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Digital Activism: How Social Media Prevalence has Impacted Modern Activism

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Abstract

Digital Activism: How Social Media Prevalence has Impacted Modern Activism

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Social media has brought significant changes to all spheres of our social existence, particularly modern activism. While many researchers have analyzed the use of social media in activist movements, there has been little scholarly work on the impacts and implications of social media, particularly as they pertain to language and the values underpinning activism. This thesis seeks to fill this gap in social media studies. Based on the theories of Stuart Hall and Kenneth Burke, it analyzes recent activist movements and social media trends in modern activism through a sociocultural/rhetorical lens. Specifically, within the context of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge and the #occupywallstreet movement, this thesis examines the manner in which values and action are both constructed and enacted. I also examine the complex relationship between content and content creators, social media's influence on production and consumption, and the

potential risks social media presents when used as a means for activism. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the sociocultural and rhetorical impacts social media has had in these movements, this thesis aims to highlight the risks of using social media for activism as well as the importance of media literacy to us all.

Keywords: Social Media, Activism, Values, Action, Rhetoric, Semiotics

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my friend and brother, Shaun Hansen

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is everywhere. In the last fifteen years, there has been a distinct rise in the prevalence of digital media platforms and devices. Entities once considered a luxury, such as the internet and cellphones, have now become commonplace, even necessary to communication and the workplace. As such, things produced and facilitated by these entities such as email, text messaging, and social media have also become commonplace commodities, inextricably tethered to our social existence. From our private lives to the political arena, the presence of social media is widespread and pervasive. This rise of social media prevalence can be felt in all spheres of life; personal, academic, economic, social, and political (Bivens, 2014; Chen, 2013; Slumkoski, 2012). Furthermore, social media has also been fully integrated into the infrastructure that underlies these different spheres of life, making it not only a means through which reality is experienced, but also by which it is constructed. Social activities that once only existed in physical space now have a digital non-space equivalent via social media. This includes modern activism (Falk, 2011; Gladwell & Shirky, 2011; Morwood, 2012). Social media has drastically changed our social and political framework as well as our modes of participation within those frameworks. Therefore, it is important that we understand what and how values are being promoted through social media and how it has ultimately affected our capacity for activism.

While many researchers have analyzed the use of social media in activist movements, there has been little scholarly work on the impacts and implications of social media's use, particularly as they pertain to language and the values underpinning activism. This thesis seeks to fill this gap in social media studies. Based on the theories of Stuart Hall and Kenneth Burke, it analyzes recent activist movements and social media trends in modern activism through a

sociocultural/rhetorical lens. Specifically, within the context of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge and Occupy Wall Street, this thesis examines the manner in which values and action are both constructed and enacted. This thesis also examines the complex relationship between content and content creators, social media's influence on production and consumption, the manner in which the language of social media frames activism, and the potential risks social media presents when used as a means for activism. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the sociocultural and rhetorical impacts social media has had in these movements, this thesis highlights the risks of using social media for activism as well as the importance of media literacy to us all. While social media can be a powerful tool for global mobilization, the decentralized power structure, lack of regulation, and low-bar to entry of social media-based activism leaves its movements susceptible to misrepresentation, co-option, and value-corruption

Background of Social Media Studies and Thesis Exigency

As previously mentioned, there is very little academic research that directly addresses the impact and implication of social media's prevalence in modern activism. My thesis attempts to fill this void by synthesizing what research has been done into a single comprehensive study as well as contextualizing recent social media activity and trends within the context of social, cultural, and rhetorical theories, emphasizing the significance of language and culture over technical application. Some researchers have concluded that social media presents enormous potential for civic engagement, especially in the hands of previously marginalized groups, showing the capacity to not only shape future movements, but also the media as a whole (Chen, 2013; Falk, 2011; Samuels, 2011; Shirky, 2011). Social media now both influences and shapes current habits of production and consumption as well as the dissemination of information in a postmodern world.

Many other researchers, however, have recognized several significant social, legal, and economic limitations of social media as a platform for activism. For example, its reliance on access to the internet significantly marginalizes those in lower socioeconomic brackets (Bach. et. al, 2013). Researchers have also suggested that online political communication orchestrated through social media will not substitute for the physical world in the nearer future, because building sustainable trust is still a face to face undertaking (Falk, 2011). Furthermore, many social-media-based activist movements are without any form of centralized leadership or structure, which frequently results in the convolution of their message (Samuels, 2011). Finally, corporate influence over various social media platforms has increased the potential for the values and ethics of a given social media based community to be subverted or tainted by market values (Carrier & Heyman, 1997).

In her research, Svenja Falk (2011) found that social media has “opened up new and exciting communication channels, providing new opportunities and threats,” citing Facebook and Twitter as “powerful communication and mobilization channels in the hands of repressed populations” (Falk, 2011, pp. 161). This inculcation of social media has had a drastic effect on modern day activism, particularly in regards to our political and social agency, the arenas within which we act, and the language we use in relation to the definition and communication of local, national, and global crises. It has created a system of highly complex and nuanced social, political, economic, and even environmental interactions which, in order to be fully understood and successfully implemented, requires a highly critical evaluation of social media’s impact on our political agency. This includes evaluating the manner in which social media facilitates the literal and rhetorical construction, communication, and definition of values and ethics (Chandhoke, 1994).

It is important to approach social media's effect on activism from three perspectives: social, cultural, and rhetorical. This is because social media is not merely a mechanistic system within which activism occurs, but is also a community in and of itself. Furthermore, the communities that take form within the context of social media are informed and ultimately shaped by the cultural context of the users. As such, understanding the relationship between the infrastructure and denizens of social media, both in a theoretical and applicative sense, is paramount to cultivating a deeper understanding of how social media shapes and facilitates activism. At the same time, however, it is not simply a question of its potential or capacity for facilitating activism. We must examine the extent and manner to which this capacity is utilized. We must understand the manner in which it orients its users to concepts of activism, the manner in which it both literally and rhetorically constructs, distributes, and promotes value across communities, and, in turn, the depth of interaction permitted by the overall structure of social media. In a simpler sense, we must be able to assess the ways people and social media itself embody/enact/engage in ethics, agency, and community.

Methods and Theoretical Framework

The research method used for this thesis is a two-step process. The first step of the process is synthesizing current research, data, journals, and articles pertaining to social media in activism so as to form a base historical and cultural understanding of how social media is discussed, analyzed, and utilized in a broader social context. With very little academic research having been done in regards to the impact social media prevalence has had on modern activism it is essential that some sort of historical and cultural precedent for subsequent analyses be established. There has been research done focusing on instances of activism facilitated by social media, but most of that research focuses more broadly on the popularity, success, or failure of a

given movement rather than how the social media platforms shaped both the movements and their rhetorical underpinnings. Very few have examined the manner in which the interconnected system that is social media has shaped the language, meaning, value, and action of a modern activist movement, which is one of the primary objectives of this thesis. This leads to the second step of the research process; reevaluation.

The second step of the research process involves reevaluating the information yielded from the first step, but narrowing the focus so as to emphasize the rhetorical and cultural aspects of those discussions, analyses, and instances of social media utilization. This was done by using a theoretical lens derived from the works of cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997) and rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1969), both of whom will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 2. While neither addressed social media in any of their works, their research is still quite applicable to the issues addressed by this thesis. For example, Hall's discussion of semiotics provides an excellent basis for deconstructing and analyzing the value of social media driven interactions between a given digital activist movement and a potential participant. Approaching social media and digital activism from a semiotic perspective emphasizes the symbolic representation of meaning through language within a given cultural context as well as the significance of the relationship between signifiers (something that gives meaning) and the signified (something that represents meaning).

Similarly, Burke's discussions regarding identification and language as symbolic action help to provide a rhetorical framing/context to a semiotic analysis of social media-based activism and its various actors. It helps elucidate the various motivations and meanings of actions carried out within a digital activist context, which occurs primarily through the implementation of language via social media platforms/technologies. According to Burke, the symbolic language

we employ radically shapes our understanding of the world, our orientation towards particular and global realities, allowing us to establish hierarchies and identify both with and against other individuals. The digital reality of social media and digital activism functions in exactly the same way, with online trends, interactions, and content informing our understanding. By reevaluating current information pertaining to social media in activism through this theoretical lens which I have dubbed the semiotic rhetoric of social media, it reframes the information in a manner that, as opposed to emphasizing the more utilitarian aspects of social media, emphasizes the manner in which ideas and information are shaped, disseminated, and perpetuated through social media use in activism. This essentially entails a recontextualization of current research that emphasizes the significance of culture and language rather than documenting the technical application of social media.

Inspiration and Moving Forward

In the beginning of my graduate studies, I had an idea for a culminating project that would, hypothetically, utilize current popular social media and recent digital activist movements as a framework for the creation of a digital activist movement oriented around the conservation of sea-stars, a keystone species in the Pacific Northwest intertidal zone. It was my assumption that, given social media's pervasiveness in modern Western culture, this would be a comparatively simple endeavor. As I engaged in my research for both the conservation movement and my academic endeavors, I ran into several obstacles, the biggest of which was the obstacle of virality. The cornerstone of any successful digital activist movement is its capacity for viral perpetuation via popular social media platforms. Despite the ecological significance of sea-stars and the increased turnouts at our local surveys and beach-walks, the sea-star conservation effort is still very much a peripheral movement, overshadowed by a plethora of

other conservation efforts, all of which are greatly overshadowed by digital trends often oriented around less profound aspects of human social life such as professional sports, pop-cultural trends, and the goings-on of celebrities.

From a cultural standpoint, this seemingly inconsequential value placed on non-pop-cultural-centric events/entities poses many questions in regards to current sociocultural values exhibited in and exemplified by social media. What values are promoted by the community that is social media, how do we arrive at these value judgements, what is it that makes a digital activist movement go viral, and what are the effects of social media virality on the values being promoted? What is even more astounding is not the manner in which social media has altered the medium through which we engage in our social and political lives, but the manner in which it has altered the language and values of those spheres of life. In a positive sense, the extent to which we can engage in a social or political discourse is no longer restricted by physical or geographic limitations.

At the same time, however, there are numerous sociological and rhetorical questions regarding the infrastructure of social media. Given the public nature of social media and its low bar to entry, anyone with a computer can participate in these new age discourses in any capacity desired. While this low bar to entry has allowed for unprecedented participation numbers in recent social media based activist movements, the lack of regulation has made it so individuals can claim to be a part of certain social movements despite contributing very little to the actual movement itself. Social media has made it so that participation in many contemporary social movements is more of a means of identification with a larger community rather than a means of eliciting actual social change or promoting solidarity. Do you feel that a post from a presidential candidate's Facebook page somehow resonates with you and expresses your personal beliefs?

Click the share button to provide a link to the same post to further perpetuate this ideology amongst your social group. Do you find the video of the teenagers dumping water on their heads in honor of those afflicted with ALS to be both amusing and moving? Click the “like” and “subscribe” buttons so as to show your support for their benevolent act and further increase the popularity of the video so that it receives even more views. But what does this “like” mean? To what extent are you invested in the policies of the candidate whose Facebook status you decided to share without supplying any insight of your own?

This represents the major issue with social media as a means of communicating and orchestrating activism: it is no longer active. It does not require one to have any knowledge of a subject or movement before engaging with it. Furthermore, since all digital activism occurs within the public domain of the internet, one does not even necessarily need to share or hold the values that initially started a movement of which one is claiming to be a part. It could be argued that participation in modern social media based activism is a purely symbolic endeavor, representing something greater than the act itself. But if there is no context to the act on the part of the actor, does the act still carry the same meaning and significance? The following chapter ventures to answer this question and more, offering a sociohistorical analysis of social media’s role in shaping contemporary social interactions and movements.

Chapter 2. THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The nature of language has been inextricably connected to technological advancements in all communications. As communication-based technology has become more prevalent within the context of everyday life, our language has come to reflect this technological ubiquity. This is most apparent today with social media. Social media has a clearly defined historical trajectory that has run very much in congruence with advancements in other communication based technologies. As the technologies underpinning social media platforms became more complex, so too did the capacity for social interaction and public integration. Therefore, the language of social media has been distinctly tied to the language of communication technologies which become increasingly more complex with new technological advancements. What makes social media so unique, however, is that it has managed to transcend the limitations of other communication based technologies to become not just a tool for communication, but a system within which communities take form, exist, and interact, unhindered by cultural, political, linguistic, and geographical boundaries.

In this sense, social media has, for all intents and purposes, become a fact of life that has blurred the line between the digital and material world (Shirky, 2011, p. 28). It has been fully integrated into virtually every single aspect of human social life, making it so that activities that once only existed in the physical space of the material world now have an equally viable digital non-space equivalent (Morwood, 2012, p. 93-94). These activities, however, are not limited simply to the mundane commonplace occurrences of day-to-day socialization or market transactions, but, in fact, include all manner of political discourse and activism. Social media has, in the last five years, provided an unprecedented tool for mobilization in the hands of political actors and agents, allowing for the global communication of ideals, values, and ethics at

a near instantaneous rate. Through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, previously marginalized and/or isolated individuals and communities now have means to make their plights known to the public while simultaneously calling attention to systemic inequities inherent of their social environment.

At the same time, this emergence of social media has not just provided a voice to fledgling activist groups, but has changed the very way in which we are able to engage in activism all together. Digital social movements often elicit real world consequences, albeit to varying degrees. The extent to which these new social media based activist movements are capable of inspiring significant real-world change, however, is difficult to pinpoint as very little academic research has been done on social media's viability as a means of promoting activism. Therefore, in attempting to address and understand what social media's overall impact on activism has been, this chapter attempts to develop a fundamental understanding of both the general socio-historical context from which social media emerged and the rhetorical scaffolding which the various social media platforms have enabled.

Web 2.0: From Content Consumer to Content Creator

Social media began as a much simpler and more efficient tool for communication, improving upon previous means of communication such as telephones and printed text. As such, the initial rhetoric attributed to the various platforms through which people chose to interact was much more utilitarian in nature, generally pertaining to speed, efficiency, convenience, and simplicity. Though maintenance of communication with members of one's community was the essential purpose of social media in its early forms, the platforms in and of themselves were no more than digital tools meant to simplify and speed up the communication process. Applications such as instant messenger, email, and text messaging exemplify these ideas of simplistic,

expeditious, and convenient communication both in terms of title and (most importantly) functionality, particularly in regards to their early implementation within business and educational settings.

Then, in 2001, came the emergence of what Tim O'Reilly of O'Reilly Media (2005) would later refer to as Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2005, 2). As Melanie Buffington (2008) explained, The term *Web.2.0*[...]is widely used to describe changes in the way people create and consume content through the Web. In general terms, the technologies of the Web 2.0 movement change the power structure of who can create content for the Web. Though many people had access to putting information on the internet for at least a decade, this process often involved significant expense and time to not only purchase, but then also learn different software packages. With the technologies of Web 2.0, it is now relatively inexpensive and simple for anyone with Internet access to create and disseminate their ideas through various forms on the Web. (Buffington, 2008, p. 37)

Web 2.0 marked a transition from Web users being passive observers to becoming active creators, contributors, and controllers of content and information (Trier, 2007, 408).

Furthermore, it represented a shift from this notion of the Web being a tool for receiving information only to being a platform for user interaction, collaboration, and personalization (O'Reilly, 2005, 2-3). Nowhere were these notions more evident than in the surge of social media platforms in the early 2000's, particularly Myspace which was extraordinarily popular with younger teenage demographics.

