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To cite this article: Jesse Heley, Sophie Yarker & Laura Jones (2022) Volunteering in the bath? The rise of microvolunteering and implications for policy, *Policy Studies*, 43:1, 76-89, DOI: [10.1080/01442872.2019.1645324](https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1645324)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1645324>



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Published online: 30 Jul 2019.



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Volunteering in the bath? The rise of microvolunteering and implications for policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the emergence of microvolunteering as a conceptual and practical phenomenon, as well as one which policy makers must engage with in a careful and critical fashion. Taking a lead from Smith et al. [2010. "Enlivened Geographies of Volunteering: Situated, Embodied and Emotional Practices of Voluntary Action." *Scottish Geographical Journal* 126: 258–274] who specify a need to extend our analyses beyond the formal organizational spaces of volunteering, we consider the potential impact of micro-volunteering on changing patterns of civic participation over the next decade or two. With particular reference to policy ambitions and transformations in the UK, but with reference to broader international trends also, we set out how microvolunteering is being variously defined and appropriated as a means of addressing structural barriers to "traditional" volunteering. Drawing on a range of practical examples we consider how microvolunteering potentially alters the relationship between volunteering, community and identity, as well as relates to the parallel notion of "slacktivism". Set against both positive and negative accounts of microvolunteering within the broader media, we advocate caution to policy makers looking to implement such activities, and particularly in respect to what microvolunteering can realistically achieve.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 January 2019
Accepted 9 July 2019

KEYWORDS

Volunteering;
microvolunteering;
slacktivism; online; charity;
third sector; fourth sector;
public sector

Introduction

Microvolunteering is increasingly implicated in complex networks of action and social dynamics as part of networks of volunteering. It is transforming who volunteers and how we think about this as a category. These types of activity, which are routinely characterized as being transitory and with little or no requirement for participants to repeat, have been widely lauded as a means of expanding the volunteer base for a range of charitable and care-giving organizations. In particular, microvolunteering has been lauded as having potential to better incorporate those with limited time and mobility into the volunteer

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landscape. In changing the nature of volunteering engagements, however, it inherently transforms the relations within and between participants and clients. This has implications both for organizations reliant on volunteer input and for those recipients of this voluntary activity. In particular there has been a growing critical recognition of the importance of those forms of informal volunteering and care giving carried out on a contingent and one-to-one basis. What Williams (2002) refers to as the “fourth-sector” – a term that has been more recently applied in an alternative context to describe organizations that trade for social good (Morton 2018) – both uses call attention to the increasingly complex landscape of volunteering. Within this landscape the role of technology, in particular, has become of heightened importance as a means of facilitating institutional engagements with volunteering and for both encouraging and providing new means through which individuals can give their time and expertise to good causes. For the most part, this innovation in volunteering has been allied to the rise of the internet, mobile technologies and associated devices, and particularly Smartphones over the past decade.

Inevitably, the potential of online modes of volunteer engagement have been the subject of much interest, investment and critique within practitioner, academic and policy circles over the past decade. Much of this discourse has centred on the capacity of virtual technologies to address many of those traditional barriers to volunteering and to expand the volunteer base. Including those in remote locations and individuals with mobility issues, virtual volunteering is also deemed well suited to people looking for flexibility, and particularly those unable to commit to rigid schedules on the basis of work and family commitments. With shortage of time habitually being identified as one of the most significant barriers to active engagement with good causes, it is here that the categories of virtual volunteering and micro-volunteering overlap and often blur into each other. In practice, a specific act of volunteering could be categorized as being of the micro or virtual variety, or indeed both. Moreover, depending on different individual and organizational perspectives, what counts as microvolunteering in one setting might not be viewed as such in other, depending on factors including time taken and level of expertise required, among others.

While there is as yet no hard-and-fast definition of microvolunteering, there exists a general working consensus that microvolunteering constitutes actions that are limited in duration and require little or no lasting obligations on the part of participants:

There are different definitions of microvolunteering but the generally accepted one is bite-sized, on-demand, no commitment actions that benefit a worthy cause. Microvolunteering is quick and convenient – a micro-volunteering opportunity might take less than two minutes to complete and, in some cases, can be done from the comfort of your couch in your pyjamas. (Volunteer Ireland 2018)

Noting a degree of latitude in terms of exact definitions employed by different bodies, the above description of microvolunteering as provided by Volunteer Ireland sets out the key tenets of this process: speed and convenience. In terms of the former, the time it takes an individual to complete an allotted task will naturally vary from person to person. However, and in keeping with guidelines set out by MissionBox – a knowledge sharing platform for non – profit organizations – a reasonable timescale for such tasks is between 5 and 30 min. Activities which are of longer duration, and particularly those which are potentially repetitive, are more in keeping with episodic volunteering in terms of commitment.

