

CHANGE IS NOT JUST A CLICK AWAY¹

Will Horter[©]

Activists, those of us who work to change the world from what it is to what we believe it should be, face enormous challenges: An economy obsessed with unsustainable growth; leaders promoting decisions which will inevitably result in catastrophic changes in climate that threaten civilization as we know it; Disparities in wealth; Access to wholesome food and clean water and education for our children. How are we as going to reverse these trends, and change the world for the better? And how do we do it fast, with few resources, and at a scale never before imagined?

These are questions every activist, and every organization is trying to answer. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. Too many people are looking for a silver bullet. Too many people are looking for that one strategy, one tactic, or one tool that will deliver us to a changed world. But if we have any chance of achieving the ambitious goals needed to save ourselves from ourselves we need to use all the tools available, including online tools. But we need to use them wisely.

Recently, there has been a controversial debate over what some derisively call “Clicktivism”. Clicktivism critics suggest online campaigns have reduced activism to the click of a mouse, an online signature on a petition, and have “an inordinate faith in the power of metrics to quantify success,” says Micah White, a contributing editor at Adbusters. The critics' rhetoric has often been hostile; with some claiming that not only is online activism ineffective, but more ominously, that it undermines grassroots democracy and will inevitably lead to the “marketization” of social change. However, it is not necessarily the online campaign itself that is at issue, but the strategy behind the Facebook pages, online petitions, and emails. The criticisms of digital campaigns—that they are market-driven, poorly conceived, indiscriminately targeted, badly executed, measure the wrong metrics, and therefore are ineffective—could easily be attributed to most old-school campaigns. The fault lies not in these campaigns' digital nature, but in the quality of the activism.

So what separates Clicktivism from effective digital organizing? To start: Integration with face to face strategies. When properly deployed, online activism can expand social networks, raise funds, and help brand and broaden a campaign's visibility. Properly targeted, resourced, and executed, online tools can produce amazing results, especially if combined with old-school techniques. At Dogwood Initiative, we've learned that online activism works best as an acquisition strategy. When properly deployed, online activism can expand social networks, raise funds, and help brand and broaden a campaign's visibility. But no matter how brilliantly designed, and executed an online action is, nothing replaces a human being talking to another human being.

Clicktivism critics have rightly criticized some online petition campaigns as ineffective. They argue that politicians seldom pay attention to online petition drives, and they are probably right. But if a petition is thought of as an acquisition device that in addition to sending a message to a politician, allows activists to network and build relationships with people of shared values, then it is an invaluable tool. What online activism does amazingly well is build supporter lists.

¹ Dogwood Initiative, November 19, 2010

At Dogwood we use petitions to begin a relationship that helps like-minded people take actions on things they care deeply about – like stopping oil tankers. We just exceeded 65,000 supporters on our petition to the Prime Minister of Canada to ban oil supertankers off Canada's northern Pacific coast. Many of these supporters came in through the online petition. These people are now part of a movement taking action both online, and offline in support of Dogwood's No Tankers campaign. They show up at rallies, donate proxies at corporate annual general meetings, make signs, write letters to the editor, and pledge to engage in amazing physical challenges to raise the profile of the issue.

Online petitions are just one tool to start a new relationship with supporters. But, whatever online tool you use, it needs to be followed up by offline contact that builds stronger ties between your supporters and your cause. The No Tankers campaign strategy aims to pair online actions with a call to take part in something more tangible, like a phone conversation or attending a volunteer meeting. When you get right down to it, online activism is just a collection of tools. Like most tools, when used with skill and focused on the correct task, they work very well. When used without skill or strategy, or on the wrong task, the tools can be ineffective, and even damaging.

Our No Tankers campaign attracted 12 people to our first event (and 8 were staff or family members), now we fill auditoriums. While digital activism has played an essential role in this rapid expansion, our experience is that it is the human element, the face-to-face interactions that drive the campaign. The Clicktivism critics have one thing right: There is no way we can just click our way to an equitable, and sustainable community, nation, or world. We need to follow a click with in-person conversations, and actions that can be seen, and heard (and tweeted, and posted).