

# Evolution of digital activism on social media: opportunities and challenges

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## Abstract

The social media revolution has affected all areas, including activism. However, there is scepticism about its emancipatory capacity, and it is considered by some to be a distorted form of activism. This article presents a review of the existing literature on digital activism, starting with the concept itself, and examines its impact on the organisation of activists and citizen participation. Likewise, based on the platformisation of these spaces and the evolution of their affordances, we observe a growth in individual, strategic and low-commitment participation, the accentuation of the role of emotions in media that promote virality, and the assumption of playful forms of politainment by activists –especially on *TikTok*–. On the other hand, the strategies carried out by organisations to promote activism in relation to their causes are investigated, such as the generation of arguments provided by the interest group and the involvement in an action of dissemination, co-creation and replication of activists. Finally, the main challenges of digital activism are indicated: the growing inequality in terms of access to algorithmic visibility between activists and brands, influencers and interest groups; the desirability of complementing playful activism with work in alternative digital media that allows for more stable forms of collaboration; and the need to protect activists against the growth of hate speech on these platforms.

## Keywords

Digital activism; Social networking sites; Social media; Affordances; Affective publics; Influencers; Virality; Datafication; Connective action; Data activism; Interest groups; Hacktivism; Clicktivism; Slacktivism; Playful activism.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media platforms have become key spaces for activism given the profound mediatisation of all human activities (Couldry; Hepp, 2017; Van-Dijck; Poell; Waall, 2018). This trend has been further exacerbated by the isolation measures of the COVID-19 pandemic biennium, which has led to a large part of the population shifting their information consumption habits to social media (Newman *et al.*, 2022). These spaces have become places from which to make visible support for social and political causes, to feel part of a larger movement, to organise to protest inside and outside the platforms, or as places from which to build and modify news frames and influence political and public agendas. Today, at any act of citizen protest or demonstration, a tide of mobile devices can be seen capturing the moment and broadcasting it, often live, through their *Instagram*, *Twitter*, *TikTok*, *Telegram* or *WhatsApp* group profiles.

The mobilisations of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street or the 15M movement demonstrated the importance of new information technologies and networked communication to expand the forms of organisation, collective action, and social and political influence of citizens (Castells, 2009; 2015, Gerbaudo, 2012; 2017; Papacharissi; De-Oliveira, 2012). During the first era of digital activism these platforms enabled the formation of a collective identity through communicative processes (Gerbaudo, 2012; Treré, 2015; Toret *et al.*, 2013); however, despite the fact that digital activism has continued to develop online mobilisations of supranational following and impact, such as the #MeToo movements (Boyd; McEwan, 2022; Fileborn; Loney-Howes, 2019; Liao; Liqiu, 2022; Quan-Haase *et al.*, 2021), #BlackLivesMatter (Hockin-Boyers; Clifford-Astbury, 2021; Ince; Rojas; Rojas; Davis, 2017; Mundt; Ross; Burnett, 2018) or #FridaysForFuture (Díaz-Pérez; Soler-i-Martí; Ferrer-Fons, 2021; Herrmann; Rhein; Dorsch, 2022), the imaginary linked to these media points to a scepticism on the part of academics and activists regarding their emancipatory capacity today (Treré; Candón-Mena; Sola-Morales, 2021).

Among the causes of this scepticism is the process of platforming these digital spaces guided by corporate commercial interests (Butcher; Helmond, 2018; Helmond, 2015; Poell; Nieborg; Van-Dijck, 2019), which has undermined the structure of equal opportunity to be seen (Butcher, 2018; Hutchinson, 2021) and whose content moderation strategies often insufficiently protect activists from harassment and hate speech strategies (Gutiérrez, 2022; Van-Dijck; Lin, 2022; Vickery; Everbach, 2018; Weinmann; Nasri, 2020). These changes complicate the exercise of activism today, while facilitating the dissemination of content in these spaces by actors with greater economic resources such as governments, political parties, pressure groups, commercial brands and far-right movements (Chagas *et al.*, 2022; Freelon; Marwick; Kreiss, 2020; Schradie, 2019).

This article follows the following structure: First, it reviews the notion of digital activism, the empirical and theoretical studies that have reviewed its characteristics and impact in the last decade, as well as the way in which the platforming of the medium is affecting the exercise of activism and participation. Secondly, it analyses the activity of interest groups, corporations and brands as actors that advocate for social and political causes in the digital context as a way of generating consumer preferences by connecting the brand with the political and civic values of its consumers, thus giving rise, for example, to brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar; Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Finally, some of the challenges that have been identified in relation to digital activism on these platforms are discussed.

