Participation and participatory culture in social media activism: Potential and limitations

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1. **Introduction**

The concept of participatory culture is developed by Jenkins (2006) to reject the passivity of consumers in the capitalist system, repositioning consumers as active agents who have a role to play in the production, distribution and re-production of cultural goods. Participatory culture therefore encourages social dimensions of creativity in knowledge transfer and learning.

According to Benkler (2006), participatory culture in social media encourages the development of self-reflexivity and the increased appreciation and acknowledgement of diverse cultures and systems involved in nurturing the emergence of such cultures. Using the theory of commons based peer production. Gee (2004) adds that the internet provides “affinity spaces” which are sites of collective learning, production and sharing among diverse individuals while Deuze and Banks (2009) considers online participation to be a form of “co-creation”. With digital media and communications tools increasingly supporting non-traditional, democratic forms of knowledge production based on co-operative partnerships across diverse individuals, one questions how participation and participatory culture manifests itself within the domain of social media activism.

For example, the social media platform served as the site for knowledge production and transfer shortly after the Charlie Hebdo massacre, as people gathered onto the online media to share, access and react to information on the event. The shift to a social media platform for news update was in part motivated by the inaccuracies of professional media outlets, attributable to the mentality of reporters to speedily access and spread information without checking the reliability of the contents (Martinson, 2015). Twitter offered updates and support through consistent news feeds which had loyal following, with #JeSuisCharlie having 3.4 million mention after 24 hours (Martinson, 2015). The spread of real-time information through the online platforms such as live blogs and social media was so extensive that it became difficult for professional news media such as BBC and Newsnight to catch up (Martinson, 2015).

The contributions of social media to civic action through large scale diffusion of information to a wide and global network of individuals is evident in mass events such as the Charlie Hebdo attack and mass protests in the Arab world (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Castells (2009, pp. 414) credits the internet for affording increased power and freedom to a networked society for the creation and transfer of knowledge via mass self-communications. Through the digital
space, individuals are free to propagate their moral values, ideologies and interests relating to the Charlie Hebdo incidents, and in so doing reach out to individuals across the globe with similar sentiments. Such sentiments were mixed, with supporters of the attack either justifying the attack or engaging in victim blaming of Charlie Hebdos, and detractors critiquing the inhumanity of the action. Online media gave freedom to global individuals to voice their diverse opinions of the attack, to garner support from like-minded individuals or reactive comments from opponents.

For example, hashtags such as #we_avenged_the_prophet and #lone_wolves were created by Islamist extremists and supporters from Pakistan and North Africa to praise the attack and justify it as an attack against the state which is an enemy of Islam (Hubbard, 2015). Online posts openly expressed support for the attack with the use of imageries to trigger similar sentiments, such as a post reported by Hubbard (2015) as such: “Two lion terrified all of Paris and made #paris_burn”, posted together with a picture of two gunmen near the time of the attack. Similarly, jihadists used social media to remix attack videos with sound effects and jihadist anthems, propagating pictures of attackers while hailing them as heroes and martyrs (Hubbard, 2015). Another hashtag, #JeNeSuisPasCharlie appeared in response to #JeSuisCharlie, with a counter-narrative that Charlie Hebdo deserved the disaster for their racist cartoons, making the crime less serious as Charlie Hebdo was blamed for depicting hate speech and in support of the fascist right-wing parties such as Marine Le Pen’s Front National.

Evident from the multitudes of online posts is that opinions on the Charlie Hebdo attack were injected with political and religious ideologies, with the freedom provided for knowledge creation on the online platform enabling the propagation of diverse ideologies, each using different visual and textual tactics to recruit loyal followings of like-minded individuals. Social media activism of the Charlie Hebdo attacks reinforced Castells’ (2012, pp. 229) perception of digital media as the “decision tools for mobilisation, for organising, for deliberating, for coordinating and for deciding”.

Where it would have been little possible for rather extreme opinions accompanied by highly emotionalised digital content to be expressed on mainstream media, online social media provided increased flexibility and freedom for a multitude of voices and opinions to be heard from diverse dissenters across the globe, thereby lowering the entry barrier for online activism. Morozov (2011, pp. 181) suggests that the increase in activism on social networks may be
attributable to the speed and ease with which social media groups can proliferate and become viral, reducing the cost of communication required for group formation. In view of the increased use of social media for activism, there is a need to question what constitutes participation and participatory culture in social media activism, with a particular focus on the Charlie Hebdo incident.

