



Towards cyberactivism 2.0? Understanding the use of social media and other information technologies for political activism and social movements



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ABSTRACT

Information technologies are increasingly important for political and social activism. In particular, web 2.0 tools and social media applications have recently played a significant role in influencing government decision making and shaping the relationships between governments, citizens, politicians, and other social actors. After the Arab Spring and the uprisings that have led to significant political changes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran, commentators argue that information technologies have the potential to strengthen social movements and ultimately transform society. However, this influence is not new. There were movements in the 90s, using the new technologies of e-mail and websites, which were able to gather significant social attention and generate political pressure. Based on three Mexican social and political movements that span close to 20 years, this article identifies key similarities and differences in the use of information technologies and proposes a framework to understand the evolution of cyberactivism. Initially, activists used information technologies to promote a movement's main ideas and gain global support. More recently, a single tool or application, such as Twitter, has been the technological basis for certain social and political movements. However, there is a trend towards a more integrated use of social media tools and applications, generating what could be called cyberactivism 2.0. In addition, there are some distinguishable stages in the development of social protests using information technologies; this evolutionary model seems to be useful to understand very different social and political movements using very different levels of technological sophistication.

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1. Introduction

Social protests have become powerful expressions against government regimes or specific public policies. Societies around the world use this tool to different degrees in different time settings. Today, technology helps with this process. The use of satellites can spread information around the globe in minutes, broadcast stations have become global (such as CNN and BBC), and online newspapers publish more frequently and immediately, updating us all about the different activities of humankind. The more frequent use of mobile devices – there were 6 billion mobile subscriptions around the globe in 2011 (ITC, 2012) – changes the behavior of protesters (Ayres, 1999), making it easier to communicate, organize, share information, or change meeting locations. The internet and web 2.0 technologies have become a perfect complement for social protests, empowering citizens with different tools to accomplish their primary goal: protest. These new online

activities have changed the street protest and the online protest, something that we called cyberactivism.

One of the most famous examples of cyberactivism comes from the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” that saw more than 70,000 protestors come together via online organizing to take on the World Trade Organization (Ayers & Maccaughey, 2003). Another example is the Wikileaks disclosure of U.S. State Department's communications to different embassies around the world, creating a global scandal about the use of privileged information and critiques of sovereign governments (Beckett & Ball, 2011; Fenster, 2012; Hood, 2011). Another use of technology to protest governments and their decisions is through hacking; the online group Anonymous is an example of this kind of activity (Himma, 2005). Leaders of social movements seem to be growing new consciousness about the potential use for technology.

The cases of Ukraine (Goldstein, 2007), the “outraged” in Spain (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, & Moreno, 2013), and later the Arab Spring, including Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria (Liz Else, 2012), are well known social movements and are directly related to different information technologies, particularly social media tools – Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Medina, 2010). However, very few of them

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have been carefully studied so far and there is no proposal for an integrative analytical model. These recent events have in common the use of social media tools to manage information, distribute functions, and enable users, or protesters, with online tools and information to organize protests and become activists. However, it is not clear what actual impact of information technologies in general and social media in particular have on social movements. Do social media tools change the way social protests organize? Are we facing a new kind of activism? Have social media tools changed cyberactivism within recent social protests? In order to partially answer these questions, this paper focuses on the intersections between technology, activism, and social behavior.

This paper presents a model to analyze the use of social media tools in social and political activism and applies this model to three social protests in Mexico, which have used diverse technologies in a 20-year period. These cases illustrate the evolution of cyberactivism and provide empirical evidence that supports the idea of a new kind of activism using social media tools and applications: cyberactivism 2.0. Therefore, the purpose of this model is to contribute to the knowledge about the effects of social media tools and applications on political activism and social movements. It attempts to systematize some of the social causes and consequences of online tools into a theoretical framework to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between information technologies and social and political activism. In addition, the paper proposes a way to understand the process and different stages of this new kind of activism. The rest of the paper is organized into five sections. [Section 2](#) presents a literature review about social movements, cyberactivism, and internet technologies. The section also proposes a preliminary stage-based model of cyberactivism and social media. [Section 3](#) describes the research design and methods used in this paper. [Section 4](#) systematically applies the proposed conceptual model to three Mexican protests using information technologies: (1) the Zapatista movement of 1994, (2) the #InternetNecesario case of 2009, and (3) the political movement “I’m 132” that occurred during the Mexican presidential election of 2012. [Section 5](#) includes the discussion and implications of what could be called cyberactivism 2.0 and, finally, [Section 6](#) provides some concluding comments and suggests several areas for future research within this topic.

