EMERGENT DEFINITION OF ONLINE SOCIAL ACTIVISM

NIKHIL AGARWAL
Fellow, Center for Resilience and Sustainable Development,
University of Cambridge

An inspirational YouTube video. Millions of likes on a Facebook page. A Twitter quote shared by thousands across continents for a cause. What do these people have in common? They belong to the new generation of online activists. The coupling between new media and social activism has attracted the attention of STS scholars. Since the past few years, multiple terms have emerged in the literature to elucidate online social activism – "Clicktivism," "Slacktivism," "Hacktivism," cyber-activists, armchair warriors and many more. The paper provides the taxonomy of different types of online activism. I am drawing upon the social presence theory that portrays the liaison between media and two communication partners. I have empirically analysed the terms by conducting semi-structured interviews and their contexts supported by an extensive literature review. The paper contributes to the scholarship by unfolding the embryonic dimensions of online social activism. Through this study, I am proposing the working, emergent definition of online social activism.

Keywords: Clicktivism, Slacktivism, Hacktivism, Identities, Protests

Introduction

Technology has given wings to people to support causes with 3Ws – What do they wish? When do they wish? Why do they wish? Thanks to social media tools such as Facebook, individuals can 'like' a cause without being a member of the organisation. The active and passive support mechanisms have significantly reduced the barriers to collaboration and communication. The discussion on how new media affects people's lives, work and political processes is getting attention (Gerodimos, 2004; Grofman & Franklin, 2014; Ingenito, 2010; Robles, 2011; Wiesslitz, 2019). In earlier literature, the negative relationship between the Internet and democracy is discussed by Capella and Jamieson (1997) and Fallows (1997);. However, we can argue that the Internet has matured significantly in the last two decades, and its influence is far more significant and profound than earlier believed. The later research from scholars (Froomkin, 2004; Gerbaudo, 2018; Rodrigues, 2014; Shannon, 2007; Trippi, 2008; Wattal et al., 2010) senses the "positive" sentiments emerging from the relationship between new media, democracy, and social movements. The new media is now regarded as a source of information, making activist organisations

more democratic and pluralistic (Bimber et al., 2009; Robles, 2011). When talking about social activism, social media serve multiple purposes for gathering, diffusion, acting on information and coordinating actions. Traditional media reporting, such as journalism, is used for a broad range of information diffusion, whereas social media could be used for focused information distribution. Social media has proved to be the most effective way of communication for action-oriented mass protests (Baxter & Marcella, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2016b; Hoebanx, 2022; Khandekar & Reddy, 2013; Petray, 2011; Qin et al., 2017). There are examples available in the literature about the groups exploiting social media to gather support in a short time to mark a solid political statement (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Culloty & Suiter, 2021; Della Porta, 2006; Enjolras et al., 2012; Gerbaudo, 2018; Karpf, 2010; Shirky, 2011).

Online social activism is based on grass-roots communication fundamentals (Conway, 2012). From being a few million users at the start of this century, billions of people today use social media tools for communication and collaboration (Gerbaudo, 2016a; Karpf, 2010). Online activists engage the new media to their advantage in raising their voices in a non-conventional manner. The meaning of slacktivism, hacktivism, clicktivism, and online activism has evolved over the period (Butler, 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2012; Karpf, 2010; Pavia, 2011). The discourse in the media has not always been favourable towards online activists; post 9/11, hacktivists, for instance, are compared with "cyber-terrorists" or "information terrorists" (Taylor, 2004; Vegh, 2003). There exists a thin line between being an "activist", or "fanatic" or "moderate." In the case of Edward Snowden, he is deemed a "fugitive" by US authorities; conversely, he is considered a hero in other parts of the world, especially on social media. Though it cannot be ruled out that a few individuals or groups with malign intentions may be part of the social media community, it is not justified to brand the whole activist community as information terrorists. On a more positive note, online activists working for causes such as *corruption* in India, *SOPA/PIPA* in the United States, *Arab Spring* in Tunisia, Egypt & Lybia and *Greenpeace* in different countries can raise their voice towards the natural causes with great success. According to (Taylor, 2004), Online social activism is nothing but an imaginative and resourceful way to use social media tools for the common good of society.

Though there is substantial literature on online activism, it is mainly oriented towards the communication aspect or focused on niche movements such as hackers or hacktivism (Bardeau & Danet, 2012; Castells, 2006, 2013; Jordan & Taylor, 2004; Lévy, 1994; Ludlow 2001; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Taylor, 1999, 2004). Only a few scholars have taken the time to group all the variations of online activism and their repertoire's nuances (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). In this article, I draw the crucial differences and the changing natures that constitute online social activism from an STS point of view. Even if scholars have studied the interaction on a digital level, an in-depth analysis of the coupling of online social activism and new media technologies in social settings is still missing.

The article deliberates on the emerging definition of online social activism in the new media context. I begin by examining definitions of clicktivism, slacktivism, and hacktivism by analysing their historical roots, linkages, and context in which these terms are used. Then I propose the emerging definition of "online social activism" by probing the

assorted "words" associated with the term. The definition is further expanded to discuss the three embryonic dimensions related to "practices," "coupling", and "social settings." Further, I have analysed the definition in "theatrical" aspects (Goffman, 1959; Sternheimer, 2012), thus linking it with STS literature. I conclude by pointing towards common themes inchoated in recent studies.

