

In defence of apathy

or the dawn of the active society

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Introduction

We've all read the apathy statistics. We know that election turnout is falling across Europe, that media coverage of serious political issues has declined to become almost non-existent, that membership of political parties is in free fall. The argument presented here is that policy makers are being distracted by these figures and rather than focussing on reversing what they see as a negative trend, they should focus on encouraging the positive, emerging dynamic of increasing activism in society.

Like a metaphorical Jim Royle, the character played by Ricky Tomlinson in 'the Royle Family', society is waking from a blue screen stupor, rubbing its eyes and sitting up in its armchair. My defence of apathy is that the only apathy we're seeing is towards traditional institutions, otherwise known as the end of deference. But this doesn't matter since it's being accompanied by a rise in activism which is reaching such a level that it is about to precipitate a major positive change in society.

Crisis looming

The starting point for the argument is realising that while Alan Titchmarsh's garden is lovely, our streets are wastelands. While Delia is cooking up a banquet of fresh organic produce, an estimated four million Britons experience food poverty, having difficulty accessing good, nutritious food at a price they can afford (Lang 2002)

Environmental degradation has become more high profile and more worrying in the past decade than within the lifetimes of the current population. It's obvious to more and more people that climate change is kicking in. Even those with the longest memories admit that the weather in the UK has become more unpredictable and images on TV tell us that around the world drought and floods are increasingly common. Species have begun to disappear too and not just obscure insects in the Amazon. North Atlantic cod was pronounced 'practically extinct' recently (Wildlife Trusts 2002). The demise of fish and chips can't fail to have an effect on the Great British public.

Evidence of social breakdown is also more obvious than ever before. Images of rioting in Bradford and Oldham in 2001 were shocking, and although overall crime figures are dropping, it is increasing rates of violent crime – perhaps the ultimate indicator of social breakdown – that make the headlines.

Until now, the evidence has been theoretical, but now the evidence is very real. We don't just see it on TV, it has a direct effect on all our lives. For example, the science of climate change has been known for decades, but now it's happening. Commentators have warned of the dangers of segregated racial communities before but the effects are now actually being felt. The prognosis doesn't give grounds for optimism.

The effect on the individual

Ad men have to work hard to sell in the twenty first century. The predictability of manipulation through 'message' and public relations has gone - the days when business or government can say with certainty that X advert or policy will cause Y effect are history. It seems the reaction of consumers and citizens follows increasingly chaotic patterns. Society can no longer be thought about as one homogenous mass, or as a series of market research classifications. Caught in the consumerism cyclone for so long, it seems people increasingly feel empty and strangely angry at being psychologically cheated.

A cynical public in a world where the only news that is believable is bad news leaves us with a problem. Perhaps it's no wonder that the Mental Health Foundation report that one in four people in the UK suffer from some kind of mental illness in any given year.

But on an individual basis, a number of responses are possible. You can remain passive, you can get angry or you can get active. Being passive, of course, is linked to the so-called end of ideology. In the face of conflicting evidence, it is impossible to believe anything anymore. Getting angry is linked to the rise of fundamentalism. If an ideology is to gather members it needs to build an extreme case against existing institutions or groups – witness the growth of conspiracy theory and religious bigotry. Throughout the consumer age we've all been passive-ists rather than activists, but I believe that changes in the structure of society, and the technology we use, mean that activism will become the more frequent response over time.

Active technology

'Kill your television' yelled early nineties rockers Ned's Atomic Dustbin. Well soon we will. The printing press first enabled 'one to many' communication, followed of course by radio and television. The internet, however is a qualitatively different technology. Evidence in the US and in Europe suggests that the thing internet users are giving up to get online is television. A Eurobarometer survey found that 73 per cent of internet users are watching less television than they used to (European Commission 2000).

It's true that TV is still the dominant form of entertainment and only 43 per cent of people in the UK say they use the internet regularly but as more and more people go on line, more and more people will follow (MORI/egg 2002). One of the basic rules of the network society is Metcalfe's law - the value of a network goes up exponentially with the number of members of the network. So the more people are in, the more people stand to gain by being part of the network and so the more people will join. Combine this with the way that digital television becoming more like the internet and the conclusion is inescapable; the 'active' internet is taking over from the 'passive' television.

