

# International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment

Vol 3, No 1 (2024)

International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment



## Social Media and Civil Society: From Individual Paths to Collective Demands

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doi: [10.12681/npse.41228](https://doi.org/10.12681/npse.41228)

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Social Media and Civil Society: From Individual Paths to Collective Demands

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### Abstract

This paper explores the evolving relationship between social media and civil society, analyzing how digital platforms have transformed individual expression into collective political action. It offers a historical overview of the concept of civil society, tracks the evolution of the internet from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0, and examines how social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have influenced major social movements including the Arab Spring, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and #EndSARS. While highlighting the empowering role of social media in political mobilization and activism, the paper also critically addresses its risks, such as misinformation, polarization, superficial engagement ("slacktivism"), and algorithmic manipulation. The study concludes by emphasizing the dual nature of social media as both a catalyst for civic engagement and a potential threat to democratic discourse.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Civil Society, Digital Activism, Political Mobilization, Fake News, Hashtag Activism

### Introduction

In 2024, we observe that social media have become an integral part of our reality, as the "click" on our mobile screens has become almost unavoidable. While for many, social media are seen as entertainment tools, sources of information, or personal work-related platforms, history has shown that these new technologies and systems are much more than that. This "click" has often served as the foundation for new collective demands, providing fresh opportunities for the recognition of mass struggles and participation in them. However, there are two sides to this reality. It is impossible to overlook that, at times, social media transform into instruments of manipulation and control by corporations and states. This duality, among other aspects, will be examined, with a particular focus on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, within a broader social context.

In seeking to understand the significance of civil society, one encounters a multitude of interpretations and meanings, as no single, universally accepted definition exists. Instead, the history of civil society

within Western political thought is marked by ongoing debates and conflicts over its "interpretation." Up until the Enlightenment era, the concept of civil society was employed to denote the political relationship governed by law. This historical trajectory underscores the evolving and contested nature of the term, reflecting broader ideological, social, and legal transformations. By examining these dynamics, we can better appreciate the complexity and enduring relevance of civil society in both theoretical and practical contexts.

For Aristotle, political society was the foremost entity, encompassing all other forms of society. His notion of the ideal society was not merely a democracy but the democracy of the best, where the people (demos/δῆμος) and the best ones, the excellent humans (aristoi/ἄριστοι) align in pursuit of a common goal: blessedness-bliss-felicity (eudaimonia/ευδαιμονία), achieved through proper education (Sorokos, 1984). However, during the medieval period, while the political dimension of civil society remained significant, a new contrast emerged: its opposition to religious society. Civil society, once viewed as the totality of institutions forming the state, began to be understood as something distinct and potentially contradictory to the state. This shift occurred as the bourgeois class sought to create an autonomous social space, separate from politics, which would emphasize the absence of state intervention, free markets, and private life. Thus, for the economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith, "civil society is the realm of the market and exchanges" (Feronas, 2009).

On the other hand, theorists such as Karl Marx and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel opposed the aforementioned definition of civil society, considering it a one-dimensional conception. For Hegel, civil society occupies the space between the family and the state. The philosopher's approach progresses from rights through ethics to the state, as he views civil society as fundamentally a society of rights. It is through commodity exchange and the existence of law that the rights—and consequently, the expansion of civil society—are ensured. These rights encompass the moral right to welfare, a right within civil society according to Hegel. In his view, individuals have claims against civil society for protection, care, and welfare. The social state, in Hegel's thought, is seen as an attractive force, where if a citizen (man) engages with it and works for its benefit, they can expect reciprocation. These reciprocations are linked to how individuals experience their daily lives and, ultimately, how they live (Jostein Gaarder, 1994). In contrast, Karl Marx disagreed with Hegel's views on civil society. For the German political economist and philosopher, civil society is the realm where social relations are "shaped," the so-called "base" or "infrastructure." It is the domain of class struggle. The state, for Marx, is the "superstructure" that conceals the dynamics occurring within civil society, to the detriment of the working class. Therefore, Marx contends that civil society is merely a formal construct, which does

not function in its true essence but rather obscures the real social imbalances, serving the interests of the bourgeoisie (Feronas, 2009).

In the 19th century, several theorists, drawing inspiration from Alexis de Tocqueville - who was the first to offer a positive view of civil society, recognizing it as the collective of voluntary organizations, including educational and cultural associations (Sotiropoulos, 2017) - and influenced by the cultural and social history within the field of political analysis, sought to define civil society in new terms. For these thinkers, civil society appeared as "*a sphere of social interaction, distinct from the economy and the state, characterized by voluntary cooperation, active citizens, media in its broadest sense, and a set of legal rights for individuals*" (Feronas, 2009). This definition reflects a shift towards viewing civil society not just as a collection of institutions, but as a dynamic and multifaceted space for citizen engagement and legal rights, separate from both the state and the economy, and central to the functioning of modern democratic societies.

