

# SLACKTIVISM: MONSTER OR MYTH?



**JustGiving™**

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## Introduction

In 2014, the global success of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge brought the concept of slacktivism to the centre of our attention. As millions poured water over their heads in the name of charity, opinion was divided on whether this was an empty gesture, with critics suggesting the campaign was all talk and no action. At the heart of the cynicism surrounding the Ice Bucket Challenge was this question: do campaigns like this, where people are asked to take a small social action on behalf of a cause, reduce their propensity to donate?

Weeks later, as it emerged the Ice Bucket Challenge had raised over \$100 million for a variety of causes, it was clear that this time, a social meme<sup>1</sup> had had an enormous impact.

In this paper, we'll explore whether the Ice Bucket Challenge was a one off, or if online awareness campaigns can translate to big giving. We've brought together the latest research into the impact of social media on giving, with fresh insight gleaned from 15 years' worth of giving data from [JustGiving](#), the world's fastest-growing social fundraising platform. Ultimately, we'll address the major questions faced by non-profits worldwide: is slacktivism cannibalising giving? Is it a monster, or a myth?

<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meme>



## Defining slacktivism

The Oxford Dictionary defines slacktivism thus:

*“Actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement, e.g. signing an online petition or joining a campaign group on a social media website.”*

This definition doesn't quite live up to the pejorative implication that these acts have little meaningful impact, so we should add “and that result in little or no practical impact” to the end and use Wikipedia's definition to flesh out the idea that slacktivism doesn't make a difference:

*“Slacktivism can be defined as the act of showing support for a cause but only truly being beneficial to the egos of people participating in this so-called activism. The acts tend to require minimal personal effort from the slacktivist. The underlying assumption being promoted by the*

*term is that these low cost efforts substitute for more substantive actions rather than supplementing them, although this assumption has not been borne out by research.”*

## A short history of 'slacktivism'

The idea of taking a 'light action' to visibly show support for a cause has been around for a very long time. In fact, in 1807 William Wilberforce purchased 50,000 medallions to promote awareness of the anti-slavery cause that he was so passionate about. This idea then evolved into charity pin badges and, more recently, wristbands and bumper stickers for cars.

Today, bumper stickers and wristbands have been augmented by selfies, Twitter follows, Facebook likes and Twibbons – all small actions we can take that signal to those around us that we support a cause and that the cause is part of our online identity.

“Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust has got it spot on with their #SmearForSmear awareness campaign. It works because it’s a simple, easy to understand and easy to take part in campaign – a real winner”.

Nadine Woogara, digital manager at Ovarian Cancer Action

It was in 2014 that these online social markers evolved into an entirely new breed of action. In the US the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge spread like wildfire across social networks, raising \$100M in total. In the UK, #nomakeupselfie raised \$12M in a week for Cancer Research UK. In Norway, people jumped into cold water in May to raise 3.5 million NOK for the Norwegian Cancer Society. Almost as soon as these social crazes began, so did the backlash. Sali Hughes in the Guardian wrote that ‘No-Make Up Selfies Won’t Beat Cancer Alone’<sup>2</sup>, claiming that the giving was a secondary gesture in what was primarily a movement about social narcissism. Amanda Gutterman wrote for the Huffington Post that “doing the Ice Bucket Challenge is not the same thing as supporting ALS Research”<sup>3</sup>.

The backlash to these viral campaigns brings up interesting questions around the ownership that people feel towards the causes they support.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, charities looking at how best to harness giving in the social age began to wonder how they could replicate some of these successes, and if they should try.

In the UK, we’ve recently seen #SmearforSmear by Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, which was criticised in The Guardian for “jumping on the social media bandwagon, trying too hard and not succeeding”<sup>5</sup>; however the goal of this campaign was not to raise millions but to raise awareness. In fact it was a resounding success for the charity in driving awareness of the cause.

According to the charity’s communications manager, Maddy Durrant, the hashtag had 14,975 mentions on Twitter with a reach of 109.3m – in just one week. And traffic to the charity’s website increased by 41% in January (compared to the previous year).<sup>6</sup>

But do these campaigns also hold the key to cracking the viral giving formula? Or are these campaigns short-term wins with little lasting benefit?

2 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/21/no-make-up-selfie-facebook-beat-cancer-research-meme>

3 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amanda-gutterman/doing-the-ice-bucket-challenge\\_b\\_5718321.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amanda-gutterman/doing-the-ice-bucket-challenge_b_5718321.html)

4 <http://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2014/aug/20/ice-bucket-challenge-hashtag-charity-macmillan>

5 <http://www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2015/jan/30/smear-for-smear-campaign-leaves-many-uncomfortable>

6 <http://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2015/feb/04/smear-for-smear-no-such-thing-as-unsexy-charity-cause>



## Giving in the social age

Between 2007 and 2010, the Save Darfur cause took Facebook by storm. A team of sociologists<sup>7</sup> analysed the fundraising and recruitment behaviour of this campaign from 1.2 million members of the cause on Facebook. They found that the vast majority of people who joined the Save Darfur Facebook campaign “recruited no one else into the cause and contributed no money to it.”

“While both donation and recruitment behaviour are socially patterned, the vast majority of cause members recruited no one else into the cause and contributed no money to it – suggesting that in the case of the Save Darfur campaign, Facebook conjured an illusion of activism rather than facilitating the real thing.”

At first glance, this study seems like hard evidence for slacktivism being a monster. On closer inspection, however, the truth is less clear cut. In 2007, Facebook was only three

years old, and Twitter just a year old. With hindsight, this lack of recruiting friends to the cause, or donating money, looks less surprising. Usage of these platforms had yet to reach a tipping point. So while the research shows that the existence of these new channels wasn’t enough to spur people to action, it’s worth considering how giving behaviour has changed since.

