



DIGITAL **ACTIVISM** &  
NON-VIOLENT **CONFLICT**

SEPTEMBER 2013

**Frank Edwards | Philip N. Howard | Mary Joyce**



# DIGITAL ACTIVISM & NON-VIOLENT CONFLICT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to analyze digital activism, we investigated hundreds of campaigns from around the world and assembled protest event data more comprehensive than any previously collected.

We define a digital activism campaign as an organized public effort, making collective claim(s) on a target authority(s), in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media. With a team of over 40 coders, reviewing hundreds of cases and two decades of digital activism, we used the highest of social scientific standards to build the best available data set on one of the most important trends in global politics.

### **Digital Activism is Civil, Non-violent, and Rarely Involves Hackers**

Despite prominent media coverage of hacking and cybercrime, both physical and technical violence are extremely rare in digital activism.

### **Facebook and Twitter Dominate Global Activism, But There Are Plenty of Regional Phenomena**

Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube may be the most popular tools for digital activism around the world, but there are interesting regional variations. For example, E-petitions are most popular in North

America and Northern Europe, regions with strong democratic traditions. Global, there is no “killer app” that makes some campaigns more successful than others.

### **Success Depends on Target Type and Tool Diversity**

If anything, using a diverse digital toolkit causes some campaigns to succeed and others to fail. Digital activism has a demonstrated, positive impact on drawing people to the streets to protest, especially when civil society groups use digital tools and changing government policy is the goal. If the objective is change in government or government policy, civil society groups have demonstrated success with just modest street protests and a few digital tools. Both recipes for success are true regardless of regime type.





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## ACTIVISM, FLOURISHING ONLINE

Cellphone-wielding activists used to inspire a lot of hope. It seems like only yesterday that people believed that an aspiring insurgent with some basic consumer-grade electronics and a decent data plan could bring any urban center to a standstill, or toss out even the most recalcitrant dictator. Yet these days people are more skeptical. Mobile phones, drones, hacktivists and cyber-attacks seem to have just added to the chaos. Many dictators, strongmen, and authoritarian governments have climbed the technology learning curve and put their iPads to work as tools of social control. Regimes in Iran, Bahrain and Syria use Facebook to expose opposition networks and entrap activists. China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia make big investments in surveillance infrastructure, with national internets built from the ground up as tools for cultural management. Recently, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that cyberterrorism had replaced terrorism as its primary security concern. Drones are only the latest technology to challenge our domestic policies on airspace, privacy, and access to consumer electronics, to say nothing of challenging our warfare ethics.<sup>1</sup>

But our aspirations for what information technologies might do for democracy will not go away either. In 2010, Google CEO Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen—a

former technology evangelist within the State Department—argued in *Foreign Affairs* that global politics was in for a digital disruption.<sup>2</sup> They recommended strengthening alliances between Western governments and global technology firms as the best strategy for ensuring that information infrastructure is put to work for democracy.

What are the key international trends in non-violent digital activism and how has this phenomenon changed over time? How do we define digital activism success and what contextual factors correlate with this success? What causal factors are the best predictors of an instance of digital activism and of the success of that instance? How can we define the democratic and peace-building effects of digital activism? These are the research questions that drove us to form the Digital Activism Research Project (<http://www.digital-activism.org>).

## Civic Engagement in a Digital Era

In recent years, digital media have been increasingly implicated in the narrative of non-violent conflict around the world. Certainly, not all observers concur on the causes and consequences of digitally-mediated civil strife, and while scholars have demonstrated some tentative causal connections, the policy implications of these trends have drawn significant contention.

The header features a green background with a world map. On the left, two raised fists are depicted in a stylized, blocky font. The fist on the left is white with a green outline, while the one on the right is solid green. Both fists are set against a sunburst pattern of radiating lines.

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This research effort seeks to take advantage of both new phenomena and new methods of study as they relate to the field of grassroots digital political contention, or digital activism. As initial research has revealed, the use of digital technology by citizens in campaigns for social and political change is a relatively new phenomenon, with major growth beginning within the last five years. While closely connected to past modes of political contention and social movements, the newness of this particular phenomenon means that we have the rare opportunity to study and explore a new field of human endeavor, create a foundational data collection, and carry out the research that will define the field in years to come. We believe that creation of a global longitudinal data set of digital activism cases, and the development of software to facilitate the collection of further data, offers the best opportunity to build our collective understanding of the effect of digital technology on political outcomes around the world and to facilitate the work of a broad range of scholars engaged in these questions.

## Research on Digital Media, Civic Engagement, and Non-violent Conflict

Ever since the Zapatista rebels used the World Wide Web to promote their struggle for indigenous land rights in 1994, international analysts have been

engaged in understanding the uses of digital technology by grassroots activists and social movements.<sup>3</sup>

In the years since, many researchers have contributed valuable insights on this phenomenon in specific geographic and temporal contexts, sometimes focused on moments of heightened contention, such as national elections or social justice campaigns.<sup>4</sup> Others have taken a thematic approach, viewing a specific phenomenon, such as digital authoritarianism, across a group of representative countries.<sup>5</sup> These scholars have drawn on qualitative and quantitative data and have written from a variety of subject perspectives, including sociology, communications, political science, computer science and area studies. Yet all have been limited to a specific country or region, and have a fairly limited time horizon.

Yet major protest movements around the world, most recently the Arab Spring, have demonstrated that the phenomenon of digital activism is of great (and increasing) importance. In 1998, Suharto's rule over Indonesia was broken by a student movement that successfully used mobile phone infrastructure to organize its protests.<sup>6</sup> During Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution of 2005, democratic leaders used mobile phones to organize at key moments to throw out a dictator.<sup>7</sup> When the authoritarian government of



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Kazakhstan shut down opposition websites, democratic organizations moved their content to servers in other countries. Threatened political elites in authoritarian regimes and emerging democracies often try to strip social movements of communications tools: Iran and Albania have blocked internet gateways and mobile phone networks during politically tumultuous periods. In Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, blogs and YouTube submissions are nascent deliberative democratic practices and reflect the real opposition there.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the Arab Spring, a Tunisian citizen used digital photos from the websites of plane-watching clubs to track the Tunisian president's wife using the government plane for shopping trips, causing a public debate about the government use of taxpayer funds in a country not known for media openness. Azeri youth have begun producing their own national news broadcasts, distributing them through YouTube. In these countries, as in Egypt, the Internet is the primary place for open dialogues about race, gender, and the interpretation of Islamic texts.<sup>9</sup>

