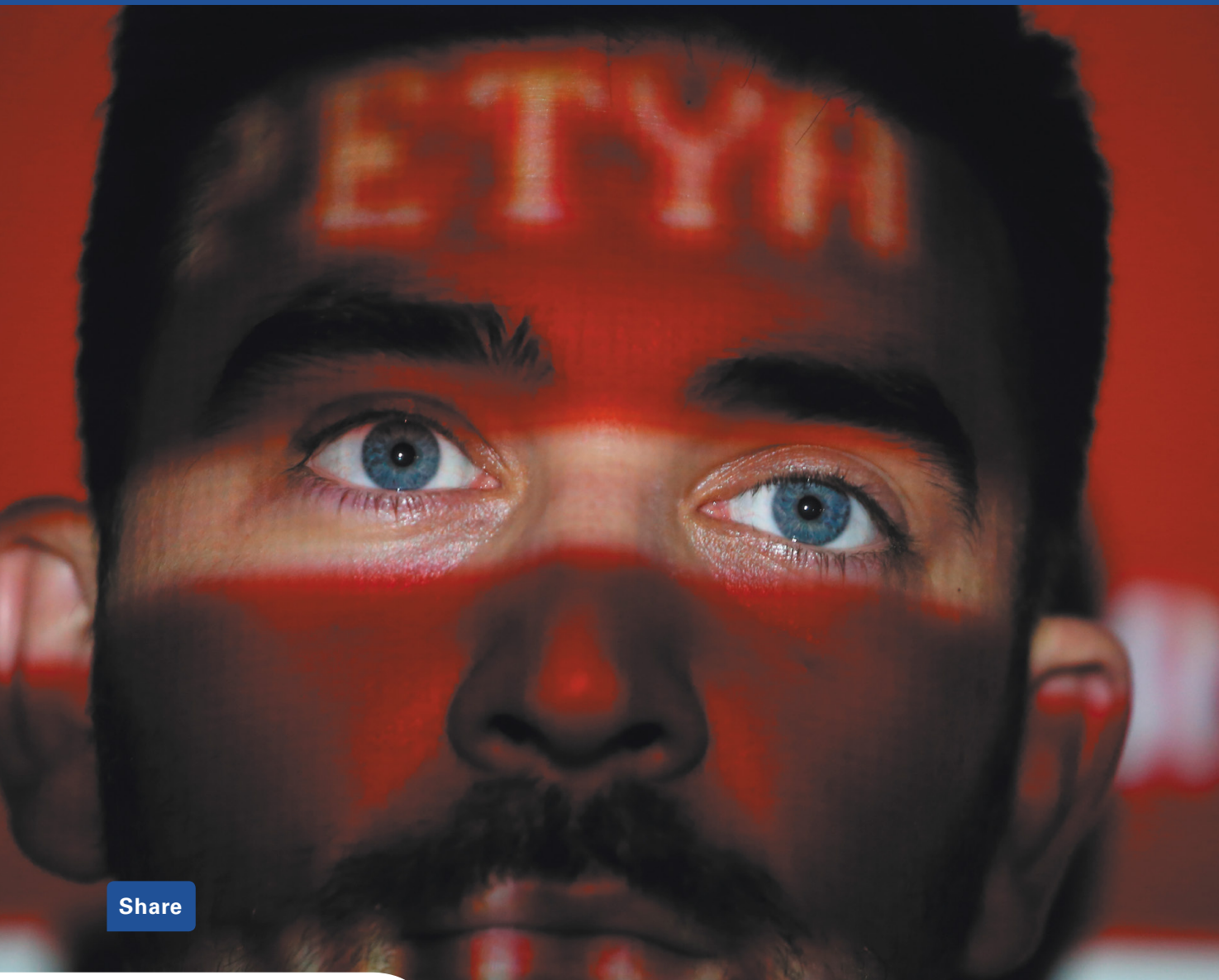


>THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM ON POST-COLD WAR POLITICS



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Image: A message related to the Petya ransomware projected on a young man; on 27 June 2017 a variant of the Petya ransomware virus hit computers of companies in Russia, Ukraine, and other countries in a cyber attack.