Can clicking on a like button on Facebook, or joining a Twitter hashtag of Charlie Hebdo groups constitute participation in online activism? Or must there be a contribution to the production of knowledge through social media engagement, such as creating a post to voice one’s opinions of the Charlie Hebdo event or to provide an update of the incident, in order for participation in social media activism to have taken place? Couldry (2010) and Dean (2010) expressed scepticism over the potential for online activism to translate into real action, commenting that the flow of information on social media networks do little beyond gratifying the networks of “communicative capitalism” trapped within a neoliberal “crisis of voice”.

One thus questions if the online construction of knowledge among those engaged in the Charlie Hebdo dissent would constitute a participation in social media activism, or whether participation can only be considered to have materialised when translated into actual mobilisations on the ground. To what extent can social media activism in the Charlie Hebdo promote collective identity formation and solidarity which are necessary for mobilisations that can potentially bring about social transformation? This paper seeks to address the above questions. The paper will be divided into two parts, the first defining the boundaries of what constitutes participation and participatory culture in social media activism, and the second examining what the potentials and limitations of online participatory practices are, both with particular reference to social media activism in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack.

2. Participation and participatory culture in social media activism

According to Keane (1995), participation in “micro-publics” often involve the formation of localised, small and dynamic social movement centred around a problem-oriented experience, drawn together into publics by a shared value. Such is the trigger point for political mobilisation before the emergence of networked communications infrastructure. Traditional participation would then be associated with physical attendance in face-to-face activities such as meetings, community work, rallies, elections, strikes and demonstrations. Della Porta and
Diani (2006) identified three characteristics of social movements, namely they have (1) vividly structured ideologies and clear opponents, (2) motivation for the creation of shared identities, and (3) dense informal network structures. Similarly, Tarrow (1994) states that participation constitutes the (1) individual decision to become part of an organisational framework or group, and (2) coordination of collective action through the social networks and cultural frames on which the group is formed.

The Charlie Hebdo attack was conducted by two brothers, Said and Cherif Kouachi, killing 12 people in the head offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris on Wednesday, 7 January 2015. The attack was conducted as a reaction against disputed caricatures of Prophet Muhammad which had been printed on the magazine. Shortly after the attack, Je suis Charlie, a slogan and logo created by French art director Joachim Roncin was launched as a Twitter hashtag #JesuisCharlie, garnering a strong following of sympathisers proclaiming their support for the freedom of expression and a resistance to armed attacks.

The slogan became viral in a short time, and was especially visible on Facebook pages when people who identified with “Charlie” began to adopt the image as their profile pictures. The symbolic sense of unity was further demonstrated through the display of computer printed or handmade placards and stickers bearing the slogan on mobile phones, websites and across media sites. The rapid spread of the slogan eventually led to Je suis Charlie movement whereby the slogan was taken offline into music, print, animated cartoon productions on a worldwide scale. Other online groups arose in response to Je suis Charlie, such as #JeNeSuisPasCharlie to display discontent against Charlie Hebdo, engaging in a victim blaming discourse to express that the satirical weekly newspapers had themselves to blame for the mishap. Online groups were also formed among jihadists to justify the attack as a fair punishment which is inflicted on the slanders of Prophet Mohammad.

In the Charlie Hebdo case, participation in social media activism takes Keane’s (1995) process of group formation online through the formation of a Twitter or Facebook group with dissipated members from across the globe, united by a similar ideology to the one adopted by the group. Rather than face-to-face interactions, followers communicate online through likes or posts, enabling the quick dissipation of information to reinforce each other’s’ beliefs, or to gather new members.
For example, the Je suis Charlie group, started through online social media Twitter, has (1) vividly structured ideologies supporting free speech and non-violence, (2) the Charlie Hebdo attacks providing the motivation for group formation to propagate their ideologies and express sympathy for the victims, and (3) dense informal network structures both online and offline. Also, individuals make a conscious choice to become part of the online group of Je suis Charlie, adopt the shared collective ideologies and identities, and coordinate their actions of embracing the slogan through the profile pictures of their social media networks or through their creative production of art, music and media expression.

