

MODULE 7

**ADVANCING
DIGITAL
ACTIVISM**

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ADVANCING DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Activism! It means a person or group acting publicly and peacefully on an issue of shared concern.

The issue may be social, political, environmental or one related to public health and safety. Activists want a change in the current situation which they are not happy about. Activists may advocate change at community level, with local government, national government or sometimes internationally.

Digital activism, also known as cyber activism, is a form of activism that uses the internet and digital technologies as key tools for awareness raising, mobilization and action. As with all other kinds of activism, it needs to be pursued peacefully and ethically.

In this chapter, we briefly explore the various kinds of digital activism being pursued in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Our aim is to identify some common strategies used by individual activists, as well as by civil society groups including youth organizations.

We will also see how the internet enables new kinds of activism by enabling the spontaneous forming of groups of persons who share the same concern.

We also emphasize that successful activism cannot happen entirely online. It requires a healthy mix of online and offline approaches.

KEY TERMS

Advocacy: An activity by an individual or group that aims to influence decisions within political, economic or social systems. Advocacy includes activities to influence public policy, laws, regulations or budgets by using facts, arguments, media use, and other kinds of messaging to government officials and/or the public.

Activism: The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about social or political change.

Clicktivism: The practice of supporting a political or social cause via the internet by means such as social media or online petitions, typically characterized as involving little effort or commitment.

Slacktivism combines the words "slacker" and "activism" to refer to simple measures used to support an issue or social cause involving virtually no effort on the part of participants. Slacktivism critics argue that these actions lack genuine commitment and fail to produce any tangible effect.



ACTIVISM: STORY SO FAR

Activism is nearly as old as civilization itself. The urge for change – and the need to collectively organize and advocate it – has driven women and men to activism for centuries.

Activism is much more than agitation. Indeed, the history of activism around the world shows that the most effective activists are those who analyzed problems, listened widely and identified solutions that they then advocated through different methods – including public communication, peaceful demonstrations, marching, picketing and boycotting of certain products. Often, activists collaborate with other like-minded groups and, where necessary, engage in (ideally, transparent) negotiations with governments or corporations whose change was being demanded.

An outstanding historical example of effective activism is the life of Mahatma Gandhi (1869 – 1948). Trained as a lawyer in England, he spent over two decades practising law in South Africa where he was closely associated with struggles for social justice against racial and economic injustices. A transformed Gandhi returned to India in 1914, and soon became a leader of the movement against the British rule of India.

The foundation of Gandhi's activism was nonviolent protest (satyagraha) and civil disobedience to achieve political and social progress. For him, nonviolence was not simply the absence of physical violence. Self-rule and radical democracy -- in which everyone participates in the governance process -- were also important parts of it. In pursuit of his goals, Gandhi was an orator, writer, journalist and peaceful demonstrator. He communicated with the British rulers without compromising his ideals.

Years later, Martin Luther King Jr. (1929 – 1968), who had met with Gandhi, would employ similar ways of nonviolent resistance during the civil rights movement with the goal of enforcing constitutional and legal rights for African Americans that white Americans already enjoyed.

For today's activists and protesters, Gandhi and King's political strategies could provide some valuable lessons. The peaceful resistance that the two pursued was more effective in exposing hard truths about injustices.

LESSONS FROM MAHATMA GANDHI

Mahatma Gandhi lived by five pillars of non-violence: respect, understanding, acceptance, appreciation and compassion. "Although Gandhi was as flawed a human as any of us, he did his best to live by those pillars," writes Arun Gandhi, a grandson, in his 2015 book titled 'The Gift of Anger and Other Lessons from My Grandfather Mahatma Gandhi'.



ACTIVISM AND COMMUNICATION

Making good use of communications tools has always been a key part of activism. As technology advanced, more tools became available for activism.

Activism started through oratory means, with public speeches calling changes or social reforms. After the printing press was invented, that enhanced the reach for activists who started using handbills, leaflets and pamphlets summarizing their positions and calls to action.

As different type of mass media emerged – starting with newspapers and magazines, and then radio and television – activists found ways of using these media to amplify their messages. However, accessing the mass media has often been a challenge for activists as media companies are controlled by the state or corporate owners (and editors) who decide which messages are allowed, and how.

