APRIL 2015

ONLINE ACTIVISM

JOEL COHEN & STEFAN RHYS WILLIAMS

DEBATING MATTERS ISRAEL

MOTION:

"SOCIAL MEDIA IS REJUVENATING POLITICAL PROTEST"

CONTENTS

KEY TERMS

Clicktivism

Slacktivism

Social media

NOTES

Social media – where internet and mobile technologies are used to engage in an interactive exchange with others – has been hailed by many as a democratising force similar to the printing press in 1440 [Ref: Huffington Post]. The use of social media has coincided with a resurgence of protests worldwide, from unprecedented upheavals across Europe and the Arab world, to Occupy camps around and in Israel's own 'J14' social justice demonstrations in 2011 [Ref: openDemocracy]. Some have attempted to draw a correlation between the two – suggesting that social media has facilitated the politicisation and mobilisation of people, and allowed the discussion of issues, and the advocacy of change across traditional societal dividing lines, in previously unthinkable ways [Ref: BBC News]. While some believe: "the speed of doing things compensates for [protesters] relative lack of organization" [Ref: Guardian], others have emphasised these movement's lack of lasting impact, claiming that they may just have been a reaction to economic or political situations . As a means of campaigning, social media is used regularly across all sectors of Israeli society allowing their ideas and concerns to reach a wider audience which might not ordinarily be represented in the mainstream press [Ref: Times of Israel]. Conversely, critics argue that political protest is not just a numbers game; high page views or clicking 'like' on a Facebook campaign page hardly constitute meaningful political engagement [Ref: Guardian].

A social revolution or just the latest technology?

When millions of Egyptians gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square to overthrew President Hosni Mubarak in 2010, journalists attributed the speed and impact of the Arab Spring to the 'Twitter Revolution' [Ref: Atlantic]. In places where traditional media and ways of communicating are strictly controlled by governments, the anonymity possible on social media has opened up space for people to organise and communicate away from government control and censors. As author Heather Brooke puts it: "Whereas before, they might have felt alone in having those concerns, instead, through social networking, they could band together and find out that they all share these concerns before starting to organise" [Ref: Wired]. Arguably, online services like the private the web browser, Tor, along with messaging services like Whatsapp and Twitter weren't popular before recent protests, suggesting the use of these services has risen alongside contemporary events. In the case of Ukraine's pro-European protests in 2013, digital marketing expert, Maksym Savanevskyy, argued people's online usage: "… changed dramatically" after a movement gathered in the streets and that "people who don't have Twitter accounts are following the hashtag to get the latest news" [Ref: BBC News]. That social media is used by protesters to communicate is without question, but the extent to which it is genuinely rejuvenating political protest has been challenged. Is social media just another means to communicate – a modern and efficient form of post and telephone - or something different in kind? One researcher, studying the use of social media in Tunisia's uprisings, reflected that: "Facebook is what guided the protests, the true vehicle for change was the protests themselves" [Ref: Atlantic]. For every protest that has used social media to connect with a broader audience there are those who claim the cause being fought for, not the technology used to fight it, explains why each protest has become significant. They argue that ideas will always find ways of communicating themselves, but social media is a tool like any other. For advocates of the power of new technologies, the difference between social media and traditional communication tools comes from its responsiveness: because stories and posts are promoted by friends or people we admire – people we have chosen to receive updates from – protest has become more accessible and more interactive than has ever been possible before [Ref: Washington Post] .

Engaging beyond the digital world

But the issue of continuous engagement has also been challenged by those who question the quality or importance of protest led by campaigns on social media. When petitions can be 'signed' with the click of a mouse or 'trolls' can undermine political debate to the level of personal slanging matches important issues can be trivialised. Micah White from the organisation Adbusters – which began the Occupy movement – claims: "Clicktivists are to blame for alienating a generation of would-be activists with their ineffectual campaigns that resemble marketing" [Ref: Guardian]. Though e-petitions can attract large numbers of supporters [Ref: Total Politics] , "…the current obsession with 'raising awareness' actually represents the negation of political action, and its replacement by a form of top-down, therapeutic moralising" argues one write [Ref: spiked]. In other words, just because some campaigns are backed up with 'real word actions' does not mean that all of them are – and

when Hosni Mubarak and other repressive regimes have shut down their country's internet access, real world protests have not disappeared [Ref: Atlantic]. In celebrating Clicktivism "...the power of ideas, or the poetry of deeds, to enact social change" [Ref: Guardian] with people thinking the "...freedoms previous generations had to fight for are now to be won with a click of a mouse" [Ref: Standpoint]: a passive form of political action dubbed 'Slacktivism' [Ref: New Statesman].

