

## Protest, Visibility, and Representation: The Potentialities and Limitations of Social Activism.

### INTRODUCTION

Social activism has the potential to enact change and empower communities both locally and worldwide. However, the concept itself – a group attempting to transform a social, political, or economic system – is inherently limited as it is working against a more powerful, entrenched systems. This paper looks to social media working alongside traditional networks, both important in the potentials of social activism today. However, both forms of social activism have their limits, most notably the reliance on external media outlets for ‘being seen’. From research, this essay argues that ‘visibility’ is central in both limitations and potentialities.

The theme of visibility is inspired from Rema Hammami’s (2016) idea of ‘intelligible and unintelligible bodies’, specifically looking to the West Bank, Palestine. The Palestinian community (purposefully turned ‘invisible’ by Israeli occupation) works by aligning itself with “bodies that count”, ‘those who are recognized by sovereign power as grievable’ (Hammami 2016: 174). Her research suggests that ‘visibility’ and ‘connection’ are necessary for a movement’s success (*Ibid* 173). I expand this by discussing how social activism can be empowering to those oppressed; the possibilities and limitations of social media activism as a communicative field; the somewhat problematic notion of ‘events’ and exposing reliance on external media; and finally, how movements can be limited by issues with self-representation.

## SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

Firstly, we shall discuss the potentials and limitations modern social activism via social media. Building on Bourdieu's concept of the 'field', Postill sees the internet as a 'digital field', a modern development in which social practices and relations are tied to technology through online communication (Postill 2021: 165). This is an appealing model, since the internet is like its own world, and given its popularity it is vital for social activists wanting to reach more people. Within this field, social media have changed 'the means of production and distribution of attention' – a vital 'resource' in activism (Tufekci 2013: 848). Social media have made activist movements' messages and resources more accessible, and now almost anyone with internet can promote a post about a specific cause. If a campaign creates an engaging post, then they have the possibility of going 'viral'; unlike traditional modes of spreading awareness such as leaflets or protests, online interaction invites a wider audience. An example is the 'ice bucket challenge', which raised millions for ALS with 'hashtag activism' (Benjamin 2018: 34). Looking more to political activism, Gray's research into the Spanish song "Parva que Sou", which discusses unemployment, shows how it spread to Portugal, gaining tens of thousands of views within the first week (2016: 63). Virality is a great potential for social activist groups to receive popularity, as more attention means more pressure on institutions upholding problems.

Therefore, the biggest potential of social media activism is information spread. By harnessing communication pathways, subverting traditional forms of media, social media activism can make restricted information public, network, and fundraise (Lindgren 2013: 208) (Benjamin 2018: 30). This tactic has been critiqued for allowing 'slacktivism', whereby people can 'sit idly on their butt, gazing at their phone instead of doing something about it',

simply retweeting a post does not much impact (Benjamin 2018: 33). From my own interactions online, I have noticed that this relaxed posting about crises comes in trends, with hashtags quickly fading out of circulation, which can lead to the normalisation or crisis; put neatly, 'a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention' (Simon 1971: 40 in Tufekci 2013: 850). Nevertheless, sharing informative posts is not a completely negative action, since an act of sharing a post still spreads awareness with the potential to gain support (Tufekci 2013: 851).

However, social media are not accessible to all. Social media are inexpensive, though access to a phone, tablet, and Wi-Fi can cost a lot, making it inaccessible to people in poorer economic conditions. Furthermore, language is a barrier restricts participation, with most posts on social media written in English to attract attention in the West – for example, the top six active accounts under the #feb17 hashtag in the Libyan 2011 uprising all Tweeted at least partially in English (Lindgren 2013: 211). This demonstrates how the appeal to external help (intelligible bodies) partially excludes non-English speakers involved the conflict. Finally, Gray explains that in times of crisis symbols and memories of local significance resurface, which I argue cannot translate globally on social media to those unknowing of the cultural context (2016: 62). Though complete accessibility is not required, the more people able to interact with a cause the more power it holds.

Constant information is useful in combatting slow violence – long-term damage to a community, using 'forms of delay, deferral, attrition, and accumulation whose ordinariness exacerbates suffering' (Ahmann 2018: 166). Ahmann's research in a polluted Baltimore town which was opposing the proposed building of an incinerator is valuable in highlighting that the victims themselves are often oblivious to the problem – as activist Greg said "[i]t's

exhausting to create an event out of nothing” (2018: 146). Social media activism here can potentially inform residents of the normalised issue, part of the ‘incrementality’ tactic, using ‘a gradual build up that sometimes coalesces’ (Ahmann 2018: 154). In Baltimore, social media was used to effectively raise awareness, eventually leading to a protest and the blocking of the incinerator.