Digital and web tools are the latest additions to the activist toolkit. These enable any individual with internet access to self-publish bypassing the ‘gatekeepers’ of owners and editors. Activists and reformers were quick to realize and seize this potential.

The web is an inherently interactive environment, and all activists need to recognize this. It means engaging in two-way communications, driven by public debate and regular engagement with virtual communities – including detractors and critics, if any.



¹ What Gandhi can teach today's protesters. The Conversation, ² October 2017. <http://theconversation.com/what-gandhi-can-teach-todays-protesters-83404>

ACTIVISM ONLINE

Digital and online activism involves a blending of campaigning, marketing and community building using various web platforms. Sometimes it extends to raising public donations for a specific cause (such as disaster relief).

In the early days of the web during the 1990s, activists used the new medium mostly for disseminating information and advocacy positions: websites (and later, blogs) gave them a potentially global reach at a low cost.

After social media emerged in the 2000s, digital activism evolved to become more interactive and complex. Different ways of mobilizing people became possible -- through campaigns, online petitions, virtual meetings, and virtual sit-ins, etc.

While the mainstream media is still an important outlet reaching out to some sections of society, more and more activism is happening online today.

Beyond outreach and mobilization, digital tools and web platforms also allow activists spread across space and time to plan and organize around shared goals and issues.

Globally, campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo and #ClimateStrike have been largely driven on social media. Yet significant actions are also being taken through physical activities like street marches and public gatherings.

A key learning from dozens of social and political activism efforts in recent years is that success depends on a healthy mix of online and offline action. Peaceful street demonstrations, marches and sit-ins at public spaces still matter, and they generate lots of photo opportunities for both social media and mainstream media.

A key challenge for activists using social media is how to sustain public interest over time. Online interest can build up fast, but it can also dissipate fast. Staying on with a single issue or cause is hard when news breaks round the clock and so many topics distract people.

Finally, it is important to remember that digital activism is much more than the use of technology. The context of digital activism refers both to the digital technologies used in a given campaign and to the economic, social and political context in which such technology use occurs.

Digital technological infrastructure -- the combination of networks, code, applications and devices -- is only the starting point. It is the differences in economic, social, and political factors in each situation or country that ultimately determine how much activists can succeed in using digital tools for public causes. Therefore, understanding your social and political realities is an important first step.



ACTIVISM ONLINE: RECENT EXAMPLES

#BlackLivesMatter is an international activist movement, originating in the African-American community, that campaigns against violence and systemic racism towards black people especially in the United States. It started in 2013 after many instances of police brutality and discrimination.

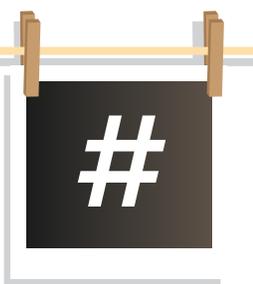
#ClimateStrike is an international movement of school children who take time off from classes to take part in demonstrations demanding action to prevent further global warming and climate change. It began when Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg staged a protest outside the Swedish parliament in August 2018. It has since spread worldwide involving youth and many others from all walks of life.

#MeToo is a worldwide movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault. The movement began to spread virally in October 2017 as a hashtag on social media. (Details in Case Study 5 below.)

ONLINE ACTIVISM STRATEGIES

Successful online campaigners have found various creative strategies to sustain their advocacy and activism. Here are three examples.

HASHTAGS



A hashtag is a common sorting device that makes it possible for others to easily find messages with a specific theme or content on many social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit and YouTube.

A good hashtag needs to be short, punchy, memorable and distinctive (it is always good to search and see if your proposed hashtag is already being used by any other group elsewhere).

There are common hashtags widely used to denote Sri Lanka: #lk, #lka, #sl and #SriLanka.

In recent years, using common hashtags like #FloodSL, #FloodLK and #SLFloods, citizens mobilized voluntary efforts for rescue and relief after major flooding incidents. #PresPollSL was widely used in connection with the presidential election of January 2015 and is being revived in time for the next presidential election in late 2019. During the 51-day political crisis from 26 October to 16 December 2018, one of the most widely used hashtags was #CoupleLK (suggesting the transfer of power was illegal), while other hashtags like #ConstitutionalCrisisLK and #PoliticalCrisisLK were also used.

Anyone may coin a new hashtag, but only some hashtags become popular or 'go viral' by many users adopting it. Hashtags emerge from among social media users themselves, and digital activists are learning how to use this simple device to connect their various posts and messages.

MEMES

A web meme usually takes the form of a static image, animated (GIF) image or video, and is meant to convey an idea quickly through mimicry, humour or satire. The creators of web memes mostly remain anonymous, and only some memes spread rapidly through multiple sharing on social media.

Memes can be rough and dirty, or they can be works of art with sophisticated graphics. It is the idea and its clever expression that matters more than presentation.

Memes originated in popular culture, but social and political activists quickly seized its potential for public interest communications. From gender empowerment and anti-corruption action to clean elections and climate activism, memes have become an integral part of digital activism today. As with hashtags, success of a given meme depends on creativity and timeliness.

A good example of a meme is the palm sign with 'Stand Against Racism' which first emerged after anti-Muslim violence in Aluthgama in June 2014. While its creator remained unknown, this aptly captured the sentiment of peace-loving majority of Lankans who shared it widely with calls for racial harmony, compassion for the affected and restraint by everyone.



**ONLINE
PETITIONS**

Online petitions are another tool available to activists if they live in a society where public opinion is valued and respected by government officials and corporate entities.

Visitors to an online petition can sign the petition by adding their details such as name and email address. Typically, after a petition gathers a sufficiently large number of signatories, it may be delivered to the subject of the petition which can be a political leader, government official, or a corporation.

Most petition websites also allow people to sign up and initiate new petitions. There are several major web initiatives featuring online petitions, such as Change.org, Avaaz.org and iPetitions.com. Avaaz is a US based nonprofit organization launched in 2007 that promotes global activism on issues such as climate change, human rights, animal rights, corruption, poverty and conflict.

**DATA
VISUALIZATION**

Activism can become more effective with the sound analysis of data related to the issue or cause being advocated. However, most people can't relate to numbers that need to be presented in ways easy to understand.

Data visualization is the graphical representation of information and data. By using visual elements like charts, graphs and maps, data visualization tools provide an accessible way to see and understand trends, outliers, and patterns in data. Powerful infographics can make campaigns come to life for the broadest possible audience.

Translating dry reports and databases into a format that resonates with human beings is one of the main purposes of data visualization. When done well, it can not only bring out the insights found in the data, but also humanize the issue in question.

"WHETHER WE'RE SWAMPED BY IT OR STARVED OF IT, THE VALUE OF INFORMATION DEPENDS ON ITS QUALITY, AND ITS USEFULNESS DEPENDS ON OUR ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE IT SUCCESSFULLY. AS ACTIVISTS, WE CAN'T SIT AND WAIT FOR PEOPLE TO WADE THROUGH SIXTY-PAGE REPORTS. TO INFLUENCE PEOPLE WE MUST MAKE STRONG ARGUMENTS AND COMMUNICATE THEM USING STRONG EVIDENCE. WELL TIMED, RIGOROUS AND WELL PRESENTED INFORMATION IS THE GREATEST ASSET ACTIVISTS POSSESS." -

**VISUALISING INFORMATION FOR ADVOCACY, 2013
BOOK BY TACTICAL TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE**

DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka has a long history of social, political and environmental activism going back to several decades. In recent years, individuals and groups concerned with various issues – from political reforms and social justice to animal welfare and public health – have started using websites, blogs, online petitions, social media and other digital tools.

As Freedom on the Net 2018 report on Sri Lanka, compiled by the US-based research and advocacy group called Freedom House, noted: “The web has provided an avenue for robust digital activism and engagement on political issues in Sri Lanka, although most campaigns progress in fits and starts. Many are hitched to specific short-lived events, crises, or stalled political processes, and campaigners are generally unable to gather the momentum needed to drive meaningful change and long-term participation. However, a number of social media campaigns occurred during the reporting period (2017-18).”