Methodology

New Media tools have actively stimulated activism in the last decade (Gerbaudo, 2018; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Social activism in democracies such as India, the USA, UK has witnessed many thought-provoking cases - such as Delhi Gang Rape, SOPA/PIPA, Occupy movement, to name a few. Activists have exploited new media for communication and collaboration to influence the polity and outcomes.

In this inquiry, qualitative research was carried out to understand the terminology of online social activism in-depth. I have chosen the interview method over others, such as surveys, because (Judge Jr & Zeithaml, 1992) and (Mintzberg, 1979) argue that field interviews are majorly significant to understand complex situations. The case study methodology is appropriate when studying new and emerging phenomena, and purposive sampling rather than random selection is especially appropriate in such situations (Eisenhardt, 1989a).

I have examined two cases and conducted forty-three detailed semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (leaders, followers, activists and volunteers) to understand the associated terms with social activism. Further, a comprehensive review of secondary material (websites, articles, media coverage) was done to triangulate the data to uncover the more profound meaning (Patton, 2002).

Case A was the born-digital case – a group of women was attacked and molested by a vigilante group while they exited an exclusive club after a few drinks. The incident was broadcasted live on TV and shared on YouTube. The vigilante group aimed to deter women in the country from adapting to the Western culture and dissuade them from acts such as going to a pub for drinking. Reacting to the incident, a few women started a Facebook campaign that became one of the first popular social activist campaigns using new media technologies in the developing world. *Case B* was the political action to pursue the government to bring anti-corruption legislation. The yearlong protest is considered the most significant mobilisation of the people for a social cause in this century. The group exploited the new media technologies for communication, training, fundraising and collaboration activities. Hundreds of millions of people supported the cause through offline and online modes.

Theoretical Background

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) explained the classification of social media through fundamental theories in media research (social presence) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure). According to social presence theory, the media changes its structure and

behaviour from the social presence of two communication partners (Short et al., 1976). Social presence is subjective of "intimacy" (interpersonal vs mediated) and "immediacy" (asynchronous vs synchronous) of the medium. In the case of mediated conversation (e.g., telephone), social presence would be lower than in non-mediated conversation (e.g., face-to-face). Contextualising in the digital ecosystem, in the case of asynchronous (e.g., email), social presence would be lower than synchronous (e.g., Live chat) conversation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). We can argue that influence is subject to higher social presence between the parties. For instance, the constant interaction between the parties would have a higher social presence, thus carrying higher influence.

In computer-mediated communication, the relational view of social presence can be witnessed. Social presence can be viewed as the behaviour and interactions of an individual in the highly-fluid, dynamic online environment. Social presence is demonstrated by how individuals post their messages and their interpretation by others. The primary goal of a social activist is to support the cause and contribute constructively to achieve it. Online mediums are another method of participation; therefore, it can be argued that the social presence of social activists is higher during their online interactions. By my empirical evidence, I can claim that online social activism is much more than mere 'liking' or raising awareness of a cause. The new media is used for training, fundraising, communication, and collaboration, thus, higher social presence.

The concept of social presence is consequent social categorisation theory (Shin et al., 2015). Social categorisation is grouping people based on gender, race or religion. Goffman (1959) has described social categorisation in an interactive situation such as online-offline presence; therefore, the individual reaffirms the identity through engagement. In this paper, I am exploring the social presence phenomenon through Goffman's 'theatrical' aspects of front stage and backstage performances of activists in online settings, thus postulating the emerging definition of Online Social Activism.

Internet, Social Media and Social Activism

The Internet and Social Media

The Internet is defined as the international network of interconnected computers. The Internet has no central governing body; however, the law of the land applies to the usage of the Internet in a particular geography. Due to the autonomous structure of the Internet, it has expanded virtually every corner of the world. Today, 35% of the world's population has access to the Internet. Internet usage has become ubiquitous due to the growth of emailing and social media. The Internet is considered the "most influential" medium in the history of humanity; no other service has ever had such widespread influence in such a short period. In its earlier days, the Internet was perceived as a 'power equaliser', which could balance the power between citizens & power barons (Rheingold, 1991). Seamless interaction between citizens and citizens & government is deliberated as the transformative capability of the Internet (Bruce Bimber, 1998; Bruce Bimber & Davis, 2003; Marengo & Settanni, 2019; Vail & Agarwal, 2007). The Internet, in a populist view, will decentralise access

to information and give power to data in the hands of end-users. The Internet is possibly shaping new democratic values due to continual community exchanges, thus inviting younger, urbane and educated people to be more civically engaged while challenging the elites (Cassell et al., 2006; Yan et al., 2018).

Media and Communication scholars have given naïve yet idealistic accounts of the benevolent consequences of the new media (Gerbaudo, 2016a; Gibson, 2015; Lindgren & Lundstrom, 2011; Stein, 2009). Conversely, many other scholars produced a much more detailed view of this argument; the concerns related to digital & social exclusion, internet governance, and the digital divide cannot be ruled out (Enjolras et al., 2012; Howard et al., 2011; Scott, 2011). We can argue that the relationship between new media and political communication is still in its infancy, and therefore, it shall be thoroughly studied and analysed in different settings.

