

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY

Saving the World, a Post at a Time –Infographics and Digital Activism

EUGENE RYOO
SPRING 2022

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Cybersecurity Analytics and Operations
with honors in Cybersecurity Analytics and Operations.

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Fred Fonseca
Professor-in-Charge of Social and Organizational Informatics
Thesis Supervisor

Anna Squicciarini
Frymoyer Chair in Information Sciences and Technology
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

The ‘infographic’ is a posting format that rose to prominence on social media platform Instagram in the Spring and Summer of 2020. Infographics are a form of digital activism that attempt to spread awareness of issues and spurn their viewers to contribute to real-world social movements; however, infographics are instead most often reposted by Instagram users performatively, more akin to showing low-stakes support or participation in a movement than real-world actions. This paper makes a distinction between ‘digital activism’ and ‘activism done online’ to show how while some technology can be used effectively by activists, infographics do not qualify as meaningful activism, instead functioning closer to voicing of support or participation in a movement. This paper also explains how factors endemic to social media caused the infographic format to become popular in the first place while also contributing to its ineffectiveness as a means of real-world social change.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	iii
LIST OF TABLES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
Chapter 1 The Internet Age.....	1
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	3
History of Activism Using Digital Tools	3
The Power of Open Publishing	4
Fake News, Social Media, and Open Publishing	6
Entirely Online Activism	9
Chapter 3 Infographics at a Glance.....	11
At a Glance.....	11
Infographics Versus Other Forms of Content	13
Why Infographics?	16
Chapter 4 Criticisms of Infographics.....	17
Infographics as Participation.....	17
Oversimplification	19
Commodifying Suffering (For Your Benefit)	21
The User Response.....	23
A Separation of Intentions	25
Chapter 5 Conclusion.....	27
Does Anything Matter at All?	27
Further Research	28

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 - Referencing 'the algorithm'	2
Figure 2 - "How to Spot Fake News"	8
Figure 3 – Misinformation Labels from Instagram and Twitter	8
Figure 4: Example infographic	12
Figure 5 – Police Brutality Infographic	12
Figure 6 – Reflection Infographic	13
Figure 7 – “Barstool is Sexist” infographic	14
Figure 8 – AAPI Allyship Infographic	14
Figure 9 –Infographics Unrelated to Social Justice	15
Figure 10 – Settler Colonialism Infographic.....	19
Figure 11: 'Corporate Memphis' Wikipedia Entry	22
Figure 12 – Reductress Satirical Infographic.....	23
Figure 13 – Satirical Infographic	23
Figure 14 – Infographics Highlighting Non-Performative Activism.....	25
Figure 15 – Embedded Donation Button	26

LIST OF TABLES

No table of figures entries found.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Fred Fonseca for his willingness to advise me on this thesis. I would not have been exposed to many of the ideas touched upon in this thesis without my experiences taking and teaching his classes, which greatly enhanced my experience at Penn State and caused me to think critically about the implications of the technology we use in our everyday lives. His patience during the research and writing processes is also greatly appreciated.

I would also like to thank my friends and family, particularly my mother, my bandmates, and my coworkers at Eclairer. I could not have written this thesis without their patience, goodwill, and support.

Chapter 1

The Internet Age

The Internet has shifted from a simple digital space for sharing information to something that itself shapes the way information is created, shared, digested, and utilized. Although humans are social by nature, our species was never meant to comprehend information at the rate it is produced online today; for example, over 720,000 hours of video content are uploaded to video-sharing site YouTube every day (Moshin, 2022). The sheer volume of information produced every day by Internet users has led to the creation of an ‘attention economy’, where Internet-based communications are all forced to compete for engagement and interaction from users. The Berkley Economic Review theorizes the attention economy has formed because ‘technological advances have made an overwhelming amount of information available, strategically aimed at capturing our attention’ (“Paying Attention: The Attention Economy”, 2022).

The attention economy weighs particularly heavy on those with monetary stake on Internet content such as digital creators or influencers. These parties, whose livelihoods are dependent on their reach and influence on a digital content platform such as YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok, often attempt to find methods to increase their content’s visibility and reach in order to create the largest profit opportunity possible. ‘The algorithm’ is often used as a monolithic term for the infrastructure and machine-learning powered algorithms that determine what content is shown to users on various platforms. Often described as ‘black boxes’ due to their relative obscurity from content creators, the mysterious inner workings of these algorithms have been discussed at length in various publications.



Figure 1 - Referencing 'the algorithm' ("Chaz Bear – Instagram Photos and Videos", 2022)

This does not only affect content creators – anyone looking to post something beyond their immediate circle of friends and family must take external factors into consideration in order to ‘game the algorithm’. These include time of posting, visual presentation, language, etc. One such group includes political and social justice activists. The use of digital technology is not new in activist movements; for example, the 2011 Arab Spring, where social media was used both for activist communications as well as disseminating news to spectators outside the country (Brown, Guskin & Mitchell, 2022). However, the social media environment has caused causes themselves to become content, almost indistinguishable from normal content found on social media.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

History of Activism Using Digital Tools

‘Digital Activism’ is defined as ‘political activism on the internet or political movements relying on it’ (Ozkula, 2021). Early examples of Internet-based political activism primarily used the Internet as a means of organization, communication, and spreading awareness; for example, a notable consumer privacy case involving ‘Lotus MarketPlace’, a market intelligence database shipped directly to marketers stored on a CD-ROM jointly developed by software company Lotus Development Corporation and credit reporting agency Equifax. After news of the software was spread across Internet message boards and computer conferences, over 30,000 individuals contacted Lotus and requested their information be removed from the database; a year later, the product was cancelled entirely (Culnan, 2022). A more contemporary example is ‘KONY 2012’, a viral video campaign attempting to raise awareness of the war crimes of Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. After reaching almost 100 million views in less than a week (“KONY 2012 | Invisible Children”, 2022), the United States senate passed a resolution backing ‘the effort of Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and the newest country, South Sudan, to stop Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army’. (Cassata, 2022)

Internet technology was also used in more traditional examples of civil disobedience and disruption; an early example of a ‘Distributed Denial of Service’ attack occurred during the 1994 ‘Intervasion of the UK’, where various activist groups coordinated email and fax bombs against the government of the United Kingdom in response to a bill attempting to outlaw outdoor raves

and rave music. These groups were able to successfully shut down government email servers and communications for at least a week (Lewis, 2022).

