



## Full length article

## Civic activism online: Making young people dormant or more active in real life?

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## ABSTRACT

Citizens can be active in their community through a diverse set of actions in real life or on online platforms. Since the emergence of the Internet, there has been continual debate about the impact of online activism on real-life activism: whilst some claim that “clicktivism” creates the false sense of making a difference, and undermines real life activities, others say it actually fosters it. We therefore explored the relationship between online and offline activism, covering a range of engagement levels in eight different domains. Every offline activity had its online counterpart. The results draw from a probability sample of 1023 participants from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo aged between 13 and 18 years. A unidimensional model fit the data better than a two dimensional model, suggesting that one factor underlies both online and offline forms of civic action. Our data demonstrate that online and offline activism are not independent constructs, and that offline activism does not constrain online activism and vice versa. The two combine in a new, so called “hybrid activism”, comprised of very different forms of offline and online actions.

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## 1. Introduction

Any individual or collective action designed to identify and address issues of public concern might be considered as civic activism, a phenomenon nowadays widely analyzed from sociological, political, communicational and psychological perspectives (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Klandermans, 2004). The emergence of the Internet changed human potential to interact with their social environment, also expanding the forms of civic participation. People use the Internet for a broad number of reasons: searching for information, entertainment, socializing, expressing their opinions or deputizing their ideas. Therefore, traditional political engagement such as voting and face-to-face campaigns no longer covers the wide range of civil activities that exists in the real and online world. There are examples of recent public movements successfully used the Internet for informing and mobilizing wide populations in different parts of the world: the

Arab Spring movement in 2010, the Euromaidan Ukrainian revolution in 2013 or the Hong Kong protests in 2014. In the Balkan region, the 2014 civil riots in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), which targeted corruption and unequal wealth distribution, and the 2016 protests in Belgrade which targeted unregulated construction works in the capital, were largely coordinated via online platforms.

Although they go under the same label, civic actions can differ substantially by the level of involvement: some demand very little, i.e. “soft activism”, such as expressing one’s opinion or persuading others, whilst others demand a lot more, i.e. “hard activism”, such as starting a petition or rallying (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002). Aside from different sets of skills that online and offline actions require, they also require different amount of resources. Evidently, it is easier to join a virtual than a real group, to sign an electronic than a real petition or to take part in a virtual than a real event (Christensen, 2011). Considering this asymmetry, some scholars assumed that virtual actions could undermine real-life activities by creating a false sense of making a difference. To illustrate this, these scholars use a term “clicktivism” for fruitless online activities (Sormanen & Dutton, 2015; Tarrow, 2014).

Early scholars assumed that the Internet would reduce collective action because individuals are isolated and physically separated from each other and therefore, less socially influential

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(Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Kraut et al., 1998; Putnam, 1995, 2000). They most often explored the impact of online activities on real life activities (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005). Later studies analyzed both the impact of online activities – e.g. blogging and time spent online, to offline activities – e.g. rallying and petitioning, and vice versa (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012; Vaccari et al., 2015; Verba et al., 1995; Wojcieszak, 2009). Recent findings suggested that, contrary to public opinions and early theorizing, the Internet enhanced political interest and fostered civic and democratic values (Boulianne, 2009; Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Krueger, 2002; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002; Vettehen, Hagemann, & Van Snippenburg, 2004; Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009). For example, recent studies of media consumption in the political sphere showed that online media complement traditional media in fostering political discussion through all communication channels (Boulianne, 2009; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

Most of the studies, however, addressed specific forms of activism (e.g. signing a petition or rallying) in a specific domain (e.g. politics or human rights). It still remains to be extensively explored whether the different forms of online and offline actions are related, and if that relation is dependent on the domain of interest.

The aims of this study were: a) to measure the prevalence of offline and online civic activism among youth in Western Balkans; b) to examine the relationship between different engagement levels of offline and online civic youth activism in the Balkans, to explore the correlations between activism performed on different platforms; c) to examine structural relations between online and offline activism.