A digital democracy?

Even outside the world of protest social media has become a lasting feature of political culture used an ever-widening variety of institutions organisations and individuals for political ends. In 2013 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even announced that: "...a new pro-Israel public diplomacy infrastructure of students on Israeli campuses is being established that will assist in advancing and disseminating content on the social networks" [Ref: Haaretz]. These and other 'digital democracy' initiatives are, according to UK blogger Laurie Penny: "...effecting a shift in the way in which politics is understood across the world, and in the relationship between governments and citizens" [Ref: Prospect], offering marginal groups in society a means of participating in political processes. Faced with such a deluge of information online from so many sources, neuroscientists have been left asking if we are more often distracted by social media than engaged by it [Ref: Guardian]. While the anonymity afforded by social media may make it easier to organise protest and express controversial opinions freely, there is also the risk that the same lack of accountability makes the engagement with ideas and politics consequently less serious. As influential author

Evegeny Morozov questions: "What if the liberating potential of the Internet also contains the seeds of depoliticisation and thus dedemocratisation?" [Ref: New York Times].

FOR

Tweeting Ferguson: how social media can (and cannot) facilitate protest
Joshua Tucker *Washington Post* 25 November 2014

From Paris to Cairo, these protests are expanding the power of the individual
Paul Mason *Guardian* 7 February 2011

Three cheers for the internet
Laurie Penny *Prospect* 16 December 2009

AGAINST

Awareness-raising makes you sick
Ken McLaughlin *spiked* 11 February 2015

So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?
Rebecca A. Rosen *Atlantic* 3 September 2011

Clicktivism is ruining leftist activism
Micah White *Guardian* 12 August 2010

IN DEPTH

J14 and the movement for social justice in Israel
Sylvaine Bulle *openDemocracy* 7 April 2012

Is the internet a tool of tyranny?
Nick Cohen *Standpoint* December 2009

Terrorists In The Internet Era
Adriana Bianco *International Post* 1 March 2015

Why the modern world is bad for your brain
Daniel J Levitin *Guardian* 18 January 2015

The resonance of Occupy
Lucy Townsend *BBC News* 24 November 2014

How social media is shaping Ukraine's protest movement
BBC News 3 December 2013

Inside Avaaz – can online activism really change the world?
Carole Cadwalladr *Guardian* 17 November 2013

Study: Young online Israelis 'hyper-connected,' adults not far behind
David Shamah *Times of Israel* 8 May 2012

The revolution will be digitised
Katie Scott *Wired* 18 August 2011

The serious and silly uses of epetitions
Fern Tomlinson and Cathy Thom*Total Politics* 12 August 2011

Twitter Can't Save You
Lee Siegel *New York Times* 4 February 2011

Internet activism: for and against
New Statesman 8 January 2011

Online protest: Power to the people?
Frontline Club 10 August 2010

What do social media and the printing press have in common?
Jenny Darroch *Huffington Post* 1 October 2009

ORGANISATIONS

38 Degrees

AdBusters

Occupy Israel

Occupy LSX

Wikileaks

Twitter, YouTube blocked in Turkey over hostage photo
Jerusalem Post 6 April 2015

Prime Minister's Office recruiting students to wage online asbara battles
Haaretz 13 August 2013

Why BlackBerry Messenger was rioters' communication method of choice
Guardian 7 December 2011

Social Media Gives Wall Street Protests a Global Reach
New York Times 15 October 2011

Twitter reveals it has over 100m users
Guardian 8 September 2011

Online Activism Comes Of Age In UK As 38 Degrees Find Their Voice
Huffington Post 6 July 2011

Crackdown on cyber activists in Bahrain
France 24 7 April 2011

What happens to the Twitter revolution when there is no Internet?
France 24 28 January 2011

ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING .....
In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....
Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD
Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN
Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC
Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debaitng Matters have have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, **www.debatingmatters.com**

"A COMPLEX WORLD REQUIRES THE CAPACITY TO MARSHALL CHALLENGING IDEAS AND ARGUMENTS"

LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA