

## **The Whole Online World Is Watching: Profiling Social Networking Sites and Activists in China, Latin America, and the United States**

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Using a cross-cultural framework, this study relies on survey data to examine how activists in China, Latin America, and the United States use social networking sites for their mobilizing efforts. Activists in China assigned greater importance to social media to promote debate. Those in Latin America expressed more apprehensions about the ease of using social networking sites. Respondents from the United States had greater confidence in their own ability to solve community problems.

New technological advances have created rapid changes in global communication systems, altering how people send and receive information. The transformation, however, has not only affected how people communicate but who has access to communication tools and, in turn, who can reach a broader public sphere of debate and discussion. For those working along the margins of government and corporate spaces, communication tools such as the Internet and social networking sites (SNS) are among a new set of devices that might be used to do activist work. In fact, Kahn and Kellner (2004) argued that the Internet offers alternative forces and progressive groups a chance to reconfigure the political sphere, and Aouragh (2008) posited that the Internet strengthens social and political agency. Likewise, authors such as Ayers (1999), Diani (2000), and Marmura (2008) have addressed the instrumental and symbolic contributions of digital tools to social movements and activists groups.

The discourse regarding this topic is not strictly from a utopian view, though this type of rhetoric surrounding technology has a long history. Carey (1989, p. 120), for instance, labeled it “rhetoric of the technological sublime.” This discourse, as it has most recently been articulated, focuses on the potential of

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the Internet as a tool for greater public participation, particularly in relation to democracy and political discussion. Such a perspective, however, lacks acknowledgment of the social and educational capital needed to access the Internet. Researchers have noted the many hindrances to participation in this digital public sphere, including geographic location both within and between nations, education level, cost, and limited abilities of those categorized as disabled (Adam & Kreps, 2009; Bunt, 2002; Hargittai, 2002; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; van Dijk, 2004, 2006).

Alas, rather than siding with a more optimistic or skeptical viewpoint, it is important to understand more about activists who use the Internet and social media, their perspectives on these new technologies, and the scope of their work. While these tools may be widely available around the world, contents and patterns may be adapted to local cultures and circumstances, just as has happened with other media (Straubhaar, 2005; see also Harlow & Harp, 2011). This study takes on that task, offering a cross-cultural comparison of activists in the United States, Latin America, and mainland China. Using data from an online survey, the research offers a glimpse at the differences between and similarities among activists in the three locations.

The study fills an important void in current understandings of the topic and is significant for its contribution to a broader understanding of activists in various parts of the world who are using the Internet and SNS—global digital tools—to send messages, organize protests, and change circumstances in local and global communities. The results here are part of a larger project tapping into the scope and reach of online activism and collective action by digital means in different societies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This article is primarily exploratory and descriptive in nature, but a framework grounded in theories of the public sphere helps to guide the investigation. While the distinction of the public and private spheres has a history in “antiquity” (Gripsrud, 2009, p. 6), Habermas’ (1962 [1989]) theory of the public sphere serves as a contemporary starting point for much discussion in communication studies. Habermas’ articulation of a public sphere highlighted traditional and rational deliberation in public spaces as identified in an 18th-century bourgeois public sphere. This articulation, however, has been highly criticized as exclusionary and idealized. The criticism has focused on two issues: it does not take into account the many people (e.g., women, the poor) who were excluded from this sphere, and it does not consider different discourses outside of that relatively small space (Witschge, 2008; see also Castells, 2008; Thompson, 1995).

Fraser (1990), noting a weakness in Habermas’ theory, called for a reconceptualization of the public sphere into one of multiple spheres that takes into account the various differences within a society and attends to those on the margins of power and access. Fraser’s theory posits multiple alternative or “counter” public spheres that allow like-minded individuals to come together and discuss issues.

Other scholars maintain that it is not appropriate to apply Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere, a Western concept, to non-Western contexts such as China (e.g., Huang, 1993; Wakeman, 1993) or developing regions like Latin America (see Oxhorn, 2001; Waisbord, 2008). However, Habermas (1989)

himself acknowledged that the public sphere is a normative and ideal concept rather than a Western reality. So the conception should be treated as fluid, adapting to a variety of historical, cultural, and societal conditions (Tai, 2006).

