

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Modern-Day Activism

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Abstract

The fourth industrial revolution is presently taking place throughout the world. This revolution was greatly influenced by the development of digital media. The range of socio-political activism was altered. Global communication has been profoundly altered by technology breakthroughs, with social media platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, and WeChat at the forefront. The study explores how social media has changed activism in the modern day by highlighting how it can increase access, visibility, scope, and empowerment. Examining well-known movements including the Greta Thunberg climate change protest, #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Anti-Discrimination Movement in Bangladesh, the analysis delves deeply into the dynamics of digital activism. Despite democratizing freedom of speech and fostering global connectivity, social media has drawbacks such as false information, divisiveness, and performative activism, and privacy concerns. This may halt the movement. The globe is currently moving towards a more sophisticated technical development. It is anticipated that activism in the future will become more digital, propelled by innovations in technology like virtual reality and artificial intelligence. In order to protect user data and guarantee social media's effectiveness as a weapon for social change, the study emphasizes the necessity of responsible platform management.

Keywords: Social Media, Digital Activism, Misinformation, Privacy, Slacktivism, Global Movements, Empowerment, Technological Advancement, Bangladesh

Introduction: Technological advancement is undergoing a rapid shift on a global scale. Currently, most of the world's communities are linked together by a single network called the Internet. Social media sites like X, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, We Chat, and others have grown in popularity as a result of the expansion of internet networks. It has altered the long-standing framework of communication from earlier times. We can consciously speak to one another, share our opinions, convey our way of life, and exercise our right to free speech. On social media, young people and other internet users are now expressing their worries about many socio-political and cultural issues. Social media's rise has given the public conversation a new dimension where information spreads quickly and formerly disempowered voices can now be heard. This raises the topic of "How social media is energizing action in the present day and what the societal ramifications are? The study seeks to explore the functions of social media in

the contemporary activism. The specific aim is to analyze the effectiveness of social media in the planning, coordination, and spreading of activist movements and assess the benefits and shortcomings of their application in this regard. The background of the research highlights the emergence of communications and mobilization frameworks within the realm of activism. It notes that social media has amplified previously disadvantaged voices, enabling the quick dissemination and coordination of information on a global scale. The study highlights a gap in the literature regarding the assessment of the negative and positive influence of social media on activism in general. Whereas other previous researchers concentrated either on the pros or on the cons of social media, this research intends to address the center in between.

On how social media helps activism today, the literature review includes both local and global studies. Locally, for example, literature from Bangladesh stresses how social media helps foster social movements and public policy. At the global level, the same accounts promulgate much about the use of social networks like Twitter and Facebook to coordinate protests, share relevant information, and bypass censorship with real-life examples such as the Arab spring. Many studies reveal both sides of the social media coin in that these may empower social movements but can at the same time threaten, through things like misinformation and invasion of privacy, negative connotations. Hence, this review fills a very large vacuum in the scope of the literature that has already been written about the various ways that social networking affects activism, ranging from promoting it to stifling it.

Methodology

The WESA Method-Web Extraction and Statistical Analysis was utilized in this research for an examination of social media role in activism. This systematic approach included the extraction of data, web and online content, limited only to what the movements used-in terms of social media. Data are therefore statistically organized and analyzed using Excel for the purpose of trend and pattern finding. Descriptive and inferential statistics then give answers to quantitative effects of social media towards a broader understanding of how organizing, mobilizing, and disseminating activism is influenced. Such an approach renders an assessment of social media in its manifold roles within today's activism broad and evidence based. This study aimed to research Social media and its present importance in activism employing the WESA Method-Web Extraction and Statistical Analysis. In its methodological approach, it focused on systematic extraction of data from web and online sources, limited to those aspects relevant to social media using by movements. Data are so organized and analyzed statistically by means of Excel in order to find trends and patterns. Finally, methods of collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data supplemented those of employing descriptive and inferential statistics for measuring the influence of social media and consequently provide a complete understanding on how the former influenced organizing, mobilizing, and disseminating activism. Such an approach makes the assessment of social media and its multifaceted roles into modern-day activism comprehensive

and evidence based. Although quite effective, this research was limited in the use of the WESA Method-Web Extraction and Statistical Analysis. Such limited scope would not quantitatively assess the short term impact of social media in activism. It was only through the data that were collected and generated about an activist campaigning through social media platforms that the description of impacts and influences could be made. The specific activity most enabled by social media in the African context was seen to be the organizing of protests. Such protest activities were heavily publicized, and videos were mobilized online. However, the actual movements were then less noticeable on social media platforms like Facebook. Judging from figures and references in the Protest Occupation, it becomes clear that some of the research needs were fulfilled by this study. Such needs were, however, only fulfilled in the African context.

