Digital Activism Survey Report 2009

Katharine Brodock, Mary Joyce, & Timo Zaeck
survey@digiactive.org

DigiActive Research Series, July 2009

above: respondents' personal definitions of digital activism

Key Findings

Age: Of the survey's 122 respondents, 28% were between the ages of 26 and 30, with 10% above age 50 and only 2% below the age of 20. The low activism rates of these young "digital natives" may be explained by political apathy and entertainment preferences online.

Gender: Outside North America, male respondents outnumbered female respondents by a margin of 7 to 3. If this gap holds true for digital activists in general, this further challenges the gender-neutral identity of technology.

Geography: Geographic representation was largely consistent with global Internet access but should not be used as representative of the true distribution of digital activists around the world.

Economics: Digital activists, particularly in developing countries, are much more likely than the population at large to pay a monthly subscription fee to have Internet at home, to be able to afford a high-speed connection, and to work in a white-collar job where Internet is also available. In short, digital activists are likely to be prosperous.

Access: Intensity of use, rather than simple access, is critical as to whether or not a person is a digital activist. This high use is only possible for people with the ability to pay for it. The Internet may be

democratizing, but its effects are felt most strongly in the global middle class.

Mobiles: Respondents with more features on their mobile phone - such as Internet, video, and GPS - are more likely to use their phones for activism. This is another indicator of the importance of financial resources for digital activists, both quantitatively, in terms of greater technology access, and qualitatively, in terms of better (mobile) hardware.

Causes: Across regions, "rights" emerged as the most popular cause, with 21 different types identified by respondents.

Broadcast: The plurality of respondents (37%) believe digital technology's greatest value for activism is one-way communication. What makes social media useful for digital activism may not be its interactivity but rather the fact that these technologies collapse the barrier to broadcast.

Platforms: Social networks are the most common "gateway drug" into digital activism.

Design: None of most popular activist tools – social networks, blogs, and email - were specifically made for activism. It is likely a combination of their open and agnostic architecture, as well as their high user base, that has made them popular with activists.

Skills: Findings on technology and advocacy skills acquisition challenge the assumption that those who have a facility with technology are more likely to become digital activists and gives encouragement to programs that seek to teach technology skills to traditional activists.

Offline: Older activists in the respondent group are most likely to use digital technology to increase the efficiency of offline activities, such as training and evidence collection, and less likely to participate in activities which have gained popularity because of the availability of online tools, such as posting original content on web sites.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This is a beta release

This report is a photograph taken from the window of a speeding car. It is a "beta" release. Despite the challenges of researching the world's digital activists we felt a need to record - in some rough way - this evolving demographic. We hope that this report will be a challenge to researchers, scholars, academic institutions, activists, and NGOs to produce deeper and more robust research on this fascinating group. Our original data set is available for download on the DigiActive site and we welcome comments and critique at survey@digiactive.org.

Our goal in creating this survey was to collect the first international demographic data on the new group we call "digital activists": people who use digital technology as part of grassroots campaigns for social and political change. From late mid-February to mid-April of 2009, DigiActive collected 122 responses through an open online form, followed by three rounds of qualitative and quantitative analysis by Katharine Brodock and Mary Joyce of DigiActive and Timo Zaeck of the University of Siegen. In future iterations of this survey we hope to partner with a wider array of partners to improve the diversity and quality of our sample and our research.

Methodology and its discontents

How do you create a sample for a population whose numbers and characteristics are unknown? This was but one of the challenges in creating the 2009 Digital Activism Survey. Thirty-eight percent of our respondents are from the United States. While one interpretation is that a preponderance of digital activists live in the US, we likely oversampled this group. While our principal means of soliciting responses was through the DigiActive web site, Facebook group, and email list, we attempted to increase the geographic variation of the sample by promoting the survey on the listserv of an international infoactivism training group for individual activists and NGO workers organized by Tactical Technology Collective. The group included large contingents from Africa and South Asia. Perhaps we oversampled this geographic group. More likely we undersampled them. We also acknowledge confirmation bias. The survey was called the Digital Activism Survey and thus attracted people who self-identify in that way.

Since we do not propose that this survey is a representative sample of the world's digital activists, in what frame of mind should the reader view this report? With an open mind and a grain of salt. All the findings in this report are consistent with previous research or supported by the anecdotal information about digital activists that has led research in the field up to this point. If we did not think that a finding might be true of the digital activist population at large we did not record it here. However, in all cases more research is needed to confirm or disprove the validity of these findings in the population and we take care to state this whenever possible.

We would like to thank Johanna Niesyto and Veronika Kneip of the University of Siegen, Chris Kennedy of Rock the Vote, Corinna di Gennaro of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Dan MacQuillan of Internet Artizans, and Patrick Meier of DigiActive for their help in advising us in this project. Any omissions or errors are entirely our own.

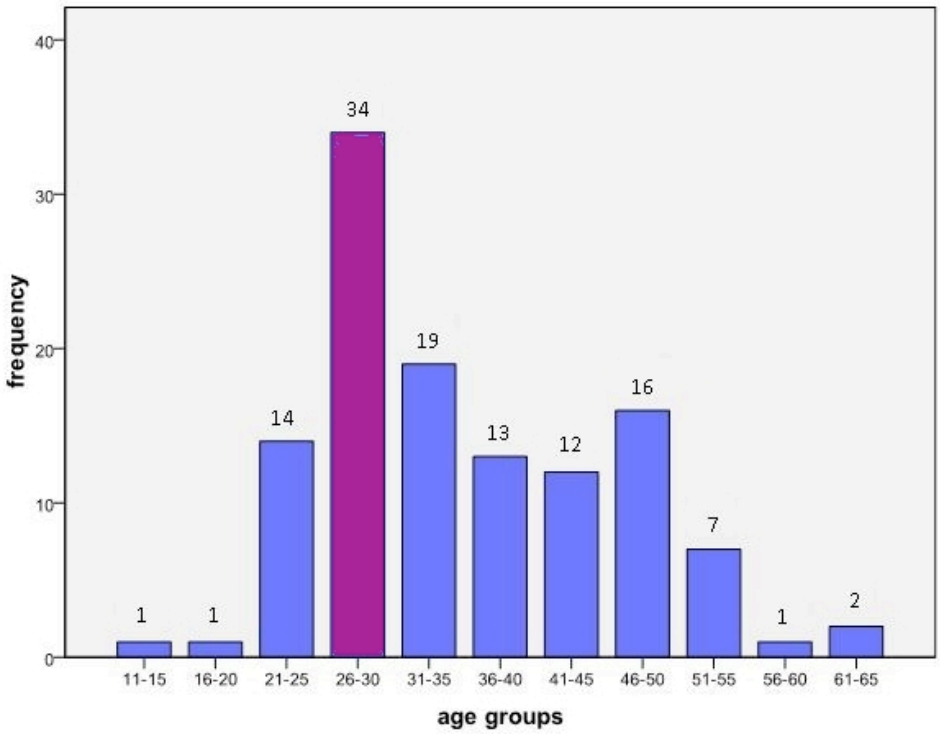
Many Thanks,
Kate, Mary, and Timo,

DEMOGRAPHICS

Late Twenty-Somethings Lead Teens in Activism

To better analyze the ages of our group of 122 respondents, we broke them into five-year ranges, beginning with 11 to 15 and ending with 61 to 65 (see graph below). Among respondents, 26 to 30-year-olds (purple bar) were by far the largest group, making up 28% of the total .[1] However, many other age groups were well represented. The second-largest group, the 31 to 35-year-olds, made up 16% of the total, and the other groups from age 21 to 50 contributed about 10% each. Not surprisingly, after age 50 responses decrease, with only 10 respondents in the 51 to 65 range. However, the real surprise is in the lack of young people among the ranks of digital activists. There were only two responses within the age range 11 to 20.

