

Pyjama-clad revolutionaries: myths and facts about armchair activism

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It is no longer impossible to be in two places at once. All you need is broadband. Thanks to technology, we can now fight to stop a family from being evicted, demand a rise in pensions from the government, support an Iranian human rights defender or combat the extinction of bees, all before our first coffee of the day.

Not even Hercules was as productive in performing his 12 labours. In the last ten years, social media has changed the face of activism. Never has it been so easy to champion a cause. But do 'likes' save lives? In the era where engagement requires minimal effort – a thumbs up – we have become demigods in pyjamas.

[Over half of the global population](#) has access to Internet and the value of social media is [undeniable in authoritarian regimes](#) or in societies with [limited freedom of expression](#). Opinions differ, however, when it comes to measuring its impact in the rest. Some see it as an effective tool for channelling discontent, others as no more than a way of salving consciences.

The term 'slacktivism', a portmanteau of slacker and activism, appeared for the first time in the year 2009. It refers to casual or armchair activism, also known as clicktivism. Those who support the latter argument, question the real impact of the anonymous justice seekers whose commitment goes no further than the Facebook wall. They see it as superficial activism, no more than social marketing.

I 'like' this cause

In June 2015, 26 million people changed their Facebook profile photos to a rainbow flag. It was the first time this social media platform incorporated the possibility of using a filter to support a cause. In this instance, it was to celebrate the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the United States. Some months later, Facebook users added a different flag to their profile picture, the French tricolour, following the Paris attacks.

For José Manuel Guerra de los Santos, professor in Social Psychology at the University of Seville, this type of behaviour reflects the need for internal reinforcement. "We all like to reinforce our self-worth, our ego, by feeling that we are taking part in meaningful actions. Social media makes it easy for us to fulfil that need."

For him, 'social desirability' is a key driver. Supporting a cause is socially desirable. "But what happens next with such people? Will they go to a demonstration, will they get more involved? I don't think so, because it is low-level solidarity."

Such was the case, for example, with the [#BringBackOurGirls](#) campaign. Over a million people, including many well-known figures such as Michelle Obama, used the famous hashtag to call for the

release of the 200 girls abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria. The whole world voiced its consternation online, but, a few months later, it had already forgotten about them.

As UNICEF stated in the year 2013, [likes don't save lives](#).

"The only thing armchair activism accomplishes is to raise issues," says Ana Isabel Bernal-Triviño from the Communications Department at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in Spain. "The most widely used hashtags are given press coverage. The real impact is not absolute, but it can be very effective in terms of awareness raising."

This lecturer and journalist quotes, for example, the reach of feminist hashtags such as #MeToo, which was tweeted over 500,000 times within its first 24 hours. "What they undoubtedly manage to do is to place issues on the media agenda. Society itself acts as a media counterforce that did not previously exist."

Laugh if you like, but it works

Georgetown University was the first to seriously study the slacktivism phenomenon. Contrary to popular belief, its [researchers found, in 2011](#), that the critics of slacktivism were wrong.

Their study found that those who use social media to support causes are twice as likely to volunteer their time. The conclusion is that promoting causes on social media can increase, but certainly does not decrease, offline engagement.

Professor Carmen García Galera is heading the study on [youth empowerment through social networks in Spain](#), a research project co-financed by the European Social Fund and the Autonomous Community of Madrid. Its surveys highlight that 44.9 per cent of young people considered themselves to be regularly committed to social causes.

The majority – 64 per cent – stated that they had signed an online petition. The second most common action was giving 'likes' to social causes – 62 per cent. The third was attending a demonstration – 44 per cent – whilst 39 per cent said they had donated to an NGO and 33 per cent had volunteered their time.

"Social and geographical proximity is a major factor. More distant causes only generate a 'like' or a signature, but involvement is greater in situations closer to home," says García Galera.

"It also depends on who the information comes from. The most influential force for young people is their peer group. If the cause comes from a friend they will give it more attention."

It may strike us as insincere or frivolous, but according to some experts, that is of no importance.

"It is not the reasons but the ultimate effects that matter. A little click added to others has a huge impact," explains Ismael Peña-López, professor of political science at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. It is what has been termed as the 'critical periphery'.

There is a small active core and a 'critical periphery' in every mobilisation. Those who protest from the comfort of their screens are more useful than it may seem, as they help to gain visibility. This was illustrated with movements such as 15M in Spain or the [Gezi Park](#) protests in Turkey. It may be

that they only share a Tweet but, all in all, their actions help to double the reach of the core protestors.

The key to success

Moumine Kone was [on the verge of being deported to Mali](#). After living in Spain for ten years, the government rejected his asylum application. Over 170,000 people signed a petition to stop his deportation. His story is one of the latest victories secured by Change.org.

With more than 220 million users, this petition platform is the paradigm of online activism. It is a tool enabling ordinary citizens to mobilise mass support for their personal causes. They themselves are able to start a petition, without filters. Only those that incite violence or break the law are prohibited. Every week, 3,000 new causes seek our support on social networking sites. "Internet breaks down barriers and enables people to empathise with you regardless of where you are," says Javier Sánchez of Change.org Spain.

This platform offers an alternative to traditional street petitions. But there is one difference. The signatures on Change.org are not official in legal terms, as the signatories are under no obligation to give their ID number. The real value of the support given lies in its power to boost the visibility of a cause.

"Petitions give visibility, but what matters is what you do with them. The key to success lies in working online and offline, and that includes calling for meetings, speaking to the media, holding rallies," insists Sánchez.

Ismael Peña-López is of the same opinion. "The success of an online campaign depends on what is behind it, if there is something solid, if there is a well-organised network." A good example is the #BlackLivesMatter movement against racism in the United States. Its strategy is built on precisely that, combining traditional activism on the street with digital activism.

"There is one matter that is not open to discussion: these technologies are here to stay. Underestimating them is the wrong approach, as is idealising them," says the political science professor.

Demonstrations and 'likes' can be useful or useless in equal measure. What seems to be clear is that, in today's world, both of them are essential.

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