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# UNIT 12 SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONTEMPORARY ACTIVISM

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## **12.0 INTRODUCTION**

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Social media has entirely changed the way we communicate, the networks we build, and the communities we create. It is the most effective means of connecting and building communities across borders with common interests. Apart from networking and information sharing, it has profoundly changed how activism is conducted.

The participatory nature of the social media environment strengthened two important aspects of human communication in cyberspace: the expansion of online communities and the use of common interests for collective change. These two dimensions have contributed to a massive expansion of activities related to online activism, particularly using social media platforms for personal and social changes.

This Unit captures the dynamics of social media-based activism. You are encouraged to recall similar units we covered in earlier courses on activism over digital media. This Unit expands on that discussion.

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## **12.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the role of social media in activism;
- Explain the social media tools and techniques used in activism;
- Understand the case studies of different campaigns carried out through social media; and
- Explain how an individual gets involved in social media based activism.

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## 12.2 SOCIAL MEDIA MOBILISATION AND ACTIVISM

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According to the Oxford Dictionary, '*Mobilisation*' refers to bringing together the things needed for a particular purpose. *Activism*, on the other hand, refers to working to achieve social or political changes, especially as a member of an organisation with particular aims.

Sociala facilitates the process of mobilisation by bringing together people who believe in a common cause or have similar interests. According to a study by Kristen Lovejoy and Gregory D. in 2012, to qualify for social media activism, the first role is to share information about a particular issue. This is followed by building the community around issues of common interests, and the last but most significant activity of activism is enabling an action that could or may not be related to mobilisation.

### 12.2.1 Social Movements or Activism

A social movement or social activism is motivated by a social process in which collective actors are given space to voice their thoughts, express their grievances, and views.

In most cases, social movements have few core issues in common. Primary among them are

**Identifying an area of interest:** Usually, the area of interest that determines my common interest. These issues could be long-term and as major as opposing a war or something as trivial as opposing a certain order.

**Formal and informal networks:** Giving the movement shape through formal and informal networking is a core area of social activism. In the case of social media activism, the different social media facilitate connectivity and create room for dialogue.

**Sustainable and effective momentum:** It is crucial to create a momentum that is both effective and sustainable. Social media itself creates room for action-oriented work. The action could be signing a petition, advocating for the cause, carrying out rallies, or putting pressure on authorities.

### 12.2.2 Digital Mobilisation

Activism in contemporary times is digitally-centric. World War I laid the foundation for global communication, a key tool for disseminating propaganda through connectivity. The radio was developed, and mass production and marketing took place to fulfil the military power requirements. The web of digital networks has led to the emergence of media in all sectors, including political, economic and social. This has led to an era of Information, network or knowledge society. The penetration of mobile technology into the social media sector has accelerated the process of information distribution, promotion and mobilisation. Social media and the digital sector are key in mobilising people, constituting social movements and global organisations. World War I and the need for global communication led to the mass production and marketing of the radio, mainly due to military requirements. Later, it entered the commercial arena

by introducing several traditions, such as mass industry and the press. Close to 450 radio stations were set up in the United States of America by 1923. In India, broadcasting was introduced by amateur radio in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, and Lahore in the 1920s, during which several experiments were conducted.

The idea of using the radio for social and economic betterment in India goes back to the period before All India Radio existed.

Television broadcasting was initiated during the 1920s in the United States and Europe. These earlier forms of television were mechanical scanning discs that did not scan a picture rapidly enough. In the 1930s, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) set up a TV station in New York, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) set up a TV station in London.

The most extensive use of television was during the 1936 Olympics, where the Nazis displayed their skills and could be termed as a gigantic propaganda show for the Third Reich.

Television in India was first set up experimentally. With the intrusion of Information and Communication Technologies in the nerve centres of the state, all sorts of development, including education, easy access to governmental policies, sharing business ideas, and promoting these ideas to a challenging and cross-market, have been phenomenal. Post-television, we have now moved on to digital media. These communication media have also been powerful in certain ways of propelling changes and motivating people to act or react to particular news information. As per Backlinko Team (2024), there are 3.065 billion monthly active users worldwide, followed by YouTube (2.5 billion) and WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, TikTok, and Facebook Messenger, all bringing in over a billion users.

A milestone movement through social media changed the way we advocated for a certain Barack H. Obama, the former president of the United States of America, successfully used his famous campaign statement, *«Change We Can,»* in social media in 2008 among the media-literate masses and promoted his political desires. With these changes taking the global media by storm in India, social media has garnered public opinion and brought change.

