Cut Them Some Slack: Slacktivism's Prosocial Potential

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Featured Essay

Check your Facebook. (Seriously, go ahead. I don't usually make it past the first sentence of a scholarly paper without checking Facebook anyway). Buried among the never-ending ticker tape of selfies, links to articles like "29 Dogs Who Are Just *Not* Having It," and ads from your friends at H&R Block, you'll probably find a handful of posts about social issues. These come from all sorts of characters: your missionary cousin posting an article about Typhoon Haiyan, your conservative coworker railing about gun control legislation and linking to a petition to save high-capacity magazines, your college acquaintance exhorting people to use more sensitive language about mental disabilities, and so on. Meet "slacktivism," token actions made in favor of a social issue—often done online—that many consider to be the face of activism today (Morozov, 2009).

Research confirms such content is widespread in Newsfeeds. According to a study commissioned by the *New York Times*, half of social media users report that they share content to "inform others of products they care about and potentially change opinions or encourage action" (Bredd, n.d.). Sixty-nine percent share in order to "feel more involved in the world," and an impressive 84% share to "support causes or issues they care about" (Brett, n.d.). With the majority of Facebook's 1.2 billion monthly users constantly generating content about social issues, the amount of slacktivism occurring is beyond human conceptualization (Facebook.com, 2013). The kind of social activism that used to manifest itself in bumper stickers, sit-ins, and unpleasant dinner conversations with family is now being broadcast by the terabyte 24/7 to entire social networks at once.

Unfortunately, no one can agree on what consequences this dramatic shift will have. Some laud the omnipresence of social issues on social media—thank god, a use for Facebook and

Twitter besides sharing pictures of food you're about to eat (Christensen, 2011)! Others claim that token online activism drains the fervor that used to fuel meaningful political action like rallies, protests, and even voting (Morozov, 2009). Researchers have made limited empirical headway into this question, but with a focus so narrow they've failed to scratch the surface. We have an abundance of opinions and a famine of evidence.

In this paper, I take stock of perspectives and research on slacktivism to date, calibrate the crosshairs of future research, and load the chamber with the proper experimental design in the hope that someone, whether myself or others, will fire. I provide evidence that while the most-studied aspect of slacktivism—its effect on the slacktivist himself or herself—may lead to less prosocial action later, other aspects of slacktivism could have positive downstream effects that make the activity worthwhile. I propose two experiments to test this possibility.

Current Perceptions of Slacktivism and Research to Date

Though the term originally had positive connotations (Christensen, 2011), slacktivism is a new favorite whipping post in popular media. The oft-quoted blogger Evgeny Morozov (2009) describes slacktivism as an "apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact" that gives people "an illusion of having a meaningful impact." Malcolm Gladwell pronounced in 2010 that "the revolution will not be tweeted," claiming that social media "makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact." In perhaps the most biting take on slacktivism, UNICEF Sweden launched an entire "Likes Don't Save Lives" publicity campaign, with headlines that snarled such messages as "Like us on Facebook, and we will vaccinate zero children against polio" (O'Mahony, 2013). Anti-slacktivist headlines spiked especially Kristofferson et al. (in press) published a study suggesting slacktivism leads to less meaningful action later: "Slacktivism: Liking May Mean Less Giving," "Just Liking a Cause Doesn't Help: Internet Slacktivism Harms Charities," and so on (Ferro, 2013; Sciencedaily.com, 2013).

On the other side, slacktivism's allies are few and unimpressive. The Kristofferson et al. (in press) paper trots out an article by Lee Fox to play the part of slacktivist advocate; Lee Fox is best known for founding a "youth media agency" called KooDooZ whose website hasn't been updated in over a year (Ross, 2012). He comes up in Google results far below a Wikipedia article for a World War II Buckley-class destroyer escort of the same name whose claim to fame seems to be almost capsizing in 1943. The conclusion of a recent scholarly article on slacktivism sheepishly begins, "there's no reason to be *outright* dismissive of all slacktivist campaigns" (Skoric, 2012, emphasis added). Slacktivism is on the ropes.

