

The Evolution of Activism: From Civil Rights to Digital Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the transformation of activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the modern era of digital advocacy. Activism has historically served as a powerful catalyst for societal change, shaping public policy, social norms, and cultural values. From civil rights demonstrations in the mid-20th century to today's online campaigns, the methodologies and mediums of activism have evolved significantly, mirroring shifts in technology, political ideologies, and social dynamics. The paper traces these changes, highlighting key historical movements, the integration of environmental and social justice issues, and the rapid rise of digital platforms as vehicles for mass mobilization. Despite the efficiency and global reach of digital activism, challenges such as misinformation, digital privacy, and the sustainability of online engagement persist. Examining the interplay between technology and activism, the study ultimately considers the opportunities and limitations that digital platforms present for the future of social advocacy.

Keywords: Activism, Civil Rights Movement, Social Justice, Digital Advocacy, Environmental Activism.

INTRODUCTION

Activism is the foundation of every major social and political change in American culture. While legally these campaigns sometimes cause a backlash and are often met with resistance, activism continues to flourish. Ever since European colonizers landed on the eastern coast of the New World to take advantage of its resources and its original inhabitants with slave labor, movements have been working to change this American way of life. Throughout the colonization, decolonization, slavery, segregation, and equal rights for women and minority population movements, American society has changed after decades of unrest. Public sentiment in the United States is constantly changing, and as a result, so is our activism. History repeats, and with it so does the change of politics, society, and economics. Since the first strike in 1170 BC, activism has formally challenged governments on pressing issues such as wages and movements to usurp the common mentality [1, 2]. When the British Empire began to slaughter entire Native American tribes in the late 1800s to expand trade into modern-day Eastern Montana, small resistance movements began to grow. In the 1950s, as a result of a compromise, Southerners continued to act on their anger, in opposition to the North and to rescue slaves as part of the Fugitive Slave Act. The 1960s brought about new vocal change that shook a nation to resolve: to bring our troops back! Jim Crow restricts American freedom. As public sentiment and American culture change, protests and marches mirror these changing ideologies; at first violent, then peaceful, symbols of American unity, and often at times no longer last. Providing a voice for the unacknowledged and unrepresented has always been the focus of movements and well-respected advocates. These lawbreakers, vigilantes, political leaders, and plebeians eventually gave birth to the resistant figurehead that at the time was socially, politically, and economically radical [3, 4].

The Rise of Civil Rights Activism

Civil rights battles in the mid-20th century mark a critical period in the history of activism. The 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott marked the country's first nationwide demonstration against systemic racism. The boycott, which occurred in response to the arrest of Rosa Parks, lasted 381 days and ended with a decree by the Supreme Court that ordered the desegregation of public transportation. While activists continued to struggle against various forms of discrimination in the following years, they staged another watershed moment a decade later. The 1963 March on Washington, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

drew some 300,000 demonstrators to the National Mall to hear King's famous speech. On that day, photographed and beamed onto television, Americans learned that civil rights were far more than a political issue—it was a moral one. As the years passed, more activists followed King's lead in engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience. In 1967, nearly 30,000 people protested the Vietnam War at the Pentagon, culminating in the arrest of over 600 people. Nationally, civil rights activism enjoyed wide but uneven success. Other organizations played important roles both in agitating and in organizing the masses [5, 6]. Movements are often replete with internal controversy, and those of the mid-20th century were no exceptions. For instance, mainstream activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X advocated different strategies for promoting civil rights. King argued for nonviolent civil disobedience, while Malcolm X advocated self-defense and using any means necessary. Both leaders made large impressions for their work and their words, but it is worth noting that King's nonviolent civil disobedience not only influenced the passage of civil rights legislation but has since influenced subsequent activism. Additionally, the U.S. government selectively resisted the demands of the civil rights movement through strong military force and prosecution, often using existing legal tools such as mass arrest. Furthermore, direct opponents of integration and civil rights usually fell at the fringes of society. Yet, others would once have identified as "not racist" who resisted the changes demanded by civil rights activists. These people participated in activities like white flight, "separate but equal" sentiment, and, of course, acts of individual and systemic racism. Policymakers, in responding to the groundswell of support for civil rights, had to make difficult decisions about how to address activists' demands. Policymakers ultimately rejected requests from civil rights leaders as not feasible or too costly. Media coverage of events such as Bloody Sunday happened in part because of everyday people and protest participants who alerted journalists and broadcasters to the news. This in turn shaped public opinion and policy change in favor of civil rights activists. In the decades following the civil rights heyday, more social movements have tried to emulate the struggle for civil rights and harness the power of well-organized demonstrations as a means to pressure change [7, 8].

The Transition to Environmental and Social Justice Movements

Orientation has shifted toward environmental and social justice. Environmental concerns began growing in importance during the late 20th century with a growth in population and industrialization. Intertwined with the desire to save the planet was the need to integrate social justice with environmental justice, advocating for those communities that would be most affected by climate change and toxic waste. The advent of Earth Day in 1970 and global activism against climate change in the late 2000s also marked a time when these movements took on a global focus. Events, legislation, and other historical markers such as the passage of the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts, the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency, and the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline have also played a role in shaping the movement against environmental degradation [9, 10]. One of the first times when a social justice framework was integrated with the environmental movement is known as the "enviro-feminist" movement of the 1970s. This campaign was designed to highlight a woman's place in the home and how it is affected by air and water pollution. Several other significant events of the 1970s would solidify the social justice element into environmentalism. The importance of integrating social justice into environmentalism was further emphasized by the siloing nature of institutionalized environmentalist groups. Activism also shifted from a strictly national focus to a global focus. There was a growing understanding that environmental degradation was a product of social inequalities. This idea of interconnectedness is central to the development of an anti-globalization social justice movement that in the 1990s and into the new millennium would criticize the undemocratic nature of new global trading systems [11, 12].

