Postdigital Slacktivism

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Introduction

A broad spectrum of goals can motivate social and political activism, from generating issue awareness to sparking revolutionary change. In pursuit of these goals, citizen-activists choose to wield a wide array of instrumentalities, some more violent than others (Ralston 2017). For example, many environmental activists append the hashtag #climatechange to social media posts (Pilar et al. 2019), while others—thankfully far fewer—firebomb SUV dealerships (Garrison et al. 2003). Both convey the message that excessive fossil fuel use is morally wrong (Ralston 2013: 15). Between these two extremes is a range of options for mobilizing the movement's supporters and catalyzing genuine social and political change. The variety of ways in which activists promote their causes can be indexed by the time, energy, and resources invested, as well as by the impact their activism has on mass opinion, public policy, and institutions (Adrian and Apter 1995).

Some political scientists and communications scholars have proposed a controversial theory called 'the slacktivist hypothesis': If citizens limit their activism to the digital context, particularly social media, then the impact will be ineffectual, vapid, and short-lived (Howard et al. 2017). Online hashtagging, liking a webpage, or changing a social media account logo, while symbolically meaningful to the movement's base, is far less effective than offline community outreach (e.g., membership drives that rally new activists to join the movement) and real-world political action (e.g., rallies, boycotts, and strikes).

The hypothesis refers to the portmanteau 'slacktivism', which is a combination of two terms: 'slacker' and 'activism'. The United Nations defines 'slacktivism'—alternatively called 'clicktivism' or 'armchair activism'—as 'support[ing] a cause by performing simple measures … [while not being genuinely] engaged or devoted to making a change' (Lodewijckx 2020). According to slacktivism's critics, 'liking', 'tweeting', or 'sharing' demonstrates low-stakes or superficial support for a cause, not the genuine commitment to civic engagement or collective action that in-person activism shows (Obar 2014).

This commentary proposes that the concept of slacktivism be enlarged and refined in light of postdigitalism's Parity Thesis, which states that digital media should not receive undue privilege relative to non-digital media. The term 'slacktivism' makes an implicit comparison of activism in digital and non-digital contexts, demeaning the former as less potent, valuable, and impactful than the latter. As a reconstructed concept, postdigital slacktivism would apply equally in both contexts, and most importantly to poorly reasoned activism. After this reformulation, slacktivism's vapidity no longer reflects the means of transmitting the activist's message but conveys that there is a breakdown in the rational or logical relation between the activist's means and the movement's end. My argument is that subjecting slacktivism to a postdigital

reinterpretation positively enriches the concept, transforming it into a pragmatically useful tool for understanding a wider swath of social and political phenomena.

Postdigitalism's Parity Thesis

The Parity Thesis emerges through a close reading of both the classic and contemporary postdigitalism literature. Nicholas Negroponte anticipates the Thesis in his foundational essay 'Beyond Digital':

> Yes, we are now in a digital age, to whatever degree our culture, infrastructure, and economy (in that order) allow us. But the really surprising changes will be elsewhere, in our lifestyle and how we collectively manage ourselves on this planet. (Negroponte 1998).

The digital context does not exhaust the experiential manifold. Similar to the integration of sensible and intellectual conditions in lived experience, non-digital factors round out our digital experience, including the cultural, infrastructural and economic dimensions. Transformation happens in 'our lifestyle and how we collectively manage ourselves', not simply in the technologies that are ready-to-hand. In other words, both the digital and the non-digital contexts must be afforded functional parity or relatively equal significance in our postdigital experience.

Discussing Melvin L. Alexenberg's contribution to the notion of a postdigital human, Petar Jandrić highlights the dialectic between the digital and the non-digital. 'Alexemberg's understanding of "the humanization of digital technologies" avoids exploration of the dichotomy between human beings and technologies which has affected much early postdigital thinking and instead replaces it with a more dialectic notion of "interplay between digital, biological, cultural, and spiritual systems"' (Jandrić 2021: 19). Transcending the human-technology dualism, Alexenberg treats the digital and analog spaces as co-equal, moving one step closer to a holistic understanding of the postdigital human (see Savin-Baden 2021). His notion of systemic interplay also suggests that neither the digital nor the non-digital should be permanently privileged over the other.

