

It's Your
World,
So Change It



Using the Power
of the **Internet**
to Create Social
Change

No matter where you are, you can be
anywhere and change everything.

It's Your World, So Change It: Using the Power of the Internet to Create Social Change

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Introduction

“There is nothing new under the sun, but there are lots of old things we don’t know.”

—Ambrose Bierce

December 25th, 1990, was one of the most important dates in the history of American civil rights because that was the day that George Holliday got his first camcorder for Christmas.

George, a Los Angeles-area plumber who lived close enough to California’s Interstate 210 to see the cars roll by, was out on his balcony a few months later, on March 3rd, when he saw something disturbing: four LAPD officers beating a black man. Holliday, who had spent time in Argentina and knew something about oppressive police tactics, did something the officers could not have anticipated: He whipped out his Sony HandyCam, took video, and distributed it to the media.

That’s how we know Rodney King was beaten by the LAPD in 1991. That’s why grassroots activists mobilized in protest against the beating. That’s why the four officers were brought up on charges. That’s why the L.A. riots ensued when the officers were acquitted. That’s why federal charges were later filed against the officers. And that’s why the Christopher Commission (which examined racism and civil rights abuses in the LAPD) came about later. The Commission’s data and the controversy preceding it led to substantial, albeit inadequate, police reforms—not only within the LAPD, but also throughout the country. All this happened because George Holliday got a HandyCam for Christmas.

Now when police abuse citizens’ civil rights, they have to be more careful about who’s watching. When a group of undersupervised LAPD officers violently interrupted an immigration rally at MacArthur Park in May 2007, for example, they didn’t just attack the protesters—they also attacked journalists and attempted to destroy TV cameras. Cell phone cameras, the Sony HandyCams of our age, captured it all on film. And when an Oakland police officer shot 22-year-old Oscar Grant in the back on New Year’s Day 2009, despite the fact that Grant was unarmed, cooperative, and lying face down on the pavement, officers attempted to confiscate all nearby cell

phone cameras as “evidence.” A video taken by a young woman named Katrina Vargas, who eluded the search, quickly went public and prevented police from sweeping the incident under the rug.

Today, human rights activists focusing on police abuse at every level, and in every country, rely on the Internet and video technology to hold police accountable. WITNESS, founded by singer-songwriter Peter Gabriel in 1992 as a program of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, helps grassroots activists record and distribute video documenting human rights abuses perpetrated by oppressive governments. And a national network of “Copwatch” groups, in which citizens videotape police misconduct for purposes of grassroots activism and media distribution, help use technology to hold police accountable.

These changes in media technology are effective only when people are watching. Having a portable camera means that you can produce important documentation of civil rights abuses; it doesn’t mean that you can distribute the evidence in a venue where people will actually see it. YouTube, for example, is full of videos of police beatings that never get media exposure nor substantial activist attention.

In November 2008, the largest gay rights rally in Mississippi history was held at the state capitol. It was organized by online activists, most of them out of state—a stunning success of online activism. But local media mostly ignored it, and the few local media outlets that did cover it largely underreported attendance. Attendees responded by uploading evidence of the rallies—photographs, videos, and firsthand accounts—to Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, and other sites. The event wasn’t just organized online; it was documented online. Traditional activism, and traditional media coverage, wasn’t part of the picture.

Online activism is helpful even when you can recruit local media to help, but it’s absolutely essential when you can’t. Online activism bridges the gap between those who control media and those who do not. It allows us to organize events and membership, raise funds, and document actions. It gives us the ability to recruit activists—students, stay-at-home moms, night-shift workers, the severely disabled, and so forth—who have historically been underrepresented in traditional activism circles. It gives us the power to shape our world in innovative ways. It gives us the power to be the George Hollidays of our time.

About This Book

There was a time when a book like this would begin with statistics. I could cite Nielsen data from June 2008 indicating that 72.5% of Americans, or 220 million people, use the Internet. I could mention a 2009 Harvard study showing that online advertising is a \$300 billion industry, accounting for more than two% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP). I could refer to a July 2008 study from the Center for Philanthropy at Indiana University, suggesting that 12.6% of donations to nonprofit organizations take place over the Internet rather than through other means, or that 8% of organizations surveyed receive the majority of their donations online.

