



# Activism and slacktivism: Social media and the future of campaigning

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An interview with Thomas Schultz-Jagow,  
Senior Director of Campaigns and Communications  
at Amnesty International, from Martin Thomas'  
forthcoming book *Go Native: A senior professionals'  
guide to social media*

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# Activism and slacktivism: Social media and the future of campaigning

During the early days of social media the tech-savvy activist community was quick to spot how social technology, and the collaborative behaviours it was encouraging, could provide a new way to mobilise activists, supporters and other like-minded people behind a shared purpose or common goal.

The challenge of co-ordinating the efforts of disparate groups of individuals, often in different locations, could be overcome by the creation of a Facebook group or campaign hashtag on Twitter. The simple act of 'liking' a campaign or signing an online petition provided people with an easy way to demonstrate publicly their support for a particular cause or issue. Forget counting how many people attended a rally or town hall meeting: activists could simply demonstrate the potency and appeal of their cause by measuring how many people clicked the 'like' button or shared the campaign hashtag.

Not surprisingly, many started to question whether this watered-down form of popular activism – that became labelled by its critics as 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' – was as meaningful as 'old-style' forms of campaigning. Their cynicism would appear to be vindicated by a research study published in *The Journal of Sociological Science* which reveals that only one percent of the people who 'liked' a charity fundraising campaign (created as a test exercise by a team of economists) actually made a donation<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Viral Altruism? Charitable Giving and Social Contagion in Online Networks*, Nicola Lacetera, Mario Macis, Angelo Mele, *Sociological Science*, March 24, 2016

In the same study, one in six people who used an app to pledge money to the charity subsequently deleted their pledge. *The Times* science correspondent, Oliver Moody described the research results as a demonstration of 'the hollow heart of slacktivism': 'Suspensions are gathering that the vast majority of social media users who broadcast their support for a cause, bask in the brief glow of virtue and then forget it – or even quietly renege on their pledge.'<sup>2</sup>

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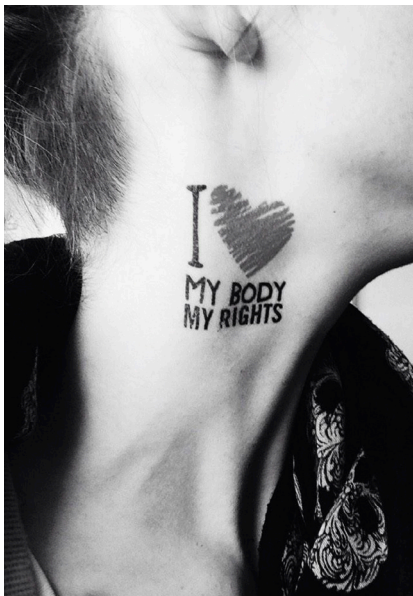
**'Social media has radically changed campaigning in the sense that organisations like ours, that are relatively large and global, have a much easier playing-field on which to experiment and test'.**

So where does this leave the role of social media as a campaigning platform? Is there a risk that a preoccupation with low cost, high reach social media initiatives encourages campaigners to ignore traditional techniques? I had the opportunity to pose this question and others to Thomas Schultz-Jagow, Senior Director of Campaigns and Communications at Amnesty International. Prior to joining Amnesty International he worked as a campaigner and front-line activist for organisations such as Oxfam GB, World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace. He has witnessed, at first hand, the growing role of social media as a campaigning tool: 'Social media has radically changed campaigning in the sense that organisations like ours, that are relatively large and global, have a much easier playing-field on which to experiment and test – in close to real time and at relatively low cost – what our audiences want and where they are. It has enabled us to move from the traditional, linear campaigning model of doing research, evaluating the findings and only then looking at developing an advocacy and campaigning strategy,

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 16th April 2016

to a faster, more integrated approach. Our aim now with any type of outreach – whether it is a marketing campaign in one of our big markets, a big global campaign push or a very targeted tactical intervention – is that it works first in social media.'

