Technopolitics: The Role of the Internet in Activism

Since the mid 1990s the Internet has become an increasingly important part of daily life. Millions of people log on every day to pay bills, play games, communicate with friends, plan vacations, and check out the latest news, weather, and sports scores. But for many political activists, the Internet is becoming more than a place to socialize. It is a virtual staging area for serious social battles. New media is “contested terrain,” used by those on all sides of an issue to broadcast messages, encourage membership, stage events, mobilize people, and shape public opinion (Kahn and Kellner, “Internet”). These virtual revolutionaries may not be taking over the streets, but somewhere in cyberspace, millions are marching (Klotzer 28).\(^1\) The articles discussed here explore how the rise of the Internet and other new media technologies enable activism.

In their article “Media Participation: A Legitimating Mechanism of Mass Democracy” Erik P. Bucy and Kimberly S. Gregson discuss the concept of media participation, which they define as political participation through media. They argue that “regardless of their exact form, participatory mechanisms are considered vital to the effective functioning of a strong democracy” but note that active participation in politics is sporadic at best (359). Other than voting, there is no form of participation in which a majority of the public engages. Citizens often feel alienated from the politics in which they are encouraged to participate. Bucy and Gregson

\(^1\) Charles Klotzer’s article was not “worth” reviewing for this paper. It was a short, one-page article that was more commentary than anything. But I loved this idea of millions of people virtually marching, so I quoted him in my introduction.
cite presidential elections as an example of this. In the 1988 campaign, journalism became elitist theater, as candidates presented themselves to the public only through carefully orchestrated stunts. Following the election, “journalists entered into an extended period of self-criticism and evaluation” that resulted in an attempt by journalists (and the candidates) to empower citizens for the 1992 election (364). As political participation was declining, media use was increasing, and Bucy and Gregson look at how interactivity became a principal component in the evolution of new media. They cite several new media formats that were used: political entertainment television, political talk radio, political call-in television, electronic town hall forums, and the Internet/World Wide Web. Ultimately, Bucy and Gregson conclude that using new media as a form of political participation provides symbolic empowerment—“suddenly, there is a form of participation in which a growing segment of the public regularly engages” (375).

Alan Scott and John Street further this notion of “new politics” in their article “From Media Politics to E-Protest: The Use of Popular Culture and New Media in Parties and Social Movements.” They discuss how popular culture and new media have been used in the United Kingdom to promote political interests—looking specifically politics as advertising—through two new media technologies—television and the Internet. Scott and Street discuss how politicians must sell themselves through mass media, first through television—the main source of political information. Television provides its audience with celebrities—some from Hollywood, some from 10 Downing Street. Scott and Street assert that in order to be successful, politicians must conform to its conventions—“politics becomes melodrama through the recounting of personal anecdotes, interviews become therapeutic encounters” (223). They say that the Internet, however, provides a very different set of opportunities: (1) It provides a network of networks; (2) It offers high impact with few resources; (3) It allows the political
participant to have editorial control; and (4) The lack of regulation offers unprecedented freedom. Scott and Street go on to say that all politicians must learn to, in a sense, exploit the opportunities offered by new media technologies—similar to how businesses have—in order to be successful.

In their article “Collective Action in the Age of the Internet: Mass Communication and Online Mobilization,” Tom Postmes and Suzanne Brunsting also discuss the political opportunities provided by the Internet, but they take a different approach. They look at how non-governmental organizations use the Internet in political activism. In addition, they (1) discuss how the Internet will affect collective action and (2) examine what motivates people to become activists and what influences them their choice of online or offline activism. The evolution of collective action has brought online equivalents for most forms of offline action, including petitioning (through letter writing, faxing, and e-mailing) and civil disobedience (through virtual sit-ins and denial-of-service attacks). Even young Israeli and Palestinian militants are using various forms of “hacktivism” to hijack each other’s sites and attack each other virtually. Postmes and Brunsting are careful to point out that although mass media coverage of Internet activism has predominantly highlighted such confrontational tactics, “associating cyberspace with lawlessness, damage, . . . violence [and] extremism,” most online collective activism is much less confrontational (293). This is important to note because one of the major ways that online activities is transforming activism is that the Internet allows an “influx of new members and sympathizers who would not normally be part of the movement” (296). These activists are not all radical. Postmes and Brunsting set up a study to look into what motivates activists and nonactivists to participate in online and offline activism, and some of the
preliminary results are presented in this article. A more detailed look at the study and its results were published later in a separate article in another journal, as described below.