Digital activism in Sri Lanka has been organized around shared hashtags as well as popular slogans. Here are a few among many examples:

- #IVotedSL online campaign was started to encourage citizens to participate in two key elections, i.e. the presidential election of January 2015 and Parliamentary election of August 2015. It was revived during the local government elections in February 2018, together with #LGPollSL, with many first-time voters sharing photos of themselves (inked finger indicating having cast their vote).
- When the Right to Information (RTI) law was unanimously passed by Parliament in June 2016, it marked the culmination of an advocacy campaign that started in 1994. Most of that advocacy was done offline, but since the law became a reality, activists have been using mainstream and social media to raise awareness about the new right and to encourage more citizens to exercise it. The common hashtag #RTIsl is being used.

- Human rights activists and civil society groups have been using #DisappearedSL to track and support the protests by families of the disappeared across the north and east, and to demand justice. Amnesty International also uses the hashtag #StillNoAnswers.
- Promoting ethnic and communal harmony has been the basis of activism both online and offline that brought together many individuals and groups to renounce racism and discrimination based on race or religion.
- Preventing sexual harassment in public transport and at work places has become a priority as data has revealed high levels of these practices. In response, awareness and advocacy campaigns have been launched both online and offline. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) collaborated with local partners on the #DoesSheTravelSafe campaign in 2018, while in early 2019 Oxfam Sri Lanka and partners launched #NotOnMyBus and #CreateAScene social media campaign calling for bystander intervention as a solution against sexual harassment of women and girls.

Not every attempt at digital activism succeeds. For example, a social media campaign organized around #NewConstSL was intended to drive conversations around constitutional reforms, but it has failed to gain much interest as the reform process itself stalled.

Sometimes activists can digitally ‘crash somebody else’s party’ to raise a neglected concern. An example is how, in 2017-18, the citizen journalism platforms Groundviews, Vikalpa and Maatram used the #Celebrate150years hashtag marking 150 years of Ceylon Tea to highlight the plight of the Up-Country Tamil community – who remain the most deprived segment of the population. (Note, however, that it can work both ways: activist-originated hashtags can sometimes be hijacked by those opposing their advocacy positions.)

More Lankan examples can be found among the case studies below.



CRITICISM OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM

There is some criticism of digital activism, and their arguments are worth noting.

Social media 'clicktivism' creates more apathy than empathy, they say, pointing out that true social change requires more than merely liking or sharing a social media post for a worthy cause. One critic says this leads to a form of "one-click rent-a-mob" – enabling ill-informed and disconnected instant electronic communication instead of genuine political discussion and interaction. Another critic says while it is easy to 'click' about issues on social media, it is just as easy to disengage online. There is also criticism that online petitions can over-simplify complex ethical questions.

In their defence, digital activists say the web and social media are additional tools to be used by activists and are not ends in themselves. Yes, they are the imperfect tools and the best results are achieved when they are used appropriately and thoughtfully.

Some data analysis done in the US shows 'Clicktivists' are twice as likely to volunteer, twice as likely to ask for donations, two times more likely to take part in an event and four times more likely to encourage others to engage.

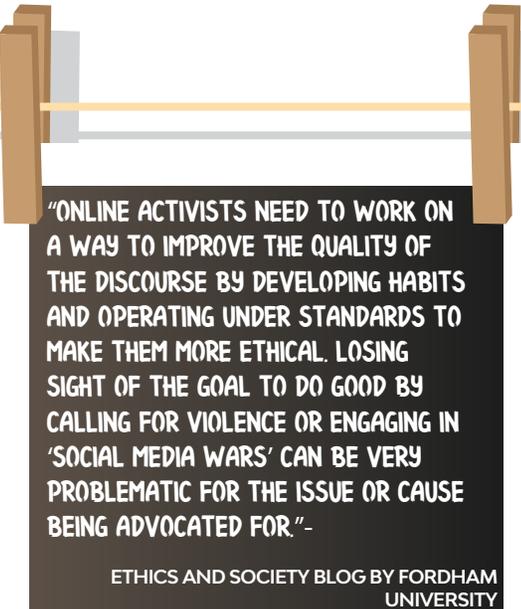
For us in Sri Lanka, where only a third of society is using the internet, activism should always combine the offline with online.