The social media phenomenon is relatively new, and its definition is evolving. Merriam-Webster defines social media as "forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)". According to (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), social media can be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." Social media is based on Web 2.0, a term coined by DiNucci (1999), and is considered a transitional technological shift from static webpages to the more interactive, user-driven web. Web 2.0 refers to the newness of the Internet, which is multidirectional, collaborative, interactive, participatory, live and instantaneous (Petray, 2011).

Social Activism

Authors such as (Blumer, 1969; McAdam et al., 1996; Wilkinson, 1971; Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991) provide helpful insight and revelations about the definition of social activism and social movements. A social movement is associated with social and political change governed by ideologies. These ideologies can be religious, social, cultural or political; therefore, it is a difficult task to furnish a generic definition to such a vast and complicated subject.

Here it is essential to understand the difference between agitation and social movement. Agitation could be a repulsive behaviour against an administrative or forceful action, whereas social movement (or social activism) is more organised with clear objectives. A social movement comprises objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership, and organisation. A few agitations may come strictly with social movements, but we can see the apparent differences as we go more in-depth.

Social media has proved to be the most effective way of communication for action-oriented mass protests. Examples are available in the literature and popular media about the groups using social media to gather people quickly and make a solid political statement (Bennett et al., 2014; Gerbaudo, 2016a; Saletan, 2011; Sen et al., 2010). In 2004, demonstrators organised a protest against Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, who

had inaccurately blamed the Madrid transit bombings on Basque separatists. As a result, the prime minister has to resign from the post. Not always the use of social media has proved to be successful as a medium of protest; there are instances where protesters' social media has failed the demonstrations. In 2009, during Iran's presidential election, activists protested against the miscount of votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi but were ultimately brought down by a violent crackdown. The government crushed the red-shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010, and dozens were killed. The government used reverse-tracking of social media to track and arrest the protest leaders. Social media may have a mixed record of success and failure; it is now a coordinating tool for practically all of the world's political movements. The matter of grave concern is the government's restrictive policies (both democratic and authoritarian) to limit the use of social media (Shirky, 2011). In India, during the month of July-August 2012, there 78 people were killed in the state of Assam due to violent protests against a minority community. It is said the rally started due to featuring doctored videos creating tension between the two communities.[1]. In August 2012, the government imposed an SMS ban for 15 days to limit the spread of misleading and potentially dangerous information. Some groups hailed the government's mandate to ban the group SMS, but many termed it as a restriction on freedom of expression.

Protestors around the world find intelligent use of technology to circumvent totalitarianism[2]. In Egypt, when the government shut down the cell phone tower and confiscated mobile phones. The small handy device that can be carried in the bag pack was used to reconnect the cell phones to each other and transfer videos/photos. The photos were shared with international media and posted on you-tube once the protestors had access to the Internet. William Saletan, author of 'Is internet driving Arab Spring?' says that radio has become the most effective medium to reach people in North Korea and Iran. In the case of Tunisia, the US government helped protestors to circumvent surveillance technologies. It is increasingly becoming a rat race between governments and protestors; the government is trying to repress, and dissidents are developing intelligent solutions.

Literature has guided us towards three schools of thought a) Optimism or mobilisation theorists, b) Pessimism or reinforcement theorist c) Scepticism theorists (Aronson, 2012). For optimist theorists, core belief lies in the positivity of the Internet (Park & Perry, 2008). Optimist theorists hold a utopian view of the power of the Internet, such as reducing communication costs. The mobilisation role of the Internet is to support the penetration of the Internet, giving people an option to expand their choices (Bimber, 2003). Hindman (2010) leans towards the reinforcement nature of the Internet; he argues that increased Internet use leads to 'exclusion'. The social constructivist and reflective view of the Internet is discussed by authors supporting scepticism (Park & Perry, 2008). They argue that the Internet expands the political horizons through cultivating participation, though it may not result in an increment or decrement of the political process; it facilitates the 'politics-as-usual' opinion.

[1.] Indian Government ban bulk SMS to reduce panic - http://www.theverge.com/2012/8/19/3251885/india-text-message-ban

[2.] Is the Internet driving the revolutions of the Arab Spring? http://facultyfiles.deanza.edu/gems/kaufmancynthia/Saletan.pdf

Slacktivism and Clicktivism

Slacktivism is derived from the word 'slacker' and 'activism.' The term is often used for a person who supports a social cause, civic engagement, or collective action with minimal personal effort. Slacktivist activities include "liking" a particular community organisation without contributing to its effort, signing an internet petition without going into the depth of the petition or using other's status messages as its own. Google Dictionary defines slacktivism as:

> *Actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement, e.g., signing an online petition or joining a campaign group on a social networking website.*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Clicktivism as,

> *"the use of social media and other online methods to promote a cause."*

The premise behind clicktivism is that social media facilities easy participation to support an organisation or cause. Clicktivism includes organising protests, signing petitions, crowdfunding, liking/following a cause, and sharing content related to a cause using social media tools. Clicktivism and slacktivism terms are used synonymously by scholars in the literature.

