

INFLUENCE OF ONLINE ACTIVISM ONTO TRADITIONAL MODELS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Abstract: *There are a lot of disputes regarding the real potential and influence of online activism onto offline world events. In line with that the aim of this paper is to establish the relationship between online activism and potential for social activism in the events that are manifesting in the real world. For that purpose we have conducted a survey of a nationally representative sample of Serbia (around 1200 respondents). Online activism is measured through both usage of the internet as the main source of information, as well as usage of Facebook used as a tool for political participation. On the other hand, real world social activism is measured through belonging to different citizens and political organizations, as well as participation in different kinds of social protests. The results of our research revealed an interconnectedness between the intensity of online activism and the potential for offline social activism.*

Keywords: Online activism, political participation, protesting, social network sites, Twitter, Facebook

1. Introduction

From the time when the modern internet had emerged there has been a lot of discussion regarding its political role. On the one side there were and still are those who believed that the internet can be a very important if not a decisive factor in a political battle, while on the other side there are many of those who were much more pessimistic about the internet as a political tool. Through the eyes of the optimist (Ayres, 1999) the internet has been seen as a miraculous tool which will revive the citizen's participation and social activism after a long period of political apathy caused by disappointment in the liberal democratic political system. It was assumed that the internet with its capability to provide information and new means of communication and cooperation will once and for ever change the role of the ordinary people in the modern political arena. Especially after the introduction of WEB 2.0 platforms (Chadwick, 2012) the capacity for social activism through the internet seemed almost limitless. However, through pessimist lenses the internet failed in fulfilling many of the early day's expectations. Instead of argued discussion, the public spaces of the internet. i.e. forums, blogs, social networks sites (SNS) are polluted with aggressive and violent voices. This could be a consequence of the so called *online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2004) claiming that when people discuss over the internet they are not in physical contact and they tend to express their opinion in a more raw form. In line with that, the internet became the number one tool for extremist parties and movements, both from the left and right ends of political spectrum (Tateo, 2005; Zhou et al, 2005; Garret, 2006; Caiani and Parenti, 2009). Furthermore, some claimed that the internet nurtures a specific type of pseudo activism – slactivism (Morzov, 2009) which means that people, especially the young ones, are much more prone to give likes and shares instead of protesting in the real world. Also, authors like Putnam (2001) point to a possible phenomenon known as cyberbalkanization, or the problem of forming groups of people over the internet who are sharing the same ideology and consequently becoming isolated from people who think differently. In the end, the legitimate question still is how the internet will fulfil its revolutionary role if more than half of the world's population is still not using it (ITU, 2016). So, the problem of a digital divide is also one of the big obstacles for wide impact of the internet onto everyday political life (Dean, 2003; Min, 2010).

In order to investigate the real potential of internet use in the context of social activism the aim of this paper was to establish a relationship between online activism and the capacity for social activism in the events that are manifesting in the real world. For that purpose we have conducted a survey on a nationally representative sample of the Serbian population.

2. Theoretical and analytical framework

The internet is much more than plain technology. Some form of subversiveness has been installed in its very roots as a result of the

atmosphere of social movements and activism during the sixties and seventies. The real creators of the modern internet were young anti-establishment oriented people predominantly educated in the very liberal environment of universities in California, especially in Silicon Valley (Castells, 2001).

Another inherent characteristic of the internet as a technology is that it is, maybe more than any other technology, suitable for creative appropriation (Feenberg, 1999) by its users. This is a result of its unprecedented flexibility which allows constant variation and innovation of its features and ways of its usage. Similarly, but in different context, Castells believe that the appearance of the internet was crucial for the rise of a new form of societal communication, i.e. mass self-communication. (Castells, 2009). He claims that this new form of communication is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience. It is also multimodal, as the digitization of content and advanced social software, often based on open source programs which can be downloaded for free, allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form, increasingly distributed via wireless networks. It is also self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many who communicate with many. This is for Castells a new communication realm, and ultimately a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive. What is even more important, the rise of this form of mass self-communication increases the autonomy and freedom of communicating actors. Now, they have a tool and consequently the power to organize themselves and promote alternative agendas in opposition to the power elites (Castells, 2012.) In another words, through autonomous mass self-communication citizens are empowered to permanently challenge one of two fundamental source of rulers' power, the power of communication.

In line with the abovementioned if our goal is to understand the social activist role of new information-communication technologies (ICT) we should analyse it on three levels: 1) As a tool for finding, processing and disseminating of information; 2) as a tool for organizing and coordinating social action; and 3) as a public sphere.