Results and Findings

I. Impact on Modern Activism

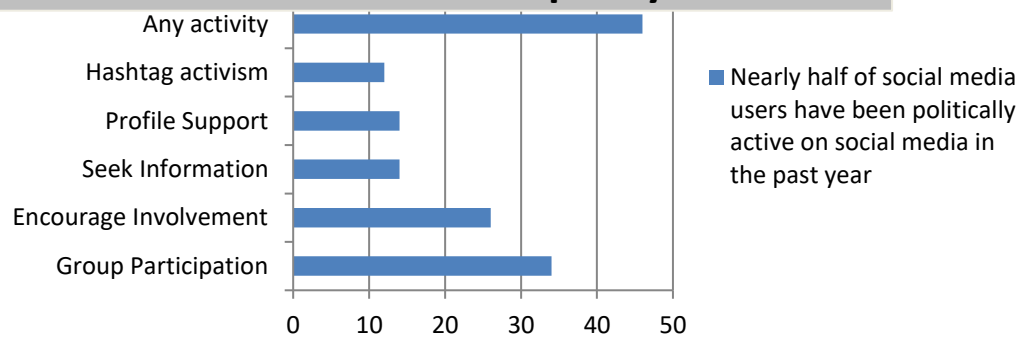
Social media has change the meaning of activism by increasing clarity and scope, empowering individuals and cherishing the global movements. In 2011, Tahrir gained international notice. By drawing attention from a sympathetic worldwide public, digital networks that enabled the demonstrators to broadcast to the world increased the costs of repression ⁽¹⁾. Tufekci (2017) states that social media enables leaderless activism and decentralized possible organizing & modern contemporary protest⁽¹⁾. In the digital age, the Internet has become a catalyst for social movements by offering a public space to share emotions, ideas, and aspirations. It allows individuals to form networks beyond personal or organizational affiliations, fostering solidarity and overcoming fear, an emotion often exploited by oppressive powers. From the safety of cyberspace, diverse groups transitioned to occupying physical spaces, asserting their right to shape history and demonstrating the self-awareness integral to transformative social movements ⁽²⁾.

Visibility & Scope: Social media has significantly changed the ontological and epistemological terrain of activism, contributing to the development of what is commonly referred to as digital activism, just as it has had a major impact on the habits and structures of production and consumption in the market and educational systems. It is challenging to comprehend the scope and character of social media's influence on contemporary activism because of its immense worldwide appeal and the extent to which it has been assimilated and rendered synonymous with human life ⁽³⁾.

“The world has been witness to the rise of Twitter and Facebook as a powerful communication and mobilization channels in the hands of repressed populations. In probably the shortest timeframe mankind has ever seen, five Middle Eastern and North African governments with unimpressive democratic track records fell. The Egyptian revolution, was sparked by everyday, ordinary people like Asmaa Mahfouz, who passionately called people to join protests through

her [YouTube] Post, spreading word fast like a wild fire from country to country. This unprecedented e-Revolution transcended class, gender, and political boundaries – at least for a moment”⁽⁴⁾

Nearly half of social media users have been politically active on social media in the past year



