The brave new world of slacktivism
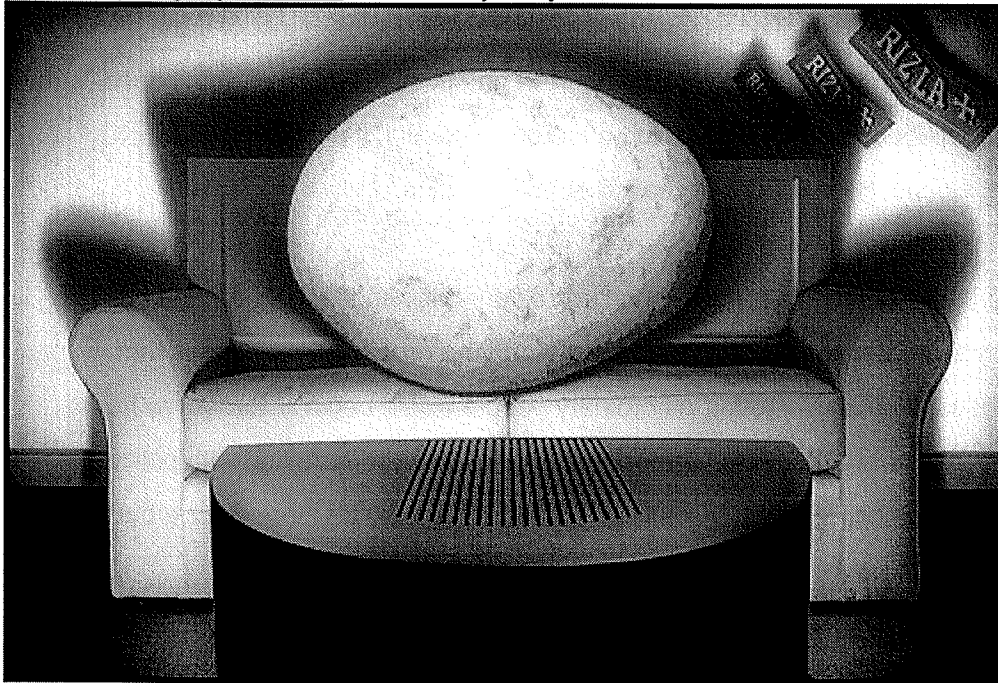
Posted By Evgeny Morozov ▪ Tuesday, May 19, 2009 - 8:11 AM ▪ ⊞ Share

Last week, *The Globe and Mail* ran an **article on the history of "slacktivism"** (the G&M piece seems to have grown out of **an interview I did with CBC's Spark** a few weeks ago on the same subject). "**Slacktivism**" is an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in "slacktivist" campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group. Remember that online petition that you signed and forwarded to your entire contacts list? That was probably an act of slacktivism...

"Slacktivism" is the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation: why bother with sit-ins and the risk of arrest, police brutality, or torture if one can be as loud campaigning in the virtual space? Given the media's fixation on all things digital -- from blogging to social networking to Twitter -- every click of your mouse is almost guaranteed to receive immediate media attention, as long as it's geared towards the noble causes. That media attention doesn't always translate into campaign effectiveness is only of secondary importance.

The adherents of "slacktivism" usually point a well-known narrative to justify what they are doing: while it's true that the dramatic fall in transaction costs of organizing activist campaigns has simply

opened up the field to many more participants and issues, there has been no drop in the actual *quality and effectiveness* of these campaigns. It's easy to dismiss most criticism of "slacktivism" as simply unproductive: after all, having thousands of people -- most of them previously not involved in any activist campaigns at all -- suddenly start practicing the kind of click-based "nano-activism" available via Facebook and Twitter could be extremely useful, if only for specific campaigns that would, indeed, benefit from increased public attention.

Perhaps, it's high time to challenge this narrative and ask a very difficult question: are the publicity gains gained through this greater reliance on new media worth the organizational losses that traditional activists entities are likely to suffer, as ordinary people would begin to turn away from conventional (and proven) forms of activism (demonstrations, sit-ins, confrontation with police, strategic litigation, etc) and embrace more "slacktivist" forms, which may be more secure but whose effectiveness is still largely unproven?

Let's not get into trying to find answers to purely speculative questions like whether the utility of the very public work of 1000 "slacktivists" equals that of the very quiet and often unattributed work of one traditional activist. The real issue here is whether the mere availability of the "slacktivist" option is likely to push those who in the past might have confronted the regime in person with demonstrations, leaflets, and labor organizing to embrace the Facebook option and join a gazillion online issue groups instead. If this is the case, then the much-touted tools of digital liberation are only driving us further away from the goal of democratization and building global civil society.

Of course, the ideal case here is when one's participation in digital activism doesn't subtract from -- and instead enhances -- one's eagerness to participate in real-life campaigns. However, it's also quite possible that a significant portion of the activist population would be morally content with the "slacktivist" option alone, preferring not to get too close to more dangerous activities that are likely to get them in trouble with authorities. So should we be more careful when discussing the success of most digital activism campaigns, since they may also have unanticipated adverse effects on more effective forms of enacting political and social change? (Of course, the relative effectiveness of one type of activism over another is a matter of great contention too.)

I don't really have a good answer here and am increasingly of the opinion that the only way to conclusively answer this question is a scientific one: we simply need to start constructing gigantic surveys, otherwise these insights will forever stay in the land of the anecdotal. I also think that it might be useful to search for traces of "slacktivism" in other fields. For example, is the growing public fascination with "**ethical consumerism**" likely to erode other more effective (and more political) forms of protest? Given that some advocates of "ethical consumerism" still cling to the notion that "shopping is more important that voting," this may as well be the case.