The social media movements started the Arab Spring. The public protest against the Tunisian government was possible through social media. Since the ince media was heavily censored and there was no room for news to go out from the state during the rule of Ben Ali, Al Jazeera relied heavily on referencing Facebook pages and YouTube in reporting real, unfiltered events. In Egypt, a young woman, Asmaa Mahfouz 2011, took up the axiomatic torch to bring Egyptians to the street with her video blog posted on YouTube. The video featuring Mahfouz in a simple black and white headscarf states, *(I, am a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square, and I will stand alone. And I'll) hold up a banner. Perhaps people will show some honour»*, managed to gain popularity and was visited, with its link shared on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media websites; and it *«went viral»*. Journalist Mona Eltahawy facilitated her credit for *«sparking»* the January 25, 2011, attendance in Tahrir Square against the corrupt government (Martin, 2011).

This began with the state assembly elections of New Delhi, where the Bharatiya Janata Party Leader, Harsh Vardhan, reportedly started his Twitter account after being named as the chief ministerial candidate for Delhi in 2014. Arvind Kejriwal of Aam Admi Party leader had 620,130 followers before the Delhi elections, the first time he contested in 2012, and till the last week of the Indian General Elections had 1,584,965 followers, Rajiv Goel from Bharatiya Janata Party had 20,957, while Narendra Modi from Bharatiya Janata Party till the week of Indian general elections had 3,655,752 followers (Ninan, 2013 & Jain, 2013). Not only are they remaining restricted to political agendas, but government bodies are also joining the social media bandwagon. The debut of Assam Police on Twitter (now X), closely followed by that of Mumbai Police, has raised the standards of the Government organisations for having their own accounts and connecting with the people, some for generating awareness on pertinent issues and sometimes for creating their own public image.

Social media activism largely functions on digital platforms. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and YouTube, among others, have amplified activism and worked as a tool for bringing about change.

Digital trends and the growth of the internet have led to the development of online services like CompuServe, America Online, and Prodigy. Blogging, which was initially known as a weblog, gained popularity in 1999 and greatly aided activists. Vlogs or video logs have created an even wider impact on social issues. Blogs of PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Greenpeace, and Hope not Hate have been able to get activists to sign and join hands in unified petitions.

Every day, lakhs of global vloggers raise pertinent awareness of social issues. Vloggers have impacted the 2024 elections in India by bringing up lifestyle issues. LinkedIn was founded as a networking site for career-minded professionals. By 2020, it had grown to more than 675 million users worldwide. It remains the social media site of choice for job seekers and human resources managers searching for qualified candidates.

**Check Your Progress : 1**

**Note:** 1) Use the space provided below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. What is activism?

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2. What are the significant determinants of social movements or activism?

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3. Write briefly about the history and evolution of social media movements.

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### 12.3 GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS

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Campaigns are both vertical and horizontal. Vertical campaigns like vertical marketing are specific and have target audiences, whereas Horizontal campaigns aim to reach a wide range of people spread across different parts of the world. Grassroots campaigns are mostly vertical since they focus on specific issues relevant to specific groups. Some of the components of grassroots campaigns are:

- a. The campaigns are conducted in districts, communities, or villages. They are directed towards a common issue or dealing with a specific brand, where people are mobilised collectively to come to a common stand.
- b. As opposed to the time with limited multimedia resources or that of traditional media, the popularity of social media has changed the way communication takes place.

Grassroots activism emanated from different sources and expressed itself through different media. One of the finest examples of grassroots activism is the formation of *Khabar Lahariya*. A women's newspaper published in various rural dialects of Hindi, including Bundeli, Avadhi, and Bajjika dialects. Starting with Nirantar, a Delhi-based non-governmental organisation, the newspaper focused on gender and education. *Khabar Lahariya* went completely digital in 2015, housed by Chambal Media, a digital media social enterprise founded by Disha Mullick and Shalini Joshi. It slowly expanded its horizons to other areas, such as local political news, crime reports, social issues, and entertainment. The main crux is that it reported everything from a feminist perspective. What started as a grassroots movement directed towards India's only women-run brand of ethical and independent rural news. This grassroots movement amplified its reach to 5 million people when aided by digital intervention. The newspaper now has a network of 30 women reporters and stringers spread across 13 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

This is considered a powerful watchdog which is instrumental in enforcing accountability by the government and policymakers in the area. It has more than 150 million views and 540,000 YouTube subscribers. While *Khabar Lahariya* is a fine example of grassroots activism, Mats activists have used digital media to a large extent. Some of the advantages of grassroots activism are:

**Disaster mitigation:** While in India, despite the difficulties, the web coverage of the Asian Tsunami brought out the functionality of these resources. Within hours of reports being received of the devastation caused by the Tsunami, three young bloggers in India had set up sea-eat, the South Asian Earthquake and Tsunami weblog, to help post information about tsunami victims and drum up support for survivors, which later earned global recognition ( Narula, 2013).