Schultz-Jagow describes how the approach Amnesty International took with My Body My Rights – a global campaign targeting the growing number of laws around the world criminalising people's sex lives and restricting women's control over their bodies – has provided a template for future campaigns: 'We built-in a social media strand much more prominently from day one, so instead of launching in the traditional way with a big research report we used a series of body-art images by Tokyo-based artist Hikaru Cho, designed specifically to be shared on social media. And instead of a big press conference in New York, we launched the campaign in a village in Kathmandu, accompanied by a global educational programme that was predominantly delivered online.'



But he also sounds a note of caution about an over-reliance on social media: 'We are not an organisation that says digital above everything else. Our approach is more nuanced. We find that in many of the countries in which we operate, moving to an exclusively digital offer is not going to work. Activities such as membership recruitment and mobilising our activists and campaigners still happens primarily off-line: for example, we still collect signatures by hand in places like Senegal and Burkina Faso.'

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## **'We have found that people like physically signing petitions and writing letters rather than simply clicking messages of support'.**

Amnesty International's pragmatic, balanced approach to digitisation is partly conditioned by the limited access to new technology in some of the countries in which it operates, but it also reflects its understanding of the psychology of many of its activists. Schultz-Jagow says, 'We have found that people like physically signing petitions and writing letters, rather than simply clicking messages of support. For our activists, meeting together as a group – for example sitting in a church hall, school or community centre to write letters to prisoners – is a big deal: it is very much how they see themselves as activists. This focus on face-to-face activism can affect the overall number of sign-ups that we are able to generate, compared to digital petitions used by other campaigning organisations, but for us the quality of the relationship with our campaigners around the world is as important as the quantity. Having said that, we have very ambitious growth targets: we have publicly said we want to grow from our current base of 8 million to 25 million supporters by 2020 and digital will play a critical role in helping us achieve this.'

Whether using social media or more traditional campaigning techniques, Schultz-Jagow sees the methodology as essentially the

same: 'Just as in the analogue days, you need to create a supporter journey and you need to have passionate and engaging story telling that gains people's empathy. Whether we reach supporters through a social media channel or a conversation in the street, the psychology underlying why they might be willing to join us is just the same. In both cases we take things slowly and it will probably be the third or fourth contact before we ask people for money.'

Schultz-Jagow has also tried to loosen-up some of Amnesty International's policies and procedures: 'When I first arrived four years ago our social media guidelines were a 20-page document that was very difficult for anyone to understand and very much mirrored our usual top-heavy sign-off and approval processes. I said let's do away with that. My social media guideline is basically one sentence: 'don't do anything on Twitter or Facebook that you wouldn't want your boss or your mother to read'. Stick to the policies and agreed positions on our key topics and mind your table manners. If we try to over-engineer what our people say on social media it is not authentic.'

Amnesty International's International Secretary General, Salil Shetty was recently selected by marketing magazine Adweek as one of the 5 *Global Activists Whose Social Media Posts Will Inspire You to Change the World*<sup>3</sup>. It describes how Shetty uses his Twitter account to share the organisation's latest news and campaigns: 'From police brutality in Brazil to labour exploitation in Qatar, Shetty's Twitter feed is an outstanding resource for keeping abreast of injustices in the world. Shetty travels the globe, providing glimpses of the tragedies unfolding in places where basic human rights have been stripped from entire populations. For brands looking to connect with a cause, Shetty offers a daily window into the battles Amnesty International faces.'

Schultz-Jagow sees this as an important endorsement of the organisation's use of social media, although he admits that Shetty initially found the platform something of a challenge: 'If you really want

3 Adweek, 2nd June 2016



to be on social media you need to be on it 24/7, and willing to engage with the content all the time, whatever is thrown at you. This takes time and resources. It is also difficult for those of us who are non-digital natives, who lack the experience or intuition, to know how it works. You simply have to feel your way through it. We experimented quite a bit with the Secretary General, letting him do everything himself versus scripting everything. We now have a mix and match approach in which we agree an overall strategy and let him get on with it.'

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## **'If you really want to be on social media you need to be on it 24/7 and willing to engage with the content all of the time'.**

So what does the future look like for Amnesty International when it comes to the use of social media as a campaigning platform?

