

Virtue Ethics and a Technomoral Framework for Online Activism

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This article examines online activism from an ethical perspective and proposes a virtue theory framework through which to advocate specific normative standards. Over the years, digital media have become useful tools for social movements in democratic societies, providing them with spaces to congregate, exchange ideas, and mobilize. Yet, this same activism-enhancing digital infrastructure paradoxically thrives on ethically inadequate principles that could undermine activists' efforts. Drawing on scholarship on technomoral virtues and media participation, this article aims to develop a set of moral guidelines that help reorient online activism toward the pursuit of a mode of social change that concerns itself with the cultivation of the self through interactions with peers and is simultaneously aware of the ethical challenges entrenched in the digital realm.

Keywords: online activism, political discourse, virtue theory, technology ethics

As the civic sphere in several democratic societies continues to transition from mostly analogue to predominantly digital, it is important to reexamine the technomoral terrain in which civic and activist movements tend to flourish. The civic sphere's increasing digitization has ushered a paradoxical political reality in which media technologies empower citizens to participate, while simultaneously enabling technology companies to restrict (Uldam, 2018), commercialize, and monetize behavior (see Cinnamon, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). This sociocultural realignment occurs in tandem with an online realm that approximates a too-big-to-regulate status, increasingly governed by a data capitalism and consumerist ethos that counts users' digital footprint as its most valuable asset (Zuboff, 2019). Yet, even in a morally compromised digital arena, it has become inconceivable for current social movements that wish to succeed to adopt an exclusively analogue communication strategy.

What might the prospect of a primarily digital activist culture mean for liberal democracy and society's moral health? This article addresses this question by examining how the advantages and capabilities as well as deficiencies inherent in digital media present online activists with both opportunities and barriers for moral development. Using a virtue ethics framework, we propose that there is strategic, social, and moral value in

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grounding digital political action in the cultivation of the self through peer socialization. We aim to develop a set of moral guidelines that help reorient online activism toward a mode of political action that enables and promotes flourishing among supporters. Vallor's (2016) "technomoral" virtues provide a valuable framework through which to do so, emphasizing as it does a neo-Aristotelian approach to the self and to digital community life (p. 19). This approach, she suggests,

allows us to expand traditional understanding of the ways in which our moral choices and obligations bind and connect us to one another, as the networks of relationships upon which we depend for our personal and collective flourishing continue to grow in scale and complexity. (p. 33)

We build on Vallor's (2016) foundation by focusing on three technomoral virtues that we believe are reasonably accommodating of the strategic nature of online political action. First, we posit that a virtue ethics framework is the most ideal to cultivate online activism that is both effective and morally defensible. Second, we argue that in a hyperconnected and increasingly global online ecosystem, citizens must recognize the coalition-building value of rooting discourse on a baseline level of civility. Third, we propose reinstating empathy as a necessary virtue for stimulating online political action through "cofeeling" (Vallor, 2016, p. 133). Lastly, we explore the moral relevance of fostering humility as a technomoral virtue to inoculate politically inclined users against engaging in ego-driven proclamations and consuming information that increasingly masquerades as knowledge. We aim to present a model of online activism for democratic societies that helps reconcile the strategic and moral value of operating within a moral framework, where human flourishing supersedes digital media's individualistic and consumerist culture.

Review of Literature

Online Activism

Online activism involves the use of digital technologies—particularly the Internet—to enhance or build politically motivated movements (Vegh, 2003). The Internet has become quite useful to activists, Vegh (2003) argues, because it allows them to identify or manage alternative channels to disseminate information and create awareness about a particular cause and coordinate online and offline political action. Occasionally, certain movements cultivate a loyal and persistent following given the extended continuity and almost infinite opportunities for membership that online spaces support (Earl & Katrina, 2011). Social media sites (SNSs), particularly, enhance this set of advantages. Hashtag activism, for example, allows activists to identify likely supporters based on their online behavioral patterns and interests (Larrondo, Morales-i-Gras, & Orbegozo-Terradillos, 2019). Calls to action and messages of solidarity and motivation often enable digitally gestated movements to influence the offline sphere in the form of public demonstrations (Harlow, 2012). Online movements targeting private firms may also attract the press' attention and (re)direct media narratives to serve the movements' objectives (Moscato, 2016), thereby contributing to the erosion of the firms' brand loyalty, stakeholder expectations, and consumer trust (van den Broek, Langley, & Hornig, 2017). That is not to say that political action was all but impotent before the advent of the Internet, but it is necessary to emphasize the unprecedented accessibility and expediency that new media provide for modern activist movements.