2. Towards cyberactivism 2.0? Historical evolution and a proposed stage-based model

Recent events have shown the increasingly important role of information technologies for political activism and social movements. Based on a review of recent academic literature, this section identifies the key characteristics of political activism and what could be called cyberactivism 1.0 and 2.0. The section also proposes a stage-based model that has the potential to help understand the dynamics and diverse aspects of social movements and political activism using information technologies, particularly social media tools and applications.

2.1. Political activism, information technologies, and social media

Political activism has existed for a long time and is frequently associated with authoritarian regimes. The democratic wave of the 19th century had another repercussion: social protest ([Huntington, 1993](#); [Klein, 1999](#)). As a result of the French Revolution, the masses became citizens, and citizens have rights and demands ([Daniel, 1994](#)). Although not the only necessary condition, social protest can arise when democratic countries provide citizens with ways to express their rights. Activism refers to political activities that embrace a goal: elections, rights claims, protests, etc. Usually, a group of people will gather into a community or people who share ideas and claims will become organized. In the 20th century, several revolutions and two world wars occurred. However, at the end of the century the People’s Power Revolution in the Philippines (1986), the student revolt in

Tiananmen Square (1989), and the Berlin Wall’s fall occurred prior to the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs). These protests were held using the traditional technologies at hand: telephone, radio, letters, and newspapers; their margin of action was limited, based on the exposure of these ideas to a small sphere of influence.

The revolutions subsequent to the proliferation of ICTs include the Zapatista uprising in Mexico (1994), studied later on this paper; the Battle for Seattle (1999); the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004); and the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar (2007). Countries with totalitarian and dictatorial leadership have had social protests to change their government or to start a revolution ([Edelman, 2001](#); [Tesaf & Wilson, 1981](#)). The concept of political participation can be described as “those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” ([Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1979](#)). Following this idea, social activism and social protest can be studied together. This paper describes social activism using technology to organize, communicate, and protest against the political establishment. To achieve this goal, we divided this section into three subsections: activism, cyberactivism 1.0, and cyberactivism 2.0.

2.1.1. Activism, social movements, and collective action

Activism takes specific steps in order to create a social change. In describing activism, the Spanish NGO called [Permanent culture \(2013\)](#) has said in its blog, it is “how to change the world”. But activism can also be focused on impeding social, political, economic, or environmental change ([Internet activism, 2012](#)). Activism can be seen as groups of people acting together in order to achieve a common goal. These social movements could be analyzed using collective action theory ([Olson, 1971](#)). Olson states that if people share interests, then they will act collectively to achieve them. These groups are also working together to provide public goods ([Gilbert, 2006](#)). Complementarily, [Tarrow \(2011\)](#) analyzes social movements by studying the interactions between institutions and politics. He considers social movements to be collective action, based on four properties: collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction. Following this idea, [Ostrom \(1990\)](#) provides another stream of research where we found a useful concept for this paper: the common pool of resources (CPR), which introduces the internet as a new public good shared by the commons.

Another stream of research attempts to understand the differences between collective action and social mobilization using the internet. Regarding collective action, [Postmes and Brunsting \(2002\)](#) found that collective action is possible because people rely on internalized group memberships and social identities to achieve social involvement online. Complementary research about this concept comes from the analysis of a women’s group in Hong Kong (the Queer Sisters) that creates a bulletin board online, which suggests that “the potential for the internet to build collective identities for social movements differs across types of social movements” ([Nip, 2004](#)). In terms of social mobilization, [Krueger \(2006\)](#) found that socioeconomic status, civic skills, and political interests influence online mobilization. In addition, [Hampton and Wellman \(2003\)](#) compare two different neighborhoods near Toronto and found that the use of the internet facilitates discussion and mobilization around local issues even when they are more dispersed. The non-wired residents in the same suburb clearly have less activity. More recent research using social media, like Facebook, shows that participation is explained by direct connections to political actors and by the exposure and sharing of political information. A different study with a sample of 774 university students in Hong Kong shows that the use of social media for mobilization could have different results ([Tang & Lee, 2013](#)). With a similar vision, a study in the US analyzes the voter turnout during the presidential campaign of 2012 and suggests that the association between television exposure and voting turnout is dynamic and changes over time ([Towner, 2013](#)). The collective action theoretical

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