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>THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM ON POST-COLD WAR POLITICS

This article surveys the ups and downs of digital activism since 1990s, analyzing its various forms and effects on the political process in the post-Cold War era. While there has been no shortage of claims about its revolutionary potential, its actual impact has proved somewhat more limited than originally expected. Nonetheless, the emergence of new forms of digital protests - ranging from cyber-attacks to advanced forms of computational propaganda - poses new challenges, revealing that the traditional political landscape has been greatly affected by digitalization.

One major problem with grasping all the effects of contemporary digital activism is that today, almost three decades after the end of the Cold War, one's view of its ultimate potential very much depends on how one interprets the sudden end of that protracted conflict. So what exactly brought down the Berlin Wall?

Those who see the end of the Cold War as a product of invisible, structural forces that pushed the Soviet Union into oblivion – e.g. a moribund economy made worse by excessive military spending on adventures like the war in Afghanistan – are unlikely to see the end of that civilizational struggle as the well-deserved reward for the patient work done by social movements, dissidents, and their foreign supporters.

The latter actors, on the other hand, typically opt for historical explanations that attribute far greater importance to the contribution of human agency – i.e. themselves. Inadvertently, such explanations often project rather hopeful views of the future, for they assume that the tactics used to crush the Soviet regime can also be deployed elsewhere. On this reading, it was information – or, rather, the far cheaper and easier access to critical resources of creating awareness and social mobilization made possible by the technological revolution – that undermined the Soviet system. “How Information Ended the Soviet Union” was the subtitle of a popular 1994 book by a New York Times journalist; it very much reflects this worldview.

Given that many policymakers, primarily in Washington but also in many European capitals, also believed that history itself was ending and that liberal democracy was quickly becoming the only game in town, it's easy to see how easy it was to equate the global march of digitization with the global march of democratization: as fax and Xerox machines – and, eventually personal computers – continued to conquer the globe, it was almost inevitable that strong authoritarian governments that had built their empires primarily by limiting

information flows would get undermined and swept away by history. And, to accelerate the process, one could always invest resources in training the latest breed of activists – the proud successors to the Soviet dissidents – in using such tools as well as proudly celebrate Western technology companies, the global exporters of the democratic revolution. In the end, it did produce the formula which shaped digital activism for several decades to come: more information + more capitalism = more democracy.

Throughout the 1990s, there were several campaigns and movements that did not fit this pattern; the clever use of electronic media by the Zapatistas in Mexico—which many military analysts in Washington found quite alarming—is only the most prominent one. Likewise, the emergence of Indymedia, a highly distributed networked of anti-systemic media initiatives that played an essential role in various anti-globalization struggles, was another sign that the cheaper and wider access to digital technology would not only benefit those who firmly believed in the “end of history” but also plenty of those who were actively trying to falsify that thesis from either side of the political spectrum.

“IT SEEMS LOGICAL TO ASK JUST HOW MUCH MORE EFFECTIVE VARIOUS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS ON THE GROUND COULD HAVE BEEN IF THEY DID NOT PROFESS NEARLY BLIND FAITH IN THE ABILITY OF THE ‘INTERNET MODEL.’”

Even the clever use of electronic networks by Al Qaeda and related groups, especially as the Global War on Terror was getting underway, did not do much to undermine the thesis that information networks would eventually help mobilize civil society across the globe to demand more democracy, more globalization, more cosmopolitanism. There were certain events in the 2000s – above all, a wave of so-called “color revolutions” starting in Serbia in 2000 and culminating in Ukraine in 2004 – which lent some truth to such expectations.

It didn’t take too much time to redeploy the vast institutional apparatus for democracy promotion that, on Cold War’s unexpected end, was standing idle; now, the ever-expanding networks of NGOs, foundations, and media like the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe were building anti-censorship tools for dissidents, offering trainings in secure communications, as well as using computer games and text messages to mobilize the crowds to join anti-government demonstrations. And as the hardline regimes in Serbia and Ukraine fell under such immense civic pressure, many found it quite logical to believe that the march of democracy and digitization would continue unabated.