The current model of mediated participation in many hyperconnected democracies greatly depends on new media's capacity for interactivity and virality and holds considerable transnational influence. Given the right circumstances, a digital activist artifact (i.e., a meme or video) escapes its virtual confines to be covered in-depth by the news media, with potential global repercussions. The #BringBackOurGirls hashtag and the Syrian Opposition Forces' Facebook presence illustrate this plausibility (see Chiluya & Ifukor, 2015; Seo & Ebrahim, 2016, respectively). Both movements originated locally and swiftly became glocal entities. Thus, citizenship in the digital age is not only tethered to the infosphere, but it also possesses glocal jurisdiction in that our actions in online arenas harbor consequences for our immediate fellow citizens and those residing beyond geographic borders. Yet, despite the glocal implications of our civic engagement and online activism, social media's very own digital architecture seems ill-equipped to foster a morally sound civic life.

The same digital tools that advance unprecedented expediency and numerous opportunities to gestate, organize, and democratize political action paradoxically sabotage these very advantages with morally questionable features. For instance, the design of most SNSs elevates disinformation and emotionally triggering content over nuanced, more emotionally neutral content (Vicario et al., 2016). This is particularly problematic, given that various tech leaders and former industry insiders have publicly admitted to designing mobile devices and social media to be highly addictive (Alter, 2018). Meanwhile, the prevalence of filter bubbles and echo chambers may stifle people's interactions beyond ideological fault lines, potentially hindering SNSs' dialogical capacities (Sunstein, 2017; Wollebæk, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, & Enjolras, 2019). On the other hand, the culture of terse self-expression that social media incentivize contributes to the dissemination of "superfluous" and "uncritical" opinions in activist forums (Larrondo et al., 2019, p. 219). Online movements targeting powerful corporations have also seen their efforts to increase awareness monitored, anticipated, and obstructed, while also facing systematic profiling and censorship (Uldam, 2018). This panorama suggests that the Internet and social media are far from the democratizing forces they were prophesized to be, promoting, instead, the culture of digital oppression and commodification that many online activists mobilize against (Morozov, 2011).

Another potential challenge to morally sound digital activism may exist within activists' own psychological profiles. The typical activist movement gestates from what Goodwin, James, and Polleta (2004) call "reflex emotions" (p. 416) such as anger and discontent toward a particular social injustice, prompting it to swiftly develop a strong collective identity (Stephansen, 2017) and clearly define the boundaries between allyship, rivalry, and threat (see van Stekelenburg, van Leeuwen, & van Troost, 2013). Other researchers such as Jasko, Szastok, Grzymala-Moszczyńska, Maj, and Kruglanski (2019) observe that, although collective outrage often catalyzes political action, the feeling of fulfillment and reward generated from acting on behalf of important causes also triggers self-seeking behavior, with activists opting to "self-sacrifice" for the cause in future instances (p. 340). Combined with social and mobile media's addictive and polarizing proclivities (Alter, 2018; Vicario et al., 2016; Wollebæk et al., 2019), the activist mindset and related acts of political action could prove vulnerable to emotional exploitation. Referencing sociologist Edward O. Wilson, former Google design ethicist Tristan Harris (2019) warns that our psychological profile, built on "Paleolithic emotions," is inadequately equipped to filter and respond to the "omniscient awareness of the world's suffering" (para. 14) afforded by our technologies. Yet, these same technologies tend to stifle collective action. Harris adds, "Online news feeds aggregate all of the world's pain and cruelty, dragging our brains into a kind of learned helplessness.

Technology that provides us with near-complete knowledge without a commensurate level of agency isn't humane" (para. 14).

The success of activist movements, Chatterton (2006) writes, rests on their ability to transcend the "ontological divisions" of activist and nonactivist, to engage in conversations with nonactivists about the long-term consequences of social change and common visions of "the good life" (p. 260). Overcoming this moral challenge online entails inoculating oneself from digital media's balkanizing and anesthetizing orientation by identifying possibilities for a politics of flourishing. "It is not the technologies *themselves* that determine whether or not we flourish socially, but rather the habits, skills, and virtues we have cultivated, with or without their help," Vallor (2016, p. 163) writes. "Once we acquire those habits, skills, and virtues, we are not only better able to avoid harm in new social media environments, we are able to use new media in ways that further enrich our well-being" (Vallor, 2016, p. 163). As we discuss below, the online activist sphere, even with its morally compromised infrastructure, has the capacity to aid activists to develop technomoral strategies to advance social change while mitigating its consumerist and individualist excesses. "Technologies neither actively determine nor passively reveal our moral character, they *mediate* it by conditioning, *and* being conditioned by, our moral habits and practices" (p. 184), Vallor writes.