Figure 1: Age of Respondents



Does this mean that there are really more digital activists over 50 than under 15? Our sample isn't large enough to say. However, the absence of young users in the activism space is inconsistent with other data on youth internet use. Research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, which provides the most thorough (though geographically-limited) information on generational Internet use, confirms the suspicion

[1] Percentages are rounded to whole numbers.

that teenagers go online in greater numbers than older users. In their report "Generations Online in 2009," they note that 93% of Americans 12 to 17 are online, more than any other age group. Digital activism was not among the activities studied by the Pew researchers, but the key to why this group isn't active politically is revealed in what that young group is doing online. According to the Pew generational report, nearly 80% of users 12 to 17 are going online to play games. However, they are also likely to be members of online social networks, a key "gateway drug" to digital activism.

If the lack of digital activism of Internet-savvy "digital natives" is a broader trend, what might its causes be? A response on a Yahoo! Answers forum on teens and political apathy gives the classic response: "Most teens are too interested in the latest Abercrombie releases, Wii games, and Brittany [sic]. You're going to have to change the whole make-up of teens to make much difference." This hypothesis assumes that the basic problem is the political apathy of young people and that the Internet, even if it makes political action more accessible, is not going to change that. In an email Corinna di Gennaro, a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society and a researcher on the book "Digital Natives" corroborates the apathy theory: "we found the same from our… focus groups - the younger kids were very much politically disengaged - but very creative and active online - college age kids on the other hand and some high schoolers were much more civically aware and engaged, both online and offline."

So what are the magic ingredients that make 26 to 30-year-olds digital activists? These respondents are beyond their student days when youthful idealism, new political ideas absorbed on campus, and a lack of familial responsibility and professional preoccupation combine to make young people on universities the world over into political activists. The 26 to 30 group is out of school and into their first years of adulthood. They are in a sweet spot of technical expertise and political idealism, not as technologically immersed as the digital natives, but just slightly removed from that level of engagement. Yet, unlike the digital natives, who may be more concerned with gaming and pop music than human rights, the 26 to 30 cohort have been around long enough to mix the idealism of youth with the experience and education of adulthood.

However, it is also important to note that this divide in activism among respondents is not necessarily caused by the digital medium, but may simply be an online expression of pre-existing offline trends. According to Veronika Kneip of the Changing Protest and Media Cultures project at the University of Siegen, it would be necessary to compare this data to studies of political activism before digitalization to know for certain. "Has there ever been significant political activism of people younger than 20?" she asks. "Hasn't the 26-30 group always been the key force?" However, Ms. Kneip is also optimistic about the political effects of the digital environment on digital natives. "Young people cannot necessarily be

characterized by a special political apathy – the digital natives may develop new and special ways of digital activism when they have reached the key force age." We look forward to seeing future research on this topic that will demonstrate through more rigorous sampling the effect of digital technology on propensity for activism.

Gender Imbalances Hinge on Geography

Of the 121 respondents who gave their gender on the survey, 48 identify as female while 73 identify as male, a 2:3 gender split in favor of men. Yet this global figure masks extreme regional variation. Of North American respondents from the US and Canada, 28 are female and 27 are male - a near 1:1 split. In this case, parity in digital activism mirrors parity in Internet access: according to Pew's 2005 "How Women and Men Use the Internet" report, the US has near parity in Internet use between men and women.

Figure 2: The Gender Gaps

All Respondents

(40% - 60%)

North America

(50% - 50%)

Outside North America

(30% - 70%)

Outside of North America, the global gender balance was more skewed, with the divide breaking down to 20 female and 45 male, a 3:7 split in favor of men. Thus the parity in North America actually masks a more drastic global imbalance. Does this gender imbalance in digital activism match Internet access rates for men and women, as was the case in North America? The sample is too small to say, unfortunately.

One important note is that the balance in Internet access does not appear to universally mirror Internet

penetration. For example, in wealthy and wired Western Europe, only 3 respondents were women and 13 were male. This lack of correlation between Internet access and gender access is supported by previous research. According to the 2005 report "Digital Divide to Digital Opportunity: Measuring the Information Society" by George Sciadis, even though Internet penetration is closely linked to GDP, it is not an indicator of the gender divide in Internet access, particularly in countries with low overall access. For example, while there was approximately 7% Internet penetration in South Africa in 2005, 48% of those users were women. In Bulgaria, however, where there penetration was roughly the same, only 10% of women had access.

ICT for development pioneer Nancy Hafkin surmises that these gender inequalities hinge on cultural practices deeper than technology access. At a talk at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society in 2006 she noted that "access to technology isn't gender neutral - there's a complex set of factors that make it less likely that women will get access to technology." For example "In most developing nations, access to the Internet is from public centers, not from the home.... Because of the poor reputation of cyber cafes, parents discourage girls from going....." In a school case in Uganda documented by the women's technology group WOUGNET, "seats in a computer lab were given to the students who arrived first. The boys ran from the classroom to get seats, but the girls - who'd been trained to be polite and ladylike - walked and didn't get a single seat." (Quotes are paraphrased from Berkman Fellow Ethan Zuckerman's blog.)

Does gender inequality in digital activism mirror the same cultural factors as technology access in general, or is it a result of other social dynamics? Are women under more pressure to avoid political persecution? Are they discouraged from taking on the public roles often associated with digital activism? Are they less comfortable with the technology? We look forward to seeing more research on the link between gender and online political participation around the world both to verify the gender gap in digital activism and to explain it.

