

Political Consumerism and Buycott's War on Koch Industries: Activism or slacktivism?

Jill Harkins

A white fist punches the air, grasping tightly to a fluorescent green dollar bill — the Buycott app's icon pictorially represents the power of consumer decisions. Buycott was developed by freelance programmer Ivan Pardo and released in May 2013 in order to provide its users with, in the words of its creator, "a platform that empowers [them] to make well-informed purchasing decisions."¹ The app allows consumers to make politically informed purchases, using their money as their ideological voice.

After downloading the app, users can join campaigns ranging from "Made in Palestine," which allows users to intentionally purchase Palestinian-made products, to "Demand GMO Labeling," which allows users to avoid purchasing food products from companies that resist the required labeling of food containing GMOs. Then, when the user is considering buying a product, she can scan its barcode and Buycott will tell her whether the product is sold by a company that she's ideologically for or against. Urban Outfitters, Starbucks, Kellogg's, Coca Cola, Sodastream and Sabra have all been targeted by various user-created campaigns on Buycott.

Theoretically, the app was created for both conservative and liberal users, plus all those users in between. However, the app boasts overwhelmingly liberal campaigns, perhaps because liberal political participants are generally younger and more likely to utilize such a technology.²

One of Buycott's largest and most politically liberal campaigns, boasting 99,219 members, is "Boycott Koch Industries," which allows users to avoid purchasing anything that is produced by Koch Industries. Owned by the libertarian and politically powerful Koch brothers, Koch Industries is the second largest privately held corporation in the United States.³ Koch Industries extends beyond consumer-products, and the revenue from its pipelines and chemicals insulates it from complete eradication by the Buycott campaign. In addition, the vast political network that the brothers have constructed over the past decades provides them with many other sources of funding than just their own cash on hand.⁴ For these reasons, Buycott is much more likely to prove effective against purely consumer-driven companies, such as Urban Outfitters or Starbucks, than against Koch Industries.

Boycott creator Ivan Pardo claims, "The premise of the app is that organized people can effect social change if they target their spending."⁵ His goal, then, seems to be to have a direct impact on the revenue of the companies that Boycott's users target. He admits that he's not yet entirely sure that his lofty agenda will be successful. The emergence of such a technology in the realm of social movements, along with its creator's irresolute objective for its use, raises a number of questions concerning the intentions of the users of the "Boycott Koch Industries" campaign.

Do they think they hold real political influence, or do they find satisfaction in feeling as though they part of some larger movement? Are they slacktivists aiming to take an easy stand by targeting their spending rather than doing something more politically active? If the 99,219 members of the campaign "Boycott Koch Industries" can't actually bring down the seemingly invincible brothers, why bother? The answer seems to lie in an inherent personal desire on the part of politically aware and active individuals to remove themselves from activities or ideologies they deem undesirable in as many ways as

possible, including by limiting their purchasing options.

"The Kochs are on a whole different level. There's no one else who has spent this much money. The sheer dimension of it is what sets them apart.

They have a pattern of lawbreaking, political manipulation, and obfuscation. I've been in Washington since Watergate, and I've never seen anything like it. They are the Standard Oil of our times".⁶

- Charles Lewis,
Center for Public
Integrity,

Brothers David Koch, chairman and CEO, and Charles Koch, executive vice president, have led Koch Industries since their father, the founder, died in 1967. Subsidiaries of the conglomerate include Georgia Pacific, which owns the paper towel and napkin-producing brands Brawny, Quilted Northern, Angel Soft, Dixie, Sparkle and Vanity Fair, as well as Invista, which produces Lycra fibers, a stretchy material similar to spandex.⁷⁸ They also invest heavily in American Greetings.⁹

The corporation's remaining subsidiaries,

including Koch Pipeline Company, L.P. and Koch Chemical Technology Group, L.L.C. don't produce consumer products, and thus aren't susceptible to Boycott's activist strategy. The estimated revenue of Koch Industries as of December 2013 is \$115 billion.¹⁰ The corporation has not released information distinguishing the revenue from these companies from that of its consumer-driven companies mentioned above. This prohibits the evaluation of exactly what percentage of Koch Industries' revenue Boycott could possibly affect, but as only two of the conglomerate's 10 subsidiaries dabbles in consumer-products, this number can be conservatively estimated as less than half.

The Koch brothers use this revenue to promote their central ideological principle: Governmental regulation should deteriorate to almost nothing. When David ran for the vice presidency in 1979, he advocated the dissolution of the FBI, the CIA, the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Department of Energy, as well as the complete elimination of gun laws, minimum wage laws, social security and all taxes.¹¹ Individuals and the market should be left to act naturally and within their own desired

terms without the oversight of the federal government.

