

Social Media Platforms and how they facilitate and aid in the Scaling of Online Advocacy Movements

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show how crucial the use of social media platforms is in regard to scaling online advocacy movements. This paper argues that social media platforms contribute largely to the scaling of movements through the facilitation of resource mobilisation, coalition building, and providing an accessible and effective method for advocacy movements to control the narrative. Social media is a vital tool in scaling online movements and the impacts are seen in both the online and offline spheres. Online advocacy movements utilise social media platforms to create the opportunity to receive and mobilise resources such as funding and donations to aid in the development and furthering of the cause. Various online advocacy groups and movements unite in solidarity against common enemies and institutions to provide a stronger force and often a louder voice. Social media facilitates this coalition bonding by providing a safe space to do so. Individuals and activists often unite under the movement centric accounts to spread their message by utilising social media platforms functions such as the 'Retweet', 'Share', 'Like', 'Quote' and 'Repost' options.

Main Text

Online Advocacy is about activists, advocates, groups, and movements speaking out against systemic injustices, raising the voices of the marginalised, and changing the political climate accordingly. This paper focuses on how online advocacy movements are facilitated by social media platforms. Some examples provided in the paper refer to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement prior to the massive effort in 2020 when the movement hit its peak, however, all points made are still relevant and applicable to contemporary society. Although social media platforms were not created intentionally for the main purpose of fuelling the growth of movements, these platforms have become a vital part in doing so. Social media aids the growth of movements by providing a platform to mobilise both internal and external resources, by providing a safe and stable environment conducive of forming coalitions between groups, activists, and movements, and it provides a means for movements to control their own narrative. Social media platforms facilitate the efficient scaling of social advocacy movements in contemporary society.

Social media platforms aid in facilitating the mobilising of both internal and external resources for online advocacy movements. Social media platforms provide users with a communal space to come together and freely discuss what is happening in the current social, political, and cultural climate and what that means

for them. Khamis and Vaughn (2012) note the importance of social media platforms such as Facebook groups and/or pages and how vital they are in regard to providing 'safe spaces' for protesters and/or advocates to meet. They state that this "type of public commons for free speech" is not available elsewhere (Khamis & Vaughn, 2012). If we look at De Choudhury's (2016) analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement, it reveals how the utilisation of social media platforms is continually involved in issues related to race, policy, policing etc., making it a useful tool in developing shared movements, understandings and ideologies, especially in relation to identity. Social media platforms are utilised by activists and advocates to mobilise the resources needed and spread their message to other users. Many advocates use social media platforms to create a monetary income for their movements, opening up links and accounts to accept donations to fund their work (Sommerfeldt, 2011). In this way, social media facilitates the mobilisation of funding resources for online causes, advocate accounts and groups. By utilising the ability to mobilise resources and funding, movements can scale their efforts accordingly (Doan & Toledano, 2018). The accessibility of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow activists to cross-share events, ideas, movements etc. and spread the information like wildfire (Burnett, Mundt & Ross, 2018). The process of sharing, liking, following, quoting, commenting on and retweeting posts on social media creates an efficient and highly effective method for information sharing, especially for activists and advocacy movements. In their research, Burnett, Mundt and Ross (2018) spoke to an online advocacy group administrator who highlighted how social media provides a platform for communication and conversations to occur between online leadership. For example, if a BLM group held an event that was successful, social media provided the administrators and coordinators with an efficient means to access other BLM groups and share their success stories and provide guidance should another branch of the BLM movement choose to follow in their steps. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p.742) state in their research that movements that have utilised social media platforms have "frequently been larger, have scaled up quicker, and have been flexible in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues" in comparison to more traditional methods. This highlights just how vital social media platforms have become regarding mobilising resources, opening channels for knowledge and ideas to be shared, and for scaling movements.

Social media platforms aid in facilitating the building of coalitions between groups and other social movements. Nien (2017) states that ties created on and by social media draws advocates, protestors, and activists together despite different identities, backgrounds etc., often, against a common enemy. When online groups and movements with varying goals and ambitions share the same enemy, such as the government, or share a similar demographic, it fosters an environment for coalition opportunities. Burnett, Mundt and Ross (2018) touch on this in relation to an interview hosted with an administrator of an online BLM group. They state that "social media facilitates connections between groups of activists",