In terms of the Chinese cyberspace, scholars have theorized a Chinese-style public sphere. Drawing upon Fraser's (1990) conceptualization of strong publics and weak publics, Jiang (2010) suggested that the Chinese cyberspace can be regarded as weak publics encompassing exclusively opinion formation and different from strong publics, which consist of both opinion formation and collective decision making based on a liberal democratic framework. That said, democracy should not be regarded as a necessary prerequisite for the practice of public deliberation or the existence of a public sphere. It is true that the Chinese cyberspace is a weak public sphere because the government actively shapes and defines the boundaries of political discourse, but, on the other hand, citizens do participate in public dialogue in this cyberspace, and their online opinions often challenge the status quo. Similar to Jiang, Lagerkvist (2006) also argued that, although the state control of the Internet in China always exists, online media have demonstrated their power to unlock the online public sphere.

The Internet theoretically represents a space where counter public spheres can flourish. Scholars argue that the Internet offers a participatory forum where individuals gather to share information, build alliances, voice alternative perspectives, and ultimately become empowered (Canclini, 2001; Downing, 2003; Kellner, 2000). Thompson (1995, 2000) posited that, in the modern industrial society, the public sphere is largely determined by the media, to the extent that mass communication has altered the traditional boundaries of the private and public domains. Mediated forms of communications allow a new (mediated) publicness, one which does not require members of a society to share a common locale (Thompson, 1995, 2000). It is in such a context where deliberation occurs and public opinion is formed and informed. In the digital era, this includes the diversity of Internet and wireless communication tools (Castells, 2008).

Clearly, digital communication forms such as the Internet and SNS have added new varieties and dimensions to public spheres of political discourse in many parts of the world. This study surveys activists in three geographic locations with the goal of understanding how the digital world is affecting public spheres.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Activism and Collective Action***

The term *activism* is generally defined as the ability or practices of individuals to bring about social, political, economic, or other changes to the status quo (Cammaerts, 2007; Gitlin, 2003; Jordan, 2002). As a relatively new term introduced in the mid-1970s, activism is intertwined with the notion of social movement, resistance, advocacy, and protest. Without a consistent definition, the terms *activism* and *activist* were thought to be "denatured, uncomprehending and evasive" (Gitlin, 2003, p. 4). Even so, agency and the action are two factors regarded as central to a tentative definition of activism (Cammaerts, 2007).

Due to its broad and heterogeneous definition, activism can be used for both reactionary and progressive purposes (Cammaerts, 2007; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Sathe, 2002), and its goals can range from hyperlocal issues to global phenomena (Bennett, Breunig, & Givens, 2008; Lomicky & Hogg, 2010). Likewise, the forms of activism vary, including direct actions—whether violent or nonviolent—such as protests, demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, and boycotts—and indirect actions such as judicial activism. This study treats *activist* as a self-aware identity and keeps the definition of *activism* open to the surveyed participants.

However defined, activists have historically relied on media outlets for purposes of mobilization, validation, and scope enlargement (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Collective action requires activists to get their message out in public spheres in order to stir contributions or support for their causes, and ultimately achieve their goals (Baylor, 1996; Diani & Bison, 2004). The Internet and other information and communication technologies can be useful tools in these efforts, because they reduce the costs of distributing information and foster a collective identity among people with similar interests and common concerns—a key part of mobilization (Garrett, 2006).

### ***Activism and the Internet***

The introduction of the Internet in the 1990s has offered new perspectives for examining activism, whether in terms of its meaning, form, scope, or agency. The Zapatista liberation movement in Mexico in the early 1990s and the antiglobalization movement in Seattle in 1999 both relied on the Internet and demonstrated the great potential of this innovative technology as a communication and mobilization tool for activism (Castells, 1997; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; J. Lee, 2009). Since then, activists all over the world have used e-mail, websites, blogs, and other web applications to organize civic actions in various fields and at global, national, and local levels (e.g., Kahn & Kellner, 2004; J. Lee, 2009; Liu, 2009; Nah, Veenstra, & Shah, 2006; Siapera, 2004). In fact, the Internet is not only perceived as a tool for assisting in activism, it is also used as a means of action in itself (Vegh, 2003). As such, new phrases have emerged, such as “Internet activism,” “online activism,” and “cyberactivism” that refer to the activities exclusively conducted in an online environment, such as a virtual sit-in or protest, an e-vote, or hacking into target websites (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003).

Several cross-disciplinary studies have examined the impact of the Internet on activism or democracy as a whole, yet the research has ended up in two camps. Optimists suggest that the Internet provides a public space free of government and corporate control in which citizens can freely express their voices and in which individuals can be involved in political participation that transcends time and spatial and other demographic confines (Rohlinger & Brown, 2009; Siapera, 2004). In contrast, scholars from the other side argue that the commercialization of the global Internet as well as the digital divide maintains the Internet as a public sphere dominated by elite groups (McChesney, 1996). Further, while there is empirical evidence that the Internet facilitates collective action (e.g., Atton, 2003; Harlow, 2011; Jha, 2007), little has been written about the utility of social media like social networking sites to activists (Wojcieszak, 2009).