The Power of Open Publishing

Digital activism is also often noted for its ability to circumvent traditional power structures in the media. This is not only limited to Internet-based activism; principles of freedom of information are baked into the Internet itself due to the ‘free software movement’, which encourages the free usage, editing, and distribution of software. Here, ‘free’ refers to ‘free speech’, not to price, although much open-source software is released for no cost and relies on donations. Randhawa writes “The open source mentality revolves around sharing and collaboration” (Randhawa, 2022). Although most end users only interact with proprietary software created by for-profit companies such as Google, Microsoft, and Meta, much of the software running infrastructure behind the scenes is mainly maintained by groups of volunteers and non-profit foundations, such as the Apache Web Server, the Linux kernel, etc.

In the past, mass media communication was almost entirely controlled by large media corporations and broadcasters. It was simply not feasible for individuals and common citizens to create content to be shared on a wide scale due to production costs, lack of expertise, etc. However, as computing technology became cheaper and more accessible to the general populace, these technical barriers were overcome. Today, anyone with a reasonably powerful computer and an Internet connection can utilize open-source software and copyright-free media in order to produce their own high-quality images, videos, podcasts, blogs, etc.

However, even after getting around these technical limitations, there remains the issue of control of broadcast infrastructure; similar to media production, mainstream media broadcasting is mainly controlled by a small group of large media companies such as Comcast, Time Warner, and Paramount. A blog post advocating open publishing says:

“To see the news you need to pay with money or with your time spent watching ads (usually for cars) or both. To create the news you need to pay expensive public relations consultants. To write the news you need to obey corporate news values, making stories on a production line, for maximum advertising impact at minimum cost. To edit the news you need to be a global stock market newswire service or a multinational media company. To distribute the news you need to have one of 6 TV transmission towers in a city of millions.” (Arnison, 2022)

Even if you can produce a piece of content for distribution, without staying in the good graces of media executives with profit incentives, it is extremely difficult, if not practically impossible, to get your piece on the airwaves. This way, media companies and their executives become the arbiters of what can be spread in the public sphere and what is common knowledge. The Internet solves both of these problems through its reliance on user-generated content and decentralization, although in the recent past there have been several examples of technology companies deplatforming users and removing content due to external pressures. One of the first examples of a coordinated Internet-based open publishing movement was Indymedia. First created to provide the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, Washington, open Internet publishing allowed news of the protests to be spread without a reliance on mainstream media outlets – in the words of activist Dorothy Kidd, "The timing was right, there was a space, the platform was

created, the Internet was being used, we could bypass the corporate media, we were using open publishing, we were using multimedia platforms” (Kidd, 2022). Although Internet infrastructure is still largely controlled by large corporations, almost anyone has the power to purchase a domain name and create a website to host content for their cause or use a ‘What you See is What You Get’ (WYSIWYG) website builder such as Weebly (now owned by Square), Wix.com, or SquareSpace.

Fake News, Social Media, and Open Publishing

It would be wrong to discuss Internet activism without a discussion of activism using social media websites. Although social media sites are not necessarily ‘open publishing’ in the sense that the content production process is not transparent, their primary draw is user-generated content. As such, users are empowered to create high-quality, informative posts that reflect their real-world opinions and ideological stances. Social media sites often show users content from outside of their immediate circle of friends in order to drum up engagement – for example, ‘trending’ topics on Twitter. This can further assist those looking to spread awareness of causes by getting the word out to people who would not normally be exposed to a topic or news item. Although everyone has a distinctly different experience on a social media site due to their unique network of friends, family, interests, and acquaintances, social media sites are still centralized in the sense that they are controlled by a single authority. In many cases, this authority is the company that created and maintains the website. This means that technology companies today often fill the same role as media companies; controlling both the means of production (the site itself, having an account to post), and also what is able to be ‘broadcast’ (hosted on their site).

There have been several instances of controversial users being banned from specific platforms, achieved with two primary methods – through censorship of content itself, such as Facebook removing disinformation posts, or through the removal of content from infrastructure; for example, a hosting provider like Amazon Web Services refusing to host your website.

However, the openness of open publishing has its drawbacks as well – for example, the ‘fake news’ and misinformation phenomenon of the recent past. In theory, since anyone can publish almost anything to the Internet, fringe opinions that would normally be unable to reach large audiences are able to find a platform for hosting, publishing, and dissemination. Bad actors are also able to take advantage of the same tools used by regular Internet users to spread exaggerations, articles with purposefully limited scope or omitted information, or at worst, even outright lies. Social media in particular is a large vector for the spread of fake news, since the same social media mechanisms that allow information to spread also benefit fake news – articles can be spread widely within the platform to anyone with an account, and users are able to comment at will, often with polarized opinions that drum up further discussion and engagement, spreading the content even more. Additionally, much of the credibility lent to mainstream media is able to be abstracted by the veneer of social media. Figure 2 contains a fact sheet from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions on fake news – however, when a piece of fake news is reposted by a friend, the true source, author, and date are obscured. Additionally, headlines are often purposefully exaggerated or misconstrued in order to further generate clicks and generate reactionary responses.