**Automated surveillance:** Social media activism and the data involved have changed the party's and its workers' relationship dynamic. Not just that, activism through social media has led to a system of automated surveillance and discipline.

**Working at a granular level:** The internet and big data-supported analysis have led to a new way of looking at data as a seed of professional campaigning that has helped the rulers and parties mobilise the voters at the granular level. Of course, this has also initiated malpractices of bribery and incitement.

**Application in the hands of all:** Grassroots activism ensures that activism is initiated and progressed through the hands of all. People have come together to protest Vedanta, a mining company forced to shut down its plant in 2018 in South India due to grassroots activism.

**Digital Support:** The 40-year-old Deccan Development Society, a grassroots working organisation based in Pastapur of Zaheerabad in Sangareddy district, works with the Dalit and Tribal women to develop climate-resistant crops and agricultural practices that ensure their nutrition, health and a sustainable livelihood. The organisation supported 2700 women in reclaiming their farmlands and generating more than one million days of employment for women across 30 villages. The intervention of digital media has led to digital activism and has forwarded its causes to a wider audience.

**Global Digital Participation:** Following the 2008 financial and economic crisis, protests spread worldwide to voice political discontent and strong opposition to rising inequality and welfare retrenchment. Activists digital media played an instrumental role in mobilisation, action recruitment and rapid diffusion. Following the 2008 financial and economic crisis, protests spread worldwide to voice political discontent and strong opposition to rising inequality and welfare retrenchment. Activists' use of digital media played an instrumental role in the recruitment and rapid diffusion of mobilisations

### 12.3.1 Visual Narratives

Narratology is one of the fundamental outcomes of media implosion, where there are multiple narrations of a single story, and each narrative takes the entire story in a different turn of events. Almost all the issues currently dominating national and international media have many aspects that are not the sole determinants of how the story is narrated. However, the media manipulates and twists a story to favour its interests. Media narratives aid the readers in constructing their imagination, sometimes remaining loyal to their ideology and often following a particular style based on earlier narrative experiences.

Social media is essentially considered an *echo chamber* that reflects the profound ways political or social issues are discussed or analysed. The discussions take place entirely from an individualistic perspective, and sometimes, this content becomes a source of common topics. This has a subsequent impact on individual attitudes and amplifies polarisation. Socio-political theorists have given this shared exposure the prominence of being able to disseminate a healthy political deliberation that takes place in thriving democratic societies.

**Hate speech:** Apart from activism, there is visible online hate speech and overhyped ethnic violence. From the narrative that emanated from the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as the anti-Semitic attacks on Jewish journalists, to reports of social media's role in mobilising ethnic violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, the offline consequences of online hate speech appear increasingly dire. Fearing that this harmful rhetoric is inciting violence and driving extremism, governments worldwide are passing regulations and pressuring social media companies to implement policies to stop the spread of online hate speech.

Similarly, Twitter's terms of service state that the company prohibits "hateful conduct", including "promoting violence against or directly attacking or threatening other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability or disease.» The company also emphasises that it does not allow accounts whose «primary purpose is inciting harm towards others on the basis of these categories» (Twitter, 2018). Facebook's definition of hate speech does not contain the incitement to violence language employed by Twitter and YouTube, instead identifying hate speech as «content that directly attacks people based on their race; ethnicity; national origin; religious affiliation; sexual orientation; sex, gender, or gender identity; or serious disabilities or diseases»

**Crosscutting interactions:** Narrative allows for more diverse viewpoints and accommodates more rationales and opposing viewpoints. Digital technology, the conjunction of form and content, allows a particular style to emerge that can prompt us to reflect on our own moral situations significantly differently than we can with philosophical, ethical treatises.

**Objectivity and credibility:** This leads to a dilemma of ethics since narrative construction is inseparable from a reader's search for truth, objectivity, and credibility in the form and content of a journalistic narrative.

**Check Your Progress : 2**

**Note:**1) Use the space provided below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. What are the different components of grassroots campaigns?

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2. Give examples of Digital Operations in campaigning.

