



SLACKTIVISM

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| TENDENS

Slacktivism – the rise and fall of “feel-good activism”

Slacktivism is defined as “actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement, for example signing an online petition or joining a campaign group on a social media website or application.” Join us as we look into the trend of slacktivism. In this trend report we investigate the concept of slacktivism, where it comes from, as well as local and international events around slacktivism. We will also ask whether slacktivism is essentially good or bad, and why the church and believers should be aware of this trend.

Where did slacktivism come from?

The word *slacktivism* was first used in 1995 to shorten the concept of *slacker activism* (Christenson 2011). The term *couch activist* is also used for this concept. It was initially used as a positive concept, but later gained a negative connotation with the focus on political participation and activism. Slacker activism is primarily practiced through the use of the Internet, and more specifically social media such as Facebook and Twitter. But it has a negative connotation because it has no impact on real-life events; it only makes the slacker activist feel good about himself (Morozov 2009). It is said that slacker activism is the ideal activism for a lazy generation (cf. Robertson 2014).

With the rapid growth of the Internet and social media, users have increasing amounts of information at their fingertips. There are thousands of articles with information throughout the world-wide web. This means that the user's access to the world is widening. In contrast, the only way to learn about events in the past, both national and international, was to listen to, read or watch the news. It was broadcast or distributed at certain times of the day. This caused a slow circulation of information, often heavily "filtered" by publishers. Since the explosion of the Internet and social media, we have had access to a whole world of unfiltered information at our fingertips. The distribution of news and information can now happen in a matter of minutes or even seconds. Therefore, more users on the Internet share more information and more people are aware of breaking news as it happens, whether these reports are accurate or not. This fast distribution and access to news can certainly be seen as an aspect of globalisation. Globalisation is where the world became flat (cf. Friedman 2005) and, amongst other things, where more information can be spread faster. Of course, there is a good side to globalisation. We can, for example, stay in touch

with loved ones on the other side of the world. It also helps us keep all our loved ones' photos in one place on the Internet. It gives us a global audience with which we can communicate. It allows us to visit Europe and use our South African bank card at a teller machine to draw euros.

This digital revolution also made people lazy. In the comfort of the digital revolution a life behind the scenes (or is that screens?) is preferred. It is a world where we prefer to connect from behind a screen rather than risking face-to-face interaction. It is easier and more convenient. It removes the messiness of "real" communication. Robertson (2014) is of the opinion that it is this second effect of globalisation (the speed with which information is distributed, as well as the ease of online communication) that breeds slacker activism. In her own words: *"These two aspects of social media are single-handedly killing historical forms of activism – marching, public speaking, protests, physical petitions and strikes. Social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter have allowed us to share a message that we find important, and then step away from it, as we continue to scan our friends' feeds."* She goes further by saying: *"We continuously absorb social justice messages, but we don't take the time to act upon them. This inaction is commonly referred to as "slacktivism" or "hashtag activism." [#activism]"*

What does slacktivism look like?

Let's have a look at how slacker activism works.

You are browsing through your Facebook feed like thousands of other people to stay on top of your Facebook connections' lives. As you scroll through all the posts, you see a post that one of your Facebook friends shared about someone who visited a certain retail store and that they were unhappy with the service they received. You think about your own experiences with the retail store and realise that you also experienced poor customer service. The friend of your Facebook friend asks that people share this post to create awareness of the retailer's poor customer service. You agree and share it with your Facebook friends. As more people share this post, the news spreads. You forget about your Facebook friend's friend's problem (which you share, but not to the same extent) and go on with your life. A few days later, you see that the same friend created a Facebook group that asks people to boycott the retailer. You join the group and, in this way, become part of a group of like-minded people united by the same cause. You and other like-minded activists are now creating awareness of this retailer's poor customer service. But are you really?

What about the Facebook profile pictures that we change for a day or two to show our online friends that we support a certain issue?