## 2. The hard definition of digital activism

Digital activism is a problematic concept on which there is no consensus among scholars and activists. Thus, Özkula describes it as

“a hazy and, as such, immanently problematic, if not dysfunctional, concept” (2021a, p. 61)

whose open debates include the question of which of the activities carried out through digital media should be considered activism (2021, p. 63), given the ambiguity and breadth of the term (Yang, 2016). In the same vein, Kaun and Uldam (2018) highlighted the growing interest of researchers from various academic disciplines in digital activism, almost a “hype” according to the authors, while noting the lack of

“it lacks a cohesive mode of inquiry that can leverage the advantages of different disciplinary insights and bring diverse perspectives and approaches into conversation” (2018, p. 2100).

Some authors have defined digital activism by focusing on the orientation of its actions towards its digital quality (Ben-nett; Segerberg, 2012; 2013; George; Leidner, 2019), which is problematic as it focuses exclusively on this condition, sometimes ignoring its contextual character as a socio-political act (Özkula, 2021a, p. 63). In this sense, several authors have insisted on the hybrid character between the digital and face-to-face planes in activist practices (Bustamante-Farias, 2019; Fischer, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2017; Greijdanus *et al.*, 2020; Karatzogianni, 2015; Nacher, 2021; Rodríguez-Suárez; Morán-Neches; Herrero-Olaizola, 2021; Theocharis *et al.*, 2023; Treré, 2019), although successful cases of digital native activism have been found, where

“the movement’s tactical repertoire is initiated, organised and coordinated online [...] with no pre-existing physical presence or offline campaign” (Li; Bernard; Luczak-Roesch, 2021, p. 1).

For Özkula (2021b) digital activism should be defined on the basis of its practices and not as a phenomenon originating from its relations with a specific technology, which would result in technological determinism, but also not as opposed to a romanticised view of traditional activism.

A remarkable definition because it emphasises its objectives and actors is the one proposed by **Karatzogianni** (2015), for whom digital activism describes:

“Political conduct aiming for reform or revolution by non-state actors and new socio-political formations such as social movements, protest organizations and individuals and groups from civil society, that is by social actors outside government and corporate influence” (**Karatzogianni**, 2015, p. 1).

The author thus coincides with **Diani's** (1992; 2000) classic definition of social movements where she clearly differentiates this type of formation from other collectives such as interest groups and political parties. From this perspective, the development of digital activist practices by actors such as commercial brands (**Manfredi-Sánchez**, 2019; **Sarkar**; **Kotler**, 2018; **Vredenburg et al.**, 2020) should not be considered digital activism. However, given that the consumption dimension is part of the areas of activism (**Teorell**; **Torcal**, 2007) and that this dimension is increasingly relevant for citizens in terms of social transformation (*CIS*, 2021, p. 4), it may not be a legitimate form of activism, but it is undoubtedly a type of initiative that brands will increasingly develop in order to connect with their audiences of interest and maintain themselves as culturally relevant (**Holt**, 2004; 2016) and socially responsible brands. Therefore, although it is understood that it is problematic to analyse these actions as forms of digital activism, they have been incorporated into this review because they have been conceptualised in this way by their authors, thus accounting for the transformation of the academic imaginary in relation to what is considered activism in the framework of social media today.

### 3. Impact of connective action

Some authors have analysed the emergence of digital activism in social media as a devalued mode of activism, ineffective for social change and whose main function is to make the practitioner feel good (**Gladwell**, 2010; **Miller**, 2017; **Morozov**, 2011). This critical view was expressed through neologisms such as slacktivism (**Christensen**, 2011) or lounge activism and clicktivism, terms that refer to the use of social media utilities that demand less effort (like, retweet, repost, sign petitions, etc.) and commitment to engage in civic and political campaigns (**Halupka**, 2018).

In contrast to this view, **Bennett** and **Segerberg** (2012; 2013) argued that Web 2.0 tools (blogs, forums, digital social networks, etc.) had given rise to a new form of personalised public engagement that they called the logic of connective action. Unlike traditional collective action, connective action is based on personalised content sharing through personal narratives rather than collective structures and identities. Thus, the effects of these online activities can lead to concrete policy changes through public pressure on governments (**Leong et al.**, 2021; **Uwalaka**, 2020) or mass boycott actions against companies (**Li**; **Bernard**; **Luczak-Roesch**, 2021), and extend political and civic outreach and participation by enabling new forms of mediated action (**Boulianne**, 2019; 2020; **Highfield**, 2016; **Kim**; **Hoewe**, 2020; **Lane et al.**, 2017; **Toret et al.**, 2013), especially attractive among young people (**Abbas et al.**, 2022; **Armstrong-Carter**; **Telzer**, 2021; **Boulianne**; **Theocharis**, 2020; **Cervi**; **Marín-Lladó**, 2022; **Jenkins et al.**, 2017; **Theocharis**; **De-Moor**; **Van-Deth**, 2019).

