity][beaten][burned][China]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,615</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Belarus/Sweden</td>
<td>[prisoners of conscience][student][seven year jail][online activism][organizing illegal migration][Sweden][advertising company][freedom of expression][media][Belarus]</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,146</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>[prisoners of conscience][international media][imprisonment][feminist][music][detention][freedom of expression]</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Our preliminary analysis of the urgent actions provides some initial tentative support for the hypotheses, although the complete and detailed analysis is still in progress. We found that proximal referents in terms of issues involving Sweden received high numbers of digital signatures. For example, this relationship was seen in the teddy bear campaign in Belarus² where hundreds of teddy bears carrying messages of freedom.

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parachuted down over Minsk, the capital of Belarus (initiated by a Swedish PR agency) and in the case of Dawiit Isaak, a Swedish-Eritrean journalist held in an Eritrean prison since 2001 without trial.

In terms of media exposure and legitimacy, we initially analyzed whether the urgent actions per se included references to the domestic or international press—for example, in the case of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot or, for that matter, the case of Sakineh Mohammad Ashtiani, an Iranian woman convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning or hanging. Sakineh’s case was widely covered by the media, as pointed out in the urgent action (week 2, 2012):

Her [Sakineh’s] case came to international attention [codes: international attention; media; press] in June 2010, and has led to the flight from Iran of one of her lawyers; the arrest and harassment of her son [code: threats; child; harassments].

Our analysis of the data suggests that the more severe the violations of dignity, the higher the number of signatures and that the violations of dignity combined with high media coverage appeared to yield the highest number of digital signatures. The top petitions, in terms of the number of digital signatures, all involved prisoners that were experiencing grave violations of human dignity, and all were facing execution through stoning or hanging. The cases typically included women, execution, torture, and imprisonment, as in the case of Li Yan (week 6, 2013):

Li Yan [code: identity exposure] could be executed [code: execution; death] any day between now and Chinese New Year in early February. Li Yan’s ex-husband, Tan Yong, abused her emotionally and physically [code: domestic violence; violations of dignity] from their marriage in early 2009. He frequently beat her, stubbed cigarettes out on her face [code: beaten; burned]. On one occasion, he cut off one of her fingers [codes: abuse; domestic violence; violations of dignity].

Our initial analysis also suggests that the urgent actions that included a picture of the victim were more likely to receive signatures. In our future research, the data on the number of signatures will be complemented and correlated with the number of postings and likes on each urgent action. The analysis will help us to link more closely the number of signatures with the way that social media was used in impulse online activism. These results help to begin to understand the mechanisms that facilitate impulse activism and raise questions about the broader implications of such behavior in social movements.

**Future work**

Our theorizing about online impulse activism included three characteristics of petitioning that affect petition signing, but also three psychological mechanisms that mediate the relationship between the characteristics of petitioning and petition signing. In our future research, we work with AI to test the whole model (see Figure 1). For example, we intend to create a pop-up questionnaire that operationalizes the overall model, as well as many control variables (e.g., demographic characteristics and impulsiveness traits). All the measures on the model variables will be based on prior literature in marketing and on political collective action adapted to the context of online activism. We also expect to include specific social media affordances, such as visibility, immediateness, and association, to gain a deeper understanding of the role played by the media per se.

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3 We plan to expand on this media analysis to include other publically available data.
Figure 1. Initial Research Model

References


Christensen, H. S. 2011. “Political activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means?” *First Monday* (16:2), article 5.