Examples of microvolunteering offered by MissionBox inhabit the online and offline spheres and include campaigning and communication (e.g. signing a petition, writing a blog post), fundraising (e.g. sponsorship and charity collection), research (e.g. completing a questionnaire, contributing content to Wikipedia) and practical help (e.g. baking a cake for a sale, donating computer processing time). Underscoring the diverse array of activities that microvolunteering potentially encompasses this has been echoed in the mainstream media. Writing for the Guardian newspaper, for example, Jones argues that “microvolunteering could involve anything from signing a petition or retweeting a message to taking part in a flashmob or counting birds in your garden” (*The Guardian*, 13 April 2017). It is therefore no surprise that the concept has been eagerly adopted by a growing number of organizations as a means of increasing participation and capacity, including the Cabinet Office and a range of Local Authorities in England and Wales.

The following section briefly examines this shifting policy landscape within the UK, tying this to broader international trends and case study examples. Charting the growing enthusiasm for microvolunteering in various organizational contexts, we pay particular attention to a growing awareness of the potential benefits and limits to this approach. Building on a critique of existing literature, we explore how microvolunteering intercedes and potentially challenges conventional understandings and practises of volunteering and volunteers, which in turn must shape how organizations adopt this approach as part of their activities. At a fundamental level microvolunteering poses questions regarding peoples’ attitudes towards, and engagements with, community. In this vein, deliberations around the relationship between microvolunteering and established ideas on altruism and activism (and particularly the prospect of “slacktivism”) represent the playing out of a moral in public and media discourse.

Microvolunteering in policy: UK and beyond

Writing in this journal in early 1990s and reflecting on his role as a Home Office minister with responsibility for the voluntary sector, John Patten noted that government was overtly aware that it could not, on its own, solve the array of social and environmental problems it was presented with. It therefore had, he noted, a responsibility to look to the private and charity sectors to work alongside state agencies in partnership to address these manifold issues (Patten 1991, 4). In the intervening period this perspective has been firmly accepted as a key element within policy formulation and development (although the rhetoric remains a contentious matter when considering the role that government “should” or “could” play in service delivery). Important moral debates regarding the role of the State notwithstanding, the UK policy approach over the past 30 or so years has been one of nurturing and empowering the “third sector” and formal voluntary groups.

In support of this process, a series of large-scale surveys have been adapted and developed which serve as sources of information about the changing rates of voluntary participation across generations, as well as throughout the lifecourse. This includes the series of Citizenship Surveys conducted by the UK Home Office and Department of Communities and Local Government since 2001. This increased level of scrutiny does not, however, necessarily accompany an increase in levels of volunteering. In their recent comprehensive review of datasets pertaining to volunteering in England since the early 1980s, Lindsey and

Mohan (2018) conclude that headline rates of volunteering have not changed significantly over this period despite significant social and economic upheaval. For them, this lack of movement speaks to the failure of successive governments to implement a consistent and long-term approach to volunteering policy in spite of the rhetoric surrounding its individual and social value.

A key part of this rhetorical machinery is the UK Government's Giving White Paper, published in May 2011, which pays significant attention to internet volunteering as part of its discussion of contributing time in "non-traditional ways". Within the consultation summary, for example, respondents were evidently enthusiastic about the potential for online platforms to create more attractive options of involvement among existing volunteers, and for recruiting new volunteers also. More specifically, these platforms were characterized as being "particularly amenable for global and remote volunteering, as well as being inclusive for groups who might otherwise face barriers to volunteering" (HM Cabinet Office 2011, 54). It would be wrong, however, to suggest that government policy is wholly without caution in respect to microvolunteering and its capacity to bring about significant change. In the same white paper, for example, it is subsequently noted that "non-traditional" forms of volunteering can augment, but not replace existing practice. In terms of these emergent forms of volunteering it is suggested that organizations might lack the capacity to manage volunteers in this way, and, furthermore, that this management process may in itself become overly intensive (HM Cabinet Office 2011, 55).