Myspace and Subsequent Platforms

Myspace ultimately set the precedent for future social media platforms, granting the user the ability to customize and instantly update their profile page with images, text, music, and

video on a daily basis as well as the ability to communicate on a global scale thus increasing the size of one's community (or "friend list") (Preston, 2008, p. 15). This, however, did not come without its fair share of concerns. Throughout Myspace's tenure in the 2000's, multiple news stories of sexual-predators preying on unsuspecting teens through the social networking site flooded both television and newspapers. This forced parents, public/academic institutions, and communities at large to truly contemplate the efficacy of the social media platform itself and the ethics of its user-base (Aiken, 2006, 33; Zirkel, 2008, p. 388-389). Despite these concerns, however, the popularity of Myspace and other subsequent social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter has been unprecedented, with the three latter platforms (which I have affectionately titled "The Big Three") becoming so wildly popular that they have become essential components to the workplace, political campaigns, governance, foreign relations, education, academic institutions, entertainment, romance, and virtually all aspects of present day social life (Morwood, 2012, p. 100; Rosen, 2007, p. 15-17).

The Language, Orality, and Rhetorical Nature of Social Media and its Implications

As the technology has improved and continues to be further integrated into day-to-day life, the language of social media has come to be simultaneously broader and more specified, often being defined by the communities that utilize social media rather than being intrinsic of the design and functionality of the platforms themselves. In the wake of technological advancements and global social integration, social media has developed a dual nature, being both a tool for communication and a space within which communication and dialogues take place. As Morwood explains, "[Technology] is a constitutive part of the production of the human, with and against the grain of nature" (Morwood, 2012, p. 100). The very foundation of human identity is predicated on how and with whom we communicate. The the implementation of social media has

not only expedited the process by which we communicate, but has also significantly increased both the diversity and number of individuals with which we may communicate.

This duality makes identifying the values of social media somewhat laborious, though not impossible if one analyzes the manner in which representations of meaning are constructed and construed via language within a social media context. Language is one of the most powerful and effective means of constructing meaning primarily is because its capacity for doing so is not predicated on the parameters of the material world. Intellectually speaking, language allows us to create abstractions, construct the negative, revise ideas, see abstractions as such, and speak in non-chronological (non-narrative) terms. It allows us to epistemologically understand and define the material world in a manner that is not intrinsically linked to the material world.

Cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1997) explained, “There are broadly speaking three approaches to explaining how representation of meaning through language works. We may call these the reflective, the intentional and constructionist or constructivist approaches” (Hall 1997, p. 24). The reflective approach implies that meaning lies in the object, person, or idea that exists in the material world and, as such, language functions akin to a mirror, reflecting the true meaning that is already intrinsic to the “real world” (Hall 1997, p. 24). The intentional approach argues that meaning is derived from the speaker who, through the use of language, imposes meaning onto the material world. Finally, the constructionist approach argues that “neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language” implying that no meaning is intrinsic, but is instead socially situated and constructed through the use of concepts and signs (Hall 1997, p 25).

Since applications, utilizations, and interactions with and through social media vary from community to community, it stands to reason that Hall’s constructionist approach can assist in

ameliorating the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the conceptions of social media as a tool for communication and a space within which communication occurs. As Hall further explained,

According to [the constructionist] approach, we must not confuse the *material* world, where things and people exist, and the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. (Hall, 1997, p. 25)

What this means is that the value of things in the material world are not intrinsic of themselves, but rather are derived from the language with which we use to describe them. It could be argued that, in the wake of advancements in communication technologies, the constructionist's distinction between the material world and symbolic practices has been blurred. That being said, Hall's observation that meaning is socially constructed, derived from social actors, and conveyed through systems of representation seems to provide a theoretical premise that explains how social media can be both a tool for communication and a space within which communication occurs.

Social media in and of itself is an amalgam of symbolic practices and processes. In one sense, as Peter Chen described, "the social-media environment is social: it functions with some reference to the same social rules and norms of the offline world" (Chen, 2013, 133). From this perspective, social media can be understood as simply being an alternative medium through which previously established systems of representation are able to operate, adhering to the rules and regulations indicative of the local context in the material world within which a social actor is

situated. At the same time, however, unlike traditional systems of representation which are often localized and inhibited by geographical, linguistic, legal, and political limitations, social media has no such boundaries (Morwood, 2012, p. 100).

So how is it possible that social media can simultaneously be a finite tool for communication and a seemingly infinite space within which transnational, multicultural, and multi-gendered communities develop, bond, and thrive? It is possible because social media is neither a tool nor a space; it is a system. Due to its variability from community to community and from user to user as well as the seemingly infinite potential applications of various platforms, it would be reasonable to consider that social media is a socially constructed system of representation; one that's value, meaning, and utility is entirely contingent on the manner and extent to which a social actor chooses to engage with and implement the system into his or her social existence. Social media embodies the essence of Web 2.0, giving, at the most basic level of use, significant amounts of power and control to the user. As such, it is up to the volition of the user as to whether social media is a tool for communication within the material world or a separate world altogether.

At the same time, however, the manner in which one engages with and understands social media content is greatly influenced and shaped by sociocultural context within which one is situated. Though, in the spirit of Web 2.0, a user is free to create, personalize, and disseminate content to their liking, external social forces still inform how a user goes about these actions. This can be better understood by approaching social media from a semiotic perspective. As Hall explained,

In the semiotic approach, not only words and images but objects themselves can function as signifiers in the production of meaning. Clothes for example may have a simple

physical function – to cover the body and protect it from the weather. But clothes also double up as signs. They construct a meaning and carry a message...The clothes themselves are *signifiers*. The fashion code in western consumer cultures like ours correlates particular kinds or combinations of clothing within certain concepts ('elegance', 'formality', 'casual-ness', 'romance'). These are the *signifieds*. This coding converts the clothes into signs, which can then be read as language. (Hall, 1997, p. 37)

From a semiotic perspective, objects, signs, images, colloquialisms, and other representations, though presented within the context of a global public system such as social media, convey a meaning that goes beyond base physical function and is reflexive of the digital or material cultural context in which the individual or community is situated. As Walter Anderson (1990) more succinctly explained,

The semioticists, the scholars of signs, say that all things human beings create are containers of meaning. A building is thus not only a shelter, but a statement. And a city is a veritable library. Every object that the eye falls upon tells something about its creator, and about society, and is used to create meaning within the mind of the beholder. (Anderson, 1990, p. 21)

Social media platforms and the content produced within the context of a social media system can come to take on multiple meanings and values within different digital and material communities to different individuals within those communities. To put it in egregiously simple terms, social media is a complicated entity and the various communities and interactions it facilitates are diverse and equally complicated. As previously established, the function, purpose, and overall value of social media is greatly influenced by the manner in which an individual chooses to interact and engage with a given platform. Therefore, in order to better understand

and contextualize how we engage with social media, we must understand the motivations that underlie, propel, and shape both social media interactions and identities.

Motivational Rhetoric

In his book, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, acclaimed literary theorist and rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1969) argues that individuals form identities through alliances with people, organizations, and beliefs/values, suggesting that the act of forming an identity demonstrates opposition to other identities (Burke, 1969). Burke further argues that it is through the process of identification that individuals are able to persuade others, something he refers to as the “New Rhetoric” (Burke, 1969, p. 64-65). Burke outlines three primary functions of identification: as a means to an end (identifying with certain groups so as to make them more amenable to both one’s personage and ideals), as antithesis (identifying oneself against or in contention with another group-e.g. the United States and Russia’s alliance during the second world war representing an antithetical ideological identity to that of Nazi Germany and the rest of the Axis Powers), and as a means of unconscious persuasion (persuading an individual to identify with a certain group or ideology under the impression that not doing so implies an association with a negative identity-e.g. convincing male voters to vote for a female political candidate so that they do not appear to be misogynists) (Burke, 1969).

The underlying idea of Burke’s rhetorical theory is that rhetoric is a means of identification. Through the use of rhetoric, we not only can define ourselves as distinct individuals, but also consubstantially with others. As Burke explains,

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so [...] Here are ambiguities

of substance. In being identified with B, A is "substantially one" with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another.

(Burke 1969, p. 20-21)

In way, Burke's rhetorical theory presents rhetoric as being a signifying element, similar to those discussed by Hall. Through rhetoric, one is capable of representing and imposing certain values and other identifying factors that are not intrinsically connected or related to the material world of our literal physical forms.

Though neither explicitly wrote on the subject, Burke and Hall's theories provide a solid basis for developing a rhetorical understanding of social media interactions. While it is a seemingly limitless digital system, the interactions facilitated by social media still adhere to the same social rules and norms that are informed by those of the natural world, albeit in a fragmented sense. Unlike the material world, in which the identity of the individual is less fluid, one can have multiple online identities and personae, derived from a singular material, bodily referent, but operated in a different rhetorical manner and at the hyper-accelerated global rate of the internet.

With the rhetorical framing provided by Hall and Burke, a semiotic rhetoric of social media if you will, the literature now turns to more easily disseminated examples of social media implementation and interaction so as to illustrate some of the innumerable ways in which people and communities engage with and through social media. For example, in 2011 the Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) held their program for the ALA annual conference in New Orleans, LA. The purpose of the program was to provide an opportunity for social media experts in the library field to speak on the topic of how businesses are successfully utilizing

social networking applications and how librarians can successfully implement those strategies so as to “better position their services and collections to assist library users” (BRASS, 2011, p. 127).

In this instance, the language surrounding social media use is still indicative of a utilitarian purpose predating Web 2.0 rather than that of community generation, content creation, and collaboration. Similar to the language that underpinned instant messaging and email, the BRASS conference’s discussion of business trends regarding the application and integration of social media into marketing/business models sees social media being presented as a means by which services can be innovated and made more accessible, intuitive, and efficient for consumers. Thinking in terms of the semiotic rhetoric of social media, social media implementation in this context is easily identifiable as being indicative of a means to an end. This is made evident by the fact that it is framed purely within the context of being a business related application intended to increase efficiency, foregoing any sort of moral or ethical quandaries.

Social Media as a Means of Collaboration

The value of social media, however, does not solely lie in the functionality of a given platform. For many larger companies, communication with and marketing directly to online communities has provided unprecedented opportunities for open innovation and collaboration. As Matthew Mount and Marian Martinez explain,

By understanding what consumers’ value and engaging in active dialogue and interaction [via social media], companies are able to develop superior value propositions that are more relevant to their target audience. On top, consumer’s direct involvement in internal

activities helps forge a deep emotional bond with the company that can lead to enhanced loyalty, satisfaction, and brand perceptions. (Martinez & Mount, 2011, p. 125)

Unlike the BRASS ALA conference which, like most other research, focused on the business applications of social media insofar as marketing and service efficiency/profitability is concerned, Martinez and Mount's research was more interested in the collaborative possibilities, a significantly under-researched aspect of social media. In particular, they were interested in "how social media can be used as a tool to facilitate open innovation and user collaboration at different stages of the innovation funnel—ideation, R&D, and commercialization" (Martinez & Mount, 2011, p. 125).

Using a "multiple exploratory" case study design, Martinez and Mount examined the application of social media for open innovation, evaluating the "motivations, implementation, impacts, and challenges encountered that inhibit its use at different stages of the innovation process" in relation to social media crowdsourcing (Martinez & Mount, 2011, p. 125-126). Three cases at different innovation stages were selected for the study: UNAIDS (a global policy initiative for coordinating efforts in combating AIDS-at the ideation stage), Rowntree's Randoms (a chocolate and confectionary brand of Nestlé UK-at the R&D stage), and Kit Kat (another Nestlé UK chocolate and confectionary brand-at commercialization stage) (Martinez & Mount, 2011, p. 127-128).

The results from Martinez and Mount's research show that all three cases encountered similar technological challenges and technological adaptation post social media implementation. All three showed significant increases in public participation and contribution, but the research also showed that,

Lack of regulation and centralized control over external social media platforms emerged as an underlying challenge across all innovation funnel stages, particularly when control was required for limiting the content generated and contributions to a specific target audience (e.g., 18-24 year olds). (Martinez & Mount, 2011, p. 135)

Social media's greatest strength is the ease of access generated from its lack of regulation. As previously noted, it is entirely open for the public to engage with in any manner and to any degree which an individual wishes, with its only participation requirement being access to the internet. That being said, this can also be a great weakness of social media if someone wishes for the interactions and information to move in a particular direction. .

As Martinez and Mount discovered, social media's lack of regulation and centralized control made it extremely difficult for all three of their subjects to narrow the focus of their respective social media collaborators. The open and unregulated nature of social media allows for enormous participation numbers in regards to collaborative opportunities. However, attempting to narrow the scope of a collaborative effort so as to redirect focus on specific demographics, ideologies, or concepts introduces a centralized power structure and additional participation requirements for collaboration. This, in turn, limits both the number of potential participants and the manner in which individuals are able to participate. It makes the act of participation more complicated, thus making the collaborative effort less attractive to the general public.

Social Media and Education

Though the exclusivity generated by the structuration of particular social media based movements can bar certain individuals from being able to participate in content creation, the content is being created and shared on a public social media platform. Therefore, any content,

though created within a more stringently structured collaborative context, is still publicly available and can be appropriated for alternative uses by non-collaborators. This type of content appropriation is a common occurrence in modern education. Since its inception, many educators have opted to engage their students through the various social media platforms to differing degrees and with differing objectives, using all manner of publicly created and distributed content to supplement the education process, as well as creating content of their own. Perhaps the most widely utilized social media platform in academia has been the video sharing site, YouTube. Founded in 2005 and purchased by Google in 2006 for the enormous price of \$1.65 billion, YouTube allows people to easily upload and share video clips across the Internet through websites, mobile devices, blogs, and email. As Robyn Longhurst (2009) explains,

Unlike traditional broadcasting that follows time-tabled viewing, people can watch YouTube anytime. Also anyone can broadcast themselves - hence the name YouTube.

Information released from YouTube in 2007 indicated that people watch in excess of 100 million videos and upload more than 65,000 videos daily. (Longhurst, 2009, p. 47)

Many have decried YouTube as an ineffective educational mechanism due to its oversaturation of content (both original and copyright protected) that some have claimed is devoid of intellectual value (Juhasz, 2009, p. 146-147). In spite of these criticisms, however, and possibly in part due to its undeniably massive global popularity, excessive amount of content and easy accessibility, many educators have integrated YouTube content into their lesson plans as a means of augmenting the educational process (Everhart, 2009, p. 33). Some have even gone as far as having courses being taught exclusively via YouTube, posting entire lectures for students to watch and respond to in either the comments section or with videos of their own.

A good example that demonstrates this full academic embrace of YouTube comes from University of Syracuse School of Information Studies professor, Scott Nicholson (2009). In the summer of 2009, Nicholson taught an online 1-credit graduate level course regarding gaming in libraries through which the primary platform for engagement was YouTube. As Nicholson explained, “Videos were created specifically for this course by the instructor and by library professionals and posted each day for a 30-day period. All videos were posted publicly, and the American Library Association hosted an open discussion forum about each video” (Nicholson, 2009, p. 233). The course structure was fairly simple, taught through daily 10-20 minute videos, with weekday videos consisting of lectures and the weekend videos being “presentations of specialized topics by professionals in the library field” (Nicholson 2009, p. 238). Though the basic goal of the course was to attract “tuition-paying students,” Nicholson also had the goal of providing educational content for library staff members regarding gaming in libraries, a concept indicative of an Open Educational Resource model (Nicholson 2009, p. 234, 236-237).

