

Digital Activism at the Intersection of Social Media and Political Movement

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Abstract

Digital activism, which is defined as political engagement via internet-connected technologies and social media platforms, has radically changed the ways in which movements attract supporters and spread their political messages. This paper takes an exhaustive look at digital activism at the confluence of social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter with political movement-building; it assesses both its transformative potential and major limitations. Social media affordances such as reduced cost of participation, signaling identity, and algorithmic curation act as important catalysts for movement success. However, there are very serious challenges to the integrity of digital activism that this paper will note: increasing censorship, deepfakes, coordinated inauthentic behavior attacks against us all from within the system itself expose ecosystem vulnerabilities and make it harder than ever before to tell real people apart from manipulated ones. The analysis focuses on that even though the internet is a giant leap forward for civic participation, it does not take away from the fact that closing digital divides in access and usage equity as well as ensuring government accountability are still very much part of the equation. Transformative potential does not just come with technological innovation; rather it comes with paired democratic governance frameworks, digital literacy initiatives, and human rights protections online as well as offline.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Social Media, Political Movement

1. Introduction

Digital activism—political engagement via electronic technologies like Internet-connected devices, computers, and smartphones—combines social-media outreach and movement-building efforts to reach larger audiences for political interaction and social change. Social media encompasses digital interfaces and applications that facilitate collective, real-time, peer-to-peer interaction and information-sharing. Platforms that operate within the Internet like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter are the primary digital channels through which individuals mobilize, disseminate, and respond to participatory political content integrated within other online activities. Political movements seek to affect social, political, legal, or cultural change by building public support outside established governmental institutions. For-shortened political-movement campaigns, digital activism uses social media to disseminate content addressing core grievances, strategies for action, and means for public engagement. The intention is not to supplant traditional means of political

mobilization, but to reach broader awareness of their prioritization and claims of urgency.

Two key perspectives shape theory and analysis of digital activism. The first posits that contemporary mobilization builds upon long-established political practices with variation limited to technological affordances that affect the scale of interaction. In this view, the difference between activism rooted in broadcast mass communication and that responding to social-media diffusion is one of scale and economic cost. The second perspective emphasizes the advent of digitally connected, non-hierarchically organized, participatory, open-ended collectives sustained through online interaction. Within this lens, political movement and collective action reflect signatures of a society characterized by slogans of freedom, liberty, and democracy. Further, the politics of contemporary digital activism is positioned as a struggle over the formation of mass collective action and discourse variation that distinguishes today's actors (Dey, 2016).

2. Theoretical Foundations of Digital Activism

Digital activism is fundamentally the strategic use of digital technologies that aim to facilitate significant political and social change in various forms. This form of activism encompasses a diverse range of activities, which include but are not limited to awareness-raising campaigns designed to draw attention to urgent issues that are often ignored or overlooked by mainstream media outlets. These campaigns play a critical role in ensuring that vital topics receive the consideration and attention they deserve. (Ghobadi and Sonenshein 2024).

Moreover, digital activism also involves the organization and mobilization of efforts, making it significantly easier for individuals to carry out various political actions with greater efficiency. Political movements now increasingly rely on a multitude of social media platforms to effectively assemble supporters and to maintain critical momentum in between physical protests or gatherings. The various affordances provided by social media—such as ease of access to information, distributed leadership roles, real-time feedback, and the ability to participate in widely shared public discourse—serve to lower the thresholds for joining collective movements. This is especially impactful for individuals who may be unwilling or unable to participate in traditional, physical marches and protests in public spaces, thus expanding the reach and inclusivity of these movements. (B. Chibita, 2016); (Garcia, 2015)

2.1. Media Theory and Political mobilization

The liberal paradigm of media theory characterizes political mobilization as a process of public communication through the mass media inspired by the democratic ideal of the well-informed citizen. Media fulfill three functions in the mobilization process: reaching out to the audience to raise awareness about political issues, defining particular social issues as significant, and targeting specific audiences with specially tailored messages. The emergence of widely

used digital media—that later digital activists call Web 2.0—in the “Knowledge Society,” along with the shift toward a “soft” conception of political power in the public domain, has led to the emergence of what is sometimes called “digital” political mobilization (Terzis, 2016).