ETHICS OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Activism – online and offline -- needs to be conducted within an accountable, transparent and ethical framework. Having good intentions does not justify resorting to dubious or self-serving practices.

For example, some online petitions have been exposed as a way of acquiring people's email addresses to later sell them for a profit to digital marketing companies. And certain fund-raising campaigns online have later diverted most of what they collected to cover running costs of charities.

Social activists are entitled to their own political views and political party loyalties. However, in public interest advocacy and activism, it is best to rise above political divides. It would be unethical for political parties to influence or coerce a social activism campaign for political gains. Similarly, advocating a public cause does not justify any activist using threatening or hateful language on social media.



"ONLINE ACTIVISTS NEED TO WORK ON A WAY TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE DISCOURSE BY DEVELOPING HABITS AND OPERATING UNDER STANDARDS TO MAKE THEM MORE ETHICAL. LOSING SIGHT OF THE GOAL TO DO GOOD BY CALLING FOR VIOLENCE OR ENGAGING IN 'SOCIAL MEDIA WARS' CAN BE VERY PROBLEMATIC FOR THE ISSUE OR CAUSE BEING ADVOCATED FOR."

ETHICS AND SOCIETY BLOG BY FORDHAM
UNIVERSITY

ACTIVISM AS A CONTINUUM

Finally, we need to remember that an activist's task is never finished: there is always more to be done. Activism needs persistence, tenacity and ability to take the long-term view.

As life-long activists for human rights, social justice or environmental conservation know well, some campaigns are more successful than others in changing a specific policy, law or action. Narrowly defined activist demands – such as suspending a contentious law or withdrawal of a controversial product – are more likely to succeed than calls for difficult reforms such as phasing out dependence on petroleum and coal to contain global warming.

This reality is true for digital activism as well. While specific successes are to be celebrated, activists need to stay engaged for social, political and other reforms that take time, effort and dialogue. Some reforms take generations to be completed, and activist vigilance is needed to guard against societies or political systems from backsliding.

As US writer Malcolm Gladwell says, “activism that challenges the status quo – that attacks deeply rooted problems – is not for the faint of heart.”

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1: ABOLISHING SLAVE TRADE IN BRITISH EMPIRE

One of history's most persistent social activists was William Wilberforce (1759 – 1833), a British politician, philanthropist and leader of the social movement to abolish the slave trade in which British-owned ships were carrying black slaves from Africa, in appalling conditions, to the West Indies to be bought and sold.

As a campaigner, he first found out what was happening. He also amassed incriminating evidence – including eye witness testimonials -- about the mass-scale abuse of human rights taking place in both Africa and on the high seas transporting captured African slaves. He then wrote and spoke across Britain using facts and figures, as well as appeals to human emotions. He managed to collect over 300,000 signatures in a petition from ordinary people calling for abolition of slavery – which countered the political argument that the ordinary people didn't care about far away abuses.

He worked with progressive Christian leaders and used churches to spread his message. He entered Parliament to advocate on this single issue. He organized consumer boycotts of sugar produced in plantations that used slave labour.

It was not until 1807 — full 20 years after Wilberforce started his campaign — that the British Parliament passed Abolition Bill and banned the slave trade. He then worked to ensure these laws were properly enforced and that slavery was abolished everywhere in the British Empire.

'Amazing Grace', a 2006 British-American biographical film directed by Michael Apted, is based on the life and work of William Wilberforce.

The strategies that Wilberforce used over 200 years ago are still valid in the digital age.

Read more: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/activists/william-wilberforce.html>

CASE STUDY 2: DARK IS BEAUTIFUL

In many parts of South Asia -- including Sri Lanka -- there is a social belief that the value and beauty of people is enhanced by the fairness of their skin. Darker skinned individuals were socially and economically disadvantaged during British rule in India, and the colonial attitude of 'colourism' has continued decades after the British left.

Women and girls are the most affected by society's bias towards fairer skin. It has given rise to a multibillion dollar industry encompassing not only 'whitening' cosmetic creams but procedures such as skin bleaching, chemical peels, laser treatments, steroid cocktails and intravenous injections -- all posing varying levels of health risks.