Such aspirations by predominantly Western observers reached their apogee towards the end of the last decade, first with a series of “Twitter Revolutions” – first, in Moldova, then in Iran – where the preferred explanation of large crowds of mostly young people pouring into the public squares to protest their governments was that it was the smartphones in their hands that were responsible for such impressive social mobilization. There was always a certain one-sidedness to such postulations: all the successes of social mobilization campaigns were ascribed to technology, while all the failures – including, by the way, in Iran, where the “Twitter Revolution” produced little by way of tangible political results – were ascribed to political and historical factors, never to the excessive faith placed in the power of technology.

Moreover, amidst all the technological utopianism of that era, it was all too easy to overlook a key development: unlike, say, in Serbia of 2000 or Ukraine of 2004, governments that found themselves on the receiving end of “digital activism” were increasingly fighting back with a sophisticated counter-strategy that leveraged a clever use of online propaganda, excessive surveillance, and a heavy dose of cyber-attacks. Often, they were doing so with the help of products and services purchased from various Western companies – so much for the joint march of capitalism and digitization towards the ever-greater democratization. It didn’t much matter that one consequence of the wide use of social media by protestors in Iran in 2009 was that the Iranian government had no troubling searching various digital platforms in order to identify – and, later, arrest – who all those protesters were: the cyber-utopian narrative lived on.

It took the spectacular and very unfortunate failure of the Arab Spring – widely touted as yet another Facebook or Twitter Revolution – to seed some doubt into the minds of most observers. With all such events, there are two types of critiques that have traditionally been aired. One – operating primarily at the level of media and cultural criticism – has sought to identify the factors that produced the excessively optimistic coverage of the use of digital media by forces on the ground, framing the result of decades of social mobilization by various political movements – as was the case in Egypt – as the nearly spontaneous outcome of a call to action over Facebook group. Here one needs to draw no conclusions about the influence of digital tools on the outcome of the protests; what matters is to single out the factors that made foreign observers view the events through a lens that gave such an excessive importance to Facebook and Twitter.

This was not all necessarily negative: the obsession of Western media with social media probably also helped to draw attention to rather exotic political causes that would never receive proper coverage had they not been framed as a “Facebook Revolution.” No one knows for sure as to how long this type of fetish with social media would last – one might as well say it’s already in decline – but it’s also undeniable that many movements and causes had tremendously benefited from the media’s unhealthy fascination with digital tools and platforms (to some, it eventually came at a huge cost, as, for example, the entities behind the “Stop

Kony” campaign on Twitter – aiming to catch the famed warlord Joseph Kony – found out on attracting millions of people to their cause).

The other type of critique stems primarily from strategic considerations about the advantages and disadvantages of a) putting social media needs above one’s organizational needs b) integrating many enthusiastic but politically untrusted supporters found via social media into some broader political operation behind a movement or a cause. The trouble with social media is that, in reducing the costs of joining a campaign, it has made it harder to exercise some broader editorial control over the direction of campaigns and protests.

The immense decentralization afforded by digital platforms might have made it harder to act strategically, even if it has allowed to spread awareness about particular causes and attract newcomers into the fold. However, in the absence of well-formulated, granular tasks for such newcomers, it’s not obvious how exactly they could help – and, without immediate tasks that can stimulate a feeling of belonging and solidarity, it might prove difficult to retain them in the longer-term. Perhaps, they can donate money or they can create “likes” on Facebook and Twitter, but are such contributions really worth it? The ultimate failure of the Arab Spring was too tragic – and, some might argue, we are still seeing its ultimate consequences in Syria or Yemen – so there was little time to draw the necessary lessons from that experience.

Nonetheless, it seems logical to ask just how much more effective various social and political movements on the ground could have been if they did not profess nearly blind faith in the ability of the “Internet model” – a faith that finds its expression in persistent queries as to whether we can run everything like Wikipedia – to resolve age-old social and political contradictions. This, of course, is not to deny that digital networks could – and have made – a difference; only to inquire if the main problem with the efficacy of digital activism today is that it insists on distilling some broader lessons from “the Internet” and then reshaping the political reality accordingly. But what if those lessons are, at best, illusory and the match – between the Internet model and the real world – is not as tight as we think?