Geographic Representation Consistent with Access but Perhaps not Representative

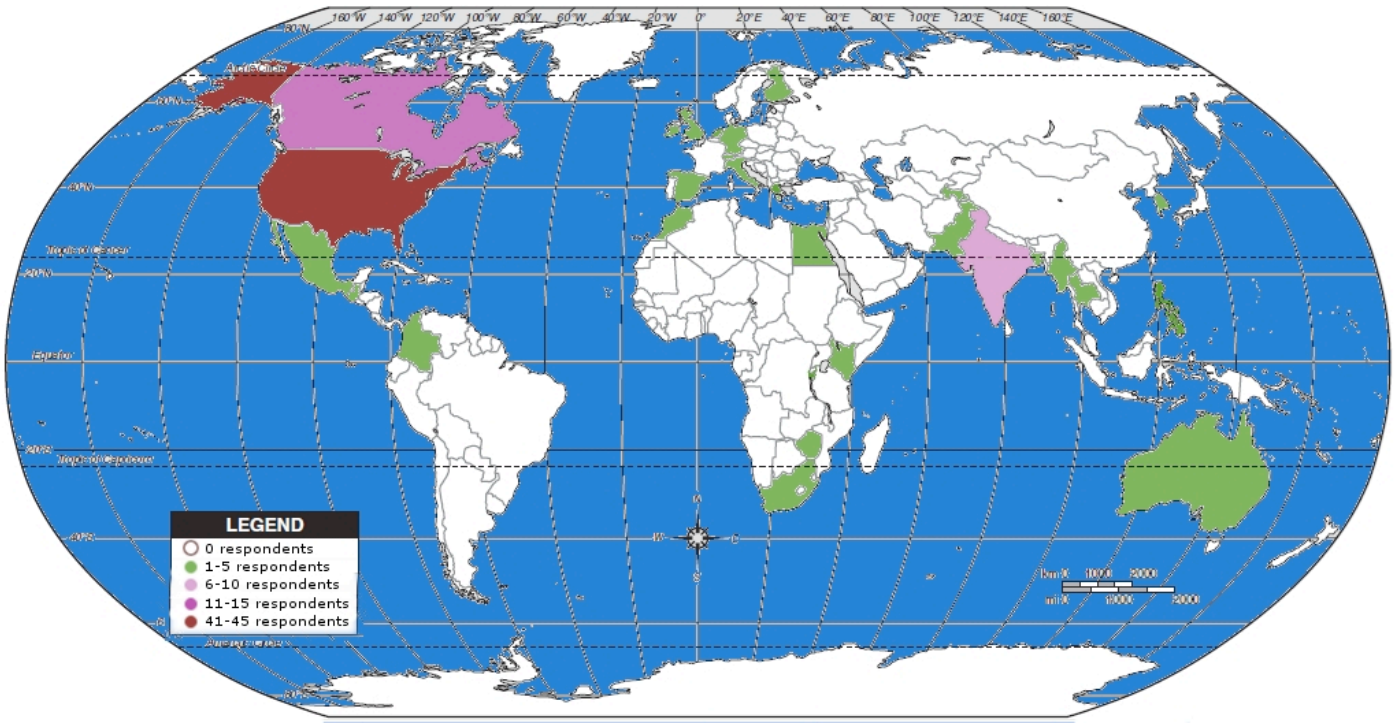
Geographically, North America represented 47% of survey respondents, while Asia as a whole accounted for 20% and Western Europe accounted for 13%.[2] These statistics fall in line with the Internet World Statistics reports. In addition to North America, Asia and Western Europe are both highly connected regions. The low levels of representation from Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia and the

[2] All of our regional assignments follow the designations of the international citizen media site Global Voices Online.

Caucasus (both less than 1%) were in line with the percentage of world users that are currently accessing the internet in those regions.

However, it is important to note that the geographic distribution of respondents should not be used as a proxy for the distribution of digital activists around the world. For example, 38% of the 120 respondents who identified their country of origin reported that they were from the United States. This data matches the visitor statistics to the DigiActive website, which indicates that perhaps this does not represent a true distribution of digital activists around the world, especially when compared to Internet usage statistics gathered in the survey itself, which showed little to no difference between country/region and internet usage. This is most likely a result of DigiActive's dissemination process: the survey was heavily promoted on the DigiActive website, and the visitor statistics to the site closely match the responses in the survey. Also, while the percentage of world users in South and Central America was almost 11% in 2008 at a penetration rate of 30%, survey respondents from the area only accounted for 2.5%. This is likely because DigiActive does not produce content in Spanish or Portuguese and thus has few site visitors from that region.

Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of Survey Respondents



Though geographic data should be taken with a grain of salt, there are some interesting outlier cases whose validity is supported by other trends. One interesting case is India, from which close to 11% responded, a significantly higher response rate than many other countries. Is this a straightforward result of the sheer size of its population? At a penetration rate of 7% in November of 2008, according to Internet World Statistics, this conclusion seems possible. In addition, digital activism has a rising profile in that country. In the prominent recent case of the Pink Chaddis campaign, a blog and Facebook group were used to organize opposition to a far-right anti-feminist organization in a public shaming where pink panties (chaddis) were sent to the organization's members. In addition, social media and blogs were prominent in the recent national elections.

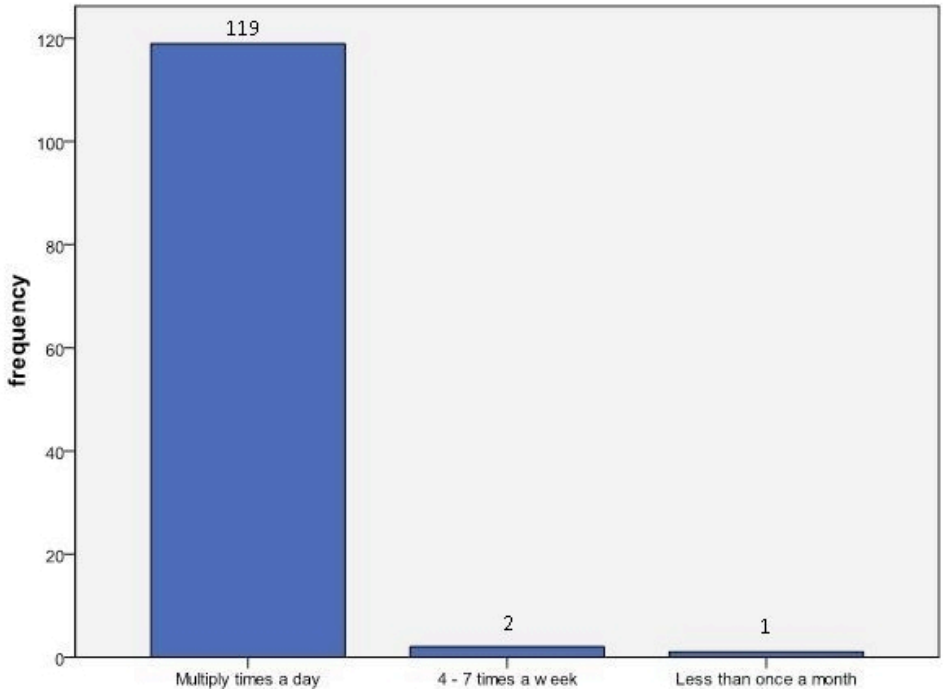
Overall, there were not any significant and conclusive trends that came out of the country or regional breakdown in terms of how it may affect digital activism around the world. Several of the following sections will address variations that hold some correlation to country or regional differences.

INTERNET

Heavy Internet Use is Crucial Factor

When asked how often they accessed the Internet, 98% of respondents replied that they went online multiple times a day. Only two respondents went online less frequently. This finding on the overwhelming prevalence of heavy Internet use among digital activists was the most consistent and dramatic finding of the survey.

Figure 4: Frequency of Internet Use



This finding challenges the latent supposition that the growth of cyber cafes and other public access points in the developing world will lead to an increase in digital activism. A 2009 paper, "Literature Review on the Impact of Public Access to Information and Communication Technologies" by Araba Sey and Michelle Fellows, notes that "a small number of studies have concluded that public access to ICTs has facilitated civic activity," including engaging users in local and national politics and serving as a physical location for civic activities. However, our findings indicate that intensity of use is more important than simple access. This is also consistent with the recent research of Eszter Hargittai of Northwestern

University, whose Web Use Project focuses on the difference in skills and usage patterns of those with Internet access, and of Microsoft's Danah Boyd, whose research on social networks shows that social and economic differences are often replicated online, instead of being mitigated by access.