The proliferation of mediated political action raises important questions about the kind of citizenship that we should practice in the digital realm. With the possibility of casual users becoming leaders with significant online and offline influence and local movements gaining global currency, mediated political action necessitates a set of moral guidelines that center on its collective nature and implications. We argue that such an effort is best aided by the development of one's virtues and the cultivation of the self through mediated interactions with known and unknown others.

Virtues and Technoculture

Virtues, broadly construed, compose fundamental character traits, a disposition so deeply embedded in a person that it encompasses not just one isolated action, but the person's very own disposition (Hursthouse, 1999). In Foot's (1978) view, they are inherent human characteristics we have and must cultivate for our benefit and, most important, that of others. Foot's "naturalistic" ethics dovetails with our call for engagement that furthers flourishing. Vallor (2016) echoes Foot's naturalistic ethics: "There are certain biological, psychological, and social facts about human persons that constrain what it can mean for us to flourish, just as a nutrient-starved, drought-parched lawn fails to flourish whether or not anyone notices its poor condition" (p. 19). A virtuous person, Foot posits, possesses the wisdom—a deep understanding of how to reach "certain good ends regarding human life" (pp. 322–323) and their actual value—and the will—the actual knowledge and desire—to be good. Considering how new media technologies elevate polarizing information and click-bait over complex and nuanced content (Berger & Milkman, 2011) and harbor addictive properties (Meshi, Elizarova, Bender, & Verdejo-Garcia, 2019; Piven, 2019), how are politically inclined individuals to pursue a politics of flourishing while partaking in online activism?

Vallor (2016) argues that society has always wrestled with this conundrum, particularly during the Industrial Revolution in which media technologies became fixtures of both our public and private spheres, with moral practices evolving in parallel with and becoming embedded in our most immediate technologies. Petitions

for generosity and charity, for example, are fairly commonplace on SNSs. If a user asks peers to spread the word about a particular misfortune (e.g., disaster relief fundraising) on social media to gain support, our disposition to care for others may manifest through sharing the post or donating and raising funds. Conversely, if driven by indifference, people might opt for purging such altruistic pleas from their timelines by “blocking” or “unfollowing” others or scrolling away. Evidently, media technologies simultaneously facilitate and incentivize moral action and moral disengagement, and because they enable us to transcend temporal and spatial limits, it means that, to cultivate our self, we must consider the collective impact of our online personas.

To address this conundrum, Vallor (2016) proposes 12 technomoral virtues—a set of existing moral values reconfigured for technological contexts. They are intended to guide individuals in their pursuit of cultivating a kind of civic mindedness that is inherently global and concerned with others’ well-being, as well as their character development. Vallor’s taxonomy of technomoral virtues includes honesty, self-control, humility, justice, courage, empathy, care, civility, flexibility, perspective, magnanimity, and wisdom. She observes that these technomoral virtues should not be adopted wholesale—interpreted as inherently universal or unmalleable. Rather, we should embrace their elasticity, as we integrate the continuously changing digital media landscape with our own psychological infrastructure. For this article, we emphasize the cultivation of civility, empathy, and humility for the proliferation of meaningful and morally adequate online activism.

The Case for Virtue Ethics

In a virtue ethics framework, one’s character traits define one’s moral character, and as such, improving one’s character leads to pursuing and living a “good life.” That, in turn, entails developing one’s strengths, mental health, and overall well-being (Elder, 2014; Vallor, 2012). Considering that we have at hand a rich repertoire of ethics perspectives to draw from, it is pertinent to consider why a virtue ethics framework would be more useful for online activists than, say, deontology or utilitarianism. Without reviewing the longstanding tensions and debates among these frameworks, we note our support for the revival of virtue ethics generally (e.g., Foot, 2001; Hursthouse, 1999; Swanton, 2003) and for the assertion of its value in media ethics in particular (Baker, 2008; Borden, 2007; Couldry, 2013; Plaisance, 2015). These voices and many others have articulated the significant shortcomings of a deontological framework to be of use in our increasingly global and pluralistic world, where abstract, Kantian claims of duty are ill-suited for the range of conflicting duties that define modern life.