Studies suggest that along with wealth, telecommunications and information policy can contribute to democratization.<sup>10</sup> With analysis of events in South East Asia, several researchers have hypothesized that increased Internet usage supports the growth of democratic institutions.<sup>11</sup> Yet both

democracies and dictatorships have fast growing numbers of Internet users, Internet hosts, mobile phones, and personal computers. Authoritarian regimes may develop their digital communication infrastructure specifically to extend state power.<sup>12</sup> There is significant research on the censorship strategies of the most authoritarian of Islamic states. Yet there is also evidence that a significant amount of digital content is beyond the reach of most—though not all—state censors.<sup>13</sup> In democracies, there is some evidence that effective state services online breed trust and confidence among citizens in their government.<sup>14</sup> There is also great variation in the national experiences with censorship strategies—studies of Iran suggest that social media there may be immune to censorship, while studies of China suggest that particular kinds of social media content can be effectively censored.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, there are lessons about civic action from Iran that may well apply in Egypt: digital technologies provide the entry points for young activists to explore democratic alternatives, an action landscape such as cyberspace that allows for political discourse and even direct interventions with state policy, and coordinating mechanisms that support synchronized social movements through marches, protests, and other forms of collective action.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the clearest signs that digital media have changed the dynamics of



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political communication in Egypt come from the awkward ways the regime has responded to its own tech-savvy activists. When Khaled Said posted an online video incriminating the police in a drug deal, he was beaten to death outside of his Internet café. Abdel Kareem Nabil Suleiman, another Egyptian blogger, has been in detention since 2006 for blog posts criticizing senior clerics and the government. Several bloggers have been arrested for blogging about other detained bloggers.

Yet there has been little original comparative research on digital media and non-violent conflict as a global phenomenon. While “terror on the Internet” and transnational Islamic identity has been covered, little research has been done on the specific mechanisms of technology use and repurposing by civil society actors. Understanding such mechanisms would help us answer broader questions about the nature of contemporary regime change, online participation, and the security implications of telecommunications policy. Some area studies and Islamist scholars have studied ICT diffusion and political practices in particular countries, or

investigated the impact of Al Jazeera on news cycles and sourcing.<sup>17</sup> The ICTs are also the infrastructure for anti-democratic movements and the site of what some have called “cyberconflict.”<sup>18</sup> However, rigorous social science can build more transportable theories about the role of digital activism during political crisis, and the role of digital media in civic life. Cyberwar and cyberterror are not the only uses of digital media in the service of political or ideological power, and the Middle East is not the only region where important changes are occurring.

## Research and Policy Questions

What tools are being used by digital activists and for what purposes? Have the affordances of digital activism made transnational activism more common or changed its character? Have the affordances of digital technology made actions by non-traditional and loose network organizations more common and how so? Are there patterns to the successes and failures of digital activism, and do these patterns vary by country, regime type, or region?

*A digital activism campaign is an organized public effort making collective claim(s) on a target authority(s), in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media.*



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These are but a few of the questions this project will be able to answer. It is no longer sufficient to study digital media, civic engagement and non-violent conflict on a case-by-case basis, with research evolving according to the interests and disciplinary foci of individual scholars. A field-building approach must be implemented if we are to understand the mechanics of this new phenomenon beyond the specifics of individual cases, and such an approach is necessary if we are to identify reasonable policy objectives. A broad-based quantitative and qualitative data set is needed to extend our knowledge of this phenomenon beyond the case study extrapolation and anecdotal cherry-picking that currently predominate. The next step is to aggregate and compare these individual cases so that more confident conclusions can be made about the global phenomenon of digital political contention.

Digital media have transformed the ways in which citizens around the world engage in politics, and there are a growing number of occasions where the Internet, social media, and information infrastructure seem to play an important role in the evolution of activism and non-violent conflict. Some argue that the new media environment supports democratization and peace-building efforts, while others argue the opposite. Either way, foreign policy analysts have no systematic way of “adding it all up.”

## The Global Digital Activism Data Sets

In order to analyze digital activism, we assembled protest event data that were more comprehensive than any previously collected.

The first is a collection of 1,180 coded cases of digital activism from 151 countries collected through a snowball sampling strategy and covering the period 1982 through 2012. The second is a collection of 426 coded cases from 100 countries from 2010 to 2012, with a much higher level of data quality. The Global Digital Activism Data Sets (GDADS 1.0 and 2.0), are available at the project website ([www.digital-activism.org](http://www.digital-activism.org)) and through the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). GDADS 2.0 is the most contemporary, state of the art incident database of digital activism campaigns, and is the basis for most of the following analysis.

To create this data set, a group of trained and supervised graduate student coders reviewed news stories created by both citizen and professional journalists which described digital activism campaigns. Sources were collected using a purposive (relevance) sampling method, described later in this report. Research assistants read each source and assigned values for qualitative and quantitative variables defined in the codebook. The substantive variables



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are described in the Appendix of this report.

Variables are divided into the following categories: coder meta-data, campaign identifiers, actors, time, digital media applications, and outcomes.

A digital activism campaign is defined as an organized public effort, making collective claim(s) of target authority(s), in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media. The campaign was considered to conform to the conceptual definition if it met several key requirements. To be a case, each campaign had to be:

1. *digital*, with initiators or supporters using at least one digital media tactic;
2. *an organized public effort* that sought to engage citizens as participants;
3. *collective*, with goals made by and for a group of citizens;
4. *claims*, meaning a proposed solution to the injustice so that the success or failure could be evaluated;
5. *targets*, who could be influenced to implement the proposed solution;
6. *civic*, in that the initiator group was not a government agency or private enterprise.

Being careful with definitions often meant excluding cases that are intriguing for other reasons. Protests of

injustice where discontent was expressed but no redress was proposed were excluded. If the target of the campaign was too broad—such as “public opinion” or “other citizens” rather than an authority figure—the case was excluded.

Subsequently, we developed additional criteria to ensure the quality and comprehension of coding sources for all members of the coding team. Though outgoing links to primary materials may have been translated from other languages, all assigned sources were written in English. Sources had to be reliable third party sources with a reputation for fact-checking and accuracy. The source of information about campaign outcomes also had to come from a credible, usually third party report. The sources also had to contain sufficient information to be coded. Information on goal, target, and digital media used had to be present. While this meant that we could not include some examples of digital activism in the event database, ultimately, it means that the existing data set has high levels of internal and external validity.

Finally, we developed criteria to prevent redundant cases. Annual campaigns were only included once, and campaigns were considered a case at their largest definable unit. In other words, subsidiary campaigns that were part of larger coordinated

campaigns were not identified as separate units of analysis.