In “Social Movement Participation in the Digital Age: Predicting Offline and Online Collective Action,” Suzanne Brunsting and Tom Postmes provide a more comprehensive look at the powers of new media in recent years and offer a thorough discussion of their research into online and offline collective action. Many of the themes of from “Collective Action in the Age of the Internet: Mass Communication and Online Mobilization” are echoed in this article, but they are discussed in more detail. In this article the authors spend a good deal of time exploring how the Internet (a “socially isolating medium”) can promote social unity (528). They assert that even though the Internet does provide anonymity and isolation, this can be appealing to some when they consider whether/how to become involved in online activism. They also say that close proximity is not necessary for a strong group identity—especially when individual identity is pushed to the background. The Internet can also “enable members of less powerful groups to express views that might otherwise be punished or sanctioned by more powerful parties. Thus, particular groups . . . may benefit from the strategic liberty offered by the medium in undertaking (punishable) collective action against a powerful out-group” (530). In addition to further exploring various aspects of the Internet that benefit collective action, Brunsting and Postmes also discuss their research on this subject. They conducted an online study focusing on environmental activism in the Netherlands. The methods, procedures, and measures are discussed in great detail—as are the results. Overall, their research confirmed most of their hypotheses, and several major points should be noted. First, both activists and nonactivists see

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2 I am citing two articles by authors Suzanne Brunsting and Tom Postmes in this paper. In the first, Collective Action in the Age of the Internet: Mass Communication and Online Mobilization,” Tom Postmes is listed as the first author. In the second, Social Movement Participation in the Digital Age: Predicting Offline and Online Collective Action,” Suzanne Brunsting is listed first. In my in-text references and on the Works Cited page, I stay true to their sequence for each article.
the Internet as a viable platform for collective action. Second, “soft actions” (persuasive and pressurizing forms of action) were seen as more effective than “hard actions (confrontational and direct acts). This is important to note, especially in light of a general point discussed in their article “Collective Action in the Age of the Internet: Mass Communication and Online Mobilization” about how mass media tend to report only the extremist online actions. The participants in this study were more likely to be a part of persuasive collective action rather than confrontational collective action. Finally, participation in online actions can be motivated differently than participation in offline actions. The Internet allows people the “strategic freedom to choose whether to participate in collective action without facing direct consequences” (549).

More and more people are choosing to get involved—as evidenced by the increasing number of non-governmental activist organizations. In her article “An Analysis: The Impact of Non-Governmental Organizations on the Practice of Public Relations,” Gina Li looks at the emergence of NGOs and how they are mobilizing. She cites a statistic from The Economist that the number of international NGOs has increased from 6,000 in 1990 to more than 26,000 in 1999. This increase is undoubtedly due, in part, to the rise of the Internet. This article provides a short, surface look at how “grassroots goes global” (12). Li argues that e-mail is the main tool that the Internet offers to activists because it (1) allows organizers to communicate things quickly and (2) provides a method by which groups can easily and simultaneously “bombard a target with protests from around the world” (12). Another way in which the Internet assists the modern activist is that Web sites can set up “virtual activist” toolkits online. Kits may include standard protest letters, flyers, e-mail addresses, and links to other protest sites. Li concludes the article with a discussion of how corporations can protect themselves from being the victim of an activist
NGO. She basically says “If you can’t beat them, join them,” calling on corporations to employ many of the same strategies used by activist groups—embracing the power of new media technologies.

In her article “Media, Bureaucracy, and the Success of Social Protest: Newspaper Coverage of Environmental Movement Groups,” Julia B. Corbett takes a more in-depth look at NGOs such as environmental activist groups. As mentioned in the Li article, the number of these groups is increasing, and Corbett says that most people tend to think these groups are “small, grassroots, loosely organized, and energetic” (41). This is certainly true of some groups but not all. Some activist groups are just as sophisticated as their targets. This article looks at whether the degree of bureaucratization within a group affects the amount of media coverage they are able to obtain and provides interesting insight into the relationship between activist groups and the media. Corbett asserts that historically protest groups have needed mass media more than the other way around. Her research found that low bureaucracy groups were “virtually ignored” by mass media (41). This dichotomy is undoubtedly one of the reasons why activist groups that are “small, grassroots, loosely organized, and energetic” are looking to the Internet as their main means of mobilization. They do not need the justification (and publication) from mass media to create a Web site, send out mass e-mails, or (loosely) organize a demonstration.