Qualifications aside, those claims to the inclusiveness of microvolunteering are not unique to the UK. On this point Rochester et al. (2010) stipulate that the growing weight of expectation surrounding the contribution of volunteering towards "individual development, social cohesion and addressing social need" has seen it become a prominent feature in international forums. In 2011, for example, the United Nations identified microvolunteering as being one of the fastest growing trends in global volunteering. Allied to rapid technological advancements centred on mobile and online information and communication infrastructure, this report highlighted a revolution in terms of the "who, what, when and where" of volunteering (Leigh et al. 2011, 28). In a rather bold and potentially controversial statement, the report asserts that the "the need for volunteers to be tied to specific times and locations" (Leigh et al. 2011, 28) is being greatly reduced if and potentially "eliminated". This points to what is regarded as the potential of microvolunteering to widen access and opportunity to volunteering, by overcoming some of the existing structural barriers of time, health and mobility more usually associated with traditional forms of place-based voluntarism. At the same time, this apparent disembedding of volunteering from place and more episodic forms of engagement raises questions for policy around the future trajectory and sustainability of community service delivery and support networks, as well as the welfare benefits of social interaction derived through voluntary participation.

Structural barriers to volunteering: time, health and mobility

For those who do identify as volunteers, time is often deemed to be a key factor in limiting the scope and scale of their involvements (Southby and South 2016; Tang, Morrow-Howell, and Hong 2009). However, it should not be supposed that participants across the gamut of voluntary activities and organizations are chiefly drawn from those

cohorts popularly characterized as comparatively time-rich. While previous research reveals that rates of voluntary activity fluctuates across the life course, various studies also indicate that levels of formal participation in voluntary organizations tends to be skewed towards those in middle age. On this point Li and Ferraro make the case that both occupational and familial responsibilities “spur social engagement from union halls and fraternal organizations to support groups and soccer fields” (Li and Ferraro 2006, 497). Corresponding with findings elsewhere, it should also be noted that the impact of life-course events on volunteering profiles remains largely unestablished (Curtis, Baer, and Grabb 2001; Wilson 2012), although Lancee and Radl also report that there is strong evidence from multiple international case studies for stable volunteering patterns over the lifecourse (2014, 834).

Two other important structural determinants of volunteer participation are health and mobility. Li and Ferraro (2006), for example, identify ill-health as likely being the greatest impediment to sustained voluntary participation in later life:

One suspects that health may be more intricately related to volunteering in later life, both a potential benefit and barrier; volunteering may benefit health, but poor health may preclude sustained volunteering. (Li and Ferraro 2006, 498)

For their own part, Li and Ferraro’s research signals that middle aged and older volunteers are generally in good health, and that mental health in particular is an important factor influencing social interactions in organizational settings (Li and Ferraro 2006, 511). A study undertaken in the US, these findings are echoed in research carried out in the UK, where volunteering more generally has been found to promote better mental health and offset functional decline, and especially in the transition from middle to older age (Tabassum, Mohan, and Smith 2016). This comes with the implication that volunteer activity in middle age might increase the likelihood and capacity to volunteer in later life.

Closely allied to issues of health is that of mobility, encompassing physical capabilities, car ownership and adequate communications infrastructure. Here the rural/ urban context is undoubtedly important, with those living in more remote communities often having to contend with high-cost, irregular or non-existent public transportation (Davey 2007; Gray, Shaw, and Farrington 2006; Velaga et al. 2012). Again, age is an important consideration, with reduced levels of volunteering among older adult vis-à-vis younger cohorts being partly accredited to the necessity of physical presence and the requirement of mobility associated with many volunteering roles (Morrow-Howell 2006; Mukherjee 2011). On this point, for example, research undertaken in the US has intimated that the over 60s are less predisposed to involve themselves in activities which require travelling (Rozario 2006). More generally there is some suggestion that the distance between (would-be) volunteers and associated sites of volunteering is a factor in both recruitment and retention (Wymer and Starnes 2001).

