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Viral Engagement: Fast, Cheap, and Broad, but Good
for Democracy?

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Abstract

In 2011 and 2012, several high profile campaigns spread with unexpected speed and potency. These “viral engagements” include the mobilization that scuttled the Stop Online Piracy Act, popular protest against the Susan G. Komen Foundation’s decision to stop funding Planned Parenthood, 100 million views of the KONY 2012 video on YouTube and its subsequent criticism and defense, and on-line activism around the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. This paper examines three aspects of these viral campaigns as a form of political engagement. First, is there a common structure of mobilization and spread? Some have argued that these viral campaigns synthesize conventional social and political networks but amplify the messages that spread through those networks through the speed of digital communication. Second, what are the potential contributions of this fast, cheap, and thin mode of engagement to democracy? We examine the implications of viral engagement for four critical democratic values: inclusion, public deliberation, political equality, and civic education.

Keywords

Viral engagement, viral campaign, popular protest, on-line activism, social networks, political networks, digital communication.

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s, the political significance of the Internet has been visible in US Presidential campaigns from Howard Dean to Barack Obama. Groups such as MoveOn.org pioneered on-line mobilization and advocacy strategies. The rapidly evolving political blogosphere has been the subject of both innovation and research.¹

Beyond these precursors, we may look back upon 2011 and 2012 as an inflection point in the impact of social media technology upon politics. During that period, a large number of grassroots campaigns and other activities – most of them occurring in physical as well as virtual space – met with unexpected, largely unpredicted, notoriety and even success. The role of social media such as Twitter and Facebook in revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere in the Middle East has received much attention.² In Europe, digital technologies seem to be playing a large role in new political entities such as the German Pirate Party and campaigning efforts such as Avaaz.³

This essay is a preliminary meditation on two main questions about viral engagement: how does it work? And, is it good? In section 2 below, we sketch the political structure of viral engagement. This kind of discursive and political mobilization is similar to familiar issue-oriented campaigns in that a political or social entrepreneur engages in communicative activity to mobilize others to support his or her cause. Recent viral engagements are distinctive, however, because digital communication technologies and on-line social networks (i) ease the flow of information and so can accelerate its spread to millions of others, and (ii) lower the costs of certain kinds of action – expressing a “like,” signing a petition, even giving money – on the part of the mobilized. Lower barriers to communication and action are what makes it possible for these sorts of campaigns to “go viral.” Furthermore, these viral engagements trigger a kind of political engagement that is broadly accessible because participation is open to political “beginners” – amateurs, if you like, who engage through non-political routes such as participation in on-line social networks.⁴

Second, (when) is viral engagement good or bad for democracy? Put crudely, there are two polar perspectives on the democratic value of viral engagement. One might view viral engagement as the 21st century virtual manifestation of Gustave Le Bon’s 19th century crowd. In this view, viral engagement transforms ordinarily reasonable and critical individuals into a collective mass driven by largely unconscious forces and simple notions (e.g. propaganda), that is slow to reason, easily manipulated by leaders and communicative entrepreneurs, quick to judge and perhaps even to act.⁵ In contrast to this skeptical perspective, a second view is that viral engagement constitutes a 21st century version of the Habermasian public sphere. In this view, the digital technologies increase the sensory and communicative capabilities of civil society; they accelerate the extent to which “the communicative structures of the public sphere constitute a far-flung network of sensors that react to the pressure of society-wide problems and stimulate influential opinions.”⁶

2. Four Examples of Viral Engagement

To fix ideas, as they say, consider capsule accounts of four recent episodes of viral engagement.

¹ See, for example, Karpf (2012); Hindman (2008); Drezner & Farrell (2008); Lawrence, Sides & Farrell (2010); Nahon, Hemsley, Walker, & Hussain (2011).

² See, for example, Howard & Hussain (2011); Khondker (2011).

³ On the German Pirate Party, see Meyer (2012); Kron (2012). On Avaaz.org, see Christensen (2011).

⁴ In this way, the phenomenon of viral engagement discussed in this chapter resembles the “amateurish” political participation described by Shelby and Bertran in their contributions to this volume.

⁵ See, famously, Le Bon (1896).

⁶ Habermas (1996).

A. Kony 2012

On March 5, 2012, a group called Invisible Children released a short 30-minute film called Kony 2012 on the YouTube video sharing site.⁷ The film documented the atrocities led by Ugandan Joseph Kony and his army in a highly dramatic, accessible way. As of this writing,⁸ the video has had over 90 million views on YouTube and 18 million plays on Vimeo. Kony 2012 hit 100 million views on different video websites in just 6 days, making it the fastest video to achieve that viral diffusion ever. By comparison, Lady Gaga's Bad Romance video took 18 days to reach 100 million and Justin Bieber's Baby hit 100 million in 56 days.⁹

A data analysis of tweets that mentioned Kony 2012 in the first days after its release shows two illuminating trends.¹⁰ First, grassroots networks that were cultivated by Invisible Children for many years were instrumental in the initial spread of the video. These networks, primarily comprised of Christian youth in small and middle-sized cities, set the campaign in motion and were responsible for the first 5,000 tweets on the video. Second, Invisible Children strategically engaged celebrities who publicly endorsed the campaign video and contributed to its virality.¹¹

Subsequent to its release, the Kony 2012 video and Invisible Children suffered a barrage of criticism from human rights organizations and think tanks such as the African Youth Initiative Network¹² and the Center for Strategic & International Studies,¹³ respected intellectuals such as Mahmood Mamdani of Columbia University,¹⁴ commentators on the pages of the Atlantic,¹⁵ Foreign Policy,¹⁶ and tech-politics digerati such as Ethan Zuckerman¹⁷ and Evgeny Morozov.^{18 19} For better or worse (that is precisely the unresolved debate), Kony 2012 made tens of millions of people aware of Joseph Kony and in that way its effect on the public debate and public sphere were substantial. We do not know whether Kony 2012 affected political decision-makers in Africa, the United States, or elsewhere. Before the release of the film, in 2011, President Obama dispatched some 100 special operations troops to search for Kony.