Of course, there are good intentions behind this online activism, but the question remains: how hard did you work to support this issue? Did you protest against this retailer from the comfort of your own home? What difference did your profile photo make in the lives of the people that you supposedly support?

It required absolutely no effort or work from you to stand up against this retailer's poor service levels.

With our lives being dominated by our online activities, I don't think changing a Facebook profile or joining a Facebook group counts as making an effort. I also don't think it makes any difference in the lives of the people you "stood up for". Or did you do it only to show that you share all these "like-minded" activists' worries in your search for groceries? Or did you do it to keep your conscience clean?

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What does slacktivism look like in real life?

If we look at where slacker activism is present in the world, we should look at the first occurrence of slacktivism: The ALS #icebucketchallenge. This movement enjoyed huge support in 2014 when participants emptied buckets full of ice water on themselves in support of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a form of motoneuron disease. Kosinki (2014) explains that, although the ALS Association received four times more donations following this challenge, the picture would have been much different had these people rather used the time and money they spent on buying ice and making the best videos on the ALS Association.

The popular #KONY2012-campaign is another example. This slacker campaign focused on catching Joseph Kony, a Ugandan war criminal. The campaign's viral video and the organisation that created it, came under fire because they ignored the efforts already made to bring Kony to justice. They were also accused of positioning a political and human-rights problem as cultural currency.

The #BlackLivesMatter phenomenon is another good example of slacker activism. The movement started in 2013 with the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media after George Zimmerman was found not guilty in the death of the Afro-American teen Trayvon Martin the previous February.

Another example was when 130 people were killed in a series of terror attacks in France in 2015. Slacker activism lit up profile pictures with the French flag.

Recently the Cambridge Analytical scandal, where more than 50 million Facebook users' data were stolen and not removed after a request to do so, also set slacker activism in motion. This time the slacktivism was characterised by the hashtag #DeleteFacebook, with prominent companies such as

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those of Elon Musk (Tesla and SpaceX) deleting their Facebook pages. Lin (2018) writes:

“Slacktivism – where people show support for the trending #DeleteFacebook campaign but do little about it in real life – will probably feed into this surveillance capitalistic machine. While I think we ought to hold Facebook accountable, I am not sure supporting #DeleteFacebook without any further action is an effective method for sabotage.”

Lastly, we should also mention activism surrounding gun violence in the USA. Thousands of young children, teenagers, parents and other stakeholders stepped away from their computer screens on 24 March 2018 to gather in the streets to protest against gun violence in the March for Our Lives. Writers like Gallucci (2018) and Willingham (2018) is of the opinion that this is perhaps the first step away from slacktivism.



Does slacktivism work?

Of course, it is very easy to see only the negative or positive aspects and dimensions of this issue. So far it may also appear as if this trend report views slacker activism in a negative light only. We would like to make it clear that there are also wonderful and positive things happening in the world of slacktivism.

A study by the University of British Columbia investigated whether slacktivism works or makes a difference. Their study questioned whether slacktivism leads to more support and awareness of certain issues. Does slacktivism motivate participants to make more financial and meaningful contributions? With the help of a series of field and laboratory experiments, they found that those who become involved in slacktivism sometimes go on to work on the issue on a deeper and more intimate level. What is the deciding factor? The extent to which a slacker activist's activism is private or public. Kristofferson et al (2014) writes in this study:

"Importantly, the socially observable nature (public vs. private) of initial token support is identified as a key moderator that influences when and why token support does or does not lead to meaningful support for the cause. Consumers exhibit greater helping on a subsequent, more meaningful task after providing an initial private (vs. public) display of token support for a cause."

Here we can also look at an online petition from 2013 that convinced an organisation representing high school coaches to develop materials to educate coaches about sexual assault and how they could help to reduce cases amongst their athletes (Earl 2016). Further online petitions changed decision-making by main corporations (see for example Bank of America on their debit card fees; Katcipole 2011).

In the spring of 2009 ten thousand protesters from Moldova took to the streets to protest against their

country's communist government. The action was called the Twitter Revolution because of the role the social media platform played in bringing the protestors together (Gladwell 2010).

