

## chapter seven

# Why Kierkegaard Hates Slacktivism



If you've been to Copenhagen, you've probably seen the Stork Fountain, one of the city's most famous sights. The fountain was made even more famous thanks to a quirky Facebook experiment. In spring 2009 Anders Colding-Jorgensen, a Danish psychologist who studies how ideas spread online, put the famous fountain at the center of his research project. He started a Facebook group that implied—but never said so explicitly—that the city authorities were about to demolish the fountain. This threat was completely fictitious; Colding-Jorgensen himself had dreamed it up. He publicized the group to 125 of his Facebook friends, who joined the cause in a matter of hours. It was not long before their friends joined, too, and the imaginary Facebook campaign against Copenhagen's city council went viral. At the peak of its online success, the group had two new members joining every minute. When the count reached 27,500, Colding-Jorgensen decided it was time to end his little experiment.

There are two strikingly different ways to make sense of the Stork Fountain experiment. Cynics might say that the campaign took off simply because Colding-Jorgensen looked like a respected activist

academic—just the kind of guy to start a petition about saving a fountain on Facebook. His online friends were likely to share his concern for the preservation of Denmark’s cultural heritage, and since joining the group did not require anything other than clicking a few buttons, they eagerly lent their names to Colding-Jorgensen’s online campaign. If that request had come from some unknown entity with few historically conscious contacts, or if joining in required performing a number of challenging chores, chances are the success of that crusade would have been far less spectacular. Or perhaps the campaign received so much attention because it was noticed and further advertised by some prominent blogger or a newspaper, thus giving it exposure it might never have earned on its own. On this rather skeptical reading, the success of online political and social causes is hard to predict, let alone engineer. Policymakers, therefore, should not pay much attention to Facebook-based activism. While Facebook-based mobilization will occasionally lead to genuine social and political change, this is mostly accidental, a statistical certainty rather than a genuine achievement. With millions of groups, at least one or two of them are poised to take off. But since it’s impossible to predict which causes will work and which ones won’t, Western policymakers and donors who seek to support or even prioritize Facebook-based activism are placing a wild bet.

Another, more optimistic way to assess the growth of activism on social networks is to celebrate the ease and speed with which Facebook groups can grow and go viral. From this perspective, Colding-Jorgensen’s experiment has shown that when communication costs are low, groups can easily spring into action—a phenomenon the Internet guru Clay Shirky dubbed “ridiculously easy group forming.” (Shirky acknowledges that some “bad groups”—for example, anorexic girls seeking to impress each other with their sacrifices—can be formed ridiculously easily as well.) Proponents of this view argue that Facebook is to group formation what Red Bull is to productivity. If a nonexistent or poorly documented cause could garner the attention of 28,000 people, more important, well-documented causes—genocide in Darfur, Tibetan independence, abuses of human rights in Iran—can certainly rally mil-

lions behind them (and they do). While there are still no universal benchmarks for evaluating the effectiveness of such groups, the fact that they exist—pushing updates to their members, pestering them with fund-raising requests, urging them to sign a petition or two—suggests that, despite occasional embarrassing gaffes, Facebook could be a valuable resource that political activists and their Western supporters need to master. That they may not know how to do this is a poor excuse for not getting engaged.

### Digital Natives of the World, Unite!

And engaged many of them already are. When in 2008 the streets of Colombia got filled with up to a million angry protesters against the guerillas of the FARC movement, which has been terrorizing the country for decades, it was a Facebook group called No Más FARC (No More FARC) that got credited for this unprecedented mobilization. (In 2008 FARC dominated Colombian news with a series of high-profile kidnappings.) Launched by Oscar Morales, a thirty-three-year-old unemployed computer technician, the group quickly gained members and became a focal point for spreading information about the protests, earning the support of the Colombian government in the process.

The American government was just a Facebook request away as well. Morales, who later became a fellow at the George W. Bush Institute, got a note from U.S. State Department's Jared Cohen, the American bureaucrat who one year later sent the infamous email request to Twitter. Cohen wanted to come to Colombia to study the details of Morales' impressive online operation. Morales didn't seem to mind.

Cohen's visit to Colombia must have been inspirational, for just a few months later the State Department soft-launched an international organization called the Alliance of Youth Movements (AYM), built on the assumption that cases like Colombia's are going to be more widespread and that the U.S. government needs to be an early player in this field, doing its share to facilitate networking among such "digital revolutionaries." A series of high-profile summits of youth movements—one was

even moderated by that staunch defender of Internet freedom Whoopi Goldberg—duly followed.