The 'Dark Is Beautiful' campaign was launched in 2009 as an awareness and advocacy campaign to fight this colourism. It seeks to draw attention to the unjust effects of skin colour bias, shaped by societal attitudes and reinforced by media messages that are undermining the self-worth of millions of people from all walks of life.

The campaign was started by Kavitha Emmanuel through a non-profit organization called Women of Worth (WOW). It has received celebrity endorsement, most notably by the Bollywood actor Nandita Das. The campaign runs media literacy workshops and advocacy programmes in schools to convey messages of self-esteem and self-worth to young children.

A blog provides a forum for people to share their personal stories of skin colour bias. Social media is being used to raise general awareness and stimulate discussions.

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During the decade since it started, the Dark Is Beautiful campaign has gained international recognition and been emulated in several countries that have a fair skin bias. The Advertising Standards Council of India tackled skin-based discrimination in 2014 by banning advertisements depicting people with darker skin as inferior. But some such products are still marketed.

Kavitha Emmanuel believes that people are more aware of the issue and hopes that the next generation will see things differently – not just in India but across the world.

Read more: <http://www.darkisbeautiful.in/>
<https://thewire.in/business/skin-lightening-industry>

CASE STUDY 3: HASHTAG GENERATION

Hashtag Generation is a youth-based and youth-led advocacy group in Sri Lanka. It was founded in June 2015 “to fill the vacuum that exists in meaningful youth civic and political participation in Sri Lanka”.

They identified social media as an efficient platform to raise awareness and catalyze dialogue on important issues through creative, easy-to-understand and youth-friendly digital illustrations and advocacy campaigns. However, as the team expanded, Hashtag Generation also undertook several offline campaigns and projects.

Hashtag Generation has distinguished itself by always working in Sinhala, Tamil and English, and by having an imaginative, graphics driven approach to all their public communication. They have been active on several fronts, always bringing youth perspectives into key national debates and processes. These include promoting ethnic harmony and transitional justice, addressing violence against women and girls (#HerSafeSpace), advocating equality for sexual minorities, and supporting women’s political participation, especially after a law revision required 25% of candidates nominated by political parties to be women.

Read more: <https://www.facebook.com/hashtaggenerations/>

CASE STUDY 4: BAKAMOONO.LK

Bakamoono.lk is a website and social media brand that promotes respect for self, respect for the other, and respect for difference. As they describe themselves, “Bakamoono.lk is about being sensible, even wise, in our dealing with issues around relationships, sexual and reproductive health, HIV, gender, and our right to be who we are.”

The team that runs bakamoono.lk is led by The Grassrooted Trust, Positive Hopes Alliance, Lanka Plus, National Union of Seafarers in Sri Lanka (NUSS), National Union of Metal & Migrant Workers in Sri Lanka and volunteers. It includes Lankans of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, medical and legal professionals.

Phase one of bakamoono.lk focused on HIV, based on the need of the hour for citizens in Sri Lanka to have access to scientifically accurate and comprehensive information on modes of transmission, prevention, and also, support. It also looked at sex and relationships, which includes information on consent, gender, cyber exploitation, violence and available government and non-government services to support us and help us through difficult times.

Bakamoono.lk is a scientifically based and empathy driven effort to ask and answer taboo questions in Lankan society, and to promote conversations on these key issues.

Read more: <http://www.bakamoono.lk/en>

CASE STUDY 5: #MeToo

One of the most prominent recent examples is the role social media has played in highlighting the “Me Too” movement around sexual harassment and assault. It illustrates how a single social media post can resonate with so many and go ‘viral’ with global reach.

On 15 October 2017 when American actress, producer, activist and former singer Alyssa Milano took to Twitter posting the tweet: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” She emphasized that the basis of her hashtag was to create a platform where women had an “opportunity without having to go into detail about their stories if they did not want to”.

The response was overwhelming. Within 24 hours, her post generated thousands of replies, comments and retweets -- and inspired thousands more original posts on social media, with women and men from around the world sharing personal stories. Milano wasn’t surprised to learn that so many people had #MeToo stories — but she was surprised about how candid they were in telling those stories on social media.

