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## **“GEN Z” PROTESTS AND THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA USE: REAL BREAK THROUGH OR JUST ANOTHER FORM OF ORGANISATION?**



**LES PROPOS TENUS ICI N'ENGAGENT QUE LEURS AUTEURS.  
BARA NE VEUT EN AUCUN CAS CORROBORER OU INFIRMER LES PROPOS DE CES DERNIERS.**

Abstract:

This article focuses on applying the existing literature on the impact of social media on collective movements to the recent so-called “Gen Z” protests. It finds a continuity between the movements of the 2010s and before scholars have applied their theories and those recent protests that have spread out around the globe. The same advantages and challenges can be observed today. However, they may take different forms as technologies evolve rapidly and spread out to a wider public.

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## **Introduction**

Through a Discord voting poll: this is how Sushila Karki, interim Prime Minister of Nepal, was chosen in September 2025 after the riots which led the prior government to resign (Shrestha, 2026). This choice of medium is a testament to the importance social media such as Discord played in this “Nepalese revolution”. They were both the original cause, through their ban, of the protests and the main organizational means used to make them happen. This is only one example highlighting how today’s social protests and movements are more and more enabled and shaped by social media and the Internet in general. It is this role that this paper will try to uncover.

It is important to remind the reader that this paper places itself within an already existing and extensive literature on the subject it covers. We attempt to make an addition to this scholarship by applying its main concepts and theories to very recent protests, thus evaluating the relevance of said concepts and theories more than a decade after the main social movements authors have used and studied to develop their theories. More specifically, this paper situates itself in the middle ground between the techno-optimism developed by authors such as Shirky (2008) and Castells (2012) and the techno-pessimism of others like Morozov (2011). We will draw from both of these viewpoints to come to a hopefully more balanced point of view on the matter. As will be evident when discussing the structure of this article, it tries to capture the innovations permitted by the use of social media to initiate and coordinate mass protests while remaining aware of the drawbacks which come with their uses. To help us in this endeavour, we will throughout this paper rely on the developments and theories laid out by Tufekci (2017) and Gerbaudo (2012) among others.

All of these scholars, when we interlink their theories, make one point evident: social media are neither a complete revolutionary tool for protesters and activists, nor something which should be seen as detrimental as a whole to those actors. What is more certain is that they reshape the landscape of possibilities for social movements as they create new digitally networked public spheres (Tufekci, 2017, p. 6). They allow more interactive and self-configurable communication, leading to new forms of hierarchical organization and thus create an arguably different kind of social movement (Castells, 2012, p. 15).

The public sphere is a concept developed by Habermas, as a people “gathered together as a public, articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1962, as cited in Tufekci, 2017, p. 6). Today’s public spheres are networked because they have assimilated digital technologies into their fabric (Tufekci, 2017, p. x).

Indeed, those digital technologies are themselves networks, defined as systems of interconnected people or things to allow for communication between and along the parts of it (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.). The Web 2.0 which social media are a part of is a network as all of its parts are connected via hyperlinks. This in turns allows for networks of people to be created, as individuals can freely move on and communicate between each other on the network formed by the Web and social media.

As it relates to activists, the networked nature of social media allows for new ways of recruiting protesters and spreading their messages, as they can rapidly make people come together around a common issue. This however comes at the cost of sidestepping many steps of the traditional organizing process of social movements, making them less likely to last in the long run (Tufekci, 2017, p. xviii). Those are some of the arguments illustrating our stance. We will expand upon them throughout this paper.

To develop their theories, the authors we have mentioned mainly relied on the social movements that have taken place in the year 2011, such as the protests leading to Mubarak's fall in Egypt, the "Indignados" movement in Spain or the "Occupy" movement in the United States and beyond.

To try and actualize this existing literature, we will attempt to apply its concepts to the Gen Z protests that spread around the world during the first half of the 2020s and that are still ongoing to this day. We will for example examine if the "tactical freeze" observed by Tufekci (2017) or the "choreography of assembly" as perceived by Gerbaudo (2012) apply to those recent protests. We will define them more precisely when we come to use them.

These protests, while stemming from different issues in the countries in which they occurred, all have two things in common. First, they were led by the generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012. Second, they were mostly coordinated on social media. This can be explained by the fact that this generation is characterised as the first one to have had access to the Internet their whole life (Shrestha, 2026).

Many countries have dealt with what have been dubbed "Gen Z protests": Morocco, Madagascar, Nepal, the Philippines, Peru, Bangladesh, Kenya, Serbia, Mexico and Timor-Leste among others. Figure 1 shows both the countries where "Gen Z protests" have been and are currently happening as well as the total amount of time each one lasted for, illustrating the global diffusion of those protests which this paper will inquire into.

All of those protests stemmed from a different starting point. To only cite a few examples, Moroccans took to the streets because of the lack of financing in their healthcare system after the deaths of pregnant women during routine C section surgeries; Peruvians

protested a pension law reform and Nepalese originally opposed a ban of many social media in their country. However, all of the Gen Z protests have evolved to become widespread contests of the political power in place in their country (Fox, 2025, Fong, 2025). They all to a certain extent reflect a backlash against corruption, economic inequalities and stagnation, poor infrastructure management, youth unemployment and the overall traditional political system (Fong, 2025).