Their political clout is obvious, but the way in which they spend their money is often hidden behind “slippery organizations with generic-sounding names.”¹² Such organizations include Americans for Prosperity (AFP), the Cato Institute (formerly the Charles Koch Foundation), and Citizens for a Sound Economy. The plethora organizations under the Koch auspices make discovering exactly how much cash they contribute to conservative political candidates and causes virtually impossible. The network through which they funnel their money and promote their causes is so intricate that both supporters and critics refer to it as the “Kochtopus”; the Cato Institute think tank and AFP, a nonprofit group that promotes Tea Party ideals, act as the tentacle organism’s central nervous system.¹³

Similarly, Koch Industries’ status as a privately held corporation creates challenges in gauging its revenue from year to year. The status means that the company does not sell stock and is not required to submit reports of its earnings to the Security and Exchange Commission. Revenue can only be disclosed

voluntarily by the company. General revenue statistics released by the company span large amounts of time, which creates difficulty in evaluating whether Buycott has actually damaged Koch Industries’ profits in the year and a half since its release.

Although the exact dollar value of contributions the brothers have made over the past few years is known only to themselves, the information concerning the money funneled through their most prominent organizations is available to the public and scrutinized by the media. According to expense reports filed by AFP in 2012, the organization spent \$122 million during that year’s election cycle in an attempt to unseat incumbent President Barack Obama; it had channeled only \$72 million combined into elections in the previous eight years since its inception.¹⁴ The organization allegedly had even more ambitious goals for the 2014 midterm elections. According to a memo titled “Confidential Investor Update” given to the group’s donors in the spring, AFP planned to spend more than \$125 million in flipping the Senate from blue to red and maintaining a Republican majority in the House.¹⁵ A source close to AFP claimed

that the \$125 million projection was a “very conservative estimate. We’re on track for more than that.”¹⁶ AFP’s filings for contributions to the 2014 election will not be available until December 2015.

The willingness of the Kochtopus’ central nervous system to increase its spending to \$125 million on a midterm election, regardless of that election’s significance, suggests that the Koch brothers aren’t particularly wounded by the Buycott campaign to disarm them. Because much of AFP’s funding comes from donors and investors, rather than from the brothers’ own personal bank accounts, the group’s spending isn’t a perfect measure of the impact of the app on the revenue of Koch Industries.

However, evaluating the brothers’ political power via their ability to influence other wealthy individuals to contribute to their causes may be even more significant than gauging it through their cash on hand, as it indicates that whether or not Koch Industries’ revenue has decreased, the brothers will maintain the influence they have built over the past four decades via their intricate network of allies and donors. The Koch brothers’ strategy of contributing only to causes that will subsequently increase their

massive personal wealth — including their dedication to lobbying against environmental protection that would decrease the efficiency of their 4,000 miles of gas pipelines and single power plant, and their commitment to decreasing taxes for the wealthy — has seemingly reached a peak from which the joint sovereigns can't be torn down. Even if the Koch brothers went bankrupt tomorrow, they would still have access to the funds of this mass network.

If the Koch brothers aren't losing political steam or influence because of the nearly 100,000 consumers who boycott their products, why do the members of "Boycott Koch Industries" continue to limit their purchases, and are their attempts worthy of the classification of "slacktivism"?

In her dissertation "Boycotting Chick-fil-A: A tale of religion, politics and consumption," Victoria Leigh Hannon of the University of Colorado Boulder offers an in-depth case study of the simultaneous boycotts and buycotts of Chick-fil-A in the summer of 2012. She concludes that political consumerism is "a space for

negotiation of meaning and values."¹⁷ Although not entirely critical of the practice, she says, "Simply by taking a side, or locating themselves through an aesthetic style, the consumer can relate to people that are taking a more active response, providing them with the moral satisfaction of political action without the need to actually take part. This assuages any guilt that the person may have about not taking an active stance."¹⁸ Hannon, then, seems to qualify specific forms of political consumerism as slacktivism only if the actors evade participation in political activity outside of the consumer arena.

In their book *Political Consumerism: Global Responsibility in Action*, political scientists Dietlind Stolle and Michele Micheletti claim that political consumers generally are active outside of their product consumption, thereby excluding the members of "Boycott Koch Industries" from Hannon's definition of slacktivism. The writers show through surveys in 21 countries that political consumers are more likely to sign petitions, demonstrate, work for a political party and donate money to political causes than are their nonpolitical consumer counterparts.¹⁹ They claim that

"political consumerism does not crowd out other forms of political participation; indeed, political consumerism is an additional tool of participation for those who are already active."²⁰

Some researchers, however, disagree with Stolle and Micheletti's claims that political consumers are politically active outside of the consumer sphere, and thus would disagree with their hypothesized classification of the users of "Boycott Koch Industries". In their study "Political consumerism: Civic engagement and the social media connection," political scientists Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Lauren Copeland and Bruce Bimber describe political consumerism as "a form of non-institutional, informal action embodying the kind of personalized, individualized, lifestyle-oriented politics that has become more common in recent decades."²¹ They claim that those active in political consumerism through outlets similar to Boycott are actually less likely to participate politically outside of their consumer habits, as their decision to boycott focuses more around a single important issue than an overall political agenda. For example, boycotting companies that

lobby against the required labeling of foods containing GMOs is motivated by a desire for healthy food, not by some larger political goal.