B. Susan G. Komen Foundation and Planned Parenthood

On December 16, 2011, following a unanimous vote of her governing board, the President of the Susan G. Komen Foundation for the cure of breast cancer called Planned Parenthood president Cecile Richards to inform her that the Foundation was ending funding for her organization and that policy

⁷ The video was placed on the Vimeo video sharing website even before, on March 2, 2012, but received only a few dozens of views in the first couple of days.

⁸ September 25, 2012.

⁹ Van Grove (2012).

¹⁰ Lotan (2012).

¹¹ Lotan, *id.*

¹² Quinn (2012).

¹³ Basu (2012).

¹⁴ Mamdani (2012).

¹⁵ Cole (2012).

¹⁶ Keating (2012).

¹⁷ Zuckerman (2012).

¹⁸ Laughland, Strauss, & Salfield (2012).

¹⁹ For a summary of criticism, see Cohen (2012).

would bar Planned Parenthood from applying for funding.²⁰ The news did not become public until January 31, when the Associated Press broke the story. On that Tuesday, Planned Parenthood responded with a press release via Twitter to its tens of thousands of followers: “ALERT: Susan G. Komen caves under anti-choice pressure, ends funding for breast cancer screenings at PP health centers bit.ly/AloRdK.” The news and outrage against the foundation spread quickly on Facebook, Twitter, and various message boards. The Facebook petition in favor of Planned Parenthood received more than 100,000 “likes.” That week, Planned Parenthood received a sharp upsurge in donations, and political leaders including Senators Barbara Boxer, Frank Lautenberg, Al Franken, Robert Menendez, and Kirsten Gillibrand publicly supported Planned Parenthood.²¹ On February 3, 2012, just four days after Planned Parenthood’s social media campaign started, the Susan G. Komen Foundation reversed its position, saying that Planned Parenthood was eligible to apply for funding. On February 7, Komen Foundation Vice President Karen Handel – a former Georgia Gubernatorial candidate who advocated defunding Planned Parenthood – resigned from the Foundation.

C. The Death of Trayvon Martin

On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in the town of Sanford, Florida. Martin was walking home from a convenience store, where he had purchased a package of Skittles candy and iced tea. Zimmerman was taken into custody and told police that he had shot Martin in self-defense after a fight. No charges were filed and Zimmerman was released.²²

The initial media coverage of the story was local and limited. It was mentioned in the Fox 35 Orlando news program on February 27, and then briefly appeared on the pages of the Orlando Sentinel on February 29 and the Miami Herald on March 2.²³ The case was not mentioned in the media for the next five days and only resurged because of the efforts of Benjamin Crump – the attorney hired by Martin’s parents. In an effort to mobilize public pressure to support his case, Crump started using his connections and pitching the story to national media.²⁴ The case was eventually featured by Reuters on March 7 and CBS coverage followed on March 8.

On March 8, a young Washington DC lawyer who watched the CBS program created a change.org petition calling for Zimmerman’s arrest (and later transferred it to Martin’s parents).²⁵ A total of 2,277,952 million people had signed that petition before it closed.²⁶ A number of other petitions on the case appeared. Change.org’s communications director, Brianna Bayo-Cotter, reports that the Trayvon Martin issue comprised their largest on-line petition drive ever.²⁷ The case garnered hundreds of thousands of mentions on Twitter, which multiplied petition signatures and led to wide media coverage by all the major news outlets. Throughout the second half of March, popular and some elite sentiment built around the case. Supporters wore hooded sweatshirts and “I am Trayvon Martin” shirts to express solidarity with the Martins. Al Sharpton, Spike Lee, and NAACP president Ben

²⁰ See Washington Post Staff (2012)

²¹ For discussion of social media response, see Warzel (2012).

²² This narrative draws on a timeline of events posted on CBS News: Dahl (2012).

²³ Stempeck (2012).

²⁴ Trotta (2012).

²⁵ Stempeck (2012).

²⁶ Change.org (2012).

²⁷ Gray (2012).

Jealous all publicly supported the Martins. During the week of March 19-25, 19% of all news coverage in the country was dedicated to Trayvon's case.²⁸

On March 23, President Barack Obama issued a statement on the case indicating that he thought it should be investigated, saying "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon." During the week of March 26-30, the death of Trayvon Martin became the most discussed topic on Twitter.²⁹ Florida Governor Rick Perry appointed state attorney Angela Corey as a special prosecutor to look into the case. Earlier that week, the Sanford chief of policy Bill Lee announced that he would temporarily "resign." On April 11, 2012, Special Prosecutor Corey announced that Zimmerman would be charged with second degree murder.

