In Defence of Click Activism

Puti Alfath Didi

International Master in Adult Education for Social Change

University of Malta

Introduction

This commentary is inspired by a keynote presentation by Katrina Popovic at the 'International Conference on Critical Education: Critical Adult Education and Learning', held at Valletta Campus, University of Malta, between 9-12 May. The keynote was entitled 'Neoliberalism, Postmodernism, and COVID-19: The Erosion of Critical Adult Education'. One of the topics discussed by those present at this presentation was click activism.

There is a perception that activism among youth is now shifting from physical demonstration to digital communication. Covid-19 is believed to have accelerated activism through social media. One take on such a proliferation of click activism, shared by some participants at the conference, is that such activism may be contributing to individual, private and anonymous citizenship.

Historically, streets and squares, as spaces of protest and counterdiscourse, have contributed considerably to social change.   Indonesia's (my home country) most memorable protest took place in May 1998. The protest occupied almost all important public spaces. It successfully led to the overthrow of the 32-year dictatorship of Suharto. This kind of real activism was argued to be the real action and could not be shifted into digital action.

Click activism, also known as slacktivism, is participation in social change through liking, retweeting, changing profile pictures, and sharing a video about an issue to show support for a movement, without participating in the physical or offline movement (Dookhoo & Dodd, 2019). Many believe that this kind of action has no impact on society as it does not put any real pressure on the government or stakeholders, and demands little commitment or effort from the social media users (Butler, 2011).

Response to the argument that underestimates social media movement

The 1980 Kwangju Uprising, a tragic massacre in South Korea, resulting from a protest against General Shun Doo-Hwans's dictatorship, was spread all over the world by foreign journalists, including Hinzpeter's recording (Jackson, 2020). Back then, television was the medium that exposed the social injustices that were happening at that time. The national media that operated inside South Korea could not do anything to show the truth of that moment. Gwangju citizens welcomed the foreign rapporteurs' effort to communicate to the world the truth about the Gwangju struggle, which was not about fighting against the South Korean state with the help from North Korea, as the official statements would have it, but about struggling to preserve democracy (Jackson, 2020).

Fast forward to the current state of affairs, social media reports play an important role in highlighting injustices and oppressions that are often deliberately overlooked by mainstream media. Established big media, with their strength and big audience, at some point lost their freedom to share the news that was not in the best economic interest of the owners or the government's political agenda. Against such a backdrop, and (with emphasis) not without challenges, social media constitute viable politico-pedagogical alternatives. Social media enable people who are affected by oppression to share their story themselves with the world, directly, without very strict censorship like in television. Also, they encourage independent journalists and witnesses to establish and share more comprehensive news of unseen oppressions, deliberately not covered by mainstream newspapers, television, radio or other conventional media.

While squares and streets are still viable spaces for activism, I contend that social-media activism is a viable pedagogical approach to social change. It helps agendas spread quickly, inspires physical movements, provides an

alternative to mainstream channels, and enables disabled people to contribute, to mention a few.

Social-media activism enables information to spread out quickly

Before the massive use of the internet, information could not easily spread out to many people. The information was distributed using channels like radio, magazines, and newspapers. It took time to share information with many people. For example, in the context of the Indonesian independence, it took months for all the territory to be aware that Japanese colonialization had ended and Indonesian independence had been proclaimed (Fogg, n.d.). Back then, the newspaper was a powerful tool not only for spreading information but also for diffusing the spirit of the struggle for Indonesian Independence in North Sumatra, a region in Indonesia (Azhari et al., 2022).

Globally, the number of internet users has increased dramatically, and has reached more than 60% of the total population in 2023 (Datareportal, 2023; Petrosyan, 2023). This means that more than 60% of the world's population can access and has the potential to share information relatively quickly. Moreover, multidirectional communication in digital communication enables people to comment and share their thoughts on the mis/information that is being communicated.

While the onus to sift through and evaluate the information remains largely on the individual user, the dialectic happens quickly and massively. A big student movement in Indonesia with the hashtag #reformasidikorupsi (or translated as reformation that has been corrupted) has caused many irresponsible users to spread fake news about the movement. Fortunately, the youth who are active on social media quickly responded to the fake news and shared the truth. A fake news about the movement consisted of a video that alleged that an ambulance was carrying stones and Molotov cocktails to be used against police. Not long after the news was published on social media, many comments appeared to counter that information, and immediately the caption of that post was edited, removing the fake news about the stones and Molotov cocktails.

The agility by which information on social media spreads is also a product of the newly-found opportunity for many to share their own story directly, without the compromises that, at times, have to be negotiated with editors and owners of mainstream media. A brutal persecution commanded by the son of an Indonesian Directorate General of Taxes officer, Mario Dandy, against

Jonathan Latumahina's son, got the attention of the public after Jonathan published the story on his social media account. Many facts were revealed, including the corruption of Mario Dandy's father and the illegal practices that they have engaged in, without any consequences. Social media helped Jonathan bring his son's incident to the public and garner more support for his son. In this case, as with others, it was virtually impossible to challenge the impunity of people with strong positions and good money through mainstream media.

