

**How has student activism changed with the advent of the digital age?  
Kristin LaRiviere, Jeanette Snider, Alison Stromberg, and KerryAnn  
O'Meara consider the strengths and weaknesses of digital media in the  
organization of student activism.**

*By Kristin LaRiviere, Jeanette Snider, Alison Stromberg, and KerryAnn O'Meara*

# Protest: Critical Lessons of Using Digital Media for Social Change

**A**T 1:42 PM ON MARCH 6, 2010, Sharon Joy Showalter started a movement—electronically. Taking to Facebook, Showalter started the page “VCU says NO to Ken Cuccinelli’s Discriminatory Letter” to rally Virginia Commonwealth University students against Virginia’s attorney general, Ken Cuccinelli, and his letter forcing the state’s public colleges and universities to rescind sexual orientation from nondiscrimination clauses. With her first post, “Email Ken Cuccinelli and let him know you support equality at VCU,” followed by the comment, “Please post comments here. I’m going to print them out and send them in a box to Ken, just to make sure he gets them,” Showalter started a conversation with hundreds of people from around the country, sparking a dialogue leading to activism on the VCU campus.

Within hours of Showalter’s initial comments, fellow Facebook members joined in the conversation,

posting comments such as “Cuccinelli is an embarrassment,” to a listing of key legislative delegates other users should write to protest Cuccinelli’s statement on nondiscrimination policies. Nearly 48 hours later, the “VCU says NO...” page began updating its news feed to reflect new forums being organized to discuss Ken Cuccinelli’s statement. Users posted updates on rallies, as well as pictures and descriptions of a protest held on March 10, 2010. These critical postings not only helped students and other individuals to organize and attend these protests, but it also helped archive critical information about what happened on campus. Showalter’s simple Facebook page became a critical linking pin for activists within hours, connecting students to one another, the public, and physical protests to make their voices heard on a critical issue.

Recent months have shown the power of digital media in creating change. Blogs, websites, wikis, social media sites (i.e. Facebook, MySpace), e-mail petitions, podcasts, digital cameras, digital voice recording, video

Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com)

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DOI: 10.1002/abc.21081

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cameras, chat rooms, and text messaging have all been playing a vital role in the formation of groups dedicated to social change. From regional movements such as Showalter and the “VCU Says No” movement to the national movements such as the student who led a revolution in Egypt, and the recent KONY 2012 video, digital media is playing an increasingly critical and powerful role in student civic activism. Digital media’s growing presence made us wonder: how does the use of digital media today enhance student learning in civic engagement? Is the use of digital media today better in facilitating student knowledge about, skills in, and outcomes of civic engagement? Or is it just a different media used than in past protest periods?

The purpose of this article is to consider the strengths and weaknesses of digital media in the organization of student activism, and how educators can bet-

ter assist and advise student activists using digital media to create improved learning opportunities. To gain a perspective on the relative strengths and challenges of online media in regard to student activism, we compared contemporary cases of student activism with instances from the 1960s and 1970s era. Specifically, we draw from historical archival research on six cases (three from 1964–1971 and three from 2009–2011; see Table 1) conducted for a History of American Higher Education graduate course at the University of Maryland. We consider the role social media is playing in society as a whole, and how the prevalence of social media influences contemporary activism. Finally, we consider the critical questions higher education educators must consider when advising student activists in a digital age. By exploring implications of the different methods, venues, and technology available to students 40 years ago and today, educators can better support the current generation of students as they learn how to enact change.

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**Kristin LaRiviere** is a recent graduate of the Higher Education Administration Program at the University of Maryland and a Fellows Program Coordinator in the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland.

**Jeanette Snider** is a recent graduate of the Higher Education Administration Program at the University of Maryland and an academic advisor in the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland.

**Alison Stromberg** is a recent graduate of the Higher Education Administration Program at the University of Maryland and a program administrator at the School of Biomedical Engineering, Science and Health Systems at Drexel University.

Dr. **KerryAnn O’Meara** is an associate professor of higher education at the University of Maryland. Her research and practice focus on community and civic engagement, the academic profession, and academic reward systems. She serves as an associate editor for the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* and the *Journal of the Professoriate*.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Jean M. Henscheid (aboutcampus@pdx.edu), and please copy her on notes to authors.