We pitted a one factor model, that postulates that one latent dimension underlies all forms of online and offline activism, against a two factor model, postulating that online and offline activism will be independent (Fig. 1).

## 2. Methods

A total of 1023 young adolescents from five Balkan countries (Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina (B&H), Macedonia (FYRoM), Montenegro and Kosovo<sup>1</sup>) comprised the probability sample. The questionnaire included a section on civic activism, a section on intergroup relations (on which we do not report in this paper) and a section on demographic. The research was a part of a regional project aiming to empower young people in the Balkans and foster their cooperation.

### 2.1. Instruments

Online and offline civic participation were assessed by parallel versions of the activism scale, in which participants were asked to mark all (offline/online) activities they ever took part in.

In order to stimulate recall of diverse activism forms, the respondents were asked to assess whether they were active in eight different domains: human (minority) rights; humanitarian issues (floods, earthquakes etc ...); environment protection; animal rights; issues related to school/afterschool activities; issues in local community; politics.

Different levels of engagement were operationalized as a set of activities ranging from soft to hard: I openly expressed my opinion about that issue; I tried to persuade other people to agree with my opinion; I was wearing a T-shirt or a badge with the slogan supporting some idea; I signed a petition; I participated in meetings/

rallies to support some idea; I volunteered in an organization/was a member of some organization. Each offline activity had its online counterpart: I openly expressed my opinion about that issue through a Facebook status, comments, forum or exchange of materials; I tried to persuade other people to agree with my opinion during Internet communication; I changed a photograph, status or profile on Facebook/twitter, etc. in order to support some idea; I signed an online petition; I joined Internet groups to support some idea; I volunteered in an Internet group e.g. as an administrator, or I was active every day in an Internet group). That way we ended up with a matrix of  $8 \times 6$  for both online and offline activities – the total score ranged from 0 to 48.

The questionnaire ended with a set of standard socio-demographic questions: age, gender, educational level, settlement type (urban or rural), and household monthly income.

The master questionnaire was developed in English and translated into local languages by two independent native speakers. We compared the two versions against one another and corrected minor discrepancies. To test the clarity and relevance of the translated versions, we conducted five pilot studies with approximately ten respondents per country.

We computed six composite measures for subscales by activity type regardless of domain; every offline activity had a parallel online activity. These scales demonstrated good internal reliability (Table 1). Two global scales of offline and online activities were highly reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.9 for both.

### 2.2. Respondents and sampling

Upon obtaining parents' permission, a total of 1023 participants aged between 13 and 18 years were interviewed over the telephone (computer assisted telephone interview). Average age of the respondents was 15.7. Approximately 200 respondents from each of the five countries within the Balkan region participated in the survey. Countries in which the survey was conducted were: Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina (B&H), Macedonia (FYRoM), Montenegro and Kosovo. The sampling universe was based on data from the national Census and estimated population dynamics. We opted for stratified two-staged combined probability sampling. Primary sampling units were households, which were defined as a group of people living in the same dwelling. Secondary sampling units were members of the household of targeted age.

To reduce sampling errors, the sample was stratified by the type of settlement (urban-rural), region, and gender per country. Fig. 2 details the demographic characteristics of the sample. Data was gathered via IPSOS regional offices in the Balkans in November 2014. The research procedure adhered to APA ethical guidelines. The response rate was over 80% on average per country.

## 3. Results

The aim of this study was to investigate the prevalence and relationship of online and offline activism, and to further explore the transformation of civic activism in a digital era. A person who performed at least one activism form in at least one measured issue is considered as activist in our study. Among the youth in the Balkans, 88.6% reported to have taken part in at least one offline action ( $N = 906$ ), compared to 75.6% who reported to have taken part in at least one online action ( $N = 773$ ). Despite the fact that our sample comprised of adolescents, the heaviest Internet users of all demographic groups, offline activism was still more present than online activism. This relatively surprising result could be due to the fact that we employed a rough measure of activism, and did not measure its frequency.

As expected, soft activism was more frequent than hard activism

<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on Kosovo.

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