



Ethics in Business: Interview with Digital Activist Mary Joyce

Advocates for Ethics in Business (GPI Interview Series)

Mary Joyce, Julia Taylor Kennedy

Transcript

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Welcome to the Carnegie Council's Global Ethics Forum. I'm Julia Taylor Kennedy, sitting here with digital activism guru Mary Joyce.

Joyce has developed an impressive resume since graduating from Vassar College in 2004. She managed New Media operations for the [Barack Obama](#) campaign, founded two nonprofit organizations, and has most recently edited a book on digital activism. The names Fulbright and Harvard have also managed to pop onto Joyce's CV.

This interview is an installment of the Council's series "Advocates for Ethics in Business." As other subjects in the series have expressed, external advocacy is one of the most forceful elements of change among corporations and governments.

In order to discuss new media as a tool for activists, it is a pleasure to welcome Mary Joyce to Global Ethics Forum.

MARY JOYCE: Thanks for having me.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Our pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us.

Let's start out by defining some terms. Your book is called *Digital Activism Decoded*. What is digital activism?

MARY JOYCE: It's the use of digital technology in campaigns for social and political change.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: How has digital activism really changed over its time in use? I remember the [Howard Dean](#) campaign and hearing "digital activism" first bandied around. How has it really morphed over the time you've been looking at it?

MARY JOYCE: You can define it in terms of the evolution of tools being used. It started off with the first version of the Internet in the 1970s when it was actually a research tool that was owned by the U.S. government, and some scientists would discuss political matters through the kind of pre-email system that they had on that network. Then probably most people became aware of it in the early part of this century when you had the beginning of social media, and you had things like [Meetup](#) and blogs. Before that you had websites.

Another way to look at its evolution is as an internationalization. The penetration of digital technology, particularly cell phones, has increased around the world, and so has the amount of

digital activism.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: And where are you seeing it? A lot of people, especially looking at your background, think of political campaigns. But how else is digital activism being employed?

MARY JOYCE: Anywhere people see injustice occurring. Usually this has to do with some kind of imbalance of power that doesn't have an institutional remedy. Activism, at least as I think of it, is outside of institutions and you could even argue is a political campaign activism.

You see all kinds of "targets" in the language of advocacy. If businesses are taking actions that are perceived as being unfair, either to workers or to the consumer, they could become the target of a digital activism campaign, or even just other citizens. For example, in a public health campaign like condom use, you know then the target is other citizens.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Does the employment of digital tools differ depending on the target, as you put it? Do you have to modify what you're using if you're targeting another citizen versus the government versus a corporation?

MARY JOYCE: Ideally, you want to choose a tool that has both the access of the activist and the attention of the target. For example, in many countries, everyone watches the nightly news. But in many countries, either because it is controlled by conservative political or business interests, the news won't cover certain things, particularly human rights issues. You have the attention of your target, but the activist does not have access to that.

In digital activism, the more common problem is that activists have access to social media. As long as you have an Internet connection all of it is free, but the target is not watching. If you have a great Facebook or blog campaign but your target isn't paying attention to social media, then it is not going to work.

Unfortunately, activists often make choices based on what they are familiar with rather than from the perspective of the target. A lot of young people are on Facebook and have some kind of issue they care about. They then join a Facebook group, but that is not strategically very effective based upon the goal.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: This gets to something that you've been talking a lot about in *Digital Activism Decoded* and other things I've read where you've appeared, which is this idea of tool versus strategy. Why is it so important to have a strategy rather than trying to use every single tool that's out there?

MARY JOYCE: There is a finite amount of time and resources for anyone, even a corporation or a government. You can't use everything, but, more importantly, you can't succeed without strategy.

When we started seeing digital technology, and even now in the way it is portrayed in the media, there was this idea of the magic bullet of a particular tool—Dean and Meetup; [Iran and Twitter](#). Of course, those are contradicted, but that's the narrative in the public consciousness. Tools are actually not even secondary but are tertiary in considering a strategy for a campaign.

When I do trainings, I talk about audience, action, message, and media. So choosing the media is

actually the last choice. But this is, for various reasons, not well known.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Why do you think that people haven't gotten that overall strategy?