D. Stop Online Piracy Act / Protect Intellectual Property Act

On May 12, 2011, Patrick Leahy (D-VT) introduced the Protect IP Act into the Senate with 11 bipartisan co-sponsors. Later that year, in October 2011, Lamar Smith (R-TX) introduced similar legislation, called the Stop Online Piracy Act, into the U.S. House. In their early days, both bills enjoyed broad bipartisan support. By late 2011, a broad-based discussion on technology and technology-policy sites surfaced serious criticisms of PIPA/SOPA – in particular the worry that these laws would create a chilled environment for speech on the Internet by opening many routes to private and governmental censorship.³⁰ Participants in this discussion, and those evidently moved by it, include a large community of technologists, important technology companies and non-profit organizations, and a number of technology policy-makers inside and outside of the Obama administration.

According to Yochai Benkler's careful account, much of the discussion of the consequences of PIPA/SOPA unfolded on technology industry and internet freedom websites such as techdirt.com and the Electronic Frontier Foundation.³¹ This discussion transformed into a mobilization against PIPA/SOPA that had several components.

On the popular, social media, front, more than seven million users had signed a Google petition against PIPA/SOPA by early 2012.³² A Wikipedia page against SOPA/PIPA received 162 million page views, and eight million of those visitors used an on-line form to contact their political representatives.³³ Three million tweets mentioned PIPA or SOPA. A second group, reinforcing and amplifying the first, consisted of powerful technology entities. On November 16, 2011, Tumblr blocked out every word, image, and video on each user's dashboard to highlight the harm of censorship.³⁴ Reddit urged its users to oppose PIPA/SOPA and to boycott companies, such as GoDaddy.com, that supported the legislation. On January 18, 2012, many large tech companies and web communities participated in a web strike: Google changed its logo to include a "censored" graphic; Wikipedia went black; and Reddit, Craigslist, WordPress, Pinterest, Amazon, and Flickr also participated.

²⁸ Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2012a).

²⁹ Hitlin & Tan (2012).

³⁰ See this excellent discussion by Howard (2011).

³¹ Benkler (2012).

³² See "SOPA petition gets millions of signatures as internet piracy legislation protests continue," *Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 2012. (URL: http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/sopa-petition-gets-millions-of-signatures-as-internet-piracy-legislation-protests-continue/2012/01/19/gIQAHaAyBQ_story.html; <https://plus.google.com/116899029375914044550/posts/WyqtYzsuJMT>.)

³³ Howard, Alex (2012).

³⁴ Jenkins (2012).

The political results of this mobilization were immediate and dramatic. During the day of the blackout, six Senate PIPA sponsors – Marco Rubio, Orrin Hatch, Kelly Ayotte, Roy Blunt, John Boozman, and Mark Kirk – withdrew their support. On that same day, more than 110 Senators and Representatives issued public statements in opposition to PIPA or SOPA.³⁵ Subsequently, Senator Majority Leader Harry Reid posted the vote and Representative Lamar S. Smith put the bill on hold.

3. Viral Engagement: An Account

A. The Ask

In each of these four cases, viral engagement begins when a set of political entrepreneurs asks a broader public to take note of what they consider to be an important public issue. This “ask” consists of three components.

First, the entrepreneur provides information about the topic that is new or unknown to much of the audience and that is presented as urgent and plainly unjust: there was a mass murderer who enslaved children in Uganda named Joseph Kony; the Susan G. Komen Foundation stopped funding planned parenthood; a teenage boy was shot in Florida; important bi-partisan bills that limit Internet freedom were winding their way through the House and Senate.

Second, the entrepreneur develops a narrative, or “frames”³⁶ the issue in a way that identifies the injustice at stake and so serves to locate the issue in the world view of the audience and highlight its salience. The slogan “I am Trayvon Martin” captured the framing of that issue perfectly. Kony 2012 made the problem salient to the audience powerfully through the narrator’s dialogue about Kony with his five-year-old son, Gavin – the injustice is plain even to a child. Planned Parenthood successfully described the Komen Foundation’s defunding decision as an unwarranted political attack that sacrificed women’s health. PIPA/SOPA opponents framed the legislative proposals as jeopardizing freedom on the Internet by paving the way for governmental and corporate censors (the slogan on the blacked-out homepage of Wikipedia warned “Imagine a world without free knowledge”).

Third, based on this new information set in a narrative of injustice, the entrepreneur asks her audience to take action. The simplest action is simply to click “like” on Facebook or view a video or other media. Media and page views – and as the capsule descriptions of Kony 2012 views and views of the Wikipedia anti-PIPA/SOPA page show – are easy to count and increasingly reported as a statistic to measure the success of Internet campaigns. More costly and time-consuming asks may include boycotting commercial companies (PIPA/SOPA), signing petitions (Trayvon Martin, the Planned Parenthood protest at the Komen Foundation decision, PIPA/SOPA), contacting political officials (Kony 2012, PIPA/SOPA), and physically participating in public demonstrations and protests (Trayvon Martin).

B. Virality

These three characteristics of the “ask” are common to every political and social campaign.³⁷ The vast majority of off-line and on-line asks fail to go viral. What is distinctive about these four cases of an “ask” is that (i) they occurred largely on-line and that (ii) these on-line campaigns spread quickly and widely, engaging millions of people over a very short time.

³⁵ ProPublica (2012).

³⁶ Benford & Snow (2000); Gamson (1992).

³⁷ See, e.g., Fredricks (2010).