Because of the way it was designed many believe the internet is a fundamentally enabling technology. The Cluetrain Manifesto, one of the most influential books in Silicon Valley, begins thus: "People of Earth... a powerful global conversation has begun. Through the internet, people are discovering new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed" (Levine, Locke, Searle & Weinberger, 2000). It is this idea of conversation – two-way equal communication – that differentiates the internet from 'push' media such as radio, TV or newspapers. The network doesn't differentiate between people depending on their sex, race or age; anybody can contribute or collaborate via the internet. As a cartoon in the *New Yorker* pointed out, "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog".

And, the internet is easy. The speed and anonymity it provides suit people that otherwise may not have taken action. As one activist put it, "I know from personal experience that there is a difference between street and online protest. I have been chased down the street by a baton wielding police officer on horseback. Believe me, it takes a lot less courage to sit in front of a computer".

One symptom of technology making activism easier has been the growth of 'hacktivism' – the blending of hacking (clever programming rather than criminal computer activity) and activism. Over the past few years, colourfully named groups

such as the 'Cult of the Dead Cow', 'the Electronic Disturbance Theatre' and the 'ElectroHippies' have been using their programming skills to stage virtual sit-ins on company and government websites. Some targets have found their sites defaced (The US Central Intelligence Agency temporarily became the 'Central Stupidity Agency'), while others found their reputation damaged in hours via email campaigns and still others found that issues they believed to be secret and local were soon made international and very public.

The techniques used by hacktivists are many and varied but the inspiration often comes from the tradition of non-violent direct action. Virtual blockades and virtual sit-ins can be thought of as the online versions of physical blockades and trespass. Hacktivists have found that electronic blockage can sometimes cause more financial stress and damage than physical blockage, as companies and governments become more reliant on electronic transactions.

Groups have set up spoof sites to draw attention to the social and environmental records of companies, while mimicking the look and feel of the real site. Shell have been victims of RTMark (now archived at www.rtmark.com/shell) while at the height of the controversy over Genetically Modified crops Monsanto fell foul of a group called the Decepticons who set up www.monsantos.org. Another group - 'The Yes Men' - took things one step further. Shortly after they set up a spoof World Trade Organisation site at www.gatt.org, they received an e-mail inviting WTO director Mike Moore to address a conference in Finland. The Yes Men replied saying that unfortunately Mr Moore wouldn't be able to make it, but would it be okay if he sent a substitute? The organisers agreed and when it came to the event, 150 business delegates got quite a surprise. After a rather unorthodox presentation, the speaker stripped out of his business suit to reveal a golden skin-tight leotard with a peculiar device attached (The story is documented at www.theyesmen.org).

You might think that these are isolated examples and have a limited impact, but another effect of digital technology is that, over time, activists will have a greater impact and increasingly, in our own small ways, we will all become hacktivists.

The small world phenomenon

A couple of years ago two students at the University of Virginia conducted a slightly wacky experiment. Brett Tjaden and Glenn Wasson created a web-based game called 'the Oracle of Kevin Bacon', whereby players could enter the name of any actor and, assuming two actors are connected if they've ever acted alongside one another in the same film, see how many degrees of separation there are between their chosen actor and Kevin Bacon. The game draws on the Internet Movie Database and its five hundred thousand actor names but for those five hundred thousand individuals it turns out the average number of links to Kevin Bacon is only 2.896. So choose any actor and you'll find that, on average, it will take less than three steps to reach Kevin Bacon.

It also seems that what's true for Kevin Bacon may be true for the whole planet. In his recent book, *Small World*, Mark Buchanan charts the history of the mathematics explaining how this occurs. Initially it appears to be a difficult modelling problem; imagine drawing a diagram of six billion dots in such a way that you could link any two dots by travelling along just six lines – even if they were on opposite edges of the diagram. If each dot were connected to its nearest 50 neighbours, it would take about ten million steps to get from one side of the paper to the other. If the connections were entirely random, it would be possible but this diagram is very far removed from the reality of society where each of us have friends and family that are not randomly

selected but are a function of birth and location. It turns out that a simple trick allows you to create a realistic model that does fit with real world experience. The trick is a small number of random, weak connections. If you were to run a test on a computer to find the number of degrees of separation with 2 out of every 10,000 of the links globally to be random you come out with a figure for degrees of separation of about eight (Buchanan 2002).