Reflecting on the issues of health, mobility and age in respect to volunteering, Mukherjee has argued that associated restrictions are “depriving volunteer agencies of valuable skills and human resources” (Mukherjee 2011, 256). In response, they make the case that online volunteering might operate as an effective mechanism through which to ensure participation through limiting physical presence, mobility requirements and more flexible schedules. If we position microvolunteering as part of this process, it

might therefore have some facility to include and integrate (some of) those cohorts who have historically been disenfranchised through harnessing mobile internet technologies; and particularly connecting people and communities “at a distance”. Peoples’ choice in terms of the volunteer organizations they can access and become part of is extended through microvolunteering, and they are therefore less restricted to those opportunities offered in their locality.

Microvolunteering in practice

Given the potentiality afforded to microvolunteering, it is of little surprise that policy makers and charitable institutions are exploring its potential for their activities. Indeed, busy and unpredictable contemporary lifestyles mean that many people are unable to commit to long-term, regular activities alongside work and family commitments. In this context, micro-volunteering is being embraced as an imperative and innovative way to overcome the perpetual barriers of time and opportunity, and to appeal to new audiences.

Among the biggest arenas in which microvolunteering has been applied has been as part of “citizen science” projects. In particular, a significant number of initiatives have made use of large numbers of online volunteers for the purpose of creating and analyzing large-scale data sets that contribute towards addressing major social challenges. Facilitating this process, the online citizen science platform Zooniverse has, for example, over one million registered volunteers who can choose to participate in various studies. These include Cell Slider, a partnership with Cancer Research UK whereby volunteers have been involved in analyzing images of cancer cells. These types of microvolunteering platforms have also proved particularly popular for large-scale environmental initiatives.

Examples of this type include Ocean Networks Canada (<http://www.oceannetworks.ca>) which brings together volunteers (who may or may not have scientific training) with marine scientists for the purpose of monitoring marine biodiversity, transformation and hazards. One such programme is “Coastbusters”, which allows members of the public to use a mobile phone application (“app”) to report unusual, large and potentially hazardous debris on the west coast of Canada. This involves uploading photographs and descriptions to an organizational database, and these reports are forwarded to the relevant authorities where appropriate. These photos are also posted on social media platforms to highlight both potential dangers and the impact of pollution more broadly. Within the UK the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has also embraced the concept of microvolunteering, offering a range of activities which can be done “in under an hour, online or offline, in your home, garden, local green space or even at work” (<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved>). Including “counting birds in your garden” and “social media volunteer”, participants are encouraged to take part “on a computer or smartphone, fully dressed, in your pyjamas or even in the bath!”

Turning to the fourth-sector and those more interpersonal voluntary activities, microvolunteering has also made a significant impact. A popular example is “Be My Eyes”, a mobile application that allows blind and visually impaired people to connect with sighted volunteers via a live video connection. This allows volunteers to assist with a range of daily tasks that the visually impaired may need assistance with. According to the organization’s website this app has over 500,000 registered users across 150 countries, harnessing “the power of generosity, technology and human connection” (<https://www.bemyeyes.com>).

Another notable example of fourth sector microvolunteering is “helpfulpeep” (<https://www.helpfulpeeps.com/>). Based on a social networking model familiar to younger generations, this organization connects people who may be able to provide help with tasks such as language learning, dog walking or helping at an event. Depending on the nature of the activity, this help can be given virtually or in person within the local community and is intended to overcome some of the disconnection associated with the digital age.

These examples clearly demonstrate how mobile communications are providing new opportunities for people to take a more active part in civil society, bringing the online and offline worlds for “bite-sized” good deeds. We should not, however, assume that this engagement is evenly dispersed in terms of geography or demography. Based on data compiled by the micro-volunteering platform *Help from Home*, Jones (*The Guardian*, April 13, 2017) reports that more than half of all micro-volunteering actions that took place in 2015 were in the UK and most were carried out by smart phone carrying young people. Nor should we assume that microvolunteering is in any way supplanting more traditional types of volunteering. Some initiatives, such as Coast Busters, are only possible through online applications. In many instances, however, microvolunteering sits alongside established forms of volunteering within host organizations which predate the internet age (for example, the RSPB). This is an obvious point, no doubt, but it is important to recognize the limitations of microvolunteering for both individuals and host institutions, as well as those potential negative implications for traditional volunteering that increased levels of microvolunteering might give rise. These include implications for identity politics and community, as well as a problematic moral dimension of engagement characterized in some quarters of the media as “slacktivism”.

