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Change.Org: Empowering Everyday Citizens to Enact Social Change

Leah Skinner

Curtin University and Open Universities Australia

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Professor Mike Kent & Dr Jane Armstrong

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Abstract

Trends in Australian political opinion show that citizens are not satisfied with traditional democratic processes and systems and are looking to alternative online spaces to engage in civic action. Additionally, citizens are more likely to engage in politics online and feel empowered by the ease, affordability and reach that decentralised digital platforms like Change.org and social networking sites (SNSs) afford them. In addition, this paper highlights how clicktivist behaviours are easy civic actions for citizens to engage in that build campaign momentum and lead to social change.

Introduction

Recent research conducted by Cameron and McAllister (2019) shows that Australians are less engaged with traditional offline politics and are more engaged with decentralised online forms of political participation. Similarly, this study shows that Australians are not satisfied with democracy, they trust politicians less and they believe that the government is only looking after themselves (2019). Couple this research in political trends with Papacharissi and Trevey's (2018) sentiment that "Citizens want [– of politics –] personalised responses and to feel as though they have some say in their own governance..." (p. 89), and it is no wonder that Change.org has seen prominence from Australian citizens since its emergence in Australia in 2012 (Halpin et al., 2018, p. 434). Furthermore, Monocher (2019) provides case studies that show how Change.org and SNSs empower citizens to hold businesses ethically accountable for their brands. These case studies prove that everyday citizens are turning to Change.org and other social networking sites (SNSs) to regain agency over their lives and to be more active across issues that concern them (Papacharissi and Trevey, 2018, p. 89). By taking to social networks and engaging in political discussion online, digital networks provide a virtual civil society for citizen activists to leverage their online connections, engaging a networked audience to participate in a wide range of citizenry issues. This paper will demonstrate how social networking sites and web 2.0 tools and technologies empower citizens to engage in opportunities to enact social change by leveraging their network connections from platforms like Change.org. It is also noted here that despite theories of digital networks birthing an era of slacktivism, low-level 'clicktivist' behaviours are not such small deeds that they go unnoticed: they contribute to campaign momentum, support connective action and lead to social change (Freelon et al. 2020, p. 1).

Change.org's online petitions are powerful digital campaigning tools that equip citizens to challenge elites and effect change by leveraging their connections on SNSs. In *Online consumer activism: Challenging companies with Change.org*, Minocher (2019) found that consumer activists were using Change.org and SNSs to challenge business elites on their business practices. And as momentum built, a negative brand identity formed across digital networks, forcing brands to start listening to the collective voice consequently, beginning the process of effecting change (p. 635). Therefore, social networks and online petitions provided a means for consumers to hold companies ethically accountable for their brand (p. 620). That is to say that the concerned consumer not only cares about how the brands they know and love supply goods and services to them, but they are also motivated and empowered, through their own moral compass, to hold brands accountable by taking to Change.org and SNSs to expose unethical business practices (p. 622). In this way, Change.org and SNSs can place a glaring spotlight on industries from the hands of consumer watchdogs.

Minocher (2019) provides evidence of these effects with a petition kickstarted in 2016 against Amazon Canada after publishing a memoir by the serial killer Robert Pickton (p. 627). This controversial memoir falsely argued for Pickton's innocence and alluded to a police scandal. Consumers were outraged that Amazon Canada could endorse such a controversial figure, leading consumers to associate Amazon as a brand that only cared about its bottom line and cared nothing about its business integrity or ethics (p. 631). Consumers took to Change.org to share the petition and their outrage across their SNSs. As a result of sharing the petition across networks, coupled with public outcry that was building from these online networks, 50,000 signatures accumulated in a single day supporting the removal of Pickton's book from Amazon Canada's site (p. 632). News coverage spanned both nationally and internationally. And as consumers continued to share their concerns about the Amazon brand supporting the book, so too did stories of distrust in Amazon's business ethics spread, leading to a negative brand identity (p. 621). As a result of the massive public outcry, Amazon pulled Pickton's book from its shelves (p. 632). In effect, consumers who leverage their connections from Change.org and SNSs are forcing companies to listen to consumer demands. The global connections that SNSs and Change.org afford consumers mean that companies will be held responsible for their business practices, forcing brands to appease the masses and remain ethically accountable or risk losing consumers and a good-standing brand reputation (p. 633). SNSs and digital platforms, namely online petition sites like Change.org,

are powerful campaigning tools that transfer power from dominant elites and place it in the hands of citizens, empowering consumers to act on injustices, inequalities and wrongdoings.

The connective architecture of Change.org provides everyday citizens with access to create online petitions that can be shared across globally connected SNSs, providing activists with the opportunities to reach a networked audience and attract enough attention that petitions can effect social change. Importantly, SNSs and decentralised platforms like Change.org afford activists and members of marginalised and minority groups a platform to expose the inequalities and injustices they experience in culture and society (Fransen-Taylor and Narayan, 2018, p. 313). The recent victory that Community Action for Rainbow Rights (CARR) (2021) won is evidence of this. CARR protested the discriminatory decision the committee of the Randwick & Coogee Ladies Swimming Association Inc. (R&CLSA Inc.) made to ban trans women from being allowed to swim in McIvor's Ladies Baths unless they had undergone gender reassignment surgery. The petition received the support of over 16,000 signatures. But after receiving no retraction from the R&CLSA Inc. and no official communication from Randwick council members, CARR decided to take matters offline in a peaceful protest to lobby the Randwick council members for a response. CARR (2021) updated their petition followers on the Change.org platform with a request to join them on 23 February 2021 to participate in a planned protest offline. In addition to their Change.org petition, they turned to their Facebook and Twitter profiles to invite its members in those networks to attend the offline protest (Community Action for Rainbow Rights, Feb 2021). According to CARR's Facebook event page, 100 people were in attendance to support the offline rally (Community Action for Rainbow Rights, Feb 2021). Because of CARR's online and offline petition to policymakers, and by leveraging their online network connections, their petition efforts garnered the attention of the Sydney Morning Herald (2021). They reported on 28 March 2021 that the offending member of the R&CLSA Inc. stepped down from her position as Committee President (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021). Decentralised digital platforms like Change.org are instrumental in contemporary politics because they deliver to everyday people the means to leverage their social networks, connecting sociopolitical discourse with a networked self and a networked audience outside of traditional top-down institutions (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 305, & Halpin et al. 2018, p. 428, 437). Change.org and SNSs afford citizens opportunities to express their concerns without an overarching hierarchy diluting or misconstruing their message, as well as construct a sense of self through civic action that can be presented across social networks (Papacharissi, 2010, p.