Digital technologies make viral engagement possible first by dramatically lowering the costs of publishing, broadcasting, and recommending appealing asks. It becomes possible for a relatively small organization to produce the sophisticated, professional Kony 2012 video.³⁸ Trayvon Martin's supporters broadcast their ask to the entire world at almost no cost. Digital technology facilitates the spread of asks through social networks, as one user who finds the ask compelling easily re-asks her friends through email, by re-tweeting to followers, sharing on Facebook, and so on. Finally, digital technologies reduce the costs of acting and responding to the ask through very low-cost actions – viewing, clicking to sign a petition, and electronically contacting politicians, other public officials, and organizational elites.

A campaign that goes viral, then, has five relevant characteristics from the democratic point of view.

First, almost anyone can initiate the ask. In the pre-internet era, the engagement and support of professional organizations and activists was necessary to voice a concern or point to an injustice. Digital technologies have substantially lowered the threshold for signing a petition, opening a Facebook group, or spreading the word about the ask on Twitter or in the blogosphere.

Second, the ask (and response) spreads quickly to millions of people. That quick and broad spread is part of the definition of “viral.” The ask spreads because each user asks additional users to participate. According to Adam Penenberg's *Viral Loop* (2009), such a campaign will “go viral” when each user on average engages 1.2 or more new users in the campaign.

Third, most of those who engage in the viral campaign act in relatively shallow, low-cost ways. This ease of action has caused many to criticize on-line political activity as ineffective “slacktivism.”³⁹ We agree that the cost is low and the action relatively shallow, but these critics' skeptical conclusions are too quickly drawn.

Fourth, viral campaigns bring new issues, or new perspectives on familiar issues before the public's gaze. Typically, these issues present an urgent matter or an injustice that could be fixed by the ask. While many of these matters may be controversial or nuanced, the campaigns tend to present them as a clear and unequivocal call for action. This was the core of the controversy with Kony 2012 – critics contended that the campaign presented complex matters in African politics in an overly shallow (even if easily comprehensible) manner.

Fifth, viral campaigns engage new audiences – millions of individuals – who were not previously engaged in that issue or in that particular way. Kony 2012 illustrates this phenomenon remarkably. The modal viewer was not the reader of *Foreign Policy* magazine. Instead, YouTube viewer statistics show that the video was most popular with 13–17-year-old girls.⁴⁰

C. The Political Structure and Institutional Context of Viral Engagement

The democratic value of viral engagement depends not just on the nature of the ask or its viral uptake but also on the broader institutional and social consequences of a campaign. We propose a simple schema, seen in Figure 1, with which to consider the political structure and institutional context of viral engagement.

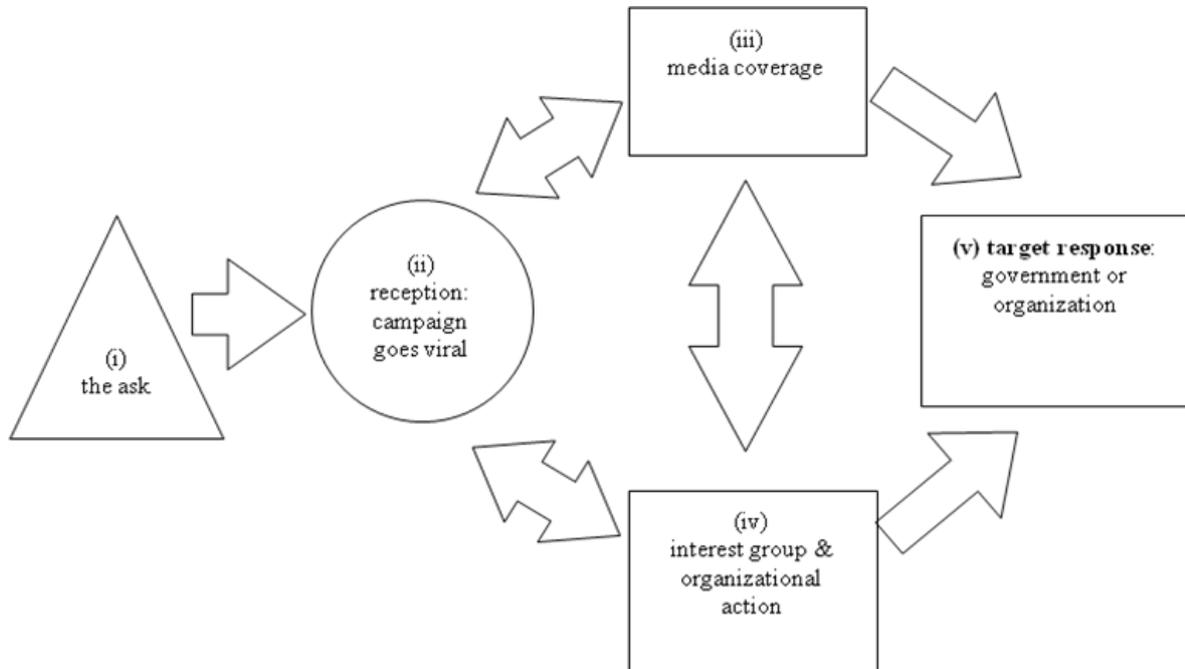
We have discussed the first two elements of this structure – (i) the ask, and (ii) its reception – immediately above. We need three additional elements to analyze the democratic consequences of viral engagement.

³⁸ Invisible Children spent less than \$1 million USD on all of their materials produced in 2011 (Davies (2012)).

³⁹ Morozov (2009); Gladwell (2010).