In an earlier essay, Jandrić proposes a robust version of the Thesis. 'In our postdigital world', he writes, 'where digital technology and media is no longer "separate, virtual, 'other' to a 'natural' human and social life" (Jandrić et al. 2018: 893), we have no other choice but develop new postdigital forms of collective intelligence.' (Jandrić 2019: 276) The integration of the digital and non-digital invites a richly human and communal form of inquiry. Treating one aspect as permanently superior to the other, or letting one crowd the other out, risks essentializing a hierarchy and undermining 'postdigital forms of collective intelligence'. Apropos of the critique of slacktivism, the non-digital eclipses the digital, so that activism in a digital context is permanently inferior to real-world activism. Permanently hierarchizing the two contexts offends postdigitalism's Parity Thesis.

In chronicling the so-called 'post-digital turn', Jandrić and Knox explore how low-level convergences between the analog and the digital are echoed in higher-level convergences between diverse disciplinary approaches. In these convergences, prioritizing one approach should not be mistaken for displacement:

> This accent to criticality, creativity and justice through a convergence of this long and diverse list of disciplinary fields and intellectual traditions sounds like a teenager's birthday wish list. Philosophy of the great convergence is in its infancy, so it is far from clear how insights developed in incommensurable epistemic frameworks can be brought together, and what such integration would imply. (Jandrić and Knox 2021: 9)

The Parity Thesis does not demand equal treatment of the digital and non-digital contexts in absolute terms. Prioritizing one over the other simply requires justification that bridges and integrates 'epistemic frameworks'. So, prioritizing is different than hierarchizing; the latter violates the Parity Thesis, while the former does not.

The Slacktivist Hypothesis

Digital activism is political activism carried out through digital means, usually (though not exclusively) on social media platforms. Within the past decade, the public conversation around digital activism has skewed strongly towards the narrative of slacktivism (Morozov 2012). Instead of organizing, planning, and executing real-world political action, a new generation of virtual activists has opted for a low-energy, low-investment digital alternative. These so-called 'slacktivists' embrace more passive modes of political participation, such as clicking on links (thus giving rise to their other moniker, 'clicktivists'), hashtagging on social media (especially Twitter), changing their usernames and logos (particularly on Facebook), as well as sharing content and memes with fellow activists in an echo chamber or 'filter bubble' (Pariser 2012).

The critique of slacktivism is two-pronged. According to claim (1), slacktivists mostly forego offline political activity, such as in-person volunteering, protesting, and voting, given their ancillary belief that online activity is a viable substitute (Robertson 2014; Yarnall and Marks 2014). However, Jonathan Obar's research indicates that most mainstream activist do not treat social media campaigning as an effective stand-in for traditional 'real world' advocacy:

> The rise of 'slacktivists' that delude organizations into a false sense of power also raised concerns, and further reveals why groups are hesitant to overcommit to social media. As exemplified when Citizens for Public Justice said, 'people click, but don't come out,' it is clear that some groups remain unconvinced that social media can substitute for proven on-the-ground techniques. (Obar 2014: 228)

Claim (2) states that slacktivists falsely believe that their online political activity is supremely impactful insofar as it produces significant political outcomes. Critics note that

activists make symbolic gestures of support on social media platforms, not knowing whether other users who make similar gestures already support the cause or are persuaded to join the cause. This criticism goes to the heart of an important distinction in the activist's lexicon: *mobilizing* versus *organizing*. *Mobilizing* targets those who already support the cause, galvanizes their already-existing pro-feelings, and engages them in political action. *Organizing* strategically wins over those who do not already support the cause (Rivera 2012). It is possible that online activism is more efficacious as a tool for mobilizing, not organizing, since opportunities for genuine deliberation and discussion are often more limited in these forums (Shirky 2011).

Evidence for the slacktivist hypothesis can be culled from classic and contemporary sources. In a classic work, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) found that mass media can produce a 'narcotizing dysfunction', whereby citizens falsely believe that consuming information through mass media outlets (e.g., newspapers and journals) constitutes meaningful political engagement. Although this finding appears to support the slacktivist hypothesis, mass media and social media are distinguishable. Mass media is predominantly consumed, while social media is both consumed and created through social networks that shape user behaviour (Kwak et al. 2018).