When assessing the role of clicktivism, it is interesting to incorporate the notion of subactivism to conceptualise the impact of these platforms on citizens' political and civic participation. **Bakardjieva** (2009) defined

“subactivism in my definition is a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerging in the flow of everyday life” (2009, p. 92),

a form of empowering the citizen who finds on the internet the possibility of exploring his or her political agency from the everyday context. Subactivism thus points to

“[...] a major reservoir of civic energy” (2009, p. 103)

that finds in communication technologies the way to express itself in the public sphere. Subactivism thus breaks with the distinction between apolitical or anti-political stances and traditional activism (**Vihma**, 2016), and points towards the individualisation of social and political engagement characteristic of 21st century social movements (**Pleyers**, 2018), where for many activists it is not necessary to be part of formal structures and organisations to participate in campaigns and causes (**Sánchez-Duarte**; **Fernández-Romero**, 2017). From this perspective, connective action can be seen as a set of digital practices that have helped to bring to the surface that individual civic energy that was rarely expressed in the public sphere before the emergence of these media. Along these lines, **Nacher** (2021) analyses the use of social media platforms in feminist digital activism as a form of “weak opposition”, with weak being understood as those mundane acts, which take place in the context of everyday life, as opposed to “heroic” acts of high visibility and leadership.

As for the consequences of the expansion of connective action in the last decade in terms of participation, **Boulianne** (2015; 2019; 2020) has found in successive research a positive relationship between the use of these media and participation in civic and political life. According to the author, this relationship would have strengthened over time in connection with social media, the growth of the interactivity of websites and the emergence of new tools such as *Change.org* that would encourage the participation of social media users in offline actions such as street protests, boycotts of companies, etc. (**Boulianne**, 2020, pp. 961-962). Several studies establish a positive correlation between participation in online and offline activism activities (**Chae**; **Lee**; **Kim**, 2019; **Cardoso**; **Lapa**; **Di-Fatima**, 2016; **Gutiérrez**, 2022; **Slavina**; **Brym**, 2019). Furthermore, these platforms have broadened the basis of participation by encouraging the involvement of politically underrepresented groups such as women, ethnic minorities, youth and groups with lower levels of education (cf. **Ruess et al.**, 2021). Other studies have analysed the effects in terms of mobilisation among those already

sensitised to a cause. Thus, **Wilkins, Livingstone** and **Levine** (2019) found that participation in social media increased the involvement of subjects who were already aware if they perceived that their action made an effective contribution to the campaign. **Foster, Tassone** and **Matheson** (2021) found that women who responded to sexist attitudes on social media were enacting their social identity through these actions, which contributed to them becoming future activists.

For their part, **Pinazo-Calatayud, Nos-Aldás** and **Agut-Nieto** (2020) found that these media help to intensify motivation for the social cause by giving activists access to sources of information contrary to their convictions and disseminating negative messages that mobilise them against the cause and reinforce their involvement with it. These results coincide with recent work that questions the social isolation capacity of the algorithmic design of social media, pointing out that effects such as the bubble filter (**Pariser**, 2011) or the echo chamber (**Sunstein**, 2009) have been little demonstrated empirically (**Bruns**, 2019) and demonstrating that spaces allow the reception of accidental information contrary to one's own opinions more easily than other media (**Vaccari; Valeriani**, 2021). Other studies, on the contrary, have pointed out that these platforms tend to reinforce beliefs, although the personality of the subjects is relevant in relation to the development of increasingly active actions in pursuit of a cause (**Workman**, 2019).

In relation to the organisational impact of activism, **Leong et al.** (2018) argued that studies on the amplifying effects of connective action have focused too much on participation as the main outcome of grassroots involvement, thus neglecting other outcomes in terms of influence and control. In their theory of social media empowerment, the authors emphasise that social media enable the sustainability of activism over time, acting as a latent structure that retains the people needed to keep the movement alive, both in times of expansion and in times of suspension of the social movement. Similarly, **Leong et al.** (2021) empirically analysed the mechanisms underlying the shift from connective action to a more structured form of activism on social media, finding that platforms posed both opportunities and constraints for collective action. Against these positive views, several authors have analysed the constraints that the digitally mediated structure poses for activist organisation (**Dumitrica; Felt**, 2019), how they can lead to the disarticulation of collective action in non-profit organisations (**Özkula**, 2021c) and the weakening of alternative digital communication and information networks that were forged before the growth of these platforms (**Poell; Van-Dijck**, 2015; **Rendueles; Sádaba**, 2019).

In the following, we review the process of platforming these digital spaces and how the evolution of their affordances<sup>1</sup> design is affecting the practice of activism in recent years.