Digital activism, of course, is not limited only to dissidents and anti-systemic movements; if anything, the big change of the last decade or so has been the way in which it has gone mainstream and mundane, with tools and techniques that were previously reserved for well-organized social movements being used by a much wider pool of people and for causes that are hardly revolutionary. From boycotts of consumers goods to fund-raising efforts to repair a piece of malfunctioning city infrastructure, such campaigns – propelled by the low cost of organizing them and the wide and immediate reach nearly guaranteed thanks to exposure via platforms like Facebook and Twitter – have become a normal part of our everyday life.

There is, nonetheless, a major change underway in the depth and vector of digital activism, especially of the more local everyday variety. Civic engagement has

been redefined as well: we are moving away from the republican political ideal of a fully engaged, permanently deliberating public to the one of a fully automated, low-cost and low-bandwidth algorithmic citizenship. Under this new model, we are not expected to regularly partake in important local political debates; the assumption is that we simply have neither time nor desire for such trifles.

Rather, the hope is to leverage the highly sophisticated network of sensors and algorithms that is spring up all around us, due, mostly to the rise of the Internet of Things and the smart city, in order to silently report some of the problems we are facing, in the hopes that, once communicated to the relevant authorities, such information could make much of traditional politics unnecessary. Consider various apps that purport to tap the sensors in our mobile phones in order to monitor the state of the roads that we drive upon and report any encountered potholes to our municipality. From the perspective of increasing quality with the least resources, this does look like a major improvement: why, after all, should we be wasting any of our cognitive energy on reporting potholes?

The downside, though, is also quite apparent: by automating much of deliberative, causal thinking about why it is that we have potholes in front of us – is it because local municipal budgets have been cut? – we are also cutting ourselves off from the stuff of traditional politics, and especially its preoccupation with questions of justice (that preoccupation itself has always been a matter of articulating a causal historical narrative as where our problems come from).

Image taken
by a Syrian
youth in Raqa.
Thanks to new
technologies,
we can share
information
and keep up to
date with what
is happening in
the rest of the
world.



There are no easy answers here: it very well might be that the future of “digital activism” will be precisely this fully automated, sensor-based way of doing politics, whereby all that is required of us as citizens is to activate our phones into the “always on/ always record” mode or agreeing to a license to share the data we generate with the relevant authorities and so on. While there might be some interesting ethical and moral questions surrounding such practices, it seems that a turn towards such fully automated digital activism might also lead to some moral and political impoverishment of the activists themselves.

The broader social trend underpinning such developments is that the goals and rationales of narrating our common experience historically – often by “hanging” it onto some common backbone of causality that links our current state to a number of antecedent causes – are giving away to a more pragmatic agenda of managing the effects of our problems. Big Data, for example, is still relatively helpless when it comes to tracing deep causal relationships, while crowdfunding and various instruments making up toolkits of Civic Tech have made it so much easier to keep problems under control, even without attempting to identify and resolve their original causes.

“HOW COULD DIGITAL ACTIVISM NOT BECOME A VICTIM OF ITS OWN SUCCESS?”

Hence the downside to much of contemporary digital activism: this is primarily activism aimed at fixing the effects of existing social and political problems rather than resolving them at a deeper, more fundamental level. There’s, however, a big difference between a digital politics that is primarily about finding more efficacious ways to adapt to problems around us – e.g. via crowdfunding, task-sharing, deploying sensors that promise more efficiency, etc – and a digital politics that seeks to undo those problems altogether.

This brings us to another problematic issues linked to digital activism: how could it not become a victim of its own success? In other words, when there are so many tools for digital engagement, when the costs of doing it so low, when the skills required to do it are also quite minimal – how does one settle for a set of tools and strategies that, over the long term, will make the most impact? How does one resist the temptation of taking the easy path of signing Facebook petitions or raising money online or tapping into vast networks of sensors and, instead, try to articulate a more ambitious – and, hopefully, far more transformational – path of action?