Deontological and utilitarian models, concerned as they are with what constitutes a “right” action, proffer well-meaning rules and imperatives that arguably are unrealistic and of less help in the negotiation of daily life. Despite the widespread dismissal of virtue ethics in previous decades, “it came to be recognised that moral sensitivity, perception, imagination, and judgement informed by experience—*phronesis* in short—is needed to apply rules or principles correctly” (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016, para. 45). Without delving into the specific debates about the strengths and weaknesses of virtue ethics, we only state, here, that (a) its emphasis on character, accumulated wisdom, and community engagement provides a compelling normative framework for activism, and (b) many of the common criticisms of virtue ethics—of adequacy, of relativism, of justificatory force—are either reductive or equally problematic for deontologist and utilitarian claims (see Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016). We endorse the value of the flexibility and general potentiality expressed by Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2016):

Contemporary conceptions of right and wrong action, built as they are around a notion of moral duty that presupposes a framework of divine (or moral) law or around a conception of obligation that is defined in contrast to self-interest, carry baggage the virtue ethicist is better off without. Virtue ethics can address the questions of how one should live, what kind of person one should become, and even what one should do without that committing it to providing an account of "right action." (para. 39)

Furthermore, Swanton (2003), notably, provides an effective rebuttal to the misconception that virtue ethics is agent-focused (p. 252). Following the lead of Vallor (2016) and others, we endorse the argument that virtue ethics is the one framework that provides the needed flexibility and moral force:

While an irreducible plurality of ethical narratives is both inevitable and desirable in a world as culturally diverse as ours, we need a common framework in which these narratives can be situated if humans are going to be able to address . . . emerging problems of *collective* technosocial action wisely and well. This framework must facilitate not only a shared moral dialogue, but also a global commitment to the cultivation of the specific technomoral habits and virtues required to meet this challenge. (p. 9)

There is a second reason for our reliance on virtue ethics as a deliberative normative framework here. Many contemporary virtue theorists (Foot, 1977, 2001; Hursthouse, 1995; MacIntyre, 1981) have constructed a compelling neo-Aristotelian framework to account for moral intuitionism and notions of wisdom, and to compensate for the rationalistic assumptions and arguably narrower concerns of deontological and consequentialist systems. This work has found purchase with emerging theories of moral judgment from moral psychology research. As Haidt and Joseph (2008) write,

There is a growing rapport between philosophical writings on virtue and emotions, empirical research on moral functioning, and cognitive science, a rapport that suggests that virtue theory may yield deep insights into the architecture of human social and moral cognition . . . what is being learned is best described as the skills of social perception and reaction discussed by connectionists and virtue theorists. (pp. 368–387)

Subsequently, increasing ranks of virtue philosophers have articulated compelling neo-Aristotelian claims that virtue theory is well-suited to build normative frameworks for the technological world. "Our theories must do a better job of representing the individual character of our moral practice," writes Pappas (2008) in his work on the ethics of John Dewey: "We should work toward ethical theories that reflect the concreteness and particularity of moral practice" (p. 44). Haidt and Joseph (2004) summarize the nature of the link:

We believe that virtue theories are the most psychologically sound approach to morality. Such theories fit more neatly with what we know about moral development, judgment, and behavior than do theories that focus on moral reasoning or on the acceptance of high-level moral principles such as justice. . . . Like Aristotle, we are seeking a deeper structure to our moral functioning, though in the form of a smaller number of phenomena that are located more in the organism than in the environment. (pp. 62–63)

Several years ago, Flanagan and his moral psychology colleagues Sarkissian and Wong (2008) suggested that it is unhelpful to aim for absolute certainty about “conceptual truths” that define human morality. Instead, they concluded, we ought to understand that we are continually pursuing

an evolving *theory* of morality, and that the proper way to investigate and evaluate this theory is to see how it coheres with other theories in the empirical and social sciences and with our experience of morality as found in history, literature, and phenomenology. (p. 46)

This focus on the fluid, evolving nature of moral judgment and value systems arguably invites more robust theorizing in the realm of political activism: To cite just one example, the moral foundations theory of Haidt and colleagues compellingly demonstrates the interconnectivity among value judgments in moral life and political orientations (e.g., Haidt & Joseph, 2008). Correspondingly, Swanton (2003) draws on the claim of Korsgaard’s argument that morality, properly understood, begins with a “plight” rather than a premise:

The central practical task of ethics is not *simply* the search for truth. That search is constrained by an even more central problem: of our needing to live together, solving our problems in ways consistent with this end. Dialogue does not *just* serve an epistemic truth-seeking goal; it serves also the social goal of solving problems. (pp. 250–251)

A Technomoral Framework for Online Activism

As illustrated above, online media seem quite valuable to the proliferation of social change-oriented movements or they may obstinately stand in their way by sowing division, diminishing political action, and monetizing polarization, lethargy, and complacency. Although some movements have found success in this morally volatile environment, it is too risky a gamble to build sustainable social change. We believe that the following set of technomoral virtues holds intrinsic strategic and moral value for online activism because, dependent on the cultivation of the self through socialization and collaboration as they are, they could help inoculate activists against the excesses of the digital architecture in which their movements proliferate.

Civility

In the current rhetorical landscape, the term *civility* has become charged and highly polarizing, especially in discussions regarding political action. On one hand, some perceive it as a fundamental cultural principle, the dissolution of which would signal the collapse of civilization itself; on the other, there are those who see it as a weapon wielded almost exclusively by the powerful to silence dissenters and dissuade disruption (Jamieson, Weitz, Kenski, & Volinsky, 2017). Calls for civility, Calabrese (2015) observes, also often prioritize order, politeness, and toleration at the expense of justice, which would almost certainly result in more injustice—not less. Where scholarly consensus appears to emerge is in the realization that advancing a standard definition of civility is an exercise in futility; for the norms that constitute civility, as Benson (2011) and Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht (2002) argue, are contingent on the ever-changing cultural, linguistic, and moral landscapes. The route, then, to reaching a compromise between these verdicts rests on advancing a conceptualization of civility that is sufficiently accommodating of political organizing and the pursuit of justice.

Vallor (2016) argues that in a globally networked information society, this kind of civility could be accomplished by advocating common causes on common ground. Civility, in her view, is tethered to our inclination to recognize our shared responsibility and the collective impact of our actions—acknowledging that we are all “in this together” (Vallor, 2016, p. 142). We demonstrate this concern by cultivating one’s awareness of others’ welfare and how our actions shape others’ character—the kinds of people our fellow citizens truly are. The moral imperative of civically minded individuals rests on their commitment to remain informed about the social issues that impact the lives of known and unknown others and deliberate about plausible solutions and engage in some kind of political action. Vallor tells us that a “good citizen” concerned with being civil toward their fellow citizens shows

a sincere disposition to live well with one’s fellow citizens of a globally networked information society: to collectively and wisely deliberate about matters of local, national, and global policy and political action; to communicate, entertain, and defend our distinct conceptions of the good life; and to work cooperatively toward those goods of techno social life that we seek and expect to share with others. (p. 141)

Good citizens should pursue this philosophy, she adds, because there is “intrinsic” value in taking part in a democracy with other “good people.” Vallor’s proposition to build common ground, however, faces opposition in the form of various digital features such as anonymity. In some ways, anonymity enhances dehumanization in our political discourse, shielding acts of incivility—bullying, violent threats, constant harassment—from public scrutiny. The weaponization of anonymity makes it more difficult for reasonable voices to emerge and easier for uncivil discourse to propagate (Barlett, 2015). Conversely, remaining anonymous online is vital for political dissenters and members of persecuted groups who wish to voice their views without fear of retaliation (Asenbaum, 2018). The double-edged sword of anonymous discourse, thus, problematizes civility and the articulation of a common cause on which it depends to build long-lasting political action.

We are not advocating for a kind of online activism that is free of dissent or emotionally charged exchanges between opposing parties, however. After all, to preserve a deliberative democracy and a democratic society, various forms of open discussion—including disagreement—must exist. Disagreement, even if it is conveyed impolitely, is necessary to promote productive exchanges in which conflicting ideas are presented and scrutinized (Chen, 2017). But, for social movements to grow beyond their awareness- creation and mobilizing stages, there is an evident necessity to transcend disagreement and the “us versus them” binary that tends to define activist discourse. Chatterton (2006) calls this confluence of polarizing factors “uncommon ground”—that is, the ontological and seemingly impenetrable division between activists and nonactivists (p. 259). Chatterton argues that, to build sustainable coalitions and advance the conversation beyond immediate concerns and into deliberations about what constitutes a “good life,” activists must view disagreement and conflict as opportunities to foster “dialogical and normative politics” (p. 260). Regarding the necessity to build common ground, he writes,

