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Social Movements in the Age of Digital Activism

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, social movements have undergone a profound transformation, fueled by the pervasive influence of the Internet and communication technologies. This paper examines the emergence and evolution of digital activism as an increasingly central force in shaping modern collective action. Through historical context, technological analysis, and case studies, it investigates how social movements leverage digital platforms to challenge traditional power structures, mobilize participants across borders, and influence public discourse. It also examines the tools and strategies employed, from hashtags to viral campaigns, and analyzes how digital activism both complements and complicates traditional organizing methods. While these digital tools provide enhanced reach and immediacy, they also introduce new challenges, including surveillance, misinformation, digital divides, and questions around authenticity and effectiveness. The study concludes that although digital activism has revolutionized social movements by expanding their reach and agility, its impact depends heavily on integration with real-world organizing and sustained collective efforts.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Social Movements, Online Mobilization, Social Media, Political Participation, Hashtag Activism, Cyberactivism, Collective Action.

INTRODUCTION

Social movements organized efforts to promote or resist change are essential to understanding today's society. Movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo challenge repression, inequality, and corruption. Digital technology plays a key, yet unstable, role in mobilizing and communicating, altering power dynamics among governments, firms, and citizens. This discussion examines the evolution, tools, challenges, and future of digital activism amidst social movements and technological advancements. Collective action needs capacity, as power imbalances limit individual influence. Social movements connect individuals into broader systems of agency and collective power through "striated diffusion." In the twentieth century, organizations such as the NAACP and United Farm Workers developed this capacity with meeting spaces, leadership, and infrastructure, using strategies of identification and framing. These changes were accompanied by technological shifts: print media evolved to radio, then to broadcast television, impacting supply and demand. Physical links like bus routes transformed into paid staff and diverse coalitions, leading to digitized supply chains. A "cascade of institutional innovations," including non-profits and agencies, was established to improve access and scale. Today's movements utilize autocatalytic media, monitored supply chains, and global connections, navigating a vastly different environment than their historic counterparts [1, 2].

Historical Overview of Social Movements

Social movements have a long history of challenging and influencing dominant power structures in various fields, ranging from labor conditions to healthcare access. Although new technologies are not a requirement for successful collective action, the development of new technologies for sharing knowledge and information often prompts cultural and political change. The recent surge of movements rooted in cyberspace thus reflects not only changes in the technological landscape, but also transformations in our cultural understandings of those technologies. Advances in information and communication technologies, especially the Internet and social media platforms, have reshaped many societal aspects, including politics.

Internet-based activism, known as digital activism, electronic activism or online activism, has become increasingly common and widespread, triggering the advent of social movements in the digital age. Numerous successful online and hybrid protests have recently emerged, such as during Mexico's 2006 Peace March, the 2008 Tibetan Freedom Concert, Japan's 2011 anti-nuclear demonstrations, and the influential role of social media during the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The continuous expansion of various social media platforms has facilitated a novel approach to collective action [3, 4].

The Rise of Digital Activism

Social movements have significantly influenced societal change, and the integration of digital technologies with collective action has altered how they operate and connect. Digital activism combines electronic media and communication technologies, enabling real-time global expression through digital devices. The Internet's emergence in the 1990s introduced new mobilization tactics, with social media reshaping activist strategies. Traditional media like newspapers and television struggle to influence public opinion, prompting social movements to leverage technological tools to shape discourse. Events illustrate the rise of digital activism, such as the widespread "cacerolazos" in 2008 expressing collective discontent in Chile and Spain, and the 2011 Arab Spring, which showcased social media's power in organizing protests. The Occupy and Indignados movements utilized similar techniques, while new media fosters interactive feedback and community formation, allowing marginalized groups to voice dissent across geographical barriers. In Uganda, the internet helps update activists and coordinate demonstrations against unfair policies. Despite challenges, digital engagement has grown, marking a shift from traditional to online platforms where virtual mobilization complements physical activism. Thus, digital politics serves as an extension of conventional politics, complicating global contention cycles. Digital activism embodies political participation reliant on Internet tools, often targeting various agendas and contributing to new collective actors. Since 2008, digital campaigns have sparked social unrest and political transformation worldwide, frequently intertwining with global networks countering neoliberalism and corporate globalization. Participants aim to align agendas and coordinate protests globally, with computer-mediated communication enhancing international campaign participation for both established and resource-limited organizations [5, 6].

