



Technology supports movements. But only risk-takers make political change

We've been giving clicktivism too much credit for the success of social movements - and sometimes ignoring the real people who made change happen

The Yes Men via Creative Time Reports

Friday 12 June 2015 04.00 EDT

Technology has always been instrumental to movements for social and political change, but recently, it's been getting too much credit for the success of those movements.

People talk about how Egypt's revolution was due to Facebook, or how none of today's activism (Ferguson, the Keystone XL protests, Occupy) would be successful without social media. That's all hogwash. Hosni Mubarak had no reason to fear a website, only what people might do when they stopped looking at it; shutting down Facebook only got people into the streets that much faster.

Electronic technologies can be important and useful, but they're never revolutionary in themselves. Like engravings, the printing press or other technologies that have appeared over the centuries, electronic media do help activists get the word out. Even "clicktivism" - tweeting,

liking, or adding your email to online petitions, which is ultimately just a much less impactful version of writing to your congressperson - has its place. But policy shifts and paradigm shifts require more than a click. Even Wikileaks and Anonymous, which put technology to truly revolutionary uses, have garnered the most attention when people like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden have stepped out of the shadows, willingly or not.

One thing that does differentiate electronic technology from past ones is the way so many people think it makes in-person action obsolete. Imagine 19th-century American factory workers suggesting that, since they had the printing press, it was unnecessary to riot for the eight-hour workday. Try to picture abolitionists arguing that, because they could pass around an engraving diagramming the tightly packed bodies on the slave ship *Brookes* - an image that helped grow support for abolition - there was no more need for civil disobedience. Can you imagine pharmaceutical companies shifting into high gear to develop Aids drugs because of petitions? Hardly. But Act Up's relentless sit-ins pushed them to cooperate, if nothing else to keep the negative press from snowballing.

Until recently it was patently obvious to every activist that change required not just technology but real action in "meatspace," as they said in the '90s.

So why do we put so much faith in today's new tools? Maybe it's leftover '90s techno-utopianism. Or it could be a touch of lethargy - as if even we on the left were still hoping that Francis Fukuyama was right that, with the collapse of Soviet communism, we'd reached the "end of history". But history is far from over, and there's no magic bullet for change.

We Yes Men haven't been immune to techno-excitement ourselves. On 1 January 1994 - the day the North American Free Trade Agreement entered into force in Mexico - the Zapatistas "declared war" on the state. They wrote ardent but humorous communiqués, which of course they spread through email and bulletin boards. But the Zapatistas' main tool was their own bodies which, with brilliant and poignant artistry, they used (and continue to use) to declare to the world that commerce should never trump human rights.

Their revolt finally spread to the global north in 1999, when 30,000 activists shut down the World Trade Organization's third ministerial meeting in Seattle and put the phrase "anti-globalization" on the global media map.

Inspired by them, we created a website parodying the WTO. Because this was the late 90s, the WTO took it seriously and issued a stern condemnation. Some media outlets found that funny and published articles linking to our fake site, which - also because it was the late 90s - meant that search engines sometimes returned our site instead of the real one. We kept up the online impersonation, and people online continued to laugh. We thought we were really on to something.

But it was only when we started getting mistakenly invited to conferences as WTO officials that we really made news. In the ensuing 20 years, we've continued to draw public attention to specific ways in which letting the market run things is insane. In the process, we've learned that the only thing that consistently captures media (and public) interest is in-person action, whether by interloping at conferences or with occupations and revolts.

American discourse would not have focused so clearly on inequality if the idea of occupying Wall Street had remained confined to a website. (We ourselves didn't listen when our friends told us they were going to do that.) But when a few dozen people set up physical camp in the center of global finance, everyone paid attention - and the influence of those occupiers is still being felt.

No amount of clicking can ever substitute for showing up at a place like Zuccotti Park and taking over - or at least demonstrating to the world that taking over is thinkable.

Movements are all about risk. Some of those risks are minimal, like the ones we take when we infiltrate conferences, or those that American protesters take when they shut down a bridge or a highway. Others have much huger consequences, as Chelsea Manning, Tim DeChristopher and countless thousands of Egyptian protesters know. But without people putting their bodies on the line, nobody's going to listen for long - and nothing's going to change.

This piece was published in coordination with Creative Time Reports. Read it here.

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