It is about making strange bedfellows and creative alliances between groups who don’t necessarily agree on everything. It is less about thinking where someone has come from but where you are willing to go and how much you are willing to go together. (p. 272)

For digital activist discourse to be persuasive and able to communicate a clear vision of justice that translates into long-term alliances and legislative action, it must stem from the assumption that most members of society operate within a disposition to build a more just social infrastructure. This mindset warrants carefully communicating a common cause that, even if delivered angrily, aims to unify and mobilize by affirming a common narrative. As Vallor (2016) writes, "A frictionless world where every social bond and duty was conditional upon the ongoing ability of others to keep us stimulated and pleased would diminish us all" (p. 164).

Despite their intrinsically commercial and individualistic orientation, social media have, at times, demonstrated a capacity to advance a notion of civility rooted in the advancement of a "common" cause or shared goal. For instance, they hold immense civic and mobilizing appeal for young people, which was illustrated by the March for Our Lives and Global Week for Future demonstrations. The activists behind these movements, many of them young students, complemented their agenda with information about the detrimental effects of inadequate gun laws and insufficient efforts to address climate change, respectively. Although having been born out of regional efforts, their movements quickly constructed digital media narratives that emphasized collective commitment toward young people and forging a safer, more sustainable global society for future generations. Despite cynical and often disparaging remarks from oppositional forces, both movements succeeded in articulating the necessity of mobilizing behind a globally appealing narrative of preservation and reform.

Empathy

Broadly construed, empathy involves being able to relate to others' experiences, to see life from someone else's frame of reference. Vallor (2016) distinguishes it from sympathy by arguing that sympathy involves experiencing a concern *for* someone else's feelings, and empathy warrants *sharing* those feelings with others. "I can have sympathy for the misfortunes of a group of anonymous individuals who are more or less interchangeable in my mind, but I typically can only empathize with a specific person or set of persons" (p. 133), Vallor writes. Yet, although somewhat divergent, both virtues interact and build on one another. For instance, in a mediated political action context, finding ourselves empathizing with the police shooting of an unarmed Black teenager in our immediate community may lead us to sympathize with Black youth facing similar circumstances in other parts of the country. Reconceptualized as a technomoral virtue, empathy must consist of "cultivating one's openness to being 'moved' to caring action by the emotions of other members of our technosocial world" (Vallor, 2016, p. 133). Empathy in the online realm must involve an intrinsic motivation to "cofeel" with known and unknown others and actively work to improve their well-being.

Social media and mobile devices—especially their live video broadcasting features—have proven particularly useful to maximize empathy's mobilizing attributes and compel the public to "cofeel" with those facing systemic injustices. The Black Lives Matter movement's use of online videos and hashtags to capture and expose police maltreatment of Black individuals illustrates this (see Anderson, Toor, Rainie, & Smith, 2018). The battery of amateur videos that circulated showing police officers abusing their power while interacting with Black Americans helped redirect the public's attention to a series of issues that were, until recently, mostly invisible. The videos' capacity to document violence from the point of view of many of the victims or their relatives arguably prioritized the humanity of the victims themselves (see Speltz, 2016;

Zelinková et al., 2014). This was partly accomplished by how video technologies allow for the dissolution of spatial borders, making digital citizens *feel* like they were present in the actual incidents, prompting many of them to organize and mobilize, exert political pressure, and even run for office (see Chiu & Schmidt, 2018; Foran, 2015).

Despite digital media's potential to capture and disseminate empathetic content, it might also be contributing to the erosion of empathy and sympathy. Extensive intergenerational research (e.g., Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Twenge, 2014; Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012) shows that empathy in college students has decreased dramatically in the last 30 years, but more significantly between 2000 and 2010. This downward trend has been documented in respondents who were students during these decades but are now adult citizens. Although it is difficult to identify specific factors that explain the decrease in empathetic behavior, Americans' withdrawal from voluntary associations (Purcell & Smith, 2011; Putnam, 2000) and the decrease of face-to-face interactions in favor of computer-mediated communication (Twenge, 2014; Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016) appear to play a role. Mobile devices, Harris (2014) observes, compete for our attention and bombard us with customized information and notifications designed to keeping us "hooked" and withdrawn from in-person activities. In our increasingly digital culture, the time needed to practice and develop empathetic behavior, preferably through in-person interactions, belongs to our devices.

