Youth, the Internet, Pop Culture, and Other Frivolous Things:

How “Slacktivist” is Today’s Youth Activism?

Introduction: “Kids these days.”

A recent news sidebar in the Canadian newspaper the National Post listed a few fascinating figures. No, not stock quotes or batting averages or historical dates, but these: 105,000 and 2,152,536, the number of members in Facebook group “Young Drivers Against New Ontario Laws”, as compared to the number of Facebook users who prefer onion rings to Canadian pop heartthrob Justin Bieber. The sidebar is titled “Facebook slacktivism by the numbers”, and its message is clear: Today’s youth may be plugged into technology and pop culture, but they are obnoxiously apolitical (Maniquest). The article is clearly a filler piece, meant to be chuckled at over morning coffee and forgotten, but the attitude it expresses is not nearly as transitory.

Ever since internet use entered the mainstream, people have worried about how its integration into everyday life will fundamentally change the human experience – particularly, the youth experience, since we are now, for the first time, raising generations of children who will never know life without the internet. These worries are often manifested through critiques of youth culture, which insinuate that today’s technologically savvy youth are somehow lazier, less political, or less motivated than previous generations. Ben Agger, author of *Fast Capitalism* and professor of Sociology at UT Arlington, deems today’s youth generation “the pulpless generation” – a generation
devoid of the physical pulp of the printed page, and of the materiality and the substantiality associated with it. Today’s youth, he writes, “avoid politics like the plague”, are quick to connect (to literally “plug in” through social networking) but reluctant to form true communities, and have been swallowed whole by a “bookless, depthless culture.” Ted Gup, in his 1997 article “The End of Serendipity”, puts this critique concisely: “We have shortened the time between departure and arrival, but gone is all scenery in between, reduced to a Pentium blur. We settle for information at the expense of understanding and mistake retrieval for exploration.” Inevitably, Gup frames his article as a generational issue, with a comparison between his childhood use of encyclopedias and his sons’ use of targeted search engines.

It is within the context of these critiques, this wariness about today’s plugged-in youth culture, that the significance of pieces like the National Post’s “slacktivism” article becomes clear. Though its title doesn’t specify the target of its satire, the article is clearly a critique of youth – for neither the “Young Drivers” group nor the Justin Beiber group is targeted at middle-aged adults. Furthermore, it seems to be a critique of internet use in general, as it refers to both groups as “slackivist”, and not just the Justin Beiber page. The “Young Drivers” group may be portrayed with slightly less contempt than the other, but it is still framed as something silly, with little real-world value. Thus, the article joins the chorus of concerned voices chanting: “Kids these days.” Kids today, these voices say, are glued to Facebook, unmotivated and apolitical, and care more about whichever pop culture phenomenon is enjoying its fifteen minutes of fame than about enduring affairs in the world of public citizenship.

Frankly, however, I disagree. While I won’t defend joining a Facebook group about Justin Bieber as a legitimate way to enact change in the world, I will, in this paper, come to argue that youth today are not any less political than pre-internet generations. Slacktivism, while perhaps not
always the most effective form of civic engagement, is hardly a monolithic practice and should not be dismissed as one. At the very least, slacktivism can serve as an entryway into the world of activism – for, many of today’s youth may want to get their feet wet in the world of politics before diving in completely. Were youth fifty years ago really any different?

What is slacktivism?

Before grappling with the minutiae of the questions and arguments I’ve raised, it would perhaps be helpful to more specifically define slacktivism as a practice. At its simplest, slacktivism is a portmanteau of “slacker” and “activism” (Lublin). Beyond that, however, critics seem to disagree about where to draw the line between real activism and mere slacktivism. While I hold my own opinions on the matter, it seems most informative to begin with a broad sampling of pop media’s verdicts on the issue, stitched together from the news pieces that helped develop my initial interest in the topic. Says one blogger: “Slacktivism is inch-deep activism that you can do from the comfort of your own couch” (Lublin). Says another, it is “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (Morozov). It can take the form of forwarding email petitions, “using Facebook status-updates as a soapbox” or pointlessly joining quasi-activist Facebook groups (Harris). It is the newest generation in a long line of indulgent, shallow displays of social consciousness – heir to the Livestrong bracelet, perhaps (Lublin). It smothers meaningful protest, inspires complacency, and turns people away from the meaningful, oldie-but-goodie activist techniques that involved stepping outside the house to risk both reputation and bodily safety. It is, says one particularly accusatory blog post, “the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation” (Morozov).