### ***Activism and Social Networking Sites***

Today, the debate regarding the Internet and activism continues to gather momentum due to the emergence and development of another Internet novelty—social networking sites. SNS refer to a variety of web-based services such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube that “allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, para. 4).<sup>1</sup>

Though SNS were originally designed as an online version of personal network tools, some evidence demonstrates that this web service is also employed for activism. For example, a 2009 survey of 122 international digital activists found that SNS were the most common tool used by the respondents (Brodock, Joyce, & Zaack, 2009). Particularly, the 2009–2010 Iranian election protests were labeled a “Twitter revolution” because of the activists’ use of Twitter and other SNS to communicate with each other (“Editorial: Iran’s Twitter revolution,” 2009). More recently, the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement had SNS as one of their most important mobilizing tools (Harlow & Harp, 2011; Jurgenson, 2011).

Some celebrate the importance and potential of SNS in perpetuating activism, while others criticize that activism should not be facebooked or tweeted (Gladwell, 2010; Koch, 2008). In addition to advancing the digital divide argument, scholars and journalists contended that most SNS users only click and rarely take any further action or make any real sacrifices (boyd, 2008; Gladwell, 2010).

Despite the lively discussion revolving around SNS and activism on mass media, few empirical studies have explored these phenomena. Little is known about who uses SNS and to what end, and little is known about how SNS are used to translate online activism to offline activism (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Wojcieszak, 2009).

### **Activism and SNS: Three Case Studies**

As part of a broader research project, this study contributes to the literature by exploring the demographic information of SNS activists, the use of SNS in activism work, and the activists’ perception of the role of SNS in activism. Moreover, considering the fact that the use of social media is prevalent worldwide—and is on the rise (Nielsen Wire, 2010)—this study also probes SNS and activism from a cross-cultural perspective. We chose three culturally and developmentally different societies to conduct our research—mainland China, Latin America, and the United States—to identify similarities and differences in activists’ uses and perceptions of the utility of social media, and SNS in particular, to activism.

We treat these regions as three separate cultures or systems of meaning comprised by shared beliefs, norms, and expectations (e.g., Mesquita & Markus, 2004; Rodriguez-Mosquera et al., 2004;

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<sup>1</sup> Given their communication utilities, several of these services have also been labeled “social media.” In this study, the terms “social networking sites,” “SNS,” and “social media” are used interchangeably, although we acknowledge that social media entails more than SNS.

Wierzbicka, 1999). We are aware that national borders do not necessarily match cultural divisions (see Hanitzsch, 2009), and thus China, Latin America, and the United States refer here to culturally cohesive regions where people's experiences of doing activism might differ. We acknowledge that cultures are not separate or clearly defined entities and that the three regions under study contain important differences within themselves. However, we argue that the understanding and performance of collective action can be determined to a great extent by cultural underpinnings. Without making activism a culture-bound term, the way activists deal with SNS in their activist efforts can arguably be linked to customary social behaviors specific to a particular culture (e.g., Planalp, 1999).

### ***China***

In 2004, after decades of economic reform,<sup>2</sup> the Chinese government proposed its strategic objective of social development to establish a "harmonious society"—a conceptual framework that changed the country's focus from economic growth to overall societal balance. This drive appeared in response to an emerging tide of social activism that deals with problems that arose during the reform period (Lee & Hsing, 2009).

The Internet is an important tool employed by Chinese activists. Since 2003, web-based activism has rapidly grown and diversified in form and scope. Online activism in China is typically initiated in the Bulletin Board System (BBS), regarded as an early or special Chinese version of social networking sites (Lu, 2008; TNS, 2010). Citizens discuss political or social issues by posting or replying to posts on various BBS forums, and some of the discussions result in virtual protests or actual street demonstrations. A few well-known regional online campaigns concern issues such as environmental protection and urban homeowners' property rights (Sun, 2007; Yang, 2008). Other collective actions online—related to popular nationalism, corruption, and rights of disadvantaged groups—have successfully mobilized nationwide and even transnational support (Chow, 2007; Yang, 2003, 2008).

Online activism in China, however, always coexists with government control (Rosen, 2010; Yang, 2009). Under the sophisticated Internet censorship system, most Western SNS are blocked in the country. Other online services, including BBS forums and Facebook's Chinese clones (QQ, Xiaonei, and Sina), are regulated (Lardinois, 2010). Conversely, activists in China have devised various ways of bypassing such controls (Yang, 2008). Considering the dynamics and the complexity of China's Internet as well as the scant research on China's SNS activism, including this country in the survey adds richness to this cross-cultural study.