More recent studies have shown that low-impact political activity (e.g., liking an organization's webpage or signing an online petition) reduces motivation to participate in higher-impact political activity (e.g., volunteering in a membership drive or joining a protest) (Kristoferson et al. 2014). If all politics is truly local, then offline political activism has the advantage of directly improving community conditions in a way that online activism cannot. 'Volunteering at a homeless shelter, for example, says something about a person's local connection', Emily Gerston notes, '[h]e or she is ingrained in the local community, which says something about politics in a broader, more abstract way' (Ossola 2010).

However, empirical support for the slacktivist hypothesis should not be overstated. In one study of a state election in Mexico, considerable evidence pointed to the effectiveness of social media as a tool to mobilize voters to support a grassroots campaign aiming to elect a populist candidate (Howard et al. 2016). Some studies indicate that greater political activity through social media can catalyse increased offline political participation (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009; Boulianne 2015; Yamamoto et al. 2015). Therefore, the validity of the slacktivist hypothesis is indeterminate. What raises concern is a bias, especially among those who are defend the hypothesis' validity, towards activism in a non-digital/offline context, demeaning activism in a digital/online/social media context. This bias violates postdigitalism's Parity Thesis, whereby digital media ought not to trump non- or digital media purely in virtue of its digital pedigree.

Based on two case studies, the notion of slacktivism emerges as a quintessentially postdigital concept, especially when viewed through the prism of the Parity Thesis.

Case 1: Changing a Facebook Logo to Fight Microaggression
In 2013, Facebook users began changing their profile image to a simple logo with a pink-coloured equal sign embedded in a red box. The memetic symbol was the creation of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a grassroots activist organization committed to promoting 'equality for

lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans' (Vie 2014). The symbol conveyed the idea that marriage equality is a universal human right regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

In turn, the online campaign took on a life of its own. Sympathizers made small alterations to the logo indicating their support, while critics changed it more significantly to reflect their opposition. Stephanie Vie (2014) recounts the organic process by which public opinion formed around the issue of marriage equality:

> The ease of replicating the HRC logo meme on Facebook showcases a critical aspect of replicated memes with regard to the intersection of group identification and kairos [timeliness]. … Here was an easy–to–make change that ostensibly illustrated the owner of the profile showing support for marriage equality … Other individuals created images that fought against the message of equality and supported Proposition 8 and the ban on gay marriage ... As the Human Rights Campaign Marriage Equality logo was quickly transmitted, these anti–equality variants were shared as well. (Vie 2014)

The point of the HRC campaign was to counter microaggressions against members of the GLBTQ community. The HRC meme's reproduction galvanized support for the campaign and also sparked a counter-movement that appropriated and revised the meme to demonstrate opposition to gay marriage. Although the original campaign was undertaken entirely in a digital medium, it shined a light on a long-neglected issue and changed minds and behaviors in non-digital contexts. Vie (2014) insists that 'digital activism made possible through social media memes can build awareness of crucial issues, which can then lead to action'. Supporters were criticized as slacktivists. Given that low-impact online activism can catalyze high-impact offline political activity, the moniker might not be deserved.

The weak assumption in this analysis is that real-world political action, the ultimate end or *telos* of organizing and mobilizing, has greater worth compared to the means or instrumentality of digital activism. However, the HRC campaign was undertaken in a digital context, and had wide-ranging implications in the daily lives of those who supported and opposed it—that is, in a non-digital context. Why would the activist impulse realized on Facebook, a digital context, not be equal in value to activism in the streets, a non-digital context?

To restore co-equality between these two contexts requires a radical reconstruction of the concept of slacktivism itself. It also demands bringing the concept in line with postdigitalism's Parity Thesis, thereby generating a new concept: postdigital slacktivism.

Case 2: Banning Critical Race Theory to Move Voters Right
In 2018, the city of Southlake, a suburb of Dallas, Texas (USA), proposed a Cultural Competence Action Plan (CCAP) to address racism in the local school district. Following the release of a video in which white high school seniors chanted the N-word, Carroll Independent School District administrators proposed to rectify the situation by mandating diversity training for all of

the district's students and teachers, a comprehensive tracking system for discrimination and bullying complaints, and a code of conduct to ensure accountability for microaggressions (Hixenbaugh and Hylton 2021b).