## LEAFLETS OR LAPTOPS: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN PROTEST

TO SET THE STAGE FOR OUR COMPARISON, it is important to underscore the well-known prevalence of digital media in society, particularly among college students. A 2009 study authored by Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady and released by the Pew Foundation reported that nearly 37 percent of all Internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 engage with the Internet—particularly blogs and social networking sites—as a means for political and civic involvement, compared to 17 percent of Internet users ages 30–49 and 12 percent of 50–60-year-old users. For those under age 30, 39 percent of students reported using social networking media for political use, compared to only 16 percent of their nonstudent peers. Contemporary activists have taken to “digital media” not only to assert their politi-

**TABLE 1. INSTANCES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT USED FOR ANALYSIS**

Institution	Location	Dates	Topic	Promotions
University of Maryland, College Park	College Park, Maryland	May 1970	Anti-Cambodian invasion; support national student activism	Leaflets, newspaper advertisements, t-shirts, banners, tabling
University of California, Berkeley	Berkeley, California	September 1964–Spring 1965	Academic freedom, freedom of speech	Phone, leaflets, face-to-face meetings, campus advertisements
Kent State University	Kent, Ohio	May 1–4, 1970	Anti-Vietnam War rally; violence against students	Fliers, marches
University of Maryland, College Park	College Park, Maryland	November 2009	Termination of employment for campus chief diversity officer	Facebook, e-mail
Virginia Commonwealth University	Richmond, Virginia	March 2010	Sexual orientation and nondiscrimination clauses on public higher education campuses	Facebook, Flickr
Defend Education	Varied	Fall 2009–Spring 2010	Increasing costs for access to public higher education	Website, e-mail, blogs, Twitter, Facebook

cal agendas and voices, but also to organize with others, as Peter Levine points out in his 2007 book, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*.

In comparing cases of student activism between 1964–1971 and 2009–2011, we learned that the digital media used today is a vital tool for students, offering student activists an inexpensive, vast, and instantaneous network to rally peers that previous generations had to work extremely hard to build. In an analysis of the use of digital media as a tool in unrest in Egypt and Tunisia, Alec Ross, senior adviser on innovation at the Department of State observed in a 2011 interview on *The Kojo Nnamdi Show* that digital media served three key purposes during the rallies: it acted as an accelerant, it made weak ties strong, and it distributed leadership. Our analysis confirms these themes; however, to these observations we would add that in comparison to the 1964–1971 cases, social media served to lower the financial costs of organizing in the 2009–2011 cases. On the negative side, the relative low commitment to participation in digital media (e.g., simply clicking your support) makes it likely many student participants will not learn the details of the issues they protest or the nature of the organizational systems they seek to change. While we see it was likely many students who participated in

protests in 1964–1971 also lacked critical knowledge of context, there may have been benefits not provided today in terms of in-person organizing.

### SOCIAL MEDIA ACTS AS AN ACCELERANT IN STUDENT PROTEST

**IN MAY 1965 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY**, there were many grassroots student groups that communicated with each other by phone, leaflets handed out on campus, face-to-face meetings, and newspaper articles. Due to the time required for the creation and distribution of these organization tools, it took time (usually at least a few days) to build momentum toward enacting change-oriented events and activities, including rallies, sit-ins, and teach-ins among various events.

Comparatively, in 2010, the number of people who could be contacted and made aware of issues per minute was staggering. Only hours after Virginia’s attorney general, Ken Cuccinelli, sent a letter to Virginia state colleges and universities advising against the addition of sexual orientation to nondiscrimination clauses, students at 12 of Virginia’s top public universities created Facebook pages to rally students in protesting Cuccinelli’s letter. As documented by *Washington Post* blogger Daniel de Vries, within three days, nearly

3,000 people had joined the Facebook group “WE DON’T WANT DISCRIMINATION IN OUR STATE UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES,” and students began posting on Cuccinelli’s Facebook and Twitter pages. The instantaneous nature of the Internet, therefore, accelerates the nature of student activism and builds momentum faster than more traditional forms of activist publications.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA CAN MAKE WEAK TIES STRONGER**

**ONE OF THE WELL-ESTABLISHED BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA** is that it connects diverse groups and makes them instantly feel connected to a common experience. In previous eras of student activism, most movements were localized due to the constraints of physical-based organizational methods, such as fliers, advertisements, and phone calls. For example, in the 1960s era of student protests, most protests were bound by geography and opportunity, meaning only those in the campus vicinity or individuals with direct campus ties were typically involved.

At the University of Maryland, information surrounding campus protests in 1970 was largely distributed via leaflets on campus, articles in the student newspaper, and limited coverage in local newspapers, according to student journalists such as Cheryl Clark, Bob Mondello and Larry Blonder, Bob Hobby, Susan Hayes, and Chad Neighbor. But in 2010, students in various geographical locations and backgrounds could be connected to a movement instantaneously. Ken Cuccinelli’s letter to Virginia’s public higher education institutions was released while a majority of students were leaving campuses for spring break, thus limiting the number of students who would be on campus. Historically this might have stifled student pushback, given the students were not on campus to give “face-time” to protests. Yet due to the connective nature of the Internet, students from across the state rallied their peers, alums, and other individuals via Facebook within hours to take action against Cuccinelli’s letter.