Though formal enrollment in the course was low, initially comprised of six students with three dropping out by the end of the first week, Nicholson found that public engagement with the course content was significantly higher than expected, with posted content exceeding several hundred views each. Furthermore, the demographics engaging with the content were not solely students, educators, or librarians. Nicholson explains, “Formal enrollment in the course was low, but hundreds of people watched the videos. Post-course surveys indicate that viewers were a mix of librarians and library students along with hobby gamers and members of the gaming industry” (Nicholson, 2009, p. 233). As Nicholson concludes, from a tuition-based economic perspective, the course was an undeniable failure. That being said, the course managed to engage with and educate the public on a much larger scale than initially anticipated. It both served as a means of

promoting Nicholson's profession while simultaneously educating and unifying several different communities (Nicholson, 2009, p. 239-240). The public nature of YouTube allowed Nicholson's course to transcend the limitations of academic formality and serve a much larger public purpose.

Taking into consideration both Nicholson's experience and the information yielded by Martinez and Mount's research, we can see that there exists a complicated relationship between social media's content creators and content consumers. Thinking in terms of Burke and Hall, creators are, in a manner of speaking, signified by the content they produce in that the content is the outward manifestation of a given creator's values, beliefs, and ethics. Their identities are inextricably connected to the types of content they produce which, in turn, distinguishes them from other creators. Though the identities of creators can shift and change over time, the content they create will reflect these changes.

Consumer relations to content, however, are more salient. A consumer can disseminate content from multiple sources without holding the values, beliefs, or ethics of any of the respective creators, with the exception of collaborative instances like those discussed by Martinez and Mount. As was seen in Nicholson's experience, the utilization of content produced and shared via social media is not limited to the original intentions of its creator. A consumer can utilize and define themselves in relation to a piece of social media produced content without identifying with the respective creator or other content produced by that creator. Thinking in terms of the semiotic rhetoric of social media, the signs of media shift in meaning and significance as they are deployed for different motives by different people at different times in different rhetorical contexts.

What this means is that at any point and time, a single piece of social media content can simultaneously be both signified and a signifier. For example, a video blogger who creates comedic videos satirizing pop culture is constantly signified by the content he/she produces. It makes up the essence of their online identity. A content consumer, however, can share one of the videos and not hold any of the values of the creator or those expressed in the video and, in fact, can repurpose the content. Perhaps the consumer thought that a certain aspect of the video was amusing and worth sharing with a friend or two. Maybe the consumer failed to pick up on the satirical elements and needed members of their online community to verify the legitimacy of the content and use the video as a means of starting a serious discussion. Or perhaps the consumer found the video to be so appallingly idiotic that they felt the need to publically criticize it and its creator. Regardless of any of the aforementioned circumstances, it seems safe to assume that the value of a piece of content is derived from the consumer, not its creator. This relationship between content producer and content consumer is pivotal to understanding social media's impact on modern activism.

How Social Media Facilitates Digital Activism

Just as it has had a significant impact on habits and structures of production and consumption in the market and educational systems, so too has social media transformed the ontological and epistemological landscape of activism, helping to create what is often referred to as digital activism. Due to its enormous global popularity and the degree to which it has been integrated and made synonymous with human life, it is difficult to both fathom the magnitude and understand the nature of social media's impact on modern activism.

Some have argued that, due to its global scope and simplistic instantaneous design, social media has provided an unparalleled means of communication and mobilization for marginalized or oppressed groups. As Svenja Falk (2011) notes,

[In] 2011, the world has been witness to the rise of Twitter and Facebook as a powerful communication and mobilization channels in the hands of repressed populations. In probably the shortest timeframe mankind has ever seen, five Middle Eastern and North African governments with unimpressive democratic track records fell. The Egyptian revolution, was sparked by everyday, ordinary people like Asmaa Mahfouz, who passionately called people to join protests through her [YouTube] Post, spreading word fast like a wild fire from country to country. This unprecedented eRevolution transcended class, gender, and political boundaries – at least for a moment. (Faulk, 2011, p. 159)

As previously mentioned, social media is not hindered by geographical, linguistic, legal or political boundaries. Therefore its users are capable of creating dialogues regarding all manner of social, economic, ethical, cultural, racial, gender, and political inequities with members of previously unreachable communities. Even further, it has provided means for people to question and challenge the structures of power that traditionally have underpinned existing communities (Preston, 2008).

Social media, however, has not only provided an unlimited global means of communication and debate for burgeoning social movements, but has also shaped the manner in which one participates in activism. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are not outlets for social movements, but have determined the way in which social movements are constructed and disseminated. For instance, Twitter has, for many, become a global news and information network, with many arguing that its technological infrastructure enables greater information

sharing than Facebook or YouTube (Bivens, 2014, p. 24-25). By creating what is known as a hashtag (indicated by the pound symbol “#”), activists have been able to use Twitter to create and organize innumerable subtopics of discussion, several of which have evolved into larger social movements that transcend the platform such as #occupywallstreet, #BlackLivesMatter, or #Gamergate. Furthermore, incorporating a specific hashtag into a Facebook post or YouTube video directly links the post or video to the subtopic designated by the hashtag, creating a sort of social-media-synergy. This is a feature that many traditional television news outlets have incorporated into their live programming so that viewers can offer their own insights and opinions as well as participate in a larger national discussion. In the United States, this has been especially prevalent during recent presidential addresses and democratic/republican debates.

An example of a recent digital activist trend that was quickly proliferated and perpetuated as a result of multiple social media platforms converging was the #OscarsSoWhite movement. The movement initially began on January 15th of 2015 as a hashtag attached to a twitter post from Broadway Black managing editor April Reign to express her displeasure with the lack of racial diversity amongst Oscar nominees for the second year in a row (Know Your Meme, 2016; Ashagre, 2016). After many in the public saw Reign’s post, however, the hashtag was quickly picked up and used by many, including several high profile celebrities, and was thus transformed into a rallying cry of sorts, appearing on numerous Facebook and Twitter posts.

Similar to the Occupy Wall Street hashtag, #OscarsSoWhite became a rhetorical signifier representing a broader social movement. In the case of #OscarsSoWhite, it represented (and continues to represent) a stance against the racially homogenous status quo being upheld by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Not only did this trend open up a national dialogue about institutional racism in Hollywood and The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and

Sciences' membership structure, but it also inspired tangible real world change. After an outcry of public criticism from social media and numerous celebrities such as Spike Lee and Will Smith expressing intentions and encouraging others to boycott the ceremony, the Academy actually decided to make significant changes to its membership structure so as to bolster and foster diversity, inviting 300 new members into its ranks (Izadi, 2016). However, in the wake of the racial homogeneity of recent academy award nominations, the hashtag has seen a resurgence and birthed a new movement, #OscarsStillSoWhite (Anderson, 2016).

Critiques of Digital Activism: Misrepresentation, Disinformation, and Oversaturation

Many have been extremely critical of social media and its relation to activism, primarily due to its infrastructure. According to some researchers, the technological requirements of social media, which are indicative of a certain socioeconomic class, are, by their very nature, socially exclusionary. As Bach, Schaffer, and Wolfson (2013) explain in their article “Digital Human Capital: Developing a Framework for Understanding the Economic Impact of Digital Exclusion in Low-Income Communities,” “the problem of increasing socio-economic inequality and social exclusion demands a deeper understanding of the intersection between technology and inequality and, correspondingly, a more aggressive and nuanced plan to address this problem” (Bach, Schaffer, & Wolfson, 2013, 247). As has been discussed, social media has great potential for facilitating civic engagement. However, as Bach, Schaffer, and Wolfson note, it is “effectively marginalizing people who lack access to it” (Bach, Schaffer, & Wolfson, 2013, 263).

Two questions immediately come to mind upon reading Bach, Schaffer, and Wolfson's critique. First, why do certain people lack access to social media? Speaking in a global sense, there could be numerous reasons why some people lack access to social media such as regional technological deficits, lack of resources, cultural or religious prohibitions against technology,

etc, however, the most likely reason for lacking access to social media is poverty. Though social media is conceptually free and open to public use, the devices required to access any of the various social media platforms are not. Social media is primarily accessed through personal computers or smartphones which, despite their cultural prevalence in modern societies, are still luxury items financially speaking. According to recent data collected by the Pew Research Center (2015), as of 2014, approximately 73% of U.S. citizens own a desktop or laptop computer. Smartphone ownership is slightly lower at 68% (Pew Research Center, 2015). This means that approximately 27% of the United States does not have the devices necessary engage with social media.

When examining that percentage in light of another statistic from Feeding America (2016) that shows the national poverty rate of 2014 at approximately 14.8% equating to about 46.7 million people, it seems highly plausible that the number of impoverished people in the U.S. can account for a significant portion of those without access to personal computers or smart phones. According to a report from Aaron Smith (2015) of Pew Research Center,

For many smartphone owners, the ongoing cost of ownership can be a financial hardship: 23% have had to cancel or shut off their cell phone service for a period of time because it was too expensive to maintain. These financial challenges are especially common among lower-income smartphone owners, as fully 44% of smartphone owners with an annual household income of less than \$30,000 have had to let their service lapse at some point or another. (Smith, 2015)

Smith goes on to note that African Americans and Latinos are “around twice as likely as whites to have canceled or cut off their smartphone service,” further giving credence to Bach, Schaffer, and Wolfson’s critique.

Another common critique of digital activism is that many of the social media based social movements lack any form of centralized leadership or ideology. Due to its low bar to entry, anyone with access to the internet is capable of participating in a digital activist movement. However, there is no imperative for the participant to espouse any of the values that might be indicative of the larger social movement to which he or she identifies with. A participant could claim to be a part of whatever movement while promoting their own values, ethics, or agenda. Bob Samuels, however, views this decentralization of power as a positive aspect of social media based activism:

These new media sites promote a decentralized social structure: people with different backgrounds and interests link together over a shared set of demands. These bottom-up social movements begin without a set agenda or organizational hierarchy; instead, new media social movements combine technology with spontaneity, offering a new way of interacting with the world. (Samuels, 2011, p. 34)

While the decentralized nature of social media does have the potential to facilitate the unification of a diverse array of groups and people from different backgrounds, Samuels fails to acknowledge the potential for misrepresentation that such a decentralized structure poses. For example, the Occupy Wall Street movement, which will be discussed in greater length in chapter 5 of this thesis, was without a set agenda or hierarchy for the entirety of its existence. The movement was without structure or a larger form of leadership beyond local demonstration organizers, mostly being organized by large public communities via Facebook and Twitter. There was no single clearly defined purpose established for Occupy. As such, the values espoused by the movement's rallies and propaganda represented a vast array of ideologies. While the majority of demonstrators decried the injustices of Wall Street, corporate greed, and political

corruption, many others used the movement as a means to protest other issues, such as environmental crises, educational deficiencies, and war. This resulted in the perpetuation of a widely inconsistent message from Occupy demonstrators..

Another critique of digital activism that is often overlooked by its participants are the corporate ties and interests inherent in the different social media platforms. For example, media studies professor Alexander Juhasz states,

YouTube functions best as a postmodern television set facilitating the isolated, aimless viewing practices of individuals while expertly delivering eyeballs to advertisers.

YouTube's corporate ownership limits the form and content of its videos, further curtailing the democratic promises touted for Web 2.0. (Juhasz 2009, p. 147)

This is the unfortunate reality of all social media platforms. While they are entirely open to public use, they are still constructed and controlled by corporations with the intentions of turning a profit. As a result, the corporate influence often leads to limited types of content being actively promoted on the platform, usually favoring content that is linked to product advertisement or other similar sponsored content. This ultimately serves to limit the experience of the user/consumer and generate a revenue stream for a given social media platform/content creator. As such, content created with the intention of promoting some sort of a cause will more often than not be buried underneath other more popular content unless it is attached to some sort of corporate or celebrity figure that will generate a lot of traffic and, consequently, a significant revenue stream. A good example of this would be the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge videos from 2014 that were posted and endorsed by high profile individuals such as Justin Timberlake, Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, and numerous others which, due to their celebrity, generated high volumes of web traffic and, consequently, significant revenue.

A final critique that has been discussed in regards to digital activism can best be explained by a concept Moisés Naím (2007) referred to as the YouTube effect. As Naím explains, the YouTube effect is, “the phenomenon whereby video clips, often produced by individuals acting on their own, are rapidly disseminated throughout the world thanks to video-sharing Web sites such as YouTube, Google Video, and others” (Naím, 2007, p. 104). In 2007, there were 65,000 new videos posted every day to YouTube. In 2011 that number increased to what equates to 48 hours of new video content being uploaded every minute, with YouTube receiving 3 billion views a day (Henry, 2011). Though most of the videos are inconsequential, many are exceptionally serious. As Naím describes,

YouTube includes videos posted by terrorists, human rights groups, and U.S. soldiers in Iraq. Some are clips of incidents that have political consequences or document important trends, such as global warming, illegal immigration, and corruption. Some videos reveal truths. Others spread disinformation, propaganda, and outright lies. All are part of the YouTube effect. (Naím, 2007, p. 104)

Despite traditional journalists and television news outlets best attempts to constantly be on top of all the latest breaking local, national, and international news, they will, as Naím so eloquently put, “never be as omnipresent as millions of people carrying a cell phone that can record video” (Naím, 2007, p. 103).

This omnipresent perception, however, is paradoxically a blessing and a curse. In one sense, marginalized groups with access to the internet are now able to rapidly spread information to other countries and rally global communities to their cause. At the same time, however, social media is not just available to these groups. It is open to politicians, entertainers, corporations, and all manner of special interests groups, many of which represent the structures of power to

which the aforementioned marginalized groups are dissenting. This means that there exists the potential for counter-narratives to be produced that would serve to delegitimize the struggle of and discredit any disenfranchised or repressed group. Furthermore, with the oversaturation of publicly generated information flooding the Internet, it would be extremely difficult for one to determine what to believe as true (Naím, 2007, p. 103). However, what is the appropriate measure of truth when it comes to a piece of content? By what means do we, as consumers of content, determine the ethical validity of a piece of social media content and its creator? This in a sense demands that people be savvy viewers of social media and not simply consumers, which in turn requires that they understand rhetoric to some degree, particularly in regards to its implementation within a social media context.

Conclusion

The reality of social media's cultural impact on the world is undeniable. What began as a simple web-based tool for convenient communication has evolved into a multifaceted and multidimensional system that now places access to the entire world in the palm of our hands. Its seemingly unlimited potential applications have given it unprecedented potential for civic engagement and mobilization. Perhaps the most significant impact social media has had on activism is that it has provided citizens the ability to be more publicly vocal and coordinate more rapidly on a global scale (Shirky, 2011).

At the same time, however, the lack of regulation and decentralized power structure of social media, while effective in attracting innumerable would-be activists, leaves digital activist movements susceptible to external influence (corporate, political, or otherwise). While its bottom-up spontaneity and ease of access inherently makes it appealing to many, the orchestration of digital activism primarily through the unregulated public space of social media

places the values of any movement at risk of subversion by an external agent. The risk of value subversion and obfuscation is made even greater by the fact that those of greater financial means and socioeconomic standing having greater access to and control over the content of social media. Given its socioeconomically exclusionary nature, its lack of regulation, its corporate ownership, and the oversaturation generated by the excessive amount of content being produced, social media poses numerous risks as a means of activism.

However, in order to clearly highlight these risks, social media can no longer be approached as simply a communication tool. Its application in modern society is far too complex and nuanced for it to be approached simply as a technological extension of the “real” world. Instead, as this chapter has suggested, social media must be approached as a socially constructed system of representation that exists in tandem with the “real” world and as a constitutive part of the development of ideas and identities. One in which the semiotic value, meaning, and utility of its content is predicated on the manner and extent to which a social actor chooses to rhetorically engage with and implement the system into the formation of his or her identity. The next chapter will examine more closely the manner in which this semiotic rhetoric of social media functions within the context of a digital activist movement and the manner in which it orients activists to the values of a given movement.