The CCAP proposal ignited a backlash by parents and conservative media, both labelling the plan as Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is defined as

> an intellectual movement and a framework of legal analysis according to which (1) race is a culturally invented category used to oppress people of colour and (2) the law and legal institutions in the United States are inherently racist insofar as they function to create and maintain social, political, and economic inequalities between white and nonwhite people. (Duignan 2022)

However, what the activists protested against was far different than CRT. They alleged that the plan would create 'diversity police', amount to 'reverse discrimination', and punish students and faculty for unconscious bias and microaggressions. They blocked the plan through political organizing and action, both online and offline.

Sponsored by the Republican Party, a number of state legislatures have enacted laws to limit the teaching of CRT or to require the teaching of opposing viewpoints. An example is a law in Texas, House Bill 3979, which mandates that teachers present plural perspectives when discussing 'widely debated and currently controversial issues' (Lopez 2021). To comply with this law, a Southlake administrator insisted that teachers present Holocaust denial literature to students in order to balance what is widely considered a non-controversial account of the Holocaust (Hixenbaugh and Hilton 2021a). According to Robert Kim (2021), anti-CRT activists utilize these laws as instruments to recruit parent-activists to a conservative cause and thereby nudge their ideological commitments to the right. The ultimate aim is to persuade these parents to vote for Republican candidates in the subsequent election.

In this case, there is no need to derogate activism undertaken in a digital (or social media) context, while championing activism in a non-digital (or offline) context. Anti-CRT activism fluidly manifests across both contexts. The reason that anti-CRT activism should be labelled 'slacktivism' is that the instrument (specifically, organizing to leverage laws and policies that ban the teaching of CRT) lacks any logical connection with the goal or end motivating the activism (viz., to undermine plans for mandating diversity training, tracking bullying complaints and addressing microaggressions). In other words, the parent-activists are slackers in the sense that they lazily assume that the means or instrumentalities will obtain their chosen end, unaware that they are being manipulated to achieve an independent end determined by outside forces (viz., conservative politicians and media intending to shift their ideological views right-ward and thereby secure their vote for a Republican candidate in the next election cycle).

In the polarized U.S. political environment, conservative media outlets and politicians have embraced an agenda of perpetuating similar movements in school districts across the country. Their goal is to transform swing-voting parents into consistent Republican voters. Indeed, one

local conservative radio show host, Dana Loesch, declared that 'the school and a lot of very far-left Marxists decided to exploit this as a way to implement critical race theory education … and they expect parents to pay for it!' (Stabile 2021)

Postdigital Slacktivism

A postdigital reinterpretation of slacktivism undermines the cogency of the slacktivist hypothesis. Rather than preserve the hypothesis's bias for offline political advocacy and against online slacktivism, the proposed reconstruction dissolves the opposition, highlighting instead the logical connection between activists' means and ends. Specifically, we interrogate whether the end is reasonably connected with the activists' end or goal. If there is a logical break, as in the anti-CRT case, then the activists are guilty of lazy reasoning, regardless of the contextual (digital or non-digital).

Postdigital slacktivism treats activism in digital and non-digital contexts as functionally equal. Permanently privileging offline, real-world activism over online, digital activism—a move central to the slacktivist hypothesis—is not allowed. Postdigital slacktivism is therefore compatible with postdigitalism's Parity Thesis. It only derogates activism guided by poor reasoning—or more specifically, activism that fails to logically connect the activist's means with their chosen ends.

A possible objection to my account is that I have smuggled into the analysis a hidden bias or test of political valence, reflecting deeply held liberal or progressive beliefs. While the second case study reveals faulty logic in a conservative activist movement, the same critique would also apply to a liberal or progressive activist movement, espousing logically incompatible means and ends. While slacktivism is inherently political, the tools for analyzing the phenomena should be as politically neutral as possible. (Of course, perfect neutrality, similar to value-neutral positivism, is impossible.) Based on postdigitalism's Parity Thesis, postdigital slacktivism offers an alternative to the current view of slacktivism—a way of identifying and criticizing lazily reasoned activism as well as restoring parity to online and offline activist movements.

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