

Digital protests: From slacktivism to activism

 By [Ashleigh Burton](#)

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According to Wikipedia, Slacktivism (a portmanteau of slacker and activism) has become widely known as the practice of supporting a political or social cause by means of social media or online petitions, often characterised and criticised as involving very little effort or commitment.



Source: www.unsplash.com

Malcolm Gladwell, in his October 2010 *New Yorker* article, criticised those who compare social media ‘revolutions’ with actual activism; famously saying – “the revolution will not be tweeted.” I wholeheartedly disagree.

In response to Gladwell's criticism of digital activism, journalist Leo Mirani argued that Gladwell might be right if activism is only defined as sit-ins, taking direct action, and confrontations on the streets. However, if the wider belief is that activism is about driving awareness, opening dialogues, changing people's minds, and influencing opinions across the world, then the revolution will indeed be tweeted.



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In April 2020, more than 78,000 people in South Africa demanded justice for Collins Khosa through an online petition by Zinhle Masombuka. In May 2020, video footage of George Floyd's murder by four police officers incited protests that were streamed live and taken up across the world through the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Echoing the #BlackLivesMatter protest, the #EndSARS campaign drew worldwide attention to Nigeria where young activists protesting against police brutality used online platforms to raise awareness and coordinate protests, as well as connect with volunteers and spread their message on a global scale.

Across the world, human rights activists aim to create social and political change. One of the ways this is done is to advocate for the rights of the oppressed and underrepresented, and to first and foremost, attempt to change political and social discourse. Social media has played an invaluable role in this process by levelling the playing field and by amplifying the voices of those who are often underrepresented by mainstream media.

Social media has most importantly allowed us to engage with first-hand accounts of those undergoing human rights crises. This can be seen through the work of Muhammad Najem, who is known as the 'Little Journalist' in Syria. The teen documentarian's social media accounts are filled with selfies however, the background showcases bombed-out buildings, destruction and the effects of war in his country. His approach to social media content has allowed so many children to tell their stories and ask for help in their own words.

Driving real change

It's often too easy for an Instagram user to 'like' the infographic they see on their feed and blindly repost it to their stories. However, it's also too easy to throw around the terms 'performative activism' and 'virtue signalling' because all activism has a place and purpose.

In a 2020 paper in the *Journal of Science*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill professors Deen Freelon, Alice Marwick, and Daniel Kreiss wrote that while one objection to digital activism is that it can't "substitute for more impactful actions such as voting or offline protest," it isn't without its own merit. They cited research that showed social media activism is a complement for offline engagement and that "sharing information about politics on social media predicted offline political activities such as attending political meetings, contacting public officials, and donating money to campaigns."

Georgetown University's Centre for Social Impact Communication and Waggener Edstrom Worldwide recently undertook a study to gain a deeper understanding of perceptions, behaviour, and motivations for cause support (locally and globally).



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The study showed that 55% of people who engage with causes via social media are inspired to take further action, like donating money (68%), volunteering (53%), donating items (52%) or attending an event (43%).

The rise of digital technology is changing the way charities fundraise, bringing with it new opportunities for organisations interested in embracing its potential. In the last two years, digital fundraising grew by 24%, of which 65% of traffic was on mobile.

I believe digital activism can drive real change and charity organisations around the world are joining people where they are – online. However, digital activism does require attention and intention.

The power of social media

Five years ago, there were still so many misconceptions and debates about the power social media held, the newfound energy that had been injected into activism because of social media, and what our generation could achieve with it. Now, social media is a serious factor in political campaigns and in the way people think about issues and social injustices.

It comes as no surprise that in the past few months, Eswatini, Senegal, Nigeria, Uganda, Niger, and the DRC are some of the African countries that have shut down online platforms or the internet during protests and elections.



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The power of social media was brought under scrutiny again in July 2021 when it was used to mobilise violent attacks in South Africa. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook Instagram and TikTok were claimed to have been used by rioters to coordinate looting and trigger the violent attacks which claimed the lives of 45 people, with over 750 suspects arrested in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

Videos, images, texts and voice messages were used to inform and mobilise people to participate in looting sprees, while others used it to spread misinformation, or further inflame the situation. We saw a similar situation unfold in the U.S when extremists stormed the Capitol and the unrest in South Africa sparked further discussions around the cyber protection legislation, passed in 2020, which stipulates that it is an offence “to incite violence or call people to be involved in the destruction of any property” on social media.

A hashtag can start a conversation, empower those who felt voiceless, connect and unite us, and even inspire a generation to action. It’s all about how we choose to use this powerful tool.

ABOUT ASHLEIGH BURTON

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