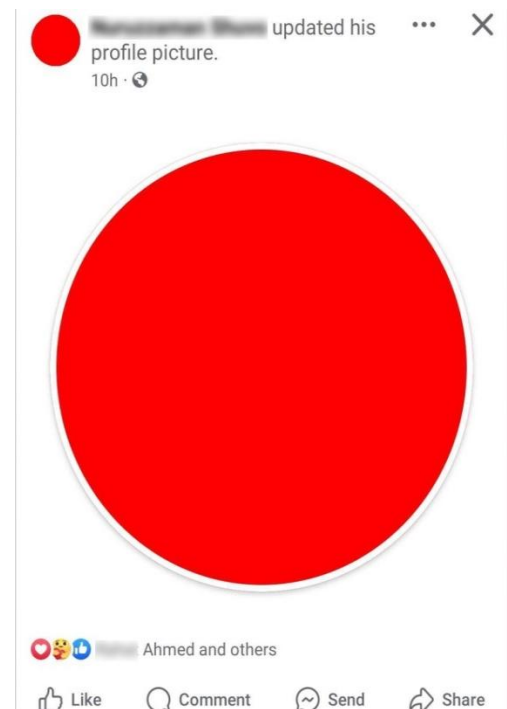
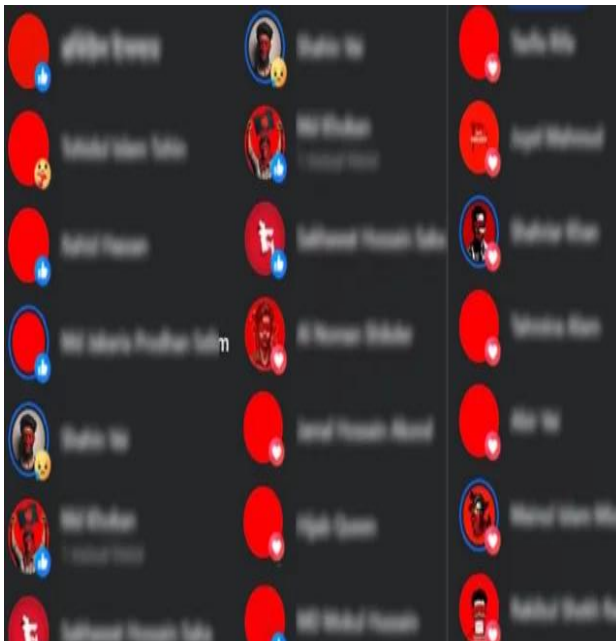
The above chart depicted the “%of US Social media users who say they have done each of the following activities in social media”⁽⁵⁾. Social media platform have liberalized the access to information and gathering.

There were 77.36 million internet users in Bangladesh at the start of 2024, when internet penetration stood at 44.5 percent. Figures published in Meta’s own tools indicate that Facebook’s potential ad reach in Bangladesh increased by 9.7 million (+22.3 percent) between January 2023 and January 2024 ⁽⁶⁾. For activists in Bangladesh, Facebook is now their primary venue for protest and awareness-raising.

From the above chart, Activism of this kind is occurring all across the world. Bangladesh's recent Anti-Discrimination Movement (2024) is a noteworthy illustration of social media activism. All social classes participated in this movement. By spreading the majority of these delicate stories, social media assisted in uniting the general public to express their opposition to the oppressive Hasina government. Conversely, the movements' main organizers used Facebook and Telegram to communicate. They communicated with each other on Facebook and Telegram during that period. They created internet groups to alert people about their upcoming events and asked for

help from all over the nation. These online forums provided Bangladeshis with a forum for education and enlightenment ⁽⁷⁾.

The Awami League's hard power dictatorship was overthrown by the youth-led uprising. Social media platforms had a remarkable impact on this campaign. People were creating cartoons, reels, and protest slogans, which they then posted on social media. Many Facebook users in Bangladesh changed their profiles to red on July 30, 2024, as a sign of support for the movement's martyrs.



People showing solidarity with the memory of the martyrs

Besides, movements like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #FridaysForFuture breaks out through social media. The hashtag #MeToo started trending on Twitter. Despite being coined by African American women's rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the phrase became well-known after actress Alyssa Milano adopted it as a Twitter hashtag in reaction to claims that Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein had sexually assaulted her. In order to highlight the severity of the issue of sexual violence, Milano urged the public to participate by using the #MeToo hashtag. In the first day alone, the hashtag was used 12 million times, garnering media and public attention ⁽⁸⁾ . Like the majority of modern social movements in the West, #BlackLivesMatter makes considerable use of online media. Understanding each new movement's digital activity on its own terms is crucial since different social movements use online media in different ways. We

shouldn't assume that BLM's internet usage will be the same as that of its predecessors because, as we've seen, it differs from others in its genre in important ways. The death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer sparked the global #BlacklivesMatter movement. People posted the shocking video of his death on social media, primarily Twitter, after it went viral. After that, things descended into chaos, and the government moved swiftly to punish the responsible police personnel. People speak out against racism and demonstrate their awareness of this problem. A network of youth working on climate change issues, Fridays for Future, continues to operate in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes it difficult to host large-scale in-person gatherings. Approximately 100,000 people marched in Glasgow, UK, at the UN global Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021, calling for more forceful action to address the global issue. This campaign set a world record for the largest number of street campaign participants in mid-September 2019, mobilizing over 7.6 million youth worldwide. We can conclude that this is the world's most effective collective action ⁽⁹⁾.