It is also noteworthy to acknowledge some common points between these countries: most of them score above their regional average on political rights in the Freedom Index but they all perform below their regional average on at least one key metric of prosperity, such as income, health or education. This combination can explain both the ability of the youth to actually get to the streets in these countries specifically as well as the reasons why they did so (Mortenson, 2025). Indeed, having political rights is necessary for people to get to the streets without fear, and their poor prosperity metrics gave them a reason to do so. Those protests which stemmed in 2024 and 2025 were also inspired by prior ones with similar demographic make-up and demands, such as the one in Sri Lanka in 2022 (Wong, 2025).

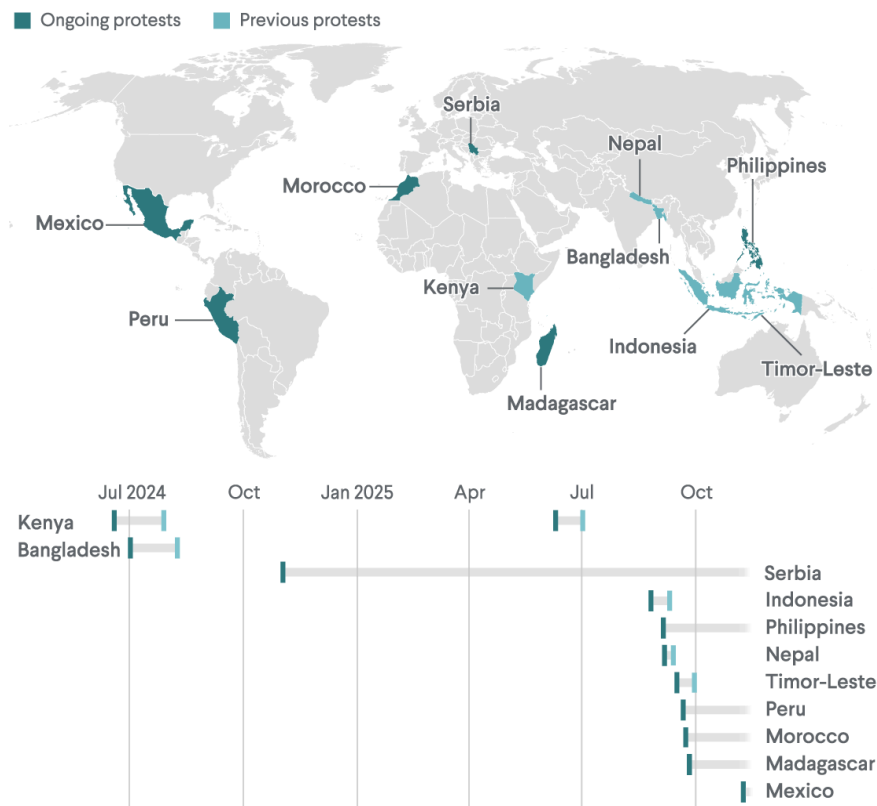


Figure 1. Global distribution of “Gen Z” protests in 2024-2025.

Note. Reprinted from “How Global Gen Z Protests Have Shocked and Transformed Governments.” by Fong. C, 2025, Council on Foreign Relation. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-global-gen-z-protests-have-shocked-and-transformed-governments>

Following the reflections we have just discussed, the question this paper will try to answer is: to what extent did social media enable the rise of worldwide youth protests and the new modes of expression associated with it in the 2020s ?

To answer this question, we will proceed as such: the first section of this paper focuses on how social media and its language can be used as tools to rally the youth (I). The next one tries to make sense of how those same specific characteristics can be taken advantage of to circumvent censorship and other countermeasures (II). Finally, the third section discusses the challenges brought by the use of social media as a means to coordinate protests (III).

## **I/ Social media and its language as tools to rally the youth**

First and foremost, if we are to understand the extent of the relevancy of social media in the worldwide protests observed during the 2020s, we have to make sense of how they can be used by themselves and through the specific language they carry to rally the youth. More specifically, this section will examine how the Internet culture and its symbols help bring individuals together (A). Then we will discuss how the digital divide existing on social media enables specifically the youth to create those communities as opposed to other generations (B). Finally, we will study how more than just enabling communities to foster, social media also plays a role in the speed at which the current wave of youth led protests has spread (C).

### **A) The new tools and symbols of Internet culture to bring people together**

First and foremost, it is important to note that the new public sphere created by the rise of the Internet and social media has led to the creation of a whole new culture around it, just like the public sphere created by the upcoming of mass media during the twentieth century was accompanied by its own culture as well. However, contrary to the culture of the mass media’s public sphere which was marked by a clear separation between producer and consumer of information, the networked nature of the digital public sphere has led to much more interaction between individuals on the web and a blurring of the producer/consumer

distinction (Benkler, 2006, p. 260). Thus, the specific culture created around the Internet has become much more able to bring people together around a specific topic, enabling social protests to occur more easily.

It is the interactive nature of this culture which enables protests around common issues to emerge. Specific means of communication such as memes and hashtags allow for the spreading of political ideas throughout the digital sphere. We will examine both of them respectively to understand the role they play in fostering social protests.