In the 20th century, the definition of civil society was further enriched by European theorists, who emphasized its cultural dimension and highlighted the importance of informal relational systems surrounding political participation. For Antonio Gramsci, civil society is a social structure in constant dialectical relation with both the state and the material base of society. Gramsci's perspective contributed significantly to the acceptance of civil society by recognizing that the institutions constituting it are capable of creating values, ideals, and consciousness surrounding the "collective" (Paraskevopoulos, 2001). Although the multitude of definitions seems to have no end, this paper will focus on the definition of civil society as presented by Mouzelis (1998). According to Mouzelis, "civil society is the third space between the state and the market. That is, in civil society, the logic of dominance, which characterizes the state, and the logic of profit-seeking, which characterizes the market, do not prevail." In other words, it is a society of citizens where the very status of being a citizen is sufficient to "impose" the ability to exercise rights (Sotiropoulos, 2017). This paper aims to examine the evolving relationship between social media and civil society. Initially, the text provides a brief historical overview of the concept of civil society through various definitions. It then presents the transition of the internet from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0, explaining the innovations introduced by new technologies. Subsequently, the paper explores the role played by social media in five distinct social movements from different time periods, highlighting the positive impact of technology on activist actions. Finally, the paper also addresses the negative aspects of new technologies, presenting the risks and detrimental influences of modern social media platforms.

## From Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 and the "New" Social Media

Social media are interactive online platforms that facilitate both individual and collective communication through the exchange of user-generated content. These mechanisms enable the online formation of communities, while simultaneously promoting social interaction (Heywood, 2014). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) offer a definition of social media, describing them as *"a group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."*

The term "web" was first introduced in 1989 by Sir Tim Berners-Lee during his work at CERN in Switzerland (Shivalingaiah & Naik, 2008). Web 1.0 primarily functioned as a "read-only" web, consisting of websites created by a limited number of authors and aimed at a massive audience of readers. This early stage of the internet was designed to serve communication between individuals and the exchange of information through a shared medium or space. Based on this goal, Web 1.0 made significant contributions to communication tools like fax and email, while also introducing online flyers for advertising purposes (Hiremath & Kenchakkanavar, 2016).

The next stage in the evolution of the web leads us to Web 2.0, a blend of technology, social trends, and business strategy. The main distinction from the earlier version of the web lies in the concept of interactivity and the "liveliness" of the internet. Users in this phase are not just passive readers but active participants who can directly engage with content. Additionally, Web 2.0 allows users to stay up-to-date with the latest content on websites, while developers can create new applications quickly and efficiently, leveraging data and information from the internet (Murugesan, 2007).

According to Conrad Wolfram, strategic director and co-founder of Wolfram Research, *"Web 3.0 is where computers will generate and think new information rather than humans"* (Nath & Iswary, 2015). This marks the emergence of a web where data is no longer "owned" but shared. It is a web in which content presentation is not a one-dimensional process, but where the reader can discover different versions of the same data through various services (Shivalingaiah & Naik, 2008). Furthermore, Amit Agrawal describes Web 3.0 as the Semantic Web and emphasizes its focus on personalization. In this network, data can be read and processed by machines more easily and efficiently (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). Key characteristics of Web 3.0 include decentralization, interoperability, linked data, artificial intelligence, and smart contracts. The automated interactions between humans and machines, combined with personalized algorithmic proposals and the creation of a "living virtual environment" by AI, present significant and complex opportunities (as well as risks) for individuals (Bharadiya,

2023).

Although not all questions about Web 3.0 have been answered in the public discourse, scholars are already predicting the next stage of the web, Web 4.0. This stage will be referred to as the "Symbiotic Web," where humans and machines will "coexist," following the prior collection of metadata. This advanced network will operate based on user searches and web content, with the key distinction that it will not only retrieve information but also make decisions and propose solutions (Nath & Iswary, 2015).

Building on the previously discussed developments in the digital landscape, it is crucial to address the characteristics of contemporary social media platforms. New social media platforms encourage user interaction through content creation and consumption, highlighting the value of interactivity. In 2003, Rogers stated that "the interactive innovation of social media offers two-way communication, which helps to speed up the adoption process because it attains a critical mass of users more quickly" (Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2015). At the same time, technologies like Augmented Reality (AR) and virtual worlds allow social media to blur the line between the "digital" and the "real," enabling users not only to explore fantastical realities but also to create their own.