A Variety of Access Points but Home Leads

According to our survey, home Internet access is the key to heavy use. Ninety-two percent of respondents have Internet access in their homes. (Access to mobile Internet will be discussed in a subsequent section.) The correlation between heavy Internet use and the presence of a home Internet connection is nearly one to one. This is not to say that cyber cafes and other public access points play no role in digital activism, only that they are not the crucial factor.

In fact, respondents do access the Internet from multiple locations, including public ones. Respondents were most likely to use the Internet at home (90%) or at work (89%), while 40% accessed the Internet at a cyber cafe and 46% found access at a school, library, or other free access point. However, it is important to note that for the vast majority of respondents, regardless of country, cyber cafes and free access points were not their primary means of accessing the Internet.

Faster Internet Speeds are Prevalent

The speed of the connection was also salient, though less important than intensity of use and home access. Of respondents, only 9% identified their connection as slow or very slow (less than 56 kb/sec to 256 kb/sec) while 67% identified their connection is fast or very fast (1 mb/sec to more than 8 mb/sec), with the rest having a moderate connection. As expected, there was a high correlation between respondents who did not have home Internet access and those who had slower Internet speeds. However, it is important to note that those without home Internet were not using the Internet from a cyber cafe, but rather from the work place, indicating that these respondents have white-collar office jobs where Internet access is provided to employees. This finding has significant implications as to the socio-economic profile of digital activists.

Digital Activism as an Activity of the Global Elite

What conclusions can we draw from these figures on Internet access? As mentioned at the end of the previous section, taken cumulatively this data draws a clear picture of the economic situation of the respondents. The survey did not request respondents to state their income because salary levels and purchasing power differ greatly from country to country. However, the data we do have draws a clear picture of a global prosperous class.

Regardless of country or region, the respondents to this survey are very likely to have a high-speed home Internet connection. This statistic means little in the context of the United States where approximately 63% of American homes have a broadband Internet connection. However, outside North America and Europe, home access is more unusual. For example, of the 13 Indian respondents to the survey, 77% have a home Internet connection and the remainder access the Internet from work, while India's overall Internet penetration is only 7%. Access rates for digital activists from countries in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia were likewise much higher than penetration rates for the majority of the population of those areas. This information leads us to believe that digital activists, particularly in developing countries, are much more likely than the population at large to pay a monthly subscription fee to have Internet at home, to be able to afford a high-speed connection, and to work in a white-collar job where Internet is also available. In short, digital activists are likely to be prosperous. Further research will be needed to verify this hypothesis outside the respondent sample.

What does it mean if digital activists are part of the socio-economic elite? It implies a corollary to the political empowerment thesis of the Internet. Yes, the Internet does empower people who previously did not have the means of mass broadcast, collaboration, and collective action. Yes, the Internet does to some extent decouple money and power by decoupling money and mass communication... but only up to a point. Merely having Internet access does not appear to be sufficient to turn a user into a digital activist. Rather, intensity of use is key and this intensity of use is only accessible to people with the ability to pay for it. The Internet may be democratizing, but its effects are felt most strongly in the global middle class.

In addition to sharing common patterns of economic status and technology use, respondents to the survey were also likely to work toward similar goals. For example, 47% of respondents are working for rights-based issues. This global activist group may represent a new international class with international values which are not determined by national political systems but by universal values.

MOBILE

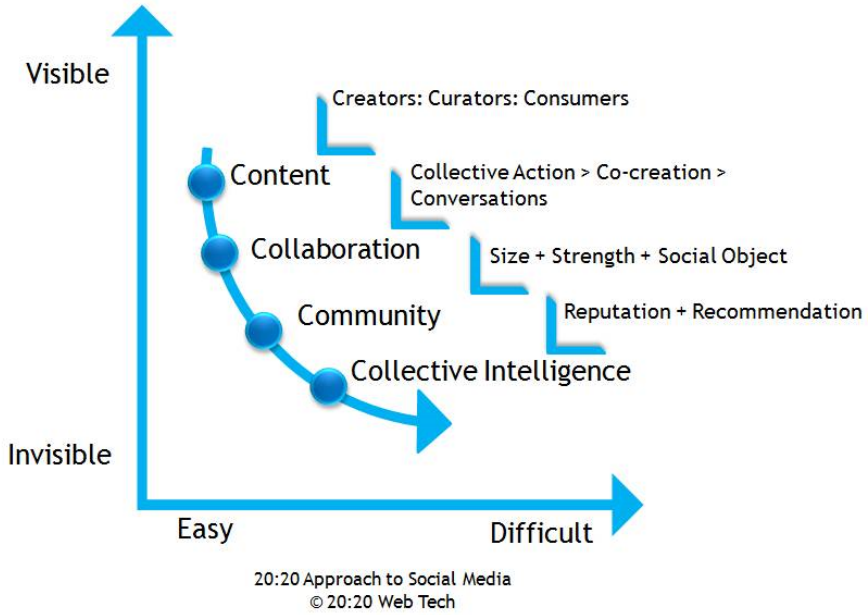
Half Use Mobile for Advocacy Regardless of Region

In addition to asking respondents about Internet usage, we also investigated their mobile use. There was a fairly even division between those who used their mobile for advocacy (48%) and those who did not (51%). (Two people gave no answer.) This even split carries through from region to region. In regions with higher access to the Internet, such as North America or Western Europe, about the half the people are using their mobile for advocacy. Likewise, mobile use is split evenly in regions with lower access to the Internet, such as the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Central America, though there is less data on these areas. As mobile phone use is certainly more prevalent than the Internet in these latter regions and mobile access nears (and sometimes exceeds) 100% in North America and Western Europe, equal usage of mobile for advocacy is surprising. These findings may simply be the result of a non-representative sample, or perhaps awareness of the value of mobile for activism is higher in the North than in the South. If it is indeed unequal awareness that leads to unequal use, this trend is likely to change given the rising global awareness of SMS services like Twitter as tools for activism through prominent cases in Moldova and Iran.

Mobiles Used for Content Generation Rather than Organizing

Besides usage, there is the question of how people use their mobile for activism. In general, people prefer to use their mobile to collect and disseminate content rather than for collective action. In the range of usage possibilities, SMS and Twitter are on top with 15% of respondents in each case. Beside this, taking photos and video follow with 11% and 9%, part of the more general activity of disseminating information. In a 2008 paper entitled "A Mobile Voice: The Use of Mobile Phones in Citizen Media," Katrin Verclas of MobileActive.org notes that "mobile phones are changing the way people consume and produce media throughout the world. They have become the most widely used form of information communication technology in human history." Yet more complex activities beyond content creation (many of which require a data connection), such as email, organizing, web browsing, and campaigning, are less common.

Figure 5: The 4 C's of Social Media



This preference for content generation over collective action is consistent with the 4 C's of Social Media (see figure left), a theory developed by Gaurav Mishra, CEO and co-founder of the social media analytics firm 20:20 Web Tech. According to this framework, the use of social media for activism trends towards increasingly complexity of interaction and cooperation, beginning with simple content generation and ending with the reputation systems of collective intelligence.