### ***Latin America***

A culturally cohesive region, Latin America encompasses more than 20 republics with a common heritage, albeit with diverging social and political dynamics, which, in general—and with the notable exception of Cuba—have gone through economic stabilization and adopted democratic regimes after

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese economic reform was started in 1978 to transform China's stagnant planned economy into a market economy. It is also called "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

several experiences of authoritarian and military rule. Such a context has marked the relationship of political and civil action—in particular, rights demands to the state (Foweraker, 2001).

Demand making has been reinforced by the Internet, and, in turn, activists in Latin America increasingly rely on online communication to express and successfully mobilize individuals and communities that share their social struggles, as seen with indigenous groups; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movements; and women's rights organizations (Salazar, 2002; Torres Nabel, 2009). Despite these inroads and despite acknowledgments that online tools enhance the range of activists' resources and reach (Ribeiro, 1998), uneven access to the Internet and its affordability (or lack thereof) as well as marked digital divides in the region have precluded the development of widespread cyberactivism (Salazar, 2002; Sandoval, 2009).

In this context, activism via social media may respond to different objectives and follow a distinct trajectory in Latin America in comparison to other societies—especially regarding the narrative of social networking sites (Scherer-Warren, 2005). Internet penetration has increased in the region over the last few years, and the use of SNS alone has grown at a fast pace (ComScore, 2010)—to the extent that 95% of Latin American Internet users have an account in at least one social network (InSites Consulting, 2010). However, little is known about the role of SNS in online activism in the region. The inclusion of Latin America in this study aims to start filling this void in the literature.

### ***The United States***

Amid claims that Americans are increasingly "bowling alone" and civically disenfranchised (Delli Carpini, 2000; Putnam, 1996), the last decade has been witness to a renewed interest in the organizational means of collective action efforts in the United States, including the technology-assisted strategies of information diffusion and mobilization (Bennett et al., 2008; Diani, 2003). However, few studies have examined how activists use the Internet—let alone SNS—and current scholarship has failed to explain the political and organizational value of such communication resources (Stein, 2009; see also Garrett, 2006).

In a content analysis of Web use by social movements in the United States, Stein (2009) found that U.S. social movement organizations are not using the Internet to its full potential, with little activity—if any—in categories such as interaction, dialogue, and creative expression. Such underutilization of the Internet, Stein argued, may have to do with lack of resources, including time and money, and different organizational orientations and diverse efficient uses of the Internet.

However, some evidence suggests that SNS can help to integrate traditional and virtual organizing (Jha, 2007; Jones, 2006) and engage young adults into different forms of activism (Koch, 2008). With this in mind, the decision was made to survey activists working in the United States to complete the cross-cultural study.

### Research Questions

To advance our understanding of the impact of social media in activism in culturally different societies, and based on the literature on activism and technology adoption, this study examines the following research questions:

- RQ1a:** What are the demographic differences between activists using SNS in China, Latin America, and the United States?
- RQ1b:** What are the demographic similarities among activists using SNS in China, Latin America, and the United States?
- RQ2a:** What are the differences in how activists use SNS in China, Latin America, and the United States?
- RQ2b:** What are the similarities in how activists use SNS in China, Latin America, and the United States?
- RQ3a:** What are the differences in perceptions between activists using SNS in China, Latin America, and the United States?
- RQ3b:** What are the similarities in perceptions among activists using SNS in China, Latin America, and the United States?
- RQ4a:** What are the differences in scope between activists using SNS in China, Latin America, and the United States?
- RQ4b:** What are the similarities in scope among activists using SNS in China, Latin America, and the United States?

### Methods

To answer the research questions and examine the profile of activists using social media in culturally diverse regions, we conducted a Web-based survey in three languages: Chinese, Spanish, and English. While there are limitations in using online surveys, we were interested in people who engage in online activism, and thus the Internet was the most convenient and appropriate medium to recruit these subjects.

Having in mind the varying realities that frame activism and social media use in different parts of the world, the researchers decided to examine cross-cultural variations. So in this study, China, Latin America, and the United States serve as labels for a set of different constraints and particularities (Mayerhoffer, Maurer, & Pfetsch, 2008). Such considerations lead us to focus on mainland China, leaving



Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan out of these examinations. Language restrictions lead us to focus on the Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and omit Portuguese-speaking Brazil.

