

Personal Statement: Mary Joyce

I am passionate about digital activism, the practice by which citizens use engineering innovations like the Internet and mobile phones to bring about political change in such areas as human rights, government accountability, and environmental protection. When I research digital activism, what I am really asking is how people are using digital technology to change the world.

I have been involved in activism and volunteerism since I was very young. I still remember my first volunteer experience preparing food at a soup kitchen as a Girl Scout. Later I tutored under-privileged youth at my church, was a hospital “candy striper,” canvassed for political candidates, and volunteered for a battered women’s shelter during college. As I grew older I became interested in studying activism as well as participating in it. My belief in the personal power of doing good, combined with an academic bent, led me to my area of research.

My personal and professional mission is to explore and explain how citizens around the world are leveraging the affordances of digital technology to bring about political change. I believe it is important not only to carry out this research, but also to explain these mechanisms to citizens so they can be more effective, to policy-makers so they can support democratic values at home and abroad, and to the community of scholars who are also asking these questions. Citizens, policy-makers, and scholars need to work collaboratively if we are to understand this new and important form of human computer interaction.

My method for studying this topic is intellectual entrepreneurialism. Over the past six years I have founded or co-founded four start-up style organizations dedicated to publicly exploring digital activism. I began with Demologue, a website I founded in 2006, the year after my Fulbright Fellowship in Morocco. I was inspired by the civil society organizations I had studied and wanted to create digital activism resources for them, a new idea at the time. Through that project I co-authored a free guide to election blogging and co-founded the first citizen journalism website in Morocco.

DigiActive was my next project, which I co-founded with a Moroccan activist. Through that project I built an international team of 43 volunteer participants from 17 countries and six continents and oversaw the publication of two guides: one on Facebook activism and one on Twitter activism. DigiActive also released five academic papers from young scholars through our R@D (Research at DigiActive) program, wrote over 300 blog posts detailing successful cases of digital activism around the world, and trained over seventy activists in three countries (Morocco, India, and the Philippines), all on a budget of less than \$10,000. I was proud of our accomplishments, but I wanted to answer bigger questions. With so much variation and change in global digital activism, I found that individual case study analysis was not giving me the insight I needed. I wanted to focus on research.

The Meta-Activism Project was next, a digital activism think tank that I founded in 2010. It was through this project that I began the Global Digital Activism Data Set (GDADS), the project that I hope to continue through a Graduate Research Fellowship. The GDADS is a public list of digital activism case studies from around the world, which seeks to track the phenomenon from its earliest emergence and currently includes over 1,200 cases from 144 countries from 1982 to 2011. Though I initiated the project, it has been a major international effort. It has involved over a dozen volunteers from the US, Syria, Hungary, Portugal, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, among other countries. Institutional support has come from the Berkman Center and Columbia University, which supplied coders, the Civic Engagement Research Group at Mills College, which supplied staff and a coder, and the MacArthur Foundation, which supplied

indirect financial support. Enhancing the infrastructure for research and education through geographically diverse networks and partnerships is naturally the way I work.

Since entering an MA/PhD program in communication at the University of Washington this September, I have co-founded a new digital activism think tank with my GRFP project advisor, Philip N. Howard, I who has undertaken path-breaking work in the international comparative analysis of digital politics. Our Digital Activism Research Project (www.digital-activism.org) has already secured funding for the 2012-2013 academic year through the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and we hope to develop the Project to include further research initiatives, in addition to the GDADS, and to include additional collaborators.

I have been doing much more besides founding digital activism organizations. I edited a volume of essays called *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*, which was published by iDebate Press in 2010 and remains one of the few academic resources on digital activism designed for undergraduates. I also maintain a blog (www.meta-activism.org), through which I share my work and analysis with an audience outside of academia. This kind of open sharing of ideas is extremely important to me.

In 2007 I entered a professional Master in Public Policy program at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, which I attended from September 2007 to May 2008 (nine months of full-time graduate study). During that time I was a Research Assistant for the Internet and Democracy Project at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, a tremendously formative experience. Given the Center's flat structure and collegial environment I was able to closely interact with some of the top minds exploring the social and political implications of engineering innovation, including Ethan Zuckerman, Jonathan Zittrain, and Yochai Benkler. As part of my assistantship I also organized the first international conference on digital activism, which took place in February, 2008, in Istanbul and included over 40 activists and experts from 16 countries. I enjoy bringing together diverse perspectives to improve shared.

Being in the intellectually rich and innovative environment of the Berkman Center also helped me see that, although I care deeply about participating in the public policy process, I wanted to be part of a more theoretically rigorous and academically focused learning environment than the Kennedy School's professional Master's program. I left Harvard after the first year of the two-year program when I was offered the position of New Media Operations Manager for President Obama's first presidential campaign in the summer of 2008. I worked for the campaign throughout the general election, assisting in the management of the 80-person New Media Department at campaign headquarters in Chicago. Seeing the world's most sophisticated digital campaign at close quarters was an invaluable experience.

After the campaign I continued to manage DigiActive and then the Meta-Activism Project. I also spent my time before returning to academia as a trainer and public speaker on digital activism. Over the past four years I have presented on panels and given keynote addresses at a variety of institutions, ranging from centers of policy formation such as USAID and USIP in Washington, DC, to public events in Spain, Mexico, Germany, and the Philippines. I have also trained activists in digital strategy in countries from Armenia to Georgia and India to Lebanon. It is important to me to contribute not only to academia, but also to policy institutions and civil society, and I would continue these activities during my Fellowship Tenure. In fact, I will present initial findings from the GDADS project in a keynote address in January at the Latin American regional meeting of the Open Government Partnership, a multilateral transparency organization.

I believe I have effectively prepared myself to become the globally engaged knowledge expert and leader that the GRFP has in mind and, with your support, I will achieve this goal.