Another potential for social media activism is for organisation or ‘digital mobilisation’ (Postill 2021: 164). Social media means that activists can access a wider variety of stakeholders, whilst also communicating to a larger number of people more easily (Benjamin 2018: 30). These two Tweets in the 2011 Libyan protests show further how modern communication allows for more spontaneous activism and direct interaction with grassroots activists (Lindgren 2013: 216):

“@Number10gov URGENT! Shortage of medical supplies in Al Bayda hospital, calling on ALL int'l health organizations to help #Libya #Feb17.”

“@[...]: #libya is revolting. we're organizing a protest at the downtown library, 1pm on saturday. come out. #feb17 #gaddafi is goin down.”

Furthermore, the wide array of input means social media activism can be more democratic approach than traditional hierarchies of activist organisations (Benjamin 2018: 31). Thus, social media can potentially express a wide array of voices in activism, appealing to wider audiences.

A successful example of internet social activism at its full potential is ‘Black Lives Matter’, which, by spreading awareness of systematic inequality and slow violence, both planned protests, shaped the “national discourse about race” and sparked (some) changes

in the police force (Wortham in Benjamin 2018: 32). Social activism online working alongside real-life action on an international scale has great changing potential, though it is rare to see such a successful campaign.

### BUILDING COMMUNITY

An important potentiality of social activism is the creation of community. Haugerud describes how activists in the 'Billionaires' movement experienced a 'sense of affective solidarity or social connectedness' based on shared values, comparable to Turner's *communitas* (2018: 16). Building on this, I argue that social activism is especially engaging for those in a community because of the joint aspiration for a better future; by blaming others it empowers individually and collectively by taking 'a small degree of control over a deeply felt sense of political peripheralization' (Theodossopoulos 2013: 201). Community, which can be physically in person or online, is a great potential for activism as it invests people emotionally in the movement, resulting in a more effective impact.

However, when a community (especially online) becomes isolated, it limits itself epistemically in a 'filter bubble' (Pariser 2011 in Postill 2018: 755). By doing this, groups may protest in a way or with a message that is not applicable to the mainstream culture and backtrack their progress. Tufekci's research also shows how bubbles can form around 'networked microcelebrities', often normal people who represent the movement (2013: 857). Postill adds that social media is a prime space for populism to emerge, since large numbers of people can communicate and rally each other, communication between figureheads and followers 'co-create news and opinion' (2018: 755; 761). An example is the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol Hill riots in the US. Many of the groups, such as the Proud Boys or Three

Percenter, have evidence of sharing extremist views online prior to the riots, unchallenged by the government, arguably drawing people further into extreme political bubbles focused around political ‘microcelebrities’ or even Trump himself. Epistemic bubbles hold potential for more effective, streamlined communication, but, given the isolation from wider society, this planning can lead to extreme actions such as violent riots. Ultimately this damaged the January 6th groups’ reputations and effectiveness significantly, with over 500 under investigation for their participation, which threatens focal points of the bubbles, and alienated onlookers. Naturally, one is limited in how much knowledge is accessible, but I argue that, both online and offline, social activism can turn into terrorist extremism due to epistemic isolation, damaging their image to many.

#### SEEING THE OPPRESSED – DEPATHOLOGISATION AND FEMINISM

This section looks at how social activism has the potential to erode colonising and patriarchal structures, looking firstly at Theodossopoulos’s theory of pathologization and exoticization of resistance. Pathologization dismisses the resistance as irrational by reducing the movement’s message, whilst exoticization places the movement in another space and time by either denigrating it as “primitive” or patronizingly idealizing it as ‘noble (but savage)... idealistic (although naïve)’ (Theodossopoulos 2014: 416-20). This is done by media and politicians to paint the movement as irrelevant, similar colonial forces portraying native populations as frozen in time – the ‘Other’ (Theodossopoulos 2014: 418). An example of this was when the Israeli authorities stopped Tel Aviv social justice occupation and protests in 2012 by depicting themselves as rational and the activists as unreasonably violent, thus requiring security intervention (Rabinowitz in Theodossopoulos 2014: 420). Pairing this with

the theme of visibility, I contend that resistance movements can be de-pathologized and de-exoticized with effective self-expression, to expose the 'cultural embeddedness' of resistance and the pathologizing institutions, which can de-exoticize non-Western groups to the Western public (Theodossopoulos 2014: 416).