And I suppose I just did all of these things, but I didn’t *have* to—because you already know the Internet is worth paying attention to. It’s part of the American cultural mainstream now, its relevance established, its importance unchallenged. But it hasn’t been that way for very long, and activist organizations have been relatively slow to get on the bandwagon.

I remember a presentation I gave in June 1997 on the importance of websites to nonprofit organizations. I argued that they represented permanent electronic real estate, that the Internet was growing, and that any organization that didn't need a website yet probably *would* need one over the coming years. All these predictions eventually came to pass, but my urgent and optimistic tone sounded ridiculous at the time, and I knew it. Convincing nonprofit leaders that a technology is worth pursuing can take years. The same Indiana University study showing that online donations make up 12.6% of overall donations, for example, also found that only 44% of nonprofits actually accept donations over the Internet. What percentage of donations would be given online if the other 56% of nonprofits followed suit?

People talk about “e-activism” and “online activism” as if they were new forms of activism, but they're really just new media for traditional forms of activism. True, they're revolutionary. But so was the telephone, and we don't still talk about “telephone activism”; it's understood that using a telephone as part of our activism efforts is normal. Online activism, or e-activism, will one day be perceived as normal, too.

Cover to Cover

This book is made up of ten chapters and five appendixes.

Chapter 1, “Online Activism 101,” is your introduction to the world of online activism. I'll explain how to persuade traditional activists to use (or let you use) online media and how to use online media to support a cause on your own if they won't. I'll introduce your eight-part online activism toolkit (explored step-by-step in Chapters 2–9) and profile an organization that has used e-activism as a way to expand its reach, as well as an individual activist who has done a great deal of good online without the support of traditional activist groups.

Chapter 2, “How to Research Issues and Stay Informed,” is all about using the Internet to *gather* information—part 1 of your eight-part online activism toolkit. I'll tell you how to use the Internet to research issues, monitor online newspapers and magazines to keep up with new developments on causes important to you, develop talking points, join relevant mailing lists and newsletters, avoid hoaxes and urban legends, find books and articles you need, keep up with legislation, legal codes, and court rulings, and use the Internet to connect with traditional resources such as reference librarians and interlibrary loan departments.

Chapter 3, “How to Build, Promote, and Maintain a Website,” tells you how you can build and maintain a website—part 2 of your eight-part online activism toolkit. I'll explain how websites have traditionally been used to move activism forward and explain how you can tailor your website's content to meet the specific needs of local, non-local, and media readers. I'll also describe ways you can ethically promote your website and make it visible to the larger community, and share five tips on creating an activism website that's well worth having.

Chapter 4, “How to Use Social Networking Sites as an Activism,” focuses on social networking—part 3 of your eight-part online activism toolkit. I'll describe the history of social networking (which connects very closely with the history of progressive activism), explain the advantages of social networking for activists, compare Facebook, MySpace, and other social networking services, highlight common mistakes that activists make when they use social networking services, and profile a political campaign that made the most of new social networking technology.

Chapter 5, “A Short Guide to the Ethics and Etiquette of Online Activism,” deals with ethics and netiquette—part 4 of your eight-part online activism toolkit. I’ll describe the 7 “deadly sins” of online activism, explain the difference between spam and legitimate site promotion, and tell you about the 10 most common types of offensively clueless online activists—and how to avoid becoming one of them.

Chapter 6, “How to Raise Funds, Host Contests, and Build Membership Online,” deals with raising funds online—part 5 of your eight-part online activism toolkit. I’ll talk about tools and services that nonprofits can use to process online donations, how to build up membership by offering members-only resources online, and how successful nonprofits have solicited funds online in the past. I’ll profile an activist organization that has done very, very well with online donations.

Chapter 7, “How to Use Multimedia Technology as an Activism Tool,” deals with multimedia technology—part 6 of your eight-part online activism toolkit. I’ll review YouTube, Flickr, and other multimedia websites that can be useful to your cause, explain how and why and when to embed visual and audio content into your online activism materials, how to find online content that is public domain or can be used for free by nonprofits, and explain why podcasting *might* be a good idea. I’ll also describe 10 cases where online multimedia was *central* to an activism effort.

Chapter 8, “How to Keep Allies Informed (Without Annoying Them Too Much),” deals with blogging and other technologies you can use to keep activists informed—part 7 of your eight-part online activism toolkit. I’ll describe different blogging platforms and technologies, explain how RSS feeds work, go over the steps involved in creating an email newsletter or mailing list, describe how activists have used cell phone text messaging to organize volunteers and keep them informed, discuss online chat technologies, and review a wonderful little site called Twitter. I’ll also describe five cases where blogging or other communication technologies were very helpful to an activism effort.