#### 4. The evolution of activist practices in the context of social media platforms

The 2010s saw a key transformation for online citizenship communication: the shift from digital social networks (SNSs) to social media platforms (**Helmond**, 2015), something that reflects, for example, the strong presence of the label social media within the academic discourse around digital activism from 2010 onwards compared to previous terms (**Neumayer; Rossi**, 2016). While SNSs were conceived as a space structured around the user's profile links (**Boyd; Ellison**, 2008) and where visibility tended to be rather horizontal (**Hutchinson**, 2021), social media platforms are programmed to act as intermediaries with third parties, for which they

“process and reuse all the data generated therein and, through automated technical and social processes, provide guidance and behavioural guidelines to their users” (**Sued; Lugo**, 2022. pp. 1-2).

Thus, participating in online public discourse today requires adapting to certain communicative logics that the platform rewards through its algorithmic design (**Hutchinson**, 2021; **Van-Dijck; Poell**, 2014). This is potentially problematic not only because neoliberal interests and values are inscribed in the design of its algorithms (**Van-Dijck et al.**, 2018), but because its configuration is opaque to regulators and users (**Bishop**, 2019; **Cotter**, 2019; **Cardon**, 2018; **Miyazaki**, 2019) and algorithmic visibility marketing options have reduced the ability of activists to make themselves visible (**Hutchinson**, 2021; **Treré et al.**, 2021).

In response to this process of datification (**Van-Dijck**, 2017), different practices of resistance have emerged over the last decade that have been encompassed under the notion of data activism (**Gutiérrez**, 2018; **Milan; Van-der-Velden**, 2016; **Milan; Gutiérrez**, 2015), especially in response to events such as Snowden's revelations about US government spying (**Fuchs; Trottier**, 2017) or the *Cambridge Analytics* scandal (**Bennett; Lyon**, 2019), among others. This type of activism can take two approaches: reactive, focused on developing and disseminating practices of resistance to the control of data by governments and corporations; and proactive, focused on promoting uses of this data in favour of justice and social change (**Milan; Gutiérrez**, 2015). Connected to this reactive approach is the digital disconnection by some contemporary activists as a political practice, as well as data obfuscation to prevent its commercial and propagandistic use, and anonymous hacking practices (**Kaun; Treré** 2020).

##### 4.1. Individual vs. collective identity

In the current media context, collaboration to promote political and civic initiatives and causes has become timelier and more strategic (**Highfield**, 2016; **Pecourt-Gracia**, 2015; **Pleyers**, 2018; **Zafra**, 2010) because connective action enables

“they connected individual viewpoints and in so doing organically assembled collaborative but not collective narratives” (**Papacharissi**, 2016, p. 314).

Participation in these campaigns also becomes useful material for expressing and self-validating individual identity online (Bennett; Segerberg, 2012; 2013; Lane *et al.*, 2017; Sánchez-Duarte; Fernández-Romero, 2017), which raises contradictions in the framework of collective action, as emphasising individual difference can hinder the development of stable alliances and fragment social movements (Caro-Castaño, 2015) within the quantitative logic of algorithmic visibility (Sued *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, the substitution of the collective by the aggregate of subjects is normalised in the imaginary of activism, which hides the complexity of collaborative processes (Dumitrica; Bakardjieva, 2018) and insists on a notion of the social and collective from the individual (Rendueles, 2013; Zajc, 2013).

In this sense, it is worth noting how individual participation in some digital activism campaigns has allowed users to gain visibility and engagement for their own personal brand, especially in the case of influencers (Abidin; Lee, 2022; Eriksson-Krutrök; Åkerlund, 2022; Riedl *et al.*, 2021) or minority celebrities (Abidin, 2019), online creators who use their position as part of a marginalised group to define their personal brand and seek online popularity. Thus, Eriksson-Krutrök and Åkerlund (2022) found that white influencers were highly visible when participating in the Black Lives Matter movement on *TikTok*, even appearing as leaders of the movement and generating positive exposure for their personal brand. According to the authors, while the narratives they constructed were positive for the movement, they shifted the focus away from those directly affected by racial injustice: the racialised people who had experienced police brutality. In the same vein, Boyd and McEwan (2022) observed that the virality achieved by the #MeToo hashtag by actress Alissa Milano on *Twitter* ultimately resulted in the erasure of the black women and women of colour community from public debate, despite the fact that the hashtag had been coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to help black girls and women address their experiences of sexual violence.