Microvolunteering, identity politics and community

Despite the ostensible capacity for microvolunteering to positively address a number of structural constraints to volunteering, its potential to generate increased levels of social inclusion on the part of participants is far from inevitable and should not be overstated. On the one hand it will be heavily dependent on the approach taken by voluntary organizations engaging with microvolunteering, and how far they are both willing and able to integrate them into their existing activities. On the other hand, it will also depend on the willingness and ability of potential volunteers to identify and engage with these opportunities. On this point, we should be wary of assumptions regarding the profile of those who can and will take part. Returning to Mukherjee’s study of older online volunteers, for example, there is evidence that there is predisposition for volunteering based on occupational background. The rapid rise of online technology across all aspects of working and social life, however, is shifting the outlook and behaviour of the baby boomer generation as they become more proficient in ICT (Mukherjee 2011, 262). This tallies with the discursive portrayal of the confident and competent “silver surfer”, and with a documented ability for older demographics to make increased use of ICT is a means through which to overcome a social digital divide (Selwyn 2004, 370).

In respect to the mechanisms and motivations behind volunteering, microvolunteering might also hold consequences for one of the most commonly cited reasons to participate in civil society; the desire to meet new people and build social networks. By definition, microvolunteering does not offer the same opportunities for sustained, face-to-face

interaction as traditional modes of volunteering. It follows that this has likely implications in terms of status, including the motives related to being seen and recognized as an active member of society. Within this framework “community” and “place” are relevant terms of reference, both reflecting and shaping attitudes towards volunteering, as well as providing both incentives and barriers to participation. In their ethnographic study of local civil society in Wales, for example, Dallimore et al. (2018) reaffirm the importance of belonging, identification and place-based interaction as important determinants of volunteering. Calling attention to shifting intergenerational expectations and experiences of community support structures, particular importance is attached to entry of the baby boomer generation into older age. This, as Skinner (2014) reminds us, brings fresh demands on existing care provision, but, at the same time, also presents the possibility of new sources of leadership within communities.

It might also be that intergenerational differences in volunteering reflect alternate ambitions and motivations, having a knock-on effect in terms of tendencies to engage in (micro)volunteering or not. A range of studies over the past 15 or so years have documented a shift towards “modern” or “individualized” types of volunteer involvement driven by a range of more self-interested motivations and with weaker organizational attachments (Handy, Brodeur, and Cnaan 2006; Hustinx, Haski-Leventhal, and Handy 2008). As Hustinx, Handy, and Cnaan (2010, 76) describe: “[m]odern volunteers often prefer short term volunteering assignments or discrete task-specific volunteering projects, which commit them to particular tasks or times rather than traditional long-term assignments” which involve a greater commitment to organizations and communities. Efforts on the part of younger people to distinguish themselves in the job market might also be of consequence in terms of individual volunteer profiles. For example, Sallie Yea notes that younger volunteers might be “driven by the desire to cultivate the Self in ways that extend career trajectories” (Yea 2018, 170).

It is therefore significant to consider whether or not an important dimension of volunteering is at risk of being undermined if people are increasingly choosing to participate in a more sporadic, less intense and more virtually-mediated ways. These concerns have also been raised by Bright (2012), and Jochum and Paylor (2013), who suggest that microvolunteering might not cultivate similar levels of satisfaction – and in turn, retention – as traditional volunteering as a consequence of diminished levels of interpersonal contact between volunteer and recipient, and a reduced capacity to see the impact of their work. They, too, indicate that microvolunteering is less likely to engender a “key benefit of volunteering” which is the sense of belonging (Jochum and Paylor 2013, 7).

However, and given the lack of sustained research into microvolunteering, we should nevertheless be wary of making claims regarding opportunity costs for individuals (and broader society) on the basis of them undertaking microvolunteering. Certainly, we would not share the view of US social sector consultant David Anderson, who has characterized microvolunteering as being “stupid” and as providing an “illusion of social engagement that threatens the work of people who engage with social issues in a serious way” (cited in Jochum and Paylor 2013). A more balanced approach is needed, and one which perhaps builds on well-versed ideas of social capital (Putnam 2001). Here scholarship has, for example, considered the role of the internet in relation to decreased levels of civic participation. In this regard, we are led to ask whether the rise of virtual communities has contributed to this trend, or if it can potentially arrest or

even reverse declining institutional involvements? While much more work is needed on this front, current analysis suggests civic engagement increases when virtual ties build up around communities of place and interest (Blanchard and Horan 2000; Wilson, Wallace, and Farrington 2015).