The appendices of this report provide more details about the sample frame and content analysis techniques used for data collection.

Our analytical work involved two phases. First we produced descriptive statistics that allowed us to evaluate data quality and weigh the statistical credibility of plausible associations between variables. Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  was used to evaluate the reliability of coder decisions. Basic Pearson's Chi-Squared tests were used to evaluate bivariate associations between outcome type and other categorical variables in the data set, using a standard threshold to evaluate the probability that a particular association was due to sampling error. Second, we did fuzzy logic modeling to compare and contrast large numbers of cases on the basis of campaign features and causal outcomes.

Our initial analysis of the data reveals several key patterns and trends.

## FINDINGS AND TRENDS

For this initial analysis we worked primarily with four sets of variables:

- *regime type*, as defined by the Polity IV democratization index<sup>19</sup>;
- *target type*, whether the target was a government agency, business, or civil society group;
- *digital toolkit*, which included e-petitions, social networking applications, microblog, videos, and a technology sophistication index built by summing up all the tools used by the campaign;
- *outcomes*, defined as the partial or full success as reported by a credible source.

### Digital Activism is Non-violent

Frequent news stories about cyberterrorists, cybercrime, and hackers make digital activism seem like a pretty dark art, whereas close comparative analysis of campaign strategies, successes, and failures reveals that persuasion features more highly than violence. This study looked at digital activism campaigns that seek to persuade an authority figure to take some action in the public interest. In looking at these campaigns, we looked for two types of violence: *physical* violence against people that was facilitated by digital technology (for example, using social media to organize a riot) and *technical* violence against hardware and software (for example, defacing a website).

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In fact, only a fraction of the campaigns involved any kind of destructive tactics: 4 percent involved offline violence and 2 percent involved hacking attacks against target infrastructure. While newspaper headlines might feature events concerning the infiltration or unauthorized manipulation of digital hardware and/or software with destructive or disruptive intent, the vast majority of digital activism is more about civic engagement than hacktivism.

Why is there such prominent media coverage of violent and destructive digital activism when it is so rare in practice? One explanation is the “what bleeds, leads” principle: stories of destruction, disruption, crime, and danger are more likely to get the attention of viewers and readers. The reality should be reassuring, though. This study supports the claim that digital activism is largely non-violent, regarding violence to both people and property.

## Facebook and Twitter Dominate

### Global Digital Activism

This study investigated the prevalence of ten types of digital media application in activism campaigns: social networks, microblogs, digital video, e-petitions, digital maps, online forums, SMS (text messaging), websites, and blogs. Of these, we were able to gather reliable results on all but the final two. Table 1

demonstrates the percentage distribution of tools across the set of cases.

The most popular applications, tied neck-and-neck for first place, are social networks and microblogs. But the dominance of these tools goes beyond application type. Within each category, one platform dominates, Facebook in the social media category and Twitter in the microblog category.

Ninety-seven percent of campaigns that used microblogs used Twitter. While this figure likely undercounts the use of Weibo in China, due to likely under-representation of China in the sample, this dominance across all other regions is formidable.

**Table 1: Digital Activism Applications, Ranked by Popularity**

Application Type	Percent of Campaigns
Social Network	50
Microblog	48
Digital Video	38
e-Petition	25
Digital Map	4
Online Forum	3
SMS	1

The most dominant platform across all categories is Facebook, since 99 percent of all the campaigns that used social networks used that application. This figure may undercount the use of Facebook rival VKontakte

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in Russia (the sample of Russian cases is too small to tell) but, as in the case of Twitter, the platform's dominance across other world regions is dramatic.

In the video category, YouTube dominates, though not by as much as Twitter and Facebook. Seventy-eight percent of campaigns that used video used YouTube. By contrast, only 8 percent of campaigns using video hosted their content on Vimeo, the next most popular video platform.

Figure 1 displays the popularity of each type of tool by region. While social networks, microblogs, and video dominate globally, their popularity differs by region. For example, in Eastern Europe, video is a far more popular tool than microblogging, and in Western Africa microblogs are twice as popular as videos. Regions which failed to surpass a 1 percent threshold of global cases (Middle and Southern Africa) were excluded.

In other words, Facebook and Twitter may seem like the globally dominant media of choice for today's activist, but there is plenty of interesting regional variation to the civic advocate's toolkit.