Whew. That’s a lot of vitriol to level at the droves of Facebook users who probably don’t equate their clicking the “Like” button on a cause’s Facebook page with the death of meaningful
Harris 4
democratic participation as we know it. I can’t say that I find it entirely appropriate – such knee-jerk attitudes are far too reductive. During the course of my research, I’ve come across wildly varying situations that have all been labeled as slacktivist, from playing games on the anti-hunger website FreeRice.com, to netroots campaigning for Barack Obama during the 2008 United States presidential election (Lublin, Hesse). Indeed, whether an action will be deemed slacktivist or not seems to depend largely on the standards of the person making the judgment call. Slacktivism, it seems, is not a black-and-white label that can be applied without question.

Because of this, I shy away from wholly discrete categories like “slacktivist” and “not slacktivist” in my own personal definition of slacktivism. Instead, I find it more accurate to conceptualize actions as falling somewhere along a spectrum of situations, somewhere in between fully-engaged, effective action and lazy, detached lip service to “causes”. Evgeny Morozov of Foreign Policy magazine specifies “small time commitment” and limited effort as markers of slacktivism; he also critiques slacktivism for failing to translate into real-world mobilization. Thus, I borrow from Morozov three factors with which to potentially “measure” slacktivism: Time commitment, level of engagement, and real-world applicability.

Fig. 1: A slacktivist Facebook status.

According to this measure, posting a Facebook status about the mistreatment of animals by IAMS pet food brand falls pretty close to perfect “slacktivism” – it is quick and easy to do, and not likely to change animal rights policy. However, daily updating a feminist political blog, such as
Carleton College’s *Happy Bodies*, requires much, much more time and effort – so even if the blog’s discussions of international women’s issues remain purely virtual, “slacktivism” seems far less applicable. A website like Be Extraordinary, run by a social enterprise company which uses its blog and Iphone application to assign “micro-volunteering” tasks to busy do-gooders, is also ambiguous. Though its networked methods can and do translate into real-world effects, those who micro-volunteer engage only in short-term bursts – slacktivism still seems fairly applicable.

However, even though one can estimate how slacktivist an action is, this does not necessarily allow for much extrapolation about its efficacy. One illustrative example is the concept of “micro-donation”, which fueled the fundraising process in the wake of the 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti in January of 2010. Most of those who donated gave only a few dollars by way of convenient avenues such as text messaging – and yet, the Red Cross alone was able to raise 38 million dollars through the actions of these “slacktivists” (Lublin). In addition, some question whether slacktivist staples like online petitions really deserve so much pessimistic criticism, citing examples such as the 8,000 virtual signatures gathered in support of protecting road-less forest land in Oregon, a petition which prompted a personal response from the Obama campaign (Paynter). In these cases, while it is easy to show what is slacktivist about these actions, the use of technology and, yes, slacktivism, seems more of a boon to efficacy than a hindrance.

In this way, the concept of slacktivism is rather ambiguous. There are many ways to be a slacktivist, and not all of them are equal. I point this out in order to clarify that, while it is necessary to discuss in-depth the meaning of “slacktivism” in order to form a solid base for my argument, I am not interested in making any broad and sweeping conclusions about slacktivism’s worth. All I will say is that *some* youth are slacktivists, but not all; *some* have altruistic motives, but some don’t; *some* slacktivism is wildly effective, but some isn’t. There are simply far too many types of actions
that can be classified as slacktivist, for me to delve any further than that – although I’m sure that studies focused on certain kinds of slacktivism could yield interesting and much more conclusive results. As I’ve alluded to in my introduction, however, rather than focus on the efficacy and ethics of slacktivist action, I myself am most interested in exploring slacktivism as it is interpreted (and misinterpreted) in the context of youth culture.