Virtual participation through the use of digital networked technologies, such as participation in online discussions, though (1) contributions to social media platforms of groups formed following the Charlie Hebdo attacks such as hashtags, (2) content management of activist sites, groups, pages relating to the Charlie Hebdo incident, (3) use of mimetic pictures such as the Je suis Charlie slogan as a profile picture, and (4) construction and distribution of collective names such as “Je suis Charlie”, “I am Charlie” constitutes participation in social media activism, aligning with Gerbaudo and Trere’s (2015) understanding of participation.

According to Gerbaudo and Trere (2015, pp. 868), participatory culture on social media platforms constitutes a focus on “inclusivity, multiplicity and malleability of protest identities”, with online platforms “tend[ing] to blur the boundaries between the inside the outside of the movement in a way that suited its values of inclusiveness and direct participation”. Facebook and Twitter pages of Je suis Charlie was inclusive of a diverse group of global audience, enabling them to present their ideologies, be it for or against the attacks. Furthermore, with the online slogan Je suis Charlie being imported into the offline space and associated with the idea of free speech, the group has managed to blur the boundary between the inside and outside of the movement, enabling supporters of freedom of expression to embrace the slogan without necessarily needing to be part of the group.

Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) and Bennett and Segerberg (2012) defined seven actions in which social media would be adopted by protest activists, namely (1) internal organisation, recruitment and networking, (2) coordination and mobilisation for direct action, (3) dissemination of movement frames which does not rely on mainstream media, (4) discussion, debate, deliberation and decision, (5) attack ideological opponents, (6) sousveillance in response to surveillance, and (7) preserve protest documents.
In Je suis Charlie, online social media has been used for (1) networking and recruitment of like-minded individuals, (2) the coordination of the Charlie Hebdo movement involving a march of four million people across France led by 44 world leaders in the frontline on 11 January 2015, (3) dissemination of news, information, events and satirical pieces outside of mainstream media (see Figure 1), (4) discussion and deliberation on the Charlie Hebdo attacks, and (5) reaction against ideological opponents such as the jihadist groups and #JeNeSuisPasCharlie. Participatory culture in social media activism would therefore encompass providing participants of the freedom and flexibility to contribute freely to any of the above processes.

![Figure 1: Satirical images and news on #Charlie Hebdo and #JesuisCharlie](image)

The practice of participatory culture in the online activism of Charlie Hebdo would encompass the provision of an inclusive, diverse and flexible digital space which encourages the co-creation of knowledge and the active participation in knowledge sharing, learning, discourse and decision making within the virtual group. Participatory culture can also encompass giving individuals the opportunities to invent their own spaces of participation which supports the collective ideologies of the group, and to initiate and coordinate mobilisation efforts, such as in Je suis Charlie which was first constructed by an individual artist to find solidarity through a collective ideology of free speech.

The emergence of the above new forms of participation and participatory culture in the virtual space has become a key point of contention, as academics question the usefulness of such
practices in contributing to social transformations through offline mobilisations. The following section will discuss the limitations and potentials online activism following the Charlie Hebdo attack.

3. Potential and limitations of social media activism

Xenos et al. (2012) reports a strong positive correlation between social media use and political engagement among young people in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Shirky (2009) points to the increasing use of the internet for the organisation of social groups across a diverse number of issues. Obar et al. (2012) conducted interviews with activist leaders and reports that social media, especially Facebook was essential in helping leaders to achieve their goals, without which their work would have been impossible.

With regards to the massive march organised through the Je suis Charlie slogan, social media has played a significant role in group formation, with the slogan encapsulating a broad variety of political opinions and thereby bringing together diverse groups from those on the right who are keen on defending the French Republic to the left and the anti-racists. The online space allowed speedy proliferation of the catchy slogan coined by a single individual, with the inclusivity of the slogan and the digital space having the ability to draw together a massive audience which culminated in a protest march to advocate for the freedom of speech and multiculturalism.

Social media acted as the site for news access following the Charlie Hebdo attack, a situation which facilitated the ease of message proliferation about the attack by activist groups as users are exposed to mobilisation information without the need for them to initiate interest by seeking out such information (Perak et al., 2009; Tang and Lee, 2013). Furthermore, the ease of contributing a response to specific posts increases the possibility for individuals to join groups which embrace their sentiments towards the attack.