Respondents Have Fancy Phones, Mobile Web

These usage patterns can also be explained through device attributes. The most commonly reported mobile application was SMS with 87%, followed by 81% with a camera. A large percentage of respondents do have access to data services, regardless of region, which is consistent with the previous conclusion that respondents are part of a global elite. Of respondents, 59% are able to send email and browse the web from their phone. Also, an impressive 35% have GPS.

Figure 6 : What Features Does Your Mobile Phone Have?

When considering the value of device attributes for activism, it is not only the type but also the number of features that count. If a respondent's phone had one to three features they are less likely to use their phone for advocacy, with only 25% engaged in mobile activism. However, if we take a look at people who have four or more features we get a different result. In this second case, 62% use their mobile phone for activism. The salience of features on a mobile phone is a further indication that the likelihood of engaging in digital activism is closely connected to the financial resources of the individual for reasons of both quantity and quality: financial resources allow both for increased access and better technology.

PLATFORMS AND APPS

Activists More Likely to Broadcast than Interact

Beyond the level of connection technology, we were also interested in the platforms and applications (apps) that activists use, and one goal of the survey was to determine the motivation for starting to use digital tools for activism. While the most frequently cited reason was because of the ability to reach people (27%), the combined responses that focused on familiarity with the technology (15%), ease-of-use (7%), and more accessible platform (2.5%) was significantly high at 25%, while the responses for higher efficiency (12%) and higher effectiveness (13%) - at 25% total - were also indicative of the beneficial functional aspects that respondents recognized in these tools.

These perceived values of digital technology for activism - ease, efficiency, and effectiveness - are not significantly different from positive perceptions of technology in general. The value that most relates to digital activism is the perceived importance of reaching people, which reflects an implicit understanding of the necessity of mass communication to achieve collective action.

As mentioned above, 27% of respondents indicated that the ability to reach people was the reason they initially used digital tools. This classification was given to respondents who indicated a desire to connect with people one-to-one, where the respondent was pushing information out but not necessarily receiving information back. The ability of the tools to then facilitate the broader, one-to-many dissemination of information was noted as important by 10% of respondents. We could combine these two classifications to highlight the benefits of digital tools in one-way communications, which would represent 37%.

Far fewer respondents value two-way communication, with 9% identifying communication and collaboration on a continual basis as being very important, while the opportunities for community building were important to only 5%. The interactive group represents 14% of respondents, a far smaller number than the broadcasters' 37%.

Since the value of social media is often seen as its interactivity, the fact that respondents are more interested in one-way broadcast is initially surprising. Yet recent prominent examples of the successful use of social media for mass mobilization and message dissemination, such as Barack Obama's presidential campaign and the Twitter broadcasters of Moldova and Iran, support the idea that the value of social media for any kind of mass mobilization is in broadcast, not conversation. What makes social media useful for digital activism may not be its interactivity but rather the fact that these technologies collapse the barrier to broadcast.

A subsequent question as to how activists were using technologies also revealed the prominence of broadcast over interactive communication. The four most common responses from a list of tool uses were to "send news to supporters" with 84%, "post information in a static location" with 82%, "create groups" with 78%, and "mobilize supporters" with 70%, with subsequent using dipping below 40% .

While sending information, posting and mobilizing are broadcast activities, the meaning of the fourth use, "create groups," is less clear. While groups certainly can be social and exhibit multi-directional communication among members, they often are used for broadcast, as in the case of advocacy organizations' email lists and Facebook groups in which the group owner messages members but members do not message each other. In addition, while mobilization is a collective action, the act of mobilizing is

centralized as the action is determined at the center and then pushed out to participants through the network. Given the divided functionality of group creation and the centralized broadcast nature of news, posting, and mobilization, the responses to this question are consistent with a broadcast theory of social media for social change.

Social Networks as the "Gateway Drug" of Digital Activism

What was the first tool you used for digital activism? According to responses, by far the most common first tool is the online social network, with 68% of respondents saying this was the first tool they started using in their activism or advocacy work. Eighteen percent of those specifically mentioned Facebook. Blogging accounted for 24% of first-time tools, general Internet accounted for 12%, email for 9% and Twitter for 8%. Email lists and newsgroups were identified as the first tool by nearly 15% of respondents. Surprisingly, SMS usage at 6% accounted for lower first-time usage than may have been expected.

The prominence of social networks as the "gateway drug" of digital activism is noteworthy, as it was by far the most common first tool of activists. The low barrier to entry of an activist group on a site like Facebook has been both praised because it is so easy to become nominally engaged in a cause and maligned because most users who click through into an activist Facebook group rarely take any further action. However, at least among the respondents to this survey, the low barrier to entry seems to be a net positive. Though most members of Facebook groups do not take further action, some do, and that social network was their entry point into activism.

It is also worth noting that none of most popular activist tools – social networks, blogs, email - were specifically made for activism. It is likely a combination of their flexible and agnostic architecture, as well as their high user base, that has made them popular with activists.

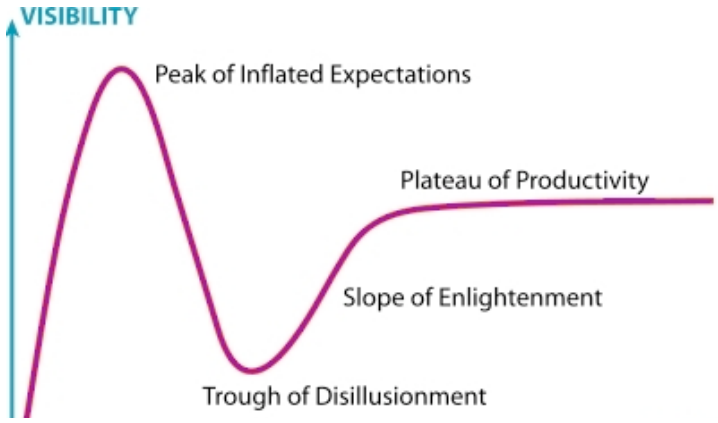
Older Social Media Plays a Leading Role

When asked how important digital technology was in their advocacy work, 92% called it important or very important. This is not surprising, given the nature of the survey. What is surprising is the digital tools being used by the people in this category. Those who highly value digital tools for advocacy are not using the latest tools like Twitter. Rather the "killer app" is email, which is used by 52% of respondents in this group, followed by 24% using blogs, and 19% using Facebook. After that, the popularity of specific tools drops below 10%: for instance, only 9% are using Twitter, 5% video, and 3% podcasting.

We cannot say that these respondents value digital technology highly because they are finding certain tools effective. It is impossible to assign causation here. However, we can make hypotheses based on the correlation. What does it mean that this group, which highly values digital technology for activism, is using relatively older forms of social media?

Does the Hype Cycle Mislead Activists?

Figure 7: The Hype Cycle



One explanation lies in the Hype Cycle, a graphic representation of technology adoption developed by Gartner Inc. in the mid-nineties (see graphic left). The diagram shows that after a technology is launched or generates initial press attention there is a steep climb of inflated expectation in which users overestimate the utility of the application. When many of these unreasonable applications of the tool fail to bring fruitful results, users become disillusioned with the tool and underestimate its utility. However, some users have found effective applications of the tool and continue to use it, sharing their positive experiences. In this phase users become enlightened and gain a better understanding of the tool's strengths and weaknesses. Finally, there is a leveling-off, the plateau of productivity, in which use of the technology for its tried-and-true applications becomes stable.