In its brief history, AYM has emerged as something of a digital-era equivalent of the Congress of Cultural Freedom, a supposedly independent artistic movement that in reality was created and funded by the CIA to cultivate anticommunist intellectuals during the early stages of the Cold War. (Unfortunately, AYM's literary output is nowhere as prodigious.) Now that the battle for ideas has shifted into cyberspace, it is bloggers rather than intellectuals that the U.S. government wants to court.

George W. Bush Institute's James Glassman, then the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, kicked off AYM's first summit in New York, explaining that the meeting's purpose was to "bring about two dozen groups together with top technologists from the United States and produce a manual . . . [to help] other organizations that want the information and technological knowledge to be able to organize their own anti-violence groups."

Companies like Facebook, Google, YouTube, MTV, and AT&T attended the New York summit, along with groups like the Burma Global Action Network, Genocide Intervention Network, and Save Darfur Coalition. (A representative from Balatarin, a prominent Iranian social news site, was present at AYM's second summit in Mexico.) The gathering was meant to send yet another powerful message that American companies, perhaps with a gentle push from the U.S. government, were playing an important role in facilitating democratization and that digital technologies—above all, social networking—were instrumental in pushing back against oppressors. "Any combination of these [digital] tools allows for a greater chance of civil society organizations coming to fruition regardless of how challenging the environment," proclaimed Jared Cohen, giving perhaps one of the sharpest articulations of both cyber-utopianism and Internet-centrism to date.

Impressed by the success of the Colombian group, American officials decided to embrace social networking sites as viable platforms for breeding and mobilizing dissent, expressing their willingness to fund the creation of new sites if necessary. Thus, in 2009 the State Department

ran a \$5 million grant competition in the Middle East, soliciting funding requests for projects that would “develop or leverage existing social networking platforms to emphasize priorities of civic engagement, youth outreach, political participation, tolerance, economic entrepreneurship, women’s empowerment, or nonviolent conflict-resolution.” (Apparently, there is no problem that social networking can’t solve.) Most likely American officials would have dismissed the Stork Fountain experiment as just a minor embarrassment, the cost of doing business in this new digital environment, but hardly a good reason to stop harvesting the tremendous energy of social networking. But could it be that in their pursuit of short-term and instrumental mobilization goals, they may have overlooked the long-term impact of social networking on the political cultures of repressive societies?

To even begin answering that question, we may need to reconsider the lessons of the Danish fountain. Both interpretations of the Stork Fountain experiment—the one slamming it as an oddity and the one worshipping it as a powerful example of the power of the Internet to mobilize—suffer from several analytical deficiencies. Neither offers a good account of what membership in such networked causes does to the members themselves. Surely most of them are not just mindless activist robots, pressing whatever buttons required of them by their online overlords, without ever grappling with the meaning of what it is they are doing and trying to figure out how their participation in such communities might affect their views on the meaning of democracy and the importance of dissent. Nor do these two competing interpretations indicate what kind of effect such online campaigns may have on the effectiveness and popularity of other offline and individual activist efforts. While it’s tempting to forget this in an era of social networking, the fight for democracy and human rights is fought offline as well, by decades-old NGOs and even by some brave lonely warriors unaffiliated with any organizations. Before policymakers embrace digital activism as an effective way of pushing against authoritarian governments, they are well-advised to fully investigate its impact both on its practitioners and on the overall tempo of democratization.

## Poking Kierkegaard

Ironically, to get a more critical view on the meaning of the Colding-Jorgensen's Copenhagen experiment, we need to turn to another Dane: Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Considered the father of existentialism, he lived in interesting times not entirely unlike our own. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the social and political consequences of both the Industrial Revolution and the age of Enlightenment were beginning to manifest themselves in full force. The European “public sphere” expanded at unprecedented rates; newspapers, magazines, and coffee houses rapidly emerged as influential cultural institutions that gave rise to a broad and vocal public opinion.

But whereas the majority of contemporary philosophers and commentators lauded this great leveling as a sign of democratization, Kierkegaard thought that it might result in a decline of social cohesion, a feast of endless and disinterested reflection, and a triumph of infinite but shallow intellectual curiosity that might prevent deep, meaningful, and spiritual engagement with a particular issue. “Not a single one of those who belong to the public has an essential engagement in anything,” Kierkegaard bitterly observed in his journal. All of a sudden, people were getting interested in everything and nothing at the same time; all subjects, no matter how ridiculous or sublime, were getting equalized in such a way that nothing mattered enough to want to die for. The world was getting flat, and Kierkegaard hated it. As far as he was concerned, all the chatter produced in coffee houses only led to the “abolition of the passionate distinction between remaining silent and speaking.” And silence for Kierkegaard was important, for “only the person who is essentially capable of remaining silent is capable of speaking essentially.”