Figure 1: Digital Activism Tools around the World

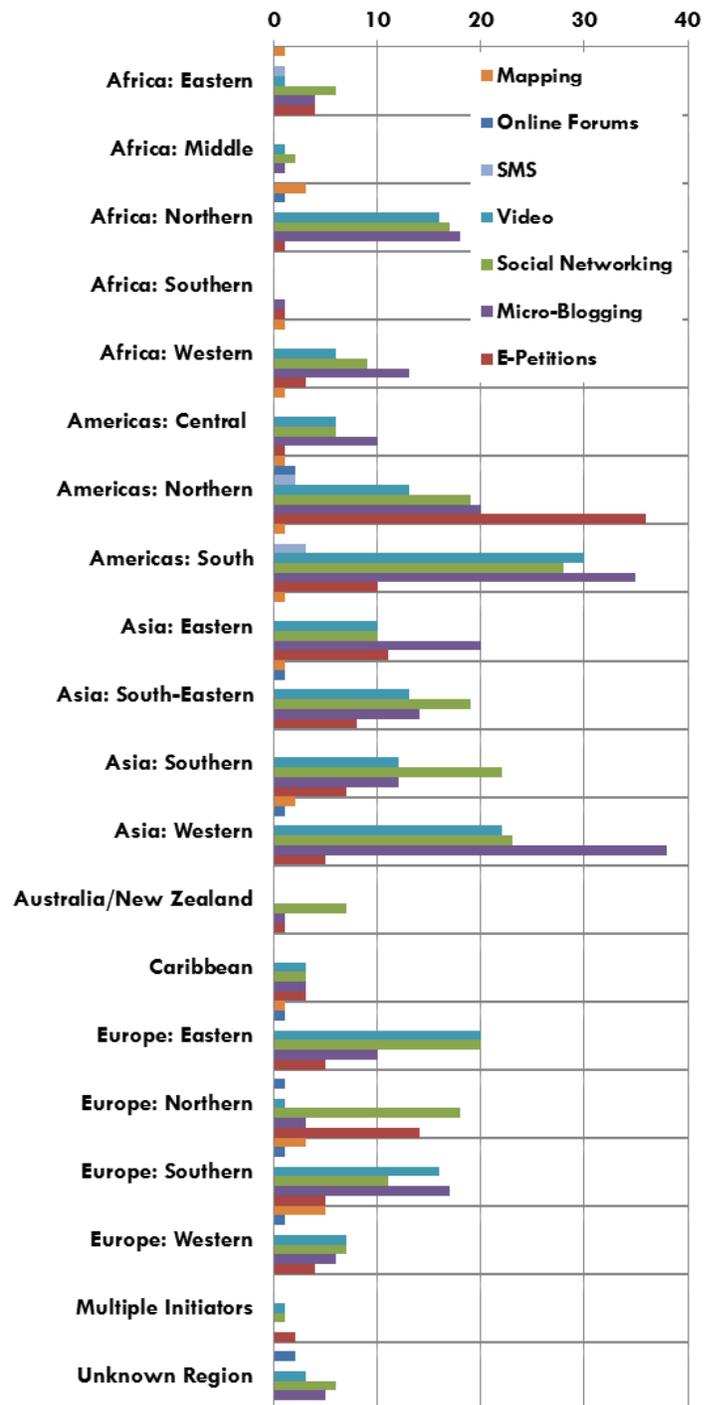


Figure 1 includes the cases analyzed in GDADS 2.0. While the collection of cases reflects the stringent sampling strategy we used, it reveals much about the global trends in digital activism. The vast majority of reported cases of e-petition use come from North America, perhaps because this is where political leaders may be most sensitive to being petitioned by citizens. In contrast, digital activism in South America and many Asian countries is dominated by microblogging strategies.

## When Is Digital Activism Successful?

What makes a digital activism campaign successful? There were no clear associations between particular tools and specific campaign outcomes. Even the most technology-intensive social movement should never be called a Twitter or Facebook revolution. Not surprisingly, it is very difficult to compare and contrast success across hundreds of civil society projects, but there are still several concrete observations we can make about the lack of association between particular tools and campaign success.

Most of the research about digital activism is grounded in case studies of individual campaigns or a network of campaigns and organizations working at a single point in time or around a single issue. We take a very deliberate comparative perspective, and our

analysis is not limited to the standard or most high-profile cases, or even to the successful campaigns.

Fuzzy set logic statistical models allow us to look for the plausible patterns of shared causal conditions and diverse outcomes by reducing the important features of hundreds of cases to a few parsimonious recipes. And to get to identify the key ingredients for the success of digital activism you also need to study the failures. Perhaps most important, this statistical modeling technique is useful precisely because it is grounded in the observed, real-world experience of the thousands of digital activism campaigns we have analyzed. It is always possible to imagine counter-examples, counter-factual exercises, and hypothetical outcomes. But our goal here is to investigate patterns in known digital activism campaigns, and not privilege null cases, hypothetical cases, or unobserved cases.<sup>20</sup>

The two most important measures of fuzzy logic model accuracy are the coverage and consistency scores for each causal recipe. Coverage refers to the percentage of cases explained by that recipe. Consistency refers to the degree to which cases adhere to a particular causal recipe. As in many statistical procedures, the research proceeds by examining a variety of models. Models that do not make sense or for which there are no real examples are dropped from subsequent analysis. A causal

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recipe also has a score for raw coverage, which indicates the proportion of the outcome explained by a recipe. It has a unique coverage score, which indicates the percentage of the outcome that is exclusively explained by a recipe.

## Mobilizing Citizens

One commonly cited measure of success for a digital campaign is whether or not the campaign can draw people into the streets for public demonstrations. In our case coding we recorded whether or not there were reports of public protest, so this allows us to see which other features of a digital activism campaign might explain such an outcome. When is digital activism successful at mobilizing people to take to the streets?

Table 2 summarizes the two most parsimonious models that best explain the success of a campaign at mobilizing a public protest. Certainly, there are more complex formulations of conditions that would also explain the susceptibility of a regime to a popular uprising, or the chances such an uprising would be successful. And there may be a host of individual country factors that are not tested here, but of the case-specific variables associated with the data set, there is a unique combination of causal factors at play. There are two causal recipes for understanding offline protest, recipes that cover large numbers of

real cases and recipes that are highly consistent with particular cases.

**Table 2: Statistical Model A—When is Digital Activism Successful at Mobilizing People To Take To the Streets?**

Causal Recipes	Raw Coverage (Percent)	Unique Coverage (Percent)	Consistency (Percent)
The government is the target for the campaign, and the government is authoritarian	24	10	62
The government is the target for the campaign, and the campaign employs multiple digital tools	29	15	64
<b>Solution coverage (Percent)</b>	<b>40</b>		
<b>Solution consistency (Percent)</b>	<b>62</b>		

Digital activism campaigns are most successful at drawing public demonstrations of protest when the government is the target. In addition, they can be most successful with the regime is more authoritarian or when the campaign has employed multiple digital tools. Together these two recipes cover 40 percent of the all the cases with good consistency.

Many of the variables (described in detail in the Appendices) that dropped out of this simplified recipe may be relevant for particular countries, but these

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short descriptions best describe the largest portions of campaigns. But the best examples of campaigns described by the first recipe come from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and China. The best examples of campaigns described by the second recipe come from Brazil, Germany, Chile, the Philippines and the USA.

## Achieving Campaign Goals

Another way of gauging the success or failure of a campaign is by analyzing third-party reports of whether the people who initiated the campaign achieved their stated goals. Many cases in the data set had no recorded outcomes, but we developed an indicator for those third-party or credible self-reports that demonstrated full, partial, or no success.

Table 3 reveals that, as might be expected, the success of a digital activism campaign depends on political context, and our data set is rich enough to reveal what that political context needs to be. First, digital activism campaigns are most successful when they target the government, there has been little offline protest, and relatively few key digital tools have been employed. Second, when the target of a digital activism campaign is a business, civil society group, or individual, and there has been little offline protest, success depends on how strong a democracy the regime is. Digital activism gets the news headlines when it achieves a major political victory in toppling a

government or ousting a dictator. But for most campaigns, success depends as much on the existing political context as the use of any particular digital tool.

**Table 3: Statistical Model B—When is Digital Activism Successful at Achieving Declared Goals?**

Causal Recipes	Raw Coverage (Percent)	Unique Coverage (Percent)	Consistency (Percent)
The target of the campaign is the government, there has been little offline protest, and only a few key digital tools are used	25	25	63
The target is not government, there has been little offline protest, but the regime is a democracy	13	13	62
<b>Solution Coverage (Percent)</b>		37	
<b>Solution Consistency (Percent)</b>		62	

Again, these short recipes have the best coverage and uniquely and consistently explain the largest proportion of cases in the data set. The best examples of campaigns described by the first causal recipe come from the advanced democracies, and countries such as Israel, Lebanon, and Mexico. The vast majority



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of examples of the second recipe at work come from the United States.