Chapter 9, “How to Create Effective Action Alerts and Online Petitions,” deals with action alerts, online petitions, and other ways to use the Internet as a form of direct action. This is part 8—the last part of your eight-part activism toolkit. I’ll discuss how to set up good action alerts (and how often to send them), address the issue of whether online petitions are a waste of time (and explain how you can make the most of them), address the issue of online polls, and go over other ways that you can use the Internet to directly organize activists. I also describe a case where an online petition did some good and profile an organization that has used action alerts very effectively.

Chapter 10, “How to Keep It Real,” summarizes your eight-part online activism toolkit and explains how you can implement these strategies in the service of your own cause. I’ll also go over some future and not yet widely adopted technologies that could significantly change the way we do online activism, describe how 10 organizations have used online activism in their work, and try to answer the question my activism mentor, Shannan Reaze, asked me in 2007: *Is online activism killing “real” face-to-face activism? How can we make sure the two coexist effectively?*

The appendixes are more important to this book, perhaps, than appendixes generally are. Appendix A sums up 10 common online activism mistakes and explains how to avoid them. Appendix B directs you to resources that you can use to find activism jobs and volunteer opportunities online. Appendix C is an illustrated timeline of online activism, from 125 BCE (yes, really) to mere days before this book went to press. Appendix D is a glossary of 100 common terms that online activists should know. And finally, Appendix E lists online degree programs that may be of interest to activists and those who work in the nonprofit sector.



A Short Guide to the Ethics and Etiquette of Online Activism

“Tradition is a guide and not a jailer.”

—W. Somerset Maugham

If you want to see a great exercise in applied moral philosophy, get your hands on a copy of Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*. Published in 1971 to help young community organizers do their jobs in a way that actually gets stuff done, rather than in a way that simply makes them feel better about themselves, Alinsky's little book is one of the wisest I've ever read. You'll probably love parts of it and hate parts of it, and that's really kind of the point, but you'll learn from it. And after you've read it once, you'll probably reread it.

I don't want to just paraphrase his second chapter, titled “Of Means and Ends,” which deals in general terms with the same sorts of ideas we discuss in this chapter. And I don't want to get way off topic and go into any great detail about the field of moral philosophy or what it means to be an ethical or good person—there are plenty of books about that, most of them useless for our purposes. But I'd like to talk a little bit about a point he makes regarding means and ends because I think it's important to this chapter. He writes:

The organizer, the revolutionist, the activist or call him what you will, who is committed to free and open society is in that commitment anchored to a complex of high values...These values include freedom, equality, justice, peace, the right to dissent; the values that were the banners of hope and learning of all revolutions...

Means and ends are so qualitatively interrelated that the true question has never been the proverbial one, “Does the End justify the Means?,” but always has been “Does this *particular* end justify this *particular* means?”

This is important. Alinsky brings up the example of terrorism—fighting a government by taking civilian hostages and blowing stuff (and people) up is always wrong, right? Well, Mahatma Gandhi (see Figure 5.1)—arguably the most effective activist of the twentieth century—thought so. But for the partisans who violently resisted the Nazis during World War II, partisans who would not have been able to do so by less radical means, violence was essential. Or we can look at Abraham Lincoln’s pre-abolitionist argument that no state should or may secede against the United States because “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Wouldn’t King George have been able to make the same argument prior to the American Revolution? (President Lincoln was in a much stronger position, morally, after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation and made abolition of slavery a clear part of the Union cause.)



Figure 5.1

What makes Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of passive resistance effective in most contexts is not its moral purity, but rather its efficacy. Even Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi’s most prominent ideological heir, did not fully support passive resistance until it was proven effective during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Photo: Public domain.

