

A DigiActive Introduction to

facebook

Activism



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A DigiActive Introduction to Facebook Activism

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Introduction

Activism is an inherently social practice. Movements cannot succeed without good communication and effective collaboration among activists. Just think about whether you would prefer to hand out flyers to a demonstration with a group of friends or by yourself. Working together is not just more enjoyable, it is necessary. Only by mobilizing our collective power and talents can we achieve our goals of social and political change.

The social basis of activism explains why Facebook, an increasingly popular social networking site, is a natural companion for tech-savvy organizers. Because of the site's massive user base and its free tools, Facebook is almost too attractive to pass up. However, the site has its flaws and is not a guarantee of organizing success. This guide is written to provide some insights into what works, what doesn't work, and how best to use Facebook to advance your movement.

The screenshot shows a Facebook group page for "Support the Monks' protest in Burma". The page layout includes a top navigation bar with "Profile", "Friends", and "Inbox" tabs, and a right-side utility bar with "home", "account", "privacy", and "logout" links. On the left, there is a search bar and a sidebar with "Applications" (Photos, Groups, Events, Marketplace, Friend Wheel, Twitter) and a "Single?" advertisement for Perfectmatch.com. The main content area features a group header with the title "Support the Monks' protest in Burma" and a "Basic Info" section. The "Basic Info" section includes the group type "Organizations - Advocacy Organizations" and a description: "Thank you for your concern for the people of Burma, it means a lot to them to see that the world cares and campaigns for their freedom, human rights and indeed survival." Below this, there is a paragraph about the "Monks' protest in September" and a call to action to read on and become a registered user of the website <http://www.burma-network.org>. A section titled "CYCLONE NARGIS RELATED ITEMS CAN BE FOUND IN OUR SISTER GROUP:" provides a link to another Facebook group. A "LATEST BURMA NEWS" section follows, with a note to check the posting wall for updates. At the bottom, there is a "Weekly News Summary" link. On the right side of the page, there is a photo of Buddhist monks in red robes, a "View Discussion Board" link, "Invite People to Join" and "Leave Group" buttons, a "Share" button, and an "Events" section listing upcoming events like "SUPPORT THE 2 STUDENTS WALKING..." and "Pledge& Join One Million Peopl... AROUND THE WORLD".

Pros & Cons of Facebook Activism

Pros: How Facebook Can Help Activists

Lots of People Use Facebook: Facebook provides a huge, networked user base. To make things even sweeter, each member has a “news feed” that announces group activity to friends. The result is a viral experience that will allow the group to spread incredibly quickly if its message is compelling.

The Price is Right: There is no cost for creating a group and it doesn't take long. This means you can spend precious resources on things like planning, recruiting, and networking.

Hassle-Free Multimedia: The tools on Facebook make it possible for group members to upload their own videos, pictures, and commentary. Devote some time to adding this content to your site and make sure others know it exists.

Opt-in Targeting: Members of your group chose to be there and are therefore going to give you at least one chance to talk to them when they initially join the group. Keep in mind they will either leave or quickly forget they joined if they aren't quickly engaged in your cause.

Cons: Why Facebook Isn't a Silver Bullet

Content on the Site is Disorganized: Facebook has a huge base of approximately 80 million user, and those users produce a huge amount of content. There are also tons of other groups to compete with. This does not only mean that you will need to compete for users' interest. If your group becomes popular, you should expect a great deal of media to be uploaded to the group wall. It will be up to you to sift through and find any really outstanding contributions to highlight.

Dedication Levels are Opaque: The low barrier to entry means that group size does not necessarily indicate genuine interest. This makes it more difficult to target those who are actually going to act. In particular, planning events will be more difficult because you won't know the exact participant headcount until the event actually occurs.

Facebook isn't Designed for Activism: The services may be free, but they have not been designed to suit your needs as an activist organizer. This means you will find that the site's functionality does not always match what you need. You will have to stretch what's there in order to be effective.