Figure 2 - "How to Spot Fake News"
(["How to Spot Fake News.pdf – Wikipedia"](#), 2022)

Social media sites have struggled to respond to the fake news phenomenon; Facebook in particular has been heavily criticized for their lackluster response to the spread of fake news and misinformation on their site. Twitter and Instagram have added labels and stickers to content that contains information about sensitive topics such as COVID-19 vaccination and the 2020 United States presidential election.

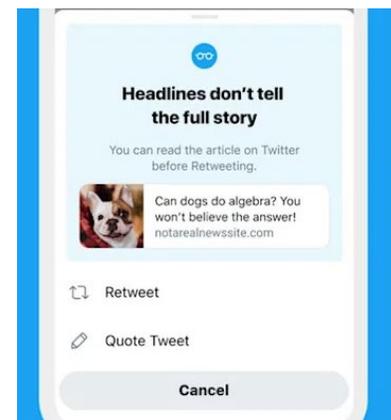
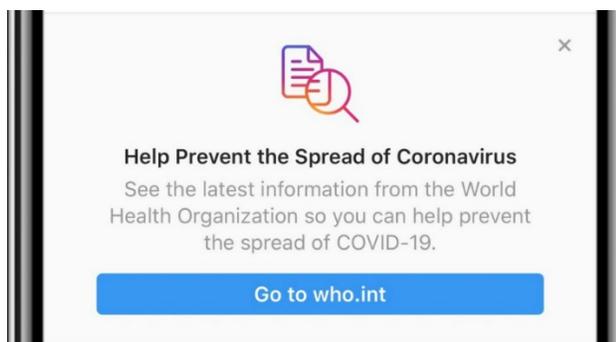


Figure 3 – Misinformation Labels from Instagram and Twitter
(Bell, 2022), (Constine, 2022)

Entirely Online Activism

Digital activism can be broken down into three distinct categories: advocacy, recruitment/movement building, and organization/coordination (Ozkula, 2022). ‘Activism that is done online’ can also be broken down into categories - Online petitions, hosting of campaign websites, large-scale verbal protests, and most severely, the hacking of websites (Ozkula, 2022). There is an important distinction between these two actions: while digital activism is primarily made up of activities that support real-world actions, ‘activism that is done online’ consists of actions taken entirely within a digital space. Despite the difference in medium entirely online and real-world activism share many obstacles. Since all large-scale movements rely on collective actions, rallying people to partake in a movement remains an obstacle no matter the medium – some of the largest obstacles to participation include how to get people to join, how to coordinate action, how to pursue the organization’s purpose most effectively, who the adversary is, and how to best confront the organization’s adversaries (Sivitanides, 2022).

The effectiveness of ‘activism that is done online’ has come under scrutiny on many occasions, mainly due to the level of commitment. Many actions that take place entirely online, such as sending emails or signing petitions, are low-cost and low-impact forms of activism, and seldom lead to large social change. Actions implemented by social media networks have often been criticized as merely being performative, such as allowing users to change their profile picture to pre-designed templates decrying their support for a certain cause.

Opinions towards digital activism can also be categorized; for example, Sivitanides describes three possible viewpoints: optimists, pessimists, and persistent. Optimists are those who believe that networked technologies such as social media allow communities to take more direct actions outside of traditional power structures. Pessimists primarily fear how networked

technologies can be used for surveillance and control, as well as providing new potential targets for bad actors such as terrorist groups. The persistent viewpoint states that although technology may not lead to new effective forms of activism, it can be used to enhance previously existing movements and tactics. Many of the criticisms of digital activism today fall under the persistent viewpoint – although signing petitions and sending emails may not lead to change in isolation, they can be used as springboards to enact real change. For example, the number of signers of an online petition is often cited while emphasizing the amount of support a particular social movement.

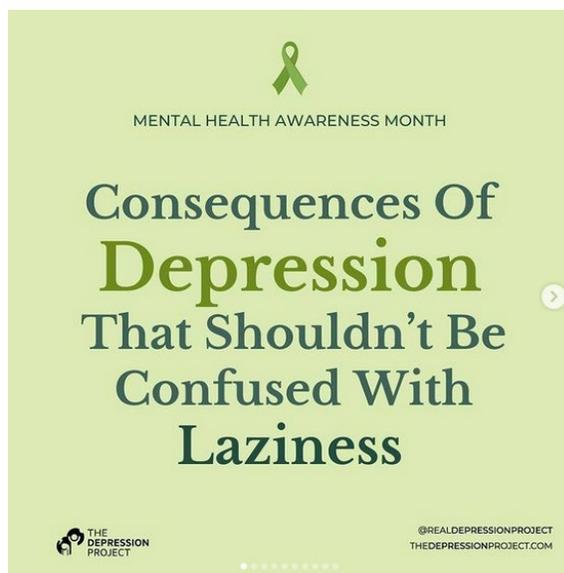
Chapter 3

Infographics at a Glance

At a Glance

Earlier a distinction was made between ‘activism accomplished with digital tools’, such as spreading awareness of issues online, and ‘activism done online’ (email campaigns, online petitions, hacking of websites, DDoS attacks). Nowadays, ‘activism done online’ is often accomplished using social media websites, since they have pre-built groups of users who will propagate content on their own – for example, spreading a link to an online petition through Facebook groups or Instagram posts. However, using social media comes at a cost; social media sites often have hundreds of thousands, if not millions of users – how is a link to an online petition supposed to stand out in this sea of updates from friends and posts from brands?

Instagram users’ solution to this is the ‘infographic’. Infographics seek to simplify and explain complex issues using collections of text and images, similar to a presentation. Designed with social media in mind, infographics conform to Instagram’s preferred 1:1 aspect ratio and often contains hooks or inflammatory hooks to drum up engagement, as well as explicitly directing viewers to comment or spread the post as well to reach even more users. For example, this post from @realdepressionproject explicitly asks viewers to share and comment; while to users, this simply appears to be supporting an important cause, in reality this is providing engagement and ‘boosting’ the post to the algorithms that drive content to Instagram’s users.



realdepressionproject ❤️ Please share to raise awareness - the symptoms of depression affect everything, especially one's day-to-day living / behaviours #mentalhealthawarenessmonth

❤️ We made this post to add more depth to why someone may do these things - instead of attributing it to "laziness", please recognise the role depression has in these moments.