What is Augmented Reality (AR)? Augmented Reality (AR) refers to "the technology that aims to digitally integrate and expand the physical environment or the user's world, in real time, by adding layers of digital information. This integration can be applied to various display technologies capable of overlaying or combining information (numbers, letters, symbols, audio, video, graphics) with the user's view of the real world" (Arena et al., 2022). Social media users regularly use filters, with almost all modern platforms employing AR mechanisms. For example, Spark AR Studio, a platform by Facebook, allows users to create AR phenomena, expanding its reach by enabling even casual users of social media to participate in creating digital filters (Javornik et al., 2022). Personalization and Data Use in Social Media Moreover, contemporary social media platforms focus on personalization.

Personal data is analyzed in comparison with larger data sets based on previous actions of the user. Through advanced algorithms and the tracking of user behavior across networks, individuals' choices are digitally represented, creating a personalized experience through platforms like the "For You" page, which tailors content to each user (Reviglio della Venaria, U., 2020). These tailored recommendations make social media use more individualized and engage users more deeply in their digital environments.

In addition, new platforms like Twitter and TikTok offer constantly updated content. These platforms,



through their tools, make sharing content easy and immediate. The "Share" button or the ability to repost user-generated content, as seen on TikTok, has redefined how conversations take place in the public sphere. Thirteen years ago, researchers from the Pew Research Center concluded that "if searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next" (Kümpel et al., 2015). This shift emphasizes the growing importance of content sharing as a social practice in digital communication.

Lastly, the power of "trending" on social media platforms cannot be ignored. Users shape social trends in the digital world, often driven by current events and viral content. These trends take the form of challenges, comedic sketches, videos with specific sounds, and even daily routines or consumer habits. Examples include popular trends such as "Get ready with me," "What's in my bag," or "Supermarket hauls." These trends illustrate how social media has become a platform for both personal expression and collective cultural phenomena, further solidifying its role in shaping public discourse and social interaction.

## **Social Movements and Social Media: The "Click" on the Mobile Screen and "Political Uprisings"**

### **Arab Spring**

A notable example of the contribution of social media to civil society can be found in the case of the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was a movement of protests, mobilizations, and uprisings with a political character. This movement took place in countries with authoritarian and oppressive regimes, where citizens were fighting for their freedoms. The movement's emergence can be traced back to December 18, 2010. In the first few months of 2011, countries that had experienced the revolutionary spirit of the uprising witnessed a remarkable and rapid increase in the number of users on Facebook and Twitter platforms. By April of the same year, eight Arab countries had surpassed the United States in terms of the number of Facebook users, despite the fact that the internet was more widely accessible in the U.S. compared to the Arab world (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

The Arab Spring exemplifies the transformative role of social media in shaping civil society. The Arab Spring was a movement of protests, mobilizations, and uprisings with a political character, occurring in countries with authoritarian regimes struggling for their freedoms. This movement began on December 18, 2010. In the early months of 2011, countries that had witnessed the revolutionary spirit of the uprising saw a dramatic rise in users on Facebook and Twitter. By April of that year, eight Arab countries had surpassed the United States in terms of Facebook users, despite the fact that the internet

was more widely accessible in the U.S. than in the Arab world (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

Social media played a crucial role in the Arab Spring by enabling the political and social mobilization of people. According to Tudoroiu (2014), social media became a key factor in illustrating the shift in power relations through the emergence and dynamics of new communication technologies. Although many analysts initially saw social media in the Middle East as an opportunity for access to alternative information and uncensored news, few anticipated the significant role these platforms would play in the political landscape and the quality of public discourse in the Arab world. Political activism undoubtedly took precedence, as stated in the article "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First," yet social media allowed citizens in the Middle East to organize their uprisings and advocate for a bottom-up political change (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013).

Throughout the Arab Spring, social media took on roles of coordination, organization, design, and above all, acceleration. The liberal ideas and democratic consciousness spread throughout the Arab world through interconnected networks and technologies that challenged the restrictions and exclusions imposed by the Middle East—what is often referred to as Islamic Exceptionalism (Tudoroiu, 2014). Blogs and social media acted as "free spaces" for criticizing and opposing the dominant political narratives and images propagated by governments. As early as 2009, the Arab world used blogs to challenge the existing leaderships, making them a prominent subject of public debate (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

Social media during the Arab Spring not only politicized the masses but also mobilized a large segment of society frustrated with the dominant political order. A notable example is the "April 6 Facebook Strike" page, created in 2008 by two activists. The page called for a workers' strike in Mahalla, a city in the Nile Delta, and within just two weeks, it garnered more than 50,000 participants. Meanwhile, the protests and marches were documented in photos and videos, which, through social media, accumulated an unusually large number of views across various blogs (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