Given the scope of the project and the type of respondents needed to answer the survey, the researchers used a two-way approach to sampling subjects in an effort to increase the diversity of respondents. First, a team of seven researchers, including the authors, used web searches, news media stories, and activist reports to compile a list of 100 activists in each location—China, Latin America, and the United States. The list purposely included different causes<sup>3</sup> and geographic areas within each region and aimed to gather the names of people of different ages, political leanings, and genders. These potential participants were contacted by e-mail and invited to answer an online questionnaire about activism and media; two reminders to respond to the questionnaire were sent in the following weeks. Additionally, for each region included in the study, the researchers contacted up to 20 prominent and popular websites, listservs, and online groups related to activism, where we posted a message inviting people to answer the same online survey. In both cases, respondents were asked to forward the survey to other people they thought might be relevant for the study. The literature shows that this type of snowballing approach helps to recruit respondents and increase the sample size in an efficient way (see, e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Further, in the present study, sample comparisons revealed that responses from either sample in each of the regions under study were quite similar, with the exception of a handful of variables—most notably, access to the Internet at home.

Data were gathered during a five-week period starting September 1, 2010. In China, 195 participants answered the survey (49% from the list of 100 activists); in Latin America, 133 people responded (30% from the identified activists); and in the United States, 128 people responded (26% from the first sample).

The questionnaire aimed to gauge the subjects' experiences and opinions regarding the use of SNS for activist purposes. In addition to the five usual sociodemographic variables—age, gender, income, education, and race/ethnicity—the survey asked about marital status, country of origin, and residence in urban, suburban, or rural areas. The research literature on collective action, online tools, and digital activism (e.g., Atton, 2003; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Ness, 2004; Wojcieszak, 2009) informed questions that tapped into the respondents' specific uses of social media and their sense of the efficacy of online activism, including how suitable for activism they perceived social media to be. The online questionnaire also included several closed items measuring the extent to which respondents engaged in online and offline activities such as signing petitions, fundraising, and contacting public officials, and other questions tapped into respondents' insight about online and offline activism. While some questions were worded in negative terms and then reversed for the analysis, the questionnaire did not focus on the potential negative uses of SNS for activism.

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<sup>3</sup> The basis for this categorization was the *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements* (Ness, 2004), which lists 16 social movement categories (e.g., labor, antiwar, civil rights, environmental, and conservative movements).

With a comparative approach in mind for the study, the researchers were careful to focus on qualitatively identical concepts across all the countries (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Chang et al., 2001).<sup>4</sup> Each of the authors is a native speaker of one of the three languages involved in this study, as well as familiar with the cultures. The analysis paid attention to both the differences and commonalities among the three distinct cultures.

## **Results**

### ***Overview of the Samples***

A total of 456 people answered the survey. Of these, 54% were men and 46% were women. The mean age was 39 ( $SD = 12.5$ ), and three-quarters (75%) had a college degree. Most of them (81%) considered themselves activists, and 78% said they use social media in their activist efforts—mostly Facebook, Twitter, and the Chinese networking site *Sina weibo*, a Twitter clone—and more than a third (37%) did so multiple times a day. Almost a quarter (24%) said they had been activists for 6 to 10 years, and almost two-thirds (64%) declared to have started their activism offline and then engaged in online activism. Additionally, 22% said they were social media users *before* starting to use these tools for activist purposes. In general terms, their activism took place both online and offline, and almost half of them (49%) agreed or strongly agreed that activism on SNS translates into activism offline. Similarly, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that SNS have contributed to dialogue about issues that matter to them.

### ***Demographic Differences and Similarities***

A breakdown by region shows significantly different demographic profiles of the activists (see Table 1). For instance, almost half (45%) of the activists in China were 29 years old or younger and overwhelmingly men (63%), whereas in Latin America, they were mostly middle aged. Respondents in the United States were mostly women (59%) and more likely to be educated; 57% of these activists reported having postgraduate studies. Almost a fifth (17%) of activists in China had only a high school diploma or less.

Considering the per-capita income in the countries surveyed, it is not surprising that in both China and Latin America, the annual median household income is below U.S. \$10,000. In contrast, a third of the respondents in the United States reported income fluctuating between \$30,000 and \$70,000. Likewise, 90% of activists in China lived in urban areas, compared to 60% of U.S. respondents and 84% of Latin American respondents.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, there are no corresponding translations for “activist” or “activism” in Chinese. Therefore, we used “social movement participant” and “social movement” to replace “activist” and “activism” in the surveys distributed to Chinese participants. Although the term “social movement” originated in Western countries, we found evidence that this term appeared in some Chinese academic articles, such as Sun (2007).

**Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of Activists Per Region.**

	China	Latin America	United States
<b>Age</b>			
18 to 29 years	44.8%	15.7%	31.3%
30 to 39 years	31.0%	17.1%	14.1%
40 to 49 years	17.2%	40.0%	25.0%
50 years or older	6.9%	27.1%	29.7%
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	37.5%	42.5%	58.8%
Male	62.5%	57.7%	41.2%
<b>Education</b>			
Less than high school	7.8%	6.3%	0.0%
High school graduate	9.4%	5.0%	2.9%
Some college	9.4%	16.3%	19.1%
College graduate	42.2%	32.5%	17.6%
Postgraduate work/education	31.2%	40.0%	57.3%
<b>Income</b>			
Median income level (in USD)	\$10,000 or less	\$10,000 or less	\$30,000 to \$69,999
White, non Hispanic	0.0%	10.1%	79.1%
Hispanic <sup>a</sup>	0.0%	78.5%	9.0%
African American/African descent	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%
Asian or Pacific Islander	100.0%	29.9%	3.0%
Native American or indigenous	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%
Other	0.0%	8.9%	9.0%
<b>Marital status</b>			
Married, partnered, or living as married	46.0%	42.5%	59.7%
Single, never married	46.0%	46.3%	25.4%
Divorced or legally separated	4.8%	8.8%	10.4%
Widowed	3.2%	2.5%	4.5%

a. While Hispanic is a common label in the United States to refer to people of Spanish or Latin American descent, it fails to fully comprise the racial diversity of Latin America and its populations of White, African, Asian, and indigenous descent, and where the label of "mestizo" (mixed race) is widespread.

Women in all three regions reported having been involved in activism for longer than men, and men agreed significantly more often with the idea that social media have made them more politically or civically active ( $t$  value = 2.257;  $df$  = 155,  $p$  < .05).

### ***Differences and Similarities in Social Media Use***

Activists in all three regions stressed the importance of SNS to send information to supporters and to network with possible followers and activists in other cities or areas. However, there were significant differences in certain types of activities (see Table 2). Activists in China stressed the usefulness of social media to communicate with journalists but were significantly less concerned with posting links about their work, unlike their counterparts in the United States. In both China and Latin America, survey respondents deemed social media as a more important tool to promote debate and discussion than activists in the United States, who assigned higher importance of social media for posting announcements and news from their groups or organizations

**Table 2. Importance Assigned to SNS to Execute Different Activist Tasks Per Region.**

	China		Latin America		United States	
To fundraise (a)	3.80	(1.29)	3.47	(1.85)	3.13	(1.50)
To post links (b)	4.04	(1.08)	4.58	(0.94)	4.61	(0.72)
To promote debate or discussion (c)	4.43	(0.78)	4.33	(0.95)	3.90	(1.17)
To post information such as announcements and news (d)	4.53	(0.65)	4.36	(1.11)	4.65	(0.66)
To communicate with journalists (e)	4.22	(1.01)	3.54	(1.47)	3.18	(1.65)

*Note: Cell entries are means, standard deviation in parenthesis, of a 5-point scale ranging from "not important at all" to "very important." (a)  $F$  = 5.399,  $df$  = 177,  $p$  < .01; (b)  $F$  = 4.202,  $df$  = 176,  $p$  < .05; (c)  $F$  = 5.227,  $df$  = 258,  $p$  < .05; (d)  $F$  = 3.565,  $df$  = 180,  $p$  < .05; (e)  $F$  = 9.196,  $df$  = 180,  $p$  < .001*

A factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to identify underlying dimensions of 17 uses of social media for activist work. Four dimensions emerged: administrative uses (e.g., to plan with other group members or to send information to followers), mobilizing uses (e.g., to mobilize supporters to

attend events or to create online groups), communication and networking uses (e.g., to communicate with journalists or to contact activists in other areas), and awareness uses (e.g., to put pressure on decision makers or to raise funds). Activists from the three regions under study equally assigned importance to the first three factors, but respondents from China scored significantly higher in the fourth factor ( $F = 3.545$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ , ANOVA).

Half of the activists in China considered their use of SNS as part of their activist work, a number that rises to 65% in the case of respondents in Latin America. Conversely, three-quarters of the activists in the United States said their activism in SNS was related to causes they were involved in but did not necessarily work for, including their own projects or causes. Respondents in China were more likely to play games with some activist connotation on SNS (e.g., virtually plant a tree to save the rainforest), albeit once a month or less often, whereas in the United States and Latin America, respondents rarely or never did this.