Tools and Platforms for Digital Activism

Dominant digital tools for collective action include social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp that foster online communities and support offline mobilization. Emerging platforms continue to augment these opportunities. The advent of digital social media has significantly impacted traditional power structures across society. Accompanied by advancements in digital communication, these platforms enable rapid dissemination of information and provide unprecedented opportunities for political mobilization and activism. Digital technologies offer various affordances that facilitate new forms of participation and action. For example, Facebook forums concentrate attention on specific issues, and Twitter hashtags unite dispersed individuals with shared identities. These mechanisms grant individuals the ability to join or depart public conversations at will and participate without committing to formal activist groups. Observers, while acknowledging that digital technologies are unlikely to completely replace traditional forms of organization, concur that they enable a novel, lightweight, more distributed modality of political action. Digital technology enables activists to communicate swiftly and inexpensively with a wide audience. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter allow the broadcasting of threatening images or political placards. YouTube supports the widespread exposure of instances of injustice to the general public at minimal cost. Twitter facilitates conversation among previously disconnected individuals; using hashtags to aggregate related communications or connect otherwise isolated social movements. These tools provide a suitability, scalability, and quality of communication that traditional organizations seldom achieve. They also extend a movement's reach across multiple countries, helping to discern broader issues beyond local or national contexts [7, 8].

Case Studies of Successful Digital Movements

Pivotal events in the evolution of digital activism are emblematic of widespread social unrest and demand for change in the broader political context. The Spanish Indignados movement originated in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, eliciting various forms of political participation grounded in online communication, notably petitions, coordinated voting, and policy drafting; Spain's 2011 municipal elections featured the unprecedented introduction of candidature lists specifically formulated by the movement. The Chilean *toreros* protests denounced the politico-economic dynamics underpinning the

neoliberal model and alleged the inability or lack of determination of the authorities to mitigate inequalities. The protests rapidly gained momentum in a climate of growing discontent due to inequalities, a low national growth rate, and inherent market rigidity. The “Save the Arctic” campaign leveraged social media to cultivate public consciousness by disseminating information and facilitating the dissemination of opinions and arguments. The rapid growth of digital tools enabled the movement to reach new horizons and raise funds in support of the campaign. Digital activism originated around the proposition of a “new original activity” intended to overcome the limits of the existing social structures of the Internet. Over time, innovations such as the Facebook “like” button, the Twitter hashtag, or the “poke” simplified mechanisms for the diffusion of information and assisted the creation of new social ties, subsequently fostering collective action [9, 10].

Challenges of Digital Activism

All forms of social movements and activism face numerous organisational, ideological and political challenges as they push for change in uneven and shifting fields of power. The challenge for digital activism is no different. As the ability of big data, algorithms and digital surveillance are fast moving beyond the capacities of the average user, control over deployed technology shapes the power dynamics of collective action. Inequalities related to the penetration of digital tools and literacy practices still shape the possibilities, and limit the reach of populations often most affected by such movements especially across large parts of Africa, Latin America and Central Asia. In the region of the Sahel, for instance, less than one third of the population has mobile phones and an even smaller number access the internet. Other restrictions include geographical disparities and weak infrastructures. In developing countries, new media activism can be co-opted by oppressive regimes. Fake news also represents a significant concern, as misinformation and propaganda have proliferated [11, 12].

The Role of Influencers in Digital Activism

Although social media platforms have undeniably empowered individuals, activists, and leaders to come together over shared ideals and aspirations, they also provide well-established venues where support can be garnered effectively and allow for the instant sharing of content with an ever-growing audience of followers. However, establishing a collective identity an essential and foundational component of successful social movements remains a challenging endeavor. As a result, many protesters are turning to a friend as a more valid and trustworthy source of information than what is typically offered by mainstream media outlets or even authoritative news organizations. The dynamics of these protests, along with the participants and their supporters, are often plotted within a broader protest-repression cycle, where we see that protests may initially surge in number and intensity but later face a decline as groups encounter various forms of repression and pushback. While large social movements and protests indeed carry an abundance of potential for creating meaningful change and influencing the world around us, it is crucial to recognize that many of them fail to gather the necessary momentum to achieve a truly significant and lasting impact in the long run [13, 14].