Chapter 3. CHALLENGE ACCEPTED: AN EXAMINATION OF THE COMPETITIVE FRAMING OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM

There is an old saying derived from the ancient Roman poet, Ovid, which states something to the effect of “a horse will never run so fast as when he has other horses to catch up and outpace.” This saying speaks directly to the competitive nature inherent of all human beings. We are constantly striving to be the best at every activity we engage in and try even harder when we have others with which to compete. Be it for the sake of acquiring necessary resources for the preservation of ourselves and/or family units (i.e. money, food, shelter, etc.) or simply for the sake of sating our egos and further distinguishing us from our peers, competitive inclinations are both naturally occurring and unavoidable (Firestone, 2013). In the United States, this competitive nature has been fully embraced and deeply integrated into our culture. This is evident by the numerous reality television programs, game shows, and all manner of competitive sports that populate the mainstream media. This competitive nature, however, has not just impacted the entertainment industry, but virtually all aspects of our lives. We get into college so as to become competitive in the job market, we attempt to work harder than our colleagues so that we can be promoted and afford luxury items, and we present ourselves in accordance with certain stylistic standards so as to appear more desirable than others.

This competitive nature, however, is not purely individualistic. It is a narrative that functions and is retold in a variety of ways in the U.S. media, which regularly feeds and validates this competitive nature. . Our collective competitiveness has generated Olympic athletes, medical breakthroughs, scientific discoveries, technological advancements, media moguls, and even sent men and women into space. Conversely, however, competitiveness for natural resources, land,

and power has led to multiple global and national conflicts, the formation of oppressive cultural hegemonies, species extinction, and ecological catastrophes. Though it has its somewhat less-desirable implications, however, the competitive nature of human beings has long been the driving force behind a multitude of technological, economic, intellectual, and creative achievements since the earliest days of civilization.

In the last few years, online activists have started a trend in digital activism that aims to appeal to this competitive nature so as facilitate social change and awareness, creating a method of digital activism I have come to refer to as digital challenges or challenge based activism.

While not as complicated or vehemently debated as social media based movements such as #occupywallstreet or #BlackLivesMatter, digital challenges exhibit the same basic structure and tendencies inherent in all digital activism, albeit in a stripped down bare-bones format.

Therefore, this chapter aims to temporarily narrow the focus of this thesis, analyzing and developing an understanding of the rhetorical manner in which values are constructed and disseminated within the context of a digital challenge so as to aid in the analysis of the more complex examples of digital activism later in this thesis. This chapter explores the manner in which this competitive form of activism has been implemented by reading it as rhetoric, identifying its rhetorical implications, its capacity for instilling long-term values, and the inherent risks of such forms of digital activism.

Digital Challenges

One of the more unique modes of digital activism is the digital challenge, or challenge based activism. Similar in terms of their decentralized/unregulated structure and bottom-up spontaneity, what makes digital challenges unique from other methods of digital activism is both the specific manner of engagement and the duration of participation. Participation in most digital

challenges implies either a single isolated activity, such as filming and posting a personal video for the ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge on YouTube, or a short-term event that lasts anywhere from two weeks to a month, such as the Northwest Earth Institute's Eco Challenge. They are brief simplistic methods of digital activism most often used to promote solidarity, awareness, and/or communitarianism by means of friendly competition with members of the social media community.

Though the challenges themselves can take many different forms and serve different causes, they all function under the same basic premise. A participant is challenged to engage in some sort of activity that serves to promote a cause, idea, or set of values set forth by an individual, group, or an institution of some sort. The participant then accepts the challenge and publicly documents their participation via social media, usually in the form of a picture or short video, all while challenging others to participate. Some challenge issuers may even choose to incentivize participants with rewards for successful completion of a challenge activity so as to bolster participation. Regardless, in most digital challenges, anyone is able to participate to any degree they so desire. The aim of most digital challenges is to bring attention to a particular cause and increase public awareness via the viral nature and global scale by which internet and social media content is disseminated.

Like most instances of digital activism, these challenges are relatively low-stake/low-risk and without any centralized leadership, regulation, or participation requirements beyond access to the internet. It is important to note, however, that digital challenges, as with other forms of digital activism, are entirely open to the public and subject to the intentions of a given participant. In a positive sense, this means that anyone meeting the very minimal requirements of participation can take part in a challenge, even though their exact motives may and likely do

vary. Though their structure leaves both their values and participants inherently vulnerable to corruption by counterintuitive habits of their participants, digital challenges' low bar to entry make them one of the most easily accessible modes of political discourse. As Chen explains,

Ease of access and application provides these groups discursive infrastructure on a scale never seen. The more open and public the nature of the space created by technology increases the visibility of counter-public discourses to the majority: increasing their discoverability for potential members, normalising alternative perspectives and political identities, and reducing the ability of subgroups to control access to any particular space. (Chen, 2013, p. 115)

One does not need to be exceptionally knowledgeable or literate in regards to a given cause to participate in its associated challenge activity. Therefore, the bar to entry remains extremely low. However, this also means that, as with other previously discussed examples of digital activism, there exists the potential for the values and motives of a given challenge to be supplanted by those of the participant.

There are no rules or regulations stipulating that the participant be knowledgeable of or even care about the cause to which a given challenge is intended to serve. As such, an individual can use the activity and title associated with a popular challenge as a means to promote their own agenda or whatever ends they desire. Alternatively, some people choose to participate in digital challenges simply because of social pressures and desires to be part of a larger social group/community. Again, however, this further detaches the actions and behaviors of the challenge participant from the values and initially intended purpose of the challenge itself. It essentially reduces challenge participation to a set of decontextualized actions that no longer represent the values set forth at a given challenge's inception. Any activist-oriented values the

challenge may have initially served to promote are removed and replaced by whatever the participant desires. This represents a major risk and common trend amongst most digital challenges and digital activism as a whole.

#NoMakeupChallenge: From Cancer to Vanity

A recent example of a digital challenge that exemplifies this risk of value subversion generated by a lack of structure and regulation comes in the form of 2014's #NoMakeupChallenge. This challenge formed as either an offshoot of or in tandem with another pop-culture trend that began around the same time. In March of 2014, actress and breast cancer survivor Kim Novak sparked controversy for her appearance at the Oscars after posting a makeup-less photo of herself on Twitter. This inspired thousands of Novak's fans and women the world over to post pictures of themselves barefaced under the hashtag #NoMakeupSelfie in support of cancer survivors, asking their friends to donate to breast cancer research (Priebe, 2014).

Within the same timeframe that the #NoMakeupSelfie had become popularized via numerous memes, the #NoMakeupChallenge came into being. Utilizing the popularity of the #NoMakeupSelfie, the #NoMakeupChallenge encouraged women the world over to post pictures of themselves without any sort of cosmetic makeup while encouraging others to do the same and donate to cancer research. The intention of the challenge was to both display solidarity for breast cancer survivors and patients as well as raise money for breast cancer research. Additionally, the challenge also aimed to promote more realistic standards of beauty for women, offering a counter narrative to the hegemonic standards marketed by the fashion and cosmetic industries through the mainstream media.

During the height of its popularity throughout March and April of 2014, the #NoMakeupChallenge and its tens of thousands of participants received significant amounts of praise from journalists and bloggers. Not only was the challenge praised for its statement of solidarity but also for its promotion of a powerful feminist narrative regarding natural female beauty, calling into question the legitimacy of the oppressive artificial standards of beauty enforced by U.S. fashion and entertainment hegemonies. Furthermore, during the course of the challenge's month of popularity, it successfully raised over \$3 million for cancer research from donations given by challenge participants and observers (Priebe, 2014). However, despite its impressive participation numbers and the obvious monetary success of the movement, the challenge has also been heavily criticized due to its slow shift in focus from breast cancer support and awareness to its seeming support of vanity. Staff writer for the Thought Catalog, Heidi Priebe (2014) observes,

Somewhere along the line, women stopped posting links to cancer research websites while hashtagging their selfies. Bare-faced pictures went viral, with captions such as "For a good cause!" and "Showing my support." Comments, on the other hand, moved away from "I just donated \$20 to support cancer research" and turned into "Girl, you're soooo pretty!" Arguably, the cause morphed from cancer support to support of women's vanity. (Priebe, 2014)

Huffington Post contributor and Hodgkin's lymphoma survivor, Kristina Egan, similarly stated,

In my eyes, the [#NoMakeupSelfie] was supposed to be a move of solidarity for the people going through cancer. Baring yourself, exposing yourself, making you feel vulnerable, to try to understand a mere taste of the fragility that someone with cancer experiences when they look in the mirror. The photos I saw did not show that. They were

still mysteriously camera ready and lacked the level of realness that the cause demanded. I commented that I would have more respect if you took one, first thing in the morning, under fluorescent hospital lights, after a colonoscopy, as it was a little more relevant. That kind of vulnerability and loss of dignity is closer to what I felt as a cancer patient. (Egan, 2014)

What Priebe and Egan, as well as many others observed during the latter stages of the #NoMakeupChallenge was a sort of rhetorical shift in regards to its values. As the movement progressed, fewer and fewer posts contained anything pertaining to breast cancer awareness, with even fewer describing ways to donate to breast cancer research. Most posts pertaining to the challenge looked like the following:



Figure 3.1. #NoMakeupChallenge Twitter posts (Twitter, 2016)

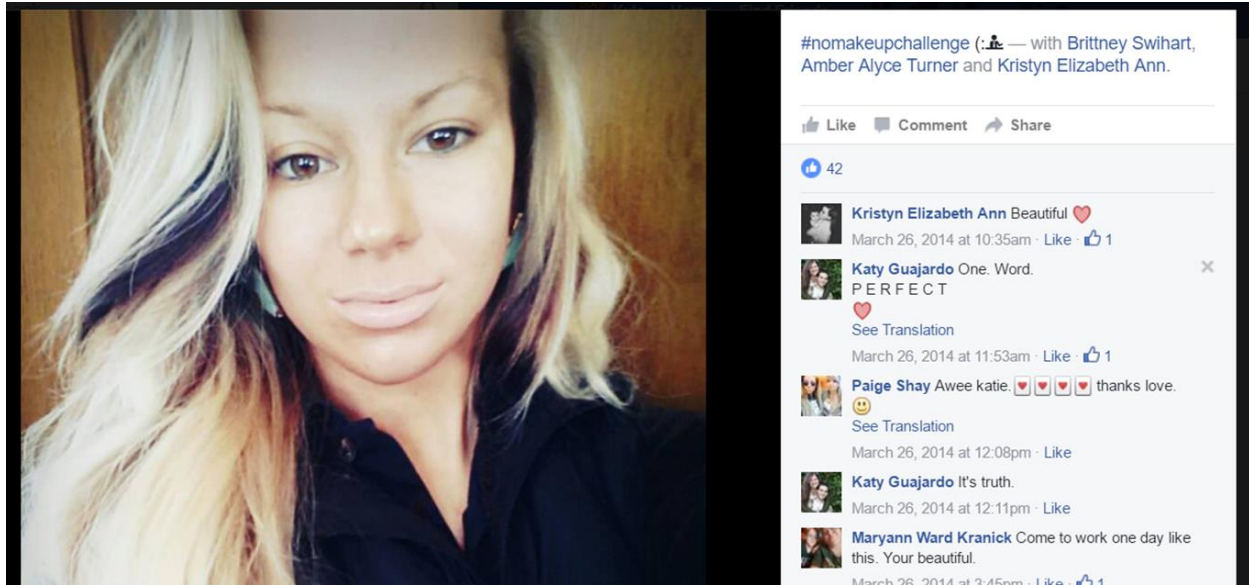


Figure 3.2. #NoMakeupChallenge Facebook posts (Facebook, 2016)

Much as Priebe and Egan noted, absent is any mention of breast cancer or solidarity. In fact, neither the Twitter posts nor the Facebook post even make mention of any sort of cause, with the first Twitter poster showing no prior knowledge of the challenge's existence. All that is consistently present throughout the three social media posts is the presence of the hashtag #NoMakeupChallenge.

Much like #OscarsSoWhite, the #NoMakeupChallenge hashtag functions as a signifier that legitimizes a given social media post and its corresponding selfie as being a part of the overall movement. Without the presence of the hashtag, the selfie is nothing more than a photograph. It is through the presence of the hashtag that a rhetorical shift occurs in which the values of the #NoMakeupChallenge are projected onto the post. However, as has already been discussed in Chapter 2, the value of a given piece of social media content is derived from the content consumer, not its creator. A similar principle applies to hashtags. In the case of hashtags, the role of the creator is played by the person who first creates the hashtag and the role of

consumer is played by the multitude of individuals who reuse it. As literary theorist and linguist V.N. Volosinov (1973) states,

Signs emerge, after all, only in the process of interaction between one individual consciousness and another. And the individual consciousness itself is filled with signs. Consciousness becomes consciousness only once it has been filled with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently, only in the process of social interaction. (Volosinov, 1973, p. 11)

In this sense, the value of a hashtag is determined by a combination of the regularity of its reuse and the type of content (both rhetorical and symbolic) to which it is most often applied.

This is where issues begin to emerge for the #NoMakeupChallenge. #OscarsSoWhite from the beginning had a clear, consistent, and (most importantly) specific message constantly being reinforced by its reuse. The specificity of its title and the regularity of the content it was most often associated with left little to no room for the value of the movement to be subverted by public misuse of the hashtag. The #NoMakeupChallenge, on the other hand, lacked that sort of clarity. Its title, rhetorically, has nothing to do with creating a dialogue regarding realistic standards of beauty, promoting solidarity, or donating to cancer research as was intended by its creators. Instead, the title is directly referring to the actions inherent of the challenge; taking a selfie without wearing makeup. Semiotically, the selfie was supposed to be representative of these values, a literal physical symbol demonstrating and inspiring support for cancer survivors as well as a stance against societal hegemonies. However, one would never know this unless additional qualifiers were included with a #NoMakeupChallenge post which, as is evident by the above images, very few participants opted to include.

Instead, the emphasis is clearly placed on the individual participants, their lack of makeup, and their “natural” beauty, with photos being legitimized (or signified) as part of the challenge by the presence of the hashtag, #NoMakeupChallenge. The motivation seems to be more along the lines of “look at me and how beautiful I am without makeup” rather than the counter-hegemonic message and stance of solidarity the initial #NoMakeupSelfie and #NoMakeupChallenge were intended to represent. Also, since there is no emphasis placed on solidarity or breast cancer awareness, all comments on the Facebook post are simply praising the participant for how they look, which does nothing to further the dialogue. There is no extra step taken in regards to inquiring why the participant is taking a makeup-less photo, let alone sharing them on Twitter and Facebook. While the comments could be viewed as being statements of empowerment and support for the participant’s natural beauty, without any context in regards to the activism that initially spurred the trend, the comments function as no more than general compliments.

What began as a movement intended to promote solidarity, femininity, and cancer research essentially devolved into a platform for egotism and narcissism. The #NoMakeupChallenge presents significant amounts of potential for a dialogue to be initiated regarding hegemonic practices surrounding feminine beauty standards that the fashion and entertainment industries reinforce. However, it is only in retrospect that this potential can be seen, as the actual practice of the challenge failed to consistently and clearly represent this nuance. In the end, without the presence of any centralized leadership or regulation to direct participation towards the emphasis of the values that initially inspired the challenge and reign in the initial deviations, the movement became less about fostering a community and dialogue of

support and awareness and more about the attention generated by engaging in the challenge activity.