Image: July Revolution, #Metoo, #FridaysForFuture

Empowerment & Access: People can share their opinions and tales on social media. Social media activists, influencers, and content producers generate posts, videos, and articles about many societal topics. Social media can display any news that is not reported by the mainstream media. One could call it citizen journalism. Anyone with a smartphone can record events and share them to the public.

Examples of Social Movements: Recent movements, such as Greta Thunberg's climate change demonstrations and the #MeToo, #JulyRevolution, or #ArabSpring movements, highlight the critical role social media plays in bringing people together across boundaries. In actuality, these have given activists the ability to organize counter-protests, exchange resources, and exert pressure on decision-makers to bring about tangible change.

I. Challenges & Limitation

The cyber-utopians argue that the new social media tools have a significant and positive influence on political results. They concentrate on how these instruments contribute to political communication, involvement, mobilization, and public sphere expansion in the process of democratization ⁽¹⁰⁾. However every phase has both positive and negative side. Social media activism faces significant barriers & disruptions due to the spread of misinformation, Propaganda, harassment, Privacy disruptions. Etc.

Misinformation & Polarization

The spread of false information has emerged as a significant threat to international democracy in the current digital era. This is particularly clear in Bangladesh, where the spread of malicious propaganda and misleading narratives is threatening democracy and reducing public confidence in institutions. Misinformation spreading is impeding democracy in Bangladesh and harming the nation's progress towards a more open and inclusive society, thanks to sensationalist news outlets and social media echo chambers ⁽¹¹⁾. The widespread dissemination of false information on social media causes certain movements to lose their validity. False information that circulates on social media greatly diverts attention from the movement. Additionally, it undermines the demonstrators'.



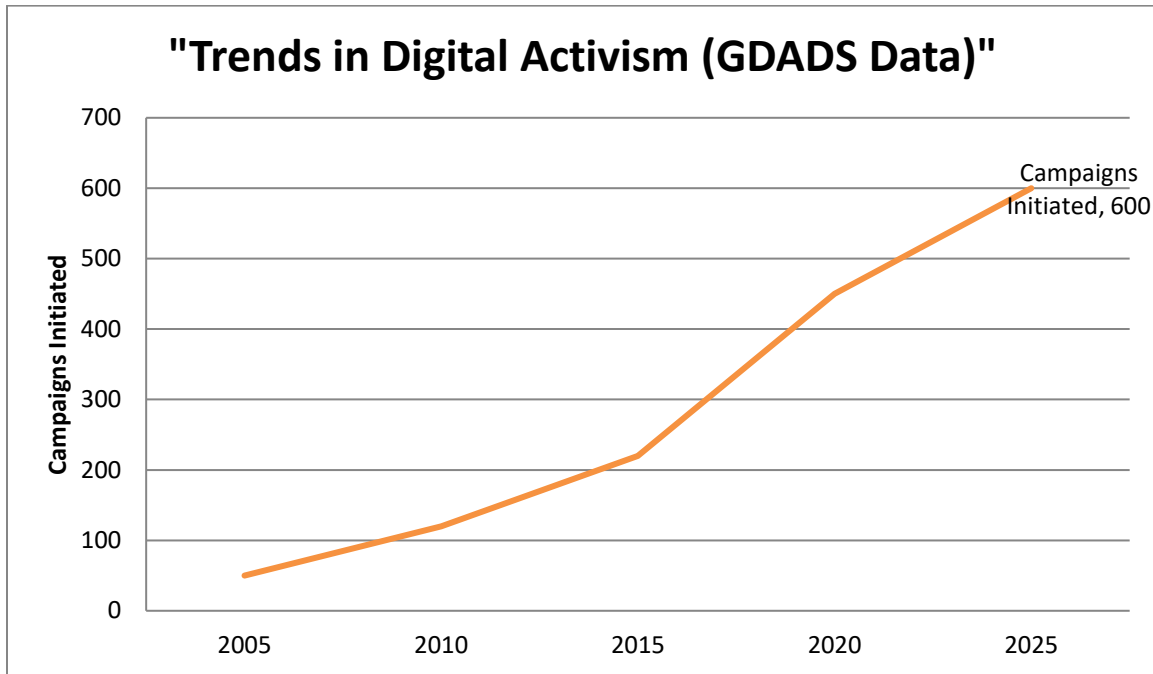
Performative Activism:

Slacktivism is the superficial or performative activism where people engage in online-only activities-like sharing posts-that require little effort and will result in no change. Real activism is diffused, and this can create an illusion of progress. According to Gladwell M. In *The New Yorker* (2010), Social media-facilitated "weak-tie" relationships are not effective for sustained activism. According to him, such networks lack the commitment that leads to real change; thus, they create an illusion of progress without a change in systems ⁽¹²⁾. In *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011), Evgeny Morozov critiques the role of digital technology in activism, emphasizing the negative aspects of slacktivism. He argues that online activism often creates an illusion of meaningful participation while enabling complacency among individuals who feel they have contributed by merely engaging in low-effort actions like sharing posts or signing petitions ⁽¹³⁾.

Privacy & Safety Concerns: We can observe significant breaches of privacy on social media. It causes people to worry about their safety. Furthermore, they began to take advantage of them and violate their privacy when activists organized a movement that did not align with the government's narrative. Social media platforms often exploit users' data for commercial purposes. This commodification of personal information not only invades privacy but also creates vulnerabilities for activists. This information can be used by governments and corporations for surveillance, especially against movements that threaten their power ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Evolution of Activism: Nowadays, the evolving nature of social media activism is exceptionally fast and dynamic. The new technologies, including AI and VR, can enhance the scale and impact of social movements. These tools create new ways to tell stories and connect with audiences in ways that make activism more interactive and impactful ⁽¹⁵⁾. I present a visualized trend of the evolution of digital activism, derived from the Global Digital Activism Data Set (GDADS) from the University of Michigan.

Year	Campaigns Initiated	Success Rate (%)
2005	50	20
2010	120	30
2015	220	40
2020	450	50
2025	600 (projected)	55 (projected)



Source: Global Digital Activism Data Set
(GDADS)

Figure: Trends in Digital Activism (GDADS Data)

This dataset, obtained from the University of Michigan's Global Digital Activism Data Set, GDADS, highlights how digital activism campaigns have been growing online for 151 countries. It documents the number of campaigns started and the rate of success across five important years: 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2025 - projected.

The line chart visualizes:

Campaigns Started: The rapid rise in the number of digital activism campaigns, reflecting the growing reliance on online platforms for social movements.

Success Rate (%)-Effective functionality of campaigns over time, indicating consistent improvement in the feedback as the tools and strategies get upgraded (16).

Responsibility of the Platform

Due to privacy and information breaches, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and others are under criticism and legal obligations. Parents whose children had access to illegal narcotics on Snapchat received similar condolences from Evan Spiegel, the CEO of Snap Inc. In late 2023, parents of over 60 teenagers sued Snap for allegedly helping their kids legally obtain drugs that were used in deaths ⁽¹⁷⁾. These kinds of problems will have a significant impact on the youth generation's psychology, which will eventually lead to segregation and impede action. Platforms must protect user data, community guidelines should prioritize free expression, and activists' privacy must be protected. Social platforms' extensive data collection exposes children to surveillance, exploitation, cyberbullying, grooming, and harmful content. Inadequate content moderation and safety protocols leave minors vulnerable. Unequal access to technology exacerbates inequalities, and excessive screen time contributes to mental health issues ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Ethical issue

Indeed, ethical considerations in the research primarily comprise privacy, informed consent, representation, and effects on the participants. Sensitive information obtained from social media and interviews must remain confidential and be anonymized and stored securely not to be accessed by anyone unauthorized. All the survey and interview participants must give informed consent as an acknowledgment and respect of the autonomy and rights of the individuals. Other factors which concern accuracy in reflecting different views such as biases and allowing fair and just analysis are considered in this particular research. Further, the consequences of the research results for the participants and their movements are carefully thought through to avoid possible damage or unintended negative impact.

Conclusion

Certainly social media has changed what activism means in the present day. It establishes a forum for the voiceless to be heard. The platform democratized free expression and links young people and the general public. However, the activism is severely hampered by false information, propaganda, privacy violations, etc. All platforms should be more cautious about information maintenance in order to address these issues. In the end, social media will serve as a voice for those who are marginalized, debaters, and activists.

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