Drop three ❤️❤️❤️ if you can relate

👉 Comment below: What are some other consequences of depression and how do they affect you?

👉 Our brand new course "How To Make Someone Feel Loved During A Depressive Episode" is launched! Click the link in our bio to find out more

Figure 4: Example infographic (The Depression Project, 2021)

Many infographics discussing systemic racism and police brutality were produced during the Spring and Summer of 2020, following the murder of Black American citizen George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota (The New York Times, 2022). These infographics made particular efforts to mobilize users outside of social media, often through contacting politicians, donating to nonprofits, or self-education and reflection.



campaignzero 🌟 Hey fam, many of you have been asking what more you can do and we've heard you.

Today we launch a new campaign: #8CANTWAIT. Together these 8 use of force policies can reduce police violence by 72%. And your Mayor has the power to adopt them all right now.

We need YOU to call and email your mayors, wherever you are, and tell them to adopt these 8 life-saving policies RIGHT NOW! We cannot standby any longer while the police kill people. Visit 8CANTWAIT.ORG and use our tools to find your Mayor's contact info, and see if your city already has any of these policies in place.

Help us spread the word and tag 10 people you want to see this policy! Together we CAN END police violence in America. 🌟

Figure 5 – Police Brutality Infographic (Campaign Zero, 2022)



Figure 6 – Reflection Infographic (Chung, 2022)

Infographics Versus Other Forms of Content

At first glance, infographics may not seem any different than a regular informational post. There are two key differences – explicit requests for engagement, and the language used within the posts themselves. Infographics seek to spur a change in a user’s real-world behavior; as such, they often employ aggressive or even accusatory language in order to justify that users change their behavior or take a certain action. This was especially prevalent in posts related to racism and racial justice (#BlackLivesMatter, #StopAsianHate, etc.). In Figure 8, note the usage of the word ‘how’ – in this case, ‘how’ implies that once a user engages with this post, they will now be better equipped to fight racism and be a supporter of the Asian American community.



Figure 7 – “Barstool is Sexist” infographic (Ford, 2020)

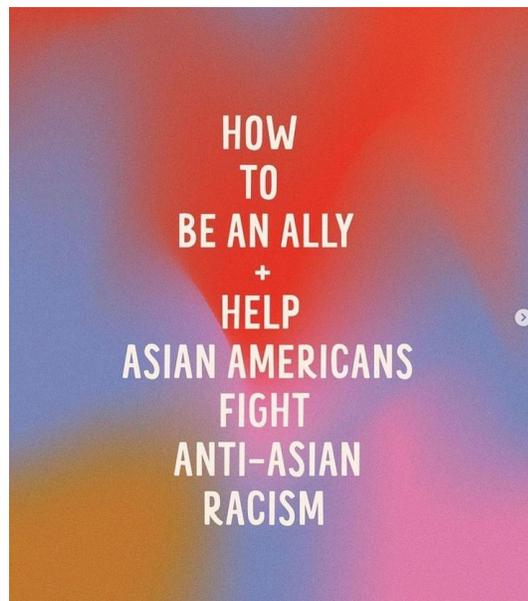


Figure 8 – AAPI Allyship Infographic (Buddha Jewelry, 2021)

The infographic format was later adopted by causes beyond social justice in order to most effectively spread information. Many accounts that specialized in posting infographics and educating their users appeared, some of which gained quite a bit of notoriety and becoming brands in their own right, such as @context.project (80.5k followers) (“The Context Project – Instagram Photos and Videos”, 2022), @campaignzero (349k followers) (“Campaign Zero –

Instagram Photos and Videos”, 2022), @theslowfactory (415k followers) (“Slow Factory – Instagram Photos and Videos”, 2022), and @so.informed (2.8 million followers) (Natale, 2022).

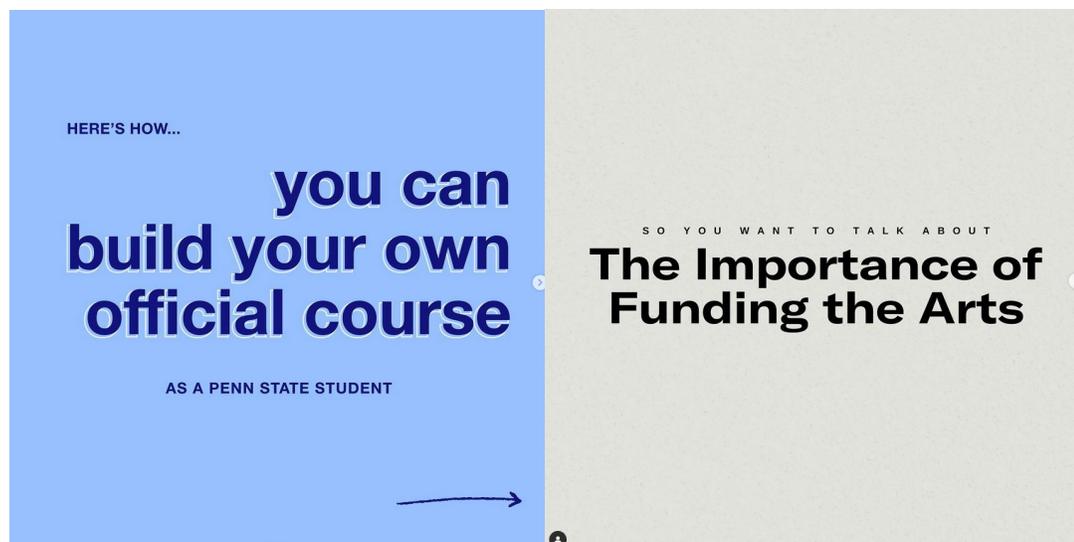


Figure 9 –Infographics Unrelated to Social Justice (Students Teaching Students, 2020), (Natale, 2021)

One of the largest advantages of creating these graphics for social media is that not only are they able to be shared to a prebuilt large audience, but users can use the pre-built functionality of social media websites to disseminate the content as well for maximum visibility. Infographics can not only be posted on a user’s main feed, but onto ephemeral mediums such as ‘Instagram Stories’ and directly messaged; users can also tag their friends onto posts to spread awareness as well.