Steps to Organizing an Activism Campaign on Facebook

Step 1: Understand Your Intent

What are your initial goals for this group? These goals will change as group members begin to take ownership and shape efforts, but having an initial vision is an important part of communicating to others why they should join in the first place. Putting these goals into clear and concise words at the top of the group page is vital.

Step 2: Create the Group and Build an Active Base

Create the group and get people involved. This means inviting everyone you know to join the group, provoking thought conversation on the group wall, and ultimately creating an active environment. Utilize the energy of your new members by asking them to help you recruit. Begin to think about who might help you moderate the group once it starts to grow. Activity and growth are the primary goals during this stage.

Step 3: Begin Digital Action

Once your group is somewhat sizeable start collectively orchestrating digital action. This could involve having people spread the word among family and friends, blog, collect images and media, or promote awareness through social media sites such as Digg (<http://www.digg.com>) or Reddit (<http://www.reddit.com>). The actions that make the most sense will depend on your intent and the context.

The important part is to keep people excited and involved. This would also be a good time to recruit members to help create an external site.

Step 4: Create an External Site

Facebook wasn't created with activism in mind and information will not be presented in a way conducive to your effort (meaning that the content will be difficult to navigate). Furthermore, not everybody has a Facebook account. For these reasons it is a good idea to create an external site to mirror the information provided in the Facebook group. You can also archive content in a meaningful way, attract participants outside of Facebook, and create specialized tools and interfaces that don't exist on Facebook.

Step 5: Contact Existing Activist Organizations

If you are looking to make a genuine impact it makes sense to work with those who have an established track record offline. Existing advocacy groups with a common cause will be willing to donate time, knowledge, and possibly even manpower/organizational assistance to your group's efforts. By creating these relationships you visibly expand the scope of your movement and increase the odds of success.

Step 6: Begin Real-World Action

Assuming your intent is to have a real impact, now is the time to get started. Since Facebook is global you probably have people around the world with a wide variety of talents. Take advantage of this. Propose the large goal such as "We want to hold a day of global protests on October 15th" or "We want to get flyers posted in every major U.S. city by the end of the month" and help the group run with it. Make sure your moderators somehow elevate any ideas with potential. The key is to be fluid and flexible: ideally the bulk of the organization is bottom up (i.e. powered by from the group members) with seeds being planted from the top (you). Make sure you have audio/video/photo records of any events that happen!

Step 7: Generate Media Support

Once your group has done something newsworthy, get it in the news. Media interest will be proportional to how journalists feel about the group's topic and/or the significance of your efforts. Ask group members to contact local radio and TV stations and newspapers to promote your story. Help by having participants create a list of relevant local media contacts and build targeted media packets (i.e. collections of images/video from specific locations). Use the Internet as well. Have people blog about the events and submit content about the group efforts to social media sites.

Step 8: Keep on Going

If you can attract media attention your group will probably flourish, if not, then at least you got your message out and people are involved. From here you just continue to plan, organize, act, and increase the group's network of members and contacts. The general model for an activism campaign is: reflect > plan > act > reflect > plan > act.... This is also true of Facebook activism. First, think about the goal of your campaign, the decision-makers it is trying to persuade, and who your allies and opposition are. Next, plan an action and carry out that action. Then reflect on the success of that action and plan another action which builds on the first. This pattern continues until you achieve your goal.

Advice for Your Facebook Campaign

DO promote the external site AND the Facebook group If people who use Facebook hear about your efforts it will be easy for them to check out the group. On the other hand, there are plenty of non-Facebook users out there. Both of these outlets are important to promoting your cause and attracting as many members as possible.

DON'T assume that people are all using the external site or the Facebook group They aren't. You want to mirror information in both places at all times. Keep in mind that getting group members to use an external site is not necessarily easy to do. Only a small fraction of Facebook users will become active on the other site.

DO use the "Recent News" section of your Facebook group wisely As a group administrator you will want to provide just the right amount of information in the "recent news" area of your group page. This is an area free of spam and user-generated content, where you are in complete control of the message. You will want to put the most important information here, but don't put up too much, as people will get bored and navigate elsewhere. For instance, do not post the total list of all 150 events. Instead, post the next 5 upcoming events and link to an external page where users can learn about the others.

