

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT :

The paper aims to highlight the change in social movement with the onset of the usage of social media. We are living in a fast-paced society with technology being the most important glue that connects us. Social media has become a strong source of information carrier that has evolved the way we now engage in society. It has led to a new type of movement that is **Digital social movement or Virtual social activism**. The paper aims to describe how the engagement of social media has changed the way society engages in any protest or reform movement, by first collectivizing it on social media rather than on the field. Social media like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have given ample space for individuals to engage in social movements and also act as sources of protest and awareness. Social media networks have given individuals the power to become activists without actually going anywhere physically but rather through a virtual presence. The usage of social media has made social movements quite easy to occur and strengthened their voice for social change. The notion of the global village, as envisioned by Marshall McLuhan, has come to fruition in today's world thanks to the rise of social media and user-friendly apps, eradicating the limitations of time and distance. This has been a blessing for humanity, enabling connectivity at cultural, emotional, intellectual, and economic levels through the sharing of a diverse pool of global information resources.

Keywords - Digital Activism, social media, Social movement, protests Digital social movement, Virtual Activism.

INTRODUCTION:

In today's fast-paced society, social media has taken the primal mode of sharing information quickly and effectively. Social media has replaced the traditional modes of media as carriers of messages. It has given rise to **Digital activism** that has changed the face and essence of social movement into a geographical less and more of a virtual presence. Zeynep Tufekci, in her work, stated how social media networks especially Twitter helped in shaping movements and protests gave voices to the marginalized section of society decentralized power structures, and aided democracy.¹ This is true, as with the availability of internet connectivity, people have started to get access to keep their voice on the platform and spread awareness and political views.

A social movement is a movement to establish a new order and bring a new system of thoughts and beliefs. Social movement is not something new, it has always been a driving force in our society for creating change and growth. The presence of Social movements like the abolition of Sati, the abolition of child marriage, the Champaran movement, the Civil disobedience movement, etc, has helped India to emerge now into a better nation with the outlook of equal participation, and equality of opportunity.

Before the Independence, of India, the media helped as the medium for connecting people and spreading the agenda, through newspapers and radio. But technological advances, like Television, internet connectivity, and many social media platforms availing the space for democratic participation of opinions have changed the canvas of social movement entirely, making it easier to access and more quickly to occur and engage to achieve the desired goal.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY :

¹ Tufekci, Zeynep. Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest. Yale University Press, 2017.

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Technology has always been the main pillar of support and social change for humanity, however, it also comes with its dangers and limitations that require proper governance and protocol. Technological adoptions enable activism and provide the platform forum for collective actions.

The combination of digital activism and networked forms results in challenging the power that traditional bureaucratic structures that come in conflict with the horizontal modes of communication embraced by networked communities². In Cyberpolitik David Rothkopf suggests how society has shifted to an Information Age, where the main essence of power is the information and knowledge and not just actors³. This directly suggests how digital space is the main powerhouse of society. The Internet's explosive growth and development have fundamentally altered how we see and operate in the world, as well as how we think, and they have compelled us to modify our worldviews and ways of thinking in response to new developments in art, technology, and innovation. With the help of the Internet, we can stay connected to the outside world, information is shared quickly, and communication is at an all-time high⁴.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM ENHANCING DEMOCRATIC VOICE :

In a network society like present times, we have to refer to what Manuel Castells suggests about how digital communication technologies operate and enable decentralized activities and collaboration across geographical borders⁵. For example in present society the #METOO movement, took a wide scale significance across borders and allowed woman from all countries to come together and voice cases of sexual abuse and harassment, this exemplify the power of networked activism in catalyzing political change. The Internet has helped to provide democratic spaces for individuals to engage in discussions and enhanced participatory forums for an equitable society.

Sociologists like Habermas, in his work, stated the concept of ' Public Sphere ' where he emphasizes the importance of democratic communication and active public participation ⁶. In today's world, we see how social media has given access to people to have better engagement and engage in a deliberative democratic setting.

SOCIAL MEDIA :

All forms of political and social campaigning that make use of digital network infrastructure are included in the category of digital activism. To recruit volunteers and spread their inspirational tales to a global audience, activists typically use social media or social networks⁷. The use of digital media as an ecology then highlights the significance of facilitating numerous interactions and forms of communication between the media and the public through a range of aspects of group action.