Stole and Micheletti's claims, however, are more applicable to the members of "Boycott Koch Industries" than are de Zúñiga, Copeland and Bimber's because the Kochs' array of political involvement is so complex, although focused on the single driving motivation of deregulation. Thus, an individual willing to boycott them would have to be knowledgeable about a wide variety of political topics in order to adequately understand, much less resist, the Koch brothers' goals. Boycotting the politics of the Koch brothers is not equivalent to the "lifestyle-oriented politics" of boycotting GMOs for health reasons because the brothers are so inherently political across a wide spectrum of issues.

As the members of "Boycott Koch Industries" are active outside of the consumer arena, their political consumerist actions can't be

termed slacktivist. According to Stolle and Micheletti, the desire to make purchases on an ideological basis – in addition to acting politically against the Koch brothers in other ways – is driven by a feeling of great personal responsibility not to contribute to undesirable causes.²² Hannon, though she views some methods of political consumerism as forms of slacktivism, conceives it as a way to construct identity. She claims, "Things now represent an outward projection of our narrative; they declare 'I see myself in a certain way.'"²³ This identity construction supports the notion that the members of "Boycott Koch Industries" are more interested in personally refraining from contributing to causes they don't agree with than actually making an impact on the revenue of ideologically powerful businesses.

This analysis reveals that while the use of Buycott against Koch Industries doesn't quite have the financial impact that creator Ivan Pardo had intended, it does fulfill the desire of the app users in

providing them an additional method of distancing themselves from worldviews and activities they don't agree with. This satisfaction in consumer actions doesn't derive simply from the alleviation of the need to take a stand in other ways, as the users are likely to remain politically active through other outlets, and so the alleged political participation of the users of "Boycott Koch Industries" outside of the consumer arena absolve them of the charge of slacktivism. At the very least, Buycott allows its users to prevent their own \$2.99, spent on a roll of Brawny paper towels, from becoming David Koch's \$2.99. Whether he uses that money to buy a sandwich or to train Tea Party activists, the desire of the users of Buycott to not put money into the pockets of two men who they are so ideologically against is certainly natural and seems to be the only conceivable way to punish, even in a trivial way, the politically omnipotent owners of Koch Industries.

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² "Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change," Pew

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³ "America's Largest Private Companies 2013," *Forbes*, December 2013, Internet (accessed September 21, 2014).

⁴ Matea Gold, "A rare look inside the Koch brothers political empire," *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2014, Internet (accessed November 11, 2014).

⁵ Sonya James, "Q&A: Ivan Pardo, creator of Buycott, on politically savvy consumerism," *Smart Planet*,

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⁶ Jane Mayer, "Covert Operations," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2010, Internet (accessed September 20, 2014).

⁷ "Georgia-Pacific Products," *Georgia-Pacific*, Internet, (accessed September 30, 2014).

⁸ "LYCRA® Fiber," *Invista*, Internet (accessed September 19, 2014).

⁹ Andrea Murphy, "Weiss Family To Take American Greetings Private With Help From The Koch Brothers," *Forbes*, April 1, 2013, Internet (accessed September 22, 2014).

¹⁰ "America's Largest Private Companies 2013," *Forbes*, December 2013, Internet (accessed September 21, 2014).

¹¹ Jane Mayer, "Covert Operations," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2010, Internet (accessed September 20, 2014).

¹² Jane Mayer, "Covert Operations," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2010, Internet (accessed September 20, 2014).

¹³ Jane Mayer, "Covert Operations," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2010, Internet (accessed September 20, 2014).

¹⁴ Michael Beckel, "Koch-backed nonprofit spent record cash in 2012," The Center for Public Integrity, November 14, 2013, Internet (accessed September 19, 2014).

¹⁵ Kenneth P. Vogel, "Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity plans \$125 million spending spree," *Politico*, May 9, 2014, Internet (accessed September 15, 2014).

¹⁶ Kenneth P. Vogel, "Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity plans \$125 million spending spree," *Politico*, May 9, 2014, Internet (accessed September 15, 2014).

¹⁷ Dietlind Stolle and Michele Micheletti, *Political Consumerism: Global Responsibility in Action*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, Print.

¹⁸ Victoria Leigh Hannon, "Boycotting Chic-fil-A: A tale of religion, politics and consumption,"

ProQuest LLC, 2013, Internet (accessed September 9, 2014).

¹⁹ Dietlind Stolle and Michele Micheletti, *Political Consumerism: Global Responsibility in Action*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, Print.

²⁰ Dietlind Stolle and Michele Micheletti, *Political Consumerism: Global Responsibility in Action*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, Print.

²¹ Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Lauren Copeland, and Bruce Bimber, "Political consumerism: Civic engagement and the social media connection," *New Media & Society* 16.3, Internet (accessed September 9, 2014).

²² Dietlind Stolle and Michele Micheletti, *Political Consumerism: Global Responsibility in Action*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, Print.

²³ Victoria Leigh Hannon, "Boycotting Chic-fil-A: A tale of religion, politics and consumption," *ProQuest LLC*, 2013, Internet (accessed September 9, 2014).