Digital media have had an impact on both the conduct and the dynamic of political mobilization (Wang, 2019). On the one hand, mobilization campaigns still rely on the communication functions of the media. On the other hand, digital formats of communication introduce new mechanics of mobilization. The effects of digital media on political mobilization are commonly understood through three related concepts: non-hierarchical networked public social spaces; new informal authoritative arrangements of collective leadership; and on-line, lower-cost behavioral thresholds to join small-scale actions, which together characterize new, digital-era forms of jointly orchestrated public expression.

2.2. Networked publics and digital collective action

The emergence of networked publics is a significant development in contemporary media landscapes, coinciding with the rise of social media technologies. Publications by the Pew Internet & American Life Project describe a networked public as a set of connections among people and information, enabled and constrained by technical systems, where large numbers of users actively participate; among these connected users, publics and counterpublics form, addressing shared issues or concerns and negotiating meanings and responses with each other and the broader environment. Three major features characterize networked publics: one-to-many dissemination with networked speed, the capacity for large-scale, low-cost investment in public and semi-public connections extending far beyond local communities, and global engagement across multiple channels, such that diverse publics can interact synchronously and asynchronously (Díaz-Romero, 2013). Publicity in contemporary societies manifests through these large-scale, systematized connections that confer weaker control over participation and content.

Building on this concept of public, digital collective action can be defined as collective action in pursuit of a shared goal that occurs through the pen of a user in a digital medium and occurs in digital environments. Networked publics change the dominant logic and mechanisms regulating action at a distance; free from direct or strong intermediary mediation, materials can circulate along multiple trajectories and exploit possibilities to cross media or formats. Earlier models of digital collective action applied hypertextual analyses to the tensions, challenges, or affordances of operating within the web as a centralized site. Free copies circulate widely even in centralized e-mail systems; locks do not deter items from being forwarded; easily shareable links are encouraged. Contagion can accelerate along social networks but requires connection in the first instance. Digital networks, linkages, groups, posts, and so forth can be organized through diagrams, graphs, and clusters to map the flow of action across capacity and

audience. Nevertheless, many of these features, while influential and potentially foundational, are neither necessary nor sufficient, particularly for networked civil resistance, which remains considered the defining mode of collective action. (Rodima-Taylor, 2023).

3. Social Media Platforms as Catalysts for Movement Building

Social media platforms catalyze movement-building efforts primarily through their technosocial properties, or affordances. The affordances of social media systems shape organizations' actions, which, in turn, affect political outcomes (Wang, 2019). Social media affords connections among users by lowering the costs of participation, allowing for identity signalling, and facilitating the shaping of shared narratives. Digital media also enables the dissemination of a diverse range of culture, information, and knowledge products that are not limited to a central script, beyond traditional norms observed in a physical space. Such affordances have mobilizing effects when they influence the amount or distribution of attention toward participation opportunities; thus, the accumulation of exposure to collective-action invitations generates collective-agenda setting.

3.1. Platform affordances and their political implications

Many social movements have utilized digital platforms to propel their collective activities. Digital media afford political participation through direct and indirect means. For instance, many platforms facilitate direct participation through mass mobilization features such as hashtag campaigns and petitions. (Earl, Maher, & Pan, 2022).

Moreover, the digital environment implicitly enables participants to display their identity, allowing movement organizations to sift through potential recruits and target supporters more accurately. These processes are beneficial for movement organizations. When organizations can reach out to preexisting networks and enlist supporters who share the same cause, the surrounding friction for movement participation significantly declines. Ease of participation is another feature on social media platforms that supports digital activism. Digitally augmented enactments further reduce participation costs because users can select a topic and provide a short message. Political movements benefit from participatory culture, a common phenomenon on social media. Content with a certain degree of significance can incorporate users' opinions to preserve attention (Bossetta, 2019). In attention economies, readily available content for public engagement around political movements is critical. Therefore, platform affordances, ranging from identity signaling to friction costs, considerably facilitate the link between online social movements and social media usage (Herasimenka & Herasimenka, 2016).