The activism technology that most obviously fits this model is the blog. Following a peak in attention around 2004 (high-profile American political bloggers covering the US election, launch of the international citizen media site Global Voices, the first of Deutshe Welle's Best of the Blogs award competitions), blogging fell into a period of disillustionment. A 2008 article by Paul Boutin in Wired Magazine, titled "Twitter, Flickr, Facebook Make Blogs Look So 2004," noted sarcastically: "Thinking about launching your own blog? Here's some friendly advice: Don't. And if you've already got one, pull

the plug....The blogosphere, once a freshwater oasis of folksy self-expression and clever thought, has been flooded by a tsunami of paid bilge." A 2009 article in a New York Times piece by Douglas Quenqua, titled "Blogs Falling in an Empty Forest," presented some sobering statistics from a 2008 Technorati survey: only "7.4 million out of the 133 million blogs the company tracks had been updated in the past 120 days. That translates to 95 percent of blogs being essentially abandoned... public remnants of a dream — or at least an ambition — unfulfilled."

Of course, this is all overly negative, the kind of rhetoric thrown off by the steep slope of disillusionment. No, blogging will not make you rich. It will not make you an instant celebrity (or even instantly popular). But blogging continues and it still functions well as a free content-rich web platform, alternative broadcast channel, or social networking node (as is the case of LiveJournal). Even though blogs are not as hyped as they once were, patient activists have found their applications and will likely continue to use them in the future.

Email, which has not been hyped since 1996, is even more firmly in a period of stable use. It is the original social media, the first way that non-techies found to use the Internet to create user generated content and to strengthen and expand their social networks. It is no surprise that activists use it so frequently in their work. According to a clever theory called Metcalfe's Law, the value of a telecommunications network is proportional to the square of the number of connected users on that system. That means the more people using a network, the more valuable it is to be a part of it. On the Internet, it is by far the largest network across age groups. According to the Pew "Generations Online in 2009" report (limited to the US) "Instant messaging, social networking, and blogging have gained ground as communications tools, but email remains the most popular online activity...."

This is not to say that newer social media tools like Facebook are not in use. Facebook is used by 19% of the high valuation group, nearly as many activists as use blogs. Yet where in the hype cycle is Facebook? Rather than in the upswing of enlightenment or the plateau of productivity, as is likely the case with blogs and email, Facebook is probably still in the phase of inflated expectations. With Facebook doubling its user base from 100,000,000 to over 200,000,000 in 2008 alone (as reported by the blog TechCrunch) and as cause pages and group pages for advocacy campaigns proliferate, it seems that many activists are piling onto Facebook for a multitude of reasons, most of which will prove ineffective. Yet, just as was the case for blogs, Facebook's value will emerge through patient use. It will likely continue to be used to coordinate international offline collective action, and perhaps more besides. Wise activists will attend to a tool's proven value and ignore the hype.

CAUSES

Many Causes Differ by Regional Context

We did not forget the "activism" in digital activism. Though we began by studying the technology use of respondents, we will next move on to questions of ideology. Our first question in this vein was "for what cause are you an advocate or activist?" The answers we received were varied, yet some unsurprising trends emerged. Forty-seven percent were passionate about rights, our largest single category which encompassed 21 types (word cloud page X) while 31% were involved in environmental causes and 11% were fighting poverty or working for peace and nonviolence. After the top four, there is a long tale of 235 other causes with 10 or fewer adherents. These causes range from accountable government and education, with ten members each, to health with seven, local politics with four, and arts with three. Interestingly, almost all the causes mentioned would be called "progressive" or "liberal". They embrace humanist values of dignity, justice, peace, and representative government. Further research is needed to determine if these causes are indeed widespread in digital activists or if progressives self-selected.

Figure 8: Digital Activism Causes

Note: Word size corresponds to frequency, word sizes drawn to scale.

Many causes differed from region to region. Eighty-seven percent of environmental activists live in North America or Western Europe while four of the eight activists concerned with freedom of speech came from countries where that right is contested: Egypt, Guatemala, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe. Though the sample is too small to say for certain, there are also indications that rights activism is more prevalent in certain regions. Six of seven activists from Southeast Asia (primarily Thailand and Burma) identified themselves as rights activists, as did six of the seven activists from the Middle East (primarily Egypt and Lebanon). In both regions this means about 86% of respondents identified themselves as rights activists. A later question also revealed that 57% percent of respondents from the Middle East use digital technology to communicate anonymously, while only 15% of activists from other regions do. This difference is likely associated with the repressive regimes in that region.

… But Rights Leads Worldwide

Despite the regional disparity, rights was the broadest category globally and the most varied. Forty-one percent of respondents globally work for human rights broadly defined with women's rights coming in a close second with 32%. While these were the largest groups, there were 21 types of rights identified by respondents, ranging from bloggers' rights to indigenous rights, sex worker rights, and the rights of asylum seekers and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer (LGBTQ) people. The regional differences - driven by the varied political contexts of activists - are not surprising. What is surprising is that, given an open field in which they could identify any cause, the rights frame was so compelling that respondents from Greece, India, Morocco, Switzerland, and Thailand said that they were all working toward the same ideal.

Figure 9: Rights-related Causes

Note: Word size corresponds to frequency, but words are not to scale in order to highlight all causes.

Tech Causes Surprisingly Limited

Another interesting finding in the realm of causes was that the digital medium itself did not have much effect on the causes represented. There were two activism categories related to technology which emerged. The first was Technology Policy (privacy issues, net neutrality, open source, etc). The second was Access to Technology and Information (digital divide issues). However, these categories combined only accounted for 10% of responses. In addition, these issues were regionally (and socio-economically) skewed. Seven out of the eight respondents interested in tech policy are from North American or Western Europe. Access to Technology and Information was more diverse, though it was also a much smaller group (the four activists interested in this issue come from Guatemala, Kenya, Lebanon, and the US).

WORK AND SKILLS

For Half of Respondents, Activism is both Work and Play

Beyond the daily behaviors, platforms, and devises used by activists, we were also interested in the context that allowed them to be activists. What was their employment status and how did they come to gain the skills of digital activism? In one question, respondents were asked whether they engaged in digital activism through their work or as volunteers. The majority of our respondents, 53%, use digital tools for advocacy both as part of their jobs and as part of their own projects. Twenty-three percent used digital tools only as part of their own projects, and only 19% used it solely as part of their work in social change organizations.

This pattern of people being paid for some of their advocacy work is true across regions, not only in wealthy nations with large professional non-profit sections. The causal relationship between passion for advocacy and having a paid position in the field is unclear, however. Do those passionate about activism seek paid work in the field or does paid work increase the capacity of these people to take part in activism by allowing for full-time commitment? Both explanations are likely true, though further research is needed to determine the directionality of this pattern.

You Don't Need to be a Techie to Become a Digital Activist

Another question asked respondents which skill set came first: advocacy or technology. When asked how respondents first began using digital tools in their activism and advocacy work, 39% indicated that they were first strong users of technology, while 27% responded that they were first advocates. Thirty-two percent said that they got involved in both at the same time.