According to Schultz-Jagow, 'my ambition is that we learn a lot faster and apply our learning and our own data analysis a lot more radically than we do today. Things are relatively cheap now, you can test, you trial, you can draw conclusions almost in real time. We are still a big complex, decentralised organisation, which means we can be slow at admitting that we knew on day one, from our social media analysis, that our messaging wasn't quite right. We need to get better at failing fast, learning fast and moving things on.

'We also have to better manage the tension between being seen as the authority on all things human rights and our growth ambitions. We have so much content and programmatic activity that I am under tremendous internal pressure to produce different content every day of week in social media, which risks drowning-out a lot of the priority things that we are trying to push. At the same time, to achieve our growth ambition I need to reduce the complexity and present two or three flagship things that ideally work globally.'

He is also keen that Amnesty International becomes less preoccupied by the established social media channels, suggesting that 'in the English-speaking world social media is still mainly about Twitter and Facebook, with a bit of Instagram. But when you look at China or Eastern Europe it is very different. We have a few people who understand that world, but they are very much in a minority. As a global campaigning organisation we need to get better at understanding how social technology will evolve around the world and not spend 80% of our time as we do today on the established channels, even if we are doing a good job.'

As is the case with any large, global organisation, the growing importance of social media has presented Amnesty International with a number of structural and operational challenges. Schultz-Jagow is a big believer in finding ways to cut through the bureaucracy and empower younger members of the team: 'Half of the time my job is to ensure the young talents that we have brought in – who are digitally native – actually get to do what they think is right and don't get stuck somewhere in the hierarchy of decision-making where their line managers may not get it.'

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## **'Listen to the young talent in your social media and campaign teams'.**

When I asked him what would be the single piece of social media advice he would give to a senior manager, he says: 'Listen to the young talent in your social media and campaign teams. They are probably way under 30 and you probably haven't given them a budget or any kind of sign-off authority. Let them design the campaign activity for you and back them up. Your job as a senior person is to clear the flight-path so they can experiment, trial and play. You do your risk management of course, but carve out that space for them. It will provide you with fascinating learning and you will probably find out that nine times out of 10 they were right.'



# Introducing Go Native: A senior professionals' guide to social media

Go Native will be the first book designed specifically to enhance the social media knowledge and capabilities of senior professionals. It has been written by Dissident consultant and author, Martin Thomas, who is course leader on digital and social media for the Institute of Directors.

The book makes the case for why senior professionals need to think and behave like digital natives<sup>4</sup>, become more social media literate, improve their knowledge and sharpen their skills. This will enable them to better respond to the strategic, operational and personal challenges presented by social media, mitigate risks and make the most of new opportunities. It will benefit their businesses and future-proof their careers.

Go Native includes advice on how to make the most of the primary social media channels and how to adopt a more strategic approach to social media risk management, campaign planning and personal brand management. It also explains how to establish an effective social media management system and illustrates the ways in which social media is having a transformational impact on customer service, market research, campaigning and business models. The book combines practical advice with new case studies and research and interviews with business leaders, marketing and social media experts and industry commentators.

4 The term 'digital native' was coined and popularised by education consultant Marc Prensky in his 2001 article *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, to describe a new generation of students who were "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, videos, video games, social media and other sites on the internet. The rest of us are relegated to being mere immigrants in this new world.

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**'I'm particularly fond of the social media work Martin Thomas does. There are plenty of social media offerings out there – but somebody who works at board level, gets organisational direction and also gets social media and changing generations? Such individuals are rare'.**

DR. SIMON HASLAM, STRATEGY CONSULTANT AND VISITING FELLOW AT DURHAM UNIVERSITY BUSINESS SCHOOL

Dissident is a consulting and campaigning agency founded by Martin Thomas and James Thellusson. It is focused on developing and delivering integrated marketing campaigns that change behaviour and build reputations, relationships and revenue. It works with a wide range of campaigning organisations and brands. Its recent marketing campaign in support of the UN-back International Year of Pulses 2016, has mobilised millions of people around the world to #LovePulses for the sake of their health and that of the planet and has been shortlisted for 'Best International Campaign' in the CorpComms Awards 2016.

For further information: [www.dissident.biz](http://www.dissident.biz)

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