As a general remark, one can say that they allow for more accessible political information, in turn leading to more people relating to them (Halversen & Weeks, 2023, p. 2). This is important to take into account as the process of individualisation has produced a shift in the way people engage with demonstrations. They now see them more as an expression of personal hopes rather than collective ones (Lance Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 744). Protests now revolve around more connective logic rather than a collective one to appeal to individuals. This means, they frame themselves in a more inclusive way, pushing more individually relatable messages rather than focusing on a specific collective group. This is specifically the case on social media, where we are more likely to be exposed to personally relevant messages we are pushed to share and act upon thanks to recommendation algorithms (Lance Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752-753).

Beginning with memes, we first have to define them to understand their ability to spread ideas and bring individuals around them. The term was first coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) to describe “cultural genes”, or units of culture such as music, stories, and ideas that undergo variation as they are passed down and propagated throughout a culture (Dawkins, 1976, as cited in Halversen & Weeks, 2023, p. 2). In regards to Internet memes more specifically, it is more appropriate not to consider them as single units, but more as groups of text, images or sounds with similar characteristics. This is because similar templates are used, reused, reproduced and assimilated to the specific context of the individual taking on the meme (Nowak, 2016, p. 76). They are often popular frameworks recognizable by internet users, which amplifies their ability to be spread and understood. Their constant reuse also creates a humoristic potential making this ability to be shared even more prevalent (Harbo, 2022, p. 5).

Memes constitute a greatly exploitable tool for activists wishing to foster grassroots action as they lower the cost of political speech. It is easy to use a memetic template to express one’s opinion, thus enabling organizations to reach audiences outside their usual demographic (Jenkins et al, 2013, as cited in Harbo, p. 6). This can be exemplified by the

extensive use of the One Piece flag throughout the Gen Z protests around the world. This flag came to represent rebellion against an established order. Just as the main characters of the popular manga rebel against the world government, the Gen Z protesters aim to change the established order in their respective country (Ratcliffe, 2025). As a symbol very much known of Gen Z, it spread as a meme to call people to rally for political change in their country.

The same rallying capacities we observed and explained about memes can also be found in hashtags. We indeed have seen with the rise of social media the appearance of what is called “hashtag activism” or discursive protest on those social media which is united through hashtagged word, phrase or sentence (Yang, 2016, p. 13). Because they are used by content producers online to categorize their content to allow for an easier finding of similar production, hashtags are used by activists to rally people around a common issue. They make it easier for those willing to engage around a topic to find like minded people and create a community. The #BlackLivesMatter is one famous example in case, but they have been used for the Gen Z protests we here focus on as well. In Indonesia, hashtags such as #IndonesiaGelap (Dark Indonesia) and #KaburAjaDulu (Just Run Away First) were pushed forward to encourage people to find alternatives to their political leadership and protest against it (Wong, 2025). Hashtags like “nepokids” or “nepobabies” were used in Nepal to call attention to government corruption (Shrestha, 2026).

Therefore, the wide-ranging nature of the internet language enables many individuals to relate to the messages that may be attached to it, making community fostering around those symbols more likely. What we will inquire into next is the fact that more than simply enabling community creation, the digital divide existing on social media enables the creation of communities of young people specifically, thus explaining why many digitally enabled protests around the world are nowadays led by the youth.

## **B) A generational gap: the language of the Gen Z**

When trying to understand how social media allows for the youth specifically to unite itself around common issues, it is important to take into account the digital divide which still exists today. This concept can be defined as a stratification in the access and use of the Internet (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013, p. 1). This stratification can be observed when studying age differences as one of the factors explaining the digital divide (Wessels, 2013, p. 18). Indeed, as it is primarily the younger generations that are present on social media, the latter form a space for the former to create their own identity, distinct from other generations.

This can be observed in the many symbols of the Gen Z protests, such as the One Piece flag we alluded to earlier, which are part of today's "pop culture" primarily endorsed by the youth.

We can then make a link between the relative novelty of both social media and the youth culture to understand how older generations, who have not grown up with any of these, tend to be less present in digitally networked protests. Using the classic concept coined by Bourdieu, they for the most part do not have the cultural capital associated with those protests, and the latter are therefore primarily constituted of young individuals.

While the youth has always strived toward differentiating itself from other parts of society, the widespread international connections allowed by social media makes this phenomenon more prevalent nowadays. Indeed, it enables young people from different countries around the world to communicate with each other and relate to the situation their peers are living through. If before the advent of social media youth movements were less likely to spread internationally, the network that is the Internet now enables the youth to build a wider social group which acts beyond their respective national frontiers.

This is precisely how the different Gen Z protests came to be. As the first ones emerged in response to actions which felt unfair in their own country, young people from around the world were able to witness and relate through social media, thus sparking new protests in other countries. It is this spreading phenomenon that Figure 1 illustrates.

So far, we have examined how social media enables the creation of the collectives necessary for the protests we study to emerge. This is however not the only way in which they facilitate those protests. Indeed, as the next subsections inquire into, they also tend to make virality easier to achieve, thus enabling protests to scale and spread faster once they have started.

### **C) The virality of social media as a means for faster contestations**

While the new tools offered by social media constitute as many ways enabling individuals to form social movements around common concerns, the way social media and the Internet are built as networks also allows for virality to be much more prevalent. Thus, protests can emerge and spread faster. Those new tools at the disposal of activists do not create collective action per se, but they remove the obstacles to its creation (Shirky, 2008, p. 159). This is what this subsection examines.