⁴⁰ See the YouTube statistics page for Kony 2012, URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc> (accessed on May 26, 2012).

Figure 1: The Political Structure of Viral Engagement



In all four of our campaigns, (iii) mainstream media coverage played an important role in bringing the attention of broader publics (and probably policymakers) to the issue and the viral campaign itself. In all four cases, media coverage helped the campaign to bring on board additional interest groups and traditional organizations that would support the cause of the campaign. Interestingly, in all four cases a combination of mainstream and social media set the wheels of the campaigns in motion. In some cases, such as Trayvon Martin and Susan G. Komen, initial coverage by traditional news outlets led to intense discussions in the social media, which fuelled further coverage by traditional media sources.⁴¹ In other cases, such as Kony 2012 and PIPA/SOPA, social media led the way and traditional media only joined later, when the story was already “trending” on Twitter and Facebook. In several of these cases (Kony 2012, PIPA/SOPA, and Susan G. Komen as well), the viral campaign and engagement was a story as much as the issue itself.⁴² This media coverage accelerates the viral campaign itself, as people who come to know of the campaigns visit the campaign sites and so experience their asks directly.

Another important category of actors consists of (iv) organizations and associations with an interest in the issue who comment on, join, or oppose the viral campaign. Kony 2012 caused groups to line up for and against the effort. The NAACP and others joined the Trayvon Martin campaign. The role of organizations and associations is perhaps most prominent in the PIPA/SOPA campaign, which drew the support of non-profit organizations, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Wikipedia, as well as corporations such as Google, Amazon, Reddit, and GoDaddy. As with media intermediaries, the relationship between the viral campaign and interested organizations is reciprocal. Such organizations are more likely to involve themselves as a viral campaign grows and their

⁴¹ Almost half of the 5 million visits to the Change.org petition period were referred by social media (Stempeck (2012)).

⁴² This statement is based on author impressions, not content analysis of news coverage.

involvement in turn draws greater public and media attention and so feeds the growth of the viral campaign. As the cases of Kony 2012, Trayvon Martin, and PIPA/SOPA show, endorsements by celebrities are also instrumental in accelerating the virality of the campaign.

The results of viral campaigns may range from general awareness-raising to concrete actions taken by policymakers. In all four of our cases, the decision-makers and organizations targeted by the viral campaigns arguably responded to them and took the requested action. The Susan G. Komen Foundation restored funding eligibility for Planned Parenthood and officers of the organization resigned. Governor Rick Perry appointed a Special Prosecutor to investigate the Trayvon Martin shooting and she brought charges against George Zimmerman. PIPA and SOPA were introduced with bipartisan support but sponsors of both pieces of legislation withdrew their support in January 2012. The effect of Kony 2012 is perhaps most difficult to assess – funding for the soldiers who are hunting Joseph Kony might have continued even without the video and viral campaign.

With this conceptual apparatus – an account of viral engagement and its institutional political context – in hand, the rest of this essay considers the effect of viral engagement upon four critical democratic values: inclusion, political equality, public deliberation, and civic education. It is important to note that we are not assessing the democratic worthiness of the goals or policy outcomes of a viral campaign. Our objective is to examine the democratic virtues of the viral engagement process, being neutral with regard to the desirability of its objectives.

4. Inclusion

Part of the ideal of a democratic society is that all citizens should be included in the binding decisions and collective actions of that society. The universal franchise is one institutionalization of the ideal of inclusion. Formal and informal barriers to voting detract from the realization of the ideal of inclusion. Even with an unimpeded and universal franchise that gives all citizens a right and opportunity to participate in political processes, however, worries about inclusion remain. In the contemporary American context, millions rarely participate in politics because they don't know, they don't care, or no one asks them. Can the opportunities and asks of viral engagement increase inclusion? Or, will viral engagement exacerbate problems of exclusion?

First, the digital social networks on which viral engagement spreads may be a more common and accessible medium for acquiring political information.⁴³ Some may be accustomed to acquiring news and other information through on-line sources in addition to conventional routes of political communication such as television, radio, civic associations, and face-to-face conversations, and some may even prefer on-line sources.⁴⁴ The opposite argument, however, stresses the way in which access to information and communication technologies correlates with other dimensions of advantage – income, education, professional status. From this digital divide perspective, the people who are excluded from the conventional channels of political information and action will also be excluded from digital channels of participation. This is not the place to settle this debate – but only to note that as information and communication technologies become cheaper and shift increasingly to mobile modalities, the breath of the digital divide may be shrinking.⁴⁵

A second factor looks not to the medium, or even the message, but to the people who deliver messages through that medium. The digital networks through which viral engagement spreads are

⁴³ This is particularly true for youth. See Cohen & Kahne (2012).

⁴⁴ Zickuhr & Smith (2012).

⁴⁵ Horrigan (2009): “Wireless connectivity has drawn many users more deeply into digital life”. See also, Cohen & Kahne (2012).

social. That means that individuals often receive political information and asks not just through another impersonal medium – although there are plenty of direct-mail type solicitations over electronic mail – but as recommended links, articles, and videos from family, friends, and acquaintances whom they have deliberately “friended” or followed on social networks like Facebook and Twitter. This social aspect of the new digital media may address the kinds of exclusion that arise: of personal alienation from conventional political organizations and other mainstream institutions. This dynamic may well have been manifest in the spread of the Kony 2012 video among 13–17-year-old girls, its most popular demographic.