Alinsky recommends looking at your options before you choose a strategy and then going with the options that are (a) least morally objectionable among the available options and (b) most likely to work. In a practical sense, (b) implies (a) anyway. For example, terrorism *doesn’t* usually work—especially in a democracy, where public outrage over terrorism will generally promote a policy agenda contrary to whatever it is the terrorists want. Hawkish leaders in the United States successfully waged two elective wars after the 9/11 attacks, something that would have been unthinkable beforehand, and instituted the most aggressive assassination

program in U.S. history against terrorist leaders. All in all, that was a pretty lousy deal for both al-Qaeda and their agenda—even before we bring morality into the picture. Likewise, the violence initiated by certain segments of the anti-abortion movement during the 1990s effectively took the idea of a national abortion ban off the table and may have done so permanently. In a democratic system, being a nut isn't only unnecessary—it's destructive to your cause.

In this chapter, we talk about the seven deadly sins of online activism. There are moral arguments that can probably be made against each of them, but for purposes of this book I'm mostly interested in the fact that in addition to being unethical and rude, these strategies just don't work.

Deadly Sin #1: Self-Promotion at the Expense of the Movement

Every time I write an activism-focused bio, I feel a little bit like Daffy Duck. You might know what I'm talking about: the old Looney Tunes shorts where Daffy fights with Bugs Bunny or Porky Pig to make sure he gets the credit he thinks he deserves. Those cartoons weren't originally made for kids, and the older I get, the more I get the subtext. We're all a little bit like Daffy Duck, some more than others.

The activist world is a lousy way to manifest that tendency. Now, I'm not saying that you can't or shouldn't promote yourself and that you should let other people take credit for your work. And I'm not saying that there can't even be a place in the movement for personalities. Martin Luther King, Jr. did a lot of self-promotion, as did Mohandas Gandhi, as did Cesar Chavez, as did Betty Friedan, and the list goes on and on. We've heard of these people, in most cases, because they did a certain amount of self-promotion. If they worked silently and invisibly and let any random idiot take the credit for what they did, they never would have been able to put themselves in a position where they could steer their movements and accomplish the things they accomplished. So I'm not knocking self-promotion. It has its place.

But that place isn't center stage.

For every Deadly Sin in this chapter, you could mentally insert the phrase "at the Expense of the Movement." So the question with online activism, as with other forms of activism, is: What do you think you're doing? Why are you doing this? Who will this help or hurt? (This question is often asked of PETA, as explained in Figure 5.2.)

For example, if someone goes to the organization's website and sees a great big photo of *you* and a bio associated with it, what message does that send? Maybe it sends a very good message; the Children's Defense Fund benefits when it highlights Marian Wright Edelman's name because she has so much clout and so much history and is so well-known. And the Muscular Dystrophy Association benefits tremendously, in terms of both branding and popularity, by its association with Jerry Lewis. Charlton Heston did incredible good for the cause of gun rights by promoting himself as president of the National Rifle Association. Nobody could accuse any of these three people of *excessive* self-promotion because their self-promotion actually worked; it benefited their respective movements.



Figure 5.2

PETA's protests often involve nudity, violent imagery, and other controversial content, as shown in this antifur protest. Although PETA's work unquestionably brings more attention to the organization, whether it does so in a manner that is ultimately beneficial to the cause of animal rights is a frequently debated question. Photo: Copyright 2007 SVTCobra (Wikinews contributor). Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution License 2.5.

Does your self-promotion benefit your movement or cause? That's a good question to ask yourself as you design a website, a social networking group, or something else and decide how much of it is going to be about *you* and other prominent volunteers. It can be helpful to put a human face on things—email updates should always come from a person *at* an organization, for example, and not from the faceless organization. (More on this in Chapter 8.) And it's good if people can associate an organization with specific personalities. But it's more necessary in activism than it is in most other areas of life to ask: Am I doing this for *me* (and/or the prestige of my organization), or am I doing this for what I believe in?

Deadly Sin #2: Unsolicited Bulk Email

This is more of a hypothetical sin than something online activists actually *do*, but there are good reasons why it isn't being done and good reasons why you shouldn't try it.

If you've ever watched *South Park*, you probably know the hilariously inept school counselor, Mr. Mackey, from his catchphrase: "Drugs are bad, mmkay?" This is not a "spam is bad, mmkay?" section. There are specific reasons why bulk-mailing total strangers to promote your cause is a really bad idea, potentially relevant issues of criminal and civil law aside:

- **It makes you look desperate**—Spamming is to community organizing what proposing marriage on a first date is to your love life. It sends the message that you have nothing to offer (or something to hide).
- **It annoys people**—'Nuff said.
- **People don't read it**—Over 100 billion spam messages are sent each day, but only 12% of Internet users have ever clicked on a spam URL with the intention of possibly taking advantage of the spammer's offer.