DON'T create multiple groups for the same effort Facebook groups generally benefit from the network effect. The more users there are in the group, the more value each member gets from being in the group. Spreading membership across multiple groups will just make it more difficult to share important information and will lower the ability for individuals to coordinate naturally. If you see another group organizing around the same cause, then either merge with them or get them to merge with you.

DO work closely with established activist organizations The activist groups you get in touch with will prove invaluable as you try to effectively make the jump from a digital venue to the real world.

DON'T spam your members If members get more than one or two e-mails a month they will leave. Provide regular updates, but do so passively by posting on the group's "Recent News" section and the external site. Rely on actively messaging members only for very important announcements, and keep these messages short and to the point.

DO work every angle to get news media attention Getting media support will help you achieve your goal by highlighting the group and the cause. This means writing press releases (short news article presenting the facts of your case, along with your contact information) and sending them to members of the TV, radio, and print media who would be most likely to cover your story and who list their professional e-mail addresses online.

DON'T try to restrict planning to a few members This is, by definition, a group effort. Every member of the group will bring some type of experience and skill to the table and it would be a terrible thing to waste. Organizing worldwide action is simply too large a task for a couple of people to do.

Great Facebook Campaigns from Around the World

The following examples from Burma, Morocco, and Egypt provide concrete examples of how digital activists are using Facebook to increase the impact of their campaigns.

Support the Monks' Protest in Burma

By Dan Schultz

Burma has a history of confrontations between peaceful protesters and a violent regime. The most recent iteration of protests began in September of 2007, led by a group of monks. These non-violent marches were quickly met with government brutality that resulted in the deaths of monks, civilians, and journalists. This time, however, the Internet was watching.

On September 19th, soon after the protests began, a Canadian college student named Alex Bookbinder created a Facebook group called "Support the Monks' Protest in Burma" on a whim. It wasn't created with advocacy in mind, but within 10 days it managed to attract over 140,000 members. The membership peaked at around half a million strong. Alex quickly recognized its potential after being contacted by a few existing activist organizations who had gotten wind of the digital developments and the group's members had used Facebook to plan and execute two global days of action on October 6th and October 23rd. These events were well attended in 100 cities around the world, with over 10,000 protesters in London alone.

Today the group is much smaller, but still exists. Several of the moderators went on to create the Burma Global Action Network (BGAN), a digital hub for Burma-related activism currently located at <http://www.burma-network.org>. After the global protests, BGAN and its sister Facebook group went on to lead a digital campaign titled "Don't forget Burma" which involved the collection of media from Burma protests to counteract the minimal amount of coverage by Western media.

How They Used Facebook

"Support the Monk's Protest in Burma" was conceived within Facebook. Once it gained a following it served as a central hub for user-generated content; acting in essence as a semi-self-moderated wiki. Appointed group moderators updated various event lists directly as the information came to them through the membership network. This practice resulted in something like a news feed for group members.

Initially the group provided a platform for people inside Burma to contact the outside world. They used the tools to post information and media about what was going on in the ground. Mainstream news outlets were then able to use this Facebook hosted content and quoted members of the group, adding to the group's momentum.

Frustrations with Facebook

Outside of the network that it made available, Facebook wasn't very helpful. Group owners had little control over anything other than content, which made it difficult to tailor the group tools to their activist efforts. Moderators couldn't message all members due to an arbitrary cap of 5000. Had this not been the case, there may have been a bigger turn out. at events It also wasn't possible to search for people within the group because there were too many names to sift through. These shortcomings inspired the creation the external BGAN site to guarantee the effective distribution of information.

Advice for Facebook Activists

Don't try to recreate the social experience in your external site. Their site contained static content and was created in a few days, but even more established and fancy sites with great forums would not yield the kind of interactivity available on Facebook without a huge amount of time and energy that would be better spent elsewhere.

Do remember the group is an outlet for individuals, so let them take control. There was a feeling of shared ownership. The group informed people of to what to do and any visible activity just inspired further action.