With that said, now that I’ve established a broad overview of what types of meanings are assigned to “slacktivism”, how to begin discussing these meanings as they relate to youth public engagement? One useful, and perhaps surprising, window into the world of youth public engagement – often presented as a symbol of the shallowness and anti-intellectualism of today’s youth – is pop culture.

What does pop culture have to do with youth activism? : The case of Racebending

The link between youth activism and pop culture may seem tenuous, likely because any relationship between the two concepts is usually presented in negative terms – pop culture is often interpreted, in the eyes of older generations, as an emblem of the apolitical nature of modern youth. Think back to the National Post’s slacktivism sidebar, which I described at the beginning of this paper – isn’t pop culture a rather large component of its implicit argument? Youth today, the article seems to affirm, would rather form opinions about twee teen pop idols than about legislation that will actually affect their daily lives. Readers of the article are supposed to be amused: How backwards are these kids’ priorities!

This inclusion of pop culture into a critique of youth activism is hardly a rare or new occurrence. Ben Agger’s “The Pulpless Generation” frames its critique of youth political engagement within the context of what he deems a “surround-sound media culture”, which is
“24/7” and “inescapable” (46). Modern youth, he argues have no tolerance for focused, deep thought; they’ve been raised on cable television that offers “too many channels for any busy viewer.” (50) Agger goes on to evoke imagery of the Ipod, the quintessential receptacle of pop cultural artifacts in today’s world: “They [youth] plug in, recharge their batteries, and bop along giving not a damn about the burning world around them, or even about their own misery.” (49) In this analysis, youth addiction to pop culture is inseparable from their disinterest in politics and activism.

There are countless examples of this viewpoint in analyses of youth political involvement. In a recent Washington Post article, Monica Hesse cynically jokes that the Facebook users who updated their statuses to read “is Neda” (a statement of solidarity with Iranian student Neda Soltan, gunned down in 2009 during election protests) probably also changed their statuses to read “is Farrah Fawcett” or “is Michael Jackson” in the aftermaths of the celebrities’ deaths. Danish psychologist Anders Colding-Jorgensen comments on the inanity of activist Facebook pages, remarking that they are probably given less social weight than users’ lists of favorite TV shows (Hesse). Likewise, Bronwyn Williams at the University of Louisville wonders why Myspace pages ask users to list their favorite bands and not their “most important social issues” (80). In this way, popular media and academia alike seem to set up pop culture and politics as antithetical, with no hope of overlap – pop culture, frivolous and meaningless, can never be political; and politics is far too serious to be expressed through Myspace quizzes or stored on Ipods.

This attitude explains why activities like “fan activism” are dismissed as petty and inconsequential. Fan activism, discussed prominently by Henry Jenkins at MIT’s Center for Future Civic Media, is activism that revolves around pop culture. Jenkins’ interest in the topic was sparked over a decade ago by the Gaylaxians, a science fiction fan group that rallied for inclusion of queer
characters on shows like Star Trek; more recent examples would include letter-writing campaigns to save shows like *Chuck* and *Flash Forward* from cancellation. Jenkins’ work on fan activism has been enormously useful to me in thinking about slacktivism – specifically, about what kinds of activist work are mocked, and what cultural narratives justify this ridicule. Indeed, fan activism both parallels and intersects with youth slacktivism in telling ways. Like slacktivism, fan activism is viewed as a juvenile domain, something outside the realm of important, mature activist work; even in their names, both concepts are qualified in order to assert their difference from “true” activism. And slacktivism and fan activism most often occupy the exact same spheres, since the internet is perhaps the best gathering-place for fans of obscure bits of pop culture – Bronwyn Williams notes this as “the easy symbiosis of popular culture and online technologies” (26). In this way, slacktivism, fan activism, and traditional Activism (with a capital “A”), are less distinct than they may initially seem, coexisting and feeding into each other in surprising ways.