The limited research available, however, does not paint the same picture of slacktivism that the blogosphere does. The most recent piece of research making the rounds online did find that participants who engage in various types of token activism in experimental conditions were less likely to take more costly prosocial action later (Kristofferson, in press). These participants were less likely to donate to a veterans' fund after agreeing to wear a poppy in honor of Canada's Remembrance Day, volunteered to spend less time stuffing envelopes for a charity after publicly signing that charity's petition, and were less likely to volunteer for an organization after publicly joining a Facebook group supporting that organization (Kristofferson, in press). A similar study, however, found that participants who signed an online pro-gun control or anti-gun control petition were more likely to donate to the same pro-gun or anti-gun organization than participants who were only given the opportunity to donate and did not see the petition (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). Moreover, participants who declined to sign the petition donated more to a different charity than those who never saw the petition at all, suggesting that mere *opportunities* for slacktivism can lead to increased prosocial activity later whether users choose to participate or not (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). Further complicating the issue, yet another comparable study found that participants who could click a box that says "I support UNICEF" later generated fewer slogans for UNICEF than participants who did not have the opportunity for token support (Cornelissen, in press). However, participants who could click the "support" box were no more

or less likely to purchase a chocolate bar sold by the nonprofit (Cornelissen, in press). Given that the three empirical papers on slacktivism provide a mixed and muddled picture of the phenomenon, it's safe to say that we need further research before consigning slacktivism to the coffin.

Despite their differences, the articles all agree that slacktivism is likely a case of two competing forces: consistency and moral licensing (Cornelissen, in press; Kristofferson, in press; Lee & Hsieh, 2013). Psychologists have repeatedly shown that people prefer to behave consistently with how they've behaved in the past (Cialdini, 2009 p. 59). For instance, people who agree to put a small sign in their window advocating safe driving are much more likely to accept a safe-driving billboard in their yard later on, and people are more likely to allow a search of their home after agreeing to answer a few questions about soap earlier (Freedman & Frasier, 1966; Seligman et al., 1976). If slacktivism works on consistency motives, people who like a charity's Facebook page would be more likely to donate to that charity later if given the opportunity. The initial like serves as a signpost for later behavior, either as evidence for individuals that they must care about this charity if they liked its page, or as a public demonstration of attitudes that they must maintain to keep up a consistent appearance to others. If this mechanism is at play, slacktivism might boost meaningful prosocial activity.

If slacktivism is a case of moral licensing, on the other hand, joining groups and updating statuses may actually free slacktivists from their consistency motives. Moral licensing occurs when people use past good deeds—or even the mere thought of future good deeds—as "moral credits" or "moral credentials" that can be used to cancel out the immorality of bad deeds or reframe bad deeds as neutral or even positive (Merritt et al., 2010). Users who like a charity's Facebook page, then, would feel freer to pass when that charity asks for a donation later, relying on their past prosocial behavior to justify their present inaction. Thus, the societal value of slacktivism hinges on whether it causes consistency or moral licensing effects.

Kristofferson and colleagues (in press) claim it is the public or private nature of slacktivism that determines which mechanism engages. They argue that socially observable actions, such as joining a "Save Darfur" Facebook group, satisfy the impression-management motive, the urge to present ourselves positively to others (Kristofferson, in press). When that same activity is private, however, consistency motives engage instead of the impression-management mechanism (Kristofferson, in press). While they do not elucidate the mechanism further, they seem to suggest that people's construal of their own actions depends on the social observability of those actions. People can dismiss their public, token support for a cause as motivated by their desire to impress others, not by an authentic commitment to that cause that should influence their behavior later. The authors claim that this nuanced approach wields predictive power beyond either consistency or moral licensing theories (Kristofferson, in press).

