From Internet Shutdowns to Personal Harassment: Examining the Spectrum of Digital Violence Against Social Activists

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An overview of ICT-enabled activism

From the early 2010s onwards, ICTs played an increasingly prominent role during large-scale protests in the MENA region.¹ Multiple cases worldwide demonstrate how social activists use ICTs to rapidly exchange information, including security protocols, coordinate protests, and garner international attention.² This TraCe policy brief draws on insights from qualitative interviews conducted with 16 anti-military activists in Myanmar (2021), 14 peacebuilding activists in Cameroon (2023),³ and 37 environmental defenders in Colombia (2023).⁴ In Myanmar, following the 2021 military coup, activists believed the country was not receiving sufficient global attention and thus turned to ICTs to mobilize support.⁵ Generally, ICTs have the potential to lower communication costs, reshape the availability of information sources, provide alternatives to mainstream media through crowd-sourcing initiatives, and democratize participation.⁶ They can also reduce disparities between opposing factions and mitigate barriers to participation.⁷ Although ICTs benefit protest activities and activists, they also present challenges requiring more attention.

Challenges of using ICTs for activism

Activists face many challenges when using ICTs for their activities, including increasing digital violence. It is important to recognize that, similar to the concept of violence⁸, which is scientifically complex and interpreted differently across various research frameworks, there are also diverse definitions of digital violence and a lack of consensus. However, we aim to provide an exploratory definition illustrating just one of the many possible interpretations (see info box 1).

Digital Violence

Digital violence refers to intentional actions in the digital realm that cause harm to individuals or their belongings, whether physical, psychological, or reputational. Examples of digital violence include hate speech and cyberstalking, both of which can have tangible effects, particularly by causing psychological distress.⁹

Our interviews show that digital violence often affects particularly prominent activists but also, more broadly, those campaigning on supposedly “polarizing” issues, such as environmental problems in North Colombia’s extractivist regions. All activists interviewed reported experiencing hate speech and violent messages, including direct threats, death threats, extortion, and threats against family members. The complexity of conflict-affected contexts, such as Colombia, involving numerous actors (e.g., paramilitary, multinational companies) with varying interests and capabilities, often makes it challenging to identify the perpetrators. Interviews conducted with human rights and environmental defenders in North Colombia and Cameroon underscore the pervasive occurrence of digital violence, with indigenous, black, and female activists being disproportionately affected.¹⁰ This demonstrates that discrimination is not limited to the “real” analog world but is also prevalent in the digital space, with similar patterns evident in both online and offline environments. Our research finds that violence can happen independently in the physical or digital world but is often intertwined and/or spills over from one sphere to the other. Additionally, technology can sometimes facilitate physical violence, such as when activists are targeted through location surveillance.
Besides direct threats, political unrest often sees the proliferation of propaganda. In conflict, this can take various forms, including biased information disseminated to influence public opinion, manipulate perceptions, or advance a particular agenda. It can be used by different conflict parties to sway sentiment, justify actions, or demonize opponents. For instance, especially in times of conflict, propaganda might be employed to portray one side as heroic and virtuous while depicting the opposing side as villainous or deceitful, thereby shaping public perception and garnering support for specific ideologies or action. In Myanmar, for example, the military made extensive use of digital platforms, including TikTok, to disseminate online propaganda to boost troop morale and intimidate activists by posting threatening videos online.

At a higher level, activists often encounter social media blockades and internet shutdowns, especially in times of protest. These restrictions are frequently imposed by entities such as the government or military bodies to limit ongoing activities, censor online content, and exert control over the digital realm. Following the coup in Myanmar in 2021, the country witnessed internet shutdowns, limited access to whitelisted websites and online services only, and the enforcement of a new Cybersecurity Law. The latter penalizes the use of virtual private networks (VPNs), which are crucial for accessing blocked applications such as Facebook – a platform of great importance for Myanmar’s activists. Similarly, in Cameroon’s ongoing Anglophone separatist conflict, frequent internet shutdowns disrupt communication channels and impede individuals from engaging in peacebuilding efforts through digital means. In 2022 alone, Access Now’s Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (STOP), in partnership with the #KeepItOn coalition, documented 187 internet shutdowns across 35 countries.

As depicted in Figure 1, internet shutdowns are frequently observed in countries experiencing democratic backsliding or in (semi-)authoritarian states. Many of these countries also face terrorism and extremist groups that might exploit ICTs for their own purposes. While some may argue that controlling extremist content may be necessary in such contexts, blanket shutdowns silence all users, not just those spreading harmful content.

Activists are also contending with growing digital surveillance, exemplified by technologies like Pegasus spyware. Governments or other entities may monitor activists’ online activities to track their movements, communications, and associations. This surveillance can restrict their ability to organize protests, communicate with supporters, or engage in other activities without fear of reprisal. Moreover, surveillance data collected on activists can be used to justify legal or political repression, including arbitrary arrests, detention, or even physical violence.