The strike gained such traction that it helped organize a massive following of individuals who continued to advocate for the cause into the following year, 2009. Activists organized through Facebook pages, with the internet becoming one of the most powerful tools ignored by the regime. By the time the government realized the role of social media in citizen activism, it was too late (Shaaban, 2021). The power of blogs and social media was so impactful that, by 2007, governments began imprisoning bloggers and restricting access to social media platforms, with online activism being



heavily condemned in what was dubbed the "War on Bloggers." In 2010, a young Egyptian man, Khaled Mohamed Saeed, died in police custody on June 6 in the Sidi Gaber area of Alexandria. The spread of his death's photograph, taken by his brother when he went to identify the body, quickly went viral, becoming what social media described as "the face that started a revolution" (Ross, 2011). Wael Ghonim, a computer engineer and internet activist, created the "We Are All Khaled Saeed" Facebook page, which by summer 2010 had gained over 500,000 followers, with many changing their profile pictures to that of Khaled Saeed. The issues of police brutality, government corruption, and censorship were politicized through social media, contributing to the common demands that led to the uprisings of 2011 and the nationwide protest on January 25 of that year, known as "The Day of Anger" (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012). Many NGOs, both within Egypt and abroad, collaborated with activists to provide information and training materials on using social media effectively. Activists were trained on how to use "ghost servers" to avoid government surveillance, and a digital guide was created by social movements and initiatives from Tunisia and Egypt to explain how Twitter and mobile phones could be used for activism and political news (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

On January 4, 2011, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire outside the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid in protest against government policies and the dire living conditions. His act of self-immolation was recorded and spread via YouTube, sparking a wave of anger and protests across Tunisia. Facebook "flooded" with users posting instructions to activists on how to protect themselves from police and alleviate the effects of tear gas. Digital solidarity was reflected in the deaths of Bouazizi and Saeed, with the Muslim martyrdom becoming a central moral issue that spread through social media, representing the "living" and "tortured" martyr (Sumiala & Korpiola, 2017).

### **Palestine and TikTok**

Another example of the contribution of social media to both political participation and civil society is the phenomenon of TikTok in relation to solidarity with the Palestinian people. In April 2021, Israeli forces evicted Palestinians, including women and children, from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. Palestinians, using the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah, sparked reactions worldwide through the TikTok platform, making the issue gain significant attention (Abbas, Fahmy, Ayad, Ibrahim & Ali, 2022). Unlike other social media platforms, hashtags here are applied as a truly functional organizational tool. A user's feed is, in fact, curated by the individual, as the "For You Page" (FYP) is shaped by filters, hashtags, effects, and sounds that the user engages with. It never runs out of material.

Furthermore, the amount of time spent on a video plays a role in how one's homepage continues to

evolve. TikTok connects users with content they are likely to interact with, even before they explicitly search for it (Herrman, 2019). According to Jackson (2021), when the word "Palestine" is typed into TikTok, pro-Palestinian tags, such as "freepalestine," appear. Videos about Palestine on TikTok have garnered over seven billion views, with the hashtag "freepalestine" alone surpassing four billion (Abbas, Fahmy, Ayad, Ibrahim & Ali, 2022).

In May 2024, American rapper Macklemore posted his song Hind's Hall on social media, a protest song expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people. Specifically, the song supported the pro-Palestinian protests and occupations taking place on university campuses, which demanded the withdrawal of Israeli investments and an end to the ongoing fire exchange between Israel and Hamas. The song went viral, with its sound being used by hundreds of users on the platform, some aiming to raise awareness about the situation, and others launching efforts to organize and mobilize those who wish to support Palestine. Countless videos appeared on TikTok's homepage, featuring images from protests, war footage, demonstrations, and messages in support of Palestine. On TikTok, there are 598.6 thousand videos where Hind's Hall has been used, shifting the terms of political discourse in the public sphere and even pressuring public figures in the arts and political fields to take a stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict. However, it is important to note that it was not only this particular sound with political content that went viral on TikTok. With a simple search on the platform using hashtags like #freePalestine, #freeGaza, and #alleyesonrafah, we can see political messages being reproduced globally in various ways and forms.