Impact of Digital Activism on Traditional Movements

Digital activism, fueled by new technologies and the Internet, has mobilized opposition groups in movements like the Arab Spring, Spanish Indignados, and Occupy Wall Street. Key tools include electronic voting, digital campaigns, petitions, chat-rooms, and social media, which have transformed social activism and created a new form of political participation. Although traditional civic engagement has declined since the 1970s, new participatory methods emerged alongside environmentalism and transnational policy networks. Digital activism aligns with global movements, allowing opponents to share political goals and coordinate protests worldwide. It enhances communication in political organizations, benefiting both resource-rich and resource-poor entities. Activist groups on Facebook and Twitter connect localized events to global discussions on transnational challenges. The presence or absence of Internet access influences societal development, empowering groups to identify shared issues. The lack of gatekeepers allows activists to disseminate alternative viewpoints, raising awareness about repression, corporate malpractice, financial policies, and environmental crises. While digital activism highlights cross-border mobilization, future strategies should focus on targeting specific audiences. Social media increasingly mobilizes individuals and groups to share stories. However, online engagement cannot substitute for physical organization or locally-based groups that may operate independently of the Internet. Cyberactivism needs to be accompanied by real-world actions to effect political and social change. When integrated with tangible efforts, digital activism disrupts traditional power structures, enhancing the impact of offline activism and redefining how social movements operate [15, 16].

Future of Social Movements in a Digital World

The intensified and accelerated circulation of information and organization permit activists to act more rapidly. The requirement to expedite information and organizational flows, however, diminishes the availability of critical and decentred perspectives. The drive to advocate without sufficient information, also known as 'haste,' represents an additional significant challenge. Collective intelligence thereby decays into misinformation. Digital activism therefore alters the immediate and political capacity of social movements. Across domains from gender and food to Indigenous communities and the environment, digital networks precariously host social disempowerment or broader referenda on societal legitimacy. The present acceleration of information fragments attention and diminishes the complexity of debates. Governmental authorities, transnational corporations, and media conglomerates collectively subject the dissident and politically heterogeneous environments fostered by new social movements to multiple levels of management and surveillance. These dynamics provoke unbalanced interpretations and lead to the underexposure or obfuscation of crucial inquiries, thereby constraining the proliferation of genuinely emancipatory practices and censoring transformative perspectives [17, 18].

Ethics of Digital Activism

Digital media's blurring of public and private realms poses challenges for those seeking to resist domination through activism. State and non-state actors exploit the technology and experience of digital activists, using it for disinformation, manipulation, rhetoric, and social control. Totalitarian governments engage in intensive surveillance and information control, while liberal governments pursue a wider range of aggressive political agendas via information warfare. Digital activism enables struggles for rights, equalities, and justice, yet it simultaneously facilitates dilemmas of image management, private information compromise, and activism predicated on distorted expressions of agency, inclusion, and representation. Social media can therefore be a double-edged sword, both empowering and confining political activity. Digital activism can turn into "hashtag activism," where public opinion is raised but immediate change is limited and often symbolic only [19, 20].

CONCLUSION

Social movements in the age of digital activism reveal a shifting landscape where political engagement, advocacy, and mobilization are increasingly mediated by technology. The integration of digital tools social media, mobile communication, and online platforms has empowered individuals and decentralized collective action, allowing for rapid mobilization, international solidarity, and real-time discourse. However, these benefits are counterbalanced by significant limitations, such as unequal access, misinformation, surveillance, and the ephemeral nature of online engagement. While digital activism can amplify marginalized voices and catalyze awareness, its long-term effectiveness hinges on its capacity to complement traditional organizing, build sustainable networks, and generate tangible societal or policy change. The future of activism lies not in digital technology alone, but in its thoughtful and ethical integration into broader strategies for justice and systemic transformation.

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