CPGE 2023-2024

oral sessions with C. Hamard

[www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), Rosalie Tostevin, March 2014

Online activism: it's easy to click, but just as easy to disengage

Essential to the co-ordination of both the London riots and the Arab Spring – many words have been spilled about the importance of the internet in recent social change. But beneath the hype, the impact of some online activism may be more modest.

In the land of social media, the position of "armchair activist" is open to all. You can change your profile picture to raise awareness, share videos and articles and keep in touch with charities by liking their pages. Making a difference seems pretty easy in the digital age. But is your contribution any deeper than a click?

Outdoors, get-chilly-and-maybe-a-little-dirty activism isn't for everyone, and someone's dedication to an online cause may well be very real. Millions of people have passed the 500-friend milestone on Facebook, giving them a potentially powerful network to broadcast over. But while the online lobby may have a loud voice, it appears their impact is still a little muted. A new study has found that the majority of people who "like" a Facebook page for a cause don't follow up that gesture with a donation. Return rates for charities and campaigns on Facebook can be a tenth of those for traditional routes such as mail solicitation. It's easy to click, but just as easy to disengage.

The study, published in the Journal of Sociological Science, looked at the Save Darfur page on Facebook. At its height, this cause was one of the largest on the social network. The research team analysed the behaviour of its members over a 989-day period. Out of the one million-plus people who had signed up, less than 3000 ever donated, raising around $90,000 over three years – pitiful statistics compared to the wider Darfur campaign, which raised over $1m in 2008 alone. As the authors point out, the page simply conjured the "illusion of activism rather than facilitating the real thing".

The foremost difference between the online and offline branches of the Save Darfur campaign is the very public and visible nature of online membership. Being safe in the company of a million members may reduce each individual's incentive to contribute. Or perhaps, the visibility of membership was the main motivation for joining in the first place. Another recent study, published in the Journal of Consumer Research, supports this explanation. The study found that people who joined a cause publicly were, when asked, less willing to stuff envelopes for the cause than those who joined in private.

So while the digital age may enhance the power of those that are already active, it can't seem to drag the rest out of their armchairs. (433 words)