The rise of Internet technologies and social media has created a generation of individuals who wish to display their social concern or sometimes to make an impression on others. The new media tools such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn provide an opportunity to "like", "+1", or "follow" a specific message/task/video/photo. The vastness of social media and its ease of use has made it incredibly easy to share a photo, video, speech or text. The "liking" of a message or post is often considered participation/endorsement of the activity. The Facebook official page describes a 'like' as "Giving positive feedback and connecting with things you care about." Liking a message or post is a way to let everybody know that you enjoyed the post, support it, and are concerned about it.

Further, leaving a comment on the message you like is an additional effort that symbolises participation in the action. The Facebook 'like' button or Google '+1' button is developed as a 'plug-in' that can be embedded on other websites. Organisations & individuals increasingly use "likes" as a measurement to prove the popularity or interest in the content. A host of companies sell false endorsements or "likes" generated from fake Facebook accounts to organisations that wish to demonstrate the importance and influence of their content. Though Facebook now removes the automated "likes" and bans organisation that purchases "likes" from bulk providers. Computer experts are critical of the "likes" business because of privacy concerns and the vulnerability of attacks.

Activists and clicktivists often "like" or "follow" an organisation/cause without participation. The activist is subjected to participate in passive acts by promoting symbolism. It is a convenient way to share, inform and engage in the cause. Though, questions are

raised about the impact of online activism, slacktivism and clicktivism (Butler, 2011; Coleman, 2011; Hern & Chauk, 1997; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Karpf, 2010; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010; Yuan, 2012). At the same time, in many instances, it is not always possible to physically participate in every cause you believe in. Therefore, the online medium is a convenient way to put your weight behind the cause and make others aware of it. Fundamentally, clicktivism is the ultimate democratisation of mass media. John Conway (2012), a blogger on the Huffington Post, describes the three-tier engagement process for activists with new media. The first tier is *the passing information* tier - the slacktivist shares the information and spreads awareness of an issue. Most activists only engage at the first tier (Conway, 2012). The second tier is the *fundraising* tier - the slacktivist may purchase a small item to show support for a cause or donate a minuscule amount from $1 to $50 (Butler, 2011). The money is used to underwrite the efforts done by the group. The third tier is *the action* tier - the small group of slacktivism who take the cause forward by participating in real offline action, organising rallies, political efforts, protests and marches (Conway, 2012). Conway (2012) argues that an easy comparison can be drawn between traditional activism and slacktivism; both follow the pyramidal structure, where tiers are much broader at the bottom and smaller at the top.

There are varied opinions in the literature about the impact of slacktivism & clicktivism on real-life activism, such as protests and marches. The personal validation agenda of these individuals makes them "armchair good doers" who wish to change society with a single click (Cornelissen, Karelaia, & Soyer, 2012; Morozov, 2012). Cornelissen called these "symbolic actions" that provide a low-cost opportunity for an individual to participate or signal one's moral concern (Cornelissen et al., 2012). Slacktivism deduces in "moral licensing," often appropriating self-righteous behaviour. Individuals derive support for their morally dubious current actions (political, prosocial or consumer choices) from morally correct past actions (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010).

On 2 November 2013, an American satire website NationalReport.net fake-news report received an unprecedented "positive" response on social media. The story was about the non-existent "rape festival" in India. The report on the website stated, "Men in India are already beginning to celebrate as the annual Assam Rape Festival is just days away. Every non-married girl age 7-16 will have the chance to flee to safety or get raped". The story was shared more than 89,500 times on Facebook and over 5000 on Twitter in a few days. The activists, without realising that story is fake and believing the satire to be "true news," commented on Facebook, "India is always raping something. Makes me sick!". Another activist wrote, "God has mercy on these innocent women.. what kind of tradition is this. All you have to know is that God is watching you, and you are going to pay for your sins." Many other websites and forums picked up the report. Once the report was disregarded by the mainstream media and verified as "fake," there was hardly any slacktivist apologising for their earlier comments. Cornelissen (2012) argues that being perceived as a moral person by others is generally considered desirable. Merritt (2010) terms this behaviour as a "self-presentation" strategy. The exhibition of prosocial intentions, symbolic actions and moral self-licensing (Merritt et al., 2010) diminishes the belief in real activism.

Hacktivism

Before discussing "hacktivism," we must understand its first move: the hack. Indeed, the action is the primary key to understanding hacktivism, as hackers call themselves so because they "hack." In the later part of this section, we will see what being a hacker means and how it leads to hacktivism.