This public/private distinction is helpful, but incomplete. Even if Kristofferson and colleagues (in press) don't agree, moral licensing theory *should* distinguish between public and private situations. People may view public token support as more righteous than private token support, and accordingly award themselves more moral license from the former than the later. So-called slacktivists could easily claim that their public token support increases the visibility of the cause and encourages people in their social networks to take action or express support themselves. Public token support also often carries some risk of social backlash: publicly joining a pro-LGBT group on Facebook could draw a nasty comment from a conservative relative, either online or at the next family reunion, for example. Incurring social risk in an attempt to rally support for a cause—whether that rallying is effective or not—should easily translate to a tidy pile of moral resources that can be exchanged later for the right to refuse to meaningfully support the same cause and still remain a good person (Merritt et al., 2010). Private token support, on the other hand, carries no risk and provides no easily explainable benefit to the world. For example, Kristofferson et. al's (in press) participants in the private token support conditions would have been hard-pressed to articulate how, exactly, they were "supporting

veterans on Remembrance Day" by carrying around a poppy in an envelope. Thus, that action should not create moral licensing because it is less likely to be perceived as prosocial (Merritt et al., 2010). Despite Kristofferson et al.'s dismissal, moral licensing theory effectively explains their public/private distinction.

With this more nuanced view, a coherent conceptualization of public slacktivism begins to emerge. When Facebook users engage in slacktivism—say, liking the UNICEF Facebook page—and know that others will see their positive act, they may automatically award themselves some moral license that excuses them from meaningful activity later (Merritt et al., 2010). When no one will know about their token support, however, they're more likely to construe their behavior as coming from their own desires, and thus more likely to take more meaningful action downstream. This distinction between public and private slacktivism, which rests on moral licensing rather than impression-management, reconciles the Kristofferson et al. (in press), Cornelissen (in press), and Lee and Hsieh (2013) findings and casts a shadow of doubt over slacktivism's worth. While we don't have data on what proportion of slacktivism is public vs. private, we have already seen the staggering prevalence of public slacktivism. If this interpretation is correct, all those status updates, likes, and shares may be suffocating true activism.

Future Directions in Slacktivism Research

While the evidence may seem to be mounting in favor of the anti-slacktivists, the pundits and pessimists shouldn't start prepping their victory speeches just yet. Even if we accept that token actions like publicly supporting social issues on social media can inhibit meaningful action later, this finding is one piece of a complex phenomenon, and we'll need an more comprehensive research program to answer some pressing questions that still remain—questions that could undermine the emerging, negative view of slacktivism.

First, we know slacktivism *can* curtail activism, but we don't know if it *does*. In an analysis of Canadian students' civic participation habits, there was so little difference between students who participate only on Facebook and students who don't participate at all that the authors suggest Facebook-only participants would become non-participants without Facebook (Vissers & Stolle, 2013). This could mean the prototypical slacktivist is not a domesticated activist, but a slightly less lazy nonparticipant. Thus, the oft-derided $12,000 raised by the 1.7-million strong "Save the Children of Africa" Facebook group (Morozov, 2011) may be $12,000 that would not have existed otherwise. More generally, internet use has a weak positive correlation with civic engagement, rather than the negative correlation that anti-slacktivists might predict (Bouianne, 2009). While correlational, this evidence casts doubt on the idea that slacktivism placates droves of the gung-ho with meaningless online activity. We also don't know how long public slacktivism's licensing effect lasts, or if it changes over time, as moral licensing studies have investigated the effect only within short periods (Merritt et al., 2010). This means that the inhibiting effect of slacktivism may fade so quickly that it ultimately has a negligible impact on subsequent action.

Second, research evaluates slacktivism based on the curious, unsupported assumption that slacktivists acts are only for the benefit of the slacktivist himself or herself. Slacktivism research has primarily explored whether an individual who takes token action is more or less likely to take "meaningful" action later (e.g. Cornelissen, in press; Kristofferson et al., in press; Lee & Hsieh, 2013). This, perplexingly, implies that slacktivism's success is measured by its effect on the slacktivist rather than on the target of the slacktivism. Thus, the supposedly neutral researchers of slacktivism join slacktivism critics in dismissing liking pages or joining groups on Facebook as useless, "token" activities that accomplish nothing (Morozov, 2009). This sidesteps an important empirical question, the one slacktivists themselves would have posed in the first place: *does slacktivism accomplish what it sets out to do*?