#### 4.2. Affective publics and playful activism

Emotions, especially positive ones (Berger; Milkman, 2012), are key to promoting mobilisation and sustaining activism insofar as it is these types of emotions that move the subject to repeat patterns of behaviour and involvement (Foster *et al.*, 2019), while they have been shown to have a great capacity to generate processes of emotional contagion with viral consequences online (Ahmed; Jaidka; Cho, 2017; Berger; Milkman, 2012; Castells, 2009; 2015; Gjerard; Eslen-Ziya, 2022). In this sense, Papacharissi (2016) proposed the convenience of analysing the affective processes that help to communicate and raise awareness in the online context and proposed the notion of “affective publics”: networked publics with a strong sense of agency that are mobilised by sentimental expressions. Affect thus contributes to establishing and maintaining feelings of community that can reflexively drive a movement in the context of social media (Papacharissi, 2016), constituting a starting point for social change (Castells, 2015). The author interprets the collaborative discourses built around hashtags in social media as “structures of feeling”, following Raymond Williams’ classic proposal, in her analysis, social experiences that reflect

“an organically developed pattern of impulses, constraints and tonality” (2016, p. 321)

that constitute meaning-making practices that can be revolutionary because they allow us to collaboratively imagine a common future (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 321).

The formation of these affective publics is possible thanks to certain affordances of the platforms that allow people who share interests and sensitivities to meet. One of the most widely used is the hashtag, which has become one of the central tools of digital activism (Bonilla; Rosa, 2015; Gjerard; Eslen-Ziya, 2022; Larrondo; Morales-i-Gras; Orbeago-Terradillos, 2019; Liao, 2019; Yang, 2016) as it allows the formation of affective audiences around an issue (Highfield, 2016; Zulli; Zulli, 2020) on a one-off basis or over time (Gjerard; Eslen-Ziya, 2022) and transnational in character, as has been the case with movements such as the anti-racist movement around #BlackLivesMatter (Hockin-Boyers; Clifford-Astbury, 2021; Ince; Rojas; Davis, 2017; Mundt; Ross; Burnett, 2018) or the feminist movement against sexual violence under the hashtag #MeToo (Boyd; McEwan, 2022; Fileborn; Loney-Howes, 2019; Liao; Liqiu, 2022; Quan-Haase *et al.*, 2021). It is worth noting that the hashtag remains the primary tool for rallying like-minded people and mobilising to seek visibility for progressive movements, however, neoconservative and far-right activist groups are developing strategies articulated around migration to alternative digital platforms without content moderation, dissemination through traditional like-minded media and manipulation and misinformation through digital media (Freelon *et al.*, 2020; Schradie, 2019), thanks to more resources and greater organisational stability (Schradie, 2019).

The platform that has become synonymous with online virality in recent years is *TikTok* (Abidin, 2021; Olivares-García; Méndez-Majuelos, 2020). Something common in the studies on digital activism reviewed on this platform is the need to learn and participate in the viral trends of the moment to remain visible through the use, not only of hashtags, but also of filters, sound and narrative memes, etc., seeking to be incorporated by the algorithm into the “For you” page and become popular (Abidin, 2021). Building on the notion of affective publics, Hautea *et al.* (2021) found in their study on climate activism on *TikTok* that the affordances of the platform facilitated a specific type of activism in which non-experts emerged as hyper-visible voices with the capacity to popularise certain ideas and consensus among younger people through the formation of an “atmosphere of connected concern” (2021, p. 12) about climate change. Likewise, Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2022) and Cervi and Divon (2023) found in their studies on the narratives of young Palestinian activists on *TikTok* that the platform’s potentialities favour a “playful activism” that helps these young people to approach audiences that had no previous interest and knowledge about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Abbas *et al.* (2022) also concluded

in their work on the use of *TikTok* by Palestinian activists how creative micro-videos could galvanise and shape opinions around the conflict through their ability to attract attention and awaken a sense of community through shared fun. In the same vein, **Vijay** and **Gekker** (2021) have argued that the platform functions as a space for playful political engagement in India.