### ***Perception Differences and Similarities***

Activists were aware of the challenges in using social media for activist purposes effectively. More than half (59%) of respondents in Latin America listed lack of affordable Internet access as one of the main challenges they have to deal with in their online activism, while 71% of activists in China mentioned the fear of government surveillance as an important roadblock. In both regions, the technical skills needed were also considered a problem. In the United States, 53% of the surveyed activists expressed concerns with the lack of time to pursue these endeavors, and half of them mentioned the nonresponsiveness from the target audience. Overall, activists from all three regions expressed worry about lack of member participation and, to a much lesser extent, fear of corporate surveillance.

The sense of efficacy of their activism—both online and offline—also differed significantly across regions (see Table 3). On a 5-point scale measuring the extent to which they agreed with several items, respondents scored similarly on their belief that online activism could influence the action of governments. However, activists in the United States agreed to a greater extent that people like them could influence governments and solve problems affecting society. Conversely, activists in Latin America were more neutral with the idea that officials are not interested in what people like them do on the Internet, including social media.

**Table 3. Perceptions of Efficacy of Activists Per Region.**

	China	Latin America	United States
People like me can solve community and national problems (a)	3.15 (1.28)	3.88 (1.15)	4.02 (1.03)
People like me can influence government (b)	3.03 (1.33)	3.67 (1.18)	3.76 (1.13)
Officials don't care much what people like me do on the Internet, including SNS (c)	2.40 (1.26)	3.00 (1.16)	2.69 (1.12)
Online activism can influence government (d)	3.70 (1.20)	3.93 (1.11)	3.71 (1.04)

Note: Cell entries are means, standard deviation in parenthesis, of a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." (a)  $F = 13.276$ ,  $df = 261$ ,  $p < .001$ ; (b)  $F = 8.750$ ,  $df = 259$ ,  $p < .001$ ; (c)  $F = 5.227$ ,  $df = 258$ ,  $p < .01$ ; (d)  $F = 1.208$ ,  $df = 263$ , *ns*.

Across all regions, both age and education were positively correlated with respondents' confidence in their ability to influence government ( $r = .239$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and  $r = .101$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). Interestingly, age was also positively correlated with the belief that online activism can influence government ( $r = .148$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

While the activists agreed that, for the most part, offline activism translates into activism on social media, the opinions are somewhat divided regarding whether activism on social media translates into offline activism (see Table 4). Activists in China agreed with the idea that online activism can lead to activism in an offline setting. Interestingly, activists in the United States thought that online activism is easier than offline activism but also reported that online activism is less appealing than offline activism.

**Table 4. Perceptions Regarding the Online-Offline Divide Per Region.**

	<b>China</b>	<b>Latin America</b>	<b>United States</b>
Activism on SNS translates into activism offline (a)	3.83 (1.02)	3.26 (1.36)	3.32 (0.97)
Offline activism translates into activism on SNS (b)	3.55 (1.10)	3.54 (1.42)	3.60 (1.03)
SNS have contributed to dialogue about social issues that interest me (c)	4.21 (0.98)	4.18 (0.98)	4.06 (0.99)
SNS have made me more politically/civically active (d)	3.90 (1.18)	3.49 (1.33)	3.35 (1.29)
Online activism is easier than offline activism (e)	3.80 (1.23)	3.26 (1.29)	4.05 (1.09)
Online activism appeals to me more than offline activism (f)	3.08 (1.20)	2.56 (1.24)	2.38 (1.13)
I am more aware of protests and social movement activities/causes because of SNS (g)	3.74 (1.32)	3.65 (1.30)	4.11 (1.16)

*Note: Cell entries are means, standard deviation in parenthesis, of a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." (a)  $F = 4.073$ ,  $df = 168$ ,  $p < .05$ ; (b)  $F = .036$ ,  $df = 167$ ,  $ns$ ; (c)  $F = .353$ ,  $df = 168$ ,  $ns$ ; (d)  $F = 2.796$ ,  $df = 168$ ,  $ns$ ; (e)  $F = 6.533$ ,  $df = 167$ ,  $p < .01$ ; (f)  $F = 5.070$ ,  $df = 164$ ,  $p < .01$ ; (g)  $F = 2.270$ ,  $df = 166$ ,  $ns$ .*

#### **Differences and Similarities in Scope and Reach**

The focus of the activists ranges from very local issues to global matters. In a multiple-choice question, an overwhelming majority of the activists surveyed in China labeled their activist work within local boundaries: city- or town-level issues (95%) and neighborhood issues (94%), followed by national issues (91%). In contrast, both in Latin America and in the United States, the main focus was on issues at the national level, with 99% and 93% of activists in the United States and Latin America, respectively, cataloguing their activism as related to national issues. The label of "neighborhood issues" was chosen by 60% of respondents in both the United States and Latin America.

Women were found to engage in neighborhood-level activism more than men (78% versus 64%), although this difference only approached significance ( $\chi^2 = 3.651$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .10$ ).