Third, digital communication technologies lower the cost of action: of responding to the “ask” that one watches a video, “likes” a post or group, e-signs a petition, or clicks through a page to contact official decision-makers on behalf of a cause. The availability of these new tools for political action blurs the boundaries between traditional elites and groups that have been excluded from political life. As the range of valid political activities expands and the cost of these activities declines, the public sphere opens up to new voices. Sub-groups who are excluded from political life may find the costs of digitally mediated political action especially low – compared to their politically and socially included counterparts – for two reasons. First, they might be comfortable with digital communication and action because that is how they often socialize and transact in non-political areas of life. Second, they might find traditional venues of political action – such as going to a community meeting, signing a canvasser’s petition, donating money, or even entering a voting booth – strange or off-putting compared to digital action.

5. Political Equality

A second critical democratic value is that all citizens should be counted equally in public decisions and that they should enjoy equal opportunities to exercise political influence. Despite universal franchise, many factors stand in the way of the value of political equality in the contemporary American political-economy. Consider two of them: a social background of unequally distributed resources and asymmetric incentives to organize and influence public policies.

Every society is marked by some inequality in the distribution of social and economic resources across its population. The degree to which material inequality creates problems for political equality depends upon (i) the extent of material inequality and (ii) the ease with which individuals can translate their economic and social power into political influence. Both of these factors pose especially great challenges to political equality in contemporary American society. The extent of material inequality is so great that some critics say that the United States has become a “winner take all society.”⁴⁶ The barriers between money and politics have never been particularly high in the United States. However, recent Constitutional decisions and political practices have made them lower than they have ever been before.⁴⁷ As a result of these factors, political scientists have found that policy decisions are especially sensitive to those in the top ten percent of the income distribution and not at all sensitive to the middle of the distribution or below.⁴⁸

A second challenge to political equality stems from asymmetries in the motives to organize to exert political influence. Many political scientists have established that the politics of making laws and regulations often favor those who have especially deep interests in some particular policy domain even

⁴⁶ Hacker and Pierson (2011).

⁴⁷ See, *Citizens United v. Fed. Election Comm’n*, 130 S. Ct. 676 (2010). For a thorough discussion of the effects of money on politics, see Lessig (2011).

⁴⁸ See Gilens (2005).

when there are many other people who stand to suffer but have only weak interests in the issue.⁴⁹ This theory, for example, predicts that it would be difficult to pass stringent environmental regulation even though there are millions who would benefit from cleaner air or water because a few (e.g. factory owners) would stand to lose much more per person because it is easier for the smaller group to organize themselves and influence the policy that potentially hurts them. Many public policies involve this kind of asymmetry between a small group which stands to lose (or win) a lot per person on one side of a public policy and a much larger group that stands to win (or lose) a small amount per person on the other side of the policy. This includes regulation of all kinds, and in particular public subsidies (think of agricultural subsidies) and procurement policies (think of entrenched defense or infrastructure contractors).

Viral engagement addresses these two challenges to political equality if it mobilizes people directly to countervail the political influence of money and entrenched organizations. This argument relies on a claim about the distinctive nature of on-line viral campaigns. Digital social network dynamics lower the barriers to spreading information and injustice frames and to politically relevant action ((i) and (ii) in figure 1 above) so that these on-line appeals unleash the social and political values of those whom traditional forms of interest group organizing have failed to organize or mobilize.

The potential of viral engagement as a countervailing power is perhaps most clearly evident in the PIPA/SOPA debacle. When those two pieces of legislation were first introduced, they enjoyed a bipartisan consensus. Initially, the industries and interest groups (such as the US Chamber of Commerce and the Motion Picture Association of America) who stood to benefit were the only vocal voices. As described in Section 2.D. above, a quick and broadly based mobilization of millions quickly changed the political tide and challenged the two pieces of legislation.

An important objection to this sentiment is that viral engagement may turn out to undermine political equality rather than advancing it. As examples such as the four discussed in this essay become more common and better understood, political entrepreneurs may develop an art and craft of making asks go viral on digital social networks. As this persuasion industry develops, we may find that asks crafted with the support of lavish resources are much more likely to go viral than less well-funded asks. If the effectiveness of viral asks is highly “elastic” with regard to the resources backing them, then viral engagement is likely to become just another form of professional campaigning that reflects the underlying inequality of resources.

Even if it turns out that effective viral asks require lavish resources, political equality may not suffer unless one further condition is met: that people can be manipulated through these asks into acting against their own beliefs or interests. In each of our four cases of viral engagement, it is plausible that people responded to the ask for action because the ask touched their deeply-held beliefs and interests. This link between viral engagement and pre-existing beliefs, values, or interests provides a safeguard for political equality; if it holds, at least viral engagement will not make our politics more unequal. It may be the case, however, that clever political entrepreneurs may be able to manipulate information and frames so that people engage in viral campaigns that actually damage their own interests.⁵⁰ The likelihood of viral campaigns becoming a propaganda tool is currently unclear – the rarity and novelty of genuine viral engagement does not allow for a conclusive assessment.

⁴⁹ See, for example: Wilson (1984); Stigler (1971); Lowi (1979).

⁵⁰ The emerging literature on “viral marketing” can be particularly handy for these purposes. Recent studies examine the factors that make viral videos appealing and persuasive and suggest how to replicate them. See, e.g., Ho & Dempsey (2008).