Through the internet or social media in particular, digital activism can mobilize activists or movement members to create "crowd-enabled connection action." Digital activism differs significantly from traditional social movements in that it is primarily organized by crowds without

² Zayani, M. (2019). Social Movements in the Digital Age: Change and stasis in the Middle East. *IEMed: Mediterranean Yearbook*, 2019, 105–111. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7215485>

³ Bollier, D. (2003). The rise of Netpolitik: How the Internet is changing international politics and diplomacy. A report of the Annual Aspen Institute Roundtable on Information Technology (11th, Aspen, Colorado, August 1-4, 2002). The Aspen Institute. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED474412.pdf>

⁴ Virjan, D. & The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. (2013). The internet is changing our world. In *Theoretical and Applied Economics* (pp. 117–124). <http://store.ectap.ro/articole/895.pdf>

⁵ Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA47167149>

⁶ Jessop, B., & Calhoun, C. (1993b). Habermas and the public sphere. *Contemporary Sociology*, 22(4), 614. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2074464>

⁷ Shah, V., Sivitanides, M., & Mehta, M. R. (2013). The era of digital activism. *International Journal of Information Technology, Communications and Convergence*, 2(4), 295. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijitcc.2013.059409>

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the help of leaders or central organizing actors⁸. This brings to the forefront the public and gives them the primal force of power, unlike the traditional media.

Digital activism has been heavily involved in the ongoing Farmers' protest in India, which is mainly focused on the agricultural reforms that the government has introduced. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have been crucial in generating support for the farmers' cause. Hashtags like #FarmersProtest and #StandWithFarmers have been utilized by activists, celebrities, and regular people to spread awareness, organize acts of solidarity, and magnify their voices. Digital platforms have also made it easier to share testimonies, videos, and real-time updates from the protest sites, which has drawn attention to the farmers' demands both domestically and internationally.

Nationwide demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which detractors claimed discriminated against Muslim immigrants, took place in India in late 2019 and early 2020. To plan protests, spread awareness, and refute official narratives, digital activism was vital. Protest schedules were shared, demonstrations were organized, and false information was refuted using social media. To bring together a variety of voices and increase the volume of their calls for the repeal of the contentious law, protestors utilized hashtags like #CAAProtests and #RejectCAA.

STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY AND CONTROL BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CYBERSPACE :

However with the onset of Free speech and expression also comes accountability and restrictions and this has curtailed the onset of many such speech and expressions. For instance, in India, we see how the country is digitizing but with the onset of cyberspace and politics, there are now controls and restrictions too that limit democratic agendas. In many cases, the government has used internet shutdowns or blackouts, facial recognition, banning certain apps and websites⁹, etc. Certain instances have happened in India recently for example in Manipur, Delhi, Jammu, and Kashmir., Punjab, etc. One of the landmark judgments to protect freedom of speech and expression was by repealing or invalidating Section 66A of the IT Act in 2015 by the Supreme Court as the concept of what was offensive was not properly defined and was widely misused to curb criticism of the government bodies online¹⁰.

With the upcoming civil debate over cyberspace, there have also been incidents where the government's intention has been challenged and brought to the forefront by companies like Meta and Twitter, for example during the Farmer's protest the Government of India ordered Twitter to block 1640 accounts related to the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, under section 69 of the IT act in 2021. This order was challenged by Twitter. Another such incident was when Meta challenged the IT Act 2021 which asked the messaging platform to help the government trace the originators of messages in the platform this invades privacy and end-to-end encryption¹¹.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM A NEW PATH :

Technology has shaped our society, and many sociologists have contributed to how technology has created a progressive society, yet there are instances where there are loopholes in that sector as well.

⁸ Herawati, A. R., Marom, A., Widowati, N., & Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Political and Social Science, Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia. (2024). Digital Activism: A New Way of Social Movement in the Digitalization Era [Journal-article]. ICAS 2022, 458–470. <https://www.atlantis-press.com/article/125991822.pdf>

⁹ *Digital India has run out of freedoms*. (n.d.). The Wire. <https://thewire.in/tech/digital-india-has-run-out-of-freedoms>

¹⁰ *Defending Digital Liberties: Changing contours of an old new civic activism*. (2023, October 5). Economic and Political Weekly. <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/defending-digital-liberties-changing-contours-old>

¹¹ *Defending Digital Liberties: Changing contours of an old new civic activism*. (2023, October 5). Economic and Political Weekly. <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/defending-digital-liberties-changing-contours-old>

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Manuell Castells, in his work “The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society” has stated how the Internet is rebuilding society and reshaping cultural networks and structures¹². Castells acknowledges that we are now in an Information society, where knowledge or information or data plays a key role in politics, economic, and social sectors and the key agent of spreading knowledge is through the Internet or Digital space.