As media companies compete for our uninterrupted attention, they overwhelm us with information, distract us, and often disincentivize displays of empathy and moral concerns in online contexts (Immordino-Yang, McColl, Damasio, Damasio, & Raichle, 2009). As Zuckerman (2014) writes, "The problem with participatory civics is not the absence of paths toward public input—it's the overabundance" (p. 164). The question, then, becomes, how can strangers who interact to discuss matters of civic importance be "moved to care" for unknown others in a digital environment that compromises our attention and clouds our moral reasoning? The answer, perhaps, involves cultivating a kind of digitally endemic empathy that is practiced routinely through our personal media devices. Although varying levels of empathy can be found in individuals of various backgrounds during their formative years, it is plausible to develop and improve it (see Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016; TEDx Talks, 2017), and digital media could help facilitate it. Greitemeyer, Osswald, and Brauer (2010), for instance, found that playing certain genres of video games could improve one's empathy levels. Specifically, exposure to video games with prosocial characteristics decreases one's satisfaction of witnessing someone else's misfortune while increasing overall empathy. Furthermore, social media and online communities appear to partly contribute to the maintenance or even expansion of one's empathetic tendencies (see Carrier, Spradlin, Bunce, & Rosen, 2015; Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016).

Paradoxically, media stimuli that could elicit an empathetic response could also stifle mobilization. By making us feel with others, especially if experiencing someone's marginalization or tragedy, Bloom (2016) argues, empathetic content could prompt people to tune out to avoid feeling uncomfortable. Certainly, there is merit to this argument, but, at least in the context of online activism, a sense of unease could also lead to collective outrage and subsequent mobilization, especially after repeated exposure to reprehensible content, as has been the case with videos of excessive use of police force against racial minorities.

Humility

Humility is often understood as one's willingness to restrain one's sense of self-importance and yet avoid the sanctimoniousness that accompanies self-deprecation. Some theologians connect this virtue to one's relationship with the Creator or a divine force in which followers reconcile the uniqueness of their self-consciousness with the insignificance of their egos. In Christian dogma, for example, humility is rooted in one's willingness to recognize one's place in the world as submissive to the Creator, not a desire to be exalted above Him (Carlson, 1944). In Confucianism, humility encompasses a process of self-examination in which we uncover and learn from our limitations (Rushing, 2013; Tachibana, 1981). Similarly, Taoists regard humility as a tenet of a truly fulfilling life; they believe it entails exercising caution, for there is much wisdom to be obtained from self-restraint and much less from succumbing to one's impulses and acting prematurely (Hinton, 2015). Exhibiting humility in the online realm, according to Vallor (2016), should extend beyond one's willingness to be self-reflexive and to restrain one's intellectual pride and hubris.

In the online realm, because of its information overload, individuals must also show vigilance and caution to avoid confusing technological progress with technological infallibility and information with knowledge and wisdom. Vallor (2016) warns that this confusion might drive us to believe that technological innovations grant us undisputed "mastery" of the world's resources and reality itself:

Recognizing the real limits of our technological knowledge and ability; reverence and wonder at the universe's retained power to surprise and confound us; and renunciation of the blind faith that new technologies inevitably lead to human mastery and control of our environment. (pp. 126–127)

Humility in an online ecosystem should dispose us to be aware of our own ignorance regarding the limits of technological innovations and to recognize the intellectual agency of others. Using an ethics of care framework, Dalmiya (2016), echoing Chatterton (2006), conceives online humility as a moral virtue that compels citizens to see others—even those with whom we strongly disagree—as collaborators, not antagonists, in myriad epistemic endeavors. A virtuous citizen, one who strives for intellectual modesty, Kidd (2016) argues, regulates their engagement with others, showing caution with how they present their arguments, including their gesticulation, body language, and rhetorical style. Ubiquitous access to the Internet and its almost infinite archive of information, however, has made us overconfident in our intellectual capacity and complacent regarding our mastery of new media. Our immersion in our technoculture appears to have rendered us unaware of our ignorance of how rapidly evolving digital media reshape social dynamics (Vallor, 2016). In online interactions, we seem to increasingly ignore our fellow citizens' intellectual agency in favor of technology's perceived intellectual authority (Papacharissi, 2004; Sunstein, 2017).