What has to be noted when discussing social media's ability to facilitate the emergence of protest is that they considerably reduce the cost of communication and

therefore of organization. Indeed, if in the past collective action required meeting face to face to organize, the Internet and social media in particular removed this physical barrier (Shirky, 2008, p. 155). Also, the sharing of information itself is today way less costly: tweeting or posting on facebook does not have any economic cost like sending a letter or producing a journal did (Shirky, 2008, p. 157). Because of those two facts, virality, as the tendency of something to spread quickly, is more likely to occur on social media. Information can spread faster and groups can form more quickly because both the size of the audience for any possible information and the ease of contact between any members of this audience have increased (Shirky, 2008, p. 159).

If Shirky at the time of the writing of her book took the example of e-mails to illustrate her point, it today translates easily to social media, and even more so. Indeed, if one could send a message to a created e-mail list, even if this was free, it was still limited to this list. Today, any post on social media can potentially be seen by anyone navigating on it if the post is public. It broadens the amount of people that can be reached even more.

One can take the Gen Z protests in Nepal as an example to illustrate this phenomenon. Indeed, the initial ban on social media platforms by the government happened on September 4 2025. The first street protests took place on September 8. It took only 4 days for the youth to organize and coordinate its nationwide actions online via Discord and Instagram. Moreover, as news of the protests spread around the country the number of protestors only grew bigger and bigger the next few days (Shrestha, 2026). To compare the difference in scope possible with social media for nationwide protests, 4 days is the same time it took to organize the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 (Britannica, 2026), which happened at a smaller, regional scale than the Nepalese protests. This illustrates the ability of information and communication technologies to remove the locality of information which prevented earlier movements to gain traction at the speed at which contemporary one can (Shirky, 2008, p. 155).

The networked nature of social media therefore facilitates the emergence of social protest at a speed not possible before them. This, in addition to the community fostering it also facilitates, can explain the rise of the many Gen Z protests around the world during the last years. However, what we will now examine is the fact that more than a tool to help initiate protests, social media can also be used by social movements once they have started to circumvent censorship and countermeasures which could be taken by their opponents.

## **II/Social media and its language as tools to escape censorship and countermeasures**

After examining the specificities of social media to form social movements in the first place, we now turn to how they can allow them to circumvent the obstacles they might encounter as they try to expand and reach attention. Thus, to understand how they can bypass censorship or other obstacles, we first try to make sense of how the widespread and vastly distributed space which social media and the Internet constitute enable this circumvention (A). Then we expand upon how the speed at which this space evolves makes it hard to regulate and control (B). Finally, we argue the evolving nature of the digital space leads to a constant innovation race between states and activists (C).

### **A) The Internet and social media: a widespread and vastly distributed space**

This first subsection aims to shed light on how the size of the network that is the Internet allows activists to organise themselves while escaping the classical censorship framework utilized by authoritarian states before the rise of social media.

To understand this relationship, it is important to define how censorship classically worked. The historic goals of censorship are to impede attention, discourage people from participation and deny protesters control over the narratives of the story they rally themselves around (Tufekci, 2017, p. 227). However, total denial of access to information becomes practically impossible to put in place in the Internet era. Indeed, while it was possible for regimes to control the mass media of their country to limit information from spreading out in the twentieth century, the international aspect of the Internet as well as the many ways, like VPNs, existing to circumvent its blocking make it much harder for governments wishing to deny access of information to their population to do so (Tufekci, 2017, p. 229). It is the sheer size of the Internet which makes it nearly impossible to have total control over it.

Classically, states of often authoritarian nature wishing to do so could control the information being circulated in their national public sphere. This is due to the fact that they could easily take control of mass media in their country, which were in the past the only way individuals could have access to information. Nowadays, escaping this classical censorship is made easier by the networked nature of the digital public sphere. Indeed, now, only one person willing to pay the costs to do so can circumvent censorship and share the uncensored information on encrypted messaging applications such as Whatsapp or Telegram. Now, individuals who do not want to incur the costs of circumventing censorship can do so anyway by getting into group networks where such information is shared (Tufekci, 2017, p. 230).

Because the networked public sphere enables a large number of ways to broadcast to the masses, as opposed to the mass media led public sphere where only a few existed, it now becomes harder for states to block access to information (Tufekci, 2017, p. 230–231). Activists can therefore circumvent classical censorship by taking advantage of the large networks enabled by social media, which states do not have control over.

For instance, this was the case in Nepal, where protestors used social media to counter the narrative laid down by classical media outlets in the country which focused on politicians without talking much about the police violence or the demands of the youth which were protesting (Chaudhry, 2025, Shrestha, 2026).

As this illustrates, classical forms of censorship are hard to apply to social media because of their networked nature, making them a useful tool to circumvent it. However, as we will now inquire into, this is not the only factor negatively impacting the ability of states to conduct censorship on the web.

### **B) Social media and the Internet: an ever changing and multipolar space**

Indeed, this subsection will try to show that many of the characteristics of the Internet and social media render their regulation and control more complex for states, thus making censorship less likely. Those characteristics, we argue, are the speed at which information and communication technologies evolve as well as the plurality of control points which one would have to take over to have a significant influence over the Internet.

First of all, the Internet in general and social media in particular do indeed evolve rapidly. They therefore require constant adaptation from states wishing to enforce censorship if they want to keep up with this pace. This means that many of the policies and regulations states may take to regulate their cyberspace could become obsolete relatively quickly, making them less useful.