One of the largest advantages of creating these graphics for social media is that not only are they able to be shared to a prebuilt large audience, but users can use the pre-built functionality of social media websites to disseminate the content as well for maximum visibility. Infographics can not only be posted on a user’s main feed, but onto ephemeral mediums such as ‘Instagram Stories’ and directly messaged; users can also tag their friends onto posts to spread awareness as well.

Why Infographics?

Infographics have risen in popularity as part of a general shift to reliance on social media as a primary news source. As stated previously, the current social media landscape consists of an ‘attention economy’ of various competing interests - at any given time, a post must compete with algorithmically suggested content, advertisements, and regular posts from each user’s individual network of friends, family, and interests. Today, with many young people primarily getting their news through social media, the news itself becomes content to be consumed, shared, commented on, and reposted. To stay relevant and garner attention, news items and activism must also ‘play the game’ of the algorithm. The infographic is the digital activist’s response to the algorithm. In a world where services are merely platforms for users to create, post, and share their own user-generated content all while interpreting and observing the work of others, the infographic serves as conveying information while still functioning as a piece of content to be interpreted or shared.

Chapter 4

Criticisms of Infographics

Infographics as Participation

At first glance the primary goal of the infographic format is the raise awareness and educate followers, similar to the previously mentioned ‘activism done online’. Although infographics are created with this goal in mind, in practice they are often used by social media users as activism themselves. The impact of consuming and reposting infographics is debatable at best, and actively harmful at worst.

One of the most common criticisms of infographics is that they are more akin to signaling support for an activist movement rather than activism on their own. This has occurred often in digital activism, enough times where the term ‘slacktivism’ has been used several times to describe this phenomenon in recent years (Lodewijckx, 2022). Real-world activism involves commitment of time and resources, as well as a potential risk to the activist; for example, canvassing, speaking at a town hall, or protesting. The reposting and sharing of infographics do not constitute nearly the same level of commitment or exposure to risk that a real-world activity does – hence, participation in low-effort digital activism cannot be called true activism but is more akin to participation or voicing support for a movement. Ozkula states:

‘Protest participation online is essentially a communicative act that expresses personal views on public issues, a narrative also driven by others (e.g. Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005) ... activism includes a range of practices of resistance rather than a "general sense of opposition to prevailing power".

Social media actions such as the reposting and sharing of infographics fall firmly into the second category – a ‘general sense of opposition to prevailing power’ (Ozkula, 2022). By reposting an infographic, one can show their sense of opposition to an existing power structure without commitment or creating meaningful change and participate in a movement without meaningfully contributing. Low-effort signals of participation like this can actually be harmful to overall activist movement as well; by enabling individuals to participate in a cause without commitment, causes themselves are performatively commodified into badges of social capital. Individuals are able to gain a sense of accomplishment or righteousness without substantially advancing a cause in a meaningful way and are able to simply forget about the cause after viewing. One possible explanation for infographic’s rise in prominence is external pressures on individuals to be as informed as possible; Generation Z in particular faces a disproportionate amount of pressure:

‘Generation Z in particular faces pressure to be the generation of change, and an offhand repost of an infographic on an Instagram story offers an easy solution. Online validation through being politically vocal on social media, and the pressure to appear ‘woke’ contributes to a culture of misinformation and creates an online space that becomes hard to navigate when searching for objectivity on political issues ... the toxicity of ‘woke culture’ exhibited itself in the form of ‘Blackout Tuesday’ (Smith, 2022).

‘Blackout Tuesday’ is an excellent case study in how social media activism is often entirely performative. This movement was conceived by two marketing executives at music publisher Atlantic Records as a show of solidarity for the Black community. Facebook and Instagram users were encouraged to post a photo of a black square to show solidarity. Although

there was widespread participation in the initiative, it is unclear what was actually accomplished beyond users being able to showcase ‘solidarity’.

Oversimplification

Another common criticism is that infographics lead to a gross oversimplification of complex social issues that serve as reinforcements of previously held beliefs rather than genuine education and learning.



Figure 10 – Settler Colonialism Infographic (Slow Factory, 2022)

Many topics covered in infographics are complex and simply cannot be summarized in ten photos or less – for example, the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. The modern iteration of this conflict has been ongoing for over 50 years since the formation of the state of Israel in 1948

(Israeli-Palestinian Conflict | Global Conflict Tracker, 2022); however, this graphic attempts to summarize the entire conflict in a series of images and text. More troubling is that infographics are rarely objective; since most infographics do not need to adhere to journalistic standards, many of them are incredibly biased and serve not as educational material, but simply help reinforce previously held beliefs. This is related to larger issues with echo chambers and polarization on social media. Modern social media platforms are not objective; they pick and choose what information to show users based on engagement and other gathered consumer data. Infographics that are shown to you most likely echo sentiments you already agree with (confirmation bias), and you are more likely to engage with and share them as a result. The aggressive language used in infographics does not help this cause; if an infographic that someone does not agree with is shared, it is likely to cause dissent.