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3. What are the advantages of narratology?

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## 12.4 HASHTAG ACTIVISM

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The idealism associated with activism is often contested as unreal. According to many critics, this activism has many demerits. Sitting with a digital device, pretending to be a part of something, makes one believe that one's role is much more whole. These virtual participants are called *keypad warriors* or *hashtag activists*. This phenomenon is eventually called *hashtag activism*.

Hashtag activism has become a global trend. Of course, the role of the internet in mobilising people cannot be undermined, but there are distinct challenges in the garb of hashtag journalism. Notable among them are:

**Superficial:** Most people who participate in favour of a particular cause often find themselves unaware of the issue from all angles. Many are aware of the issue as a trending problem, but lack an in-depth study of it.

**Large networks:** Hashtag activism tends to attain an extensive network of people scattered across the globe. This is both advantageous and disadvantageous. The positives are that it attracts global attention and creates subsequent pressure.

**Digital dependency:** Hashtag activism thrives on digital presence. If people do not access digital media, activism will not survive, subsequently limiting people's involvement in a movement. Most countries have a large-scale digital divide, where the digital gap fails to meet the normative goals and creates hurdles for social and economic justice. Civil society's failure to update normative goals accentuates the feudalistic attitude towards information.

**Relatively lesser self-life:** If an issue is trending on social media, it prolongs the movement's life. In the wake of another issue, the uproar over the previous issue dies down and distracts digital activists' attention.

### 12.4.1 Understanding Slacktivism

When activists and advocacy groups receive support through «clicks,» «tweets,» «likes,» or «shares» of their messages on social media platforms, that trend is usually referred to as *slacktivism*. The intrusion of Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube, among others, is a good option to garner popular

support for any social issue debates. Uphold the idea that if *slacktivism* is measured only by gaining awareness of a cause, the other elements closely related to activism would surely fall short.

Online activism, in itself, is not enough. We need to be realistic about what will create advocacy and long-term support. Awareness is only one part of a multi-tiered set of tools we employ. To be successful, causes need to be activated, such as social change, fundraising, participation, and the like. If I look at the causes and events that have been the most successful, participants become activated right from the start. They feel more involved as they have skin in the game.

Social media's role is stated to be overrated, and the role of other aspects, like the cab drivers and the conversations at the coffee house, determines its overrated potential.

The Occupy movement has had great success in focusing the conversation on inequality, but has been less effective in changing the policies that sustain it. Despite its loud presence on social media, the movement could not gain the momentum anticipated in real life.

Austerity policies in Europe continue despite large numbers of protesters carrying out sustained occupations in multiple countries, including Spain and Greece. Of course, the power of the media here is apparent.

The advent of blogging and the rise of cheap cell phones with video cameras also created major changes as activists started acquiring, publishing, and circulating video evidence of the many grievances that made everyday life difficult for citizens. One well-known blogger, Wael Abbas, became an investigative journalist—a profession that had been somewhat rare in Egypt before the revolution—and published videos of police corruption, torture, women being harassed on the street, traffic, bribery, and many other issues that were of great concern to the public.

In India, vloggers like Dhruv Rathee, CarryMinati, and Flying Beast, among others, have a huge fan following and cover the most significant issues impacting the election mood.

#### **12.4.2 Resilience and Sustainability**

As discussed previously, mobilising people using social media is simpler. Getting them to do something requires patience and sustenance. However, sustaining the movement or the process considerably longer is challenging. Several theories have been associated with the sustenance of social media movements. One such theory has been Anthony Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle. Down's Issue Attention Cycle divides the stages of activism into five stages. They are

##### **The Pre-Problem Stage**

In every activism or advocacy, there lies the pre-problem stage. This stage is when people realise that whenever an issue exists, the social condition that persists is unacceptable and has not been able to garner mass support. This is especially concerning since some experts or interest groups could have already been troubled by it, but could not get support.

### **Alarmed Discovery and Euphoric Enthusiasm**

The transformation into the second stage is sudden but natural. In this stage, people are triggered by dramatic events, and now they understand the potential threat the issue carries in its subsequent outcomes.

### **Realisation of the Costs**

The third stage in Downs' model is the gradual awareness of the movements' limits. This involves the impracticalities and high costs, a gradual realisation of the high level of commitment to significant progress, and the realisation that the problems have benefited many.

### **Decline in Intensity of Interest**

A key part of the third stage is the increasing recognition that a relationship between the problem and its solution is required. In this part, the activists understand the inordinate sacrifice that leads to the fourth stage and, hence, the gradual decline in intense public interest.