For instance, one can take a look at the social media mostly used by the Gen Z demonstrators to coordinate themselves to illustrate this ever changing nature. Indeed, while prior protests mainly used Facebook and Twitter, Gen Z protests have generally been coordinated via Instagram and Discord. Morocco's Gen Z 212 Discord server, which more than 250 000 people are a part of, was the main channel for organizing the protests in the country. Organizers find it more "secure", since state authorities are not yet familiar with the platform (Fong, 2025).

Furthermore, the difficulty of regulation of the Internet and social media stems from the multiplicity of actors around them and their technicality. More specifically, social media are inherently influenced by the profit seeking nature of international companies running them. This means that states, unlike mass media which they could own, cannot fully control and regulate social media as they see fit. Some try to create their own social media environment, like China or Russia, with varying degrees of success. However, it is very hard to completely cut access to foreign social media, because of the international network they represent and of the physical infrastructures and virtual protocols on which social media depend. States can only have so much control over those elements, which mitigates their ability to regulate social media.

This illustrates the complexity of internet governance, as defined by DeNardis (2014). Indeed, governing, or using one's power to control or influence something, is on the Internet a distributed and networked multistakeholder process. Because of the public good nature of the Internet, its governance process not only involves traditional public authorities and international agreements, but also new institutions and the private actors linked to the Internet market (DeNardis, 2014, p. 23). As it is a public good, one can not simply be denied access to it or to the benefits it brings to the community. Therefore, any state's possible influence, which they could use to enforce censorship, is diluted by the plurality of actors also having influence over Internet governance matters.

Moreover, those matters are themselves plural and one would have to have control over many to actually influence Internet governance. They include the control of the distribution of not only finite virtual resources such as Internet Protocol addresses or domain names but also of the natural resources like water and fossil fuel necessary for the Internet to operate on a constant basis (DeNardis, 2014, p. 34).

Those finite virtual resources, which are called Critical Internet Resources, are the necessary precondition for being on the Internet (DeNardis, 2015, p. 46). One necessarily needs an IP address to get access to the web. Having oversight over their distribution would grant great power to states which could easily locate activists and opponents through their IP addresses or targeting domain names related to them, as those are individual and unique (DeNardis, 2014, p. 46). This is why the control of those resources by non-profit institutions like ICANN or registry operators (DeNardis, 2014, p. 51) is at the advantage of activists. Because the Internet and the social media it encompasses are an international public good, the governance over their many virtual and physical components is spread among a plurality of actors which are for many neither market-based nor under government oversight (DeNardis,

2014, p. 54). This is done to avoid a public good tragedy where a collectively accessible good's quality is diminished by the abusive use of one specific user. Thus, state censorship is less likely to occur on social media.

So far, we have discussed that it is harder to conduct censorship on social media because they constitute an international networked public goods. The speed at which they evolve also makes it harder for states to enforce possible legislation as they have to constantly adapt to them. However, this does not mean that they do not try. We therefore observe an innovation race between states and activists. It is this race and its influence on censorship possibilities that the next subsection tries to shed light onto.

### **C) The constant innovation race between states and activists**

As we have stated, information and communication technologies, which social media are a part of, evolve rapidly. Thus, we see an innovation race between activists and their opponents to make the best use of new possibilities. What this subsection tries to highlight is that in this race, states more often act reactively rather than proactively toward the activists' strategic innovations, thus giving the latter the upper hand in avoiding censorship. This structural lag between innovation and regulation is however only a short lived head start that has to be constantly renewed and rethought so as for it to prevail.

First and foremost, social media and the digitally networked public sphere they constitute allow to level the playing field between activists and states when it comes to organization and communication. Now that the cost of communicating between large groups of individuals and of organizational means such as excel sheets has become nearly zero, it has become as easy for protesters than for states to coordinate large actions quickly (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 5). In the past, states possessed already institutionalised ways of coordinating their responses to protests and each social movement had to build their own from scratch. Now, activists also have communication and organizational tools at their disposal from the start.

This ability given to activists by social media may also explain the head start that they most often have on states when it comes to the innovation race. Indeed, as online action can be asynchronous (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 77), the time cost of activism can be greatly reduced. People can choose, for example, to sign an online petition whenever they want or just share and interact with activists' content whenever they pass time on social media. This flexibility allows activists to quickly take advantage of any new technology or advancement,

while the institutionalized way of working within states requires them to set up meetings and follow procedures to implement any regulation, which are more costly timewise.

Those are the two affordances created by digital technologies and social media which allow activists to escape censorship for some time: they sharply reduce the cost of action both time wise and monetarily and they allow to aggregate participants individual actions into a broader collective one without them having to be copresent in time and space (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 10).

Having explained why activists generally have a head start in the technological arms race with states, we now turn to a few contemporary examples to illustrate this race: the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and of satellite Internet tools such as Starlink. Starting with generative AI, its advent over the last few years has led to both activists and states trying to make use of it for their own profit. On both sides, it has taken disinformation to an unprecedented level, as both activists and states create AI-generated content to falsely make their support appear greater than it actually is. It has for example been the case since the 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising in Iran up to this day (Alimardani, 2026). In Nepal, AI-generated videos of the government center being burned down were produced even before it became a reality (Shrestha, 2026). This use of AI reinforces states’ abilities to enact new forms of censorship (on which we will expand later) as well as give the means to activists to do the same to counteract.

