

The role of social media in youth political activism

Gen Z prefers social media for political activism because they demand a more fast-paced, on-the-ground approach when it comes to covering politics. Whether it is a small local issue or a larger national crisis, social media has empowered young activists to assemble quickly and with greater efficiency.

MEHRAB JAMEE

It's no secret that the majority now consumes news on social media. From short bits and clips to in-depth deep dives and podcasts, the role of social media in news consumption and circulation cannot be overlooked. The case for political news is not different either. When we think of heated political conversation, we might think of shouting matches around tea stalls, but in reality, much of the discourse now happens on social media. Be it ideological narratives, fact-laden posts, or just traditional media talk shows and news breakdowns, the youth tend to consume media online. And with the speed at which content is being churned out, traditional media just can't keep up.

In fact, Gen Z prefers social media for political activism because they demand a more fast-paced, on-the-ground approach when it comes to covering politics. Whether it is a small local issue or a larger national

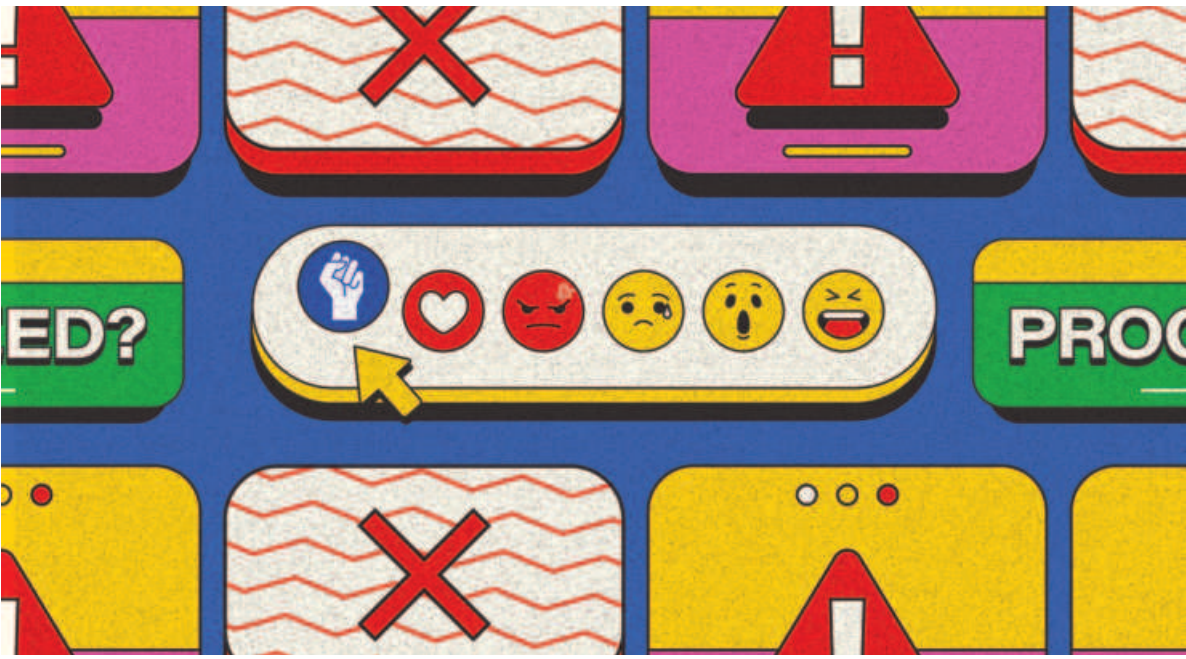


ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

Ashfi Islam, an intermediate student at the capital's Willes Little Flower School and College is one such youngster who joined the protest. On the role of social media as a force for political activism he said, "We received information mostly from social media. Kids my age aren't used to traditional media formats. We're also online a lot. Even my friends who were conservative about posting political news on their timelines were sharing posts about the atrocities that were unfolding. It felt like the youth were united in these posts. There was no way of ignoring our wave anymore. When everyone began sharing the same videos of police brutality and political suppression, the point was driven home. It inspired me on a personal level to come out on the streets."

Social media – compared to conventional media – is doing a better job of captivating, convincing, and mobilising protesters. Mujahidul Islam, a final-year medical student opines, "A big reason for using social media as a platform for any protest is the option of anonymity. In contrast, making an appearance on mainstream media carries a level of risk in our country. Even if it doesn't lead to harassment from law enforcement agencies, you might face harassment at your workplace or educational institution. Speaking on such platforms has less possibility of repercussions while at the same time conveying support for a cause you believe in. The compound effect of a critical mass of people speaking on an issue is also real. People might see their peers posting online and be compelled to post themselves. This is eventually communicated to our power structures or traditional media outlets, and the point is conveyed as intended."

Elaborating on the same issue Nomayer Nehal, a student and resident of Khulna



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

crisis, social media has empowered young activists to assemble quickly and with greater efficiency. Adoption of social media as a platform for raising your voice

against any discrimination is therefore widespread. It becomes clearer if we look back to the days before social media when news had to be accessed through physical mediums. Some protests received news coverage, while others didn't.

With social media in hand, this conundrum has changed. Movements like the Shahbagh protests of 2013, the quota protests in 2018, the Road Safety Movement in 2018, and of course, the 2024 quota protests, which led to a full-scale uprising are some movements, just in our country, that come to mind. All of these gained traction on social media as small movements and eventually accumulated public support, in large part because of online activists and bloggers.

One such online activist is Zakaria Tasrik, a student of Robotics and Mechatronics Engineering at Dhaka

University. When asked about why young people overwhelmingly turned to social media during the July protests he said, "In my opinion, social media played the role of pushing people into the movement. On the other hand, a lot of traditional media channels propagated disinformation, which made people rely on social media even more. I remember the parallel attacks on Dhaka University (DU) and Jahangirnagar University (JU). I came across clips of tear shells being shot at students in front of TSC on Facebook, the day after Abu Sayed died. I took that video and decided to post it on Facebook. Within an hour it got around 10,000 reacts and a million views. Short videos like these, from multiple sources, fuelled the protests. Videos of students being attacked, as much as they traumatised people, prompted them to join the protests."

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