The finding challenges the assumption that those who have a facility with technology are significantly more likely to become digital activists and gives encouragement to programs that seek to teach technology skills to traditional activists. It is also worth noting that the survey was primarily distributed through digital channels, which means that it reached people who are already at least somewhat immersed in digital technology.

Boomer Activists use Digital Tools to Improve Offline Tactics

Not surprisingly, skill levels also vary with age. The most interesting data in this area is on the 51 to 55-year-olds or "baby boomers", not the age group one normally associates with digital activism. While a 51 to 55-year-old is among the least likely to post information in a static location, like a blog or web site, they are most likely to use digital technology to train supporters. This group is also most likely to use digital technology to collect evidence. Though more research would be necessary to determine the validity of this trend for the general population, the information from this respondent group indicates that older activists are most likely to use digital technology to increase the efficiency of offline activities, like training and evidence collection, and less likely to participate in activities which have gained popularity because of the availability of online tools, such as posting original content on web sites.

DIGITAL ACTIVISTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Success Stories: Traditional Institutions Incorporate New Technologies

In the most open format question in our survey we asked respondents to briefly describe a successful case in which they used digital tools in their advocacy, there were many telling quantitative and qualitative responses. A few notable responses follow.

Some respondents were part of traditional institutions that had begun using social media:

> *"Parents leaving messages on our Facebook fan page wall looking for information regarding benefits entitlements - our trained adviser responded enabling the parents to be more aware of what they are financially entitled to as a parent of a disabled child." – Male, 26, United Kingdom*

This response indicates a process that was put in place at an organizational level by using a platform such as Facebook. While it's not clear whether this process was initiated as a formulated strategy, or as a reactionary response to people leaving messages on Facebook, it does indicate the adaption of Facebook as a platform to support the particular initiatives of this organization. It is important to highlight that the organization developed a deliberate method of handling the conversation that was happening on Facebook. From this response, it identifies a topic that would be interesting to explore further concerning how the adoption of digital tools occurs within an organization as well as what frameworks and plans are created to support that adaption.

> *"I have used digital tools to recruit new Advisory Board Members, interns, mobilize people to attend volunteer activities and send messages to legislators about certain issues that I care about both in my work and in my personal life." – Female, 30, USA*

This response is indicative of some of the actions that people perform by using digital tools: recruit, mobilize, attend, and send. In this case, all of these actions occurred online. This also exemplifies how digital and social media tools are being used to supplement and augment tools and processes that were once only done offline. It would be interesting to know how much these tools benefit the recruiting, and mobilizing functions of an organization, and how specifically they were used to compliment the traditional techniques used to accomplish these tasks.

Success Stories: New Tools Provide Critical Support in Crisis

Digital tools are useful to activists not only during their normal advocacy activities, but also in times of crisis, as this example indicates:

> *"Getting the word out from youth in Nairobi during the violence there and attempting to garner international support." – Male, 42, Canada*

While the above response is somewhat vague, it seems to point to elements inherent in acts of citizen journalism, including providing information for people on the ground during a time of crisis - in this case probably the post-election violence in Nairobi - and the attempt to draw attention to the situation in order to gain international support for ending the crisis. We have seen similar accounts of these sorts of actions in places such as Moldova and Iran.

In another example, an organization's pre-existing technology infrastructure was used for a new purpose in times of crisis:

> *"I was working on a human rights case and one of the people connected to the case was attacked. He was not an activist or victim but a teacher, and thanks to the blog of his organization http://fne-icb.blogspot.com I was able to send quickly messages to many advocacy groups such as AI and HRW but also to people involved in education in my country. To have such information was crucial to keep the interest, to foster the action and to give him visibility. Also it helped people to feel closer to the cause. " – Female, 28, Guatemala*

In terms of quantifying the responses to this question, while we did not have enough response consistency for statistically significant data, in most cases, the data at least directionally supported many of the other questions that were asked.

Failure Stories: Study of Challenges Lacks Clear Trends

The survey also asked what activists' most pressing challenges were. No clear trends emerged, with most challenges of the pre-selected list receiving a response rate of just above 20%. Of the most popular responses from a list of options, 24% mentioned a "lack of affordable mobile/SMS plans, second was a "lack of fast access to the Internet" with 23%, and a "lack of affordable internet access" with 21%. Following these top three answers, slightly less than 21% fear "government surveillance" while using the Internet and 18% are worried about this surveillance while using mobile. The same amount lament that

people in their country are not responsive to digital activism techniques. Finally, 12% say they are worried about the filtering or blocking of the Internet.

The reason for the lack of salient trends arising from this question comes out clearly when challenges are correlated to region. For example, though most countries in Western Europe and North America have a high degree of political freedom, most of the respondents concerned with government surveillance came from this region. A survey with a most representative geographic sample would likely have resulted in more relevant and representative answers.

Most are Digital Activists, But Some are Activists Who Just Happen to be Digital

Of all respondents, 73% self-identify as digital activists. Whether or not people identify in this way seems to depend mostly on their relationship with technology. Of those who consider themselves digital activists, 79% say that technology is very important in their work, while only 43% of respondents who do not identify as digital activists value technology in this way.

The final question of the survey asked each respondent for his or her personal definition of "digital activist". Unfortunately this question was added to the questionnaire late, so only 2/3 of the respondents were able to answer. Nevertheless, clear patterns appeared. In general, the answers cover three aspects. The most popular definitions of digital activism involve technology or a cause. Using digital resources or technology topped the list with 33 mentions, followed by work goals such as "change," "justice," or "social good" with 16 mentions.

Figure 10: Respondents' Definitions of Digital Activism

Note: Word size corresponds to frequency. Words are drawn to scale.

This distinction between technology and cause indicates a difference in perspective between those who see digital activism as primarily a technological pursuit or as activism which just happens to use digital technology. While some people do seem to see their work as primarily digital, a significant minority see themselves as activists who just happen to use digital technology in their work. This focus on activism over digital is summed up in one activist's response: "There is no need to create a distinction between an activist and a digital one!"

This latter interpretation, in which digital technology is merely incidental to activism, is likely to become more prevalent as digital tools become a normal part of the activist toolkit. In the future, it is possible that so many activists will be digital that no distinction will be necessary. Then we will be able to legitimately ask, is it necessary to create a definition or is a digital activist a "normal" activist just using a certain set of tools?

About The Authors

Katharine Brodock is a new media marketing specialist and founder of the marketing strategy firm Other Side Group. She holds an MBA from the Goizueta Business School of Emory University, an MA in International Relations from The Fletcher School of Tufts University, and BAs in History and Political Science from the University of Rochester. In a professional setting, she works with new media to develop marketing strategies that best fit into a digital world. She is an active correspondent for DigiActive, the Managing Director of the Girls in Tech Boston Chapter, Co-Chair of the New Marketing Special Interest Group for TiE-Boston, and is involved in various research projects on the topic of using digital tools for political, societal, or cultural influence.

Mary Joyce is the co-founder DigiActive. She is the author of "Blog for a Cause! : The Global Voices Guide to Blog Advocacy," "The Election Blogging Guide," and "Prospects for e-Advocacy in the Global South," among others. In 2008 Mary worked as the New Media Operations Manager for President Obama's election campaign, where she ran day-to-day logistics for the new media department at the Chicago headquarters. Previously, Mary was a master's student at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and a Research Assistant for the Internet and Democracy Project at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, also at Harvard.