As previously mentioned one of the major critiques of digital activism is its movements' lack of identifiable power structure and participant regulation. Nowhere is this critique more valid than in digital challenges, many of which manifest themselves as pop-cultural trends both in terms of their popularity and transience. Digital challenges are often created in the wake of significant sociocultural, pop-cultural, economic, or political events that trigger massive public outcries of support (or disdain). As long as a given event remains relevant in the public sphere, so too will any associated digital challenges that have sprung up in its wake. However, the longer a challenge exists, the more likely it will be misappropriated by the public at large and become detached from its initial value like the #NoMakeupChallenge. As a result of this value detachment, the forms of social organization for participants and conditions for interaction that initially underlie a given challenge are similarly changed so as to reflect the new set of values being promoted (Volosinov, 1973, p. 21).

This potential for a challenge to be utilized for an alternative purpose than its initially intended use is an unavoidable risk that comes from its lack of structure and regulation. However, it is this lack of structure and regulation that makes digital challenges so appealing to the casual activist. In this sense, digital challenges are double-edged swords. While introducing more advanced levels of structure and participant regulation to a digital challenge can serve to better preserve its initial values and intentions, it also raises the bar to entry, thus minimizing participation and potential contribution to the cause. A prime example of this would be the Northwest Earth Institute (NWEI) and its annual EcoChallenge.

Northwest Earth Institute and the EcoChallenge

NWEI's EcoChallenge is oriented around the promotion of sustainable living practices, reducing individual contributions to carbon emissions, and generally more environmentally conscious behaviors (Northwest Earth Institute, 2015). Participants are challenged to change one unsustainable lifestyle habit for the span of two weeks and document their progress on the EcoChallenge website, which is both similarly structured and connectable to Facebook as well as several other social media platforms including Twitter and Instagram. The underlying hope of the NWEI is that the values promoted by the challenge are ultimately internalized by the participant so as to result in continued sustainable practices and behaviors. However, upon examination of the manner in which the language of the EcoChallenge recontextualizes environmentalist activities into that of a competitive engagement and acts of ecological conservation and sustainability into means of acquiring points so as to win prizes, the potential for an environmental ethic of sustainability appears to be subverted by consumeristic motives and values.

Before delving into a deeper analysis of the EcoChallenge, it is important to understand the sociopolitical landscape and environmental discussions from which it has emerged. One of the most widely discussed and debated environmental crises currently facing our planet is climate change. Currently, there is significant scientific data that not only verifies the existence of climate change, but also shows strong evidence that supports the claim that it is in fact directly linked to human industrial activity (Nordhaus, 2013, pp. 4, 15). Due to the abundant evidence linking human activity to climate change, the goal of many recent environmental movements has been to impart alternative means of living that are more environmentally conscious and sustainable while also encouraging a redefinition of the natural world as a landscape that

necessitates such behavior, thus mitigating human contributions to climate change. In order to provide sustainable values and practices that can replace the more detrimental practices inscribed by habits of production and consumption, environmentalists must demonstrate the manner in which sustainable behaviors can be easily integrated into and enrich our daily lives.

However, the Western world's historic predisposition towards the cultural integration of economic habits of consumption and production has alienated much of society from the natural world. The here and now of postmodern industrial society is oriented around, as Herbert Marcuse (1964) described, the production and consumption of waste, or rather things that are not necessary or intrinsic to survival (Marcuse, 1964, pp. 7-8). As such, the dissemination of sustainable practices that would essentially curtail or prohibit these activities on a local level can be perceived as counterintuitive, both socially and economically, thus making the efforts of environmentalists that much more difficult (Marcuse, 1964, pp. 4-5). People enjoy the luxuries brought forth by technological and industrial advancement and, as William Nordhaus describes, "do not want to return to a caveman standard of living" (Nordhaus, 2013, pp. 20). As Kari Norgaard observed, to pursue any action or behavioral change that would both acknowledge the legitimacy/significance of environmental claims and defy social norms would, for many, destabilize what is perceived to be reality (Norgaard, 2011, pp. 67-68). This is where the NWEI and the EcoChallenge come into play.

Founded in 1993, NWEI is a non-profit organization based out of Portland, Oregon. Their objective, as specified on their website, is "to give people a framework to talk about our relationship with the planet and to share in discovering new ways to live, work, create and consume" (Northwest Earth Institute, 2015). The basis of their entire operation is built upon the ideas of shared learning, community building, and accessibility, notions which seem to echo

sentiments similar to political scientist Robert Putnam's (2001) call for the bridging of social capital and the reinvigoration of American communities (Putnam, 2001, pp. 22-28). A major point of concern for the NWEI is the "say-do" gap, which implies that there is significant disparity between the environmental values Americans espouse and the everyday actions they engage in (Northwest Earth Institute, 2015). As such, the focus of the institution's many events and endeavors is to promote the mitigation of individual contributions to climate change in the form of easily disseminated sustainable behaviors and shared experience. With the advancement of Internet technologies and the full integration of social media into the institution's infrastructure, the NWEI has successfully cultivated a global community in which geographical boundaries are no longer a cause for concern. The widespread and expeditious nature of social media has made the dissemination of NWEI's values, ethics, and action both extremely quick and relatively simple.

One of the more prominent events held by the NWEI is the annual EcoChallenge. Started in 2009, the EcoChallenge is a two week event that challenges participants to "change one habit that benefits both you and the planet" (Northwest Earth Institute, 2015). In line with the NWEI's concept of accessibility, participation in the EcoChallenge is a relatively simple five-step process. First, the participant chooses the challenge they wish to engage in. The participant can either choose from a list of suggested categories, ranging from water conservation to civic engagement, or create their own individually tailored EcoChallenge. Though the overall goal of the EcoChallenge is to promote long-term sustainability in all aspects of life, it also recognizes that, within society's current framework, sustainability must be presented as a practical option for potential participants. Regardless, once the participant has selected a category, the participant must then choose one or more of the challenges within the selected category, including

measurable challenges (i.e. limiting water consumption by shortening shower length) and non-measurable challenges (i.e. investing in water saving appliances) (Northwest Earth Institute, 2015). The second step is to simply register for EcoChallenge, at which point the participant can either register as an individual or register a team. The third step is to create an EcoChallenge profile on their website. The fourth step is to share your challenge with friends and family and invite them to participate. The fifth and final step is for the participant to begin working towards their challenge goals from the start date of the challenge to the end date (2015's challenge was held from October 15-29) and check in to the EcoChallenge website daily to log their progress similar to the manner one may update a Facebook page or personal blog (Northwest Earth Institute, 2015).

As previously mentioned, some challenge based activist movements opt to provide incentives such as rewards so as to increase both participation numbers and individual levels of participation. The EcoChallenge is no exception. For basic participants, there are eleven means by which to acquire points that qualify the participant for different tiers of prizes, with point values ranging from 5-50 points. Points can be acquired by joining an EcoChallenge team, being one of the first 500 participants to register, creating and leading a team, posting a profile picture, meeting one's daily EcoChallenge goal, blogging about one's story on his/her EcoChallenge profile, recruiting new members to one's team, recruiting other team captains, making a donation to NWEI, reactivating one's previous profile as a team member, or reactivating one's profile as a captain (Northwest Earth Institute, 2015). Furthermore, and perhaps most curiously, those who choose the donation method receives five points for every dollar donated to NWEI, meaning that those with greater monetary means can potentially forgo all other means of point acquisition and

essentially buy their way to the top. Even further, the point margin increases should one choose to register for the EcoChallenge as a fundraiser.

What appear to be most heavily emphasized by this point system, however, are not necessarily the acts of sustainability or conservation engaged in by EcoChallenge participants. Obviously, the sustainable practices participants elect to engage in during the course of the challenge are relevant. These practices not only signify the participant's involvement in the EcoChallenge, but also demonstrate a commitment to the values of the EcoChallenge as put forth by the NWEI. If there were no point system, it would be reasonable to assume that participants are motivated to actively participate in the EcoChallenge because of a shared commitment to bettering the world through sustainable habits. However, the manner in which the EcoChallenge reduces participation to mere points on the board seems to undermine the message of sustainability championed by the NWEI and changes the motivation of its participants. The points are intended to motivate increased participation (and increased sustainable habits) by fostering friendly competition amongst participants. However, the presence of a point system as a means of increasing interest and participation completely undermines the significance of the environmentalism at the heart of the challenge. The attribution of point values to acts of community building and donation contradicts the values of the EcoChallenge in that it motivates participants to engage with the challenge for the purpose of competition rather than those of environmentally sustainable habits. This ultimately transforms any sustainable action performed under the pretense of the EcoChallenge into a pseudo social capital exchange.

Speaking in a more tangible sense, what are these points going towards? Obviously, there is the potential for bragging rights, that sort of base spoil of competitive engagements that greatly appeals to many American sensibilities; turning sustainable lifestyles and acts of conservation

into competition. However, one cannot hold bragging rights, nor can they sustain an individual, at least in a physiological sense. As previously mentioned, so as to further incentivize participation, the EcoChallenge offers several raffle prizes to those that accrue the most points during the course of the event, all with their monetary values listed. As one earns more points, the cash value of the prizes increase. Those who earn 100-249 points qualify for a variety of magazine subscriptions, gift cards, or accessories such as hats or bags ranging from \$12-\$35 in value (Northwest Earth Institute, 2015). Those with 250 points or more qualify for more high profile prizes such as gear or services from REI, gift cards to Whole Foods, one hour massages courtesy of Massage Envy, free coffee for a year from Coda Coffee Company, or even three cases of beer from Widmer Brothers, which range in value from \$50-\$300. The grand prize, priced at a value of \$360 is a year's worth of Organic Valley Products. To qualify for the grand prize, the participant needs to have either earned 250 points or make a donation of \$15 or more.

A question that emerges upon seeing this list of prizes is the matter of how they are related to sustainable living practices. The Organic Valley products are the easiest to tie to concepts of sustainability as it is a cornerstone of their advertising campaign; "Sustainability: Growing Green Since 1988" (Organic Valley, 2015). The other prizes, however, have little to nothing to do with sustainability. Arguably, an individual with some creative fortitude could devise an alternative sustainable purpose for some of these prizes. Clearly, the Whole Foods gift card could be put to use purchasing sustainable food items, in spite of legal allegations lobbed at the company claiming unnecessary price inflation and misrepresentation/marketing of non-organic items as organic, sustainable, and/or locally grown (Joffe, 2015). However, one would be hard-pressed to argue the environmentally sustainable purpose of a body massage. What these prizes seem to promote is conspicuous consumption; consumption that serves as a means of

displaying one's status so as to gain the respect of his/her peers rather than meeting the actual needs of the consumer (Knoedler et al., 2013, p. 97).

Despite its predisposition towards the inherent limits of digital challenges, the NWEI's EcoChallenge is actually one of the more viable examples of challenge based activism, at least from a participatory perspective. This is primarily because, unlike other challenges like 2014's ALS Ice Bucket Challenge which will be explored in the following chapter, the EcoChallenge is orchestrated and directly overseen by a centralized institution; NWEI. Its bar to entry, though still comparatively low by comparison to other non-digital activist groups, is slightly higher due to the fact that the NWEI has certain rules and regulations one must adhere to so as to officially participate in the EcoChallenge. Though this ultimately serves to only ensure that the behaviors inherent of the values being promoted are preserved, it also serves as a deterrent to potential participants because it requires more active engagement than other digital challenges or activist movements. As such, even if a given participant is only interested in the prizes, the participant must still register for the event and engage in some sort of recognizably sustainable behavior for the duration of the event so as to be recognized as an official participant. This, at least in a performance-based sense, helps to preserve the values of the EcoChallenge from being subverted by external groups.

The Double-Edged Sword of Digital Challenges: Conclusion

Digital challenges are somewhat of a double-edged sword. Those that are decentralized and unregulated such as the #NoMakeupChallenge have unprecedented potential for participation due to their accessibility. At the same time, however, they are also at risk for value subversion by their participants due to their unregulated and decentralized nature. Without some sort of guiding figure to clearly articulate and rhetorically connect the values of a challenge to its

actions, the values set forth by the challenge's creators will more than likely become detached from the actions. As a result, any activist purpose originally intended will be supplanted by whatever values and participation motivations the public gravitates towards and ultimately projects onto the challenge.

Conversely, introducing a more structured and regulated participant system with participation incentives such as with NWEI's EcoChallenge ensures more consistent forms of participation, but ultimately limits accessibility and generates a new series of potential value subverting obstacles. The utilization of participation incentives such as the point system in the EcoChallenge ultimately undermines the initial values set forth by the challenge creators. It contradicts the intentions of the challenge creators in that it motivates participation not out of identification with the values of the overall movement, but out of competition. Furthermore, the inclusion of prize incentives in conjunction with the point system further detaches the intended values from the actions of a challenge by unintentionally promoting conspicuous consumption.

Regardless, framing any digital activist movement within the context of a competitive engagement generates the potential for the values of community building, solidarity, environmentalism, or charity to be placed at risk of being transformed into mere means to a self-serving end. Without the presence of a centralized power structure or participation regulation, the preservation and perpetuation of the values set forth by the challenge issuers is contingent on the participant's capacity to simultaneously internalize the prescribed values and resist the temptations of external social forces. The next chapter further explores the manner in which the detachment of values from the actions of a challenge can influence future participation and the overall movement, this time focusing on the 2014 ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge.

Chapter 4. CASE STUDY 1: ICE-BUCKET CHALLENGE

This chapter examines the implications of the rhetorical framing of the ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge. The ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge rose to viral levels of popularity in the summer of 2014 between the months of July and September. It was initially started by a Boston College student who had been diagnosed with ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease (Sifferlin, 2014). The purpose of the challenge was to raise public awareness of ALS and encourage the public to donate to ALS research. Due to its viral success via social media, members of the mainstream media and other high profile corporate and political figures began participating, making the Ice-Bucket Challenge a global phenomenon. While it was an undeniable monetary success, its proliferation and perpetuation within the context of a public social media based system ultimately resulted in the detachment of the movement's values from its actions, with many of its core values being supplanted by those of pop-culture and the free market.

Summer 2014: The Ice-Bucket Challenge Begins

In July of 2014, Boston College student Pete Frates started the ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge. At one point an accomplished Division I baseball player, Frates began suffering what appeared to be the early symptoms of ALS and was officially diagnosed with ALS in 2012 (Goldberg, 2014). With his budding athletic career put on hold, Frates decided to channel his efforts into raising public awareness of the debilitating motor neuron disease. Thus, in the summer of 2014 with the assistance of fellow ALS survivor Pat Quin, the ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge was created. Utilizing the popular social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, Frates and Quin launched what would become one of the most viral social media phenomena in recent memory.

During its summer tenure, the movement raised over \$115 million nationally and approximately \$220 million globally for ALS research (Holan, 2014). According to the ALS Association (2015), more than 17 million people uploaded their Ice-Bucket Challenge videos to Facebook alone. Furthermore, the metrics for Ice-Bucket Challenge videos uploaded to Facebook show that they were watched by “440 million people a total of 10 billion times” (ALSA, 2016). These are staggering numbers for any piece of web-based content, resulting in significant online and mainstream media attention, so much so that president Barack Obama was even convinced to partake in the event (though he ultimately declined, opting to donate and encourage others to do the same). Due to its undeniable popularity, the ALS Association decided to turn the Ice-Bucket Challenge into an annual event to be held every August “until there is a cure” (ALSA, 2016).

