
Activism, in 140 characters or less

- Diya Kar

What if Gandhi had Twittered on the way to Dandi to make salt? Or if Martin Luther King, Jr. set his Facebook message as “I have a dream?” The rapid growth and emergence of new social media in recent years has changed the scale and scope of social and political activism. The success of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign demonstrated how these forms of media can be used to mobilize and organize millions, leaving his less-technologically savvy opponent befuddled and behind. Yet, the advent of these forms of new social media raises important questions about the future of social activism.

Political scientist Benedict Anderson wrote in his classic work, *Imagined Communities*, that the emergence of the printing press redefined how people saw themselves as being part of a community or nation. As newspapers and other printed works became more readily available, individuals in different parts of the same nation could increasingly conceptualize themselves as belonging to the same community, the same causes and therefore somehow connected. New social media, then, is redefining the kinds of communities individuals see themselves as belonging to. By clicking on “Like” we can identify ourselves on Facebook as supporting a particular political candidate, rock star or food; or by joining a particular group, we can belong to “A Million Strong against Genocide.” Yet, even as we belong virtually to these groups, what are the consequences for actual forms of social activism?

A quick search on YouTube (the irony is not

lost), which brings up clips of King’s well-known speech, however demonstrates something else; as does a Google Image search shows Gandhi and his followers on their march of civil disobedience against colonial rule; or even the footage from Obama’s election night speech in Chicago’s Millennium Park. What is evident in these images is the fervor and dedication of the people in the crowds. Is it possible, then, to ever virtually constitute this sense of engagement?

French social theorist Emile Durkheim argued that the sense of belonging to society emerges through collective action. Durkheim focused on religious ceremonies in which collective worship, or collective effervescence, served not only individual spirituality, but also created in the individual a sense or feeling of the social. This sense of the collective, however, could dissipate over time, and so it becomes necessary to reaffirm the social through regular participation in rituals. In many ways, participation on social activism requires a similar kind of collective effervescence. Participation in rallies, protests, sit-ins or marches achieves something that is inherently missing in the virtual: the reaffirmation of the collective.

This is not to argue that activism through new forms of social media is disingenuous or wrong; rather it, is to consider the ways in which social media can be harnessed without losing the kind of work that traditional forms of social activism achieved. What do we do, in other words, after we have clicked the “like” button? □