MARY JOYCE: We receive a lot of education, particularly in developed economies, about products. Twitter is a product, the iPhone is a product. People are not as educated about noninstitutional change-making.

We see social change through the lens that has been given to us, so we tend to focus on these tool-based and consumer-based perspectives. We haven't been given strategies, and often we don't even know that we lack them.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: I hear my mother in my brain and people of other generations who say, "Well, but tools are difficult to learn for some people." It doesn't come naturally to everyone.

How do you develop that kind of flexibility where you're throwing everything against the wall, seeing what sticks, and then shifting?

MARY JOYCE: If the people who are going to be working on your campaign are not comfortable with a particular tool, then that's the access issue. You don't want to say, "Okay, we're going to use this tool, but no one in my organization uses it yet, so we have to train everyone, convince them to use it, and then we can do the campaign." That's usually not a good idea, particularly in the short term. If you're doing your institutional transformation, then sure.

The key is to meet people where they are, both the target and the supporter of the advocacy campaign. We need to ask what are people already using, what are they already comfortable with, where are their eyes? At least in the Obama campaign, we used a ton of email because everyone knows email.

Obviously, now there is an overuse of email in advocacy, so there will need to be something else.

I don't think that shifting people's behavior, at least in a campaigning framework is too hard.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: How did you get involved in all of this media? As I rattled off your resume, there is a lot of impressive stuff in there, but it's not a computer science background. So how did you come to this?

MARY JOYCE: I was initially interested in politics. I did the Fulbright that you mentioned in Morocco with grassroots political organizations. This was during the Bush Administration when there was a great focus on promoting democracy abroad. It meant that American money and institutions going into other countries went towards creating democracy.

What I saw with these institutions on the ground was that they understood their local context better and they were far more committed. They weren't going to stop working on democracy issues when the next budget cycle hit and there was no more grant money.

They also have very limited resources, because Morocco is a developing country and there is not enough funding for nonprofit organizations. So I was thinking, what resources could they use to

increase their effectiveness without having more money? This was also during the time when blogs and wikis and those kinds of tools were becoming available.

I started exploring the technological possibilities, and the more I learned, the more I've found that there is a value there. I came from the political side and then got into technology.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Then how did you end up on the Barack Obama campaign?

MARY JOYCE: While I was in graduate school, I started off as an intern. My first day was the day that he got the Democratic Party nomination. Then they started hiring people for the general election, and I got hired in this management position in the New Media Department. I was there for the general election.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What was that experience like? From the outside, there was so much hoopla, especially about the New Media element of his campaign.

MARY JOYCE: From the inside, it was very serious, very rigorous, very data-driven, and fairly high stress. I think a lot of the hope and change and the very buoyant outside image was made possible by the really serious, rigorous, analytical hard work that was going on inside the campaign. You could get disconnected from everything that was going on around because of these huge speeches and people volunteering. In the campaign you're looking at the data and you're brainstorming new tools and connecting all the different parts of the campaign, like field and communication.

But I think that's why the campaign was successful, because it wasn't about, "Oh, well, let's try this, and maybe we should do that." It was, "Well, let's try this, but what does the data tell us about the likelihood of this being successful?"

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Give me an example of data that you were analyzing and then how you modified to respond to it.

MARY JOYCE: [Crazy Egg](#) is a tool that is accessible to anyone. It's a heat map for a website, so you can see where people are clicking on your website.

Let's say you want people to be donating. However, all the clicks are at the top of the page on the right-hand side and your donate button is down on the bottom on the left. So we say, "Okay, based on what we know about our user behavior on our Web site, let's move the button." Or even things like changing the color of the button, the text of the button, and then actually running experiments to see which was more successful.

That's not the outside part that you would want to show your volunteer to inspire them to take part, but that's how you get good New Media.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: That's what you need, yes.

MARY JOYCE: Be scientific.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Anyone in the nonprofit industry knows that the donate button is probably one of the most important buttons on your Web site.

Do you think that people in the political advocacy realm are getting on the digital-activism bus, or is it not hitting the way it should yet?

MARY JOYCE: It depends on the "community." There are a lot of firms now that are providing these skills. There is certainly innovation, but I think there is a general knowledge of how to create a website and how to link it to off-line.