Me Too as a social movement began a decade earlier with Tarana Burke, a civil rights activist from the Bronx in New York. In 2006, Burke began using the phrase “Me Too” to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse and assault in society, and the phrase developed into a broader movement, following the 2017 use of #MeToo as a hashtag after the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations and Milano’s tweet.

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The virality of the “Me Too” movement briefly reached Sri Lankan social media spaces with dozens of women using the opportunity to share their experiences, but saw greater success in countries like India where people were named and shamed and as a result, and faced real consequences.

[If you are a resident in Sri Lanka and would like to speak to someone about sexual harassment or assault you faced or are facing, please reach out to Women In Need via their website or call them on 011 4718585.]

Read more: <https://metoomvmt.org/about/>
<https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/10/9/17933746/me-too-movement-metoo-brett-kavanaugh-weinstein>
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47025662>

DISCUSSION POINTS

Here are a few questions and discussion points for further exploring this topic.

- What made Mahatma Gandhi one of the most effective political activists in history? How did his nonviolent activism influence other giants like Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela?
- Why is offline activism still needed, especially in countries like Sri Lanka? Why can't all activism and advocacy be done just in social media?
- Besides memes, hashtags and online petitions, which other tools or strategies can be useful for digital activism?
- Can you name more local or national level examples of digital activism that have created impact at some level in recent years?
- Are you aware of a civil society organization or advocacy group that successfully combines online and offline methods in their social change campaigns?
- Have you ever initiated or signed an online petition? If so, discuss on what issue or topic, and its final outcome.

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- One criticism of digital activism is that the action may have little effect other than to make the person doing it feel satisfied that they have contributed – this is called slacktivism. Do you agree? Discuss.
- The #MeToo movement started in the West but soon spread to other parts of the world, empowering women who have been sexually harassed or abused to talk about it and even name their perpetrators. #MeToo came to India, but not quite to Sri Lanka. Why do you think it has not happened in Sri Lanka yet (as at mid-2019)?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this module, you will have an understanding of the following:

- Activism is more than agitation. The most effective activists analyze problems, listen widely and identify solutions that they advocate through different methods.
- Good public communication is a key part of activism. As technology advanced, more communications tools have become available for activism: the printing press, radio, television, web and social media among them.
- Digital activism, also known as cyber activism, is a form of activism that uses the internet and digital technologies as key tools for awareness raising, mobilization and action.
- For any kind of activism to become effective, it is essential to understand the country's social, political and cultural realities. For this reason, global campaigns need to be localized.
- For those engaged in digital activism, there are various strategies and tools – such as hashtags, memes and online petitions – with which to build virtual communities and to engage in dialogue.
- Two-way communication is an essential quality of online campaigns and advocacy: activists need to regularly engage supporters as well as those who might be curious or critical.
- There is a growing number of social, humanitarian and political reform campaigns that have been promoted through digital activism in Sri Lanka. Not all have been equally effective, and that holds valuable lessons for all who are keen to enter digital activism.

FURTHER READING

Freedom on the Net 2018 Sri Lanka report

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/sri-lanka>

Activism in the Social Media age

<https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/07/11/activism-in-the-social-media-age/>

Activism on Social Media: A Curated Guide

https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/23_guide_social_media/

Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change

<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/digital-activism-decoded-new-mechanics-change>

The man behind Avaaz: Can we change the world, one click at a time? Ricken Patel, a young Canadian, thinks so. 1843 Magazine, May/June 2013.

<https://www.1843magazine.com/content/features/robert-butler/man-behind-avaaz>

Visualising Information for Advocacy, 2013 book by Tactical Technology Collective

<https://visualisingadvocacy.org/>

New Tactics in Human Rights website's guide to visualization information

<https://www.newtactics.org/conversation/visualizing-information-advocacy>

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Ethics in Online Activism: False Senses of Social Action or Effective Source of Change?

Fordham University Center for Ethics Education, 2016.

<https://ethicsandsociety.org/2016/02/17/ethics-in-online-activism-false-senses-of-social-action-or-effective-source-of-change/>

Was Kony 2012 Social Media Activism or Mere Slacktivism?

Media Ethics Initiative

<https://mediaethicsinitiative.org/2019/02/27/the-ethics-of-online-activism/>