The members of many such groups are part of what Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner call “Internet subcultures” in their article “Internet Subcultures and Political Action.” The Internet has fostered the formation of subcultures, allowing “the construction of a wide variety of non-mainstream identities and communicative practices. Much like the hyper-textual nature of the Web itself, the identities of Internet subcultures are often hybridic and complex themselves.” Kahn and Kellner discuss how the Internet has emerged to form these subcultures. The article
presents a detailed time line chronicling an evolution that people actively helped to create and not simply experience. The rise of the Internet as a (sub)cultural force has been politically complex. Corporate forces have built the Internet for corporate use, but subcultural forces have often “borrowed” such technology for their own uses (P2P file sharing and the emergence of online zines are mentioned as examples). Another political aspect of the Internet emerged after the events of September 11, 2001. Questions began to arise about how Americans would retain freedom in the midst of Total Information Awareness. Another aspect of politicization involves the influence of global forces on local situations. The anti-globalization movement has grown in recent years, and the Internet has played a large role in this movement. Kahn and Kellner touch on this here (and more in their article “New Media and Internet Activism: From the ‘Battle of Seattle’ to Blogging,” which will be discussed later in this paper). The WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 were mobilized in large part online, and the Internet provided vital coverage of the event—showing pictures, posting eyewitness accounts, and offering a variety of critical perspectives. The authors cite an increase in the use of other new media as well, such as notebook computers, cell phones, PDAs, pagers, and GPS devices. Finally, the article looks at the relatively new phenomenon of blogging and its relationship to democracy. Kahn and Kellner conclude that “the construction of situations, the use of technology, media of communication, and cultural forms . . . promote a revolution of everyday life and increase . . . freedom, community, and empowerment.”

William Briggs examines the WTO protests in more detail in his article “Sea Turtles, Cell Phones and the WTO.” The article begins with a brief history of the WTO and discussion of why it is so hated. They quote Mike Moore, WTO head and former prime minister of New Zealand, as saying, “The WTO has become a target of grievance for everything that has gone
wrong in the world. . . . If we were not a democratic institution, we’d rebrand ourselves and start again” (14). The article presents the 1999 protests in Seattle as a culmination of decades of animosity. Briggs briefly recounts the events of the demonstration, noting that although there was some violence (which was, of course, what mass media picked up on), there were many peaceful protesters with genuine concerns. The meeting was not a success, and although some of that was due to mass (unexpectedly large) protests, the WTO itself was to blame as well. Briggs says it “imploded from its own organizational mistakes” (15). Briggs goes on to say that the legacy of this event goes beyond mass media coverage and beyond the mistakes of the WTO. What will remain from the “Battle of Seattle,” the first “wired mass demonstration,” is the emergence of a new kind of politics—“disparate groups coming and going at the speed of electronic communication and confronting issues at a global level” (15).

In their article “New Media and Internet Activism: From the ‘Battle of Seattle’ to Blogging,” Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner provide a final look at new media and activism. They address many of the same themes in this article published in *New Media & Society* as in the online-only “Internet Subcultures and Political Action” article cited earlier. This article polishes up the rhetoric a bit and focuses on two main issues: globalization-from-below and blogging. Kahn and Kellner discuss how “advances in personal, mobile informational technology are providing rapidly the structural elements for the existence of fresh kinds of highly informed, autonomous communities that coalesce around local lifestyle choices, global political demands, and everything in-between” (89). Then they delve into a discussion of interactive media such as blogs and wikis. In their view, blogs represent “the next evolution of web-based experience” and are successful because they are relatively easy to create and maintain and because they provide an ongoing discussion and commentary about the world in which we live. Although mostly
thought of as a form of alternative media, Kahn and Kellner note that blogs have had some “political success.” It was political bloggers who focused attention on Speaker of the House Trent Lott’s racist remarks. Lott’s remarks had been buried somewhere in the back of the
Washington Post until a few bloggers began discussing and publicizing them. Despite “successes” like this (and others) Kahn and Kellner are quick to point out that blogging should not be judged only on “whether it generates obvious political effects” (92). The blog itself can be seen as accomplishing a goal. The article cites an example of an environmental activist who broadcast a “wireless account of her battle [from] 130 feet atop an old growth redwood” (93).

These articles provide a look into how the Internet and other new media technologies can be used (and are being used) to enable activism. The articles have shown that these technologies can be used by politicians to present themselves to the public. New media can also be used by subcultures and activist groups to protest policies or events, broadcast messages, and encourage membership. The articles cite the many advantages to all who use new media technologies, such as interactivity, immediacy, and global reach. It is this reach that is the most impressive aspect of new media. Anyone can use the Web to set up a blog or enter a chat room. Those who wish to be involved in activist causes but do not wish to draw attention to themselves can do so under the radar. Those who want to help but have limited time and/or resources can send a standard e-mail or a fax to government officials with the click of a button. The Internet and other new media technologies allow activists on all levels to be empowered more now than ever before.
Works Cited