Whilst the majority of micro-volunteering takes place online, there are a number of UK-based examples where online micro-volunteering platforms have facilitated forms of place-based interaction and interventions performed both by individuals and groups of volunteers. The aforementioned “helpfulpeeps” is one, as is website “good gym” (www.goodgym.org) which links exercise with altruism by establishing connections between its members and older people in their local community with differing needs. In this model members run to the home of older individuals to help with a one-off practical task that they are no longer able to do on their own, such as moving furniture or changing a lightbulb. Describing itself as a “fine grain” approach to volunteering, participation in good gym is based on frequent low impact activities that are integrated usefully into the lives of clients and volunteers. Emphasizing experiences as both runners and volunteers, the good gym programme highlights flexibility in its literature and is clearly aware of the danger of foregrounding commitment. Indeed, there is a sense that drawing attention to commitment might well undermine its attractiveness to new members: “Because it fits into our lives it’s easier for us to commit for the longer term, it makes it easy for us to keep going” (good gym website). Indeed, perhaps stretching the “no commitment” definition of micro-volunteering, good gym participants can also choose to undertake a regular weekly slot where they run to visit and spend time with an isolated older person. However, as well as seeking to alleviate loneliness amongst the elderly, good gym is posited as a platform that establishes social connections between people of all ages with group runs and activities. This is pertinent at a time when loneliness is becoming a target for policy intervention (e.g. *A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness* [HM DCMS 2018]) and initiatives such as good gym might be harnessed as part of community-based social prescribing schemes.

Microvolunteering, then, opens up possibilities for volunteers to engage with a wider range of organizations, and in such a way that might engender new virtual social networks as well as develop existing networks in place. Nonetheless, it remains likely that engaging in microvolunteering alone will not bring about directly comparable experiences in terms of notions of identity, ownership and belonging. Microvolunteering, then, is experientially different, but this is not to necessarily to infer that these experiences are essentially less valuable to those engaged in these activities. There are, however, potential implications for volunteer outcomes more generally. While we should be wary of falling into an “either-or” trap, there has been some concern that acts of online microvolunteering might be effectively reducing the propensity for individuals to undertake volunteering work which is more corporeal, consistent and beneficial for society at large. This is particularly apparent in media accounts of “slacktivism” and the dangers of ephemeral, non-committal forms of engagement in good causes.

Slacktivism and the problematic moral dimensions of microvolunteering

Combining the words “slacker” and “activism”, the term “slacktivism” appeared during the mid-2000s in the context of the rise of social media, particularly Facebook and, more recently,

Twitter. Defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause (e.g. signing an online petition), characterized as requiring little time, effort, or commitment, or as providing more personal satisfaction than public impact” (OED 2018) the practical dimensions of this account resonate with descriptions of microvolunteering, albeit with additional, deleterious connotations.

In this vein slacktivism is a subject that has been discussed in the popular media at some length, being derided in some quarters as an often-superficial mechanism for people to feel virtuous without doing a great deal of practical help for others. James Surowiecki, for example, writing in for the *New Yorker* on 25 July 2016, allies much of this censure to financial concerns; i.e. that critics deem the exercise as tending to amplify “people’s tendency to donate for emotional reasons, rather than after careful evaluation of where money can do the most good”. Going further, in a 2013 Editorial for the *New Scientist*, Sara Reardon reported that a potential knock-on effect of slacktivism is that it could actually be associated with a reduced tendency to donate both time and money to those same causes (*New Scientist*, 2 May 2013).

In addition to media deliberations on the fiscal implications of slacktivism, questions have also been asked of its ability to translate virtual advocacy into practical support. Thus, an anonymous charity professional writing in *The Guardian* has pointed to the potentially detrimental impacts which fleeting online engagements with good causes may engender:

This failure to create true activists will have a detrimental impact on the charity sector’s work. Individuals will think that raising awareness on social media means they are an advocate, and as a result will not engage more deeply in campaigns or lobbying. Instead, a social media post saying “We should do something!” or a simple graphic share makes people feel like they have done their part. (*The Guardian*, January 20, 2016)

