It wasn’t long ago that college students were pegged as a passive, narcissistic bunch who regarded the idea of direct action with a collective "meh."

That stereotype may be changing. Students this year led a series of high-profile protests, occupying administrative buildings and, in at least two cases, prompting college leaders to resign.

Nevertheless, contempt remains high for "slacktivism" — a neologism describing those who might tweet their support for a cause but don’t otherwise put skin in the game.

But is slacktivism really such a bad thing? Not at all, says Sandra González-Bailón, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania. In a new paper, Ms. González-Bailón and a group of researchers at New York University and the University of Oxford argue that slacktivists play an important role by amplifying the complaints and testimony at the heart of protest movements.

"Their power lies in their numbers," write the researchers. In the end, "their aggregate contribution to the spread of protest messages is comparable in magnitude to that of the core participants."

*The Chronicle* talked with Ms. González-Bailón about slacktivism and its discontents. The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Q. Complete this sentence: "You might be a slacktivist if …"
A. … you only click to "Like" or retweet messages, but you don’t actually take your engagement beyond that.

Q. You have another word for slacktivists: "the critical periphery." Can you explain what that is?

A. That’s a term we use to differentiate the people who are very central in a network. We focused particularly on the Turkish protests that emerged in May of 2013. The core participants are the most central users in Twitter in the network we analyzed, who also happened to be the users on the streets. They were taking photos and videos of what was happening.

What we call "the critical periphery" are the users that are connected to that core because they retweeted once or twice. They are the users who, on an individual basis, didn’t create a lot of information, but there are so many of them that when you aggregate all that activity, they make a big difference in terms of echoing the information that comes from the core.

Q. When the Supreme Court upheld gay marriage, in June, a lot of people tinted their Facebook profile photos with a rainbow flag. When Paris was attacked, in November, a lot of people tinted their photos with a French flag. Some people criticized these lightweight displays of support as unearned or inconsequential, saying tinting your Facebook picture doesn’t "do anything." Are they right?

A. It depends on what you mean by "inconsequential." Often whatever social change these movements are pushing for doesn’t happen for years or decades, but that doesn’t mean that they didn’t make a difference. If we think of social movements as engines for creating awareness that can eventually help them push for that change in the form of legislation, then raising awareness is important.

You still need a committed minority at the core — the brave ones who are willing to risk their lives or invest a lot of time and energy defending a cause. What we’re claiming is that, even if you have a small minority of highly committed people, you still need their message to reverberate in society. Slacktivism is a way of allowing the wave to expand. I would never claim that it’s enough, but it’s an important part of the chain.

Q. So even if slacktivism isn’t forcing the issue in the same way as occupying a building, it still does something — and over time, if a person sees enough friends or family members expressing
solidarity with a movement, the person’s attitude might shift?

A. Changing your profile picture might make some of your friends on Facebook become aware of a given cause, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they will change their minds. It’s a necessary step in this process of changing attitudes and increasing solidarity, but it is not sufficient.

The thing to understand here is that social media has transformed radically how we get exposed to information. In the past, social movements were invisible if they weren’t in the newspapers or on TV. In Turkey, during the first hours of the protests on the streets, which were becoming really violent because of the police reaction, the main TV channels were showing, like, penguin documentaries. There was censorship.

In the past, that probably would have been the end of it. The only way that news could come out of the country was through social media. And that happened because people retweeted messages, photos, and videos. So yes, slacktivism might seem irrelevant. But when you see how that changes the levels of exposure to information, compared to before, then I would say it changes things for the better.

Q. Some people for whom social protest is important see Internet people using a hashtag or retweeting some slogan, and they say, "This sucks. People are doing this instead of actually going to a protest." Is there any suggestion that people are choosing slacktivism instead of traditional activism, or is that a false choice?

A. It’s difficult to know what would have happened. You’d have to run an experiment with control groups and so forth. I do think there is empirical evidence suggesting that when you get exposed to information online — if my Twitter friends are using the #occupy hashtag — then the chances that I will start talking about that, or even go to the streets, are higher. The impact is small, but it’s there, and it’s significant.

I wouldn’t say using a hashtag is a substitute for going to the streets. If you’re going to go to the streets, then you’d use the hashtag and go to the streets. When movements don’t manage to mobilize people, don’t blame social media. Social media is just an instrument.

Q. Has social media made traditional activism — the kinds of protests people show up for — more powerful?
A. I think it has. It has certainly made it easier to mobilize resources. It doesn’t cost any money to record a video and post it online now. It has made it more powerful in that sense.

But there’s no magic formula. It’s one thing to claim social media has democratized access to the public domain. It is another to say any message can go viral if you want it to. You still need good causes, good ideas, good leadership for social media to become really useful.

Steve Kolowich writes about how colleges are changing, and staying the same, in the digital age. Follow him on Twitter @stevekolowich, or write to him at steve.kolowich@chronicle.com.

Questions or concerns about this article? Email us or submit a letter to the editor.