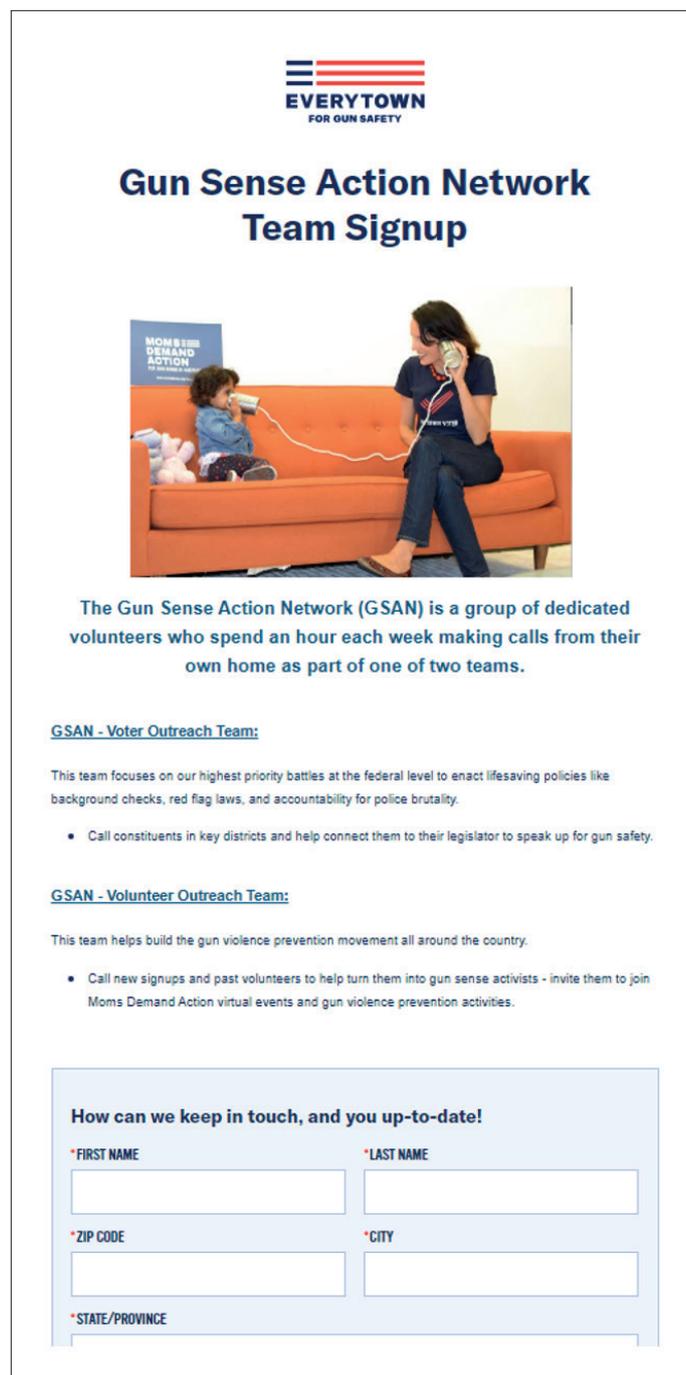
Recent studies on *TikTok* activism, on the other hand, have focused on how social media allows activism to create alternative narratives to hegemonic discourses (**Abidin; Zeng**, 2020; **Yang**, 2016; **Zhao; Abidin**, 2023) as well as access to algorithmic visibility for members of marginalised groups, such as migrants (**Jaramillo-Dent**, 2022; **Jaramillo-Dent; Contreras-Pulido; Pérez-Rodríguez**, 2022; **Sánchez-de-la-Vega**, 2021). Overall, the reviewed works point out that *TikTok* offers young people a space for political and civic engagement in an educational, entertaining, and interesting peer-to-peer format (**Abidin**, 2021, p. 84) where the confluence between influencers and the design of affordances is shaping a specific repertoire for social justice communication that **Abidin** and **Lee** (2022) have termed as the “popular cultures of social media”.

## 5. Advocacy and interest groups

Communication processes have undergone a significant modification since the emergence of communication 2.0, which is characterised, in general terms, by improved interaction and symmetry between audiences and organisations (**Ingenhoff; Koelling**, 2009; **Guillory; Sundar**, 2014). In this context of dialogic communication (**Kent; Taylor**, 1998) relationships are based on an increasing interactivity in which citizens take on more participatory roles and shared interactions (**McAllister-Spooner**, 2009; **Leiner; Quiring**, 2008). From this, five categories can be established according to the type of involvement and participation:

1. “Connect”, organised through a model of asymmetrical bidirectionality in which the activist maintains a passive action and which is essentially focused on the demand for information, such as subscribing to the organisation’s services (newsletter, downloading content, among others).
2. “Sharing”, organised as an activity in which the user provides information to other members of the network or the organisation, becoming a disseminator of information.
3. “Commenting”, which involves an increase in the activist’s activity and consists of comments, added to the communicative spaces generated by the organisation or as a result of a specific campaign on the network. It takes the form of comments and opinions on the campaign, whether in the news generated in the media or on social networks.
4. “Participate”, structured as an action that involves getting involved in the mobilisation actions of a campaign, such as writing to the media, writing to public representatives, signing petitions or intervening in the streets.
5. “Collaborate”, at this stage people increase their involvement and become co-creators of content with their own contributions or with documentation provided by the organisation.

The possibility of generating new supporters can be done by the organisation itself, but also by activists directly contacting other people to become activists. The latter approach can be more effective (**Almansa-Martínez; Quintana-Pujalte; Castillo-Esparcia**, 2023). One of the reasons for this is the



**EVERYTOWN**  
FOR GUN SAFETY

## Gun Sense Action Network Team Signup

**MOMS DEMAND ACTION**

The Gun Sense Action Network (GSAN) is a group of dedicated volunteers who spend an hour each week making calls from their own home as part of one of two teams.

**GSAN - Voter Outreach Team:**

This team focuses on our highest priority battles at the federal level to enact lifesaving policies like background checks, red flag laws, and accountability for police brutality.