Certainly more will be learned by exploring the data in the years ahead.

## Conclusion

The findings above are just a first taste of results from the data set. They reveal that while some elements of digital activism are manifestly evident – such as the global prevalence of certain applications and the absence of violence – the mechanics of digital activism require further research into the data set: What accounts for the regional disparity in tool use? Why are mobile phones increasingly prevalent but SMS use so rare in digital activism campaigns? Why are governments by far the most popular target of persuasion campaigns, and do the mechanics of government-focused campaigns differ according to the responsiveness of government?

No single digital tool in this study had a clear relationship with campaign success. This is consistent with received wisdom. Experienced activists will tell you that using Facebook or Twitter or an e-petition will not guarantee success. Now there is data to demonstrate that using these tools does not even make success more likely, when that is the only factor being analyzed.

This analysis also showed that outcome did not have a clear relationship to beginning year, indicating that activism did not become more successful (or less successful) over the three years in the study. This finding challenges hypotheses about a digital activism learning curve, which would suggest that activists in general would get more successful over time as these tools become more commonplace. It also challenges cyber-pessimist hypotheses about repressive governments becoming more savvy about digital activism, and thus better able to defeat digital campaigns. This study suggests that there is not a clear change in the rate of campaign success or failure between 2010 and 2012.

Further research using this data is called for to explore whether multivariate associations exist that were not clear at the bivariate level, and to evaluate whether external political, cultural, and social phenomena influence the patterns and effectiveness of digital activism.

The goal of this report is to answer some questions and inspire new questions. And we invite other journalists, researchers, activists and the interested public to use and improve the data set.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Frank Edwards** has been involved in several initiatives bridging the gap between activism and digital media, notably as an editor with the [Austin Independent Media Center](#), a community organizer with the citizen journalism project [Chi-Town Daily News](#), and as an advisor to [AREA Chicago](#). Frank is a graduate student in the department of Sociology and a Comparative Law and Society Studies fellow at the University of Washington. He holds an MA in Sociology from DePaul University, and his research interests include race, child welfare, social stratification, the sociology of punishment, and historical sociology.

**Philip N. Howard** is a professor of communication, information and international studies at the [University of Washington](#) and Director of the [Center for Media and Communication Studies](#) in the [School of Public Policy](#) at the [Central European University](#). He investigates the impact of digital media on political life around the world, and his projects on digital activism, global information access. He has authored numerous journal articles on the politics of new information technologies, and his recent books include [Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring](#) (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013) and [State Power 2.0: Authoritarian Entrenchment and Political Engagement Worldwide](#) (Farnham,

UK: Ashgate, 2014), both with Muzammil Hussain. He has had research appointments at universities and think tanks around the world, most recently at Princeton University's [Center for Information Technology Policy](#). He blogs at [philhoward.org](#) and tweets from [@pnhoward](#).

**Mary Joyce** conceptualized and initiated the Global Digital Activism Data Set project in 2010 before bringing it to the University of Washington in 2012, where she is currently in the MA/PhD program in Communication. She is internationally recognized as an expert in global digital activism and frequently speaks publicly and trains activists around the world. Mary was New Media Operations Manager for President Obama's 2008 national campaign and edited [Digital Activism Decoded](#). (New York, NY: International Debate Education Association, 2010). In 2013 she received a [Graduate Research Fellowship from the National Science Foundation](#) to support her work. This is the fourth digital activism project that she has founded or co-founded.

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The goal of the Digital Activism Research Project is to study the effect of digital technology on civic engagement, non-violent conflict, and political change around the world. We hope the findings of this report will contribute to the current academic, policy, and practical debate regarding how citizens are using new digital tools for activism around the world. This project is dedicated to the digital activists of the world. The Global Digital Activism Data Sets empirically describe this new global phenomenon through the creation of a rich public repository of coded digital activism case studies. The data set was designed as a public resource and speaks to a variety of interests, from social science to policy-making to tactical decisions by activists. Its format is conducive to further qualitative analysis or quantitative statistical methods. We invite scholars, policy-makers, and activists to bring their own interests to the data set and believe that the understanding of this complex phenomenon can only be understood by openness and collaboration.

Please direct correspondence to Philip N. Howard, Director, Digital Activism Research Project, Department of Communication, 141 Communications Building, Box 353740, University of Washington,

Seattle, Washington, 98195-3740, Telephone: (206) 685-5276, Email: [pnhoward@uw.edu](mailto:pnhoward@uw.edu).

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any funder or affiliate organization.



[www.digital-activism.org](http://www.digital-activism.org)

### Report Citation

Frank Edwards, Philip N. Howard, Mary Joyce, "Digital Activism and Non-Violent Conflict," *Digital Activism Research Project*, 2013. 23 pp. Seattle, University of Washington.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people contributed to this project. We would like to acknowledge the help of our project advisors Ethan Zuckerman and Hardy Merriman. For their support in reviewing cases and providing feedback we are grateful to Rodrigo Davies at MIT, Lance Bennett at the University of Washington, and Sheldon Himelfarb at USIP.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of several organizations, including The National Science Foundation, The United States Institute of Peace, and the University of Washington. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of our sponsors. We are grateful to Eliza Mason for copy editing services and substantive feedback. We are grateful to Adam Welch of Hemisphere Design for design services.

Columbia University Research Team: Ryan Beck, Gal Beckerman, Charles Berret, Ania Calderon, Diani Citra, Ron Davis, Ørjan Madsen, Violeta Duncan, Oray Egin, Roxanne Emadi, Camille Francois, Anna Gaarde, Sarah Girma, Shih-Chun Huang, Rasha Kashkoush, Rafael Kern, Isya Kresnadi, Ruizhi Li, Saranya Misra, Francis Murray, Veronika

Rozmahelova, Aline Sara, Rajlaxmi Teli, Hector Trujillo, and Ran Ju.

University of Washington Research Team: Laura Busch, Frank Edwards, Meara Faw, Mary Joyce, Kelly Kistner, Jonathan Lam, Shin Lee, Colin Lingle, Will Mari, Ruth Moon, Luis Santana, Kiana Scott, and Danny Stofleth.

## RESEARCH FUNDING AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT



The United States Institute of Peace was the primary supporter of this research through grant 212-11F, Philip N. Howard Principal investigator, “Digital Media, Civic Engagement, and Non-Violent Conflict,” \$79,905, 2012.