There is also the story of Sameer Bhatia, a young Silicon Valley entrepreneur who developed acute myelogenous leukaemia. Bhatia needed a bone marrow transplant, but he couldn't find a match amongst his family and friends. He had the best chance with a donor of his own ethnicity, but there were very few South Asians in the national bone marrow donor database. A business partner of Bhatia sent out an email in which he explained Bhatia's problem to over four hundred of his contacts; they, in turn, spread the news further. Facebook pages and YouTube videos were dedicated to the "Help Sameer" campaign. Eventually close to 25 000 new donors were registered on the bone marrow register and Bhatia found a match (see Aaker & Smith 2010 for other examples).

Here at home the #feesmustfall debacle is a good example of how a generation who refuses to be burdened by study debt was so intensely part of the action that the government eventually gave in to their demands. (This report is fully aware that there were other dimensions to this #feesmustfall situation, and that the result wasn't solely reached through slacktivism. The purpose of this reference is simply to point out that a large part of the campaign was driven by social media.)

There are also many online petitions against the e-toll system in Gauteng. The question is whether this is a good example of slacktivism that has changed into real activism and therefore also true change? There are many online petitions, and many people didn't register for e-toll, which led to huge outstanding accounts. Perhaps this is why David Makhura, the Gauteng premier, admitted in his state of the province address that OUTA (the civil action group opposing e-toll) strangled the e-toll system.

How can we move away from slacktivism towards action?

Aaker and Smith (2010) strengthens this trend report in this regard. They mention that social media is built on “weak connections” between people. Facebook gives you the opportunity to be Facebook friends with hundreds of people, many more than you would ever befriend in your offline life. The cardinal concept that should be remembered in this trend report is that a distinction should be made between strong and weak social connections. Asking one of your Facebook friends to sign a petition or to join an action group is not the same as asking your strong social connection, a friend that you visit often, to stand up for a cause. We should also not expect the same reaction from social connections. It is said that “*social networks are particularly effective at increasing motivation,*” but “*social media activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.*”

Shirkey (2008:49f) refers to the ladder of activities that can be promoted through social media and networks. The ladder of activities consists of (1) sharing, (2) cooperation and (3) collective action.

The first step in this ladder, sharing, requires the least effort and energy from users. It is only a group of “like-minded people” agreeing on an issue. Sharing information in this phase leads to partial awareness between participants. An example would be to like or share a page on Facebook if someone asks you to do so.

The second step in the ladder is cooperation. This is a more difficult step because it requires the person who participates to change. Only when all the participants are synchronised can true cooperation take place. This phase in the ladder is dependent on shared creation. An example is being part of a Facebook

group that was created to talk and think about how to initiate action for a certain cause. It will, however, remain at cooperation only.

The third step in this ladder is the most difficult. Going over into collective action requires of people to commit themselves to performing a specific action, but in such a way that the decision of the group binds every individual to the collective group. It is the cohesion of the group that is vital to their success. This shared responsibility binds the identities of the participants in the group to the identity of the group. It now becomes possible to take action and to implement the decisions of the group, or to leave digital spaces behind to do something that will really make a difference.

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Why should the church be aware of slacktivism?

One of the reasons for writing this trend report about slacker activism is to create awareness of this trend in our own lives as Christians.

The first aspect that we should be aware of is that a possible motivator of slacker activism may be the “feel-good” phenomenon. If we feel that we should speak up for those who can’t speak up for themselves, or that we should stand up for those who can’t stand up for themselves, or that we should alleviate the pain and suffering that pops up on our screens, what would be our motivation for doing so? Do you share things online so that your online connections can see that you are “doing something” about the issue? Or is it a yearning for true change? Do you think simply sharing your worries online will be enough to bring change? Do we “do something” so that we can pat ourselves on the back and say, “Well done”? Or do we do it like Proverbs 31:8–9 and Zechariah 7:10–11 teaches us: to be a voice for those who don’t have voices? Or because we want to bring God’s Kingdom into the present?