Nichols (2017) situates the roots of the public's aversion to expertise, intellectual restraint, and established knowledge on the rise—and recent empowerment—of the low-information voter. For many of us, an impromptu Google search, Nichols observes, often supersedes laborious autodidacticism and intellectual humility. He writes,

American culture tends to romanticize the notions about the wisdom of the common person or the gumption of the self-educated genius. . . . These images empower the social fantasy of the ordinary citizen out-performing the professor out of sheer grit and ingenuity. (p. 38)

New media technologies have become fertile ground for the proliferation of this social fantasy that, enhanced by the persistency of “echo chambers” and “informational and reputational cascades” (Sunstein, 2017, pp. 4, 99), contribute to treating and circulating misinformation as legitimate information. The spread of the antivaxxer movement and conspiracy theories about the U.S. government’s involvement in the September 11, 2001, attacks and recent school shootings, sometimes legitimized by celebrities, social media influencers, and media personalities, are prime examples.

In a digital media landscape where many social movements attract amateur media creators, it is the moral duty of any activist to exercise an adequate level of humility when employing digital media tools to advance the movement’s goals. Forgoing this stage of planning and moral reasoning could damage not just the reputation and goals of a particular movement, but also the members of our immediate community. The social impact of lacking a basic level of restraint and self-awareness of the complexities of online technologies was evident in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings. Days after the bombs had gone off, the FBI released blurry photos of the suspects, causing a frenetic online hunt for them. Immediately after the FBI’s announcement, a Reddit user posted pictures of one of the suspects alongside Sunil Tripathi, a young man whose family had reported as missing prior to the incident and who had no role in the attacks (Kang, 2013). Moments later, social media crowds banded together to exchange baseless speculations about Tripathi’s disappearance and how it connected to the bombing, and quickly transitioned to attack Tripathi’s family on social media.

Tripathi’s case is not an isolated event. Similar instances of mistaken identity and mob mobilization erupted after the White supremacist rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia (see Sydell, 2017). The emergence of these leaderless, powerful—albeit often short-term—modes of online activism illustrates the need to exercise caution when processing sensitive and potentially uncorroborated information. Yet, just as digital media technologies could become fertile ground for cultivating various virtues, they might prove equally beneficial to fostering humility, perhaps by embracing a digital architecture that favors restraint, where impulsive reactions are dissuaded. Harris (2014) suggests that, to mitigate smartphone addiction, digital media companies should design their products to be slightly less convenient, with features that create boundaries that help us distinguish between communication and self-expression and between meaningful and banal information. As an example, he proposes a wider implementation of “do not disturb” notifications for users who do not wish to be interrupted with texts or e-mails. Similarly, we could envision algorithms that identify sensitive materials and remind us of the moral implications of acting on our impulses to organize and mobilize around them.

Conclusion

This article’s purpose was to outline a set of moral guidelines for online activism that accounts for both the limitations and advantages of digital media technologies in democratic societies. Our objective was to

reconcile the strategic and moral value of grounding online activism in moral principles that advance flourishing through interactions with activists and nonactivists and building sustainable coalitions on a clearly articulated common ground. We explored SNSs' capability to operate within a virtue ethics framework that cultivates the virtues of civility, empathy, and humility, which may help empower and inoculate activists against digital media's oppressive and divisive features without diminishing the pursuit of justice and social change.

The exploration of the moral and strategic value of digital media in online activism remains an ongoing project and warrants additional study because there is still much that is unknown about the impact of media technologies on people's moral and psychological development. The technomoral framework proposed in this article aims not to eradicate digital media's moral pitfalls—because such a project warrants, as Harris (2019) opines, a holistic effort spearheaded by policymakers and tech companies—or to impose universalist values—because virtues are bound to cultural norms and rhetorical dynamics—but to help make activists aware of the polarizing and atomizing incentives embedded in media devices and how to transcend them to articulate a clear and consistent moral vision to build long-lasting coalitions.

Yet, online activists must simultaneously avoid the trap of technological solutionism that Morozov (2011) warns about, and, as Bakardjieva (2011) argues, expand critical research to better understand digital media's often "impoverishing effects on the lives of users" and empower them to "defy oppression and advance emancipation" (p. 46). Online activists must also contend with the reality of advancing their mode of political action in an increasingly oligopolistic, commodified, and surveilled public sphere. In this ethically compromised technological landscape, where media are predominantly designed to monetize our primal impulses and digital footprint, the need for reform by necessity falls, momentarily, on critically aware citizen activists. In short, to build activist movements that are morally conscientious, they must consist of morally conscientious members.

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