During its initial run in 2014, the ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge was the fifth highest trending topic on social media (Ton, 2015). Outside of the previously mentioned Facebook statistics, over 6.2 million Ice-Bucket Challenge videos were uploaded to YouTube. Of the videos uploaded to YouTube, the highest viewed submissions came from high profile individuals such as Bill Gates, Robert Downey Jr., and numerous other celebrities, all with views ranging in the tens of millions (Ton, 2015). Factoring in the millions of mentions on Instagram, innumerable parodies, numerous pop-culture references, and even Halloween costumes, it was clear the Ice-Bucket Challenge had become an undeniable global phenomenon. Furthermore, as a response to its viral levels of global popularity, the ALS Association began releasing Ice-Bucket Challenge paraphernalia so as to further promote and encourage participation in the event quite similar to the prizes used in the NWEI’s EcoChallenge (ALSA, 2016). Unlike the EcoChallenge, however, which was from its inception overseen and by the NWEI, the Ice-Bucket Challenge

existed separately from the ALS Association until 2015. Though the donations generated by the 2014 version of the challenge were directed to the ALS Association, the various paraphernalia created by the ALS Association were not an intrinsic part of participation in the challenge, nor were they rewards for successful completion.

Rules of Engagement: Ice-Bucket Challenge Participation Structure

Participation in the Ice-Bucket Challenge is a relatively simple feat. Like most forms of digital activism, there is an exceptionally low bar to entry, requiring no specialization and minimal technological accommodations on the part of the participant. All that is required is a camera, access to the internet, and a social media account. According to the official rules posted on the ALS Association's website, there are four steps one must go through in order to participate in the challenge:

1. **ACCEPT:** Accept the challenge;
2. **RECORD:** Take a video of yourself dumping a bucket of ice water over your head to increase awareness of ALS;
3. **UPLOAD:** Upload your video to social media, tagging/challenging at least three of your friends;
4. **GIVE:** Make a donation to support the ALS community. (ALSA, 2015)

The ALS Association also has a colorful infographic to better break down and illustrate how to participate (depicted below).

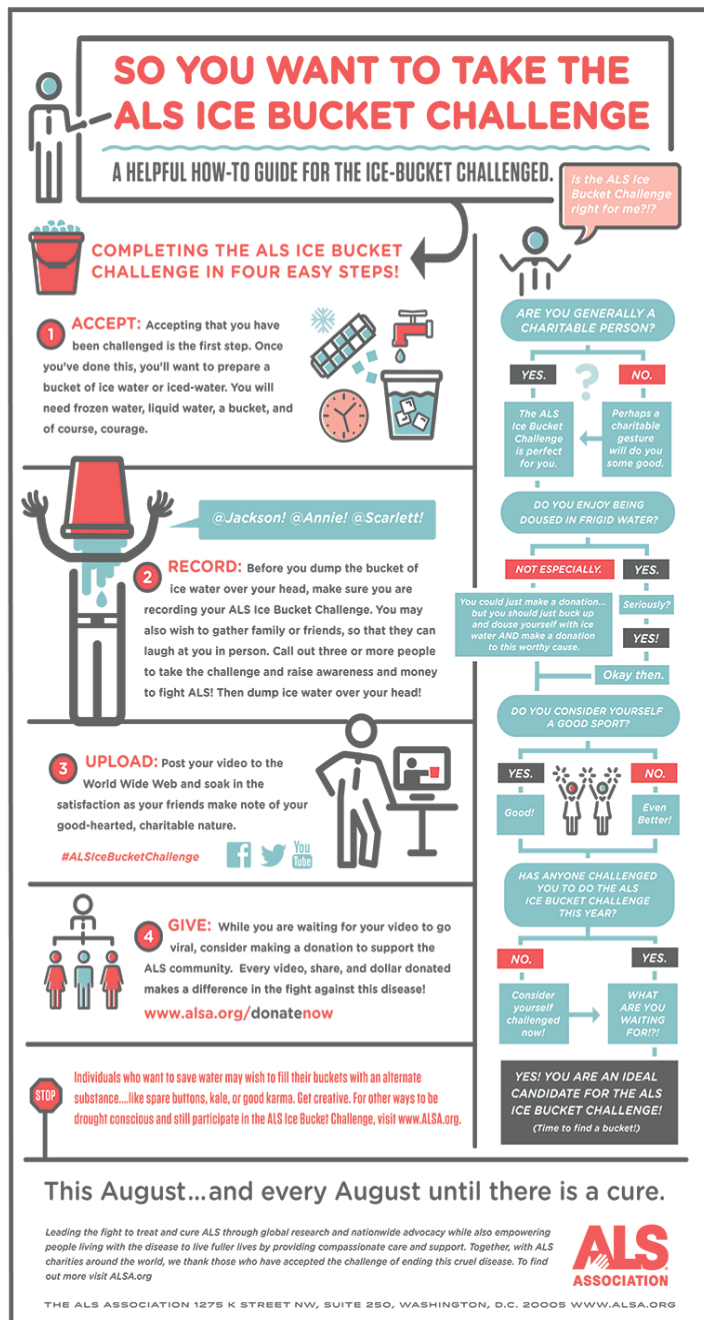


Figure 4.1. “So You Want to Take the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge” infographic. (ALSA, 2016)

The infographic is divided into two distinct parts; the part on the left which illustrates the previously mentioned four steps of participation and the part on the right which is a somewhat comedic flowchart.

The part on the left is straightforward enough, simply using bright colors and charming minimalist illustrations to better accent the fun of participating in the Ice-Bucket Challenge. The flowchart on the right, however, is not as straightforward. At face value, the chart is supposed to be used to determine whether one should take the Ice-Bucket Challenge. Despite the fact that one can respond with either yes or no to any of the questions, all choices made in the context of the chart converge to the exact same conclusion; yes, one should participate in the Ice-Bucket Challenge. Obviously the main purpose behind this is to motivate more people to participate in the challenge by promoting the idea that everyone should participate regardless of one's disposition towards charity, cold water, and sportsmanship. However, upon closer examination, the manner in which the flowchart treats donation is somewhat peculiar.

While the ALS Association encourages participants to engage in all aspects of the Ice-Bucket Challenge, donation is not mandatory. It is their firm belief that by the very nature of posting a video, participants are contributing to raising overall awareness of ALS, though they express that both participating and donating is the ideal circumstance.. This is explicitly stated on the FAQ page of their website.

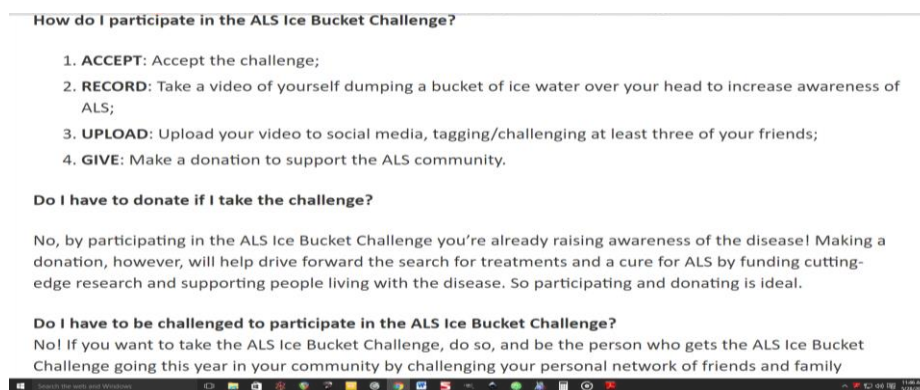


Figure 4.2. Screenshot of ALS Association website FAQ page. (ALSA, 2016)

Clearly, donation in conjunction with participation is encouraged and certainly preferred based on its designation of being “ideal.” However, if one looks back to the infographic flowchart, the conclusions for negative responses (answering no) to questions regarding charity and participation are much more coercively slanted than encouraging.

For example, the conclusion reached by responding negatively to the question “Are you a generally charitable person?” reads “Perhaps a charitable gesture will do you some good” (ALSA, 2016). There is a subtle inflection of condescension in the phrasing of this conclusion, implying that the potential participant is in some sort of karmic deficit that can be rectified through the power of charity. More importantly, however, there is a value judgement being made; participation in the Ice-Bucket Challenge (a charitable gesture) is good, with the subtle implication being that not doing so is bad. Regardless, the flowchart’s rhetorical framing of the Ice-Bucket Challenge as being both a charitable gesture and, by extension, something that is good motivates the participant to engage in the activity. The participant is motivated towards participation not necessarily because he or she wishes to inherently identify with charity, but so as to identify antithetically to the rhetorical negative being produced by the flowchart (and by extension the challenge).

This sort of coercive rhetorical slant towards participation continues to be seen in the second question of the chart which asks “Do you enjoy being doused in frigid water?” The conclusion reached by a negative response reads “You could just make a donation...but you should just buck up and douse yourself with ice water AND make a donation to this worthy cause.” This conclusion rhetorically makes several implications in regards to the nature of the participant, specifically in relation to the act of donating. In the FAQ section it is clearly emphasized that donation is a key aspect of the challenge. In fact, there is far more emphasis

placed on the explanation of the potential good generated from donation, so much so that it actually makes donation seem as though it is the more important aspect of the challenge.

The infographic, however, seems to imply that donation is only a half-measure or is in some way inadequate; a rather conflicting message. Not only that, rhetorically, the notion that one should just “buck up and douse yourself with ice water” seems to imply that a) not enjoying being doused in frigid water is a sign of weakness, b) donation is only a half measure, and, by extension, c) simply donating is a sign of weakness. In line with Burke’s theory of identification discussed in Chapter 2, the rhetoric being deployed in the infographic is clearly intended to persuade an individual towards a specific type of identification within the context of the challenge. Again, this sort of rhetorical framing alters the motivation of the participant so that they engage in the Ice-Bucket Challenge not necessarily for the sake of identifying with the righteous and good values of charity and benevolence, but for the sake of antithesis; to not appear weak, to not appear uncharitable, and to not appear bad. This sort of rhetorical coercion, however, is something that has been present in the Ice-Bucket Challenge long before the ALS Association’s involvement.

Conspicuous Activism: 2014 ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge

What is interesting to note about these official rules, infographics, and flowcharts, however, is that the ALS Association did not appropriate the Ice-Bucket Challenge until after its viral success in 2014. Though the ALS Association endorsed and encouraged participation in the challenge, the 2014 iteration of the challenge was very much its own autonomous, unregulated, and decentralized movement perpetuated through social media. Like the No Makeup Challenge before it, the Ice-Bucket Challenge was conceived as a means to promote solidarity and charity for ALS survivors. However, as the movement progressed, fewer participants bothered to make

mention of ALS or the charitable purpose of the challenge. The movement had gradually transformed into a more disambiguated pop-cultural trend. The further the movement got from its point of inception, the more the actions of the challenge were detached from the intended values set forth by Frates and Quin. The only original aspects of the Ice-Bucket Challenge that remained constant throughout its existence were its actions and the presence of ALS in the title of the challenge. However, as the charitable aspects of the challenge were overshadowed by the challenge's popularity, so too did the significance of ALS in regards to the challenge. With many, ALS was completely dropped from the title and the challenge was simply referred to as the Ice-Bucket Challenge.

That being said, participation in the 2014 ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge followed a similar formula to the later ALS Association iteration. Sans the reactions of the participants post being doused in ice-water, most of the 2014 Ice-Bucket Challenge submissions contain essentially the same exact dialogue shown in the following template:

Hi, my name is x, I am accepting y's nomination for the ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge. I nominate a, b, and c to take the challenge. You have 24 hours to complete the challenge. If you don't, you have to donate \$100 to ALS research.

Within the context of this template, there are three rhetorical moves that are made. First, the participant is identifying oneself both literally in terms of stating one's name and symbolically as an official participant in the challenge. This move legitimizes both the participant's official status within the challenge as well as the connection between their video submission and the values of the overall challenge. It is essentially a rhetorical act of signification which stamps all content contained within a given video with the Ice-Bucket Challenge seal of approval. The next move occurs in the nomination of the three potential participants. This again serves a sort of rhetorical

act of signification. However, instead of signifying the legitimacy of the new candidates within the context of the challenge, they are merely identified as potential participants whose identity within the context of the challenge is in a sort of purgatorial state, contingent on their decision to accept or decline their nomination.

The third rhetorical move occurs in the presentation of donation as a mandatory alternative to participation. Though the rules of participation are essentially the same, the most significant difference between the 2014 Ice-Bucket Challenge and the challenge post being appropriated by the ALS Association is the rhetorical treatment of donation. In its initial iteration, the donation aspect of the Ice-Bucket Challenge was treated as a consequence to non-participation, rather than something that is greatly encouraged though not mandatory (Sifferlin, 2014). As shown in the above template, if any of the nominees failed to complete the challenge within 24 hours of being nominated, they were told that they must donate \$100 to the ALS Association, treating donation almost as a punishment.

Under most circumstances, a donation is semiotically representative of the values of charity which more often than not are associated with benevolence, selflessness, and various other concepts indicative of “good.” In the context of the 2014 Ice-Bucket Challenge, however, donation serves a very different rhetorical role; as a punishment and a motivation. In this context, donation comes directly as a result of failing to complete the challenge. If one fails to complete the challenge within 24 hours of being nominated, they must donate. This rhetorical move transforms donation, which is normally associated with charity (a “good” thing), into a fine (a “bad” thing) for having not been conspicuously activist. This alone changes the motivation behind taking the challenge in that it creates a tangible financial risk for non-participation as a motivating factor.

At the same time, however, there is more to donation in this context than its signification as a potential financial loss. In the context of the 2014 Ice-Bucket Challenge, donation is portrayed as the rhetorical negative of participation, similarly to the manner in which it is represented in the ALS Association infographic. As a result, donation takes on a more negative social implication in that it is explicitly connected to failure and uncharitableness. While this motivates the individual to participate in the challenge, the motivation comes as a result of the participant's desire to identify against the negative implication that donation takes on within the context of the challenge rather than with the values of the movement. Thinking back to the infographic, to not participate in the challenge and simply opt to donate reflects poorly on the individual in a social sense. It implies that one is uncharitable, weak, and in a sort of karmic deficit. It is viewed as a half-measure that negatively juxtaposes an individual with other participants.

This implied social stigma that comes with non-participation, however, is not hyperbole and in certain instances is extraordinarily explicit. For example, in January of 2015, a British ad campaign designed to raise awareness of motor neuron disease (the European designation for ALS) placed several billboards in UK substations. The billboard depicts an average looking 34 year old male named Michael. Next to Michael, there is a quote that reads, "Last summer, I was the only person I knew who didn't do the Ice Bucket Challenge. Five months later I was diagnosed with motor neurone disease" (Snowdon, 2015).



Figure 4.3. The U.K. Substation Billboard from the Motor Neurone Disease Association (Harrison, 2015).

To say that the message of this billboard misses the mark in regards to exemplifying the challenge's initially intended values is a bit of an understatement. This billboard appeared in multiple regularly used and highly populated public substations in the UK. It was clearly targeted at individuals who had completely abstained from the Ice-Bucket Challenge the year before, but what purpose does it serve? What is its symbolic significance? According the MNDA Director of External Affairs, Chris James, the intention of the MNDA was to show the indiscriminate nature of MND, illustrating how the disease can be devastating across all communities and inspiring solidarity on behalf of MND survivors (Snowdon, 2015).