When it comes to information, accessing the internet can be seen as a hybrid medium which combines the elements of traditional media, i.e. newspapers, radio and television. But, the internet is not just the simple aggregation of traditional media elements, but much more than that. In contrast to all of them, the internet is a two-way media with a highly decentralized structure which makes it suitable for new forms of information exchange, such as citizen journalism (Chadwick, 2012; Vergeer et al., 2013).

But the internet is not just for media, it is a powerful tool for communication and cooperation. Platforms for social networking like Twitter or Facebook are especially important tools for communication and it is fair to say that they have become inseparable from contemporary social activism. Numerous

researchers confirmed that these platforms can play very important roles in organizing social actions (Petrović, 2013; 2016).

On the third level, the internet can be seen as a tool for revival of the public sphere as Habermas saw it. He defined the public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. In its ideal form, the public sphere is "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (Habermas, 1991). Especially in the early days of the internet many had hoped (Kellner, 1997) that this new virtual space would be ideal for the awakening of, in a liberal democracy, disappointed citizens. Although, this optimistic spirit has largely vanished by now (Dean, 2003; Papacharissi, 2009), we still cannot deny that the internet played an important role in providing a new political arena for those who would not be able or at least would not be motivated to participate in debate in any other way.

3. Data and measurement

In order to investigate the real potential of internet use in context of social activism we have conducted a survey on a nationally representative sample of Serbia (around 1200 respondents). Online activism is measured through both, usage of the internet as a main source of information, and usage of Facebook as a tool for political participation. On the other hand, real world social activism is measured through both, belonging to different citizens and political organizations, and participation in different kinds of social protests.

The first concept we measured was *the internet usage*. This concept is operationalized through three five point scale items that has been used separately in the analysis, and these are usage of Twitter, Facebook and Forums and Blogs (Table 1). As we expected, Facebook is used by the majority of our respondents while Twitter is regularly (weekly level) used by only 12.1% internet users.

Table 1. Internet Usage (%)

	Every day	Few times a week	Few times a month	Less often than that	Never
Twitter	8.7	3.4	2.3	3.2	82.4
Facebook	39.4	9.4	2.9	2.4	45.9
Forums and Blogs	7.9	9.0	7.7	7.5	67.9

As a measurement for *Political Activism on Social Networks Sites* (PA_SNS) we constructed a scale based on five items measuring the frequency of following: liking, sharing, commenting and posting on SNS (Table 2). The frequency for each PA_SNS activism is measured on a five point ordinal scale, i.e. from never to everyday, while the overall scale of PA_SNS is formed as a regression factor score.

Table 2. Political Activism on SNS (%)

	Every day	Few times a week	Few times a month	Less often than that	Never
Following	22.9	13.7	6.6	7.0	49.9
Liking	9.1	8.2	5.8	8.8	68.2
Sharing	3.8	4.3	5.6	9.7	76.6
Commenting	5.0	5.0	5.4	10.2	74.3
Posting	3.9	4.4	4.2	9.7	77.9

The concept of *Online Political Activism* (OPA) is formed also as a factor regression score based on six items: using alternative web portals as a source of information, using special political portals as a source of information, participation in online discussions, connecting with organizations, groups and movements, signing petitions on the internet, and organizing social and political actions on the internet (Table 3). For each item a five point ordinal scales is used, as well. As we can see, the most common OPA is

informing through alternative portals while other forms of OPA are much less present.

Table 3. Online Political Activism (%)

	Every day	Few times a week	Few times a month	Less often than that	Never
Using alternative web portals	39.4	18.4	5.1	3.1	33.9
Using special political portals	8.4	8.9	9.0	9.0	64.6
Participation in online discussions	2.4	3.6	4.8	8.7	80.5
Connecting with organizations, groups and movements	2.3	3.2	4.0	8.9	81.6
Signing petitions on the internet	2.0	2.0	7.9	15.5	72.7
Organizing political actions on the internet	1.7	1.7	2.4	6.5	87.7

Our two main dependent variables, which were about measuring Political activism in real life, were produced by realization of factor analysis (Maximum likelihood and Promax rotation), based on eight items (Table 4). Each item is operationalized on a three point frequency scale. As a result of the factor analysis we identified two concepts i.e. *Political Activism* (PA) and *Activism Through Communication* (ATC) (Table 5). Correspondingly, we formed regression factor scores for these two concepts.