To some extent, of course, this question has a very simple answer: this is what leadership is for. Or, at least, this is what it used to be for: social movements, however decentralized, still had a brain – composed, perhaps, of democratically elected wise and experienced members trusted by the rest of the movement. It

was this brain of the movement that was supposed to think tactics and strategy, optimizing the use of tools given their long-term costs and opportunities.

Leadership is not such an easy problem to resolve in the realm of digital activism. Most such movements, in as much as the word “movement” even applies to such networks, many of which are short-lived, might have faces of the movement – the photogenic people who, having been involved with some early campaigns early on, might go to CNN or BBC to explain the movement’s reasoning. But being a spokesperson, while important, is not the same as offering genuine strategic guidance and helping to choose between alternative paths of action. The problem is often further aggravated by the fact that many such movements explicitly reject the premise that they can ever have a leader, preferring to defend themselves as fully decentralized and structureless organizations.

Not all of contemporary digital activism is of the passive variety, of course. The last few decades have witnessed not just an immense fall in the costs of getting in touch with one’s peers but also in, say, launching sophisticated cyber-attacks. Initially pioneered by movements like Anonymous, such “hacktivist” measures have become a nearly permanent feature of the contemporary digital landscape, with many important online platforms and sites occasionally held hostage by waves of devastating cyber-attacks.

Many such attacks are also tied to various political causes and are often conducted under the banner of patriotism; hence they are particularly prevalent in times of geopolitical conflict, as was the case, for example, with the first major publicized instances of such attacks (Russia vs. Estonia and, later, Russia vs. Georgia). In a sense, they often combine an active political attitude – since many such attacks are clearly illegal, people who participate in them are clearly committed to the cause – with a rather low-cost and low-commitment set-up: normally, one participates in such attacks simply by lending one’s bandwidth and computing power. With the march of digitalization and the arrival of the Internet of Things and the smart city, one should expect such attacks only to intensify: on the one hand, there are many more critically important resources to target, and, on the other hand, there are many more devices that can now participate in launching such attacks.

A related phenomenon is the rise of what some researchers dub “computational propaganda” – the deployment of bots, Big Data, and algorithms in order to spread fake news and other types of propaganda, often for openly political purposes. Of all the unexpected consequences of the digital revolution was the discovery that the production of propaganda – set against the profound profitability crisis of the traditional news industry – would be democratized as well. The kinds of propaganda activities that have been previously reserved to governments can now be pursued on the cheap – and with extreme effectiveness, especially once combined with photos, videos, and other types of meme-friendly content.

Much like with DDoS attacks, there's often a patriotic dimension driving this phenomenon; hence, it's not uncommon for bottom-up, highly decentralized movements that support a particular geopolitical cause favored by their government leverage their social media skills to push professional propaganda content produced by the traditional media of that government. The name "computational propaganda" should not distract us from the fact that many of the bots responsible for producing it have to be programmed by somebody; in a sense, this is the propaganda equivalent of distributed DDoS attacks – bored but passionate hi-tech people lending their skills and spare computer power to steer political arguments one way or another.

"THANKS TO THE ONGOING DIGITIZATION OF EVERYTHING, THE POLITICAL SPHERE HAS BECOME MUCH MORE ACCESSIBLE TO SOCIAL FORCES."

The tremendous online success of the Trump campaign, for example, owes much not only to the stealthy work conducted by the likes of Cambridge Analytica but also to the ad-hoc volunteer work performed on behalf of the campaign on sites like Reddit or 4Chan. Some of it might have seemed banal and amateurish at the time – and it barely broke out from the meme echo-chamber where it started – but it probably ended up having more impact than we give it credit for. For example, it's still relatively hard to access the damage done by techniques like "hashtag hijacking" where online conversations focusing on a particular topic are taken over by one's opponents and made useless via constant injection of spam or any other damaging materials.