There is, however, nothing visually contained in this billboard that in any way intrinsically illustrates the indiscriminate nature of MND or promotes solidarity. A picture of a man staring directly at the camera while standing in front of some trees and a rosebush, though compositionally appealing to some degree, does not have any inherent correlation with either of these concepts. Semiotically, this correlation would have to be construed symbolically through

the utilization of text/words so as to give context and value to the imagery of the billboard. Without text, the billboard is nothing more than a photograph of an average looking white male. As such, it is through the presence of specific words that this billboard is signified as being connected to the Ice-Bucket Challenge. However, the connection that is made is not one that promotes solidarity or awareness, but rather one that condemns those who chose to participate in the challenge. Similar to the coercive rhetoric seen in the ALS Association infographic, the rhetoric of the billboard seems to imply that those who chose not to participate in the Ice-Bucket Challenge are, by some act of karma, at risk of developing ALS/MND. So now, beyond risk of financial punishment or being ostracized by one's community for not participating, the narrative being put forth is that, should you not participate in the Ice-Bucket Challenge, karma will see to it that you are crippled with a fatal degenerative disease.

Riding the Social Media Wave: The Memetic Mode of Cultural Reproduction

The simplicity of the Ice-Bucket challenge in terms of its execution makes dissemination of the challenge through multiple social media platforms normally unreachable communities both quick and easy. However, due to the public nature of social media and the Ice-Bucket Challenge's lack of a centralized power structure and regulation, the movement is incapable of sustaining the initial values of its creators. This is primarily because there is nothing that intrinsically or rhetorically connects the actions of the challenge to the intended values of its creators. The Ice-Bucket Challenge is, in this sense, very similar to the previously discussed #NoMakeupChallenge, which had similar charitable goals. The movement was started with the intentions of creating a public dialogue, promoting solidarity and encouraging charitable research donations. Like the #NoMakeupChallenge, performing the actions of the Ice-Bucket Challenge were supposed to be a symbolic action, semiotically representing the creators' value. However,

without the presence of any centralized leadership or regulation to direct participation towards the emphasis of the initially intended values of Frates and Quin, the movement ultimately succumbed to its viral popularity, becoming nothing more than a trend like the #NoMakeupChallenge before it.

This is the double-edged sword of digital activism and is an unavoidable aspect of using social media for the propagation of any activist purpose. Though most digital movements begin as an idea put forth by an individual or group, once the movement goes viral, it becomes a seemingly sentient entity, free of regulation and ownership. Once a digital movement becomes viral, it is no longer affiliated with its creators or their values. It is solely associated with the actions involved and whatever values the participant puts forth in his/her execution said actions (Morwood, 2012). Even in Matt Damon's video submission in which Frates and Quin's message is still casually mentioned (though donation is still referred to as a "fine"), the main focus is actually on the promotion of Damon's non-profit organization, Water.org (Water.org, 2014). This was a common trend of many celebrities and higher profile figures who chose to participate; opting to use the popularity of the challenge to promote some new endeavor to which they were linked rather than more heavily emphasizing ALS awareness.

But what causes a social media based movement to go viral? Social media virality usually derives from a collection of different factors that can be boiled down to what Richard Dawkins (1989) and, later, George Rossolatos (2015) described as the "memetic mode of cultural reproduction," or, in a simpler sense, the spreading of culture through memes (Dawkins, 1989; Rossolatos, 2015). Memes are entities such as catchy songs, fashion trends, and various other cultural constructions that are primarily disseminated through imitation. As Rossolatos explains,

This mode of propagation abides neither by linear models offered by cognitive psychology that attempt to account for how messages are memorized by starting from simple attention and culminating in storage in episodic memory, nor by semantics, which seeks to unearth the invariable structure beneath haphazard semiotic constellations. Messages in a networked economy are occasionally valorized provisionally not because of their consonance with an organic axiological framework and their ability to sustain belief systems, but because of their sheer “fascination” and their ability to foster bonds among members of ephemeral networks (either online or offline). In this context, the value of signs is not dependent on their exchangeability for a semantic content, but on their pragmatic outcomes in terms of consolidating bonds among community members. (Rossolatos, 2015, p. 134-135)

Due to its existence within a social media context which, at both a rhetorical and cultural level, operates as a social constructor of reality, the popularity of the Ice-Bucket Challenge was essentially unavoidable as it met all the requirements for successful memetic reproduction. It consists of an easily replicated action that allows the participant to engage with and broadcast to a larger global social media community within which numerous high profile celebrity figures are also participating, which in turn increases both general public fascination with the challenge and the challenges visibility within social media.

At the same time, however, as Rossolatos explained, the success of the Ice-Bucket Challenge is not connected to the axiological framework initially set forth by Frates and Quin, nor is it contingent on the challenge’s ability to maintain long-term belief systems inherent of a specific axiological framing. Like all other digital activist movements, the success of the Ice-Bucket Challenge comes as a result of the fascination generated by its ease of access and

capacity for community building. TIME contributor Ethan Wolff-Mann (2015) noted that, during the course of the challenge in 2014, many were concerned that participants were more caught up with the viral sensation of the challenge than the actual charitable intentions, donating less than the typical donor and often not knowing anything about ALS (Wolff-Mann, 2015). While the viral popularity of the movement pushed the Ice-Bucket Challenge to forefront of many people's minds and daily life between July and September of 2014 and beyond, the same cannot be said for ALS. In an interview with Wolff-Mann, Charity Navigator's Acting COO Tim Gamory stated,

Some people didn't even know about ALS—it just became Ice Bucket Challenge [...] So it would be interesting to see data as far as what people actually know. I can tell you from our site, the searches for ALS went up a ridiculous amount, from around 500 to 68,000 in August. And then it went right back down [...] As far as any longer term impact on those donor people who were exposed, it's questionable [...] Many of the donors were flash-in-the-pan. (Wolff-Mann, 2015)

In Gamory's observation, there are two types of participants in regards to the Ice-Bucket Challenge; "those who are deeply engaged in the cause, giving over many years, and those who respond to the social media wave" (Wolff-Mann, 2015).

Rhetorical Disconnect: Conclusion

When there is not an explicit rhetorical or semiotic connection made between the values and actions of a movement, digital or otherwise, the values are placed at risk of subversion. This is a common risk amongst all digital activism, but even more so with digital challenges due to their simplicity. The Ice-Bucket Challenge is, in this way, no different from any other digital challenge. Without some sort of guiding figure to clearly articulate and rhetorically connect

Frates and Quin's values to the reproduced actions of the Ice-Bucket Challenge, the movement ultimately turned into a pop-cultural trend free of context. It became an easily replicated set of actions that, while capable of inspiring donations, only persisted because of its memetic reproduction. While there were many that fully embraced and internalized the movement's originally intended values, most simply chose to ride the social media wave.

This probable detachment of values from action, however, represents an enormous and potentially damning risk for social media based activism. This is not simply because it removes context from the actions of a movement. It also presents opportunities for outsiders to project their own (and often unrelated) motives and values onto those actions while still performing them under the guise of being part of the larger movement from which the actions are derived. It essentially allows individuals or groups to take advantage of a given social media based movement's popularity so as to further an entirely separate agenda. This risk is discussed at greater length in the following chapter which analyzes the rhetorical and cultural implications of #occupywallstreet.

Chapter 5. CASE STUDY 2: #OCCUPYWALLSTREET

The following chapter discusses the #occupywallstreet movement of 2011, examining the rhetorical and cultural implications of its creation, orchestration, and organization through social media. #occupywallstreet was a social movement that began on September 17, 2011 and lasted until early November of that same year with occasional demonstrations under the Occupy banner appearing in 2012. Though the movement initially began as a small protest in Manhattan's Zuccotti Park, it quickly grew and spread to over 80 different countries as a result of the movement's prevalence on social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter (#occupywallstreet, 2016; Pepitone, 2013).

While there are many different interpretations of what Occupy set out to accomplish, the general purpose of the movement was to address economic inequalities, particularly in regards to the disproportionate amount of power the wealthiest percentage of society hold over politics and the world at large. While some would argue that the movement was successful in opening up a global dialogue on wealth inequality as well as temporarily placing that dialogue at the forefront of many people's minds, #occupywallstreet proved incapable of maintaining long-term values due to its lack of a clearly defined message and overall disorganization. Though the subject matter is more socially nuanced and complicated than in other instances of digital activism like the Ice-Bucket Challenge, #occupywallstreet bore a similar overall structure, mode of dissemination, and susceptibility to misappropriation inherent of all digital activism.

The Origin of Occupy

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly from whom or where #occupywallstreet came. While some suggest that Occupy came as a result of the culminated efforts of several other organizers and economically driven social movements such as New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, OpESR

(Operation Empire State Rebellion), and Seize DC, most attribute its creation to the Canadian anti-capitalist magazine Adbusters (Kroll, 2011; Schneider, 2013). On July of 2011, Adbuster senior editors Kalle Lasn and Micah White “issued a call” via a listserv sent out to Adbusters’ 90,000 subscribers as well as a post to Adbusters’ Facebook and Twitter accounts calling for 20,000 people to flood the streets of Manhattan on September 17, 2011 (Greene, 2011; Kroll, 2011; Wood, 2012).



Figure 5.1. The poster included with Adbusters’ initial Occupy call to action (Bierut, 2012)

With the listserv and social media posts, White and Lasn included a poster depicting a ballerina dancing on top of a bull statue from downtown Manhattan with several protesters in gas masks standing in the background. As Lasn explains,

We put together a poster for the July issue of Adbusters. The poster was a ballerina—an absolutely still ballerina—poised in a Zen-ish kind of way on top of this dynamic bull. And below it had the [Twitter] hashtag #OccupyWallStreet. Above, it said, “What is our

one demand?” I felt like this ballerina stood for this deep demand that would change the world. There was some magic about it.” (Chafkin et. al, 2011).

Heavily inspired by the Arab Spring uprising in Tunisia, Egypt, and several other Middle Eastern countries earlier that year, #occupywallstreet was a response to the recent United States economic recession that had negatively impacted the lives and livelihood of numerous U.S. citizens. Touted as a leaderless “people-powered” movement, #occupywallstreet sought to “to fight back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future,” protesting under the slogan of “We are the 99%,” a phrase referring to the growing difference in wealth in the U.S. between the wealthiest 1% and the rest of the population, often credited to Anthropologist and Occupy general assembly coordinator David Graeber (Chafkin et al, 2012; #occupywallstreet, 2016).

Social Media Mobilization and Legitimization

While the #occupywallstreet protests themselves had a very pervasive real-world component, the movement as a whole was primarily facilitated via social media, specifically in regards to the mobilization of its participants, the orchestration of its demonstrations, and dissemination of its ideas. As Lasn explains,

After Tunisia and Egypt, we were mightily inspired by the fact that a few smart people using Facebook and Twitter can put out calls and suddenly get huge numbers of people to get out into the streets and start giving vent to their anger. And then we keep on looking at the sorry state of the political left in the United States and how the Tea Party is passionately strutting their stuff while the left is sort of hiding somewhere. We felt that there was a real potential for a Tahrir moment in America because a) the political left needs it and b) because people are losing their jobs, people are losing their houses, and

young people cannot find a job. We felt that the people who gave us this mess — the financial fraudsters on Wall Street — haven't even been brought to justice yet. We felt this was the right moment to instigate something. (Elliot, 2011)

Graeber was initially skeptical of Adbusters reliance on social media as a means of mobilization, especially for a demonstration on the scale of what Lasn and White were proposing. He, like many in 2011, was concerned that vocal support on the internet would be able to translate into “real on-the-ground organizing” (Chafkin et al, 2011). This concern, however, was put to rest when Anonymous, an online collection of hacker activists (also referred to as hacktivists), began reposting Adbusters' call to action. On August 23, Anonymous posted a video to YouTube calling for the “citizens of the internet” to join them on September 17th as they occupied Wall Street. This bump from Anonymous proved incredibly beneficial to #occupywallstreet as it served to not only increase the online buzz surrounding the impending demonstration, but also further legitimized the movement in the eyes of social media users.

Within a few days of the initial protest, #occupywallstreet became a viral sensation, with the hashtags #WeAreThe99%” and #occupywallstreet permeating all social media platforms, serving as the key signifiers for Occupy demonstrators. Furthermore, as a result of both its pervasive social media presence and the growing size of the protests taking place in Manhattan, Occupy received regular daily coverage on mainstream media and news outlets on top of the support of many labor unions from around the country including the AFL-CIO and SEIU (Pepitone, 2013). In the span of two week, hundreds of thousands of tweets and Facebook posts were made regarding Occupy. Not only was the movement getting significant amounts of attention, but it was also inspiring a multitude of spin off movements operating under a similar rhetorical precedent, with other Occupy-inspired movements popping up in Chicago, Los

Angeles, Boston, St. Louis, Seattle, and numerous locations outside of the United States (Greene, 2011).

Organizers and protestors actively posted to their social media accounts, documenting protest activity and calling for others to join the cause. As a result of Occupy's significant amount of mainstream media coverage, these calls to action ended up attracting numerous high profile figures who became quite actively involved in the protests such as acclaimed academic and activist Cornel West, director Michael Moore, actress Susan Sarandon, and hip-hop/business mogul Russell Simmons to name a few. Even celebrities Ross Robinson, Kanye West, and Alec Baldwin made appearances at several rallies. This celebrity involvement not only inspired many younger activists to get involved with Occupy, but also served as a means of legitimizing the movement by the high profile and reputable nature of its celebrity supporters.

Several politicians also expressed support for the plight of the Occupy protestors, including House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, who stated, "I support the message to the establishment, whether it's Wall Street or the political establishment and the rest, that change has to happen [...] We cannot continue in a way this is not relevant to their lives" (Desvarieux, 2011). Another extraordinarily vocal political proponent of the movement was Vermont Senator and current presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who in a brief interview in 2011 stated,

"I think what the protestors are doing in New York and across the country is extremely important for two reasons. Number one, they are focusing attention on the most powerful entity in our country, which is Wall Street, which is also the most secretive and I believe the most dangerous. Let's never forget that it was the greed and recklessness and illegal behavior of Wall Street which plunged us into this terrible recession which resulted in millions of people losing their jobs, their homes, and their life savings [...] Second of all,

I think it is absolutely appropriate that the protestors are now forcing a debate and discussion in this country on the huge issue of income and wealth inequality...there are very few people who talk about that issue [...] but we do have to ask whether it is morally and economically appropriate that 400 people in this country own more wealth than the bottom half of America, 150 million people. (The Guardian, 2011)

Perhaps the most significant political bump Occupy received during its brief run was on October 18th when, after weeks of being pressured by Occupy protesters, President Obama finally spoke out in regards to the movement, stating,

I understand the frustrations being expressed in those protests [...] In some ways, they're not that different from some of the protests that we saw coming from the Tea Party. Both on the left and the right, I think people feel separated from their government. They feel that their institutions aren't looking out for them [...] The most important thing we can do right now is those of us in leadership letting people know that we understand their struggles and we are on their side, and that we want to set up a system in which hard work, responsibility, doing what you're supposed to do, is rewarded [...] And that people who are irresponsible, who are reckless, who don't feel a sense of obligation to their communities and their companies and their workers that those folks aren't rewarded.

(Dwyer, 2011)

Despite vaguely echoing sentiments previously expressed by Lasn, this served as an enormous boost for the movement. The very fact that Obama publically acknowledged and sympathized with the plight of the Occupy demonstrators was hugely important in legitimizing the movement in the eyes of the political left, especially those of the Democratic party. However, his

juxtaposing the movement with the Tea Party, a movement of the political right later, essentially ensured that Occupy would gain no traction with Republicans.