Table 4. Offline Political Activism (%)

	I did that	I could do that	I would never do that
Contacting media	9.7	36.8	53.4
Contacting politicians	10.4	34.1	55.4
Contacting public servants	14.8	37.0	48.2
Contacting organizations	8.4	38.4	53.2
Participation in unofficial strikes	11.3	28.7	60.0
Participation in legal strikes	16.8	36.8	46.3
Participation in political events	19.0	27.7	53.2
Occupying buildings	4.4	17.0	78.7

Table 5. Offline Political Activism items – Factor Pattern Matrix

	Factor	
	ATC	PA
Contacting media	.858	
Contacting politicians	.824	
Contacting public servants	.812	
Contacting organizations	.807	
Participation in unofficial strikes		.916
Participation in legal strikes		.753
Participation in political events		.647
Occupying buildings		.636

4. Results and discussion

First, we tested bivariate correlations among the whole set of variables. The data can be found in Table 6. The strongest correlation we have observed between PA_SNS and OPA. In other words it could be said that the more people are politically active on the internet, the more they are active on SNS, which is quite an expected result. Also, we have observed a very high correlation between PA and ATC, which is also an expected result. Namely, there is a strong correlation between the two concepts of political activism in real life. Also, we have observed a rather strong correlation among three variables of internet usage. The weakest correlation is identified between ATC and three types of internet usage.

Table 6. Correlation matrix among all the variables

	PA_SNS	OPA	ATC	PA	FB	TW	F&B
PA_SNS	1	.787**	.420**	.418**	.538**	.433**	.431**
OPA		1	.432**	.432**	.514**	.439**	.483**
ATC			1	.664**	.151**	.210**	.146**
PA				1	.185**	.224**	.170**
Facebook					1	.422**	.511**
Twitter						1	.549**

** p < 0.01

The hypothesis that was tested was the predictability of internet usage (IU), i.e. frequency of using Twitter, Facebook and Forums & Blogs of ATC and PAI, which are dependent variables. The results are presented in the Table 7

Table 7 Regression analysis – IU variables as Predictors of PA and ATC

	Twitter		F&B		Facebook	
	PA	ATC	PA	ATC	PA	ATC
Intercept	.671**	.579**	.463**	.365*	.256	.136
Male	.330**	.299**	.337**	.306**	.336**	.307**
Age	-.002	.002	-.002**	.002	-.001	.005*
Income	.035**	.025**	.035**	.025**	.033**	.023*
Urban	.187**	.208*	.200	.221**	.200**	.217**
Twitter	.125**	.131**				
F & B			.076**	.083**		
Facebook					.075**	.087**
R ²	0.11	0.085	0.094	0.068	0.095	0.072

** p < 0.01

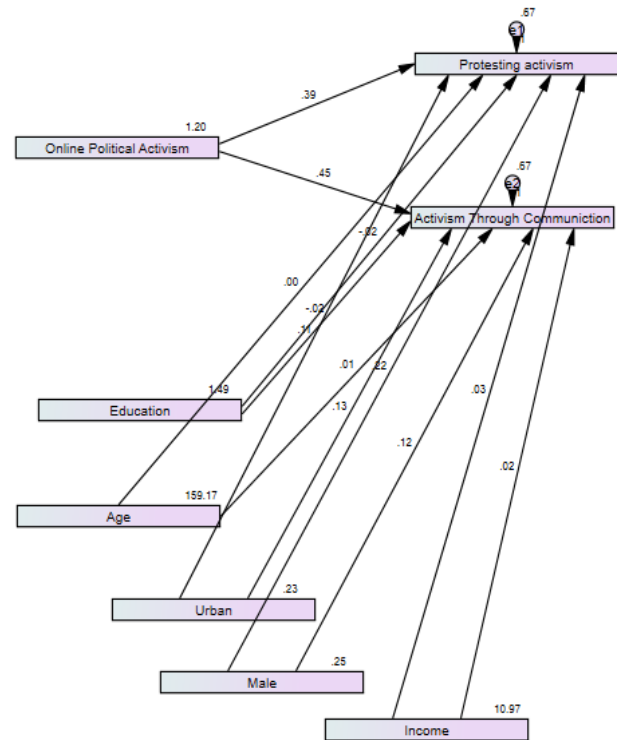
** p < 0.05

As we can observe from table 7, being male and living in urban areas are strong predictors of both, political activism and activism through contacting. After introducing Male, Age, Income and Urban as controls, we identified the predictability of the IU variables onto Political Activism in Real life. First, we find that using Twitter is the best predictor of Political Activism, seemingly, to some extent using Twitter is a stronger predictor of PA compared to ATC. But, also, using Forums and Blogs is connected to Political Activism in real life, and the level of relation is very similar. In both cases, predictability of ATC is somehow stronger compared to PA. So, we conclude, using Twitter, Forums and Blogs, as well, as Facebook is connected with Political Activism in real life.