The National Science Foundation supported Mary Joyce’s work on this project through an award from the Graduate Research Fellowship program.



The Department of Communication at the University of Washington is the institutional home of the Digital Activism Research Project.

## APPENDIX I: GLOBAL TRENDS IN DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Table 4: Descriptive Trends across All Variables, By Regime Type

Variables	Democracies	Emerging Democracies	Authoritarian Regimes	Transitional States	All
<b>Organizations and Targets</b>					
Violence by Initiators or Supporters (Percent of Campaigns that Turned Violent)*	4 (1.7)	8 (11.4)	1 (1.3)	1 (4.7)	14
Initiator - Formal Organization (Percent of Campaigns Initiated by a Formal Organization)*	58 (24.1)	16 (22.9)	9 (11.3)	7 (33.3)	90
Target - Government (Percent of Campaigns targeting a Government)**	174 (72.2)	60 (85.7)	73 (91.3)	18 (85.7)	325
Target - Business (Percent of Campaigns targeting a Business)**	54 (22.4)	9 (12.9)	7 (8.8)	2 (9.5)	72
Target - Civic Organization (Percent of Campaigns targeting a Civic Organization)**	13 (5.4)	1 (1.4)	0	1 (4.8)	15
Target - Initiators Targeting Entity in Another Country	28 (11.6)	8 (11.4)	7 (8.8)	3 (14.3)	46
<b>Tools and Strategies</b>					
Campaign Hacked or Attempted to Hack Its Targets (Percent of Campaigns)**	3 (1.2)	5 (7.1)	1 (1.3)	0	9
Campaign Used E-Petitions To Organize (Percent of Campaigns)**	83 (34.6)	9 (12.9)	10 (12.7)	3 (15.0)	105
Campaign Used Social Networking Applications to Organize (Percent of Campaigns)*	110 (45.6)	47 (67.1)	35 (43.8)	13 (61.9)	205
Campaign Used Twitter or Other Microblogging Applications to Organize (Percent of Campaigns)**	97 (40.2)	43 (61.4)	47 (58.8)	14 (66.7)	201
Campaign Developed Video Content (Percent of Campaigns)	82 (34.2)	34 (48.6)	33 (41.8)	9 (45.0)	158
Campaign Used Mapping Applications (Percent of Campaigns)	8 (3.3)	3 (4.3)	6 (7.6)	0 (0.0)	17
Campaign Used SMS (Percent of Campaigns)*	4 (1.7)	1 (1.4)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	5
<b>Outcomes</b>					
The Digital Campaign Generated Significant Street Protests (Described as Multiple Protest Events, With Many People In Attendance)	118 (49.0)	47 (67.1)	43 (53.8)	14 (66.7)	222
Campaign Achieved or Partially Achieved Its Goals (Percent of Campaigns)*	121 (50.2)	36 (51.4)	41 (51.3)	14 (9.5)	212
Campaign Did Not Achieve Its Goals (Percent of Campaigns)*	95 (39.4)	25 (35.7)	35 (43.8)	5 (23.8)	160
Campaign Outcomes Unknown (Percent of Campaigns)*	25 (10.4)	9 (12.9)	4 (5.0)	2 (9.5)	40
<b>Cases</b>					
Number of Cases with Known Country Initiator	241	70	80	21	412
Percent of Cases	58.5	17	19.4	5.1	100

\* Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  of at least 0.677, \*\* Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  of at least 0.800.

## APPENDIX II: METHODOLOGY

### About the Data Sets

With USIP support, we have produced two original data sets on global digital activism.

#### GDADS 1.0

There were three criteria for inclusion in GDADS 1.0. Cases needed to describe either 1) an activism campaign including at least one digital tactic or 2) an instance of online discourse in which citizens used digital technologies to try to achieve social or political change. In order to be included in the data set, the case also needed to 3) be described by a reliable third party source, which provided a check on source quality as well as a filter on case volume. The initiator of the case needed to be either a traditional civil society organization, such as an NGO or non-profit, or a looser grouping of one or more citizens. Cases initiated by governments or for-profit entities are not included in the data set.

Coding was based on qualitative sources that provide narratives of the case. While some traditional news sources and peer-reviewed journal articles provided this information, we found that most descriptive sources on digital activism are also digital. The international citizen journalism curation site Global Voices Online was particularly useful, as were sites

like MobileActive.org, InformationActivism.org, and Wikipedia.

An initial case list of 1,346 cases of digital activism was collected for the project. Though only 1,180 (88 percent) of these cases were ultimately coded, we think the full list of cases and sources may be useful to other researchers. The 12 percent of cases were excluded because they did not fit within the inclusion criteria described above. Most of these cases were rejected because they described an organization rather than an instance of digital activism undertaken by that organization or because they relied solely on primary sources and did not include a source written by a reliable third party.

#### GDADS 2.0

The second data set was completed in September 2013, and it consists of 25 qualitative and quantitative variables describing 426 digital activism campaigns from 100 countries and dependent territories, from 2010 through 2012. These cases were treated with a revised coding scheme and an extended review process. The data are also available at the project website and the ICPSR, and more details on methodology appear below. For the purposes of this study, a digital activism campaign is defined as an organized public effort,

making collective claim(s) of target authority(s), in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media.

## Inclusion Criteria

This conceptual definition, derived from the work of Charles Tilly (2004), is operationalized as follows. If a campaign failed to meet any of these criteria it was excluded. No geographic criterion was included and we wished to gain as large a geographic sample as possible. In addition, no temporal criterion was placed on the sample.

## Sampling Strategy

Our population was all digital activism campaigns, without geographic or temporal constraint, as defined by our conceptual definition and as operationalized through our inclusion criteria. Our first option would be to study these campaigns *in situ* using methods of ethnography or participant observation. However, because of the geographic scope and scale of our population, studying the subject directly was not feasible.

Following the classical methodology of the study of social movements, we decided to study campaigns by means of news reports about them.<sup>21</sup> The media-based approach to data collection is especially valuable when the political phenomenon at hand is particularly new.<sup>22</sup> Our method for analyzing these

texts would be a content analysis, a systematic means of textual analysis, which endeavors for all observers to come to the same conclusions about the content of the text. This inter-coder agreement increases the reliability and also the authority of the attendant findings.