Thanks to Facebook and other digital media outlets, students and other interested individuals were united and activated quickly despite being geographically separated from one another and the campus. In addition, today there are more part-time students working more hours on and off campus than ever before. Digital media—not unlike online courses—have created more flexible access points for students, so involvement in protest can be accessed within their complex schedules. Likewise, the larger and more diverse the institution, the more likely students find a niche and exist within smaller-identity, major-related, or activity-related groups. Digital media creates a venue for such groups to easily connect to support an issue together, despite their own physical affinity groups.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA HELPS DISTRIBUTE LEADERSHIP**

**ON MOST CAMPUSES, STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS HAVE A HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE**, which limits the number of significant leadership positions. Typically there is one student body president, one editor of the newspaper, one president of the fraternity. In terms of organization, the Internet offers student activists a variety of opportunities to organize outside of organizational boundaries or even hierarchical leadership structures.

In the past, civic activities—while typically voluntary—often took place within formal organizations that followed rules, required dues, and used a vertical leadership structure. Thanks to articles written by student journalist Cheryl Clark, we learned the student activists developed a strike committee with the assistance of Robert Schuyler, an anthropology assistant professor. Six subgroups were formed under the strike committee umbrella, including internal publicity (canvassing, the media), finances and supplies, communications, geographics (to decide where groups will demonstrate), and housing.

Yet, with the emergence of digital media, there is little formal organization, no dues, horizontal governance, and sporadic membership. Due to the seem-

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ingly infinite space of the Internet, it is a place that can host political organizations and movements without the guidance or influence of mainstream institutions. Instances such as the current UC Berkeley and the Defend Public Education online group exemplify a more formalized instance of the digital organization; yet, examples such as the Facebook pages surrounding Ken Cuccinelli's letter illustrate that it simply takes a few clicks of a mouse rather than thousands of copies to start a movement.

One limitation of this same advantage, however, is that digital activism and its horizontal structure leads to a poor long-term rallying point and little guidance from figures who might improve the movement. As UC Berkeley graduate students Robert Hurwitz and Michael Rossman recall in their memoirs, the Free Speech Movement had Mario Savio to rally and sustain activists during the 1964 protests; in comparison, modern protests at Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Maryland lacked a prominent figurehead, begging the question of who is in charge and who would follow up with administrators and policymakers after the protests were over. This final point is especially important since digital media sites often allow members to join and leave at will—or not even offer opportunities for formal involvement. While this is empowering to the individual, it often causes Internet-based movements to be loose and less collective.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA LOWERS THE FINANCIAL COST OF ORGANIZING AND IS NIMBLE**

**THE LOW COST OF ONLINE ORGANIZATION** also attracts many student activists. The relatively inexpensive cost of running digital media has dramatically decreased costs of organizing, causing a subsequent growth in the number of movements. With the rise of digital media websites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, a solitary student is able to create groups, petitions, and events to mobilize peers with a few clicks of a mouse and with little or no monetary payment. Websites such as Picasa, You-

Tube, and Flickr are also retaining various accounts of activist events occurring on campuses across the nation and the world, for no price. In the case of the 1970s protests, there were real costs involved in printing flyers and posters, renting buses, and posting bail for activists who were arrested, as well as general administrative operations of phone and meeting costs. For instance, in 1970, University of Maryland activists placed a full-page poster/advertisement in *The Diamondback*. According to Michael Fribush, general manager of Maryland Media Inc. (the newspaper's printer) and a student journalist during the 1970s protests, a full-page ad cost \$401.31 in 1970 (\$2,326.55 adjusted for inflation) (personal communication, January 30, 2012). In January 2012, the cost for a full-page *Diamondback* advertisement is \$2,146; Facebook groups, Twitter, Flickr, and blogs are, on the other hand, free.

Along with the inexpensive—and mostly free—startup fees, the Internet also allows users to easily and entirely reshape events and platforms in a matter of seconds, thus leading to changes in the various roles of producers and consumers of information.

Digital media shaped how students responded to the issue of a diversity officer being dismissed at the University of Maryland in November 2009. A protest and rally was initially suggested by a single student at an open forum early on November 4; however, the flurry of Facebook messages and listserv e-mails that were sent following the town hall meeting and between students on November 4 built the momentum to turn the idea of protest into reality. Students interviewed for the history of higher education project that sparked this article revealed that the messages about the protest did not specifically focus on the rally being aimed toward the dismissal of Cordell Black. One particular Facebook message sent to students described how students must fight for their ancestors who were abused, the diversity tensions on campus, and the lack of voice students had in the decision-making process. As the events at the University of Maryland illustrate, students can simultaneously be producers and consumers of information. As students read information from vari-

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**SOCIAL MEDIA MAY FURTHER DISCONNECT STUDENTS FROM UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGE THEY SEEK AND THE BEST STRATEGIES TO PURSUE**

**WHILE THE INTERNET HAS CREATED NATURAL NETWORKS** for the organization of civic activism, there are important open questions about its impact on social change, especially on college campuses. The easy access and horizontal governance of online movements may make joining simple, but also allows students to leave within seconds. Scholars such as Peter Levine contend that this open-door nature makes online movements less action- and group-oriented. On many social media sites, members simply need to click to join a group, instead of the era of the 1960s where students needed to physically attend meetings in order to develop movements. The lack of physical presence may mean students are joining online to simply say they are a part of a movement, instead of actually being a part of the movement.