Do get involved with established movements. Combine 500,000 members with existing local grassroots communities and you have a well-formed network of local agents ready to encourage involvement.

The Help Fouad Campaign in Morocco

By Amine

On February 5, 2008, a 26-year-old Moroccan engineer, Fouad Mourtada, was taken into custody because he had created a false Facebook profile of the King's brother, Moulay Rachid, as a practical joke. In police custody he was brutally interrogated and beaten. Angered by this unjust treatment, a group of young Moroccans got together to protest his imprisonment and fight for Fouad's freedom.

How They Used Facebook

The campaign to free Fouad Mourtada initially set up the Facebook group to publicize the case, aggregate information and solicit messages of solidarity from the more than 5000 members who joined it. Members were asked to change their profile pictures to a "Free Fouad badge" to spread the message further, and the group was used to upload press clippings, picture messages and various multimedia.

On February 23rd, Fouad was sentenced to 3 years in prison by a Casablanca court. A member of the Facebook group, writing a message on the group wall, suggested organizing a protest in Paris in solidarity with Fouad. Within a few hours the idea was quickly expanded upon and Facebook became the main tool in organizing simultaneous rallies in 8 cities around the world (Rabat, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, London, Madrid, Montreal and Washington DC).

Event pages were created for each city, allies and local organizers were identified, and were asked to administer their local events, organize the logistics, and seek the appropriate government permits to hold a rally where it applied. They were also asked to take pictures and videos and send them back to a centralized email address or upload them to Flickr.com or YouTube.com. These were used the day after the rally to create a YouTube video summarizing the case and showing the extent of the solidarity movement around the world.

Frustrations with Facebook

Responding to false comments or rumors posted on the group wall is extremely resource intensive as the administrators had to spend a lot of time moderating the comments. The solution was then to provide extremely detailed background information in the group description, and within a few days, other group members, not moderators, started posting comments to react to false statements or accusations and correct them.

Because it is not designed specifically for activism, Facebook as a platform can present some technical challenges. It is not possible for an administrator of groups with more than 5000 members to message all of them at once, and when groups of members were sent messages one at a time, administrators were quickly red-flagged as spammers by Facebook and were prohibited from sending messages anymore. One way to bypass this issue is to invite all the group members to the group's events pages, through which administrators are given the right to message all members.

Given that most people use Facebook under their real names and identities, many of the group members expressed concern with the lack of anonymity and some chose to leave the group or create different accounts under aliases because of the political danger of being identified with the protest.

Advice for Facebook Activists

Do organize information in a clear and concise manner. It cannot be assumed that all group members will read through every new press release or message so it is necessary to constantly rewrite the group description to include all elements, new and updated, in a succinct manner. It is also useful to standardize information across all platforms (group, external website, events pages) to avoid conflicting messages.

Do encourage members to change their profile pictures to a picture of the cause. This is extremely useful as it allows you to spread the message much further. Just make sure to include a link to the external campaign web site in the picture so that people can go there for more information.

Do engage the group members, read their comments, and respond to their suggestions. It will empower those specific members and will create the environment of collaboration necessary to create a real movement around the cause. As members appropriate the cause and closely identify with it, they are inspired to get involved and take action.

Do decentralize the organization of events by giving control to local activists. Decentralization is necessary to better manage limited resources. Identify allies who are on the ground in the specific city where the event is held, appoint them as event administrators, provide them with a blueprint and let them take over the details organization. They have access to more contacts offline, and know more about organizations or groups that could potentially help. They are also able to organize annex events to print flyers, make banners, organize ride share, apply for the appropriate police licenses etc.

Do connect with blogger communities. Provide them with links and information, in formats that are both accessible to people who have Facebook accounts and those that do not.

Do use other tools such as Google maps or Yahoo maps to include specific directions to protests and other events.

The Free Kareem Campaign in Egypt

*By Esra'a El Shafei, * Director of FreeKareem.org*

Kareem Amer is an outspoken Egyptian blogger who challenged the oppressive regime of President Hosni Mubarak and criticized Islamic extremism and violence. While his posts were considered offensive by some because of his harsh assessments of Islam, he was one of the most prominent secular bloggers in Egypt and many admired his courage in calling for civil rights and freedom of expression in his country.