Unlike many content analyses, in which unit of analysis and unit of observation are one in the same, in this study the two are different. The unit of analysis is the digital activism campaign while the unit of observation is the news report about that campaign. This means that we studied our digital campaigns indirectly. Media bias is a legitimate concern that was mitigated by relying on a variety of news outlets and on amateur as well as professional sources, but could not be completely nullified. Using this method means that we can only say that there is or is not evidence for a particular finding in the sources that were reviewed.

In cases in which the news report itself is the unit of analysis (for example, a study of the language used by journalists to describe candidate gender in a senate race), a sampling frame can be created by devising or locating a list of all stories in a particular news source or set of news sources within a given time period. However, in this study the campaign, not the



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news story, was our unit of analysis, and there was no extant sampling frame for this population.

We also believed it would be impossible to create a sampling frame which would include the entire population of campaigns. While our conceptual definition implied that there would be some digital trace of all of the campaigns in the population, we did not believe that we could identify all digital campaigns. Moreover, we did not believe that all these campaigns had been recorded in a news story, so we could not use any single news source, or even a combination of news sources, as our sampling frame. Because we did not believe we could create a sampling frame of the entire population of campaigns, we believed it would be impossible to create a random sample, and did not attempt to create one.

In place of a random sample we created a purposive sample, also called a relevance or judgmental sample. According to Klaus Krippendorff,

It is important to remember that the use of random samples always entails the admission that one does not have a clue regarding what the population of interest looks like or where to find the needed information. In content analysis, this is rarely the case.... When using

relevance sampling, analysts proceed by actually examining the texts, even if superficially, often in a multistage process.<sup>23</sup>

This is the process we used to identify campaigns for our data set. We knew what sources were reporting on digital activism, and we had a detailed operational definition of what type of campaigns we were looking for. We reviewed a range of likely sources (see Figure 1) and collected sources which fit our inclusion criteria. We then used these sources as the object of a content analysis, which we used to create the data set. We were only able to identify just over 400 texts that met all the inclusion criteria. We did no further sampling and coded all texts.

While traditional social movements studies have relied on newspaper accounts, through the ubiquity of blogs and websites we also had access to the reports of citizen journalists. Amateurs, whom one might expect to know less about journalistic practice than professionals, wrote these reports, but we did not believe that they knew less about the topic at hand. In fact, as bloggers, we had good reason to believe that they would understand the activism of digital media better than traditional journalists. We also believed that relying on citizen journalists would increase the number of cases to which we would have access, since

the gatekeeper function of traditional journalism would be attenuated.

**Table 5: Sampling Sources**

Source	Description
<b>Global Voices Online</b>	Citizen media website, editors report the news of their countries based on the citizen media created by the citizens of that country.
<b>Actipedia</b>	Website of activism tactics from around the world, focus on artistic and creative tactics.
<b>Global Digital Activism Data Set, version 1.0</b>	Spreadsheet of sources used on previous iteration of this project.
<b>Lexis-Nexis</b>	All News search, English only. Sources included newspapers, blogs, web-based publications, magazines and journals, press releases (excluded because not created by 3 <sup>rd</sup> party), new transcripts, aggregate news sources, industry trade press, and legal news.

We still had to account for linguistic bias. All the members of the research team were Anglophone. Although some of the coders were able to read other languages, asking them to use their specialized language skills would have made replication different. Also, though we have one coder who was fluent in Spanish and another who was fluent in

Korean, we would never have been able to bring together a coder team able to read material about each campaign in their native language. We needed to develop a method that would minimize linguistic bias as much as possible.

Our method for reducing sampling bias based on the campaign's primary language was two-fold. The first and most important step we took was to rely on reports of campaigns created by native bilingual (citizen) journalists who were able to read the campaign's primary materials in whatever language they were written in, and then translate and interpret that content in English. The citizen media aggregation site Global Voices Online provided this type of content, and the majority of cases in the data set (58 percent) were identified using this source. Our second means of reducing linguistic bias was to use Google Translate, and the Google Translate plugin for the Chrome browser, to translate primary sources created by activists that were linked to from the principle source (Source1). While Source1 was in English, for maximum comprehension and to facilitate study replication, we also used automated translation in specific instances enumerated in the codebook.

Global Voices has another extremely useful feature. It covers citizen media in the global south and east, precisely the regions which are less likely to be

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covered by English-language news media. The advantage of sampling from Global Voices is in providing a broader and more representative global reach than would have been previously possible. Indeed, having the network of Global Voices volunteers generating and translating content means that our sample of cases of the “universe of cases” We reviewed all cases in their Digital Activism and Protest categories. All cases that met the inclusion criteria were added to the sample.

**Table 6: LexisNexis Search Strings in GDADS 2.0**

Year	Search String
2010	"digital protest" OR "online protest" OR "net protest" OR "internet protest" OR "web protest" OR "mobile protest" OR "cyberprotest" AND NOT "Wikileaks" AND NOT "flotilla"
2011	"digital protest" OR "online protest" OR "net protest" OR "internet protest" OR "web protest" OR "mobile protest" OR "cyberprotest" AND NOT "15M" AND NOT "Arab Spring" AND NOT "Occupy Wall Street"
2012	"digital protest" OR "online protest" OR "net protest" OR "internet protest" OR "web protest" OR "mobile protest" OR "cyberprotest" AND NOT "Aaron Swartz" AND NOT "SOPA" AND NOT "Trayvon" AND NOT "Pussy Riot" AND NOT "Kony" AND NOT "ACTA"

In addition to Global Voices, we reviewed other websites that covered global digital activism and published in English. (We did not review sites that cover only regional or national digital activism, such as China Digital Times or Upside Down World, but we

invite others to add to the data set by doing so.) We reviewed Movements.org, Mashable.com, and Actipedia for additional cases for the year 2012, setting a threshold success rate of 5 percent (for example, for every twenty cases reviewed we needed to identify at least one relevant case in order to retain that source). Only Actipedia met this threshold, so it was retained. We also reviewed the case list of the first version of the Global Digital Activism Data Set which, unsurprisingly, had the highest rate of relevant cases, 55 percent for 2012.

In addition to the two web sources (Global Voices and Actipedia) and the GDADS1 source list, we also felt we needed to include traditional journalism, so we created a search string for LexisNexis. After a search string based on various permutations of the phrase “digital activism” failed to meet the 5 percent threshold, we used a permutation based on the word “protest,” which met the threshold. We also excluded popular cases already identified through the web sources to limit the number of redundant articles to be reviewed. (Any term excluded from the LexisNexis search was already included in the sample through another source.) The complete search strings for the four years in the sample are detailed in Table 6.