My favorite example of this is one that Jenkins follows with great interest: the currently-unfolding situation of Racebending, a race-conscious media watchdog group that arose out of exasperation with the white-washed casting of the movie *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. *Avatar*, a successful children’s television cartoon created in 2005, takes place in a carefully-researched and rendered world based on Inuit and Chinese cultures. Yet, in 2007, when the film was cast, primarily white actors were hired to play the parts of the main characters, with actors of color cast only in the roles of villains or extras. This was, understandably, surprising and painful for many dedicated fans, and led to the creation of Aang Ain’t White, a Livejournal group in which *Avatar* fans gathered to vent and take action (such as a letter-writing campaign, begun in 2008). As of 2010, Aang Ain’t White has grown into a full-fledged website, Racebending.com, which has been featured around the
web, on both critical race websites like Racialicious.com and in mainstream publications such as the Los Angeles Times.

Clicking through the website, it is hard to classify Racebending’s project as simply fan activism, slacktivism, or good old-fashioned grassroots activism. Though it is driven by the passion of fandom, the site’s mission extends beyond simple fan activism and into the realm of social justice — on twitter, Racebending tweets both about Hollywood (“We're getting a screening of Karate Kid next week, so we'll let you know what we think”) and about politics (posting links about SB1070, Arizona’s proposed law on immigration). And while the website makes full use of slacktivist standbys, encouraging visitors to watch a one-minute explanatory Youtube video and share links to the Racebending Twitter page on Facebook, it also solicits volunteers to join “street teams” to work on local, real-world protests and outreach projects. *Avatar* will be released in theaters in July of 2010; as of now, it remains to be seen whether Racebending’s campaign will affect ticket sales. However, the example provides vivid evidence that the hierarchy of activisms (sit-ins are better than Facebook campaigns, and youth obsession with pop culture cannot possibly be political) is overly simplistic — modern youth activism may look a bit different than any activism we’ve seen before, but that doesn’t preclude it from enacting real-world change.

Yes, but how does “Save *Chuck*” save the world? : Egotistical slacktivism as a gateway for youth engagement

This is not to say that all fan activist campaigns carry as much weight as Racebending does. Just as there is a difference between clicking to join an activist Facebook page and actually maintaining an activist blog, there is a difference between Racebending’s media watchdog mission and letter-writing campaigns to save *Chuck* from cancellation. As I continue to reiterate, there is
endless variation within the realm of today’s technology-fueled youth public engagement – just as there are many different ways to approach slacktivism, there are many ways to approach fan activism, many ways to combine the two, and many ways to segue into real-world activist action. Though I acknowledge that a “Save Chuck” campaign is not the meatiest form of public engagement, I’ve come to believe that even the lightest, most benign online fan campaign can serve some purpose, especially on an individual and personal level.

In order to explore this significance of slacktivism on a personal level, it is important to delve into the reasons why youth today might pursue activism through the avenues of online slacktivism or fan activism. Of course, critics of slacktivism are quick to supply reasons: Youth today are lazy, detached, and – perhaps most appallingly – egotistical. The egotism, in particular, has been brought up for discussion in the aftermath of a January Facebook meme, which encouraged female users to post their bra colors in their statuses in order to “spread the wings of breast cancer awareness”. Though the trend caught on for several days, afterwards, many wondered what the real objective of the status updates were – especially in light of the fact that the meme seems to exclude actual breast cancer survivors who have undergone mastectomies. At best, the meme seemed to be a way for users to demonstrate their social awareness and earn activist street cred; at worst, it was a way for users to draw attention to their taste in undergarments; either way, the goals seem distastefully egotistical (Meraji).