For Kierkegaard, the problem with the growing chatter—epitomized by the “absolutely demoralizing existence of the daily press”—was that it lay outside of political structures and exerted very little influence on them. The press forced people to develop strong opinions on everything but rarely cultivated the urge to act on them; often people were so overwhelmed with opinions and information that they would indefi-

nately postpone any important decisions. Lack of commitment, caused by the multiplicity of possibilities and the easy availability of quick spiritual and intellectual fixes, was the real target of Kierkegaard's critique. He believed that only by making risky, deep, and authentic—one of Kierkegaard's favorite terms—commitments, by discriminating between different causes, by dealing with both triumphs and disappointments of such choices, and by learning from the resulting experiences, do people acquire wisdom and fill their lives with meaning. "If you are capable of being a man, then danger and the harsh judgment of existence on your thoughtlessness will help you become one" is how he summed up the philosophy that would come to be known as existentialism.

It's not hard to guess what Kierkegaard would have made of today's Internet culture, dominated by the 24/7 cycle of punditry and fluid engagement with ideas and relationships. "What Kierkegaard envisaged as a consequence of the press's irresponsible and uncommitted coverage is now fully realized on the World Wide Web," writes Hubert Dreyfus, a philosopher at the University of California at Berkeley. A world where professing one's commitment to social justice requires nothing more than penning a socially conscious Facebook status would have greatly rankled Kierkegaard. His Twitter account would surely be hard to find. It's safe to assume that sites like RentAFriend.com, where you can "rent a friend to go to an event or party with you, teach you a new skill or hobby, help you meet new people, show you around town" by choosing from more than 100,000 members registered on the site, would not be much to Kierkegaard's liking. Ukrainian Web entrepreneurs have adapted RentAFriend's model to the protest needs of their country's numerous political movements by setting up a website that allows anyone organizing a rally to "shop" for registered users, mostly students, who, at just \$4 hour per hour, are eager to chant political slogans of any ideology. The entrepreneurs would not be among Kierkegaard's Facebook friends either.

And yet the Dane's philosophy is useful in grasping the ethical and political problems associated with digital activism, especially in the context of authoritarian states. It's one thing for existing and committed activists who are risking their lives on a daily basis in opposition to the

regime to embrace Facebook and Twitter and use those platforms to further their existing ends. They might be overestimating the overall effectiveness of digital campaigns or underestimating their risks, but their commitment is “authentic.” It’s a completely different thing when individuals who may have only cursory interest in a given issue (or, for that matter, have no interest at all and support a particular cause only out of peer pressure) come together and start campaigning to save the world.

This is the kind of shallow commitment that Kierkegaard detested and saw as corrupting the human soul. Such high-minded moralizing may seem out of place today, but then no one has yet toppled an authoritarian government by assuming the posture of a clown and cracking jokes about the guillotine. Even when structural conditions favor democratization, an opposition movement composed of meek and characterless individuals will most likely fail to capitalize on such openings.

The problem with political activism facilitated by social networking sites is that much of it happens for reasons that have nothing to do with one’s commitment to ideas and politics in general, but rather to impress one’s friends. This is not a problem caused by the Internet. For many people, impressing one’s peers by pursuing highly ambitious causes like saving the Earth and ending another genocide may have been the key reason for joining various student clubs in college, but this time one can proudly wear the proof of one’s membership in public. Explaining the Stork Fountain experiment to the *Washington Post*, Colding-Jorgensen said, “Just like we need stuff to furnish our homes to show who we are, on Facebook we need cultural objects that put together a version of me that I would like to present to the public.”

Research by Sherri Grasmuck, a sociologist at Temple University, confirms Colding-Jorgensen’s hunch, revealing that Facebook users shape their online identities in implicit rather than explicit ways. That is, they believe that the kinds of Facebook campaigns and groups they join reveal more about them than whatever they put in the dull “about me” pages. Thus, many of them join Facebook groups not only or not so much because they support particular causes but because they be-

lieve it's important to be seen by their online friends to care about such causes. In the past convincing themselves and, more important, their friends that they were indeed socially conscious enough to be changing the world required (at a minimum) getting off their sofas. Today, aspiring digital revolutionaries can stay on their sofas forever—or until their iPads' batteries run out—and still be seen as heroes. In this world, it doesn't really matter if the cause they are fighting for is real or not; as long as it is easy to find, join, and interpret, that's enough. And if it impresses their friends, it's a true gem.