Commodifying Suffering (For Your Benefit)

Another criticism is that infographics commodify suffering for the benefit of social media users. Within the social media paradigm, causes are also content – as such, any infographic seeking to be widely distributed must adhere to the unspoken rules of the social media platform for maximum visibility. Infographics place a heavy emphasis on design for mass appeal – so much in fact, that the cause itself can be abstracted away almost entirely. With infographics ‘there isn’t much of a relationship between content and aesthetics. If anything, the content is just interchangeable like an ad, for better or worse’ (Smith, 2022).

When examining the aesthetics of infographics, take notice of shared characteristics between them and traditional advertisements – a call to action convincing users they must participate in a movement, or that they will be better equipped to participate in a movement, inoffensive designs, etc. This also ties back to the participatory nature of sharing infographics discussed previously. Using infographics, Instagram users are able to show their participation in social movements in clean, mostly unoffensive ways. This trend can be seen in tech advertising in general; the visuals of many large technology companies are often criticized as being generic, lifeless, and inoffensive – for example, in 2017 Facebook rebranded their visuals using ‘Allegra’, a flat, generic mimicry of human forms. This trend later spread across other technology companies.



Figure 11: 'Corporate Memphis' Wikipedia Entry (Wikipedia, 2022)

A large component of activism, particularly non-violent activism, is disruption. Strikes, protests, and other forms of more participatory activism are effective because they force a response from those in power. When infographics adopt principles of modern corporate design, they stand in direct opposition to this principle – users can show that they believe in a cause, but in a vapid way that does not cause any sort of meaningful change or require a response – and if you disagree with an opinion, you can simply scroll past it.

The User Response

There has been an interesting pushback from Instagram users themselves to infographic posts. Infographics have been satirized both by known media publications such as Reductress, a satire site similar to the Onion with a focus on women's issues, as well as by individual users.

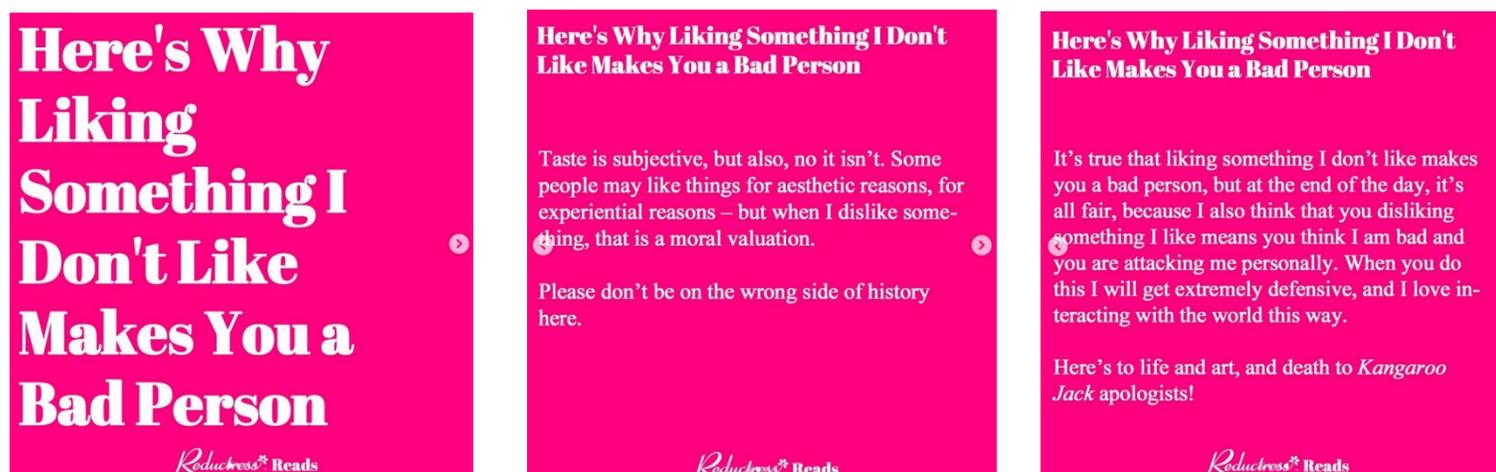


Figure 12 – Reductress Satirical Infographic (Reductress, 2022)

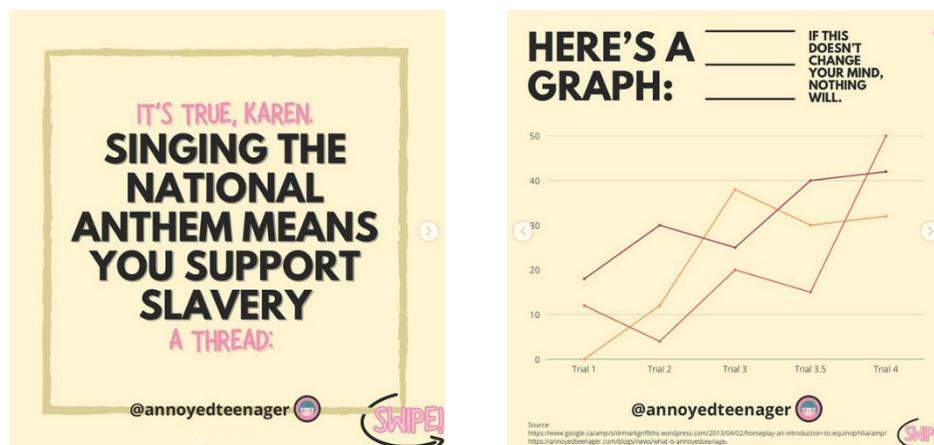


Figure 13 – Satirical Infographic (Annoyed Teenager, 2021)

Figure 12 is particularly interesting – ‘when you do this I will get extremely defensive, and I love interacting with the world this way’. This is making a mockery not only of the people who are posting infographics, but commentary on the general state of online discourse today.