The Emergence of Digital Advocacy Platforms

Online and digital platforms have significantly expanded the repertoire of collective action, enhancing the scope and scale of citizen-leader interaction using innovative methods. With the advent of the Internet and social networking platforms, individuals are no longer confined to offline means of organizational behavior or personal networking to generate pressure on policymakers. Given the increasing importance of digital media in the lives of individuals, minority group members' activism in different countries has built substantial user engagement. While claims about the impact of social media campaigns on raising awareness have inspired a debate about how to measure their effectiveness, some scholars and practitioners have argued that appeals and campaigns on digital advocacy platforms have been fruitful in terms of policy change, drawing responses from hundreds of thousands of people around the globe [13, 14]. A leading digital advocacy platform provides a universal resource for mobilizing support and bringing attention to their campaign. The company has grown quickly and attributes its triumph to a vibrant community of engaged users who customize and start their campaigns. It deploys a petition

format. Other digital advocacy tools include crowd-funding to raise money for legal action, matches and campaigns, campaign launches, advocacy organization partnerships, viral campaigns, and other campaigns resulting from local contact and outreach. As such issues are becoming increasingly global and require a continuous flow of information and ideas from the bottom up, the involvement of technology and technological innovations, and online media has become increasingly prevalent, thereby affecting bottom-up participation. However, there is a concern for members about misinformation and digital privacy. As a result, efforts will be made to mitigate disinformation both within the communication and through seeking digital platform advocacy partnerships that can contribute to and maintain the digital privacy and security of our members [15, 16].

The Future of Activism: Opportunities and Challenges

But as we look to the future, let's first acknowledge the dynamism of the landscape of social issues. If there has been one common strategic thread throughout this entire volume, it is the evolution not only of the activist but also of the cause or the issue that the activist promotes. Although advocating for social change requires more than simply aligning one's voice with the "right" side of history, it is also true that the terrain over which one must traverse to achieve real change will never be constant. Flexibility in strategy and tactics will always be a principal component in the success of the activist group. Given that creating an urgency to change social policy is an evergreen task, digital technology is sure to play a role in the activist's toolkit to come. For instance, the ability of digital technology to help forge coalitions between diverse activist groups promoting different issues within the same geographical space is quite valuable. Furthermore, the speed and vast reach of information transfer over wireless and broadband channels make the gathering and coverage of events, as well as the communication and advocacy connections that can be made in real-time across various issues, more likely. No activist coalition, irrespective of the substance of the causes, is at a disadvantage in today's informational society, or one that relies upon digital technology to help fill in the gaps that historically fall between and among various social justice movements. It is also fair to note that while social networking websites can serve as digital organizing centers, the long-term sustainability of these newfound social ties is not yet known. In other words, can "virtual" ties die off as easily as they are formed? In conjunction with this, the causes and organizations that seem "sexy" to support may draw the majority of attention away from other worthy causes, or even create situations in which groups compete to be highlighted. Thus, individual and organizational activist efforts may be dissipated if they ride the digital bandwagon to such an extreme that they lose sight of the importance of attending to the "ground game" – the slow, steady, and interpersonal groundwork that is essential when working together to sustain a communal vision. Finally, we must always bear in mind that the discounting of relationships on the web as somehow living is inherently problematic, which is what makes the "flash activism" associated with digital communications so uncertain. It is unclear whether people are actually being taught issues or simply "buzz words" when they are involved in digital activist initiatives, and if they are being educated, it is unclear what the depth of their encounters is. Is it easy to zap an "invite" to an educational session, and even easier than before to opt out of such social justice events come the day of the event? Hence, a key feature of activism remains true: the development of a cohesive vision, with sustainable communal resilience to carry us to that vision, is essential. And at the end of the day, it is not the tools of technology or other material resources that lead to triumph, but our inner resilience, our deep spirit of commitment and unity. It is the persistence of the human spirit that an individual carries within that sustains our activist labors. Consider the valence of youth activism on various levels. We must consider the valence of youth activism on the front of educational philosophy, the urgent struggle to arm and cultivate new "genius" citizens, ready to inherit the activist workforce, and equipped with the unique theoretical and experiential tools necessary to transform society as we know it. Remembering tomorrow depends on our actions today [17, 15, 17].

CONCLUSION

The journey of activism from civil rights to digital platforms emphasizes both the adaptability and resilience of social advocacy. While the core objective of activism remains unchanged—achieving justice and equity for marginalized communities—the methods and tools have expanded to harness the power of technology. Digital platforms now enable activists to mobilize global audiences, foster immediate engagement, and create networks that transcend geographical boundaries. However, this evolution also brings challenges, such as maintaining meaningful, sustained involvement and mitigating the spread of misinformation. For activism to remain impactful, it must balance digital innovation with the foundational principles of unity, commitment, and resilience. As the world continues to evolve, so too must the strategies of those committed to social change, ensuring that both digital and traditional methods contribute to an inclusive, informed, and sustained movement for justice.

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