and that it can even increase participation and attendee numbers for planned offline events. They also take the time to mention how the phrase “the rising tide lifts all boats” is a very resonant description of how important a role social media plays in providing accessibility for the formation of coalitions between the LGBTQI+, female, immigrant, and ‘brown’ communities and groups, as well as other movements (Burnett, Mundt & Ross, 2018). For example, if multiple groups and/or communities are facing oppression by the same institution, social media provides an unbiased and unfiltered platform and opportunity for knowledge and connections to be shared and built upon. This creates an opportunity to unite and challenge systemic injustices with a stronger front, creating an attack with multiple strong points. It is suggested that the strong force of the BLM movement is due to the strong connections between activists fostered by the accessibility of social media, especially in contemporary society. Baron (2013) supports this notion in their research, sharing that social media facilitates coalition building, that social media connects networks and shares ideologies in an efficient method that extends beyond ‘loose’ connections and instead forges strong ties between groups and/or movements despite varying identities and backgrounds. By utilising social media platforms to share knowledge and opportunities, movements are inviting users to share and engage with the content and comment on the current issues. This in turn creates a wider audience for the movement’s message and ideologies, as it is shared and reposted, amplifying the movement’s cause to reach the feeds and platforms of like-minded activists, henceforth scaling the movement in an efficient manner. Both Hwang and Kim (2015), and Baron (2013) argue that online social media platforms and networks enabling organisational and personalised sharing is a large contributing factor to the creation of strong ties, sustainable interpersonal networks and coalitions between groups and movements. Social media platforms allow for an efficient method of scaling for online advocacy movements, with coalition building being a strong influencing factor in the scalability of movements.

Social media platforms aid in controlling the narrative of movements and providing accurate, uncensored accounts. Social media platforms assist in helping shape the current discourses pertaining to relevant contemporary issues surrounding politics, identity, and culture (Carney, 2016). Whilst social media platforms are often utilised by movements to mobilise resources and form coalitions with like-minded activists, it is also used to spread accurate accounts of information, to provide a safe platform for individuals to discuss issues raised by the movement(s) and to provide the opportunity to offer commentary on many other current affairs and issues. In Burnett, Mundt and Ross’ (2018) interviews mentioned above, they found that the most notable function of social media platforms to the movements and activists is how it provides them with the ability to control their own story, their own narrative, therefore creating awareness, visibility and understanding for the issues and topics the movements address on their own terms. Social media platform functions such as the ‘Retweet’, ‘Share’, ‘Like’, ‘Quote’

and 'Repost' options provide speakers, activists, and movements with the means to facilitate the amplification of their preferred narrative without worry. One [BLM] group shared that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have provided them with a stable platform to tell their story as real, raw and relevant as it is without having to worry about their words being filtered or redefined by someone else's perspectives and/or biases (Burnett, Mundt & Ross, 2018). A BLM group administrator stated that often they find social media platforms to be a more credible source of information in comparison to traditional news media, speaking of an example where the Freddie Gray uprising that they attended in Baltimore was represented vastly different on traditional media compared to what participants and witnesses were posting on Twitter (Burnett, Mundt & Ross, 2018). It is clear just how important social media has become in regard to online advocacy movements, as being able to amplify 'non-dominant' narratives that aren't pushed by traditional media sources becomes an important function to activists and movements using social media platforms. It is important to see how the opportunities afforded by social media platforms contribute to controlling the narrative and shifting public discourse accordingly. Many movements use hashtags to scale and spread their message and narrative such as #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM. However, some groups against these movements often attempt hashtag hijacking to draw attention to a different topic and/or cause by spamming the hashtag with unrelated content (Eichinger & Gudacker, 2016; Goldhaber, 1997). Stories and narratives can often be hijacked and redirected on social media, however, with the option to report posts available, it rarely works to the full intended extent unless there is a massive participation in the hijacking. K-pop fandoms on social media, especially Twitter, participate often in hashtag hijacking in the form of posting fancams (footage of celebrities taken by a fan, usually a performance video) tagged with current trending hashtags (Abidin, 2021). An example of hashtag hijacking would be during the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, when a movement opposing BLM with the hashtag #WhiteLivesMatter (WLM) attempted to make a stand against the BLM community. Due to the massive belief in the BLM cause and the coalitions the BLM movement had formed on social media with other online groups, especially with the K-pop fandom community, the #WhiteLivesMatter hashtag was hijacked, and their message drowned out by tweets from K-pop fans including the WLM hashtag paired with K-pop videos and/or fancams which were completely unrelated to the cause (Voytko, 2020). Whilst social media platforms hold some risks in reference to hashtags and potential hashtag hijacking, the ability for activist and movements to truly tell their stories and proclaim their truths without bias is worth the risk, and so, in this way, social media platforms provide movements and activists with a platform to share uncensored and accurate accounts, therefore, maintaining control of their own narratives.

To summarise, it is strongly suggested by existing literature and research that social media platforms can facilitate wide levels of resource mobilisation, including accepting funding and donations to support

activists and movements in their aspirations and goals. Existing research shows that coalition building between movements, groups and activists of varying causes is efficiently facilitated by social media platforms, providing a stable environment for information sharing. It has also been proven that by using social media platforms, movements have an accessible and effective method to control the narrative of their own movement, events, and messages, making sure to speak their truth without mainstream media recontextualising their efforts to fit their own perspectives and biases. Whilst there is risk involved with using social media as a means to scale a movement, the benefits outweigh the negative possibilities, with opportunities being provided for the public to speak on current discourses without pressures to conform to particular ideologies or beliefs held by traditional media companies and outlets. Social media platforms, through facilitating resource mobilisation, coalition building, and means to control the narrative, provide activists with accessible and effective means to scale up their respective movements in contemporary society.

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