Pierre Bourdieu in his work also states how the internet influences cultural consumption and social dynamics¹³. This is true, as we see how through social media, a new cultural awakening happens and people’s cultural values and beliefs have been influenced. For example, the # MeToo movement, #blacklivesmatter, etc has brought a new dialogue in society and engaged people to have a wider social perspective.

Another key contributor to understanding new communication technologies was Ulrich Beck, who emphasized how digitalization mediates individual and mass responses to global risks and uncertainties and also plays a key role in shaping new forms of social and political participation¹⁴. Beck’s viewpoint draws attention to the intricate relationship that exists between risk and digitalization in modern society and calls on decision-makers, corporations, and individuals to have thoughtful conversations and take proactive steps to reduce digital risks and promote more resilient and equitable forms of digital society. The digital risks that he is talking about consist of cyberattacks, hacking, data breaches, false information, etc.

DRAWBACKS OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM :

With the positive side of digital activism also comes a price that often brings risk and online harassment and trolling that affects an individual’s mindset and behavior also in many instances, we see how weaker sections of society are mostly targeted especially women. Frank, in her work, states the gendered nature of online harassment and how it disproportionately targets women, especially those engaged in digital activism. This harassment frequently manifests as revenge porn, doxxing (posting personal information online), threats of violence, and misogynistic remarks¹⁵. For example, we have seen in the case of India, Rana Ayyub in 2022, who received death threats and rape threats online, when she posted her opinion on showing her solidarity with Yemen and calling against the Saudi-led coalition¹⁶.

Another major drawback is that digital activism comes with its limitations, that it might not turn into proper political outcomes and might not lead to meaningful change. Most social movement trend that starts in virtual space often comes within a short time period and might lose their relevance if they lack institutional support. For example the

#bringbackourgirls campaign in Nigeria that lost its relevance with time due to lack of political support offline .¹⁷ Another important term that can be used is ‘Slacktivism’ when people participate in tokenistic or shallow internet activism without taking significant offline action. Morozov contends that digital activism and superficial engagement may not result in real political change or structural improvements and are only limited to just mere likes and shares¹⁸.

There are also dangers regarding how digital activism might be misused by authoritarian figures or institutions for their gains and create negative influence to benefit their agendas. Digital technologies provide activists with more freedom and control over how politics are shaped. It makes the case that

¹² Castells, M. (2001). *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*. Oxford University Press.

¹³ Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia University Press.

¹⁴ Beck, U. (2000). *The Brave New World of Work*. Polity Press.

¹⁵ Franks, M. A. (2015). The dark side of digital activism: Targeted harassment and abuse of women online. *Harvard Law Review*, 128(2), 297-340.

¹⁶ Investors for Human Rights. (n.d.). Online violence against women activists is skyrocketing. Here’s what investors can do to help. Retrieved from <https://investorsforhumanrights.org/news/online-violence-against-women-activists-skyrocketing-here-what-investors-can-do-help>

¹⁷ Morrison, A., & Taylor, G. (2018). The limits of digital activism: A case study of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(4), 526-541.

¹⁸ Morozov, E. (2015). The illusion of control in digital activism. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(3), 32-42.

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the efficacy of digital activism as a vehicle for social change can be undermined by its potential to be appropriated by wealthy interests and subverted by authoritarian governments. Technology has a deterministic effect on society and it is pertinent to view things from a critical analysis and contextually understand digital activism, investigating where the source of information coming from and why is it bringing the information to the foreground¹⁹.

Another major drawback is the circulation of fake news and information online. Many individuals often tend to create false narrations to gather attention and also create confusion and chaos in society²⁰.

CONCLUSION:

The field of digital activism, with all of its positive and negative facets, offers a complex terrain for social change. On the one hand, it provides marginalized voices with hitherto unheard-of chances to use online networks and platforms to spread their views, rally followers, and confront structural injustices. On the other hand, it might also create risk and divide. But with every technological progress comes a social change and the most important aspect is the intent of how we are going to use the technology matters most and the responsibility in handling it.

¹⁹ Morozov, E. (2015). The illusion of control in digital activism. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(3), 32-42.

²⁰ Friggeri, A., Adamic, L. A., Eckles, D., & Cheng, J. (2014). Rumor cascades. In *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (pp. 101-110).