6. Public Deliberation

A third critical value is public deliberation: collective decisions and actions should be based upon a broad public consideration of contending reasons, arguments, and evidence that appeal to everyone who is affected by them. Put this way, it may seem that viral engagement is the opposite of public deliberation. The “asks” of viral engagement typically involve emotionally charged, one-sided, appeals that are designed to motivate action rather than a considered balancing of reasons and evidence on all sides of a question.

Many cases of viral campaigns are criticized because they spread false rumors or even hate speech.⁵¹ Similarly, some of the criticism of the Kony 2012 video, for example, focused on its partial use of the facts – Joseph Kony is believed to be no longer in Uganda and the forces under his command are now a pale shadow of what they once were. Other critics argued that Kony 2012 drew unwarranted public attention to a problem that ranked relatively low on the schedule of Africa’s most urgent concerns regarding human development or human rights. Similarly, much of the commentary surrounding the PIPA/SOPA legislation stressed worst case scenarios of public censorship. Unsurprisingly, the petition statement that Trayvon Martin’s supporters signed on change.org did not suggest any of the possible justifications for George Zimmerman’s actions.

The discourse composed directly of viral engagement – by the ask and its immediate reception – will rarely constitute a fair-minded consideration of the issue at hand. However, neither the beginning nor the end of public consideration of an issue is coterminous with on-line viral engagement around that issue. For this reason, we argue that viral engagements typically contribute to the quality of public deliberation and decision-making for three reasons.

First, the “ask” in a viral engagement typically occurs in response to perceived shortcomings in some ongoing public debate or sequence of decisions. Responses, coming initially in the form of the “asks” of political entrepreneurs, introduce novel information, arguments, or perspectives into the public debate, or at least bring those discursive elements before audiences who were previously unaware of them. Beyond the substantive information – the harmful consequences of intellectual property regulation or the politicization of a women’s health decision – viral engagements also provide the public and decision makers with the information that many millions of people seem to care about (or at least be reasonably interested in) the issue that is the focus of the online campaign. Thus, viral engagements contribute to the quality of public deliberation by articulating a counterpoint to the prevailing currents of discussion and action.

Second, the arguments made by the entrepreneurs who begin a viral campaign and are aired within that campaign offer only one input into a broader public debate. The perspectives and interpretations of a viral campaign are never the last or only word, and seldom are they the most powerful voice. If the only arguments – or the hegemonic ones – about intellectual property were those made in the anti-PIPA/SOPA campaign or we had no other perspectives about United States foreign policy in Africa other than those of Kony 2012, those viral campaigns would indeed have detracted mightily from the quality of public deliberation. But those perspectives were simply not hegemonic, and so worries that viral campaigns will dominate public discourse are misplaced. Structurally, they cannot dominate. As figure 1 highlights, the entrepreneurs who seek to spark a viral campaign constitute only one actor in a much larger political system that includes many other interest groups, media, and governments and other decision-makers. In a free society, those other groups will articulate their contrasting perspectives and arguments.

Third, viral campaigns often enrich subsequent public discussion by pressing those other organizations to become more articulate and public regarding their reasons and arguments in the

⁵¹ A recent and powerful example is the movie trail “The Innocence of Muslims”, which went viral and led to violent protests in the Muslim world. See e.g., Marantz (2012).

public sphere and in institutional spaces. Kony 2012 sparked many rich discussions in varied media ranging from Foreign Policy to the New York Times. Blog posts on technology and culture have explored the boundary-testing and protecting nature of the ensuing debate: do adolescent girls have a place in foreign policy discussions?⁵² Public sociologists used Kony 2012 to explore the colonial character of US foreign policy interventions, even those justified by the desire to safeguard human rights.⁵³ The video created an occasion for human rights advocates and foreign policy intellectuals to debate the future of intervention in Africa and the wisdom of trying to apprehend Joseph Kony. And the Kony 2012 video brought these debates to the attention of millions who were previously ignorant or apathetic about the issue. Viral engagement around the Trayvon Martin controversy triggered a searching reconsideration of the shooting in institutional space: the appointment of a special prosecutor and a second degree murder charge. It would of course be an enormous loss for public deliberation and for criminal justice if the massive petition campaign somehow sealed George Zimmerman's fate, but that is not how public campaigns work in democratic societies governed by the rule of law. What the Trayvon Martin campaign did do was highlight a potential mistake by local law enforcement officials. The subsequent investigation and prosecution will follow its own procedures and rules of evidence, although those procedures will likely be more carefully scrutinized as a result of viral engagement.

It is important to note that virality can also work in anti-deliberative ways. For example, information cascades (Watts 2002) can spread false information or a social graph might be constructed in such a way that beliefs and arguments are polarized in segregated social echo chambers (Sunstein 2009). Although this is not the occasion to engage in an analysis of what separates deliberative from non-deliberative virality, the four cases described above exhibit deliberative qualities because the kind of public dialogue in which they figure incorporates heterogeneous views in ongoing exchange.

7. Civic Education

A fourth critical value is civic education. A democratic society must create mechanisms for its citizens to learn "virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation."⁵⁴ Is viral engagement such a mechanism?

