Thinking Critically about Social Media

Many people spend a lot of time engaging with others on social media. Some do it for fun and others use social media as a tool to influence others in many different areas. As you complete the activities below, be sure to think carefully about how and why people use social media.

Task 1: Activation Guide. Show how much you agree or disagree with the statements below on a 1 - 10 scale. 10 indicates that you agree most strongly.

1. Social media (for example, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram) can be a powerful tool to make positive social change.

   ![Scale Image]

2. It is more meaningful to take social action offline (in real life) than it is to engage in social action online.

   ![Scale Image]

3. Young people today are more interested in social justice issues than young people 20+ years ago because of social media and technology.

   ![Scale Image]

4. Sharing a hashtag or article related to a social issue is not real activism.

   ![Scale Image]

Task 2: Before reading, answer the questions below in complete sentences. Provide an anecdote (a short personal story) to support your response if it will make your ideas clearer.
If you like something on social media, does that mean you care about it? Explain why or why not.

What are possible benefits of online social activism, and what are its possible limitations or negative effects?

Hashtag Activism, and Its Limits

David Carr  March 25, 2012

If you “like” something, does that mean you care about it?

It’s an important distinction in an age when you can accumulate social currency on Facebook or Twitter just by hitting the “like” or “favorite” button.

The ongoing referendum on the Web often seems more like a kind of collective digital graffiti than a measure of engagement: I saw this thing, it spoke to me for at least one second, and here is my mark to prove it.

But it gets more complicated when the subjects are more complicated. Hitting the favorite button on the first episode of “Mad Men” is a remarkably different gesture than expressing digital solidarity with kidnapped children in Africa, but it all sort of looks the same at the keyboard.
In the friction-free atmosphere of the Internet, it costs nothing more than a flick of the mouse to register concern about the casualties of far-flung conflicts. Certainly some people are taking up the causes that come out of the Web’s fire hose, but others are most likely doing no more than burnishing their digital avatars.

In February, the digiterati (persons well-versed in computer use and technology) went bonkers after the Susan G. Komen foundation (shorthanded as #Komen on Twitter) announced it was cutting off financing for Planned Parenthood. And then #KONY2012 started popping up in my Twitter feed and I, along with 100 million others, watched a video about the indicted Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony.

After weeks of remaining under the radar, #TrayvonMartin began to surface as well, with many suggesting that the people who got so frantic about the victimization of young black males on another continent needed to look closer to home, at the death of an unarmed black teenager in Florida.

As a reporter, I don’t sign up for various causes, but as someone who lives — far too much — in the world of social media, I can feel the pull of digital activism (a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue). And I have to admit I’m starting to experience a kind of “favoriting” fatigue — meaning that the digital causes of the day or week are all starting to blend together. Another week, another hashtag, and with it, a question about what is actually being accomplished.

I ended up thinking a lot about the power and limits of digital activism earlier this month when I was in Moscow during the Russian presidential vote. I spent election night with Aleksei Navalny, a Russian blogger who had become a tip of the spear in the social media campaign against the current government. On that night, camera crews from around the world swirled around him and it seemed as if anything was possible.

But by the next day, it was clear that Vladimir V. Putin would retain his grip on power, and Mr. Navalny ended up posting on Twitter from police custody when he was arrested after an opposition rally. Social media activism may prove to be a durable force in Russian politics, but in these early days it is no match for offline might.

Evgeny Morozov, the author of “The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom,” is not entirely dismissive of the Web as a political organizing tool, but is skeptical of the motives, and power, of digital activism.

“My hunch is that people often affiliate with causes online for selfish and narcissistic purposes,” he said. “Sometimes, it may be as simple as trying to impress their online friends, and once you have fashioned that identity, there is very little reason to actually do anything else.”

Which brings us to the online campaign denouncing (to pronounce especially publicly to be blameworthy or evil) the fact that “Bully,” a movie about child-on-child harassment and violence to be released Friday, has received an R rating from the Motion Picture Association of America’s ratings board.
I have watched the evocative trailer for the movie and met the director, Lee Hirsch. And as a parent of a 15-year-old, I have skin in the game.