Not surprisingly, psychologists have also noticed a correlation between the use of social networking and narcissism. A 2009 national poll of 1,068 U.S. college students conducted by researchers at San Diego State University (SDSU) found that 57 percent of them believe that their generation uses social networking sites for self-promotion, narcissism, and attention seeking, while almost 40 percent agreed with the statement that “being self-promoting, narcissistic, overconfident, and attention-seeking is helpful for succeeding in a competitive world.” Jean Twenge, an associate professor of psychology at SDSU who conducted the study and also author of *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, believes that the very structure of social networking sites “rewards the skills of the narcissist, such as self-promotion, selecting flattering photographs of oneself, and having the most friends.” There's nothing wrong with self-promotion per se, but it seems quite unlikely that such narcissistic campaigners would be able to develop true feelings of empathy or be prepared to make sacrifices that political life, especially political life in authoritarian states, requires.

## Kandinsky and Vonnegut Are Now Friends!

Given how easy groups can form online, it is easy to mistake quantity for quality. Facebook is already facilitating the processes that do not really require much social glue to begin with. The truth is that it's natural for people to form groups. Social psychologists have long understood that while it doesn't take much to make a group of people feel

they have a common identity, it is considerably harder to make them act in the interests of that community or make individual sacrifices in its name.

Beginning in the early 1970s much research in social psychology was dedicated to the so-called Minimal Group Paradigm, the minimal conditions that can foster a sense of group identity among complete strangers. It turns out that the fact of categorizing people into groups—using completely random, coin-tossing methods—already produces a strong feeling of group identity, enough to start discriminating against those who are not members of the group. This was first confirmed by a group of British researchers who showed a group of schoolboys pairs of highly abstract paintings by two artists, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, without identifying the authorship of each painting in the pair. Having solicited the boys' preferences, they used this information to form two groups, the Klee lovers and the Kandinsky lovers, although some children were told they were assigned to a group randomly rather than based on their preferences. Each boy was then given a fixed amount of money and was asked to allocate it among the other boys. Much to the surprise of the researchers, the children allocated more money to members of their own group, even though they had no prior shared experiences and no obvious future as a group, and it was highly unlikely they felt strongly about either Kandinsky or Klee (in fact, in some cases the researchers showed pairs painted by just one of them without telling the students).

On first sight, this only seems to bolster the case of Internet enthusiasts who celebrate the ease with which online groups can form. But as any tax collector would know, dividing a small pot of other people's money in a scientific experiment is not the same as agreeing to cofund a Kandinsky exhibition out of one's own pocket. Obviously, the weaker the common denominator among the members of a particular group, the less likely they would be inclined to act as a coherent whole and make sacrifices in the name of the common good. It's little wonder that members of most Facebook groups proudly flaunt their membership cards—but only until someone asks for hefty membership fees. Since

there are no sacrifices to make on joining such groups, they attract all kinds of adventurists and narcissists. Notes the Canadian writer Tom Slee, “Sure, it’s easier to sign up to a Facebook group than if you have to actually go and meet someone, but if signing up is so easy it’s not likely to be much of a group, just as an automated phone apology that ‘all our agents are busy right now’ is cheap, and so is not much of an apology.”

The widespread tendency to misread meaningless mutual associations, both offline and online, as something much deeper and politically significant is what Kurt Vonnegut was ridiculing in his 1963 novel *Cat’s Cradle*, in which he wrote of the “granfalloon”: groups of people who outwardly choose or claim to have a shared identity or purpose based on rather imaginary premises. “The Communist Party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows—and any nation, anytime, anywhere” were Vonnegut’s most prominent examples. For Vonnegut, the granfalloon was based on little but air or, as he put it, whatever is “hiding under the skin of a toy balloon.”

The Internet, with its promise of fostering “virtual communities” on the cheap and widely advertised by the earlier generation of cyber-utopians as something of a panacea to many of modern democracy’s ills, has driven the costs of joining such groups to zero. But it’s hard to imagine how it could, all by itself, help cultivate a deep commitment to serious causes. This, at least for the foreseeable future, would be the task of educators, intellectuals, and, in some exceptional cases, visionary politicians. Not much has changed in that regard since 1997, when Oxford University’s Alan Ryan wrote that “the Internet is good at reassuring people that they are not alone, and not much good at creating a political community out of the fragmented people that we have become.”