304-305). Moreover, the appeal of most social networks – apart from being grassroots in nature thus absent from hierarchical structures (González-Bailón, 2014, p. 209) – is the low-cost, instant global network that connects audiences to issues and encourages everyday citizen to participate and engage with politics (Freelon et al. p.1).

Change.org empowers everyday citizens with the agency to act on sociopolitical issues concerning them from a decentralised platform. Change.org pride itself on being the “world’s platform for change” (2020 Impact Report). Their mission to empower a global citizenry of change-makers through online petitions is the world’s largest platform of its kind, with over 329 million global users (2020 Impact report, 2020). Change.org allows subscribers to connect with and develop a network of change-makers from both their platform and other SNSs, and empowers everyday people to connect with issues concerning them. And Papacharissi and Trevey (2018) note that “people pay attention to politics when they believe an issue is relevant to them, and they understand relevance through emotion and personal identity” (p. 88). Storytelling then is not only imperative to framing political debates but is also paramount to the success of a campaign: the better a petition is at evoking the feelings and emotions of the public, the more momentum and attention it will draw (Vromen and Coleman, 2013, p. 78-79). Change.org’s framework encourages citizens to tell their stories and share them with an audience of change-makers. Importantly, Change.org educates its users on the best way to create a successful campaign, showing budding activists how to enlist storytelling tactics to attract enough attention to effect social change. They educate activists on how to share a petition with their global network whilst also delivering the opportunity for activists to connect with past petition signers who have subscribed to email updates from Change.org (Change.org, n.d.).

Halpin et al. (2018) conducted a 5-year research starting from February 2012 to February 2017 on how Australian citizens used Change.org to gauge the types of petitions everyday Australians were creating and the types of participants they were attracting. Their research found that online petitions were an “important feature of political engagement in advanced democracies” simply because they better represent the collective voice and extend political discourse beyond partisan-centred institutions. Similarly, Halpin et al. (2018) found that Australians were more likely to sign a petition than participate in any other form of political activity. Their research on Change.org in the Australian political landscape found that 1) petitions were predominantly started by citizens, were predominantly political, and were directly targeted at government institutions; 2) most people signing petitions were not

serial participants: they were signing a single petition only, and 3) super users – active participants on Change.org who signed multiple petitions – engaged in a broad range of issues, suggesting that Change.org was not just an echo chamber for political views and opinions (p. 428). This study concluded that Change.org had delivered the traditional form of petitioning into a streamlined contemporary digital landscape that makes signing, creating and distributing a petition easier (p. 440). Halpin et al. (2018) also found that Change.org’s decentralised base drew in a broader, more diversified range of petition topics and issues and that this did not lead to a mass creation of frivolous issues. Moreover, Halpin et al. (2018) found that most petitions were either political – covering several governmental sectors – or non-political consumer-based petitions. Their study stepped away from identifying whether online petitions amounted to “victories” and focused on the behaviours of petition creators and signers, delivering key insights into the behaviours of petition creators and signers, somewhat defusing scathing slacktivist theories (p. 439).

Low-effort behaviours characterised as liking, sharing, commenting and signing online petitions are not such “low-effort” acts that they go unnoticed (Freelon et al., 2020, p. 1). On the contrary, Freelon et al. (2020) suggest that these “low-cost actions” help to boost the visibility of online campaigns (p. 5). Minocher (2019) likewise found that “low-effort actions” aggregated towards “larger collective impact” (p. 628-629). Similarly, Halpin et al. (2018) noted that their studies did not find examples of clicktivist activities but found petition signers were calculated and deliberate in their choice to support a particular cause (p. 439). Minocher (2019) found evidence of clicktivist activity when consumers called Nestlé out on their Facebook page – after a report found that Nestlé used palm oil in their products – rather than taking more affirmative action like boycotting the brand (p. 623). However, whilst this instance details how online participations can fall short of affirmative action, there is far more evidence to prove that the “clicktivist” is not just a “keyboard warrior” (Halpin et al., 2018, p. 438) but a key ingredient in the digital activist mix that is effecting change.

Conclusion

Citizens are using social networks like Change.org and other social media to participate in sociopolitical issues. Furthermore, these networks empower citizens with the agency to effect social change across various sociopolitical issues affecting them with as little effort as clicking a button. And these low-effort participatory acts – like digitally signing a petition, liking, sharing, and commenting on online petitions – amount to campaign

momentum both online and offline, moving towards enacting democratic processes. The digital architecture of Change.org and SNSs allow citizens to affordably and swiftly connect with a globally networked audience that can mobilise and build campaign momentum quickly, increasing the chances of campaign success. These digital networks empower everyday citizens to share stories of injustice, inequality and other wrongdoings by leveraging their existing connections and formulating new relationships and networks. Change.org and SNSs transfers power from top-down establishments into the hands of everyday citizens who are both motivated and empowered to challenge elites and enact social change.

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