## Coder Training

Version 2.0 of the data set was coded by graduate students from the Departments of Communication and Sociology at the University of Washington. All coders underwent a day-long training, were supervised while they coded, and were assigned intercoder reliability cases on a weekly basis. These cases were also reviewed on a weekly basis in a group meeting to clarify areas of disagreement and to measure ongoing coding quality.

## Intercoder Reliability

For intercoder reliability, cases were randomly selected from the case list on a weekly basis using a random number generator. Because we reworked the coding scheme a number of times and recoded several variables, the intercoder reliability statistics for some variables are based on fewer cases than others. However, no intercoder reliability statistic is based on fewer than 10 cases (2.3 percent of the cases in the data set) coded by 5 coders for a total of 50 case/coder instances. Researchers who wish to recode a larger sample of cases and recalculate intercoder reliability are encouraged to do so.

Though we used average pairwise agreement to evaluate results on a weekly basis, we calculated cumulative agreement using Krippendorff's  $\alpha$ , the

most rigorous measure of intercoder agreement for multiple coders. We suggest that anyone who uses the data also use  $\alpha$  as their measure of reliability.

Krippendorff suggests an optimal  $\alpha$  of  $\geq 0.800$  and a minimal  $\alpha$  of 0.667 for speculative conclusions, which is appropriate to an exploratory study such as this one.

The variables below fall within that 1.000 to 0.667 range, with three exceptions: violence, the use of SMS, and Outcome Type 1. We retained the first two variables because the phenomenon indicated occurred extremely rarely: Only 3.4 percent of cases included physical violence by participants and only 1.7 percent of cases included the use of SMS. While there was high agreement on the absence of these features in a campaign, there was low agreement on their presence. Using a relevance sampling method to recode cases in which these features were present would likely raise the agreement level. Though it falls below Krippendorff's threshold we decided to retain the original coding of Outcome Type 1 in addition to the merged Outcome Type 2 so that other researchers could explore the exact nature of the disagreements.

The table below lists all the variables in the GDADS 2.0 data set, the pairwise percent agreement and Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  associated with each variable, and

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explanatory notes on the meaning of that agreement coefficient.

## The Variables

To maintain the highest possible standards of data collection and analysis, we carefully crafted key variables, tested them, and tracked agreement among the coding team.

**Table 7: Variables and Reliability in GDADS 2.0**

Variable Name	Krippendorff's $\alpha$	Notes			
<b>Case ID</b>	N/A	Textual variable, agreement not calculated.	<b>Initiator</b>	0.785	agreement was not calculated. Despite multiple attempts, we were unable to create a reliable categorical variable for initiator. This was due to the lack of specificity of the source material and of the phenomenon itself: It is often unclear who initiated a digital activism campaign because initiators may choose to intentionally obscure their identities and may not be affiliated with named organizations.
<b>Title</b>	N/A	Textual variable, agreement not calculated.	<b>Country</b>		The lack of specificity of the initiator also made the country in which the initiator was based harder to identify.
<b>Goal Description</b>	N/A	Textual variable, agreement not calculated. A variety of goal categorization schemes were attempted, but regardless of the number or specificity of categories, the problem of overlap was persistent. We invite other researchers to create an improved categorization scheme for this variable.	<b>Initiator</b>	N/A	Agreement not calculated because not generated by coders, derivative variable of INITCOUN.
<b>Violence</b>	0.000	Physical violence initiated by participants was so rare (present in 1 percent of campaigns) that there was no agreement as to when violence <i>did</i> occur, the reason for the very low $\alpha$ .	<b>Region</b>		Agreement not calculated because not generated by coders, derivative variable of INITCOUN.
<b>Initiator</b>	N/A	This is a textual variable, and	<b>Initiator Sub Region</b>		Agreement not calculated because not generated by coders, derivative variable of INITCOUN.
			<b>Target</b>	N/A	Textual variable, agreement not calculated.
			<b>Description</b>		
			<b>Target Type</b>	0.806	No notes.
			<b>Target</b>	0.886	Targets, mostly governments, were easier to identify due to their formal organizational identity and clear geographic affiliation.
			<b>Country</b>		
			<b>Beginning Year</b>	0.781	The starting year of the campaign was often not explicitly stated and needed to be inferred by coders based on available evidence. We were not able to reach acceptable agreement of End Year because

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		most sources were written in the middle of the campaign and ending year information was missing or ambiguous.			is calculated by converting it into a dummy where the presence of digital video use in the campaign is 1 and the absence of digital video use in the campaign is 0.
<b>Forum</b>	0.823	This is a textual variable. Agreement is calculated by converting it into a dummy where the presence of forum use in the campaign is 1 and the absence of forum use in the campaign is 0.	<b>Mapping</b>	0.741	This is a textual variable. Agreement is calculated by converting it into a dummy where the presence of digital map use in the campaign is 1 and the absence of digital map use in the campaign is 0.
<b>E-Petition</b>	0.847	This is a textual variable. Agreement is calculated by converting it into a dummy where the presence of e-petition use in the campaign is 1 and the absence of e-petition use in the campaign is 0.	<b>SMS</b>	0.000	SMS was so rare (present in 2 percent of campaigns) that there was no agreement as to when SMS was used, the reason for the very low $\alpha$ .
<b>Social Networking</b>	0.703	This is a textual variable. Agreement is calculated by converting it into a dummy where the presence of social network use in the campaign is 1 and the absence of social network use in the campaign is 0. Use of social networks (most often Facebook) were often not mentioned explicitly, but were only revealed through the hyperlinks in the text. Some coders may have missed these links.	<b>Hacking</b>	1.000	(No notes.)
			<b>Participation Offline</b>	0.750	This is a textual variable. Agreement is calculated by converting it into a dummy where the presence of offline tactics in the campaign is 1 and the absence of offline tactics in the campaign is 0.
			<b>Outcome Description</b>	NA	Textual variable, agreement not calculated.
			<b>Outcome Type 1</b>	0.606	The outcome was often not mentioned in the principle source (Source 1) and the broad range of outcomes made categorization difficult. This is the original coding structure of the variable.
<b>Microblogging</b>	0.867	This is a textual variable. Agreement is calculated by converting it into a dummy where the presence of microblog use in the campaign is 1 and the absence of microblog use in the campaign is 0.	<b>Outcome Type 2</b>	0.691	Because of the low agreement on the original categorization scheme, the second version of the variable is also provided. In this version the
<b>Video</b>	0.756	This is a textual variable. Agreement			



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values 1 (total success) and 2 (partial success) are merged, resulting in greater confidence, but with lower precision as to the type of success.

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## ENDNOTES

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