Challenging the tendency to oversimplify these debates Ben Matthews, also writing in the *Guardian* on the 6 July 2011, had previously pointed out that microvolunteering is generally of more benefit than slacktivist actions, transcending the act of adding a “like” to a Twitter feed or adding a name to an online petition. Such statements clearly draw a line between microvolunteering and slacktivism, but they do recognize that this line is occasionally ambiguous. They also underscore the need for organizations employing microvolunteering to set out how these activities are beneficial and serve a wider purpose. From an ethical perspective, this outlook is shared by many charitable bodies in the UK including the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), who, on their website, suggest that “tapping into the microvolunteering buzz” could provide a firm basis for its membership to entice more people into “philanthropic community engagement” within and beyond their localities. Certainly, the capacity of microvolunteers to affect change at multiple scales is widely acknowledged underpinning its attraction for many, appealing to a desire to feel “part of something bigger”. This resonates with that body of work which considers the rise of global civil society and global citizenship, connecting the role of individuals in addressing issues that are global in scale such as climate change and ocean plastics (Griffiths 2017).

In terms of practicalities, Matthews also calls attention to the tendency for critics to misrepresent microvolunteer platforms in terms of their ambitions and claims to impact. Rather, argues Matthews, many of these platforms are very much aware of what can and cannot be reasonably achieved on the part of their facilities and volunteers.

By extension microvolunteering should be considered as a provider of niche services addressing specific problems, and “not be judged on how many volunteers it converts for macro-volunteering” (*The Guardian*, 6 July, 2011). It is therefore case that many organizations should not necessarily seek to differentiate between different types of volunteering on the basis of being more or less productive or valued. Rather, they should look to inspire and facilitate participation in their programmes through a variety of means, recognizing that individual preferences and capacities to contribute vary, and over time.

Needs, expectation and a way forward: concluding remarks

In an era when the state has actively looked to devolve responsibilities (or at least hold a fragile line in the face of increased costs and demands), and where the mantra of social prescribing is gaining traction, then microvolunteering might well have its part to play. However, this is premised on a firmer and more brevilouquent understanding of what microvolunteering is and what it is not, and what microvolunteering is and is not capable of achieving. Ultimately, many those practical and ethical debates which have accompanied the rise of microvolunteering revolve around the question of what constitutes volunteering, and what does not. We are not suggesting that we can in any way provide a firm, or even partial, answer to this. However, it is important to recognize that a significant weight of critique around microvolunteering can be reduced to the matter of “who benefits”? Most obviously these constitute the recipients of charitable interaction (people, communities, environments etc) and the volunteer base; with microvolunteering adding further complexity in the relations within and between these categories. In terms of policy and practice, microvolunteering has also provided new opportunities, but also challenges, for voluntary organizations.

Putting aside those more principled assessments of microvolunteering as being the “fast food” of big society, representative of a postmodern shift towards consumerism and individualism (Shanks in Jochum and Paylor 2013, 7), a range of more mundane, utilitarian challenges face organizations looking to employ microvolunteering as part of their operations. Chief among these is the more limited levels of control these organizations might exercise over interactions between volunteers and clients, and the need to put further measures in place to encourage and galvanize the volunteer base (Jochum and Paylor 2013, 7; see also Bright 2012). This point, however, assumes that retention of volunteers is an intrinsic aspect of volunteering across the board.

From the perspective of delivering outcomes via microvolunteering – such as providing assistance reading a label through Be My Eyes or changing a lightbulb as part of a goodgym run – a “revolving door” model does not constitute a fundamental problem in terms of deriving positive outcomes. However, where more structured engagements are required, bringing formality and responsibility, microvolunteering does not bring the same level of stability and “guarantees” as traditional volunteering. On this basis, microvolunteering holds an inherently limited capacity to provide essential services, and be co-opted as such, but should be taken seriously as part of a suite of delivery mechanisms. As part of this process it is essential that policy makers make it clear what they mean when applying the term microvolunteering, being aware that it is a “fuzzy concept” and with a range of interpretations. In particular, we must be careful not to automatically conflate microvolunteering with virtual volunteering. They are not

interchangeable, but there are clear overlaps and elisions, and they and raise similar issues and affordances in regard to their place within volunteering landscapes.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant ES/L009099/1; and European Research Council under Grant 339567.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/L009099/1]; FP7 Ideas: European Research Council [grant number 339567].

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