- Call constituents in key districts and help connect them to their legislator to speak up for gun safety.

**GSAN - Volunteer Outreach Team:**

This team helps build the gun violence prevention movement all around the country.

- Call new signups and past volunteers to help turn them into gun sense activists - invite them to join Moms Demand Action virtual events and gun violence prevention activities.

**How can we keep in touch, and you up-to-date!**

\*FIRST NAME

\*LAST NAME

\*ZIP CODE

\*CITY

\*STATE/PROVINCE

Image 1. The Gun Sense Action Network. Source: Everytown (2023). <https://secure.everyaction.com/RvQymTQk-E-Eyw-jFksSHg2>

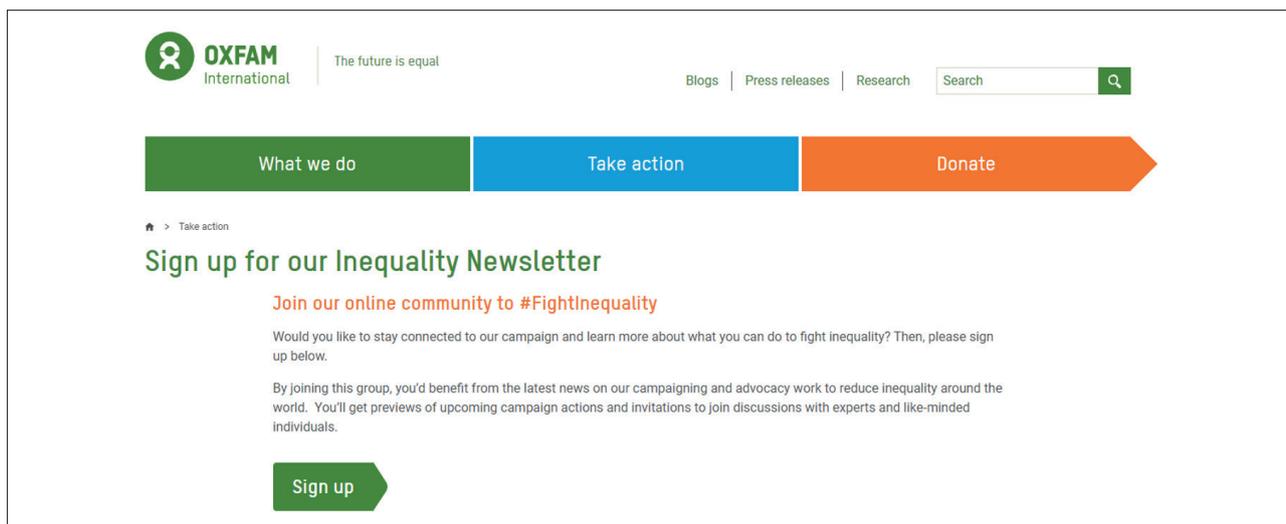


Image 2. Oxfam International newsletter subscriptions. Source: Oxfam International (2023)  
<https://www.oxfam.org/en/take-action/join-global-movement-change>

greater involvement, because personal connections between activists create stronger and closer ties. This is the case of the lobby *Mom Demand Action. For Gun Sense in America*, as reflected in Image 1.

The different parameters for developing a digital activism strategy are modulated by two strategies. The first involves the generation of arguments, sources or documents provided by the organisation that has planned the campaign. The second involves an action of dissemination, co-creation and replication by the activists who are part of the campaign. In this sense, a digital strategy involves a minimum number of people who are the ones who initiate the viralisation process and who, through personal and collective networks, extend the echo of the messages. Thus, any digital activism campaign brings together a series of characteristics such as:

- a. Generate a strategy of what we want to transmit, based on a planning that modulates the audiences we want to involve as disseminators and recipients, the objectives of the campaign, the timing of the communication process and the availability of technological, instrumental and personnel resources.
- b. Participatory concept of the process in which there must be different modes that generate communicative spaces in the form of a network and that allow information to be sent to the different audiences (Image 2).
- c. Implementing clear, transparent and concrete messages so that activists can disseminate, participate and co-create new communication scenarios.
- d. Generate documentation and messages for activists. Thus, it is necessary to have a series of arguments that can be disseminated not with closed phrases, but ideas that can produce messages specific to each activist in order to show an image of private and unorganised initiative. At the same time, it is necessary to share documentation (texts, photographs, videos, posters, etc.) that can serve as support for these activists in the action of disseminating the campaign.
- e. Knowing the most appropriate time to carry out the activist campaign, which will allow a better visibility of the cause to be disseminated.