When the online world is full of content that is purposefully skewed to gather your attention in one way or another, it is natural for the response to be similarly reactionary and exaggerated – being ‘terminally online’ is a common criticism of reactionary users of social media, particularly Twitter.

A Separation of Intentions

The disconnect between the thought behind infographics (spreading awareness) versus the behaviors they encourage and use to spread (engagement, sharing, commenting, posting, sending to friends, etc.) are extremely interesting. A common sentiment echoed in infographics is to mobilize beyond the digital space; to call a politician, go to a protest, etc. However, it is currently unclear how many people actually engage with these actions instead of merely scrolling past a post after engaging with it.



Figure 14 – Infographics Highlighting Non-Performative Activism (Chung, 2020), (Katerina, 2020), (Harper, 2020)

Although it is unrealistic to expect the same level of commitment to a cause from every single member of a social movement, it is interesting how this has been identified as a common-enough problem for content creators to have to address it. This again relates to issues endemic to social media and slacktivism – since it is so easy to engage with online content in low-effort ways, the amount of support social movements gain online versus offline usually has a huge disconnect. Kony 2012 serves as a good example of this – during the height of the original video’s virality, Invisible Children, the organization behind the movement, attempted an event called ‘Cover the Night’. Viewers of the video were encouraged to cover public spaces with Kony-related pamphlets, posters, and banners; although Kony 2012 remains one of the quickest

viral trends in history, the sentiment was not reflected in the real world – the largest reported gatherings only consisted of a few hundred people, not nearly having the desired impact (Devil, 2022). These problems are by no means specific to infographics, but online activism in general as stated previously. Social media activism such as reposting and sharing infographics should not be the primary focus; instead, actions taken online should be reinforcement for real-world actions through spreading awareness and organizing actions and disruptions in the real world – as Sivitanides says, “new technology should be used as tools to change the ways such issues are confronted, making some tasks easier, others more challenging, and leaving many unchanged”.

Platform publishers have also recognized the performative aspects of digital activism, and have implemented countermeasures to varying degrees of success. For example, Instagram has now added donations buttons to posts, allowing users to directly contribute to a cause financially without having to go to an external money-transfer application. Keeping users within the same app is proven to raise the chances of them taking an action because it is simply less trouble than to shift to another app.



Figure 15 – Embedded Donation Button ("Impact - Instagram Photos and Videos", 2022)

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Does Anything Matter at All?

The sheer volume of information available on today's Internet has forced activists to compete with the entire world for people's time and attention. This paper first presented the issues that have caused this phenomenon in the first place, along with an overview of previous digital activist movements. The paper then made a distinction between these previous forms of digital activism, 'activism done with digital tools', and 'activism done entirely online'. The 'infographic' post format was then examined as a case study of the ineffectiveness of digital activism due to the performative nature of low-commitment actions such as reposting and sharing without being accompanied by real-world actions as well.

The Internet, particularly social media, has been a great boon for activist movements – by providing pre-built tools and audiences, activists can now spread awareness at an unprecedented speed and scale. With such a high volume of information being produced and shared constantly, humans now have a larger option of causes and issues to care about than ever. Competing movements on social media site Instagram led its users to develop the 'infographic' post format in order to alleviate some issues endemic to social media – although in theory, infographics do an excellent job of spreading awareness about issues, in practice the act of reposting and engaging with them is often conflated for activism itself, so often that Instagram users have satirized the behavior. Effective activism using digital tools is possible – however, the focus

should not be on the digital paradigm, but on using digital technology to assist with real-world movements.

Further Research

Much of the analysis done in this paper has been conceptual; it would be very interesting to conduct analysis of statistical trends of infographic posting; although they mainly entered the common consciousness following the Summer of 2020, the format cannot have simply appeared out of thin air. It would be prudent to observe trends, as well as what sort of events correlate with rises in spikes of infographic posts. There is also potential for future human research studies with both content creators and consumers. This would be very valuable to understand the actual real-world impact of infographics – how often do users engage with posts? How often do they ‘follow up’ and use listed resources or take recommended actions? Have content creators seen a boost in funding, awareness, or in-person activist activity? This research could help platform publishers further create avenues for meaningful change within their applications, or at least allow their users to contribute to movements in more meaningful ways.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrea Katerina [@andrea_katerina], (2020, June 20). *What is Performative Activism?* [Infographic detailing performative activism]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBrAemnFjUM/>
- Annoyed Teenager [@annoyedteenager], (2021, February 11). *It's True, Karen. Singing the National Anthem Means You Support Slavery* [Satirical reactionary infographic]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLJ92W0Mu9t/>
- Arnison, M. (2022). Open publishing is the same as free software. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <http://purplebark.net/maffew/cat/openpub.html>
- Bell, K. (2022). Twitter says its test to get people to read articles before tweeting worked. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.engadget.com/twitter-prompt-read-article-before-tweeting-191907421.html>
- Brown, H., Guskin, E., & Mitchell, A. (2022). The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/>
- Buddha Jewelry [@buddhajewelryorganics], (2021, March 16). *How to Be an Ally + Help Asian Americans Fight Anti-Asian Racism* [Infographic discussing AAPI allyship]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/CMfa_LphAbV/
- Campaign Zero [@campaignzero], (2020, June 3). [Infographic detailing 8 measures to reduce police violence]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/CA-_Bexg24Z/
- Campaign Zero - Instagram Photos and Videos. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/campaignzero/>
- Chaz Bear - Instagram Photos and Videos. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/chaz.wick/>
- Cassata, D. (2022). Senate pushes measure condemning Kony. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from https://web.archive.org/web/20150315051547/http://www.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2012/03/21/senate_pushes_measure_condemning_kony/
- Chung, Jezz, [@jezzchung] (2020, May 29). *6 Ways to Activate Beyond Social Media*, [Infographic detailing real-world activism]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAyuZx7gFHJ/>