The challenge is that every one of us has a hero complex (Wigg-Stevenson 2013:340). We all want to be the hero in our own stories. We want to be the centre of our own, or even God’s story! We all want to save the world. But God didn’t call us to live our own stories, or to be the centrepiece in His story. And therefore we can also not be the hero. God called us to love Him and to love those who are in this world with us (Mark 12:28–31). To make God’s Kingdom a reality by being a living testimony to God’s love, to stretch ourselves towards Christ as Hebrews 12:1–3 teaches us.

Doing this doesn’t mean we should try to patch up every crack that forms in the world. We should rather ask how we can live a life of God’s healing and love in a very broken world. It is standing in a living

relationship with the living God and realising that your actions happens from within this relationship with God (Keller 2010:292). It is to have a living relationship with God, our neighbours and the world. Isn’t this how we represent and promote God’s Kingdom? By being a witness to God’s mercy in the world. By not doing something for ourselves, but for God and His Kingdom (Wigg-Stevenson 2013:962ff). It is to bring God’s *shalom* back into the Creation (Keller 2010:3060). Pain and suffering in the world isn’t new, but ‘real-time global knowledge’ thereof is! (Wigg-Stevenson 2013:436). Technology makes the world a smaller place, which causes us to notice more of the pain and suffering that exists. Does this mean that I should “do something” about every case of pain and suffering that I cross paths with? Or should I rather, like the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37, be sensitive to the people that cross our daily road in order to realise God’s Kingdom in their lives?

Secondly, we should be honest about why we want to stand up for change. Do we do it to confirm our own comfortable lives? We often act from within our own human fears (Wagoner 2017:51, see also Keller 2010:1807 for more on the question about what is “right”). Or do we create a reality (let’s call it our own picture of God’s Kingdom) in our heads and then “stand up” for it? God’s Kingdom isn’t a clean screen where we can project our own understanding or wish for an ideal Kingdom! (Wigg-Stevenson 2013:1092). If we look at the Bible, we see in Romans 13:1–5 that we should obey the authorities. We can’t rise up against them simply because we don’t agree with them. Or because they are making my comfortable life a bit less comfortable! We, as believers, may never live selfish lives. To be a Christian means thinking less about ourselves and more about God and our neighbours (see Malina 2011:218–230). So, do you stand up for your own comfort, or for your neighbour who is oppressed?



Thirdly, we may never replace Christianity with slacker activism. There is no lazy or easy road in the Christian faith. There is only red-hot loyalty to Christ and nothing else! There is also no such thing as “couch potato” Christianity. There is only Christianity where our hands and feet get dirty like Jesus showed us (Wigg-Stevenson 2013:523). Look at Luke 9:23-27 where Jesus teaches us what His followers should look like. Do you carry your own cross as you follow Christ into heaven? Or are you a slacker activist that tries to lighten his burden so that your life as a Christian should be a bit easier? Or do you bring change in God’s Kingdom for your neighbours? (See Malina 2011:164 which clearly shows that God’s Kingdom has both a social and political dimension.)

Fourthly, our prayers may never be slacker activism. True intimate from-the-heart prayer should spur us to action. If we pray for those around us but we don’t do anything for them, isn’t that slacker activism?

Lastly, a few pointers on how to move away from slacker activism towards discipleship with impact:

1. **Be informed.** As we said at the start of this trend report, there is so much information in the digital world that we can easily become uninformed or be aware of half the story only. Don’t react or become involved unless you have all the necessary information to ask how you, as a Christian, should or shouldn’t react to it.
2. **Pray.** How does God want you to become involved in the issue? We can so easily react emotionally instead of reacting the way in which God wants us to.
3. **Do it!** Christianity without action doesn’t exist. It is God’s will that we should be good to each other (2 Corinthians 8:5). How can you be good to every person that crosses your path? Is this not how we should represent God’s Kingdom? Is this not the action that we as Christians should work for so that we can “do” change?

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