As with the case of Jonathan and his son, social media enables ordinary people to put their thoughts in a visible online space that could be read by many people. Their opinion about the police and government in online spaces could impact reality.

The online movement also inspires offline protest and the opposite

Social media help offline movements to grow organically, beyond the movement's original targets. Social media help movement organizers to quickly share information about events and political updates, making it easier to plan protests (Jost et al., 2018). Even though social media algorithms do not always provide the same result for every content to be seen by many people, there are a lot of cases that prove that the social media movement inspires people to protest on the streets. The news about oppression on the internet usually appears on social media in various forms, such as videos or photos with a caption about the case. The responses shared in the comments section signal the algorithm to share it with more people. When it goes viral, it usually inspires people to organise themselves into a movement that spills onto the street.

Social media helps to organise people globally. The case of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman who died after falling into a coma during detention by Iran's morality police, attracted attention and mobilisation on a global scale (Aljazeera, 2022). Large protests erupted in Iran, leading to the deaths of hundreds of people on the streets. Global protests immediately followed suit, from Los Angeles to Istanbul, from Paris to Washington, D.C., in solidarity with women in Iran (Wamsley, 2022). Hackers and tech experts helped activists to share with the world what was happening in Iran as the internet there was predicted to be shut down (Khazani & Bulos, 2022). Social media users who spread this issue contribute to raising awareness about this issue and challenge

other social media user's critical thinking. They are significant in sharing with more people about this case.

Mahsa Amini's case on the street that blew up on social media at the same time also inspired more people to act. It means the offline protest that is recorded again and published again on social media drives more people to know about the issue. It is a reciprocal never-ending and multidirectional cycle for social activism. It grows itself consciously or unconsciously, organic or organized, and with the existence of conventional media, social media helps in escalating the issue to get more attention and consideration from people with the hope it could create social change.

Social media as the resistance of the mainstream channel

Social media comes as an alternative for people who have a passion for journalism and/or social justice to share genuine news in a faster time with fewer restrictions. Social media users are relatively flexible in sharing various themes and topics of content on their accounts. They could share funny content and on the same account share recipes and political opinions. A stand-up comedian in Indonesia, Bintang Emon has gone viral after his sarcastic comedy about the persecution that happened to Novel Baswedan, a previous investigator of the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission. The support pouring in for Bintang Emon motivates him to create more social critique content, even though he may not have initially planned to do so. Television may be unable to facilitate comedians in sharing spontaneous social critique without censorship to protect the media from government warnings or bans.

Moreover, setting up a television, newspaper, or magazine program demands a substantial amount of capital, making it inaccessible for individuals with limited resources. Social media has emerged as a viable alternative for such individuals to establish a mass media presence. It empowers independent organizations, student movements, or any other social initiatives to wield mass media influence. Social media algorithms prioritize creativity, gauged by account engagement and content, thereby providing equal opportunities for both large and small-scale mass media to compete for attention and share their agendas.

In the conference session, Julia Alegre Mouslim mentioned that social media also empowers disabled individuals to voice their opinions. Public spaces do not always offer inclusivity and accessibility for people with disabilities. Social media become an inclusive space for people, it has sound for people to hear, it has a caption feature, and can be shared with many people without necessarily moving to public space. There are a lot of technological tools that enable disabled people to access social media (Mammadova et al., 2016). It helps them to use the tool to speak their mind.

Social media also allows people who have barriers to travel to see social movements and protest outside besides of seeing from television. People who rarely go outside because of physical disabilities are still able to update with the latest information due to the use of technologies including social media. For instance, social media platforms enable Disabled People's Organizations to connect with grassroots disability communities from around the world, fostering communication and bridging the gap between the disability community and governance (Trevisan & Cogburn, 2019).

Challenges of Social Media Activism

The algorithm system of social media is problematic for the diversity of society. Algorithm systems that show only desirable content could lead to fragmentation of public opinion and a dilution of shared common sense. People who tend to engage more with certain political opinions will be more likely to get certain content. People who engage with certain content themes will tend to get similar or related content which creates polarization in society because the other paradigm might not come up due to lack of interest and exposure. Silo thinking constitutes a major collateral damage of algorithms, making it difficult for users to be exposed to divergent mindsets.

Conclusion

Online and offline movements have to be seen as coalesced and supporting each other as opposed to negating each other contribution. There are also many considerations that need to be taken into account with regard to the impact of social media activism and information dissemination. People need to be educated about how to filter and evaluate the information they get. Social

media activists need to learn more about researching information and strengthen their principles to keep sharing information that is in line with social justice.

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