Dahlberg (2011) holds a more optimistic outlook on the potentials of social media activism, considering the digital space to be an incubator for counter-publics that can culminate in real action against a common cause. In Je suis Charlie, the Twitter platform became a space whereby diverse groups of individuals are “moved to act by a perception of systematic exclusion and injustice” (Dahlberg, 2011, pp. 860), motivating them to defend the rights and
liberties which support the functioning of plural societies. Through facilitating online knowledge dissemination of the Charlie Hebdo events among existing social networks and enabling people to develop more knowledge of political issues, social media activism potentially expands activist networks of Je suis Charlie and encourages online and offline participation in supporting its cause.

Social media activism can also rely on social influences to garner support. Peer networks have a significant impact on the individual’s participation in political activities (Klofstad, 2011). Coppock and Ternovski (2014) finds that one’s status as a follower of a certain advocacy page would influence their tendency to convey a message to sign a petition on Twitter. The visibility that social media usage gives to individuals within Je suis Charlie potentially increases the likelihood for participation both online and offline, especially if users are conscious that their actions are being monitored by their networks, who would be likely to appreciate and value their contributions.

While the above studies paint an optimist outlook on the effectiveness of social media activism and its role in facilitating the offline protest march, there are also various limitations to the use of social media activism. Gillan et al. (2008) points to the integral role of social media in supporting the mobilisation for and coordination of direct actions, albeit suggesting that the online space is inadequate in and of itself, as text messaging and mobile technologies often complement the mobilisation efforts of online social media. The above is evident in the case of Charlie Hebdo, as the social media platform sparked the conversation about free speech and non-violence, with the catchy online theme being quickly promoted through various forms of offline support, such as its appearance on the French Embassy in Berlin, display at vigils and demonstrations across the world in France, Europe, North and South America, Oceania and some Asian cities, in print media such as Spectator, Le Monde, Le Figaro, Liberation and L’independent, and on the banners of journalism agencies in the United States.

It is thus evident that while social media provides activists with a platform to organise and motivate action, the digital media has its limitations in terms of translating online engagement into offline activism. Granovetter (1973, pp. 1361) defines the strength of a tie as being determined by a “combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie”.

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In the case of Je suis Charlie, the almost instantaneous formation of the massive group which spans across the globe would imply weak ties as the length of time invested in such relationships are short, with minimal emotional attachment or intimacy with particular individuals, and participants joining the group through having similar sentiments about the attack. The theme was however branded by the strong offline networks of journalists, writing clubs and media in their mobilisations, a move which further united the online network through a sense of emotional solidarity around the shootings. While weak online ties enable more diverse groups to coalesce into a unitary network with a common goal, a communication of the information acquired from weak ties to offline networks characterised by strong ties is key to translating online activism of Je suis Charlie into the political march on the streets.

Castells (1996) supports the above argument, pointing to social media as an important platform for social network formation which is integral for political activism, albeit adding that the network ties are usually weak due to the anonymity of the internet. In supporting social media as a contributor to the success of offline activism, Castells (1996, pp. 388) states that “the advantage of the Net is that it allows the forging of weak ties with strangers, in an egalitarian pattern of interaction where social characteristics are less influential in framing, or even blocking communication.” Castells’ (1996) analysis is evident in the Je suis Charlie, as the personal yet inclusive theme managed to bring together a diverse group of individuals with different social status, political and religious ideologies in an egalitarian manner, uniting through a single cause of identifying with Charlie.

On the contrary, techno-pessimists discredit social media activism as being a real form of mobilisation. In particular, critiques argue that “lazy” activism, e.g. slacktivism or clicktivism can be used to describe online participants in social media activisms, as they are unable to make time in their lives for active mobilisation. Morozov (2009) adds that slacktivism gives those who participate “an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group”, and that it is a type of feel-good activity which has no political or social impact. In the case of Je suis Charlie, it appears that what started off as clicktivism has translated into real action rather quickly, disproving the above claim that online activism is often associated with laziness and lack of commitment, and that lack of mobilisations among online activists may perhaps be indicative of lack of coordination and weak ties formation rather than of laziness.
According to Harmon (2004), the emergence of digital activism results in a fragmentation of communication channels into different digital spaces, resulting in discontinuity in political discourse and civic movements. In the Charlie Hebdo case, it is evident that the internet has allowed for disparate groups to cluster into diverse digital spaces to propagate their divergent ideologies (either support, victim blaming or jihadist), with this different clusters often perpetuating an exclusion of individuals who are not supportive of their cause. For example, in the case of Je suis Charlie which implicitly demonstrates support for Charlie Hedbo publications, the group can be exclusive of individuals who may support free speech but not the publication itself, such as Cole (2015) who considers the newspapers to have “gone specifically for racist and Islamophobia provocation”, and that “Charlie Hebdo cartoonists were not mere gadflies, not simple martyrs to the right to offend: they were ideologues. Just because one condemns their brutal murders doesn’t mean one must condone their ideology”.