Critical Opposition & The End of Occupy

Not all responses to the Occupy movement were positive unfortunately. While the movement had found significant support from several high profile celebrities and the political left, there were many on the political right who lambasted the movement, such as then republican presidential front runner and Tea Party endorser Mitt Romney, who called the movement dangerous and accused its demonstrators of inciting “class warfare” (Bingham, 2011). Another republican presidential candidate, Herman Cain, was also highly critical of the movement, stating,

“Don't blame Wall Street, don't blame the big banks, if you don't have a job and you're not rich, blame yourself! [...] It is not a person's fault because they succeeded, it is a person's fault if they failed. And so this is why I don't understand these demonstrations and what is it that they're looking for.” (Bingham, 2011)

Then New York mayor Michael Bloomberg also criticized the movement, describing it as detrimental to both the rights and health of residents surrounding Zuccotti Park as well as the state's economy (Selfman, 2011).

By mid-October, several thousand protesters filled the streets of Manhattan and the numerous other cities that had joined in the cause. However, as the protests increased in size, so too did law enforcement activity. Jennie Wood (2012) describes,

#occupywallstreet continued to grow throughout the fall. On October 1, more than 700 arrests were made as activists marched across the Brooklyn Bridge. On October 5, thousands of union workers marched with the #occupywallstreet protesters through New

York City's Financial District. On October 15, rallies were staged in 900 cities throughout the world, including Chicago, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Paris, Tokyo, Berlin, Sydney, Hong Kong and many more. Thousands of #occupywallstreet activists rallied in New York City's Times Square. More than 70 arrests were made in New York City and 175 protesters were arrested in Chicago. (Wood, 2012)

Occupy had grown exponentially, however, the movement was beginning to stagnate and the sheer size of the Occupy protests proved difficult for local organizers to manage, particularly in regards to the actions of the demonstrators. Towards the end of October, numerous instances of violence and property destruction on part of Occupy demonstrators started occurring, adding much legitimacy to the claims of opponents to the movement. As a result, law enforcement began reacting in an even more aggressive fashion using barricades, teargas, and various other aggressive tactics, resulting in the injury of numerous demonstrators and the now infamous UC Davis pepper-spraying incident where a university police officer pepper-sprayed a group of students involved in a non-violent Occupy demonstration after they refused to vacate the campus.

On November 15, 2011, after nearly two and a half months of occupying Wall Street, a cadre of armed police officers evicted all demonstrators from Zuccotti Park. As Colleen Long and Verena Dobnik (2011) described,

“Hundreds of police officers in riot gear raided the #occupywallstreet encampment in New York City in the pre-dawn darkness Tuesday, evicted hundreds of demonstrators and demolished the tent city that was the epicenter of a movement protesting what participants call corporate greed and economic inequality [...] The police action began

around 1 a.m. and lasted several hours as officers with plastic shields and batons pushed the protesters from their base at Zuccotti Park. (Dobnik & Long, 2011)

During the course of the eviction, over 200 people were arrested. Furthermore, Mayor Bloomberg had implemented strict enforcement policies prohibiting the use of tents, sleeping bags, tarps and generators in the park, effectively ending the occupation of Zuccotti and dealing a critical blow to the movement as a whole (Dobnik & Long, 2011). Though several protesters continue the movement into the New Year, the eviction of the Zuccotti protesters ultimately resulted in a significantly lower turnout for subsequent demonstrations.

Analysis: The Rhetoric and Structure of #occupywallstreet

There are three signifying elements present throughout the #occupywallstreet movement; Zuccotti Park, #WeAreThe99%, and #occupywallstreet. Zuccotti Park, formerly known as Liberty Plaza Park, is a literal tangible landscape with a basis in the material world. It is located and prominently featured in the financial district of Manhattan. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, meaning is not necessarily derived from the material world, but rather from our language systems and interactions with the material world. From a constructivist perspective, meaning is not intrinsic; it is rhetorically constructed, socially situated, and shaped by experiences in and with the material world. Zuccotti Park as a material entity devoid of intrinsic meaning gives the park the capacity to be signified by the values of those who are most often associated with it, which prior to #occupywallstreet would be Wall Street bankers and corporate CEOs. In this sense, prior to the Occupy demonstrations, Zuccotti Park, due to its proximity to Wall Street and corporate ownership, can be understood as a symbol for capitalism, commerce, and wealth.

From this perspective, it is very easy to identify the motivation underlying why Adbusters chose Zuccotti Park as the home-base for Occupy. As previously discussed in chapter 2, there are, based off of Burke's research, three potential primary functions of identification. One of the functions Burke discusses is identification as antithesis in which an individual identifies themselves against or in contrast to another individual or group. The concept of Occupy, for all intents and purposes, derives from Adbusters, a magazine which markets itself as "anti-capitalist." At a very basic rhetorical level, the values of #occupywallstreet and its creators are absolutely antithetical to the values which Zuccotti symbolized. Therefore, by occupying Zuccotti Park (and by extension Wall Street), the Occupy demonstrators distinguished themselves through the juxtaposition created by placing an anti-capitalist social movement in a park closely associated with capitalism. At the same time, however, by nature of the demonstrators' very presence within the park, the Occupy movement was presented with an opportunity to redefine Zuccotti in the image of the movement, thus changing the nature and value of the park long after the protests subsided.

This leads to the other two signifying elements of Occupy; the hashtags. These can both be discussed simultaneously since their rhetorical functions are related. Unlike Zuccotti Park, which came to serve as a symbol of the Occupy movement, the hashtags #occupywallstreet and #WeAreThe99% are purely rhetorical constructions. They are signifiers used as a means to identify the movement as a whole and its constituency. These hashtags essentially function like a brand name. Attributing these hashtags to a social media post does three things. First, in a basic technological sense, adding either of these hashtags to a social media post automatically links that post to every other post that has been made within a given social media platform that contains either hashtag. The hashtag essentially serves as a very simple means of categorizing

posts on social media based off of keywords or phrases (designated by the hashtag/pound symbol “#”) (Kricfalusi, 2016). Second, thinking in terms of Hall, including these hashtags signifies a given social media post as being a part of the Occupy movement. As previously implied, using these hashtags in a Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube posting is the social media equivalent to branding. Third, using these hashtags, particularly #WeAreThe99%, signifies the user as being part of #occupywallstreet, even if it is only as part of the dialogue surrounding the movement. These hashtags are essentially means of identification both with the larger Occupy movement and against those it is protesting. While the hashtags served as an exceptionally simple means for digital activists to identify themselves in relation to #occupywallstreet and its protestors, their simplicity in conjunction with the structural characteristics of social-media-based activism generated a multitude of issues for the movement as a whole.

As is discussed at great length in the chapters 1—3, all digital activism has three defining structural characteristics; a low-bar to entry, a decentralized power structure, and an absolute lack of regulation. Despite its hybridization of digital and traditional activist methods, #occupywallstreet bears all three structural characteristics of digital activism due to its creation and dissemination via social media, specifically because of its reliance on hashtags. In regards to its low-bar to entry, Occupy is about as easy as they come in regards to participation. While the real-world demonstrations were what garnered significant news coverage and were geographically exclusive, they represent only one mode of participation. All one needed to do to participate in Occupy was post to a social media page and include one of the two previously mentioned hashtags. By doing this, one not only identifies the content of his or her social media post as pertaining to #occupywallstreet, but also inadvertently includes oneself in the Occupy movement.

In regards to its decentralized power structure, this a characteristic regularly celebrated by Occupy participants. As stated earlier in this chapter, #occupywallstreet touted itself as a leaderless people-powered movement. Despite *Adbusters'* Micah White and Kalle Lasn's involvement in Occupy's inception as well as David Graeber's initial involvement with organizing assemblies, they admittedly had very little to do with how the trajectory of the movement post the initial demonstration. As Lasn stated in an interview, "*Adbusters* gave it the spark, but after that we've had almost nothing to do with it" (Chafkin et al, 2012). Occupy's actions were constructed and orchestrated by numerous groups collectively deciding the future of the movement, with the majority of them doing so publically via social media.

As far as a lack of regulation is concerned, Occupy's lack of a centralized power structure and reliance on social media made it virtually impossible for Occupy to be controlled by any single individual or group. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, social media is a fully public entity. Anyone with access to the internet can use social media (and in turn, social media trends and movements) in any way and to any degree they desire. While its lack of regulation allowed for a large turnout and wide degree of types of participation, it also allowed variety of different social movements to take advantage of Occupy's media prevalence to promote their own cause under the guise of being a part of Occupy. #occupywallstreet from the beginning lacked of a clearly defined message and set of demands. The constant influx of other causes and their respective rhetoric being integrated into Occupy only served to further obfuscate the motivations and message of an already disorganized and increasingly anarchistic movement, thus confusing movement outsiders (Pepitone, 2013).

Conclusion

Most of the causes that took advantage of Occupy's movement exist within the same ideological wheelhouse as Occupy, such the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault, National Organization of Men Against Sexism, and The Organization for a Free Society to name a few. However, there were several fringe groups and highly controversial individuals that endorsed Occupy while promoting a drastically different and often antithetical message. The most controversial of them came from Former KKK Grand Wizard, David Duke who in a video posted to YouTube on October 20th of 2011 praised the Occupy demonstrators for occupying "Zionist" Wall Street and calling out what he referred to as the "Judeo-Capitalists" (Tech, 2011). Duke opportunistically used Occupy's popularity and media prevalence as a means to promote anti-Semitism. This came after many on the political right, such as Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Abe Greenwald had accused the movement of fostering anti-Semitic sentiments due to several small isolated incidences of anti-Jewish rhetoric being promoted by perceived Occupy participants both at demonstrations and online.

During October of 2012, several Facebook pages claiming to represent #occupywallstreet had started posting Anti-Semitic comics such as the one below.



Figure 5.2. Anti-Semitic comic posted to Facebook by a “troll” site (Childs, 2012)

Official #occupywallstreet organizers were very quick to dismiss these pages as racist imposter sites using the Occupy name to both opportunistically spread a message of hate and demonize the movement to outsiders and attempted to have the imposter pages shut down (Childs, 2012). Despite the official dismissal of these pages by many well respected members of the Occupy community, these imposter Facebook pages still garnered hundreds of thousands of followers. What this means is that either there is an enormous population of anti-Semites that supported #occupywallstreet or, more likely, a significant portion of imposter pages’ followers consist of individuals who, believing the page was legitimate, clicked the “Like” button. As Simon Childs explains,

Crazy people post crazy shit on the internet all the time. But what these examples show is that ridiculous or pretty horrible ideas can be dropped into a stream of otherwise

uncontroversial information and given new clothes. Many people only ever experience politics through the internet, where you can easily say things that would have you pissing blood for a fortnight if you said them in your local and where information overload means sometimes it's hard to see the wood for the international Jewish conspiracy.

(Childs, 2012)

Very few would argue that imposter Facebook pages such as these or the views of individuals such as David Duke accurately represent the values and motivations of #occupywallstreet. However, it is because of the limitations of social media as a means of promoting activism that such things exist.

This relates directly back to a concept brought up in Chapter 2 regarding how social media's lack of a centralized power structure and regulation presents the potential for misrepresentation of a digital activist movement. Due to social media and, consequently, digital activism's ease of access (both technologically and rhetorically), it is very simple for an aspiring activist to get involved with a social movement such as #occupywallstreet. All one needs to do is repost something to a social media account with the appropriate hashtag or simply claim to be a part of the movement. However, as was seen with the #NoMakeupChallenge and the Ice-Bucket Challenge, by not creating or maintaining any semblance of a hierarchical power structure or form of participant regulation that would serve to maintain Occupy's core set of values as well as reign in and dissuade the actions of potential fringe groups or individual outliers, the Occupy movement was placed in a position where it was susceptible to co-option and misrepresentation. This was made even easier due to Occupy's distinct lack of a clearly defined message and set of demands. It essentially presented a blank slate onto which an individual actor could project his or

her own values and then rhetorically legitimize them as being indicative of a larger movement through the inclusion of a simplistic signifier.

Chapter 6. CONCLUSION

This thesis set out with the intention of examining the manner in which the ubiquity of social media has impacted modern activism. This study has also sought to highlight the complex relationship between content and content creators, social media's influence on production and consumption, and the potential risks social media presents when used as a means for activism. As previously stated in Chapter 2, social media's seemingly unlimited potential application gives it unprecedented potential for civic engagement and mobilization on a rapid global scale. However, while social media can be a powerful mobilization tool for activists, its structural deficiencies render it inadequate when it comes to rhetorically imparting and sustaining the values of an activist movement. The decentralized public nature of digital activism and the manner in which it is disseminated leaves these movements rhetorically vulnerable to co-option and misrepresentation.

It must be understood that that this thesis is in no way intended to be a condemnation of social media use in activism. In fact, as this thesis demonstrates, social media provides unprecedented potential for local and global mobilization. The decentralized and unregulated nature of digital activism offers unprecedented potential for participation due to the accessibility of social media. It is very easy to be a digital activist as all that is required of a given participant is access to the internet. Due to its minimal entry requirements, digital activist movements are capable of attracting and mobilizing enormous numbers of people for a given cause. At the same time, however, as is discussed throughout this thesis, the lack of regulation and decentralized power structure of social media has many drawbacks. While the ubiquity of social media makes it effective in attracting innumerable would-be activists, its low-bar to entry, decentralized power structure, and lack of regulation leaves digital activist movements susceptible to external

influence (corporate, political, or otherwise). While its bottom-up spontaneity and ease of access inherently makes it appealing to many, the orchestration of digital activism primarily through the unregulated public space of social media places the values of any movement at risk of subversion by an external agent.

By not having any explicit regulations regarding participation, a digital activist movement is open to absolutely anyone regardless of previous knowledge or experience. The Occupy movement is a prime example of this kind of massive mobilization that is, through social media, able to reach and unify culturally, linguistically, and ideologically diverse communities of people around a single cause. At the same time however, mobilization can only account for so much. If the message, motivation, and values of a movement are not clearly articulated, massive mobilization such as with #occupywallstreet will only serve to obfuscate or derail the initial motivations underlying a movement.

Furthermore, without a centralized form of leadership to regulate the actions of participants so as to maintain the core values set forth at a movement's inception, a digital activist movement will trend towards a multiplicity of convoluted and often irreconcilable values which ultimately subvert the initially intended motivations and values of a movement. As can be seen with the #NoMakeupChallenge and the Ice-Bucket Challenge, by not containing explicitly clear rhetoric that connects the values of a movement with its actions, a digital activist movement loses its meaning. As the movement progresses and is memetically reproduced ad nauseum, it is ultimately reduced to nothing more than a pop-cultural trend; a disambiguated series of actions performed under whatever pretense the participant desires for as long as the movement remains popular. While vestiges of the activism that once was may remain such as the donations to the ALS Association in the Ice-Bucket Challenge, the purpose of those remnants has been

transformed so as to promote a more conspicuous form of activism. The movement is no longer a movement; it is a trend.

So what does this all mean? In a general sense, this means we must be more mindful as consumers of social media based content. As previously stated, this thesis is not a condemnation of social media use in activism nor does it purport that participation in digital activism is wrong. However, there must be context to the participation that goes beyond the immediate cultural fascination with the movement. Simply replicating the actions of a digital activist movement because it is trendy does not serve to promote its values. Neither does reusing a movement's rhetoric without understanding its significance. All this does is further divorce the values of a movement from its actions. When there is not an explicit rhetorical or semiotic connection made between the values and actions of a movement, the values are placed at risk of being subverted.

The most major limitation of this thesis is that it cannot account for the constant influx of new information regarding social media and newer digital movements. Social media is still a relatively new phenomenon and is in a constant state of growth and transformation. Barring an unforeseen apocalyptic calamity, social media shows no sign of stagnating in its development. As such, it would be impossible for any social media focused research endeavor to encompass all of which social media and digital activism have to offer. That being said, it is my hope that this thesis provides solid groundwork for future rhetorical analyses of social media based activism and social media research in general.

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