Social patterns such as social inequalities are also reflected to some degree in the Internet, which feeds the potential for online groups to be less collective and impacts the organization and actions of online activism. For instance, online movements may exclude students or other individuals who do not have Internet access or students who do not have the time to devote to keeping up the instantaneous nature of the Internet.

In their 2009 Pew Research Report, Smith and his coauthors question if online efforts will have the same level of influence on policymakers as more traditional forms of activism, such as petitions or face-

to-face political discussions. Is the Internet allowing a more diverse group of students to deeply engage with issues due to the vast amount of information available in seconds? Or, is social media encouraging information-“lite” protests with minimal student engagement since it does not require the time and resource commitments as traditional activism?

Contemporary cases such as that seen at Virginia Commonwealth University suggest some students engage in the process of online activism without the necessary “due diligence” needed to enact sustained change, including targeting key policymakers. When students at VCU took action against Cuccinelli’s cease order on nondiscrimination clause changes, hundreds of students, faculty, and staff joined Facebook groups focused on developing an on-campus rally to deplore Cuccinelli’s remarks. When the publicized rally time arrived, hundreds of people showed up for the on-campus protests, with signs, banners, and remarks. While the campus location was convenient for the protest, it was not placing student activists at the location where change could be made—the Virginia Legislative Assembly.

Out of the hundreds gathered on the VCU grounds for the primary protest, fewer than 100 students followed the campus rally with a canvassing session at the Virginia Legislative Assembly, the body with the authority to allow public institutions to include sexual orientation in nondiscrimination clauses. Examples such as VCU highlight the power digital media has in organizing and rallying students around issues, but also make clear those involved in online protest need to use the medium to foster better understanding of seats of power around those issues. Clearly, many protesters in the 1960s and 1970s also lacked knowledge regarding how the institutions they sought to change worked. Yet the sustained interactions and experiences they had together, with professors and with off-campus groups like the NAACP or SNCC, may have provided greater spaces for such learning.

# Our comparison shows that there is a critical need for educators to use social media to strengthen student knowledge, skills, and orientation toward civic engagement and activism.

Since digital media-based movements such as the VCU rally move so rapidly without prominent leadership, the actual actions often lack the necessary guidance to channel long-term actions toward the body with the change-making authority.

## CONCLUSION

COMPARED TO THEIR PREDECESSORS OF THE 1960S AND 1970S, student activists of today face new threats and opportunities stemming from the prevalence of digital platforms. Moreover, modern instances show how it is challenging at best to learn how student affairs educators and faculty members can best leverage online platforms for inclusive and lasting civic engagement and social change. Researchers such as Smith and his coauthors and Levine question if the Internet is simply a tool for those who would have been naturally more action-oriented, or if the Internet is offering opportunities for students that typically would be inactive civically due to the historical work needed to be involved.

Our comparison shows that there is a critical need for educators to use social media to strengthen student knowledge, skills, and orientation toward civic engagement and activism. As we have demonstrated by comparing contemporary activism to the 1964–1971 protest era, social media leverages unique opportunities for more distributed leadership, lower-cost organizing, and connecting diverse groups of students. However, it will not guarantee someone stays in the fight for the long haul, or knows where to target action. Social media is also no substitute for true knowledge building about the root causes of problems or sources of power.

In higher education, this means helping students understand who has power, or shares power, over specific functional areas where change is desired. Sustaining long-term change requires understanding the history of organizing and protests at an institution or against a cause, and which strategies are likely to

achieve the best ends within an organization's structure and culture. Educators can look to groups such as Educause and works such as Helen Barrett's on electronic portfolios to support their endeavors in engaging students in effective digital learning and action.

As such, digital media needs to be wielded by educators as one of many tools to engage students in the change-making process. Savvy educators and activists might even find ways to use social media itself to overcome the challenge of a lack of long-term commitment to seeing social change movements through more than just the initial few days. They could find ways in which social networking groups could intensify or strengthen commitment and networks and to engage students in ways that increase knowledge about social concerns and where their action should be oriented. Regardless, educators have a responsibility to help students wield social media as a tool that educates, strengthens commitments, and contributes to social change.

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