3.2. Algorithmic curation, attention economies, and mobilization

Algorithmic curation, attention economies, and mobilization. Social media activists have benefitted from platforms that host both large numbers of users

and constant flows of attention. Central to platform affordances are feed algorithms that determine which posts users see, the logic behind which shapes the dynamics of exploration and exposure (Wang, 2019). Feed algorithms affect the virality of different types of content and the extent to which posts reach intended audiences; content not selected for a user's feed is rarely seen. The design of platforms and the functioning of algorithms thus influence the capacity of posts to gain exposure, warranting scrutiny of the relationship between algorithmic curation and mobilization (Velte, 2016).

Algorithmic curation governs which posts receive user attention in environments saturated with competing information, allowing only select content to enter users' feeds. While such filtering can focus attention on individuals' choices and amplify the role of influential accounts, its net effect often diminishes the likelihood of engagement by broader networks. Pressure to ensure posts remain visible to both existing and potential supporters increases along with the segmentation and narrowing of engaged audiences. Platforms position participation or endorsement as acts of "support" or "solidarity," downplaying the active role of the agent and reinforcing a tendency to select content congruent with previously expressed views. Such formatting may discourage "re-tweeting" clashing messages. Curation thus has the potential to impede rather than facilitate wider mobilization. (Fouquaert & Mechant, n.d).

Attention focuses on the volume and intensity of content generated by users: the "attention economy" posits that content is a scarce resource for which producers and platforms compete. Digital activist framing influences not only movement identities and collective action but also the repertoire of framing employed and the persistence of issues. Framing resonates across platforms and channels alike, suggesting that strategic attention to framing choices is as important in digital contexts as it is in offline movement building. Design and algorithmic curation affect exposure and circulation, making choices still more influential. (Lou, Yap, Zhou, Lim, Koh, & Tan, 2024).

4. Challenges and Controversies

Digital activism is not without its challenges. Certain aspects of governance, legitimacy, and competitive pressures can impede movements that rely heavily on digital platforms. Digital activism is intrinsically linked with the rapid rise in digital media, particularly social media platforms. Nevertheless, while social media platforms are still in their infancy, fierce struggles for governance and legitimacy have emerged even in this relatively young stage of digital activism. In many countries, users have witnessed mounting censorship, deep fakes, and coordinated inauthentic behavior, compromising the integrity of the medium and exposing vulnerabilities across the ecosystem. Institutions tend to have fewer restrictions than civil society, leading to a competitive disadvantage for movement-builders reliant on social media. One group that imposes such governance challenges is the state. Political leaders seek to expand

control over these new channels to pre-empt challengers or induce self-censorship among citizens. Complementing this approach, governments threaten bans as deterrent measures or enact restrictive laws. (Ba & Şen, 2024).

Further, owner-driven governance is also a source of platform instability. If rapidly evolving digital media shifts influence toward unregulated private platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok, positions established by traditional media and stakeholders may become threatened. This phenomenon is heightened when competing media attract significant attention among a populace whose daily routines are already fractured. Multiple accounts exist of owners implementing sudden, sweeping changes that reorient the usages of digital resources. (Wang, 2019).

4.1. Platform governance, censorship, and rights

Platform governance constitutes the outsourcing of public policy to private actors, with the result that previously public functions like content regulation have been privatized and there are partnerships between state and private actors on surveillance. The decline of state control of information has opened significant spaces for activism and dissent. At the same time, however, the commercial logic of social media platforms, coupled with close relations with state agencies, creates serious barriers to the exercise of freedom of expression on these platforms (Hintz, 2016).