Similarly, Greenwald (2016) commented on the hypocrisy of Je suis Charlie as people, such as comedian Dieudonne M’bala, were arrested weeks after the Free Speech march for hate speech, behaviours insulting religious faiths and cheering on the attackers. Greenwald (2016) criticises Je suis Charlie for claiming to protect the freedom of expression, yet failing to assert the universal rule across all individuals, only giving certain parties the rights to free speech while not protecting the rights of others.

While the social media platform claims to promote inclusivity for all to participate in the co-creation and distribution of knowledge, critiques of Je suis Charlie agrees with Carpentier (2009) that the digital space is governed by dominant, unspoken and self-serving ideologies, For example, Greenwald (2016) claims that the advocates of free speech in Je suis Charlie are self-serving and selective about the causes they support, that “only when anti-Islam cartoons were at issue, and a few Muslims engaged in violence, did they suddenly become animated and passionate about free speech. That’s because legitimizing anti-Islam rhetoric and demonizing Muslims was their actual cause; free speech was just the pretext”. As a contemporary site where relations of global capitalism are played out, social media activism seems limited in advocating for inclusivity and democratic co-production of knowledge, as inclusivity seems selective and conditioned on the embracing of common ideologies.
4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of technological innovations and communications infrastructures have brought about an increasingly networked global society. The above changes have supported the emergence of new forms of participation and participatory culture in social media activism, leading to increasing attention given to the topic among academics.

Participation in social media activism after the Charlie Hebdo attacks constitutes individual decision to become part of an online network through Twitter and Facebook, to share the ideologies proliferated by the group (mainly the support for free speech, or victim blaming or jihadist justification for the attack), with particular attention to making individual contributions towards the collective goals and actions of the online group. The practice of participatory culture in the social media groups of Charlie Hebdo involves the creation of an inclusive and flexible digital space for diverse individuals to contribute towards the co-creation and distribution of knowledge, as well as participate in discourse and decision making within the group.

Participatory practices through social media activism presents both potentials and limitations for offline activism and social transformation. Proponents of social media activism argue that online participation encourages the formation of weak ties among people from across the globe in a speedy and efficient manner. The weak ties in Twitter networks such as Je suis Charlie or JeNeSuisPasCharlie facilitates information dissemination by activist groups, enabling people to access or chance upon sentimental information which strikes a chord with them, possibly leading to participation in the networks in support of the collective ideologies.

The ease of group formation, the ability to organise without organisations, the low entry barriers and costs for collective action as well as the promises of organisations with a flat hierarchy are also benefits attributed to social media activism. In the case of Je suis Charlie, social media activism acted as a tool to fuel the desire for alternative forms of collectivity which disrupts the insularity of networked connections, in so doing facilitating and encouraging participation in collection action through a branding of the Je suis Charlie slogan and a bringing of the protest to the streets and the vigils.
The limitations of social media activism in bringing about political mobilisations have also been raised, with the strong offline groups of journalists and professional media networks playing a significant role in complementing online activities and strengthening the solidarity of the online group. Je suis Charlie however seems to contradict techno-pessimists’ understanding of social media activism as a form of slacktivism which gives people the wrong idea that they are participating in an alternative form of politics in the virtual world which is independent of the real politics. In particular, Je suis Charlie culminated in a protest march within four days of its emergence, with others across the globe actively brandishing the slogan in both their online and offline media as an expression of solidarity in support for freedom of expression.

While the social media platform has encompassed a diverse number of opinions and hence enabled a more democratic production of knowledge than possible in professional medias, the extent to which social media activism is uncertain, as inclusivity seems to be premised on one’s willingness to adopt shared ideologies of the group.
References