Skeptics might say that the quick and shallow nature of viral engagement prevents this kind of on-line political engagement from conferring any meaningful educative benefit to those who engage in it. According to this line of thinking, the low-cost of viral engagement also makes it low-value, civically speaking. Unlike participating in a church or union meeting or working on a political campaign, clicking on a "like" button on one's web browser does not provide much training in citizenship. Furthermore, in a much-noted article, Malcolm Gladwell has argued that strong social networks – the bonds of close friendship and solidarity – were a necessary component of civic education in social movements such as the US civil rights protests. The on-line social networks through which viral engagement spreads, he argues, are composed of weak ties between hundreds of virtual friends with whom one has little meaningful contact or even common interest.⁵⁵

But why does a citizen – or a critic – have to choose between on-line engagement and traditional social protest or other political activity? Part of the concern from the "slacktivism" view seems to regard not so much the low value of viral engagement itself, but the worry that such on-line activity will crowd out higher value activities which are more meaningful, effective, and educative

⁵² Jenkins (2012).

⁵³ Mamdani (2012).

⁵⁴ Gutmann (1987).

⁵⁵ Gladwell (2010).

such as traditional political or community organizing. An implicit component of Gladwell's argument is that these protesters are tweeting and "liking" instead of sitting-in and demonstrating.

If there is some sort of zero-sum displacement dynamic at work – if individuals have a fixed budget for political activity that can go either into on-line engagement and conventional political activity and if online activity is less educative – then worries about slacktivism are justified. We know of no empirical evidence to support this displacement thesis, however.⁵⁶ In fact, existing evidence suggests that online engagement may strengthen traditional forms of political participation, at least among the youth.⁵⁷

Given such evidence, consider the following two possibilities. First, the amount of on-line engagement may or may not be related to conventional political activity. For participants, different motivations and opportunities may govern participation in these two distinct spheres. If viral engagement does not displace other political action, however, then it should count as a net positive for civic education. Although participants may not experience the deep personal transformations of those who engage in demanding activism like the Freedom Rides, viral engagement does bring new information to and awaken a modest kind of interest (enough to take the time to watch a video or complete a web form) in millions who would have not been otherwise engaged. Moreover, it allows previously uninformed individuals to take symbolic and expressive action in spheres that used to be in the sole domain of professional and committed political activists.⁵⁸ If viral engagements become more common – with people considering whether or not to respond to different sorts of asks several times a week – the experience may not be akin to often walking through a public square with many speakers on soap-boxes. As real soap-boxes are prohibited by anti-loitering laws, citizens may come to learn about many issues and learn some of the routes to influencing public decisions through viral campaigns.

Another possibility, as likely as the others, is that viral engagement is a "gateway drug" to more intense forms of political activism. As a fast, cheap, and low-cost form of engagement, it may be for many the lowest rung on a ladder of engagement.⁵⁹ 37% of the people who visited Trayvon Martin's change.org petition signed it.⁶⁰ A small percentage of those who signed also shared the petition on their social networks. An even smaller percentage of these individuals participated in street protests and other more demanding, sustained, political activities. The example of the German Pirate Party is illuminating in this context. The party was started by a group of internet activists as an online campaign against intrusive copyright legislation in Europe, but later took shape as a more consolidated political unit, participated in German elections, and won seats in local governments and state parliaments in the country.⁶¹

Even if an on-line ask is the lowest, and not only, rung on a ladder of activism, different kinds of viral campaigns may be better or worse for civic education. When an organization or coalition utilizes viral engagement as part of a long term strategy to build a political constituency – as with

⁵⁶ For a summary of research that finds that there is no displacement effect of conventional political activity by on-line activism, see: Christensen (2011).

⁵⁷ A report on "The Internet and Civic Education" found that "those who use blogs or social networking sites politically are much more likely to be invested in other forms of civic and political activism. Compared to those who go online but do not post political or social content, or to those who do not go online in the first place, members of this group are much more likely to take part in other civic activities such as joining a political or civic group, contacting a government official, or expressing themselves in the media." See Smith, Scholzman, Verba, & Brady (2009).

⁵⁸ Tufekci (2012).

⁵⁹ The "ladder of engagement" argument is common among political activists. For a classic account, see Arnstein (1969).

⁶⁰ Stempeck (2012).

⁶¹ Kron (2012).

Invisible Children's Kony 2012 video or perhaps the organizations behind the campaign to defeat PIPA/SOPA – we can expect that organization or coalition to use viral engagement as a way to identify supporters who can be recruited into repeated and more intensive kinds of activity and so provide effective opportunities for civic education. Other viral engagements, however, aim to change a particular decision with less interest in building a lasting constituency.

8. Conclusion

In the pages above, we have offered some speculative reflections on the potential contribution of online viral engagement to democratic governance. Two important shifts of perspective were important in composing these reflections. First, viral engagement is composed of many different kinds of actors, not just participants in the engagement itself: political entrepreneurs initiate that engagement, and power interest groups and intermediaries respond to it and amplify its spread. Second, we view any episode of viral engagement as occurring in the context of highly flawed political institutions and an ongoing process of public debate and decision-making that unfolds over time. Perhaps it is this second shift that makes us relatively sanguine about the democratic contributions of viral engagement. For us, the question is not whether participation in a campaign like the fight to stop PIPA/SOPA is itself egalitarian or deliberative, but whether the existence of that campaign advances, from the status quo ante, values like political equality or public deliberation. Further, we do not aim to assess the worthiness or desirability of the objectives of a viral campaign, but only examine the democratic virtues that are part of the viral engagement process. With the caveats that instances of viral engagement are still relatively rare and new, and that there is not much empirical research to draw upon, online campaigns that go viral have the potential to enhance inclusion, political equality, public deliberation, and civic engagement.

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