- Constine, J. (2022). Instagram uses its power to put coronavirus tips atop. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/13/instagram-coronavirus-tips/>
- Corporate Memphis - Wikipedia. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corporate_Memphis
- Culnan, M. (2022). CPSR - document_view. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <http://cpsr.org/prevsite/conferences/cfp91/culnan.html/>
- Devil, D. (2022). Kony 2012 supporters 'cover the night' in downtown Phoenix | Downtown Devil. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20120423213626/http://downtowndevil.com/2012/04/21/26874/kony-2012-phoenix-uganda/>
- File:How to Spot Fake News.pdf - Wikipedia. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:How_to_Spot_Fake_News.pdf
- Ford, Bella [@bellacford], (2020, July 8). *Barstool is Deeply Racist and Sexist & You Need to Unfollow* [Infographic detailing racist and sexists social media posts from Barstool Sports]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCY6KxFg08T/>
- Harper, Mireille [@mireillecharper], (2020, May 30). *10 Steps to Non-Optical Allyship* [Infographic detailing non-performative activism]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA04VKDAyjb/>
- How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd.html>
- Impact - Instagram Photos and Videos. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from https://www.instagram.com/p/CaYfIWGpX_1/
- Israeli-Palestinian Conflict | Global Conflict Tracker. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/israeli-palestinian-conflict>
- Jess Natale [@so.informed], (2021, May 7). *The Importance of Funding the Arts* [Infographic detailing the importance of funding art and music programs]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/COkof9znR-C/>
- Kidd, D. (2022). Indymedia. org: A new communications commons. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from https://www.academia.edu/852073/Indymedia_org_A_new_communications_commons

- KONY 2012 | Invisible Children. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://invisiblechildren.com/kony-2012/>
- Lewis, D. (2022). Mediaalternatives » Wikileaks Infowar not the first online protest action. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20110821141633/http://mediaalternatives.blogotery.com/2010/12/15/intervasion-supports-anonymous/>
- Marcos Sivitanides, V. (2022). The Era of Digital Activism. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.1073.6318>
- Mohsin, M. (2022). 10 Youtube Statistics That You Need to Know in 2021. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/youtube-statistics>
- Natale, J. (2022). so.informed - Instagram Photos and Videos. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/so.informed/>
- Ozkula, S. (2021). What is digital activism anyway?. *Journal Of Digital Social Research*, 3(3), 60-84. doi: 10.33621/jdsr.v3i3.44
- Paying Attention: The Attention Economy. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://econreview.berkeley.edu/paying-attention-the-attention-economy/>
- Reductress [@reductress], (2021, July 20). *Here's Why Liking Something I Don't Like Makes you a Bad Person* [Satirical infographic]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRj4OWEpOOZ/>
- Randhawa, S. (2022). Open Source Software and Libraries. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.1067.6066&rank=2&q=open%20source%20software&osm=&ossid=>
- Slow Factory - Instagram Photos and Videos. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/theslowfactory/>
- Smith, S. (2022). So you want to talk about: Instagram infographics – The Oxford Student. Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2021/06/09/so-you-want-to-talk-about-instagram-infographics-2/>
- Students Teaching Students [@pennstatests], (2020, October 5). *Here's How You can Build Your Own Official Course* [Infographic detailing student-ran courses at Penn State] Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CF-hUqNpH2h/>

The Context Project - Instagram Photos and Videos. (2022). Retrieved 4 April 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/context.project/>

The Depression Project [@realdepressionproject], (2021, May 10). *Consequences of Depression that Shouldn't be Confused with Laziness* [Infographic discussing consequences of depression conflated with laziness]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/COsb1-eiAqs/>

The Slow Factory [@theslowfactory], (2021, May 11). *What is Happening in Palestine is not Complicated; It's settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing* [Infographic discussing the Israel-Palestine conflict]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/COvqhx4lgse/>

ACADEMIC VITA

Education

The Pennsylvania State University - Schreyer Honors College **Expected May 2022**

- *BS: Cybersecurity Analytics and Operations*
- **Coursework:** Cyber Analytics Studio, Networking and Telecommunications, Statistical Analysis for Information Sciences, Distributed-Object Computing, Malware Analytics
- **Minor:** Music Technology

Experience

The Pennsylvania State University – IT Infrastructure Intern **January 2021 – present**

- Managing Penn State’s border firewalls and related network infrastructure

Cybersecurity Consulting Intern – Ernst and Young **June 2021 – August 2021**

- Identifying and prioritizing continuous improvement opportunities in security operations and platforms
- Collecting and preparing metrics and progress updates to be shared with clients during weekly and monthly meetings

Éclairer – Full Stack Developer/Cybersecurity Analyst **January 2020 – present**

- Implementing features on The Ballet Scout, a website that assists ballet students finding auditions, programs, and job opportunities.
- Leading initiative to improve cybersecurity position – configuring LogDNA, enforcing password and account requirements, static and dynamic code analysis.

Activities

Penn State Competitive Cyber Security Organization **Spring 2019 – present**

- Representing Penn State in offensive and defensive collegiate cybersecurity competitions
 - CyberForce 2021 – 3rd place
 - MACCDC 2020, 2021 – Participant
 - CPTC 2020 – Participant
- Worked with other members to design and develop a Discord bot for automating tasks.

Penn State Audio Engineering Society – President **Spring 2020 – present**

- Starting and managing new club initiatives – live music sessions and an equipment library for member rental.

Honors and Awards

- David Rusenko Entrepreneur in Residence Scholarship Recipient Spring 2022
- 1st Place – College of Information Sciences and Technology IdeaMakers Challenge
Spring 2020
- Dean’s List - College of Information Sciences and Technology Fall 2018 –Fall 2021
- Eagle Scout - Boy Scouts of America November 2017