4.2. Misinformation, manipulation, and security concerns

Digital platforms facilitate mass participation in political expression through easy-to-create cultural and information artifacts that people circulate with, and update their reception of others' content, political affiliation, shared culture, and collective action (Sehgal, Peshin, Afroz, & Farid, 2021). Yet, these platforms also heighten misperceptions of political and social issues, spread hate speech and disinformation, and amplify harmful or divisive narratives. This surge in harmful content and activity has become ubiquitous across social media, deeply embedded in both conventional news media coverage and regulatory discussions on the problems of online technology (Corpus Ong & Vincent A. Cabañes, 2018).

Public social communication is also vulnerable to adversarial manipulation. Malicious players can impersonate real users with inauthentic accounts and exploit the online environment to inject and disseminate disinformation (Tran Truong, Lou, Flammini, & Menczer, 2019). Such manipulation aims to influence the behavior of users on social media by leading the public to follow inauthentic accounts, exposing them to large volumes of low-quality content. Cybercriminals real users, interjecting malware without clogging the network yet disrupting a wide range of platforms for illicit commercial gain. In a noisy and chaotic social space, deepfakes and advanced visual technologies add more obstacles to the effort of developing online safety guidelines and standards.

5. Policy Implications and Ethical Considerations

Civic digital literacy and digital inclusivity strategies target the disparities between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in people’s access to digital devices, connectivity, and the ability to access/use them for active citizenship (Garcia, 2015). A multi-pronged problem exists when services are unavailable but also when they are available, yet do not support participative or enabling actions. A lack of information on ‘who is responsible’, ‘who can’ or ‘what’ actions are required is part of the impediment. Unlike traditional media, social media are less well associated with specific public actions like voting, accountability of public representatives, etc. Very few users can specify concrete actions which they need to take relating to social media use for enhancing citizenship or relating to policy options/issues which they need to get engaged in. Gaps also exist with respect to the needs for digital education content. Users mention requirements for videos on how to use certain applications; for demos of apps like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook; for information on usage regulations, policies; for data privacy; or for how to monetise them; I.e., courses for teenagers, etc. Other notable emphasis is on the need for raising more awareness on current vital issues like climate change, water scarcity, plastic recycling; issues outside the traditional agenda of concern and outside the prevalent media coverage.

Two promising approaches to invest in digital inclusion through a wider civics-focused agenda, are regulation and transparency measures. The urgency and extent of regulation varies from context to context across the world, yet remains topical virtually everywhere. Sources point out opportunities to have citizens request data proactively from platforms to disclose categorisation of user-generated content, disclose service availability and ensuring a minimum set of guarantees of expected privacy. (Meo & Anees, 2025).

5.1. Civic digital literacy and inclusivity

The Internet and social media can enhance civic engagement, revolutionizing traditional forms of participation and facilitating the emergence and escalation of protests. In 2011 protest movements swept across regimes in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and Russia, and parallel protest activities were conducted globally in chronological synchrony. Such transnational activism occurs when opponents possess a common interest but retain autonomy over organizing processes. Digital tools amplify and economize communication access for both well-funded organizations and resource-poor, emergent movements. The Internet, social media, and macro-structural shifts converge to foster a non-linear, multi-sequence approach to social phenomena. A transnational perspective permits an examination of temporal, geographical, and organizational facets ignored by conventional national frameworks; transnational processes remain essential to understanding domestic dynamics (Díaz-Romero, 2013).

Media production and dissemination increasingly fall beyond the exclusive purview of mass media organizations. Though broadcast continues to play a role in the circulation of materials, contemporary social actors employ various channels for generating and circulating political materials. The rise of participatory media permits the widespread creation and circulation of diverse audio-visual artifacts, generated by both formal and informal actors. These resources influence civil society production. In particular, new audio-visual tools and distribution platforms enable the communication of personal, embodied experiences grounded in situated realities (Colon, 2016).