Network communication technologies provide activists with tools that bring the traditionally disengaged citizen closer to "playful disruption" (Froes & Tosca, 2018) or "playful resistance" (Conte, 2023). Socio-political messages take the form of memes, humorous-educational dialogues, and artistic creations, ranging from material directly related to political issues to "trends" involving grooming, fashion, or dance. In this way, social media manage to "bypass" expression barriers in the public sphere, leading to what is referred to as "playful citizenship" (Conte, 2023). TikTok is viewed as an "experimental audiovisual playground," where user agency, combined with the platform's playful and humorous capabilities, enables the alternative promotion of political action (Cervi & Divon, 2023).

Additionally, the tools provided by TikTok (such as video stitching, filters, and the ability for live image and sound broadcasts), in conjunction with new technologies, have helped activists find alternative solutions when required. Meta has been openly accused of supporting "shadowbanning" tactics, wherein users or their content are blocked on social media through covert web surveillance techniques, without the user being aware. Content with pro-Palestinian social messages would be

immediately taken down, or user accounts engaging in intense social action via social media would be deleted, often under the guise of online terrorism or sometimes without any justification. The need for free speech, to support the struggles and ideas of the Palestinian cause without restrictions, led social media users to devise creative means of expression online, one of which was the use of the watermelon emoji. TikTok users began speaking about Palestine without explicitly mentioning it. Using the watermelon as a symbol, they created an alternative form of communication understood as a response to "digital censorship." The use of the watermelon as a symbol for Palestine is no coincidence. In 1967, during the Six-Day War, Israel banned the public display of the Palestinian flag in Gaza. As an alternative, Palestinians used the watermelon in their art, as it contained all the colors of their flag—red, black, white, and green. The watermelon symbol was revived on TikTok as a symbol leading an online uprising, bringing to the forefront events and information. It bypassed the fear of being "banned" and generated interest through the creative ways it was used (Conte, 2023). This is an example of "algospeak," a tactic employed by social media users to avoid surveillance systems that might take down their content or block their accounts (Steen, Yurechko, & Klug, 2023). For example, users might use the hashtag #unlive instead of #dead to keep their content visible on the network (Lorenz, 2022). The watermelon filter on TikTok, "FILTER FOR GOOD I," which operates with augmented reality mechanisms mentioned earlier, was created by Jourdan Johnson, adding an interactive element to the digital fight for Palestinian freedom.

Another feature TikTok provides is that the filters in the Effect Creator program allow for revenue generation under specific terms. If a filter is used in at least 200,000 videos within 90 days of its creation, it is possible to "earn" over \$10,000. Based on this feature, the watermelon filter has been used to raise funds for the Palestinian cause. As of May 2024, the filter has been used over 11 million times on TikTok, raising \$14,000 for the Palestinian people (Mendez, 2023). Additionally, numerous users have added the watermelon emoji to their bio or changed their profile picture to the emoji as an alternative political statement. In conclusion, it is clear that TikTok has succeeded in spreading political messages and expression in a "playful" and alternative manner. One might argue that it is perhaps the most attractive medium for spreading awareness and engaging in activist action, particularly among younger audiences.

### **"MeToo is a Movement, Not a Moment", Tarana Burke**

Tarana Burke, an African American activist, was born on September 12, 1973, in the Bronx, New York. Growing up, Burke became a victim of sexual harassment and abuse several times, and these experiences would later influence her adult path. After completing her studies in 1989, she began

working on social activism. As mentioned on her website, [justbeinc.wixsite.com](http://justbeinc.wixsite.com), in 2003, she turned her focus to young women of color, founding the program “Jendayi Aza,” which eventually led to the creation of “Just Be, Inc.” On the official website of the movement, [metoomvmt.org](http://metoomvmt.org), Burke explains that the term “MeToo” came to her mind during a program camping session when a young girl approached her to share her own traumatic experience. Burke listened as the girl described the abuse she suffered from her “stepfather,” and within five minutes, she stopped the conversation, referring the girl to another counselor. It was that day that the term “MeToo” occurred to Burke, as she recalled that the only thing she wanted to say to the girl was, “Me too.”

However, the term did not gain widespread recognition until 2017 through Twitter. In October 2017, The New York Times published an article accusing Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein of abusive behaviors, sexual harassment, and rape. This article prompted actress Alyssa Milano to tweet, “If you have been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” The hashtag quickly gained traction, being used over 500,000 times in just 24 hours (Brünker, Wischniewski, Mirbabaie, & Meinert, 2020). The #MeToo hashtag created a space for individuals who had experienced abuse to share their stories. It did not simply speak about gendered violence in general terms, but specifically identified a form of violence in the workplace. People shared their personal stories through social media platforms, gained the courage to speak out, and took a political stand alongside the victims, transforming bias into awareness and social consciousness (Zacchia et al., 2019). The #MeToo hashtag gained such momentum that it spread worldwide, reaching individuals from various nationalities, class backgrounds, and social realities. This led to the creation of localized hashtags that were synonymous with the global #MeToo campaign. Examples include #balancetonporc in France (“#DenounceYourPig”), #quellavoltache in Italy (“#ThatTimeWhen”), and #sistabriefen in Sweden (“#TheFinalBrief”), demonstrating the widespread impact and influence of a tweet from the Twitter platform. Research indicates that from October 2017 to April 2018, 2,174,787 posts using #MeToo and other local hashtags were made by 1,203,564 Twitter users (Zacchia et al., 2019).