On Thursday, word came that David Boies and Ted Olson, the attorneys who were on the opposite sides of the Bush v. Gore Supreme Court case, had joined the effort to persuade the motion picture association to change the film’s R rating to PG-13, so that the young people most affected by the issue could actually see the movie. Celebrities and politicians, everyone from Drew Brees to Justin Bieber, have weighed in, as have more than 460,000 people who’ve signed an online petition demanding that the rating be changed.

The petition was started by a teenager, Katy Butler, who was bullied for being a lesbian, and has blown up huge on Twitter and elsewhere.

“We were absolutely disappointed with the rating,” Mr. Hirsch told me Friday. “This film has been heralded and welcomed by all kinds of education groups, and multiple school districts were planning to take their students en masse.”

Mr. Hirsch said the petition came out of nowhere. “I got an e-mail the day after it started and I have watched it rising since,” he said.

Generally the way people express support for a film is by paying for a ticket. If “Bully” were seen only by the people who signed the petition, it would have a domestic gross of about $5 million. “Food Inc.,” “Inside Job” and “Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room,” all major documentaries that landed with significant impact, never made it to the $5 million mark.

There’s another thing to wonder about. The film is distributed by Harvey Weinstein’s company — who I can say without irony is one of the most talented bullies in any business — and what seems like a blossoming of netroots (the grassroots political activists who communicate via the Internet especially by blogs) has obvious commercial value to the Weinstein Company. It would not be the first time a distributor happily courted controversy to call attention to a film.

I called Christopher J. Dodd, the former senator who now runs the motion picture association and who was on the receiving end of a full-fledged Web revolt after his organization’s support of unpopular piracy legislation in January. I expected him to suggest that all the online petitioners had failed to grasp the nuance and importance of the ratings system. Not so.

“These are our customers and it behooves us to listen to them,” he said. “We had a screening in Washington and among others we had Katy Butler, who started the petition, and she got up and spoke. I commended her for what she had done.”

“This is the world we are going to live in as far as I can see into the future, and we need to be part of that conversation instead of wringing our hands,” Mr. Dodd said.

Mr. Dodd said he and Mr. Weinstein had been in steady and earnest communication, and that he believes that some sort of compromise on the content of the film will be reached so that young people who wish to can see the film together — as they should — without having to hold hands with or seek permission from their parents.
That outcome — a very traditional organization responding with an open mind to a netroots outcry — made me think again about my own cynicism about Web activism. Many of the folks who made the unpopular decision at Komen are gone and the policy has been amended. Trayvon Martin’s death is under investigation and the president is now weighing in directly. And who knows, perhaps the Web-enabled sunlight on Joseph Kony will end with him being brought to justice, finally.

Sure, hashtags come and go, and the so-called weak ties of digital movements are no match for real world engagement. But they are not only better than nothing, they probably make the world, the one beyond the keyboard, a better place.

Task 3: Using context cues from the reading, define the following terms in your own words:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Change</th>
<th>Activist</th>
<th>Injustice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Define:</td>
<td>Define:</td>
<td>Define:</td>
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Task 4: Respond to the following questions in complete sentences. Support your response with details from the text.

1. Is it possible for one person to spark (start) change? Explain your response with details.

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2. Can people make meaningful change using social media? Explain your response with details.

3. **Central Idea** of the passage (does the writer believe social change can come from social media)? Explain your answer.

4. Cite evidence from the passage (at least 4 quotes) to support the central idea in #3.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote from source</th>
<th>Do you agree/disagree? EXPLAIN</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
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2. Explain whether you personally believe a hashtag can create real social change.
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3. What are the pros and cons of using hashtags to promote change?, Cite evidence from the passage to support your answer.
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5. Explain whether you personally believe a hashtag can create real social change.
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6. What are the pros and cons of using hashtags to promote change?, Cite evidence from the passage to support your answer.
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Task 5: Look back at Task 1 and the scores you gave to each of the following statements:

1. Social media (for example, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram) can be a powerful tool to make positive social change.
2. It is more meaningful to take social action offline (in real life) than it is to engage in social action online.
3. Young people today are more interested in social justice issues than young people 20+ years ago because of social media and technology.
4. Sharing a hashtag or article related to a social issue is not real activism.

Have your thoughts changed after reading the article and completing the associated tasks? If so, tell us which one(s) and why. If not, explain why you didn’t find the article and activities persuasive. Use the space below to write your answer.