Ignoring that question in research establishes a double standard that ensures slacktivism will always come up wanting. We don't measure protestors' success by whether participating in a protest increases their likelihood of participating in a sit-in, nor do we evaluate benefactors' donations by whether they'll later sign a petition. Similarly, if we evaluate sharing a link to a pro-gun control petition by the likelihood the sharer will march in a pro-gun control rally, we miss the point. Activism has obvious goals beyond the propagation of more activism: to influence government policy, to push culture in a certain direction, and to bring topics into the national discourse. Despite what its critics assume, propagating activism is only one of slacktivism's aims, and it may be quite effective at the other goals it sets out to accomplish.

In fact, one of the best-known instances of slacktivism had little to do with directly promoting in-person activism. In March 2013, the Human Rights Campaign asked Facebook users to "change their profile photos [to the HRC logo] to show their support" of the LGBT community while the Supreme Court heard arguments in two cases related to marriage equality (Human Rights Campaign, 2013). Profile picture changes subsequently shot up 120%, likely due to the HRC request (McCarty, 2013). In her analysis of the social media campaign, the HRC's Senior Digital Analyst remarked:

> Standing in support of marriage equality on social media, and bleeding the Internet red, sends a powerful message to the community -- particularly LGBT youth -- that the majority of Americans are on the right side of history (McCarty, 2013).

Given this statement of purpose, assessing the success of the HRC campaign by tracking how likely users were to take some kind of "meaningful" action after changing their profile picture misconstrues the goal of the effort. The HRC launched the campaign to make supporters of marriage equality visible, and given the widespread take-up of their request, they appear to have succeeded.

While critics may counter that increasing visibility is a meaningless goal (Morozov, 2009), this much-derided instance of slacktivism could actually have a range of highly positive

psychological effects. The HRC campaign could have greatly reduced the prevalence of pluralistic ignorance—the phenomenon wherein each individual thinks he/she is the only one not acting in according with his/her inner state—in the case of marriage equality (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Marriage equality supporters who thought they were alone in their position likely realized that large swaths of their social network agreed with them. The likes that HRC profile pictures garnered could have served as positive social reinforcement for displaying pro-marriage equality behavior; even users who didn't change their pictures could experience vicarious reinforcement by viewing the likes and comments garnered by friends who did (Bandura et al, 1963). The campaign could have returned positive results for the HRC even without widespread conscious engagement, as repeated exposure to the group's logo may have engendered liking through the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968). That positive affect could have downstream effects, making people more likely to donate to an HRC volunteer who approaches them on the street bearing the symbol, or increasing positive evaluations of promotional materials published by the HRC. This simple "raising awareness" campaign may have done much more than that. Unfortunately, we have no evidence one way or the other, because researchers have not yet caught on to any aspect slacktivism besides what it does for the slacktivist himself or herself.

Moreover, social media was likely a *better* vehicle for demonstrating widespread support for marriage equality than any kind of in-person activism. Users logging into Facebook could see members from all of their different social groups taking purposeful action in support of marriage equality, an experience akin to everyone you've ever known lining up outside your bedroom window and holding an equals sign above their head. This provides influential social norm information from people who users have affirmed as meaningful social referents, which researchers have shown to be a strong driver of behavior (Goldstein et al., 2008). Facebook provides this information more consistently online than could be done in real life: your avatar appears next to everything you do on Facebook, unlike in real life where your political beliefs are

not on display to everyone who can see you. Of course, the movement could also simply spread more quickly online.

  With such large gaps in our understanding still aching to be filled, I propose two experiments that test the tantalizing possibility that slacktivism may have positive implications. Study 1 takes the Kristofferson et al. (in press) paper to its logical next step, and Study 2 provides a model for studying slacktivism in its purest form.