The very early origin of the "hack" takes place in the 1960s MIT, where it was described as a "funny and ingenious way to resolve a technical problem" (Söderberg, 2008). Richard Stallman, the creator of the GNU operating system, refers to it as "playful cleverness" (S. Williams, 2010). Furthermore, a hack can be any act towards a technology complex enough to allow it (Jordan & Taylor, 2004; Turkle, 1984), but it must also be "imbued with innovation, style, and technical virtuosity" (Levy, 1984). Turkle's definition of a "hack" follows three principles: simple, masterful and illicit. The illicit part creates the first sparkle, the kick that leads to the hacking (Jordan & Taylor, 2004). Another important distinction is the one between hackers and crackers (Jordan & Taylor, 2004). The cracker tends to act illegally, for example, intruding illegally on someone else's computer or database to take advantage of it (S. Williams, 2010). Hackers would tend to see problems as a game for the mind and find a solution to it for the sake of amusement. The reader will notice that the difference is thin and subtle; only the output is essential. Hacking means understanding technology on a level that allows thinking beyond its first use. Wark defines the hack as a creation of abstraction (Wark, 2006).

According to Jordan & Taylor (2004), it was in the mid-90 that the term "hacking" started to be associated with the "use of technical skills to commit computer crime." It was then that "hacktivism" started. If the origin of hacking and hacking goes back to the '60s, the term "hacktivism" is more recent and arises from a new generation of hackers. Jordan & Taylor (2004) complete Levy's hacker generations by extending the list up to seven generations of hackers: the original hackers, the hardware hackers, the software hackers, the hacker/cracker, the Microserfs, the open-source hackers and the hacktivists. Hacktivists are not only the latest generation to date, but they are also the most politicised ones. Indeed, the original hacker ethic is more linked to the intellectual thrill of hacking rather than the potential political power that comes with it. More and more, activists, at that time mostly connected with anti-globalisation movements, started to use their technological skills to pursue political goals, such as the Zapatistas in 1994 and the Internet-based blockade during the Seattle demonstrations of 1999 (Jordan & Taylor, 2004). I would add another action — the operations — of the Anonymous group, such as the attack on the Scientology Church in 2008 (Operation Chanology) or the campaign against the SOPA and PIPA law project in January 2012 (Operation Backout), to only speak about the biggest ones (Bardeau & Danet, 2011). However, mass actions are not the sole practice of hacktivism; in fact, more precise and detailed effects can also happen. So, at some point at the beginning of the '90s, computing started to be used on a broader scale for political purposes and from this, hacktivism was born.

There is no such thing as a hacktivist class or a part of the population we can define as hacktivists. Hacktivism is a set of practices that are taking place in the realm of the

Internet. Some authors coined the term "cyberspace" to define the "place" where such practice happens (Jordan & Taylor, 2004; Ludlow, 2001; Wark, 2006). However, it is more and more irrelevant as there are no "gates of the Internet" (i.e., fixed terminals) anymore, as technologies such as the 3G and the 4G allow us to be "always on" (Hanckel & Morris, 2014). (Barlow, 1996)(Barlow, 1996) "new house of mind" defined in the "Declaration of Independence of the Cyberspace" is melting inside society, and the frontier between activists and hacktivists seems to be getting more and more blurred. Nevertheless, was it defined in the first place? To understand it, we must see what kind of practices can be described as hacktivism.

Jordan and Taylor define two hacktivism practices: mass action hacktivism and digitally correct hacktivism (2004). The mass action happened in 1999 with the Seattle events; we can add Anonymous operations to this example. They are characterised by using technology to continue direct civil disobedience or symbolic actions such as blockades or boycotts but on the Internet. Anonymous use a software called LOIC that allows it to launch a denial of service attack that will saturate the server and make the website targeted unavailable. It is the same tool with the same purpose used in 1999 called FloodNet. As the symbolic part is essential, this type of action is added to the practices of culture jamming to expose a political message. Again, this practice is widely used by Anonymous and the use of the Internet's memes, remixed famous images of pop culture (Bardeau & Danet, 2011).

The second type demands more technical skills as it is much more technical support, such as the one given by Telecomix to the Tunisians, Egyptians or Syrians during the Arab Spring [http://telecomix.org/]. The primary goal is to help from a small group of skilled people to a group of non-skilled people to counter censorship, surveillance, and repression by giving and teaching them the means to defend themselves against the most prominent and influential actor.

Vegh (2003) divides online activism into three practices: awareness/advocacy, organisation/mobilisation, and action/reaction. Hacktivism is part of the third, defined as a "more proactive and aggressive use of the Internet" (Vegh, 2003). As we saw by reviewing different parts of the literature about hacktivism, it is much more a set of practices defined by heavy use of computer technology oriented towards specific goals than anything else. Like the hack, it often hits the line between legal and illegal actions. However, it is not even if the line between hackers and hacktivism seemed easy to draw. "Hacktivism is activism went electronic" (Jordan & Taylor, 2004). However, as we will see in this article, there are different ways of being politically active online, and hacktivism is more direct and aggressive.

Emerging Definition and Dimensions of Online Social Activism

The Internet has empowered social activists in a way no other medium has done in the past (Diani, 2000; Gerbaudo, 2018; Harlow, 2012; Hoebanx, 2022; Wang & Soule, 2016). Online activism is voluntary participation in the cause using social media and Internet technologies. In Case A – the full-time journalist started a Facebook page to protest atrocities among

women, and thousands of volunteers worldwide joined the page within days. *Initially, it started as a joke, I spoke to one friend, and she joined. Then the following day, hundreds of people joined the group".* – Founder, Case A. Online activists voluntarily contribute as just an observer of activity, keen participants, moral supporters, and contributors of funds, and use social media for collaboration and communication. *There were two sets of people; first, who felt enlightened, provoked and who thought it was privileged to participate in something meaningful. It was not meaningful for the second set of people, who did not want to get involved directly. The role of the activist is to propagate the idea, and* no one can own the idea:– Founding member, Case A.

