



© 2010, Brian Bailie and Collette Caton.

Editor's Introduction

Social Change through Digital Means

Brian Bailie, Syracuse University
and **Collette Caton, Syracuse University**

Despite the significant role digital technology has played in social movements, including the political protests in Iran last year, many still doubt the ability of these technologies to foster civic engagement and social change. In “Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted,” Malcolm Gladwell claims the enthusiasm for social media is “outsized,” and that 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement we’ve (“we” meaning Americans writ large) “seem to have forgotten what activism is.” Gladwell’s analysis highlights many short comings of social networking technologies, and moreover, makes (very) clear his distinction between social networks performing one-off acts of kindness and hierarchical organizations making “real” social change.

What Gladwell fails to acknowledge and share with his readers is that there are people successfully using social networking technologies towards achieving the traditional activist goals he holds in such high regard. This type of work, however, often goes overlooked in articles like Gladwell’s due to dominant American narratives about change. In these narratives social change is only possible through sweeping strategic measures (rallies, demonstrations, sit-ins) relying on the take over and manipulation of physical space. But as Paula Mathieu points out in *Tactics of Hope*, social change doesn’t happen overnight, and in the long run, small acts or tactics (digital or otherwise) can end up being just as effective as large-scale demonstrations.



This special issue of *Reflections*—entitled Social Change through Digital Means—is but a small sampling of the tactics utilizing digital technology that scholar-teachers and activists/organizers are using to work towards positive change. Instead of accepting the claim that the Internet and the Web are simply tools which “efficiently manage acquaintances”(Gladwell), the writers represented in this issue recount how they’re using the affordances of social networking, multi-media, and Web composing technologies to question, teach, cajole, protest, organize, instigate, and fight for progressive social change.

The scholars, activists, and educators presented in this issue do this in various and provocative ways. Michael Donnelly leads the issue off with “Digital (Dis)Engagement: Politics, Technology, Writing,” asking the reader to reconsider the dominant narratives attached to technology, namely the misconception that digital discourse can only used by individuals in expressive, not deliberative ways. This opens into Phyllis Ryder’s, “Public 2.0. Social Networking, Nonprofits, and the Rhetorical Work of Public Making,” an essay describing how the same technologies criticized by Donnelly are utilized by a nonprofit in Washington D.C. to form a donating public to help the homeless. Next, Kevin Mahoney, in his essay entitled “Viral Advocacy: Networking Labor Organizing in Higher Education,” describes how a blogging platform can pull double duty, that is, be used as a tool to mobilize desire when organizing a campus union as well as space to win over traditional media outlets to a pro-labor point-of-view. Then, Erin Anderson’s “Global Street Papers and Homeless [Counter]publics” explores how web-based communication can “carve out a new rhetorical space for translocal, counterpublic discursive practice among homeless and economically marginalized people around the world.”

This notion of empowering marginalized publics is then placed into juxtaposition with the population often seen as the “power users” of digital technologies: affluent college students. While there are many stereotypical notions about this population when it comes to political



apathy and political apathy's well-meaning but ineffectual cousin, "slacktivism," Joannah Portman-Daley's article, "Reshaping Slacktivist Rhetoric: Social Networking for Social Change" challenges readers to re-conceptualize slacktivism as real civic engagement. Michelle Albert continues this tour of digital composing as civic participation in "Civic Engagement and New Media" as she discusses how a multimodal class project enabled students to become active participants in the civic process.

This idea of creating persuasive texts for Web 2.0 is continued in Bob McEachern's article, "(Un)civil Discourse in Nonprofits' Use of Web 2.0." In this text, McEachern analyzes how nonprofits can capitalize on the '(un)civil discourse' that results from interactive digital texts, when organizations give up control and empower readers to become co-authors. Laurie Britt-Smith continues this discussion of no-profits and their Web 2.0 endeavors through a collaborative rhetorical analysis—with her students—of various no-profits websites in her piece, "Txt Msgs 4 Afrca: Social Justice Communities in a Digital World." In an interesting (and important) twist, Britt-Smith makes clear in her article the oft forgotten, but completely relevant, capabilities of the Internet to connect individuals looking to build community alliances that work towards social justice.

Paula Mathieu's interview with Jeff Grabill, "Change is Really Hard Work," continues this theme of making connections and community building. The focus of this interview is the move away from the "great man" narratives often connected to stories about activism and a move towards the salient and already existing tools within most American communities that can be manipulated by activist groups for material social change.

Finally, Amy Lynch-Binieck closes out the issue with her essay, entitled "An English Teacher's Manifesto," making clear that for all the affordances digital technologies bring to writers that these technologies



are still just tools that *may* engender participation. These technologies, Biniek points out, “don’t create collective action—they merely remove obstacles to it” (Shirky qtd in Biniek).

Whether working with students, community stakeholders, community activists, or the texts produced by no-profits, the writer-scholars of this special issue question commonsensical, “appropriate” uses of technology in contemporary America. Every writer represented in this issue of *Reflections* is working towards the same goal: a more egalitarian, verdant, and just society. As the guest editors of this special issue, we hope this installment of *Reflections* does its part in providing hope, inspiration, comfort, and practices that can be duplicated by fellow travelers who see the same possibilities for a better tomorrow through the teaching of critical literacy practices, the utilization of digital technologies, and the importance of civic engagement.

Works Cited

- Gladwell, Malcolm. “Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted.” *The New Yorker*. Condé Nast Digital, 4 Oct. 2010. Web. 10 Nov. 2010.
- Mathieu, Paula. *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2005. Print.