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Fellow Commentary
Brian Lax

In this essay on slacktivism, Adam applies a formidable command of each lexicon element to a flashy new subject area. For its strength, we decided to publish his piece in its entirety, save Adam's experiment proposal and appendices. Crucially, however, Adam takes a gamble by employing a tone that combines earnestness and irony. His paper—which takes as subject those who engage in the everyday (but perhaps effective) phenomenon of slacktivism—adopts an appropriately colloquial, sprightly tone. In another hand, this choice would be dangerous, as too casual a tone—in the absence of all other lexical elements—can work against the writing. Therefore, Adam's paper comes with a caveat: if tone is the icing on the cake, we need to apply the right icing to the right cake.

The introduction is exemplary: Adam first generates motive by implicating his readers to imply the phenomenon. Interest piqued, the reader discovers that Adam has isolated a pressing question for psychology—that there is a gap in the criticism, and, more specifically, that researchers seem misguided. This paper is here to rescue us by redirecting the conversation; its thesis is given assertively. In the terms of the lexicon, it has got everything: motive, orienting, and thesis.

The literature review that occurs on page 101 is an excellent example of key terms. The two concepts, apart, prove hazardous: students often lose their authority (their motive) when outlining an entire body of criticism, and just as frequently choose key terms disadvantageously. A writer may begin to simply parrot past criticism, or key terms do not become a necessary component of thesis. Here, Adam distills his literature review by identifying two central key terms—"consistency," and "moral licensing." He looks for trends in the research, and finds that they all circle back to these two psychological forces. The added bonus is that these key terms become incorporated into the thesis; they are chosen because they help Adam articulate his argument by refining the dichotomy of public v. private.

Remarkable is what we might consider Adam's macro-motive. He selected a topic of great personal *and* general interest: slacktivism is a glitzy new area of inquiry in psychology. However, because the scholarship is as young as the phenomenon, Adam had to locate a nearly absent critical conversation; he still manages to assert a bold, pioneering claim. Peruse his commentary, where he describes the process of following a citation trail when critical articles prove elusive: locate the breadcrumbs dropped in bibliographies.

Author Commentary
Adam Mastroianni

This paper, my final assignment for PSY 400: The Social Psychology of Social Change, encountered an unexpected challenge that led to some happy results. I had recently read about moral licensing—the psychological phenomenon where people use their good deeds to justify bad behavior—and hypothesized that I could apply this theory to online activism (or "slacktivism"). I intended to argue that posting pro-social messages on Facebook might hamper offline activism. As I began writing, however, two separate groups of researchers published articles with that exact idea.

Instead of scrapping the topic, I took a risk and delved deeper. I realized that these new papers relied on faulty assumptions about the purpose of slacktivism—assumptions that I would surely have made if I didn't have their work to inform my own argument. They investigated slacktivism's effects only on slacktivists themselves, not whether slacktivists' actions accomplish what they claim. With this insight, I was able to focus my paper around a much more interesting and compelling point than I intended to make originally: slacktivism may actually work, but not in the ways we've been measuring.

As I expanded that thought into a full paper, I kept a close eye on point sentences and tone. Fifteen pages is a dangerous length, too short to fit all of a subject's details, but long enough to get lost in the ones you choose. My point sentences try to steer my argument away from those pitfalls by introducing a new piece of information in each paragraph, but only in connection to the idea discussed previously. The concept sounds simple, but the execution was not. I take pride in the fact that if you read only the first sentence of every paragraph, you'd have the distilled version of my argument. In that sense, writing this paper amount to writing the point sentences and filling in from there.

The somewhat jaunty tone—maybe *too* jaunty—that appears especially in the introduction was entirely a trick to keep myself interested in my own paper. I get a kick out of writing comedy, and the words come truer and freer and more authentic when I'm gunning for a chuckle. Scientific writing does not generally do this, but then, most scientific writing is really, really boring.

As a young writer, it's easy to fear that everything worthwhile has already been said, and often by people with fancy degrees whose opinions count more than yours. Writing this paper showed me how navigating a pre-charted academic conversation can be as exciting as striking off into new territory, and I'm honored to have the opportunity to share the result.