If you find yourself eyeing an ad from a general bulk emailing service and wondering if this might be a useful approach to try...no. It isn't. Use targeted email distribution lists, which I describe in Chapter 8, instead—and send messages that focus on your target group, that don't annoy people (or that at least annoy people less), and stand a much better chance of actually getting read.

Deadly Sin #3: Hacktivism

In 2004, a small group of pro-Democratic activists had an idea: Why not get a bunch of users together to simultaneously load up Republican web servers at a specific time, overwhelming them? Ignoring basic questions of the law (this technique, known as a denial-of-service attack, is illegal in some jurisdictions), this is a potentially harmful, and in most contexts ultimately ineffective, strategy. I'll explain why in a moment—but first, a little history.

The first recorded semi-successful “hacktivism” incident was the Worms Against Nuclear Killers (WANK) worm, launched by Australian hackers against NASA's computers on October 16th, 1989, in ostensible protest against alleged radioactive danger associated with the Galileo probe (see Figure 5.3). Worms aren't the threat to Internet security that they used to be, but the time was when they were scary beasts. As cybercrime historian Suelette Dreyfus puts it:

A computer worm is a little like a computer virus. It invades computer systems, interfering with their normal functions. It travels along any available compatible computer network and stops to knock at the door of systems attached to that network. If there is a hole in the security of the computer system, it will crawl through and enter the system. When it does this, it might have instructions to do any number of things, from sending computer users a message to trying to take over the system. What makes a worm different from other computer programs, such as viruses, is that it is self-propagating. It propels itself forward, wiggles into a new system and propagates itself at the new site. Unlike a virus, a worm doesn't latch onto a data file or a program. It is autonomous.

> > NOTE

Read more about the history of cybercrime here: Suelette Dreyfus and Julian Assange, *Underground: Hacking, Madness, and Obsession on the Electronic Frontier*, Kew: Random House Australia, 2001. Online edition. URL: www.xs4all.nl/~suelette/underground/justin/contents.html.

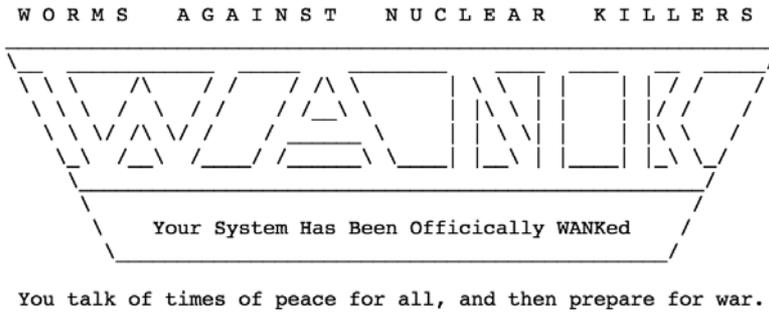


Figure 5.3

This appeared on the screens of NASA employees on October 16th, 1989. Public domain image, courtesy of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

A n A n t i - N u c l e a r M e s s a g e

The quote shown in Figure 5.3 (“You talk of times of peace for all, and then prepare for war.”) is from Midnight Oil’s “(The City of) Blossom and Blood,” off their *Species and Deceases* (1985) album. The full stanza reads:

You the warriors with your words,
 throw away your spears.
 You talk of times of peace for all
 and then prepare for war.

The eponymous city of blossom and blood is Hiroshima, Japan, which was attacked in the world’s first nuclear strike by the United States on August 6, 1945.

In this case, the WANK worm took over NASA computers intermittently for two weeks and printed fake text on the screen that led users to believe that their files—often sensitive research files—had been deleted. While the worm didn’t disrupt the launch of the Galileo probe, it caused a serious headache for NASA’s computing staff.

There have been many defensible examples of benevolent hacktivism—most notably, hacktivism directed against government programs restricting Internet access in China and Iran. But hacktivism is ultimately about three components: skilled programmers, adequate access, and adequate bandwidth. And *all three components can be purchased*. None of these components necessitates a movement. In the long run, the propagation of hacktivism—and its widespread use and acceptance—would allow those with the most money to make unlimited use of it, whereas grassroots movements would be left with a disadvantage. Hacktivism can literally be bought, with no community support whatsoever.