On November 6, 2006, he was arrested by Egyptian state security officers because of his blog. On February 22, 2007, he was sentenced to three years in prison for insulting Islam and inciting sedition and one year for insulting President Mubarak. Shortly after his arrest, a group of digital activists, led by Esra'a El Shafei, created a web site, FreeKareem.org, and began a campaign to fight for his freedom and subsequently support him during his imprisonment. As of the writing of this guide, Kareem is still in prison.

How They Used Facebook

As part of their campaign, FreeKareem.org used Facebook to spread awareness among college students and to recruit members for the Free Kareem Coalition. They found at least two solid contributors on Facebook who heard about the cause via their groups, threads, and wall posts and immediately wanted to help the campaign. Most importantly, they used Facebook to organize worldwide rallies. They created a Facebook event page for rallies in France, Germany, the USA, and other countries.

Facebook allowed people to get involved with the campaign who would not otherwise have been aware of it. Students attended these events without ever contacting the campaign. They were able to get involved because campaign organizers used the Facebook group to post a description of the rally, why it was held, and where it was going to be held, and people just showed up. Following the events, people forwarded the digital pictures they had taken to the campaign, noting that they heard about the event from Facebook and wanted to support in any way possible.

Facebook is a great recruitment tool for digital activists, but it's tricky. So many things go on in the world of Facebook, so the campaign had to work hard to gain people's attention.

Free Kareem's Facebook groups were generally active. People discussed Kareem in wall posts, through group messages, and by sharing videos and pictures. One great thing about Facebook now is its multimedia tools, which really helped the Free Kareem campaign. It allowed the campaign to personalize

Kareem's situation as much as possible. Videos always help. They are much more powerful than photos, so the campaign tries to use them often.

Frustrations with Facebook

Facebook is generally disorganized. It's currently full of junk - fun walls, gifts, pokes, games, etc. So with all of these distractions, it is very hard to generate any interest in something serious. Every time Facebook adds a useless tool, it makes the work of activists a lot harder, because it means they have to make more effort to be interesting to their target audience. Member spamming (posting irrelevant material on the wall/board or repeatedly publishing insulting and inappropriate messages) is also increasingly challenging because it requires you to moderate the group all the time.

Advice for Facebook Activists

Don't have multiple Facebook groups for the same cause. We have three Free Kareem groups by three different people who are out of touch - and two of these groups are now inactive.

Do contact the creators of the other groups and request for a merge if theirs are inactive. People want a good way to keep in touch with what is going on, and having other inactive groups on the search list doesn't help. People might join them and then never receive any relevant updates, eventually causing them to forget about your subject.

Don't use other people's Facebook groups for your activism, if it's meant to be consistent. Start your group early, and then be visible.

Don't send daily updates, people don't appreciate that unless it is absolutely urgent. Send them bi-monthly, but be very informative. Don't bore people by repeating the same information or old news.

Do be creative and always make sure there's an event going on for people to join if they want to help.

*edited and with an introduction by Mary Joyce. Information on Kareem's arrest and trial from Wikipedia.

End Notes

About the Author

Dan Schultz is a student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he is studying Information Systems. In 2007 he was one of 27 individuals to win the first Knight News Challenge and he is currently an active blogger for the MediaShift Idea Lab. He is still discovering new interests, but digital media as a community facilitation device has been a driving directional force since he started using the Internet. He believes that activism and community often go hand in hand, so writing for Digiactive provides a perfect opportunity to explore the community dynamics of digital media.

About DigiActive

DigiActive is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to helping grassroots activists around the world use the Internet and mobile phones to increase their impact. Its goal is a world of activists made more powerful and more effective through the use of digital technology. DigiActive pursues this goal in several spheres of action, including a blog of digital activism best practices around the world, an interactive map which serves as a visual database of digital activism, a research program, and Open Trainings, a new open source repository of digital activism training modules. Learn more and get involved at www.DigiActive.org.