Social activism is meant to go viral. The success of the social movement is directly proportional to the 'noise' generated, and some people participated, thus influencing the targeted party. Case A and Case B's outreach strategies were based on a simple principle – create a "people-to-people network" by sharing the posts on their Facebook walls or forwarding the text messages to their mobile friend's list. *"Within a day of starting the campaign, we had 500 odd members. In a week, we hit 40,000",* Founder Case A. The viral phenomena of social activism can be controlled up to the "inflexion point" or the "tipping point." Once that tipping point is crossed, the initiator(s) of the campaign have little control over the activities on the ground. In our case, the initiators started the campaign, but once it had picked up steam, it was not easy to control its popularity. The online presence was to facilitate the discussion, recruit new volunteers, disseminate information and complement it with the offline strategy. Through online participation, social activists were able to communicate with a large section of society in a fast and efficient manner.

Empirical data, literature review and interactions with social activists have thrown certain "key" words that denote the attributes and elements of online social activism. It is worth noting that not all online activists may or may not possess all these traits. Nevertheless, these words highlight essential aspects of online social activism (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: Cluster of words for online social activism

Education	Action/ Reaction	IT literate
Low cost	Concern about a cause (social cause)	Wider spread
Political	Moral	Views and values
Volunteer	Donation	Privacy
Backlash	Collaboration	Communication

Online social activists are commonly **educated** and **IT literate,** as being online needs access to new media devices. Social activists are **volunteers** supporting (or opposing) a **political** or **social cause**, hence upholding their **views and values**. Social activism is caused by an **action** or **reaction** to a political/social issue (e.g., Arab Spring, Occupy movement). New media is used for **low-cost, widespread communication and collaboration** purpose. Another purpose of using new media is to gather support and generate **donation**s for the financial sustenance of the social/political cause. Some social activists are concerned about **privacy** and potential **backlash** by authorities, organisations, friends & family or opposition

entities. These clusters of words provide us with the emergent working definition of online social activism:

> *"The practice of vigorous action, through the coupling of technology, to support a cause for the betterment of the society."*

Social presence for activists in the online environment stimulates the process of engagement and exchanges, thus creating a closer virtual non-mediated environment. This iterative process gives the individual a sense of social presence (Shin et al., 2015). Social activists are emotionally bonded through the cause they support; they express their emotions and feelings while interacting with one another. The social presence becomes stronger with peer feedback and online communication (Choi & Chung, 2013; Kim, Kim, & Nam, 2010; Shin et al., 2015). According to (Newberry, 2001), the social presence in the online environment enriches the individual experience. Therefore, we can argue that social activists have a higher social presence in the online environment.

Online social activists are engaged in seven different activities:

1. Demonstrate their feelings, emotions (anger, love, hate, etc.), and experiences to promote their cause
2. Share details of personal participation and opinion
3. Respond to queries and questions raised by potential volunteers
4. Engage with other volunteers to evaluate their positive or negative feelings
5. Gather support for the offline action (on-the-ground protests)
6. Generate financial support for the cause
7. Engage in the debate to influence the policy

Online activism is an engaging activity, whether it is done momentarily or for a more extended period. Social activist is volunteers who use the online medium to express their feelings and emotions due to the ease of availability of new media. Their online engagement is about sharing the details of personal participation, providing opinions and responding to the queries/questions raised by other activists. As the movement grows, automatically, certain volunteers assume the role being the propagator of information. "*Things were happening at a scary pace, sometimes with a blink of an eye you missed an important comment or discussion, and you cannot sit in front of Facebook for the whole day, we all had jobs*" – Case A. In cases A and B, they created a group of 'trusted' volunteers to answer and handle the queries. Some volunteers acted as 'coordinators' for funds collections, organising local protests, gathering new volunteers, and reaching out for endorsement from influential individuals.

Social movements constantly need funds to keep their activities going; online activists reach out to potential supporters to generate funds. A similar approach we have witnessed in elections where candidates reach out to the public to donate online to support their elections in a promise of better representation. Easy access to new media tools has allowed activists to debate and participate in policy discussions. People can sign-up petitions on

websites such as change.org to establish considerable support for a cause to influence policymakers.

A substantial relationship exists between media and online and offline forms of engagement (Evans, 2019; Grofman & Franklin, 2014). The current research does not provide adequate evidence that online activism would substitute on-ground activism. In some of the earlier studies, it was perceived that online activity does expand communication and interaction. Nonetheless, it did not have much influence on the consequences of the action (Norris et al., 2005). Here, I am arguing that online activism complements offline action. In Case B, activists provided protests and rally details on online forums; thousands of people participated in the rally by looking at the information online. In today's connected world, offline action would not be so successful without online communication. Therefore, we can corroborate the complementarity of online activism and offline action.

In the following sections, I am discussing online social activism from three different dimensions - "Practice," "Coupling", and "Society Relationships."