In other words, community activists who contribute to the spread of hacktivism contribute to the spread of a new online activism where community activism matters less and government or megacorporate sponsorship matters more. We don’t really want hacktivism to catch on; in the long run, that would work against us.

Besides, it doesn't usually work out so well anyway. That effort by pro-Democratic activists to shut down Republican websites? It didn't have any real effect on the election. If the approximately 40,000 participants each donated 20 bucks to a specific local race instead, the extra \$800,000 probably would have made more of an impact. And if they didn't want to give money, having 40,000 volunteers on a phone bank isn't anything to sneeze at, either.

Deadly Sin #4: Violating Copyright

Unlike spam and hacktivism, copyright violations are endemic in online activism. Some people even believe that if copyrighted material is redistributed by a nonprofit organization, the organization is automatically shielded from liability. I'm not an attorney, but I know this isn't true.

I can think of three very good reasons why redistributing copyrighted material that you haven't been given permission to redistribute, as part of an activism initiative, is a bad idea:

1. It can get you sued.
2. It makes you look sloppy.
3. Have I mentioned that it can get you sued?

In Chapter 7, I explain how to find copylefted and public domain material that you can use in your activism efforts. That's a much safer, and therefore more useful, approach than just cutting-and-pasting something from a website.

>>> NOTE

Not all copyrighted material is out of bounds! Some copyright owners deliberately "copyleft" their content by copyrighting it with a license that allows for free redistribution at no cost and without permission.

Deadly Sin #5: Nagging

A local activist gave me a piece of advice once: He always bulk-emails supporters about an event a month before it happens, then again two weeks before it happens, then a week before it happens, and then every day of the week up until the day it happens. Then he sends out one last invite two hours before the event happens and another update the next day announcing how great the event was.

Yeah, you probably shouldn't do that.

Online communication is the most convenient way to nag somebody. Unlike telephoning, it does not require one-on-one time—you can contact people in bulk. And unlike snail mail letters, postcards, and such, it costs nothing, arrives instantly, and does not require any real prep time. So the temptation is certainly there to bug people constantly, to keep your events and causes on their minds, and up to a certain point this is very beneficial to your cause. But there is a point of diminishing return.

Exactly how much nagging is too much? It's hard to say, which is why listening is important. If people who are participating in the organization—and I mean people who actually participate because anybody can sit on the sidelines and criticize—express concerns that they're receiving way too much email, it's probably best to back it down.

Tone is also important. People don't usually want to attend events that they associate with negative feelings and drama. If attendance at the last monthly meeting was lower than you think it should have been, berating your supporters *en masse* is a bad idea because they don't really owe you anything. It's not that they're not committed activists, necessarily, but people can choose many, many avenues to make the world a better place; why pick one that involves failure, shame, and verbal abuse? So be positive. As one old midrash tells us: "Angels do not lie, but neither are they stupid." Several years ago I organized a meeting for local writers at a coffee shop, and only six people showed up. I'd promoted the event online and was disappointed in the low turnout, but the way I described it was that the meeting was a success (which it was, given an appropriately scaled definition of success) and that we had difficulty finding enough seats to accommodate the number of people who showed (which we did because we were sitting on the patio and there was a concert inside). I'm not saying you should spin things *that* much, but what you say about an event—before and after—should ideally make people a little bit excited. It should make them want to show up to future events so they don't miss out on the experience.

If people are treated in a hostile way by a movement, it can create unintended side effects. Christopher Hitchens was regarded as a liberal, but the international Left's response to the 9/11 attacks—which sometimes vilified the United States, portraying it as a worthy target—made it easier for him to become a neoconservative. And Rep. Michelle Bachmann (R-MN), a leader in the American conservative movement, was a nominal Democrat until a passage in a Gore Vidal book, criticizing the Founding Fathers, made her question her party's commitment to classical liberal philosophy. This shouldn't inspire anyone to be more centrist or moderate than they are in their personal beliefs—people should speak what they consider to be the truth without fear that it might turn others off—but when you're doing activism, it pays to be strategic and think of how your audience is likely to react. If the gut-level impression you give potential supporters is that you're angry and negative, it will almost certainly make them less likely to take your cause seriously.

Deadly Sin #6: Violating Privacy

Online media is all about distributing information, which can be very unpleasant if the information being distributed isn't intended for distribution.