### **Post-Problem Stage**

The fifth and final stage, the post-problem stage, is called a twilight realm of lesser attention. However, it is distinct from the pre-problem stage in that new institutions and bureaucracies continue to impact policy and allow for more attention than issues in the pre-problem stage. Here, the activism appears at a sporadic level. The passionate activists keep generating awareness on the issues from time to time.

### **Check Your Progress: 3**

- Note:** 1) Use the space provided below for your answers.  
 2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.
1. Discuss three elements of hashtag journalism.

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2. What is the pre-problem stage in online activism?

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## **12.5 LET US SUM UP**

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Through this Unit, you have learned about the power to influence and how it is currently used by most media personnel; new media also has positive and negative implications. This Unit also discussed how Social media enables activism, which impacts both the grassroots and global levels.

As you are aware, media activism is one of the most debated terms, especially in the wake of revolutions and incidents that have made the media both

protagonist and antagonist in their approach. The impact of online symbolic acts depends on many factors, including the political opportunity structure, the willingness and ability of the state to enforce repression, and elite cohesion. Street actions are also not magic wands for social movements, yet they enable everyone to participate in the change in most social setups.

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## 12.6 KEYWORDS

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**Activism:** Intentional action taken to bring about social or political change, often involving protest, advocacy, or campaigning, both online and offline, for justice-oriented goals.

**Automated Surveillance:** Using algorithmic systems and digital technologies to monitor, collect, and analyse individual behaviour data, often without explicit consent or visibility.

**Digital Operations:** Planned online activities and strategies implemented by organisations or groups to manage information flow, influence audiences, or execute campaigns using digital platforms and tools.

**Grassroots Campaigns:** Community-based movements driven by ordinary citizens rather than elite leaders, aiming for social or political change through local organising, advocacy, and public engagement.

**Hashtag Activism:** A form of digital activism using hashtags to amplify causes, build awareness, and foster virtual communities around social justice, often leading to real-world engagement.

**Narratology:** An academic discipline studying the structures, elements, and functions of narratives across media, examining how stories are constructed and interpreted by audiences.

**Slacktivism:** Minimal-effort digital support for causes, such as likes or shares, is often criticised for replacing deeper political engagement with symbolic, feel-good online gestures.

**Social Media Mobilisation:** The strategic use of social media platforms to organise people, disseminate information, and coordinate collective actions for social, political, or cultural causes.

**Social Movement:** A collective, organised effort by a group aiming to promote or resist change in society's norms, policies, or institutions, often sustained over time.

**Visual Narratives:** Stories conveyed primarily through images, videos, or multimedia elements, shaping audience perception and understanding by combining aesthetics with emotional and informational content.

**Vloggers:** Individuals who produce and share personal video content regularly on platforms like YouTube, blending storytelling, entertainment, and commentary to engage online audiences.

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## 12.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress: 1

1. ‘*Activism*’, on the other hand, has been referred to as working to achieve social or political changes, especially as a member of an organisation with particular aims. According to a study by Kristen Lovejoy and Gregory D. Saxton in 2012, to qualify for social media activism, the first role is to share information about a particular issue. This is followed by building the community around issues of common interests, and the last but most significant activity of activism is enabling an action that could or may not be related to mobilisation. According to the Oxford Dictionary, ‘*Mobilisation*’ refers to bringing together the things needed for a particular purpose. ‘*Activism*’, on the other hand, has been referred to as working to achieve social or political changes, especially as a member of an organisation with particular aims.
2. In most cases, social movements have few core issues in common. Primary among them are
  - Identifying an area of conflict
  - Giving the movement shape through formal and informal networks
  - Creating a momentum that is both sustainable and effective

### Check Your Progress: 2

1. The different components of grassroots journalism are:
  - a. The campaigns are conducted in districts, communities or villages. These campaigns are directed towards a common issue or a specific problem, where people are mobilised collectively to reach a common stand.
  - b. As opposed to the time with limited multimedia resources or that of traditional media, the popularity of social media has changed the way communication takes place.
2. The advantages of grassroots activism:
  - a. **Disaster mitigation:** While in India, despite the difficulties, the web coverage of the Asian Tsunami brought out the functionality of these resources. Within hours of reports being received of the devastation caused by the Tsunami, three young bloggers in India had set up sea-eat, the South Asian Earthquake and Tsunami weblog, to help post information about tsunami victims and drum up support for survivors, which later earned global recognition ( Narula, 2013).