In this sense, in terms of the degree of activists' involvement, they can be organised into the following typologies:

- Hacktivism: involves a high involvement of activists with actions to influence and lobby for the achievement of objectives. It is based on the term hacking, which involves intrusive access to systems and organisations.
- Slacktivism, with minimal action on the part of the individual. The commitment to the cause or demand is minimal and focuses on passive feed-back, such as "liking" or sharing content.
- Clicktivism: focused on getting a large number of people to click on a petition, send online messages or letters to certain politicians or join platforms such as *Change.org*. The most important thing is to get a high number of clicks that allow them to justify metrics with many people supporting a demand or petition.

A significant part of activist campaigns is strengthened when they move from social media to traditional media (either in the off or on format), as they are still media of high social influence on the political class. One of the recent cases is the *Bud Light* beer controversy

"because it sponsored two *Instagram* posts from a transgender woman" (Wiener-Bronner, 2023).

This event has been followed by all kinds of pro and anti-transgender aftershocks in different social networks and digital spaces.

One of the aspects to consider in digital activism is that it is part of an organised communicative process that is located in the digital environment and online platforms. This interactive process can involve organisational aspects, but

also inter-subjective aspects, and everyone participates in communication strategies aimed at achieving certain ends. Therefore, the need to measure and evaluate digital campaigns is inherent to any strategy. It is necessary to start from the axiom that measuring is not evaluating, because evaluation is a complex process in which the degree of fulfilment of objectives is verified based on the results obtained in the measurement. It is therefore essential to establish a series of levels of impact and evaluation of a digital campaign in any digital activity. In this sense, *International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC)* establishes a taxonomy of evaluation based on the following concepts:

**Outputs:** as the production of communication campaigns and the reception of a given audience. It focuses on measuring the impact or presence of our tools in different communication scenarios. It can be tracking coverage rates, number of news items published in the media, the media spaces in which they have been published, whether they are spaces in newspaper pages or time on radio and television, the number of views of videos, posts, tweets, number of blog entries, audience of the different media in which we appear, number of comments on the news, attendees at an event, click throughs. It is a taxonomy in which the impact on the population that our activity has had is counted.

**Outtakes:** refers to the degree of reception of the public and their attention to what has been communicated, whether it is attention, awareness, engagement, or participation. Examples of this type of reception are subscriptions to newsletters, recollection of knowing or receiving the information, retweets, comments, among others.

**Outcomes:** focused on knowing the effects of the communication on the audience. These are medium and long-term effects and address cognitive aspects on individuals, such as whether their behaviour towards the organisation has changed, whether there has been a change in attitude, whether audience preferences have changed, whether there has been an increase or decrease in support for an organisation, or whether knowledge about a specific topic has improved.

It is these three taxonomies that help us determine the type of reception, awareness, and uptake of campaigns.

## 6. In conclusion: key challenges

1. The commercialisation of social media visibility. The transformation of SNSs into social media platforms developed according to technocommercial interests and mechanisms during the 2010s has meant that corporations, stakeholders, governments, and neoconservative movements (with more economic resources and organisational stability) are gaining presence in these spaces while citizens and activists are increasingly forced to adapt to the affordances of the platform if they do not want to be punished with algorithmic invisibility. Given that a large part of citizens' lives is mediated by these platforms, it is critical for the proper functioning of deliberative democracy to advance transparency around the functioning of these algorithms. Likewise, it seems appropriate to study limitations by supranational governments on the commercialisation of visibility in these spaces, as this visibility tangibly affects citizens' participation in the public space. However, recent moves such as *Twitter's* decision to transform its old identity verification system (blue check) into a pay-for-visibility system for user tweets point to a worsening of this logic (Bécares, 2023).

2. The growth of playful activism and its limits for raising awareness. The importance of adapting to the affordances of the medium has led to the development of forms of activism that base their messages on entertainment formats, thus incorporating themselves into the media logic of traditional media politainment. This strategy, while useful for raising awareness and broadening the basis for social mobilisation, especially among young people, must be complemented with less superficial forms of activism on alternative platforms that offer more space and time for reflection and where users are more able to control their relationships and access to information. In this sense, it is interesting to note the movements of *Twitter* users towards *Mastodon* and other decentralised platforms following Elon Musk's purchase of the service (Chan, 2023), as a way in which users seek to regain control over their experience of the medium.

3. The need to protect activists. The governance of platforms and the problematic ways in which they exercise content moderation has allowed the proliferation of hate speech that has resulted in many activists -especially women- leaving these spaces, as well as the censorship of those who denounce abuses (Jaramillo *et al.*, 2021). Governments and supranational institutions must address this issue beyond the promises of self-regulation by these corporations, whose actions do not seem to be producing the necessary results.

## 7. Note

Given the diversity of approaches to the notion of affordances, this paper assumes the definition proposed by Ronzhyn, Cardenal and Batlle-Rubio (2022, p. 14):

“Social media affordances are the perceived properties, real or imagined, of social media, which arise from the relationship between the technological, the social and the contextual, and which enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms.”

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