Hammami's research in Palestine is an extreme example of how the state orchestrates a 'regime of visibility' to turn native Palestinians invisible by hiding oppression (Hammami 2016: 173). In the West Bank, Mbembe's theory of 'necropolitics' is dominant – "violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilisation'" deciding life or death, so Palestinians against the Israeli state are portrayed as a risk to civilisation, becoming the Other (Hammami 2016: 170). In the West, this makes it difficult to access information about the Palestinian experience, and they become 'ungrievable bodies' unrecognised across 'ontological divides' (Hammami 2016: 171). This is an example of exoticizing, making them seem separate. However, social activist organisations combat this with online communication – village blogs, sharing videos etc. – to 'internationalize' the West Bank, an example of the intelligible-unintelligible bodies alignment (Hammami 2016: 175). Countersurveillance aims to make Israeli soldiers and settlers fearful of international condemnation; by sharing local stories it humanises the Palestinians (de-exoticizing) and avoids romanticisation (de-pathologizing), thus exposing the colonising framework (Hammami 2016: 178) (Theodossopoulos 2013: 203). Here, social activism can potentially break down harmful divides of exoticisation between the West and Third-World countries, giving agency to the Palestinian whilst exposing oppressive structures.

Social activism also has feminist potentials, looking again to an example in the Middle East. Mohanty's work 'Under Western Eyes' theorises that Western feminism frames

the Third-World woman as a domesticated, uneducated victim, constrained by family and cultural traditions which Western feminism must save them from; thus we must change this orientalist view to see Third-World woman not through oppression alone (2003: 501).

Feminist organizations work to highlight women's issues aid them, but these do not change the epistemic problems of how people view them. Hammami explains that traditional patriarchal gender norms in the Middle East (also persist in the West) associate violence with men and vulnerability with women, painting them as "passive, oppressed Muslim women" (2016: 181). This is despite Palestinian women being on the 'front line of collective actions', such as 'stealing' men back from police; the Israeli regime makes this 'invisible' to outsiders as previously discussed (Hammami 2016: 181). Thus, women are often doubly disadvantaged by cultural gender norms and ethnic exclusion by Western feminism.

Therefore, I found the case of Bahraini activist Zainab Al-Khawaja a particularly striking example of the potential social activism holds to change mentalities (Tufekci 2013: 860-863). Al-Khawaja became a microcelebrity during the Arab Spring Bahrain uprisings, tweeting her experiences of violence, protests, and her father being arrested by police. This on-the-ground reporting relates to previously discussed tactic of harnessing social-media virality. I see this case as starting to break the 'Western Eye' of feminism as it shows her in an active position, with tweets [*sic*] giving her a powerful voice.

'Alkhalifa, YOU CANT BREAK US, U CANT BREAK US. WE WILL ALWAYS STAND STRONG AGAINST YOU' (Tufekci 2013: 862).





*Figure 1: Found in Tufekci 2013: 863.*

Furthermore, an image of her blocking a procession of police cars was seen globally, making it into *The New York Times* (figure 1); parallel to this provocative ‘masculine’ activism, Al-Khawaja continued to post images of her baby daughter, showing the West importantly that traditional ideals of Bahraini motherhood could coexist with activism, breaking the ‘Western Eye’. Though admittedly she is at an advantage to the Palestinian women with access to the internet, Al’Khawaja’s social activism shows its feminist potential.

### SPECTACLE

From research, social activism’s main limitation is the reliance on press coverage. Social movements “need news media for three major purposes: mobilization, validation and scope enlargement” (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993: 116 in Tufekci 2013: 851). To capture mainstream attention, protests or occupations are organized as a focal point. Ahmann

highlights that ‘crisis is a privileged designation – a moment of rupture’ showing how (in the case of Baltimore) an occupation works well to attract media to slow violence, which is difficult to express beyond a local level (2018: 144). There, residents used ‘moral punctuation’ – ‘an explicit marking of time that condensed protracted suffering and demanded an ethical response’ – by marking December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, as a date to act, catching media attention (Ahmann 2018: 160).

A further excellent example is the ‘No Billionaires Left Behind’ activists. Activists dressed satirically in ball gowns and suits, played badminton, and drank champagne in Central Park holding signs like “widen the income gap” to critique wealth in relation to politics in America (Haugerud 2013: 1). The absurdity intentionally captured the imagination of onlookers and journalists.