One of the reasons that the digital campaign worked so well is that there was already so much attention on Obama from the mainstream media. We could gain donations, for example, because people were watching his speeches on television and they were seeing his face in *Time* magazine. It's harder with more local candidates, where there is not the same interest and exposure, and you are just not going to be able to do a digital campaign in the same way.

For nonprofits, there is an increasing awareness that new media is important and we need to figure out how to do something with it. But again, there is a lot of focus on tools. "Oh, we need to create a Facebook page"—without actually being clear about strategically how that's connected and if it works.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Let's talk a little bit about the corporate side of things, because it seems like corporations, when they come to corporate social responsibility, are starting to employ digital tools. One that pops into my mind is the [Pepsi Refresh Project](#), which is very digital, very corporate-social-responsibility oriented, and is trying to include community organization.

Do you follow that campaign or any campaign in general that come from corporations? What do you think about the difference between what they are able to leverage versus what these more grassroots organizations are able to leverage?

MARY JOYCE: I think the challenge, particularly for corporations that have visible consumer brands, is that when you open up a corporate social responsibility project to the public in a digital way, you can lose control over, for example, who wins the contest and where the money goes.

There was one such project where there were more controversial organizations, like opposing abortion or promoting abortion, something like that, and they quietly removed these nominees. Of course, this generated criticism because some people are going to be skeptical of corporate social responsibility.

You have to go all the way. People are very attuned to a show of digital openness but without a follow-through. People are kind of waiting to pounce on those little inconsistencies.

It's good for a company to understand at the outset what might happen or put in the terms of use, "We only accept these kinds of nominees."

If you're transparent in the beginning, people say, "Okay, well, this is a corporation that has a certain brand that they want to associate with other nonprofit brands." There will be more acceptance for that. But then not understanding what it might entail and backtracking, that doesn't work.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What is missing now in digital activism? That's something that you're pinpointing with this new organization that you've started.

MARY JOYCE: That's the [Meta-Activism Project](#), and the goal is basically to increase the level with which we are building knowledge about digital activism. We have a lot of case studies and a lot of stories. You can read them in *The New York Times* and you can watch them on CNN. There's a lot of opinions.

Some people are very cynical about digital activism and say, "This is going to help our oppressive forces." Others are very optimistic and say, "this is going to free the world," or skeptical and say, "this doesn't matter at all." It is all basically opinion and is supported by cherry-picked examples.

The goal with the project I started is to get more data and analytical rigor. Our current project, which is our first one, is actually just creating a data set so that academics can start charting large amounts of data on digital activism.

They will be able to see which contexts matter, which factors don't, and what tools are most successful. Do you need a certain penetration rate in a country to get a certain kind of outcome? Then you can have more fact-based conversations than what is happening right now.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You are at an early stage, so I don't know if you have results yet on how effective or noneffective, but I can imagine that the way you analyze that data in any kind of academic pursuit can really color your results. So how are you trying to maintain objectivity as you're collecting?

MARY JOYCE: Actually, it's an open project. That means the goal is that it is created by volunteers and that it is open to anyone who wants to use it.

Obviously, there are certainly potentials for bias in the design of the parameters, but then the goal is that once the data set is created, anyone can use it for anything. That is at least one solid response to the problem of objectivity.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: And what kind of data is going into the set?

MARY JOYCE: Case studies. All kinds of narrative examples—this is what happened in Iran, this is what happened in the U.S. with the Dean campaign—and then basically putting them into machine-readable format.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: I see.

MARY JOYCE: Campaign examples from around the world.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You've mentioned Iran a few times. We know some of the common U.S. examples. Where else is this happening?

MARY JOYCE: "All over" is an exaggeration. As an exercise with this network of members of the Meta-Activism Project, I said, "Tell me your favorite example of digital activism."

It was just something to engage people. I think the majority of examples people gave I had never heard of. It has to do with whether there a digitally active segment of society. That is based on the infrastructure in the country.

Germans, both because of infrastructure and also because of their recent history, with the lack of freedom of expression, are very attuned to these issues. Egypt has a lot of digital activism, which is interesting in Africa because they actually use the bandwidth that goes to Europe and around the Mediterranean.