Timo Zaeck is a student at the University of Siegen in Germany where he is studying for a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science and Media Studies. He is also a student assistant at the Media Upheavals collaborative research center of the German Research Foundation, where he works on a research project entitled "Changing Protest and Media Cultures: Transnational Corporate Campaigns and Digital Communication". As a member of the student magazine `fool on the hill` he also writes about higher education policy.

About Research@DigiActive (R@D)

Research@DigiActive (R@D) is a project of DigiActive, an organization that encourages technology use by grassroots political activists around the world. The purpose of R@D is to produce applied, thought-provoking, actionable research at the cutting edge of Digital Activism. It seeks to highlight and disseminate qualitative and quantitative studies in the by publishing short papers by promising scholars. To submit a paper or get more information, please contact our Director of Applied Research, Patrick Meier by email at Patrick [at] DigiActive.org

About DigiActive

DigiActive is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to helping grassroots activists around the world use the Internet and mobile phones to increase their impact. Its goal is a world of activists made more powerful and more effective through the use of digital technology. DigiActive pursues this goal through several spheres of action, including a blog of digital activism best practices, an interactive map which serves as a visual database of digital activism, the research program R@D, and digital activism trainings. Learn more and get involved at www.DigiActive.org.

Appendix: The 2009 Digital Activism Survey

Demographic Info

1) Age:_____
2) Gender:_____
3) Country:_____ (If you wish to keep your country confidential, please state your region:_____)
[*Note: on the online version of the survey Region was a separate question*]

Digital Tool Quality

4) How often do you access the internet? (Choose one.)

- ❑ Multiple times a day
- ❑ 4-7 times a week
- ❑ 3 or fewer times a week
- ❑ Once or twice a month
- ❑ Less than once a month

5) What is the speed of the internet connection you use most frequently? (Guess if you are unsure).

- ❑ Extremely Slow (less than 56 kb/sec = more than 7 seconds to load a web page on your browser)
- ❑ Slow (56-256 kb/sec = 7 to 1.6 seconds to load a web page on your browser)
- ❑ Moderate (256 kb/sec – 1 mb/sec) = 1.6 to 0.4 seconds to load a web page on your browser)
- ❑ Fast (1-8 mb/sec) = 0.4 to 0.05 seconds to load a web page on your browser)
- ❑ Extremely Fast (more than 8 mb/sec = less than 0.05 seconds to load a web page on your browser)

6) Do you have an internet connection in your home?

- ❑ Yes □ No

7) Where do you use the internet? (Rank in order of frequency (1 = most frequent access point.)

- ❑ Home
- ❑ Work place
- ❑ Internet cafe
- ❑ School, library, or other free access point

8) Do you use your mobile phone for activism?

- ❑ Yes □ No If yes, please describe how:_____

[*Note: on the online version of the survey "please describe how" was a separate question*]

9) What features does you mobile phone have? (Check all that apply.)

- ❑ SMS
- ❑ Video
- ❑ Camera (for still images)
- ❑ E-mail
- ❑ Web browsing
- ❑ GPS

Digital Tools & Advocacy

10) For what cause are you an activist/advocate?_____

11) What best describes your affiliation? (Choose one.)

- ❑ I use digital tools for advocacy as part of my work. (If you check this box, please state the type of organization you work for:_____.)
- ❑ I use digital tools for my own advocacy projects (as an individual activist)
- ❑ Both - I use digital tools for advocacy through my work and for my own projects.

12) Why did you first start using digital tools for activism/advocacy?_____
_____

13) What tool did you first use?_____

14) What best describes the way you began using digital tools for activism/advocacy? (Choose one.)

- ❑ I was first a strong technology user and then applied those skills to advocacy.
- ❑ I was first an advocate and then learned technology skills.
- ❑ My technology and advocacy skills developed at about the same time.

15) How important is digital technology in your activism/advocacy work? (Choose one.)

- ❑ Very Important - I use digital technology every day to increase the effectiveness of my advocacy work.
- ❑ Important - I use digital technology often in my advocacy work but not on a daily basis.
- ❑ Moderately Important - I sometimes use digital tools, but most of my advocacy work is offline.
- ❑ Not Important - I rarely or never use digital tools in my advocacy work.

16) In your country, which tool is the most effective for activism/advocacy?

- ❑ Internet
- ❑ Mobile phone
- ❑ Both
- ❑ Other:_____

17) How do you use digital technology in your advocacy work? (Please check all that apply.)

- ❑ To **send news** to supporters (as with e-mail listservs, social networks)
- ❑ To **fundraise** (as with ChipIn or PayPal widget)
- ❑ To **create groups** so supporters can interact with one another (as with a social network like Facebook, discussion boards, or forums)
- ❑ To **mobilize** supporters for an action (as with e-mail, SMS)
- ❑ To **post information** in a static location (such as a web site or blog)
- ❑ To broadcast **video** (as with YouTube)
- ❑ To get **feedback** from supporters (as with online polls)
- ❑ To put **pressure on decision-makers** (as with e-mail campaigns and e-petitions)
- ❑ To **distribute** digital materials to supporters (such as PDF's of posters for supporters to print)
- ❑ To **collect** digital materials from supporters (such as event photos)

- ❑ To communicate with **journalists** in the mainstream media
- ❑ To organize and **plan** within a leadership team (as with Skype or instant messaging)
- ❑ To **train** supporters in digital skills (as with a webinar)
- ❑ To collect **evidence** (as with mobile phone video or photos)
- ❑ To **provide security** to activists (as with Twitter feeds)
- ❑ To **communicate anonymously** (as with https, Hushmail, or anonymous e-mail accounts)
- ❑ To **browse** the internet **anonymously** (as with a proxy server or Tor)
- ❑ To **write collaboratively** (as with a wiki or Google Docs)
- ❑ To share digital material **offline** (as with a thumb drive)
- ❑ To **broadcast auditory** information (as with a podcast)
- ❑ To **share auditory** information interactively (as with IVR)
- ❑ To **map** information (as with a Google Earth mash-up)
- ❑ To **share links** within a group (as with social bookmarking)
- ❑ To post information from your campaign on **supporters' sites** (as with feeds and widgets)
- ❑ Other:_____
- ❑ Other:_____
- ❑ Other:_____

18) What is your biggest problem with using digital tools for advocacy? (Check all that apply to you.)

- ❑ Lack of affordable internet access
- ❑ Lack of fast internet access
- ❑ Lack of affordable mobile/sms plans
- ❑ Internet filtering/blocking
- ❑ Fear of government surveillance while using the internet
- ❑ Fear of government surveillance while using mobile
- ❑ People in my country are not responsive to digital activism techniques
- ❑ Other:_____

19) Please briefly describe a successful case in which you used digital tools in your advocacy:_____
_____
_____
_____

20) Do you consider yourself to be a digital activist?

- ❑ Yes □ No

Please briefly explain why:
_____
_____
_____

[*Note: on the online version of the survey "*briefly explain*" was a separate question*]

21) Please give your personal definition of "digital activist" :_____