Online Social Activism as Practice

In the case of the Internet, I am conceptualising two aspects of the Internet: the *material Internet* as the cables, keyboards, terminals, the artefacts that we use to be connected and create the second aspect, the *immaterial Internet*, is all the cultural creations such as websites, blogs and so on. Both aspects existed as the Latourian Nature and Society, in equal balance and linked. Moreover, this is a theoretical distinction as they do not exist separately and cannot interact without one another. They are different but not separated. The Nature pole and the Society pole are two points that act together in creating *the Internet itself*. There is an inherent aspect of practice after this distinction, something that we can link to the concept of sociomateriality (Leonardi, 2012) as a particular use of materiality influenced and coupled with a specific social context.

Online social activism is created through materiality: the keyboard or the touchscreen. An inherent aspect of practice comes out after we reviewed the three dimensions of online social activism (clicktivism, slacktivism, and hacktivism). (Williams et al., 2005) have noted that the "*Success of new ICT products does not simply reflect functionality and price, but also the extent to which they are compatible with skills, understanding and habitual practices of potential users*" (p16). Indeed, activism is going through devices and is thus defined by the use of these devices.

Hacktivists, already hacking this tool by their nature, have a deeper connection to computing technology and use it more than a tool but also as a means. Both mass action hacktivism and digitally correct hacktivism have this genuine relation that technology can empower people and help them fight for their ideas. They use it not only as a communication tool but also as an action tool that allows them to conduct civil disobedience actions.

Coupling between Social Activism and New Media Technologies

The global society is shifting from irregular cycles of protest to a permanently mobilised society in which movements spread and diffuse around the world at the speed of modern telecommunications (Buechler, 2002; Tarrow, 1998). The emerging social media technology is paving the path to more vital social movements. Technology and society 'mutually' shape each other – the social shaping of technology argument reminds us that technology advancement and its outcomes are linked to how technologies are appropriated and embedded in society. These online movements become social artefacts that would stay in public memory for an extended period and probably stay on the Internet forever.

Numerous scholars are concerned about the sudden emergence of new media and the dangers associated with the aimless digitisation of content (Bar et al., 2016; Marengo & Settanni, 2019). Celebrities, influencers and especially political leaders are becoming over comfortable with the new media, resulting in social isolation and less face-to-face contact (Khamis et al., 2017; Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013). (Putnam, 2001) observed, media is accused of distorting the facts to generate interest in the story; with the rise of the new media, these insincere stories stay in electronic format on the Internet, thus damaging the social fabric of the society. The power of the people is transferred to corporate hands, manipulating the community's collective intelligence (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Gerodimos, 2004). Another primary concern is data privacy and digital identity corruption; digital records can be modified or destroyed without any paper trail.

What is at issue is the emergence of sustained "couplings" between the communication capacities (or, more precisely, the "affordances" discovered by the user groups) and "social practices" (Williams et al. 2005). Technological change is reducing the cost of communication and opening up various kinds of opportunities for engagement. Therefore, new media technologies can support an increasingly pluralistic society.

The relationship between online activism and society

Protests existed before the Internet was even conceptualised, but they never appear for many reasons and are deeply rooted in the context where they appear. Herbert Kitschelt developed the concept of "political opportunity structures" as the understanding of the social movements to significantly impact government policy (Kitschelt, 1986). According to his work, the success or not of a social movement is linked to the government's openness and the state's structure, which would allow or not claims coming from civil society. Meyer (2002) adds that the notion of perception as a social movement will act as "they do what they think that they can do" because the political opportunity structures influence them. Moreover, other scholars worked on the relationship between the state structure and social movements to understand if the policy context could impact the development of social movements (Della Porta, 2006; Kriesi, 1992).

Using those frameworks, communication and creating online social space is crucial to developing a social movement, making a problem exist and creating communities (Curran et al., 2016; Fuchs, 2017). The Internet is not separated from society: the policies about the networks of communications and geography do matter (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006). The

fundamentals of social relations and interactions are deeply rooted in online engagements. Moreover, we must consider online activism as an extension of "real world" activism, as online personalities are an extension of "real world" personality.

Goffman (1959) describes the meaning of identity and how an individual presents a diverse demeanour in different situations. I will draw upon (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010) here; according to them, during online interactions, individuals desire to control the impression; this adaptation portrays the societal dimension of social media. The online interactions of individuals with others can be considered a front-stage act, where one exchanges view through chat messages, pictures, posts or a blog. The individual conduct reverses to their backstage personality once the online interaction ends.

Individual campaigners have to play roles in promoting their cause; one of them is being an activist, while they lead the ordinary life of being a businessman, having a regular job, or nurturing a family. New media facilitates the interactions among these activists to participate in the movement. "*All six of us do not come from a social activist background. My friend was a businessman; I was in business myself, and there were two other engineering students"*, Social Activist Case B. Individuals from different backgrounds assume the role of activists in the campaign.