Then, of course, you have examples like [Ushahidi](#), which is this reporting platform that uses mobile. But you are seeing it in more places, including China. And that's good for data analysis, because the more examples you have, the more information you can get.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: We talked a little while ago about strategy. When you're thinking of strategy, is this something where you can really draw on other social movements, like from the 1960s and from other eras? Or is this really all new and needs to be tailored to the digital tools?

MARY JOYCE: It's not all new, but at the same time, all the previous strategic frameworks we have were made in a predigital era.

Media, up until 15 years ago, for most people meant broadcast and high capital inputs if you wanted to reach a large audience. That was the media environment that campaigns have been working with up until fairly recently. Certainly a lot of the basic mechanics of convincing people of your message and then convincing them to take action, is old but is still relevant. Exactly how you do it is what is changing.

I use community organizing and strategic communications theory when I do training, but you need to kind of take that with a grain of salt. It was created before the Internet, and the Internet changes how we communicate.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: One of the other interesting elements of this is that in a sort of idealized world, the cost of campaigning would go down. If we transferred completely to new media, then you wouldn't have to do media buys. But are there other costs that offset that?

MARY JOYCE: I think the problem with attention is that the easier it is to gain access to a publication tool, the more people will do it, and the lower the value of publications in that medium is.

For example, Facebook. At one point there weren't that many causes on Facebook, and it was very innovative and very effective. But now people have learned to start a Facebook group and so you have a huge array of causes even on the same issue. In regards to the BP oil spill, there are hundreds of groups to boycott Louisiana. So the value of these goes down, and that is why television still has value; there is limited space on television and it does have broad attention.

You could solve the kind of attention competition problem on line, which is basically [the long tail](#) of there's a few sites where people actually watch and then there's everyone else. But it's still a challenge.

I don't know if it eventually will go all-digital, but we'll see.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: We'll see.

One thing you mentioned is something else that comes up in your book, which is the

question of the "armchair activist." Someone who joins a Facebook group and doesn't do anything more. So the question is, what value is there in that? I am curious what your take on that is.

MARY JOYCE: Engagement and activism is a continuum. The challenge for a campaigner is to move people to greater action that's going to have more of an impact.

For someone who has joined a Facebook group, what they have done is they have self-identified as someone who supports a cause. That's the effect. So then the next step is you're doing a blast message and saying, "Okay, we're going to be doing some campaigning; can you please now move onto our email list?" Then you say, "We're having this event, and can you come to the event?" And then, "Can you organize an event?"

Because the bar to act and start an "activism campaign" comes so low people don't appreciate that, strategically, you have to take steps.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: So it is an incremental process.

MARY JOYCE: Yes, and there is certainly value to a Facebook group, even if you have 200 people who join and never do anything, because then you know they've self-identified. "I support your cause, [let's put Betty White on SNL](#) [Saturday Night Live]," or whatever.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Right.

MARY JOYCE: Then there is that effect. If you do have enough people, then it has its own effect. But sometimes it doesn't. But that doesn't mean it has no effect. It just means you need to push people.

These are strategy things that most people aren't aware of, and that's why it makes a good story. "Armchair activist" and "slacktivist" are very catchy.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: My immediate response is how many people will bite? But then you think, you don't even want everyone to bite or to organize an event. You want that pool to get smaller.

MARY JOYCE: Yes, it will. There is no question that it will. If you have a huge amount of people organizing an event then that is great. In organizing a methodology, it's kind of a network where you have different nodes and then they connect to ten people in each one.

So starting off with a big pool of people in your Facebook group is great. It will be kind of like a pyramid as you push people to greater activism.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Mary, these are really interesting questions, and I'm so glad you stopped by to discuss them with us here on Global Ethics Forum.

MARY JOYCE: Thanks a lot for having me.

Audio

Mary Joyce, who worked on Obama's campaign, defines digital activism as the use of digital

technology in campaigns for social and political change. But technology is just a tool, she says, not a magic bullet. Strategy must come first, and when planning a campaign you should first consider audience, action, message, and then medium.

Mary Joyce is an internationally recognized trainer, author, speaker, and consultant in the field of digital activism.

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