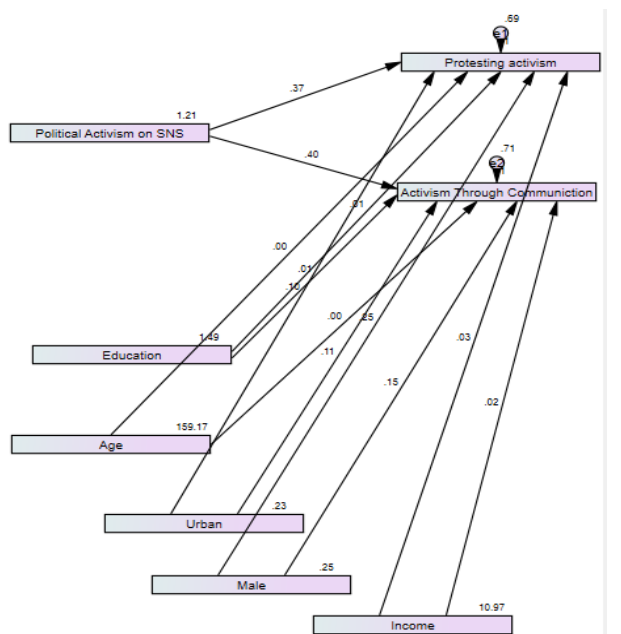
By testing OPA and PA_SNS as predictors of Political Activism in Real life (Graph 1 and Graph 2), we identified strong predictability of both predictors onto both dimensions of Activism in Real Life. Presumably, OPA and PA_SNS are somehow stronger predictors of ATC compared to PA. So, we conclude that being

politically active online, as well as being politically active on SNS, will increase the potential for Protesting Activism, as well as for Activism Through Communication.

Graph 1. Online Political Activism as predictor of Activism in Real Life



Graph 2. Political Activism on SNS as predictor of Activism in Real Life



Our findings are in line with numerous research which showed that people who are politically active online are also more politically active in the real world (Petrović, 2013; 2016). It is important to note that we have detected two different forms of political activism in the real world, activism in the classical sense (through protesting) and some sort of individualized activism which is based on direct contacting of different actors (media, politicians, etc). But, both of these types of offline activism are, more or less, equally associated with online activism even though one could expect that “contacting” activism would be much more empowered by the internet as a communication tool. This is probably due the

fact that this contacting activism is primarily occurring through traditional interpersonal media like the telephone.

As several researchers already confirmed, Twitter is proved to be the most important SNS for political activism (Feezel Jessica et al, 2009) and our findings are pretty much in line with that. We can assume that Twitter compared to Facebook is more suitable for social activism because it is typical, public sphere, interactive media and it has a decentralized structure of networks that is resistant to control and censorship. Anonymity is rather characteristic of Twitter more so than Facebook. As such, Twitter is employed by the people to promote their causes, organize protests and to disrupt and circumvent the official flows of information stemming from traditional media or economic and governmental institutions (Lindgren, 2013). In other words, through Twitter usage of all three levels of the internet as a social activism tool are employed: it is a source of information, a communication tool and a public sphere.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to test the relationship between online activism and the potential for social activism in the events that are manifesting in the offline world. For that purpose we have conducted a survey on a nationally representative sample in Serbia. Our results have shown that using Twitter, Forums and Blogs, as well, as Facebook is associated with Offline Political Activism in real life. We also concluded that activity on Twitter is the best predictor of Political Activism. Furthermore being politically active online, as well as being politically active on SNS, will increase the potential for Protesting Activism, as well as for Activism Through Communication. These findings are in line with numerous studies claiming that online activism is beneficial for political battles in the real world. We can assume that online activism is an important part of real world social activism because it provides more autonomy and freedom for communication among actors compared to any other media. Today, contemporary activists have a tool and consequently the power to organize themselves and promote alternative agendas compared to power elites. In other words, through autonomous mass self-communication which is possible because of the internet, citizens are empowered to permanently challenge one of two fundamental source of rulers' power, i.e. the power of communication.

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