Psychologist Anders Colding-Jorgensen further probes the egotism of the slacktivist movement, claiming that activist Facebook posts act only as “cultural objects” that users collect to demonstrate a hip social consciousness. His point is well-taken in light of an experiment he conducted in 2009, in which he created a Facebook group whose title implied that Copenhagen’s landmark Stork Fountain would be bulldozed to make way for an H&M retail outlet. The group
grew with stunning rapidity, boasting nearly 28,000 members by the time Jorgensen decided to shut it down. As you might be able to guess, Stork Fountain was never in danger; in fact, Jorgensen had early-on posted a thread in the group’s discussion forum detailing the group’s purpose as a social experiment. As the Washington Post’s Monica Hesse puts it, “Users wanted not to educate themselves or figure out how to save the fountain, but to parade their own feelings of outrage around the cyber-public.”

This critique of egotism is also present in critiques of youth engagement with pop culture. Bronwyn Williams explores how, just as a Facebook group like “Save Stork Fountain” might act as a cultural marker of social awareness, name-dropping a TV show like *South Park* can act as “a synecdoche for a particular popular culture sensibility of subversive, transgressive humor and cultural critique.” (35) Thus, even if a person has only ever seen four episodes of *South Park*, they may be eager to list it as a favorite on a social networking page; talking about the show becomes more about identity formation than about true engagement with its content. And even when a young person is fully engaged with pop culture, like those who joined letter-writing campaigns to save *Chuck*, they are liable to be critiqued for egotism: Why give so much time and devotion to a TV show, when you could be expending your energy doing good in the world? (Jenkins) No matter how deeply youth choose to engage with pop culture, it seems, they are criticized as egotistical, because pop culture has been cemented as a realm of apolitical frivolity in the minds of older generations.

I’m not going to argue that egotism does not drive youth slacktivism – I’m quite sure that, in many cases, it does. However, I will maintain that it may be helpful for budding activists to engage on an egotistical level (a level on which many young people feel comfortable) before branching out and trying to enact large-scale change. As the old feminist saying goes, “The personal is political.” There are many reasons that youth might choose slacktivism on a highly personal level (bra colors
and favorite television shows) before diving into politics. Henry Jenkins neatly elucidates these reasons in a blog post on the “Save Chuck” campaign. While Ben Agger (the scholar who claims today’s youth “[give] not a damn about the burning world around them”) chalks up young people’s detachment from politics to the fact that they merely connect rather than form actual communities, Jenkins argues that fan activist groups like the “Save Chuck” campaign may well be valid iterations of a community-based “participatory culture”. He gives five reasons why:

The first reason: “Low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.” This is what Mary Joyce, founder of online activist website digiactive.org, refers to as the “low bar of entry” – “joining – or starting – a cause is easy, and causes can reach and educate a wide range of people.” It is true that not much knowledge or expertise is required to check one’s bra color, join a Facebook group, or declare undying devotion to a television show one has been following for months. The second reason Jenkins lists: “Strong support for creating”. This is a strategy that appears often in youth-oriented blogging. For example, prominent feminist blog Feministing.com ends each week with a round-up post, in which editors ask readers to share links to their own blogs and writing. This is related to Jenkins’ third reason, “informal mentorship” – participation and community flourishes when “what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices”. Fourth, Jenkins lists: “Members believe that their contributions matter.” This can be seen in the “Save Chuck” campaign, in which fans were motivated to buy sandwiches from Subway (Chuck’s sponsor) and leave individual, supportive fan notes in the chains’ suggestion boxes – actions which were personally applauded by Chuck star Zach Levi. The final, and perhaps most important, of Jenkins’ reasons why fan activism can count as participatory culture, is this: “Members feel some degree of social connection”. This strategy can be seen on Racebending, where fans of Avatar post pictures of themselves holding signs in support of fair casting practices. This focus on community-building,
while admittedly stronger in some online campaigns than others, runs contrary to Ben Agger’s assertion that today’s youth prefer to “plug in” rather than form communal bonds. If Racebenders are interested only in “plugging in”, why would they devote so much effort into putting faces to names?