### Discussion and Conclusions

Several scholars argue that digital tools like SNS offer activists—at least in theory—a chance to spread their message, mobilize people, and ultimately achieve their goals. This study builds on that notion and expands the current literature addressing online activism while shedding some light on how social networking sites are used for activism and civic engagement and on who is using these online tools.

Our profile of activists using social media in China, Latin America, and the United States underscores the diverse orientations of activism in different geographical locations as well as the structural conditions that may frame collective action. While much has been written about the potential of new information and communication technologies, it is important to remember that their use does not occur in a vacuum. On the contrary, SNS use for activist purposes is shaped by social and political scenarios, with cultural resonances that help explain how these tools are used in different regions. For example, it is very telling that for respondents in China, the top challenge for using SNS for activism was fear of government surveillance, while for those in the United States, it was the lack of time. Respondents from Latin America, on the other hand, emphasized the lack of access to affordable Internet, and, indeed, 15% of these survey respondents said they did not have access to the Internet in their own homes.

Our findings reinforce the growing importance of social media for activists in three distinct societies and offer insight into the role SNS play in activists' mobilizing and recruiting efforts. In an era when much of the public sphere is mediated (Thompson, 1995, 2000), the fact that SNS are acknowledged and used as part of an activist's digital toolbox confirms that social media are instrumentally important to activist groups. SNS help activists generate and participate in an online, even alternative, public sphere. For instance, activists in China stressed the usefulness of SNS in talking with journalists and bypassing state censorship, whereas those in Latin America highlighted how SNS could promote discussions and engage citizens to debate.

The results support Stein's (2009) argument that efficient uses of the Internet by social movements depend on diverse organizational goals and objectives. Not surprisingly, then, the importance assigned to the administrative, mobilizing, and networking possibilities of social media for activism did not differ across cultures. It was on matters of fundraising and promoting debate that these activists had varying opinions about the usefulness of social networking sites, as well as in their sense of efficacy producing social change. Thus, activists in China and Latin America assigned more importance to the usefulness of SNS in fostering debate, while survey respondents in the United States were significantly more confident in their power to solve society's problems. Once again, cultural settings frame the use of SNS for collective action, as activist efforts vary across countries and activists cannot ignore their regional realities—as well as their own patterns of thinking and acting in regard to activism.

Building on this point, our study found support from activists themselves for the notion that social media help people to be more active in political and civic arenas and help promote dialogue. Respondents endorsed these ideas in all three locations, which lends credibility to a more optimistic view about the democratic consequences of new technologies and their potential contribution to more inclusive society. This area of inquiry requires more systematic research to examine both SNS use for activist purposes *and*



the different regions examined. It is also important to understand this research within the context of issues preventing many around the world (and within each of the geographical locations studied here) from accessing and using social media. There are still great numbers of people around the globe who lack electricity, broadband technology, financial means, and education levels needed to use these tools for activism. The finding that 90% of the surveyed Chinese activists were from urban areas, for instance, hints at a gap in terms of conducting activist work in rural China.

Even within the context of a digital divide, this work is important because it offers clues to who uses social media for promoting social change. The findings bolster the argument that the Internet and SNS provide alternative public spheres for work outside the margins of formal government and corporate spheres. In other words, this study offers evidence that social media can become a participatory forum where people with common interests can come together, become empowered, and ultimately join efforts to improve their communities. While some obstacles remain, these activists' responses attest to the contribution of SNS to healthy, if alternative, spaces of discussion and deliberation.

The link between media—including social media—and activism has been well documented in the literature. This study, albeit exploratory and mainly descriptive, is a snapshot of current social media use for activism in three culturally and developmentally different regions. Drawing on past literature on the potential of the Internet for collective action, it provides empirical evidence of the actual uses and importance assigned to social media by those who are trying to mobilize and recruit others to achieve common goals and social change. Our cross-cultural approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Another important contribution is the finding that nearly half of the activists surveyed believe that online activism translates into offline activism. As scholars and activists debate the usefulness of SNS for activism, the debate is far from solved. Several findings here highlight areas that are rich for further study—for example, the findings that women have been activists longer than men and that women are more likely to be involved in local issues.

Given the sampling method and the size of the sample, our results are not generalizable, which is one of the shortcomings of this article. Future research should consider expanding the base of potential respondents and could benefit from qualitative approaches when tapping into activists' uses and perceptions of social media. Examination of the other side of the issue—the target of these activists' efforts—also begs for consideration. Social and political events such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement not only stress the increasing importance of SNS use for activist work but highlight the relevance of this line of inquiry.

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