In Nepal, generative AI was used by protesters to help create slogans and memes for the Gen Z protests to see which ones would gain the most traction (Shrestha, 2026). It can thus also be seen as an extension of the affordances of the Web we described earlier, reducing the cost of organizing even more for protesters. AI thus increases even more the likelihood of protesters to have a head start in the innovation race against states.

During the same wave of protests, Iranians have made use of satellite Internet connectivity such as Starlink to bypass the state imposed Internet blackout (Alimardani, 2026). In doing so, they temporarily managed to escape censorship. This can however backfire when the Iranian state adapts and starts looking for the devices allowing for satellite connectivity, blurring their connection and punishing those who possess them.

What this section has tried to make apparent is that social media, through their networked and ever changing nature, enable protesters to avoid classical means of censorship and to have a headstart in their struggle against states wishing to counter them. However, this battle is not always won. The use of social media to coordinate social movements presents

many challenges which activists have to deal with. It is those challenges which we will now try to uncover.

### **III/ The challenges brought by the use of social media to coordinate contestation**

We have discussed at length the usefulness of social media for activists and protesters. However, they do not have only advantages. They also bring with them new challenges that have to be dealt with and overcome to create truly successful social movements. The first aspect we will study is what social media lacks compared to other more classical forms of creating and coordinating social movements (A). Then we try to make sense of the new forms of censorship brought along with the widespread use of social media to coordinate protests (B). Finally, we discuss social media's still limited reach as a weakness to be overcome (C).

#### **A) What social media is missing compared to other forms of coordination**

First of all, it should be noted that the shift toward primarily digital means of social coordination has left a gap. While they have many advantages we covered in the previous sections, they lack some of the essential processes previous social movements had to go through which enabled them to sustain themselves over time and succeed in their aim.

One of these aspects is embodied in the concept of “tactical freeze” developed by Tufekci (2017). As she emphasizes, the networked movements developed mainly through the use of social media face a lack of leadership or decision making capabilities that would otherwise enable them to be sustained over time. This weakness can for most of those movements be equated to a choice, as a lack of trust toward institutional options (Tufekci, 2017, p. 77). However, without any leader, those movements are unable to negotiate properly with adversaries or even within themselves, which can lead to internal divisions and to their weakening. Digitally networked social movements are thus “frozen” because they do not possess any proper leadership to move them forward (Tufekci, 2017, p. 71).

Gerbaudo (2012) argues that what we are witnessing in social media driven protests is not a lack of leadership per se but another, more liquid, form of this concept (p. 135). Indeed, if we define leadership as “a relatively centralised influence on the unfolding of a collective action” (Barker et al., 2001, as cited in Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 135), then this influence does not have to be direct. It is this idea of a more indirect leadership which Gerbaudo captures in his concept of “choreography of assembly”. Here, administrators of facebook pages or widely

followed individuals behind twitter accounts can shape the course of a collective action by communicating about it. While they may not be orders, their messages influence the way people act together, thus creating some kind of leadership (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 139). They can be seen as choreographers, shaping the way the scene unfolds in the background without being directly seen.

It is however precisely this invisibility which makes digitally networked movements' leadership problematic. Because they push forward the idea of horizontalism and structurelessness, it allows their de facto leaders to remain unaccountable (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 25). Horizontalism or structurelessness being an organizational ideology pushing forward collective decision making rather than a hierarchical, vertical decision making process (Gerbaudo, 2012, pp. 24–25). As a result, no one is perceived as legitimate to speak in the name of the movement, and it then experiences the tactical freeze we have explained above.

It is also relevant to note that networked protests organize themselves more efficiently thanks to social media. It is much easier today to spread the word of an incoming boycott than at the time of the Montgomery bus boycott. However, the whole process of organizing prior social movements had to go through to even get their initial protest started was longer and more complex. This means that they developed strong links between protesters and the necessary skills to adapt to adversaries' responses. That in turn allowed them to keep innovating strategically and to succeed even after their initial start. This is not the case of today's digitally networked movements. They indeed develop and scale faster, but they can therefore lack some of the skills necessary for them to succeed over the long term (Tufekci, 2017, pp. 63–64).

The disadvantages of a lack of leadership can be exemplified by the Nepalese Gen Z protests. Without any formal leader, the movement struggled to impose its will onto the military that had taken the interim in power after the former prime minister left the country, thus letting their initial momentum dissipate (Arte, 2025).

This subsection showed that social media as tools of protests coordination have disadvantages compared to their predecessors. However, they also possess weak points of their own, starting with new forms of censorship brought by their use. We will now study those.

## **B) The new forms of censorship brought by the use of social media**

We have noted and covered the ways in which digital technologies allow activists to circumvent classical forms of censorship. However, what this subsection aims to show is that as states adapt, activists have to face new forms of censorship from them. Moreover, the social media companies themselves, through the rise of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) and of their benefit oriented behaviours, constitute a new kind of censorship that activists have to face too.

To begin with, while we noted priorly that political powers around the world tend to struggle to adapt to social media, authoritarian regimes have been shaping their censorship to fit the rise of digitally networked social protests. If the classical goals of censorship, such as denial of access to information, cannot be reached in the Internet era, then they must be reframed. Therefore, today's censorship now operates through a denial of attention, focus and credibility (Tufekci, 2017, p. 228).