Both of the above-mentioned tactics – DDoS attacks and computational propaganda – entail huge reputational costs for those unlucky targets who find themselves on the receiving end of such attacks. Unsurprisingly, this has led to new types of insurance offerings that many companies and even public institutions are beginning to ponder over: from reputational insurance that will ensure immediate help from the PR professionals to help offset any reputational damage to cyber-insurance which will pay compensation should the cyber-attacks disrupt regular business flow or result in data leaks.

Unlike earlier tactics honed and practiced by many activist movements, from consumer boycotts to blocking entrance to corporate headquarters or strategic warehouses, the new slew of interventions allows for remote, cheap, and rather modular participation: tasks that are farmed out to participants can be unique while the participants themselves can join in from anywhere on the planet. It's unlikely that this new headache for corporations and public institutions will go away any time soon; if anything, with the rise of artificial intelligence, we are likely to see even more sophisticated examples of such algorithmic sabotage, not least because it also helps to draw media attention to the cause.

Examining the changes in the digital media landscape from a historical perspective, it's hard to miss one major difference between 2017 and, say, 2000. By now, it has become obvious that much of digital activism, especially actions aimed at mobilizing crowds to take action, depends on the benevolence of so-called digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Digital activism has never been so intermediated by these firms; their algorithms make or break certain causes, helping to divert the attention of the global audience that they control. There's very little transparency in this process and little can be taken for granted: some causes and campaigns might receive phenomenal success while others might tank or even disappear completely if they run counter to the rules, explicit or even implicit ones, embraced by the platform.

And it's not just social movements or NGOs that see Facebook as the default digital infrastructure for their advocacy and outreach work; political parties, too, have increasingly come to depend on it – a dependence they are likely soon to regret. However, given the prevalence of cyber-attacks and the role that instruments such as artificial intelligence now play in helping to guard against them, it's not obvious if political parties can really do it alone, building their own platforms and operating systems, for internal communication: given the mismatch between their own cybersecurity expertise and that of Facebook, they might just eventually prefer the easy way out and quietly accept the fact that they will no longer be in charge of their own digital infrastructure.

Supporters
take photos as
Donald J. Trump
speaks at his
presidential
rally at Xfinity
Arena in Everett,
Washington.



Moreover, it's not uncommon for these firms to mobilize their own users on issues that affect their own business interests. Thus, the likes of Facebook and Uber – as well as Google and Wikipedia – didn't hesitate to alert their users when some form of unwanted government regulation of those platforms was imminent. Often, such purely advisory notices are accompanied by calls – and opportunities – for action, calling on users to sign a petition or let their elected representative know where they stand on the issue, all with a click of a button. This, of course, raises some rather thorny questions about the neutrality of the platforms on which much digital activism is conducted, as mobilizing huge crowds in support of a given issue is much easier for, say, Uber or AirBnb, than for your local municipality that is trying to regulate them.

“IT HAS BECOME OBVIOUS THAT MUCH OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM, ESPECIALLY ACTIONS AIMED AT MOBILIZING CROWDS TO TAKE ACTION, DEPENDS ON THE BENEVOLENCE OF SO-CALLED DIGITAL PLATFORMS LIKE FACEBOOK AND TWITTER.”

All in all, thanks to the ongoing digitization of everything, the political sphere has become much more accessible to social forces, including many anti-systemic ones, that have previously lingered on its periphery. This does not need to imply that the consequences of such “democratization” would necessarily be negative; it could also lead to a healthy “rejuvenation” of the public sphere. There are, however, several additional factors – including the growing role of digital platforms in intermediating most of our online activities – that do not bode well for the future of politics in the digital realm.

The main test of the efficacy of digital activism is in whether, over the next ten years or so, there emerges a way to translate immense online energy that can now be harvested from all over the globe into deeply transformative and sustainable action plans. This will require us to rethink what it means to lead in an age of decentralization but would also probably make us question how much power we'd like to continue delegating to the digital giants. The other, more ominous future is the one where, failing to find such a path, we settle for the kind of digital activism of low-energy but high-damage which today represented today DDoS attacks and various forms of computation propaganda. This would not only be a rather destructive turn of events but, also, a terrible waste of online resources that could be better be deployed to resolve many of the world's toughest problems.

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