## The evolution of social giving

A research paper published in 2013<sup>8</sup> found two primary motivations that underline slacktivist behaviour – a desire to present oneself in a positive light to others and the desire to be consistent with one’s own values.

These motivations are surely evident in the social memes we see today where people take selfies (present oneself in a positive light) and make a donation, nominating others to do the same (be consistent with one’s own values of altruism).

7 [http://www.sociologicalscience.com/download/volume%201/february\\_/The%20Structure%20of%20Online%20Activism.pdf](http://www.sociologicalscience.com/download/volume%201/february_/The%20Structure%20of%20Online%20Activism.pdf)

8 <http://web.missouri.edu/~segerti/capstone/Slacktivism.pdf>

## Social giving in 2015

Over the last 14 years over 20 million people worldwide have used the JustGiving platform to show they care and raise money online for the causes they care about. As a result, we're in a unique position to look at giving behaviour on a massive scale.

At the heart of JustGiving is the [Fundraising Page](#). It's where someone can tell the world what they care about and raise funds online. Their family, friends and colleagues, and even like-minded strangers, can donate online to their cause. Our platform is filled with millions of inspiring fundraising stories and we use our technology to help every single one reach more people, inspire more action and raise more money for their cause.

Analysing millions of transactions on the platform, our findings show a link between sharing and giving. We consistently find that:

- Each share to Facebook is worth about \$8 on average in donations to charity.
- People who share a [Fundraising Page](#) to social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are four times more likely to give than those who don't share.
- People who share to social networks on their mobile devices are seven times more likely to give than those who don't share.

Whilst sharing to social media rather than giving on JustGiving might seem like slacktivism on an individual level, the large numbers of

people taking this small action has a significant impact for charities. In one year alone, we saw over [\\$108 million donated to non-profits on JustGiving by people coming from Facebook](#).

## Analysing sharing motivations

Noting that sharing tends to lead to an increase in giving, in January 2015 JustGiving conducted an A/B test to try and increase the number of donors who shared the link to their friends' [Fundraising Page](#) after making a donation.

We chose to vary the text that prompts people to share and focus on three assumptions we'd made about people's motivations for sharing:

1. to present themselves in a positive light
2. to help raise more money for that cause
3. to get more friends involved in fundraising.

The previous text that prompted people to donate was "Inspire more people to give - Share your donation" (see figure 1).

Figure 1: original sharing message

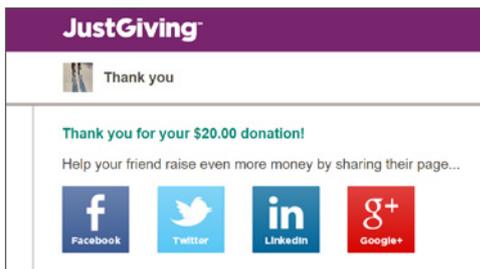


We wanted to see if the “slacktivist” was motivated more by presenting themselves in a positive light than in actually helping to share their fundraising efforts.

Based on an observation of over half a million donors, the motivation to help their friend raise more was the most compelling and we were able to increase the proportion of donors who shared by 28%.

Out of the three messages tested, the one that elicited the highest response was “Help your friend raise even more money by sharing their page” (see figure 2).

Figure 2: new sharing message



We were able to show that by connecting the initial act of support (“help your friend”) to its outcome (“raise even more”), more people were inclined to take action (“by sharing their page”) for the greater good. This suggests that charities could encourage more micro participation through social media by demonstrating how that participation makes a real difference.

We’re not the only ones who have come to the conclusion that more social activity is beneficial financially for charities. Beth Kanter conducted philanthropy research<sup>9</sup> with data from Vision Critical Research in 2014 (survey sample size of 30,000) which looked at whether more activity on social media equated to more donations.

Over a third of the people they surveyed had donated to a charity after seeing or sharing something about that charity on a social network. The most likely to give were those who were most influential and most active on that network and that were new to the charity too.

Given the importance of attracting and engaging new donors to non-profits, the study shows that there is a new – and perhaps more importantly – an influential audience that they can engage with on social media.

The study also showed that people share content on social media as a way to show they care – almost a third of people surveyed had posted an appeal to donate to a charity they supported on their personal social media profile.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.bethkanter.org/sxsw-analytics/>

## Conclusion: Is slacktivism a myth or monster?

We've seen that slacktivism has been observed as a meaningless action both in looking at high profile Facebook campaigns and in small scale academic studies, but JustGiving data proves quite the opposite. The most successful viral fundraising campaigns we've seen have been started by supporters, not the charity themselves. People give to people, and reaching the friends of a supporter is likely to put that cause in front of even more potential new supporters. In short: peer to peer fundraising works.

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge and #nomakeupselfie campaigns revealed that it is possible to raise incredible amounts of money from what on the surface may appear to be frivolous or small social actions.

And although liking a Facebook page for Darfur didn't raise much money or appear to have an impact, liking a Fundraising Page on JustGiving and sharing it on Facebook results in an extra \$8 to charity.

Slacktivism is not a monster eating away at charities' time and resource. The evidence clearly shows that there is huge value in charities investing time and resources into preparing for their social fundraising meme moment. Harnessing the power of people's networks on the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram is invaluable in spreading awareness and getting people to give.

Social giving is real. And it's becoming more powerful as the networks that fuel it become stronger: the conditions are ripe, today more than ever, for giving to spread quickly across a social network.

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At JustGiving, we're on a mission to make sure no great cause goes unfunded. Visit [justgiving.com/charities](https://justgiving.com/charities) to find out how our tech can help your cause reach more people, inspire more action and raise more money.

Thanks for reading!

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