Social media led to alternative methods of activist mobilization, with “hashtag activism” becoming a legitimate form of social action. Hashtag activism collectivizes, informs, educates, and organizes communities, increasing citizen engagement in common issues and politics (Mishra, 2018). #MeToo reached such proportions that it even entered parliamentary spaces, demonstrating that social media can be tools for exerting social pressure.

On October 26, 2017, eleven days after Alyssa Milano’s tweet, the European Parliament approved a resolution addressing sexual harassment and sexual abuse within the European Union. During the

debate in the plenary, both female and male politicians held placards with the #MeToo hashtag in various world languages, such as "#MoiAussi" and "#Yotambien" (Zacchia et al., 2019).

Additionally, a simple search on the TikTok platform reveals over 440 million videos that have used the #MeToo hashtag, on an app that has grown rapidly in recent years, especially since its founding in 2016, a year before the movement's rise (Junfeng, 2022). When typing "MeToo" in TikTok's search bar, a message titled "Help is Available" automatically appears at the top of the homepage. Clicking this message presents a text that, among other things, asks if the user has experienced sexual violence or harassment, stating, "... Be kind to yourself. Help is always available when you're ready..."

It is also noted that TikTok is a platform striving to contribute to individuals' ability to share their experiences and access reliable information. This shows that the immediacy and interactivity that social media offer can activate revolutionary responses, leading to uprisings and social movements. From the "revolution of the individual," where one finds the courage to speak out about their experiences, to "revolutions of society," which demand and overturn the dominant political landscape.

### **Black Lives Matter and EndSARS**

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter emerged on social media in February 2012 with a post on Facebook. That year, George Zimmerman, a member of a neighborhood watch group in Sanford, Florida, shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Public outrage erupted when Zimmerman was acquitted, claiming self-defense.

The #BlackLivesMatter movement gained momentum following the deaths of Michael Brown in 2014 and George Floyd in 2020. Just twelve days after the unrest and protests following Floyd's death while in police custody, the hashtag #BLM was used nearly 48 million times on Twitter, with daily usage reaching 3.7 million mentions on social media platforms (Marshall, Hammer, Springfield, & Bonfils, 2024). Furthermore, the cold-blooded murder of George Floyd was reportedly discussed on social media platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook) more than 80 million times within 30 days of his death (Scotland, Thomas, & Jing, 2024).

This vast information-sharing space, combined with the ability to create a continuous cycle of discussions among people from marginalized communities to urban centers in the West, has transformed the way political public discourse is conducted and reproduced. Social media platforms brought to light instances of violence, terrorism, and "graphic images" of a harsh reality. Now, through our mobile phones and laptops, we can watch videos of people losing their lives due to incidents of

police violence and racist rhetoric: from Eric Garner crying "I can't breathe" as he lost his life at the hands of officers, to Laquan McDonald falling to the ground after being shot in the back by the police. (Russell-Brown, 2017). The list continues.

However, beyond the ability for immediate dissemination of events with audio and video, social media platforms (such as YouTube and TikTok) have created a new space for artistic expression. In June 2020, singer H.E.R. released her song "I Can't Breathe" on YouTube, with the title being the last words of George Floyd before he died at the hands of the police. The music video for "I Can't Breathe" has gathered 2.4 million views on YouTube, with the song accompanied by powerful images of police violence, mass marches, and protests. The video captures moments that highlight the sense of solidarity and the revolutionary spirit imposed by the terrifying times of racism and xenophobia. It concludes with the names of victims who lost their lives due to hate and violence against African Americans. H.E.R.'s song "I Can't Breathe" won the 2021 Grammy Award for "Best Song of the Year," representing the violence and discrimination faced by African American people (Ramadhan & Ariastuti, 2023). Similarly, the TikTok platform has highlighted politically charged musical tracks from the artistic world, which either gain popularity through the platform or are "reborn" there. The song "Stand Up" by Cynthia Erivo has been used in 54.1 million videos on TikTok, often accompanied by various hashtags such as #nojusticenopeace, #blackhistory, and #blackhistorymonth.