Whilst events can be great for drawing attention to a movement, a critique is that they do little to reduce the ‘structural violence that inequality has engendered’ (Theodossopoulos 2014: 424). In the case of #MeToo movement, by using spectacle to call out sexual assault ‘#MeToo placed attention on individuals as harbingers of fetishized evil rather than helping tackle the structural problems found at the heart of institutions’ (Pipyrou 2018: 417). However, we should not be so discrediting, as events make people question seemingly natural structures, such as the existence of billionaires, which is the start of change – vital, following Malinowski’s idea that “the main province of law is in the social mechanism” (1926: 60-61 in Pipyrou 2018: 416).

Activists focus on the ‘spectacle’ (seen clearly in the Billionaires), however the visuals can shroud the actual message, limiting effectiveness. Spectacle can be used to activism’s advantage, such as Baltimore protesters designating seven people to be arrested to involve

the state in the issue (Ahmann 2018: 143). However, it can inhibit the movement. In October Just Stop Oil protesters hit headlines as they threw soup on Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' to highlight the doomed environment and the cost-of-living crisis. Yet instead of provoking thought on the climate crisis, the public instead debated vandalism and the value of art. Thus, an event involves careful planning to get the message across whilst also drawing enough attention, requiring a lot of temporal and emotional. Since activist events work against powerful institutions, they need a lot of effort to maintain this uphill battle, so loss of momentum and lack of resources is also a significant limiting actor for activism (Theodossopoulos 2014: 421-2). A careful balance must be made between spectacle and message within the constraints of available resources.

Building on spectacle, labelling a movement essentialises the issue into something easily fixable (Theodossopoulos 2014: 417). Mainstream media has considerable power over this since they condense messaging for readers. This containment potentially pathologizes a movement and social activists are limited in their influence by journalists.

The main point here is that social activists have little control over how the mainstream media publicises them, limiting them hugely, and links to the fact that the media can pathologize and exoticize (Tufekci 2013: 852). News outlets rarely describe the police as violent, even though it is part of their job, so to stand in opposition to this, protesters are often portrayed as dangerous and disruptive, even if peacefully protesting. Conversely, the media can belittle the movement. Recent headlines about climate activism convey this, for example the *Daily Mail* stating "Police force is 'running out of vegan meals' because they arrested so many Just Stop Oil protesters" or "Just Stop Oil stunt backfires as student, 22, tries to hurl bucket of paint" in *Express*. This journalism aims to discredit the

movement by making fun of the individuals and is uncontrollable to activists, limiting their impact.

## ALIENATION

This final section discusses how activism can limit itself by alienating potential supporters with class divisions and by having damaging consequences. Linking to visibility, the issue raises a question: who can voice discontent? Who decides the path activism takes?

Karen Bell's autoethnographic research into UK environmentalist organizations shows how these groups are widely run by middle-class people who don't understand the working-class experience of climate change, thus alienating those who are worse affected (2020: 110). Summarised by one interviewee:

"They seem like they're run by very privileged individuals who I would find it difficult to relate to or to communicate with, who perhaps wouldn't appreciate the other challenges of my life" Bell 2020: 111).

Bell explains that suggestions from environmental organisations are inaccessible for the working-class: occupying land can lead to arrest, making it harder to find jobs, and reducing environmentally damaging consumption closes industries, leading to increased unemployment (Bell 2020: 115, 126). These internal issues alienate people who otherwise support the cause, limiting their influence.

Similar division is felt in Greece with the 'indignants', a group in Greece protesting the handling of the financial crash. Firstly, the occupation was divisive; one teacher exclaimed "[t]his is not indignation, this is embarrassment", referring to the messy scene in

the square for all tourists to see (Theodossopoulos 2013: 205). Here, national pride alienated more conservative Greeks from the cause, even though they were all impacted by economic downfall. Harmful consequences were also critiqued: the 'we won't pay' sentiment had people fearful of being expelled from Europe, whilst others highlighted that the protested measures were needed, otherwise unemployment would increase (Theodossopoulos 2014: 205). Again, social activists limited their support through their own messy optics and neglect of wider consequences.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, social activism has the potential to spread educational knowledge, change thought, and combat patriarchal and colonialist legacies by subverting dominant powers. However, substantial change depends on gaining support and the movement being seen, which is best done through global media – this dependence on the mainstream being their main limitation. Thus, social media is better for doing this than traditional mainstream media, since activists exercise direct control. Even with this, social activism is still limited somewhat by spectacle and internal problems like class inequality. Yet, overall, social activism is an uphill battle without set methods to follow, so I think these limitations will persist since they do enact some change.

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