Thus, instead of trying to deny access to information about the protests to their population, authoritarian regimes deny the protests the attention they need by overflowing the Internet and social media with posts or interactions unrelated to the protests. If in the past censorship was effective because of the lack of information, it today uses the great amount of information on the networked public sphere to its advantage. Because the means of verifying the authenticity of a given information existing on social media are perceived as less legitimate, authoritarian regimes can distill misinformation to create confusion about and distraction away from the protests taking place at a given time. They thus deny protestors of the attention they need to sustain their activities (Tufekci, 2017, pp. 230–231).

This has been reinforced by the new technologies like AI-generated videos we alluded to earlier. As they spread among real content, most individuals and even classical media outlets do not have the resources to differentiate them from real videos (Shrestha, 2026), making seeking the truth on social media even harder.

For instance, just like Tufekci (2017) described the “troll army” of Russia which aims to undermine activists' credibility on social media (p. 239), Amnesty International has investigated and found out the same practices have been used in Kenya during the Gen Z protests that happened in the country between 2024 and 2025 (Wandera, 2025).

The rise of surveillance allowed by digital technologies is another means of censorship implemented by states as it discourages whistleblowers from acting in the first place and journalists from investigating by instilling fear (Tufekci, 2017, p. 251). This rise is also the result of the practices put in place by companies in the age of what Zuboff (2019) calls “surveillance capitalism”. In this age, it is human private experience itself which is

claimed by capitalists as free raw material to be translated into behavioral data (Zuboff, 2019, p. 14) which can then be profited from by selling it to advertisers. In this era, states can therefore pressure social media companies to give them access to user data which they can then use for their surveillance. For example, we know that our location is tracked through our digital devices. This “body rendition” (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 156–157) can be used by authoritarian states to track their adversaries to better censor them. This was the case during the Gen Z protests which have taken place in Kenya in 2024 and 2025. As Amnesty International has reported, digital surveillance has been used by governmental agencies to track the protesters (Wandera, 2025).

This rise of digital surveillance is reinforced by the fact that it is cheaper to enact than its offline counterpart. Online, storage space is virtually infinite, equipment is relatively cheap compared to states’ budgets and digital technologies allow doing more with less, as one person can take care of many tasks on different devices (Morozov, 2011, p. 150).

The combination of state surveillance with social media companies data allows for surveillance to occur more easily than before. However, the corporate and benefit seeking nature of the companies themselves, without any state pressure, can also form a new kind of censorship, as a visible control of the content being viewed on their platforms. More specifically, to maximize their revenue, companies adopt privacy policies and use certain algorithms which can hinder the ability of activists to receive attention, which can be seen as censorship as we defined it in today’s era. It is indeed some sort of modern censorship, as it is gatekeeping attention from users. In this sense, access to the public sphere formed by social media is limited by their owner’s will (Tufekci, 2017, p. 134). For example, while anonymity allows protesters to express themselves more freely online, Facebook’s “real name policy” which requires its users to only use their real name and not a pseudonym, can impede this effect (Tufekci, 2017, pp. 141–142).

This subsection showed that both states and social media companies create barriers to the goals pursued by activists on social media which they have to bypass. However, those are not their only limitations. Indeed, the digital divide we alluded to earlier takes many forms and makes for social media’s reach to be a limited one. We try to examine how exactly so in the next subsection.

### **C) Social media' s still limited reach**

As we alluded to earlier, the digital divide can serve as a tool for the youth to bring themselves together. It allows them to have a space relatively circumvented to their community where they can organize with less scrutiny. However, as this last subsection argues, this digital divide can also be to the detriment of young activists as they try to expand their messages to a broader population. Indeed, while it facilitates the creation of social bonds between like minded individuals and therefore of political communities likely to start a protest, the digital divide can also diminish the abilities of the latter to actually communicate their messages. As the digital divide is multidimensional (Wessels, 2013, p. 18) young activists not only have less possibility to communicate with the older generations like we described priorly, but also with many other social groups. Ethnicity, education, socio-economic background and gender all play a role in the digital divide. A divide is also observable on the international scale, as different countries have different levels of infrastructure enabling the use of information and communication technologies (Wessels, 2013, p. 18). If they solely rely on social media to spread their message, activists therefore risk cutting themselves from the most disadvantaged groups within their societies, standing on the other side of the digital divide, which could relate to their messages.

This can be seen in the social background of most of the Gen Z activists during the last few years. Indeed, most of them, while still remaining from middle class backgrounds, are urban students. They are therefore more educated and have better than average access to social media than a relatively big part of other young people in their country. For example, as of late Kenya and Madagascar still had a primarily rural population, both around 68% (World Bank Group, 2026). Yet, the protests happened in the cities, cutting off a big part of the people concerned by them from participating.

Outside of the digital divide which we just described, another aspect of the use of social media can lead activists to have a limited reach if they solely rely on them: the fact that they create echo chambers. Those are self-enclosed environments where one only gets exposed to the views and opinions they agree with (Barbera et al., 2015, p. 1531). They are not only present on social media, as homophily is part of our nature as social animals (Tufekci, 2017, p. 268). However, social media connects more people than before and enables the emergence of this phenomenon on a long-distance scale, making echo chambers more likely to be present on them (Tufekci, 2017, p. 268).