Another social movement related to the phenomenon of police violence and the violation of fundamental human rights is the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria. The hashtag derives from the name of Nigeria's police unit, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The abuse of power by Nigerian police forces was, in its entirety, a criminal and inhumane practice. Torture, illegal arrests, rapes, and murders committed by Nigerian police officers were brought to light by victims through their stories and via circulating videos that exposed these crimes (Nwafor & Nwabuzor, 2021).

The #EndSARS campaign began when Segun Awosany collected 10,195 signatures from Nigerians on a petition calling for the dissolution of the Nigerian police force. On December 2, 2017, a video surfaced online showing men from the SARS unit shooting a man and ending his life. The hashtag #EndSARS quickly turned into a popular Twitter campaign, with tweets surrounding the issue exceeding 400,000 mentions within twelve hours (Akpan & Targema, 2022). The organization of protests by Nigerians relied heavily on the use of social media. Nigerians were able to "translate" and capture the sentiments and demands of online protesters into physical demonstrations and actions. Through social media, Nigerian activists organized protests in major cities such as Lagos, Abuja, and many others.



Moreover, social media not only played an organizational and coordinating role but also served as a source of funding for the social movement, collecting money in the form of Bitcoins, US dollars, and other donation methods (Ajisebiyawo, 2022).

Finally, social media also played a role in exerting social pressure on government officials. The Governor of Rivers State, Nyesom Wike, posted a tweet 24 hours before the scheduled #EndSARS march, banning it. However, he was later found conversing with Nigerian protesters about the crimes committed by the SARS unit. Social pressure and the fear of being "judged" or becoming the target of trolling on social media forced the governor to "succumb" to activists' demands for an immediate stance on the issue, with celebrities, artists, sports figures, and public personalities voicing their support for the #EndSARS movement. Finally, the way in which Nigerian protesters expressed their demands externally was also based on social media. With the hashtag #5for5, protesters in the #EndSARS campaign promoted and spread their demands through five key proposals: the release of detained protesters, justice for those killed by the crimes of the SARS unit, and financial compensation for their families (Ajisebiyawo, 2022).

### **The Other Side of Social Media: Fake News and Superficiality in Social Networks**

Social media platforms and their enhanced capabilities do not always yield beneficial outcomes. Frequently, the ability to instantly disseminate unfiltered content and unverified messages from users results in the phenomenon of "fake news." According to research on the relationship between social media and fake news, it appears that false information and messages spread more rapidly than any other type of content on social media platforms (Olan, Jayawickrama, Arakpogun, Suklan & Liu, 2024).

Social media create a vast, interconnected audience, within which individuals can post any information or message without fear of authenticity or verification, and with minimal effort. This, in combination with advanced technological capabilities, has led to the creation of machine-controlled accounts, known as social bots. Artificial intelligence enables these social bots—automated applications—to write, feel, and act on social media in ways that closely resemble human behavior (Hajli, Saeed, Tajvidi & Shirazi, 2022). A notable example is the creation of 19 million accounts on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential elections, which were controlled by machines aimed at spreading political messages.

Simultaneously, over 20% of US citizens reported having shared fake news on social media, either intentionally or unknowingly (Gimpel, Heger, Olenberger, & Utz, 2021). According to a 2016 study by Bessi and Ferrara, bots were employed in the American elections to promote certain candidates

while undermining others. Through various mechanisms, social media bots manage to guide users towards specific content, selectively promoting certain "knowledge" (Hague, Harrop, McCormick, 2020).

Another major risk posed by social media is the phenomenon of "clickbait," a strategy employed by influencers and even large companies. "Clickbait" refers to those sensational and provocative posts that use an attractive and catchy headline to encourage users to click on them. These posts often present themselves as informative articles, but the content may not correspond to the headline. The purpose of clickbait is to deceive the user into clicking on a link. According to a study conducted by Stanford students, 96.2% of the students encounter "clickbait articles" at least once a day (Indurthi, Syed, Gupta, & Varma, 2020). What about users who only read the headlines? What about individuals on social media who do not engage with the posts, assuming that the headline reflects the content? The misleading impression that users have acquired knowledge about a particular issue negatively impacts the quality of public discourse.