Some authors do not echo the Goffmanian interpretation of the front and backstage justification in a social media context. The seamless exchanges (Chats, Facebook messages, Twitter posts) may not allow individuals to switch roles. (Sternheimer, 2012) stresses, "These backstage communications can easily become the front stage with an errant keystroke (such as hitting 'reply all') or worse yet, a subpoena." Sternheimer narrates an incident in September 2010 to support her argument - a Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi was videotaped using the webcam by his roommate Dharun Ravi, without his knowledge while kissing another man. Mr Ravi posted this video on Twitter, urging people to watch it. Following the incident, Mr Clementi ended his life by jumping off a bridge a few days later. This case demonstrates how a situation changes once private (backstage) conduct is made public (front stage) using the online medium. (Goffman, 1959) delineates this phenomenon as 'inopportune intrusions', which is essentially an interruption by unwanted someone during the backstage performance. Here we can connect it with the notion of 'faceted identity', how people show different facets or sides of their character to fulfil the demand of the social situation (Farnham & Churchill, 2011). For instance, a family-oriented businessman or a student becomes a social activist when the situation demands.

Individual personalities are very fluid and contextually driven by changing social settings. Diverse traits of an individual do not construct a separation between online and offline façades (Vieweg et al., 2015). The cases in this paper discussed examples of how social activist interchange between distinctive social settings. The empirical material assists us in better understanding of separation/integration between offline and online binary. Here I argue that the identities are contextual, whereas an individual's personality integrates the numerous identities that she/he assumes to handle distinctive social situations. For instance, the businessman wears the identity of a social activist to participate in a protest,

and he performs the act of a businessman while dealing with his customers. His social situations allow him to change his act, though his personality will remain the integration of various social identities he assumes.

Self-disclosure is another critical feature of social media; it describes how an individual develops his online identity by forming a profile page or webpage (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In the online space, the self-disclosure can be either public or private. Public websites, blogs, and comments on other posts constitute the public self-disclosure in which an individual has less control over the other's perception, whereas participation in closed online groups or members-only pages is private self-disclosure; here, individuals have better control over impressions and perceptions of others.

As online activists, individuals fear the potential backlash and concerns about invasion of privacy. "During the initial phase of the movement, people have to make sacrifices and contribute, but that also results in backlash and their personal life is disturbed. So, I want to protect myself ….. at the same time, I wanted to contribute (towards the cause)", Activist Case B. Other activists quote, "I am a member of various other groups. Being technology savvy, I can access their various logs and member list and pull out the data……. many groups maintain the member list and phone numbers in their folders. So I could get hold of their database. This agitation is of national interest, so I used the anonymous email ID to distribute the messages to these groups."

This study confirms that their fears are not speculative; there are instances where the establishment prosecuted individuals for their role in the online protest. An activist created an anonymous email id to avoid disclosing his identity as he was afraid of the backlash from his employer. Online presence facilitates seamless interaction between activists' online and offline lives; it provides an opportunity to conduct the "front-stage" performance without physically being on the front stage.

Conclusion

The critics of online social activism draw our attention towards the global digital divide - that less than one-third of the world's population is online. This may lead to the disproportionate representation of the members of the protest organisation, leaning towards the educated, urbane and technologically capable members. In developing countries like India, China, and Africa, the literacy and affordability of Internet devices may create a more significant divide between individuals who use online tools as a protest medium and others who do not.

The cases, interviews, and data used in the study are limited to providing the emergent definition of online social activism in the context of practice, coupling and societal relationships. The data is used for another research project by the author. Though six pilot cases, two clear cases, and forty-three interviews have provided enough insights for this study; however, the emergent definition of online social activism shall be tested in different settings with a higher number of cases for a more comprehensive description. My empirical findings have substantiated that social activists have a higher social presence in the online environment.

As discussed above, activism in human culture has existed possibly from the beginning, but online activism is a relatively new phenomenon. This inquiry throws many future research possibilities for exploring the attributes and characteristics of social activists in various situations. There are ample opportunities to extend the research to other democratic countries, multi-issue groups and further case studies. An analysis can be drawn to study the impact of online activism on offline activism in a different context.

We may agree that digital activism's effectiveness and relevance are still questionable. However, it is fair to argue that the dual force of offline action and online activism can provide a formidable channel to spread the voice quickly and efficiently. Online activism is a new twist in the tale of 'traditional-old-age' activism and is worth discussing.

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ANNEXURE 1

S. No.	Classification of Groups	Issue raised
Case 1.	Awareness / Advocacy	The case represents that no criminals are in elected office. Supported by the most extensive media group in India
Case 2.	Awareness / Advocacy	The group was an awareness and advocacy group to motivate voters to vote on election day.
Case 3.	Organisation / Mobilisation/ Awareness / Advocacy / Action / Reaction	Mobilising people against corruption and advocating for policy change to penalise corrupt officials. In one protest, the group directly mobilised over 100 million people (400 indirectly). (selected for detailed study)
Case 4.	Organisation / Mobilisation	The group was to push the policy mandate to check the transfer of black money to safe foreign destinations and efforts to bring this money back to the country.
Case 5.	Action / Reaction	The vigilante group attacked and molested women to exhibit their actions as to 'safeguarding women from western civilisation ill practices such as drinking in a Pub. (selected for detailed study)
Case 6.	Action / Reaction	Action group formed to prosecute the miscreants for the murder of an actress.