

The Myth of the Keyboard Warrior: Public Participation and 38 Degrees

James Dennis

Dennis, J. (2014, March 17). The Myth of the Keyboard Warrior: Public Participation and 38 Degrees. *openDemocracy*. Retrieved from <http://www.opendemocracy.net/participation-now/james-dennis/myth-of-keyboard-warrior-public-participation-and-38-degrees>.

A cursory glance at the comment section of the UK's leading newspapers suggests that democratic engagement is at an all time low; we are generation apathetic. In their annual health check, the Audit of Political Engagement, the Hansard Society paint a bleak picture of [participation trends](#) in Britain. Only 41% of those surveyed are committed to voting in the next General Election. Moreover, less than 1% of the population is a [member of a political party](#). However, 38 Degrees, the political activist movement, bucks these downward trends. In the four years since their foundation in 2009, 38 Degrees have amassed a membership of 1.8 million individuals—more than three times the entire combined memberships of all of Britain's political parties.

The organisation is not without its critics, however. Earlier this week, during a debate in House of Commons on the Care Bill, David T. C. Davies MP [cast doubt](#) on the authenticity of the organisation's ethos, "People. Power. Change", claiming that:

These people purport to be happy-go-lucky students. They are always on first name terms; Ben and Fred and Rebecca and Sarah and the rest of it. The reality is that it is a hard-nosed left-wing Labour-supporting organisation with links to some very wealthy upper middle-class socialists, despite the pretence that it likes to give out.

Likewise, in a [comment piece](#) for *The Guardian*, Oscar Rickett argued that the form of participation cultivated by 38 Degrees is not beneficial to our civic culture as it encourages fragmented, issue-driven collective action in which "small urges are satisfied with the implication that they are bringing about large change".

However, given the lack of empirical research undertaken on 38 Degrees, such criticisms are often anecdotal or campaign-specific. So here are just a couple of the significant findings emerging from my ongoing research.

New organisations

38 Degrees bears little resemblance to the organisational models that we've become accustomed to. Unlike political parties or traditional pressure groups, 38 Degrees operates on a more level playing field. Members are central to the key decisions that are made before and during a campaign and the staff facilitate these choices. Essentially, the organisation acts as a conduit for its membership, removing the layers of elite-level decision-making that characterised political groups in the twentieth century.

38 Degrees seeks to structure grassroots engagement in two ways. Firstly, the group fuses a vast range of qualitative and quantitative data sources from its membership to guide their campaign decisions and strategy. By using digital media, members are able to express their opinion very quickly on an unprecedented scale. One way in which they do this is through ad-hoc surveys of their members to decide on key strategic decisions, such as their survey regarding the decision to campaign against plans by the NHS to compile a database of medical records for potential use by private firms. In just 24 hours the group had a response from 137,000 of its members, with 93 per cent [backing their plans](#) to organise a mass opt out.

Secondly, the group offers the platform [Campaigns By You](#), which provides members with the technological opportunities to structure and undertake their own campaigns, retaining complete autonomy over the decision-making process. In both cases, albeit to a differing degree, it is the mass of individual participants that direct the group strategy, with 38 Degrees offering the technological capacity to structure this. 38 Degrees assimilates the fragmented, competing individual voices of its membership, and offers cohesive, collective action.

David Karpf proposes that we consider this phenomenon as characteristic of new type of organisation. These new organisations challenge our traditional understanding of collective action as they are structurally fluid. 38 Degrees relies on central staff to structure the wants and needs of their membership. However, this doesn't necessarily lead to a regimented hierarchy. Paolo Gerbaudo describes this as 'soft leadership' where the central staff act as choreographers, organising and structuring collective action whilst minimising their encroachment on the will of individual members.

The importance of granularity and self-expressive action

Secondly, given Oscar Rickett's critique, it is important to note that the repertoire of actions used by 38 Degrees is not limited to e-petitions. The organisation employs a range of online and real-space engagement repertoires that vary depending on the campaign aims.

In their recent campaign to influence the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill, otherwise known as the 'Gagging Law', members were initially tasked with emailing Chloe Smith MP, the minister responsible.

However, as the campaign progressed, members around the UK were involved in local meetings with their own MP, a national rally outside Westminster was held, and the targeted lobbying of MPs on Twitter took place during key votes.

Furthermore, by fixating on the deterministic relationship between acts of digital micro-activism and the desired political outcome in isolation, we lack an appreciation of the expansive, procedural foundations at the heart of political participation. This emphasis ignores the role that 38 Degrees plays in relation to information exchange, political learning, and discursive engagement, i.e. other civic goods that emerge from 'public participation'.

Now, it is true that often those actions require small amounts of effort or time on behalf of the member: they are often designed with this in mind. For by making campaign actions granular, the organisation lowers the barrier of entry to political participation. These acts are not performed by seasoned activists but by non-activists taking action in spheres traditionally engaged in by political professionals.

If we consider the time pressure that individual's experience on a daily basis, then the granularity of digital engagement represents an important means of maintaining awareness, keeping a toe in the water so to speak, sometimes sparking further involvement at opportune moments.

These moments tend to revolve around personal contexts. The membership of 38 Degrees is not tied into one fixed ideology but instead consists of loose affiliations of individuals that pick and choose the issue campaigns to which they relate.

38 Degrees uses digital tools to enable individual participants to join large-scale collective action on the basis of more individualised identity frames. Political participation is therefore self-motivating as political acts are akin to personal expression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the successes of 38 Degrees, in terms of mobilising public participation, come down to how the organisation maximises the membership's sense of efficacy, the feeling that each individual member has, or can have, an impact.

By providing influence over the decision-making process, either explicitly or implicitly, members become more than just cheerleaders observing elites from the sidelines; they are active and involved in the planning and execution of public participation.

Bibliography

- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chadwick, A. (2007). Digital Network Repertoires and Organizational Hybridity. *Political Communication*, 24, 283-301.
- Chadwick, A. (2012). Recent Shifts in the Relationship between the Internet and Democratic Engagement in Britain and the United States: Granularity, Informational Exuberance, and Political Learning. In E. Anduiza, M. Jensen & L. Jorba (Eds.), *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide: A Comparative Study* (pp. 39-55). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Action*. London: Pluto Press.
- Karpf, D. (2012). *The Moveon Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tufekci, Z. (2012, 10/03/2012). #Kony2012, Understanding Networked Symbolic Action & Why Slacktivism Is Conceptually Misleading. *Technosociology*.