

*Recently, a journalist posited that online activism doesn't really count — that online activists are "slacktivists" with no influence. We think that's bunk, so we decided to weigh in.*

The slacktivism theory holds that real-world activism is valuable, but online activism usually is lazy, meaningless — or just a ruse designed to build an online list for fundraising. We think this theory is totally whacktivism.

Consider two of our clients with LOTS of real-world activism, but very different histories with "slacktivism": Planned Parenthood (PPFA) and ACORN.

One thing they have in common: both organizations are frequently under attack from conservative talking heads, right-wing politicians and, occasionally, Stephen Colbert.

Planned Parenthood has been under attack since it was founded. As the organization grew, the task of defending itself (and the people it serves) from attack was always a part of its work, and its leaders knew it would take a national network of supporters to be effective.

ACORN's experience has been very different. ACORN is historically a loosely-bound network of chapters with local concerns, local campaigns and local activists. But in 2008, ACORN became the target of relentless attacks from the right wing on a national scale.

ACORN was caught off-guard by these attacks. Its supporters were organized locally, but the organization hadn't developed a national infrastructure capable of responding to attacks on its national brand and organizational credibility. ACORN couldn't ask a list of several hundred thousand supporters to fund a rapid-response ad, or provide vocal support for its valuable work — because that list didn't exist.

And while ACORN organizers on the ground could fight for the credibility of their local chapters and retain the respect of local leaders, traditional activism couldn't respond quickly enough on a national level to deflect a

concentrated full-force hit job by the right-wing noise machine.

The inevitable result: after months of enduring these attacks, ACORN's national brand was tarnished.

Planned Parenthood has been nurturing an online community of supporters since such work became possible.

It has consistently relied upon that community to speak out in defense of the organization. In 2007, for example, anti-choice activists revived their "40 Days for Life" campaign — which basically amounts to 40 days of protesters harassing and intimidating patients, doctors, nurses and volunteers trying to enter and exit Planned Parenthood clinics.

Real-world activism had proven inappropriate for responding to this annual assault on Planned Parenthood — who wants a shouting match outside a clinic? And even if that response was appropriate, anti-choice types don't tend to target the activist hotbeds like New York and San Francisco. More like smaller, less populated spots. Time for the slacktivists to step in.

Planned Parenthood created an online counter-demonstration called "I Am Emily X," which, using that pseudonym for a small group of clinic workers, put a human face on the folks demonized by anti-choice activists.

PPFA went out to their robust online list with emails from Emily X, an Emily X blog, a Facebook group, MySpace comments and more. The online community responded by sharing their own stories and messages of support — which, we can assure you, are meaningful to the people who are being harassed, threatened, demonized every day for over six weeks — and by pledging a certain donation amount for every protestor Emily X encounters, to be fulfilled at the end of the 40

days. The pledge fulfillments brought in tens of thousands of dollars for PPFA.

More importantly, the campaign allowed the distributed online community to respond to attacks even where traditional, on-the-ground activism was impossible.

While ACORN's attackers were able to cause lasting damage to the organization's credibility with the public and drain the organization's resources, PPFA's attackers inadvertently provided an opportunity for online community members to share appreciation with one another, reaffirm their commitment to the cause, and raise needed funds for Planned Parenthood.

It's all about being prepared. PPFA is better-situated to respond to attacks partially thanks to its mature Internet operation and the "slacktivists" it's made of, but ACORN had a far more limited Internet community when

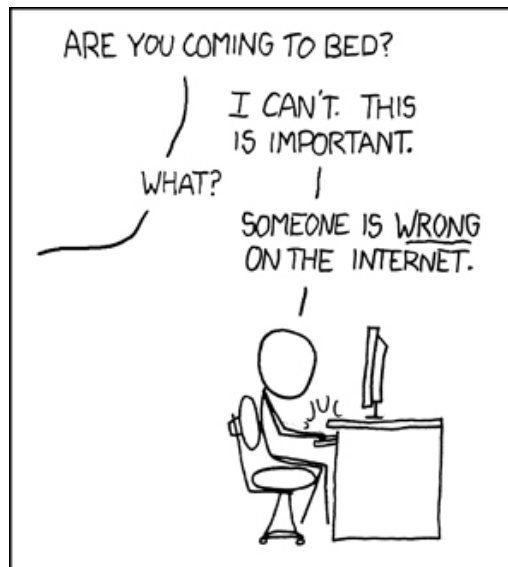
it was attacked.

Despite almost 40 years of old-school, real-world, street-cred activism, ACORN was virtually defenseless against attacks on a national level because it lacked the army of slacktivists to fight back.

Now, we're working with ACORN to build that online community of slacktivists so that the next time Michelle Bachmann, Michael Steele or Glenn Beck takes to the airwaves to spread misinformation and denounce the idea of poor people getting involved in the political process, online supporters can respond in force.

It's all well and good to sneer at slacktivists — until you find that you need exactly the kind of support they can provide.

*Watershed Weighs In is what happens when we're irked, inspired or intrigued by the Internet.*



<http://xkcd.com/386/>