Why we need to be concerned
Contemporary activism relies heavily on ICTs owing to their myriad advantages, including amplifying voices and providing real-time updates. However, there is a clear global trend of escalating digital violence, aiming to
censor supposedly critical voices and restrict activities that could incite uprisings and change. In response, some activists choose to disengage from social networks due to emotional distress and legal repercussions, leading, in some cases, to reduced participation. Disengagement and self-censorship are often what attackers seek to achieve through their acts of violence, leading to a shrinking space for engagement. While some activists consciously withdraw, others report incidents to official institutions for (legal) support, continue to mobilize for resistance, and advocate for their causes. Our interviews show that some activists have developed strategies to counter digital violence. These strategies vary widely depending on several factors, including technical expertise, emotional well-being, support networks, financial resources, and time.

Overall, everyone, including policymakers worldwide, should be concerned about the shrinking online spaces and rising digital violence that affect activists worldwide. This violence often leads to reduced political engagement in both digital and physical realms as the boundaries between these forms of violence blur. It is essential to enable activists to participate in political and sociocultural discussions without facing censorship, internet shutdowns, or direct threats. When activists are silenced, ruling entities like military or (semi-)authoritarian governments can spread one-sided information. As activists increasingly withdraw due to the violence they experience, the foundations of democratic and peaceful spaces are threatened.

Although our examples mainly relate to Myanmar, Cameroon, and Colombia, similar phenomena can and have been observed worldwide. More systematic research into cases of digital violence would deepen our understanding of the phenomenon in all its aspects.

**Reflections on what could be done**

Acknowledging the complexity of making specific recommendations is important, given the diverse and unique contexts in which activists operate. Further, it is crucial to tailor actions and projects to local needs and circumstances. With this in mind, this policy brief outlines a few considerations that could enhance the protection and support of activists and organizations enabling them to continue their activities:

1. **Enhancing digital infrastructure:**
   Ensuring equitable access to digital infrastructure is vital for reducing discriminatory practices and promoting universal accessibility. For instance, activists in areas with limited power supply and internet access may resort to unencrypted phone calls, exposing them to potential interception and surveillance. Conversely, a reliable internet connection enables the use of encrypted communication services (e.g., via messenger calls), providing better protection. Access to robust infrastructure is indispensable for safeguarding individuals’ privacy and security in today’s digital age. Overall, allocating more financial resources to developing and enhancing digital infrastructures could effectively reduce disparities in access.

2. **Building resilience and learning how to handle instances of digital violence:**
   Besides focusing on more technical solutions, it is paramount to prioritize strengthening the resilience of activists and organizations that work with them. In the future, more attention could be paid to supporting local organizations working on digital rights, digital literacy, and digital security training so that they can independently run workshops for activists for instance. Such workshops may help activists to identify potential threats and vulnerabilities and equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to (better) navigate the digital landscape securely.

3. **Highlighting unacceptable incidents of digital violence and taking a stand:**
   It is essential to develop strategies to bolster support for activists and hold the entities responsible for perpetrating digital violence accountable. When perpetrators are identified, publicly disclosing their identities and enforcing consequences for their actions is critical for this accountability. This approach raises awareness and signals strong commitment to combatting digital violence and upholding human rights principles in the digital sphere. By addressing digital violence and technology-facilitated oppression, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders can reaffirm their commitment to principles such as freedom of expression, privacy, and non-discrimination in the digital age. By consistently highlighting instances of digital violence, they can increase awareness of the prevalence and impact of such behavior. This awareness-raising is essential for mobilizing public support and galvanizing action to address digital violence effectively. Publicly acknowledging incidents of digital violence sends a powerful message of solidarity and support to the activists affected. It demonstrates that their experiences are taken seriously and that they are not alone in facing such challenges. Another important measure is advocating for national and international laws to address digital violence and expanding and strengthening existing legal frameworks.

4. **Understanding the preferences of activists:**
   Better understanding the (technical) needs and wishes of activists affected by digital violence is essential for
several reasons. First, it allows support and resources to be tailored to their specific needs, ensuring effective and relevant interventions. By listening to activists and gaining insight into their (technical) challenges and preferences, targeted solutions can be developed that address their concerns and enhance their digital security. Further, adapting projects and technical developments based on activists’ input is essential for promoting user-centric design. Rather than imposing solutions from the top down, engaging with activists facilitates co-creation of interventions that are responsive to their lived experiences. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among activists, as they are directly involved in shaping the tools and strategies designed to support them. Support might involve funding initiatives that prioritize the technical needs identified by activists, supporting capacity-building efforts to enhance digital literacy and security skills, or collaborating with grassroots organizations to develop tailored solutions. By placing the voices and experiences of activists at the center of the design and implementation of projects, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders may better support their efforts to navigate and resist digital violence.

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About TraCe
What effects do global developments such as technologization and climate change have on political violence? How can political violence be limited or legitimized by international institutions? How is it interpreted and conceptualized? Since April 2022, these questions are addressed by the BMBF-funded regional research center “Transformations of Political Violence” (TraCe), in which five Hessian research institutions work together with a variety of disciplinary perspectives.


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