This likeliness is reinforced by the profit seeking nature of social media corporations. Indeed, in order to maximise their revenue, their goal is to retain their users on their sites as

much as possible. To do so, they tend to create algorithms which recommend content individuals are already familiar with or are more likely to agree with (Tufekci, 2017, p. 271).

This effect was observed in the literature. Barbera et al. (2015) for example observed that individuals tend to only retweet tweets from ideologically like minded accounts on political topics (p. 1537). The digital divide on social media therefore not only cuts off activists from possibly like minded people but also from their direct opponents.

## **Conclusion**

As a final word, we can say that social media definitely played a constitutive role in the emergence of the current youth led social movements. However, as we have seen, they are both useful to the activists as well as to their opponents, and the corporate interests of the companies managing these social media also have to be taken into account. Therefore, the relative gains young activists make by using social media to coordinate are mitigated in that they have to respond to specific tactics used by their opponents and also comply with the policies companies decide to run on their social media.

The first section of this paper focused on showing how social media are a tool which is primarily used by younger activists and are therefore useful in gathering this generation around common issues to enable social protest. The language proper to social media can in itself be used to rally younger individuals, as it primarily relies on things such as memes or hashtags. Those have an inclusive framing to which many individuals, whatever their collective appartenance, can relate to and make their own.

Social media also allows for collective protests to occur faster because they enable virality. Indeed, just like it is easier for a disease to spread when the population of infected increases and contact between people does too, social media enables the size of the population interested in protesting for social issues to increase in one virtual place so that contact between the individuals within this population becomes more likely. Social media also removes the locality of information which enables information about a social protest to spread faster than in the past.

Also, the digital divide which can be observed in terms of age when we examine social media users tells us that they are primarily used by the youth. They therefore constitute the means by which this generation specifically creates its own cultural capital, thus differentiating itself from other parts of society and creating a worldwide social group.

Our second section tried to show the extent to which social media can be used to counter censorship. First, the fact that they constitute a widespread, internationally networked space makes it harder for their opponents to grasp the many activities protesters lead online. Social media constitutes a public sphere on which states cannot have total control over, such that censorship in the classical definition of the term is less likely to occur on them.

Following this, we argued that the speed at which information and communication technologies evolve leads to censorship being harder to implement, as any policies or means aiming to do so would soon be outdated. In the same way, the complexity and multiplicity of actors surrounding internet governance means that any influence one state could have over it to impose some censorship is greatly diluted.

Censorship is also harder to enforce on social media because the constant innovation race between states and activists favors the latter. They more often than not have a head start in this race, creating a structural lag between innovation and regulation. They must however stay aware of the many measures taken by states which adapt quickly.

Finally, we tried to highlight the downsides which come with using mainly social media to coordinate social protests. What is made apparent by many scholars is that while having their own benefits, social media lack aspects of prior organizing and coordinating processes which makes movements initiated through their use less likely to be sustained over time. The lack of proper leadership and the speed at which they develop mean they do not build the tools to properly communicate within each other and with external actors, making them reach a state of “tactical freeze”.

Also, with the use of social media comes the need to adapt to the new forms of censorship happening on them. Indeed, authoritarian states wishing to censor their opponents adapt. Instead of trying to deny access to information about protests, which is nearly impossible on the web, they instead deny them attention by flooding the space and spreading misinformation. Social media companies themselves, through their policies, create some sort of censorship or facilitate it. The algorithms they put in place play a role in the extent to which protesters can spread their message efficiently and companies can also simply decide to ban certain content if they see it as going against their policies. In the rise of surveillance capitalism, the meta-data collected by social media companies on their users can also be used by states’ intelligence agencies to facilitate the location and censorship of opponent activists.

The digital divide which allowed the youth to become a worldwide social group on the Internet can also be detrimental to activists. Indeed, it does not only affect age but is also observable in the rate of access to digital technologies of individuals with more or less

education and economical resources. Therefore, if activists only focus on using social media to coordinate themselves and spread their messages, they risk missing a big part of the population which would be likely to adhere to their cause. Also, the echo chambers more likely to appear on those sites tend to promote extreme behaviour and polarization of political debate (Tufekci, 2017, p. 271), making the divide between activists and their possible public even more prevalent.

The scope of this paper remains very limited. It only aimed at applying the classic literature existing about its topic to what it identifies as a new wave of popular youth protests around the world. It therefore may be blind to any novel development brought by this wave which would have not existed before it. Moreover, when focusing on the successful protests enabled by social media, we do not acknowledge properly that the power law distribution existing for content on social media (Shirky, 2008, p. 122–130) can lead many attempts of digitally networked activism to actually never succeed.

However limited the scope of this paper is, it should serve as a reminder of the speed at which digital technologies evolve. Its aim was to actualize theories that are only a decade or two old, and yet we saw that as actors adapt to the new tools available to them, new ones are already on their way to reshuffle the cards and make the whole social movement landscape even more complex. Therefore, as scholars, activists or policy makers, we should do our best to stay on track of this fast moving train, or else we might be left overwhelmed like many before, unable to shape the world we want as we see technologies created by others foster another one. This is what the Nepalese youth, to come back to our introduction, has set out to do. In the last legislative elections on March 5, 2026, the country's citizens elected former rapper Balendra Shah as Prime Minister, defeating the former one Sharma Oli (Landrine, 2026). The process that started during the Gen Z protests in September 2025 has thus now turned to a new chapter.

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