Moreover, the issue of polarization and the reproduction of extreme rhetoric through social media platforms has a detrimental effect on the functioning of democracy. In his article "Is Social Media Good or Bad for Democracy?", Cass Sunstein discusses the Colorado experiment, which highlights group polarization in action. According to Sunstein, the Colorado experiment illustrated, albeit unknowingly to its participants at the time, the influence of social media on the political process. Groups were formed from Colorado (a region with more conservative views) and Boulder (a region with more liberal views). These groups were then divided into those with a progressive-liberal mindset and those embracing conservative political views. After participants were informed that they responded to stereotypes, they were asked to discuss three controversial current issues, such as the possibility of legalizing civil unions for same-sex couples. Each individual anonymously recorded their answers before and after fifteen minutes of group discussion. The results indicated an increase in the adoption of extreme positions by participants after the group discussions. Sunstein raises the issue of extreme position adoption and polarization via social media, stating, "Every minute of every day, the Colorado experiment is being replicated on social media, and in countless nations. Your Facebook friends may be a lot like one of the Colorado groups (only a lot bigger). On your Twitter feed, you might follow people who think like you do. As you read what they have to say, you'll end up more entrenched in your position. For many users, social media platforms are creating the equivalent of the Colorado experiment and with damaging results for democracy" (Sunstein, 2018).

In recent years, the phenomenon of "echo chambers" on social media has become a significant topic

on the public agenda. On platforms like Twitter and Facebook, users with different educational backgrounds, biological or social gender, political opinions, and from almost all age groups utilize social media to share views and information. Although the possibility of direct access to individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences on a common platform should ideally result in diversity on the internet, studies show the opposite (Choi, Chun, Han, & Kwon, 2020). On social media, users tend to selectively gather with like-minded individuals, forming "echo chambers." These are closed networks where participants with common beliefs and ideas group together, cutting off dialogue with those who do not share the same views. As a result, a significant proportion of users ends up seeking information from sources that either confirm or reinforce their beliefs, undermining the quality of discourse and contributing to polarization (Bruns, 2017). The advanced algorithms on social media platforms naturally diminish users' autonomy, while simultaneously automating actions regarding which information is displayed in the user's feed. Many organizations and companies with power use these algorithms to engage or retain their audience, with news ultimately becoming a specific consumer product for marketing purposes. This should perhaps be alarming, as a large majority of individuals under 25 form their opinions based on sources from social media on various important issues (Swart, 2021).

Finally, many scholars and researchers have raised concerns regarding the formation of activist actions in the age of the Internet and social media. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, as previously mentioned, have led to alternative forms of political participation, although many regard them as "micro-activism." It is argued that a significant number of people are satisfied with posting politically-charged content or sharing information on social issues, without being willing to engage further. It is acknowledged that many individuals are active on social media in terms of online activism merely to enhance their sense of participation and feeling that they are "fighting for a cause." "Slacktivism" refers to actions that make the individual feel good but are, in reality, ineffective and superficial forms of political participation (Christensen, 2011). The term "slacktivism" originates from the combination of "slacker" and "activism" to describe individuals who participate virtually in the political sphere. It was first coined by Dwight Ozard and Fred Clark in 1995, and the phenomenon of limited, superficial activism has grown significantly over the past thirty years (Yilmaz, 2017). How will forms of activism look in the near future?

## Conclusions

The role of social media as a tool for information, expression, and (self)organization has been significant and continues to evolve. On one hand, it is impressive to observe the vast amount of

information and knowledge to which we have access through social media; on the other hand, it is equally striking how much we mistakenly believe we have "mastered" cognitively. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have played a pivotal role in the revolutionary actions of civil society, with new social media increasing the opportunities for activists to engage directly in political communication and social practices (e.g., Palestine and TikTok).

However, at what point does digital activism and hashtag activism cease to be effective? How clear is the line between the struggle for likes and shares and the struggle on the streets and in neighborhoods? Civil society cannot afford to ignore the internet, just as the internet cannot disregard the influence of social media. Yet, we must understand the risks the internet entails if we wish for it to become a true ally. Echo chambers, the logic of clickbait, the proliferation of fake news, and the misleading political nature of algorithms are issues we must learn to identify. When we understand how the other side of social media operates, we will not only be able to protect ourselves from its harmful effects, but also improve the political game: starting from the individual user and extending to networked collectives.

Social media is a digital "dialogue partner" that should not be underestimated. It is difficult to imagine what the current landscape would be like without social media: how the movements mentioned above might have been organized and evolved, and what kind of impact they would have had if social media had not been part of the social and political reality. While the power of the "viral" and "trends" has undoubtedly changed much, including the political landscape, we must recognize that viral phenomena with political significance would never exist without an individual driven by the culture of a healthy and proactive civil society on the ground. "Trends" are tools for the user, not ends in themselves. The world of social media is a path that can lead to remarkable and "foreign" places; however, if we choose to follow it without actively engaging with it, we may lose the way.

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