Legal issues aside, it's usually a bad idea to distribute private emails, contact information, and other material that the sender has not agreed, implicitly or explicitly, to let you distribute. It undermines trust in the organization, it contributes to burnout, and it generally drives people away. People like to be able to control access to their stories, their information, their identities, and if you deprive them of that control, they understandably tend to leave.

This isn't just theory. I can think of some real situations I've witnessed in recent years where people did not honor privacy and did real damage to their causes. Out of respect for the privacy of participants (see what I did there?), I haven't mentioned any names or identifying information:

- A local pastor deals with a dispute with a local church board member by secretly forwarding copies of the board member's private emails, which include material of an obviously confidential nature, to the congregational president. After discovering this, the board member suffers an instant case of burnout; he disappears from the congregation within a year. The rest of the board is brought into the controversy and, within two years, the pastor and board president also leave the congregation.
- An officer in a nonprofit advocacy organization makes some suggestions regarding possible online activism content to the local president in a private email. The president replies to the email, sends copies to several other officers who were not originally on the recipient list, and mercilessly ridicules the suggestions.
- An organization decides to reward donors who have contributed more than \$1,000 within the past year by honoring them by name in the online newsletter—without asking their permission first. The wealthy donors are horrified to be named, working-class donors are horrified that their monetary sacrifices aren't given the same level of acknowledgment, and fundraising plummets the next year.

Violating privacy, like the other six Deadly Sins of online activism, is a bad idea primarily because it's destructive to your cause.

Deadly Sin #7: Being Scary

I'm going to step offline for a good example of this. Operation Save America, a conservative religious group, held its annual event in Jackson, Mississippi, in July 2006, sending hundreds of activists to picket the state's only remaining abortion clinic. I was among the local prochoice counterprotestors. It was, at the time, the largest activism event I had ever participated in.

Although I'm proud of the counterprotest in general, some people on both sides made major strategic errors. A few young folks who had come down to help decided to "mingle" with the Operation Save America people at their own events, sometimes in a disruptive way. On YouTube, there is a video of a young woman from this group screaming at length into the ear of a frightened-looking young man clutching a Bible. Who does this help?

But the biggest mistakes were on the other side. Fourteen of the anti-abortion protestors were arrested on various charges—no easy feat in a state as conservative as Mississippi. There was a bomb threat against prochoicers at the local state park. And, as the event wrapped up, some of the anti-abortion protestors decided to burn a Qur'an and a rainbow flag to state their opposition to Islam and homosexuality.

Yes, you read that right. At a national protest against an abortion clinic, they decided to burn a Qur'an and a rainbow flag.

This had a predictable effect: The church that had hosted their presence stated that they were no longer welcome to lodge there. Local Muslims, belonging to a religious community not generally associated with conspicuous support of abortion and gay rights, found unexpected allies. (The next week, a local imam preached the sermon at the city's liberal Unitarian Universalist church.) Members of the local gay rights community who had not previously had any interest in prochoice activism joined the counterprotestors. Operation Save America ended the week outnumbered, unwelcome, and humiliated.

Where did they fail? I'd argue that their *biggest* mistake was broadening their message to the point where instead of advocating a specific, sane-sounding point of view (namely, the view that fetuses are human beings and deserve legal protection), they advocated ideological warfare with huge swaths of the local community. They burned things in public, voraciously condemned large groups of people without much apparent forethought, and generally made locals uncomfortable. This marginalized them in a community that otherwise would have been receptive to their message.

Don't Be Creepy

Worried about scaring people? Here are five tips to bear in mind:

- **Avoid unnecessarily violent rhetoric of every kind**—Don't casually throw around metaphors that involve decapitation, evisceration, and so on. People visualize what you're reading, and if you can't discuss a policy issue without sounding like the script to a *Kill Bill* sequel, you're going to frighten potential allies away.

The 2009 Tea Party protests, initially organized in response to the 2008–2009 U.S. government bailouts of the banking and insurance industries, were tainted by an attendance and a rhetoric that overlapped with the violent paramilitary “patriot” movement (as shown in Figure 5.4). If you talk about killing and murder and bloodshed, even if you're speaking metaphorically, people are probably going to want to back away slowly.



Figure 5.4

A Tea Party protester holds up a sign reading “I WILL GIVE MY BLOOD FOR MY CHILDRENS[sic] FREEDOM.” Photo: © 2009 Street Protest TV via Flickr. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0 Generic.

