

Hactivism and the Future of Political Participation

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Alexandra Whitney Samuel

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Thesis Advisor: Prof. Sidney Verba

Alexandra Samuel

Abstract

This dissertation looks at the phenomenon of hacktivism: the marriage of political activism and computer hacking. It defines hacktivism as the nonviolent use of illegal or legally ambiguous digital tools in pursuit of political ends. These tools include web site defacements, redirects, denial-of-service attacks, information theft, web site parodies, virtual sit-ins, virtual sabotage, and software development.

The dissertation uses data from fifty-one interviews in conjunction with additional primary and secondary source material. This data is used to construct a taxonomy of hacktivism, and to apply the taxonomy to three core issues in political participation.

Chapter 2 presents a taxonomy of hacktivism defined by variation in hacktivist origins (in the hacker-programmer or artist-activist worlds) and orientations (transgressive or outlaw). The dissertation identifies three distinct types of hacktivism: political cracking, which consists of illegal actions like web site defacements and redirects; performative hacktivism, which consists of legally nebulous actions like virtual sit-ins and web site parodies; and political coding, which consists of political software development.

The taxonomy illuminates several key questions in political participation, each examined in a different chapter. Chapter 3 focuses on the role of identity incentives in shaping political participation, and finds a strong correlation between hacktivist origins and the type of hacktivism engaged in. Chapter 4 looks at political coders' strategy of

policy circumvention, which focuses on nullifying rather than changing a targeted law or policy. The success of this strategy depends on political entrepreneurs, low costs of failure, and high political costs of repression. Chapter 5 examines deliberative democrats' suggestion that the Internet may constitute a new public sphere, friendly to democratic discourse. It suggests that variation in how hacktivists handle speech rights and anonymity challenges proceduralist visions of deliberative democracy.

After reflecting on the themes that unite the dissertation, the conclusion reflects on how the post 9/11 political climate has heightened the pressure to erroneously treat hacktivism as cyberterrorism. The author hopes that the rising fortunes of political coding, which is increasingly legitimated by both governments and businesses, will ensure a continued space for hacktivism within the repertoire of political contention.

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