To many people in the policy community this is a familiar model. The debate, originating in the US but continuing in Europe, about social capital also uses the idea of strong links (bonding social capital) and weak links into other groups (bridging social capital). A society is more likely to be sustainable, or have greater social capital, if it contains a mixture of strong bonds, connecting family members, close friends and neighbours, as well as random links which connect groups that are not alike.

Technology is facilitating a change towards a greater number of 'random' or 'bridging' connections in society. Word spreads in minutes in a connected society, reputations can be shattered in the space of hours and whole organisations can be demolished by scandal overnight. It turns out that a little bit of randomness has turned society into what mathematicians call a complex adaptive system and this is where the relevance for policy makers comes in; these types of system behave very differently.

Emergence

'Emergence' is the movement from low-level rules to higher level sophistication, usually associated with complex adaptive systems (Johnson 2001). The world we find ourselves in, the cities we live in, even the communities we are part of, are all now too complex for one person or small group of people to govern. According to some commentators, major change is not due to centralised direction but due to small changes in conditions across the board which affect behaviour of every individual.

An illustrative (although not very flattering) analogy in nature of emergent behaviour in society is slime mould. Slime mould is a very simple single cell organism, found on the floor of woodland, hidden under stones or roots, but it displays remarkable behaviour. Each cell is identical and independent, but if you watch an area of slime mould you discover that it behaves as if it were a larger organism; the cells move as one to search for food, separating into smaller groups where more appropriate. Despite the simplicity of the constituent cells at the micro level, at the macro level slime mould displays sophisticated behaviour. No one cell directs the group, sophistication simply 'emerges'.

The key here is that emergence can occur very quickly and has an effect on all of the constituent parts of the system.

The implications of an active society

To recap, I've argued that the environment and society are in very bad shape and we live in cynical times where the old institutions such as government and big business are no longer revered. I've argued that the internet, through its design, is facilitating activism on an individual basis. Also, the communications revolution that has taken place over the past few decades has led to an increased level of connection in society, as shown by the Oracle of Kevin Bacon, which means that society can be described as a complex adaptive system. In such a system the phenomenon of emergence, rapid and sophisticated change in the behaviour of society, becomes

possible. So, even though we are increasingly apathetic towards politics, we are living in an increasingly active society.

The implications for policy makers are profound. In the face of massive problems, governments face a far more complex world in which 'cause and effect' in policy terms appears to no longer hold true. Put simply, achieving sustainable development is more urgent now than ever before but the twentieth century rulebook has been torn up and policy makers need to start again.

For example increased activism will make representative democracy difficult to sustain. It will lead to more decision-makers not less as each citizen becomes more able to articulate their opinion. How will policy makers manage the transition to a far more 'real time' democracy?

The method of developing policy will be key. Governments will need an understanding of 'network governance' requiring public sector managers to make sure that the correct feedback loops are present in society. Feedback is the key to the survival of adaptive systems in nature. When conditions change, information needs to pass quickly and efficiently throughout the system in order to create a change that will allow the system to survive.

An example of this new role of government might be implementing a personal 'carbon bill' for every citizen. This would detail the carbon dioxide emissions due to the activity of each person based on data on home and workplace energy usage, transport emissions, and the carbon emissions due to major purchases. Of course the data for this type of bill would be difficult to collect reliably today but will be possible in the future.

Another environmental example would be to provide data on atmospheric pollutants in a visible position in every community. A billboard sized display at road junctions showing particulate pollution levels might affect peoples' decisions about driving short distances. Or how about labels on packaging for seafood that chart the numbers of the particular species over the past few years? Providing the facts at the point of purchase might dissuade people from buying cod for a while.

The problem in many areas where racial tension has built up is also a lack of feedback. Segregation in terms of schools has meant that Asian children don't know what white children are like. If government were to encourage feedback between different groups, creating opportunities for them to communicate, tension would be far less likely to build up.

And here lies the real challenge for policy makers: the active society will mean they need to let go. They need to believe that, given the correct information, people will form their own decisions for the benefit of society and the environment. New Labour have given mixed messages about their willingness to let go. Devolution has been positive on the one hand while the shift of power to Downing Street has shown the desire for control. But unless the government can redefine its role, the positive, radical changes that are made possible by the 'active society' and are utterly necessary, given the social and environmental state of the planet, will not occur. An opportunity will be lost forever.

References

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