Fig. 2: Fans of Avatar show support by sending their pictures to Racebending.com.

For these reasons, Jenkins argues, the nature of online slacktivism and fan activism is surprisingly conducive to growing a sense of engaged citizenship. Online engagement with pop culture, he writes, is like “flexing a civic muscle”, getting a chance to “play with control on the micro-level.” He continues: “Popular culture can function as a civic playground, where lower stakes allow for a greater diversity of opinions than tolerated in political arenas.” Bronwyn Williams agrees, pointing out that fan activism allows fans to “appropriate control of the pop cultural text”, granting power of a sort that is not usually granted to rookies in the activist world (27). Thus it seems that forms of activism deemed frivolous may actually play an important role in allowing youth to gain a sense of self-efficacy in the worlds of public participation and politics, acting as a gateway into types of activism that are more respected.

Conclusion: Today, nail polish; Tomorrow, the world
On my last day of class in a course about gender inequalities in education, the professor declared the class period a time for forming groups for “planning, executing and creating programs for social justice in the future.” Tellingly, two of the groups formed were interested in issues of pop culture (specifically, gendered advertising and children’s entertainment). At the end of the class period, when asked about action plans, one of my peers – disturbed by “edgy” nail polish names like “Sugar Daddy” ever since we’d studied the disturbing abuse and sexual health consequences of the sugar daddy phenomenon in Zambia – spoke up: “I’m going to start a Facebook group.” In light of my research, I couldn’t help but wonder about her reasoning for the decision. What did she think the group would accomplish?

After further discussion, my question was answered. The group, she hoped, would be awareness-raising; furthermore, it would mark a sort of public “coming-out” as a feminist trying to bridge the gaps between her pop cultural world and her political convictions. Though she expressed concerns about being laughed at for taking things too seriously – because, as critical cultural narratives assure us, pop culture is anything but political – she felt creating the group in such a public space would be an important step in formulating and cementing her ideas. Just as Jenkins posits, this online engagement with mildly politicized elements of pop culture seems to act as a training-ground for future activism, helping young people ease into expressing their politics in public. This “training” may not make a splash in the larger world, but surely it makes a difference in the mind of a budding activist. While this woman may now be starting a Facebook group to rally against sexist advertising, she will soon be graduating from Stanford as a scholar of international comparative education, a field with clear implications for social justice. Who knows whether this “coming-out” on Facebook might, even in a very small way, contribute to the evolution of her skill and confidence in future activist work?
I do not claim that all youth slacktivism serves as training for future activism. After all, not all of today’s youth are political or have desire to engage in activist work, just as surely not every teenager in the sixties who grew their hair long and listened to rock music really wanted to partipate in the nitty-gritty of the counterculture resistance movement. I do argue, however, that we tend not to give youth culture enough credit. It is short-sighted to paint youth activism with a broadly negative brush, because the avenues through which to practice activism are endless in number, just as the topics to rally around and the motives for doing so are impossibly varied. We cannot always demonize today’s youth as disturbingly dependent on technology and vapidly obsessed with pop culture, for I’ve shown how text messaging can raise millions of dollars for disaster relief, and how pop culture fandom can leak into social justice work – and further exceptions to the stereotype are everywhere. Slacktivism exists, to be sure, but it is nothing to agonize about. For a young person forming their beliefs for the first time, trying to figure out how their views should be expressed in the world, slacktivism can serve as a tool for getting comfortable with being political in public, a gateway to real-life activism. We cannot be so quick to assume that starting a Facebook group about the politics of nail polish is completely frivolous, just as we cannot necessarily assume that the group will enact any measurable real-world change – for this plugged-in generation, as with every generation before it, things are just not that simple.
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