5.2. Regulation, transparency, and accountability

Despite the rise of digital activities that promote and challenge movements, states have retained responsibility for upholding human rights online and offline. They should uphold the same civic role online as they do offline by forging a democratic space; they should promote transparency throughout the monitoring process, which in turn paves the way for the emergence of more equal civic actors (Gorwa & Garton Ash, 2019). Attention to the concept of public space suggests that accountability in government also entails giving publics a direct say in the politics of public space. Instead of pursuing technocratic solutions to political problems, attention should turn to the content and expressive capacity of digital content (Terzis, 2016).

A single-accountability approach colours expectations for government rule; it creates a monopoly over privilege and favours a specific economic-political (thus not mechanically compounding speed) approach. Mass digitization creates an abundance of additional, neglected opportunities. Data commons—now a key site of international debate—are still largely treated as if they simply queried corporate databases instead of intelligent creatures governing data in the first place. A single-accountability approach leads to the under-utilization and misimagination of mass digitation.

6. Future Directions in Digital Activism

Politics, like every other aspect of human life, is intrinsically connected to the emotions of humanity. History has shown that hence every revolting and progressive movement has had its emotional peak that resulted in dramatic change. The civil rights movement, the “southern civil rights” movement etc. are some of the movements that express this human urge for emotion and change. History has also shown that celebrity involvement in the activism process does tend to provoke more attention. Celebrities have a higher chance of going viral due to their connections and the community and fan following that they have built up over the years. Getting a supporting tweet from a celebrity does impact the extent of public involvement that movements get. Rap songs have also been a common media for inducing protest due to the easy access that general people have to them. Rap songs also naturally tend to have a rebellious with an emotional outburst as the main theme and message. The singer’s rags-to-rich

story is also comfortable enough to relate to. The statistics of the revolts that mention music as a prominent factor is utmost clear to see. Every now and then either mainstream singers or rising drummers attempt to themed their song to a relating event of activism. The Black Lives Movement, MeToo, Anti-Austerity and so on have all witnessed such musical emergence.

Political involvement has shifted, allowing any average individual to voice their opinion. On the other hand, there are new emerging problems with this development. Determining what is fake from what is true has proven to be hard to do with the introituition of the internet. Events that bravely expose false inputs or website links lingered in danger of being misinterpreted as phony data. Cheng, somehow, gives the wrong impression of not being able to spoon-feed information on every uprising for citizens to pick their side. And this pointer leaks to the idea of giving out too much information if not the right one.

7. Conclusion

The Internet introduced new spaces for debate on political issues, expanded the actors that shape public opinion and enabled new forms of civic engagement. As policy problems acquired a cross-border dimension and global attention turned to public crises in Africa, Asia or the Arab world. Digital media facilitated knowledge dissemination and political advocacy among local and non-local activists. Social media and instant messaging emerged as channels for political opposition in states where traditional media were closely controlled. Political and activist figureheads adopted social networking sites to attract supporters, citizens employed social media to appeal for humanitarian assistance, and international advocacy groups mobilized respective audiences online to put pressure on authorities.

At both international and national levels, attention towards Africa, Communication, geographic information systems (GIS) and social media grew during the latter part of the previous decade. Social media enhanced information sharing, socio-political debate and the creation of virtual public spaces across contentions settings were viewed as catalysts for democratic political change online. The latter facilitated political engagement through the transmission of political messages, the sharing of valid information or the monitoring of national and international events.

This study concentrated on digital activism at the intersection of social media and political movement—a topical focus that carries significant scholarly and practical implications. The phenomenon exhibits a strong growth trajectory. Social media involvement within protests occurs across diverse settings, such as complex democratic landscapes, authoritarian political arrangements undergoing reform, and conflicted transition periods. Digital campaigns also infuse urgency into political causes, accelerate collective mobilization and spread awareness among diverse audiences. Digital activism is a ubiquitous phenomenon—both within a plethora of equally omnipresent

initiatives, worldwide—yet sensitive to multitude spatial and temporal coordinates. The marked heterogeneity of manifestations and venues therefore merits tailored exploration.

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