- **Don't talk in a bigoted way about groups**—Even excessive, repetitive condemnation of your ideological opposition makes you sound more cranky than radical.
- **Don't focus on personalities**—If you keep mentioning someone, especially a local ideological opponent, by name, it comes across as if you're targeting that person in some way. Keep your focus on the change you're trying to achieve, not on the individuals who most prominently disagree with what you're advocating.
- **Promote your events, not the opposition's**—Occasionally you may find it necessary to counterprotest public events, but as a general rule anything you suggest that comes across as an invitation to disrupt other people's private or group activities will come across as creepy.
- **As much as possible, be positive and pragmatic**—The message you should be sending is one of achievable change, not unavoidable doom. Unavoidable doom isn't worth picketing. Avoidable doom is a much better target for your activism.

This applies to online activism, too. If you think 9/11 was a government conspiracy but your activism issue is abolition of the death penalty, don't mention the former opinion on the latter website. There's nothing wrong with being a committed member of an ideological minority group, but if you come across as being *against* people instead of *for* a specific policy change, you'll probably hurt your cause.

Your E-Activism Toolkit: Following the Rules



Having an ethics chapter in a book about activism is in some respects superfluous because every chapter in the book should reek of ethics and morality and decency and all that noble, wonderful stuff. And I think that's more or less true when we're talking about very specific issues—Chapter 7 deals with multimedia, for example, so that's the place to go if you're looking for hints about tagging people in photographs—but some general ethical principles echo throughout the book that are worth keeping in mind here.

If I were a real ethicist, a real moralist, the central message of this chapter would be “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (I did, in fact, write Que Publishing’s *The Absolute Beginner’s Guide to the Bible*, published in 2005.) But this book is primarily about the *how* of changing the world, not the *why*, so the message is a little simpler: “Do unto others as is most likely to advance your cause, within reason.”

It should go without saying that I’m not writing this book with white nationalists, violent international terrorists, and other perpetrators of human evil in mind, so I’m not writing this chapter for them. I’m writing this chapter for you, the well-meaning online activist, and this means that you already have a pretty good idea of what sort of behavior falls under the heading of “within reason” and what sort of behavior doesn’t.

But we get distracted. In a very real sense, every human being who has ever lived has at least a mild case of attention-deficit disorder—because being able to control our focus is difficult. And this applies even to our moral focus.

So even good people can make the mistake of committing one of the previously described Deadly Sins. I’ve committed a few of them myself—activism is a great social outlet for me, for example, so I’m really bad about self-promotion. Other bolder, less egotistical people might need to be talked out of using hacktivism as a way to promote their causes.

On the face of it, that sounds silly—Patrick Henry didn’t say, “Give me liberty or give me death, but I draw the line at appearing in public with my shoes unbuckled”—but when we’re talking about behavior that is going to be detrimental to the causes we’re fighting for, it makes sense to talk, in a general sense, about ethics and netiquette. So we’ve talked about it. Read, mark, and inwardly digest. And as we go through other kinds of activism, look at how the basic principles of this chapter might be relevant to them.

If you’re designing a website, for example, Deadly Sin #1 is a serious risk—plenty of activism websites (I won’t name names) are *all* about promoting the prestige of the organization rather than the cause, or even promoting the personality cult of an individual associated with it. And I do discuss this in a freestanding way in Chapter 3, but the basic principle of not promoting yourself or your group at the expense of your cause is crucial to online activism because it is so *easy* to make that mistake when you have a potential audience of near-unlimited size.

Email netiquette is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 8, which focuses on how we get people in the loop and keep them there, but Deadly Sin #2 is worth highlighting here because unsolicited bulk email is an idea that *sounds* worthwhile but isn’t. Likewise hacktivism, Deadly Sin #3. The same could be said, really, of any item on this list.

Deadly Sins #5, #6, and #7—don’t nag, don’t violate privacy, don’t use “terror-lite” techniques (even accidentally)—are all about not turning into the sorts of people who are detrimental to our cause. Because humanity is central to what we do as activists; because we need to maintain the ability to connect to people; because if we lose our humanity, scandals will follow us, and our movements will suffer as a result. Activism is one of the *very few* areas of life where being a good person and having noble priorities almost always pays off because activism attracts noble people and, online or offline, they can usually tell if you’re faking it sooner or later.

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