

THE PARADIGM OF VISIBILITY: ALGORITHMS OF PROTEST

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ABSTRACT AND KEY TERMS

This dissertation investigates the intersection of visibility, algorithms, and digital activism in contemporary social movements. In an increasingly digitised and algorithm-driven world, the dynamics of visibility – whether manifesting as visibility, invisibility, or hypervisibility – profoundly shape participatory culture, societal narratives, and power structures. By drawing on theoretical frameworks like Panopticism and algorithmic control, this study examines how digital platforms influence which voices and causes gain visibility, and how social media algorithms marginalise or render others invisible.

Through discourse analysis and comparative case studies, the research explores both the opportunities and challenges posed by digital activism, especially for marginalised groups. Movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #AmINext are analysed to showcase how social media can amplify activism but also risk undermining it. The thesis critiques the biases embedded in algorithms, highlighting their function as gatekeepers of digital visibility, shaping public discourse by selectively promoting certain narratives over others.

Ultimately, this research offers a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between visibility, algorithmic power, and digital activism, contributing to the ongoing discourse in media studies, social justice, and the ethics surrounding algorithmic media.

KEY TERMS: Algorithmic Bias; Algorithmic Gatekeeping; Digital Panopticism, Digital Visibility; Digital Invisibility; Digital Hypervisibility; Social Media Activism; Participatory Culture; Marginalisation

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

Student Number: 22956574

I hereby declare that *The Paradigm of Visibility: Algorithms of Protest* is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



Michaela Rabe

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

David Lyon (2018):

“Surveillance is not simply about watching or monitoring, it is about power and control, about shaping what people do, how they behave, and who they become.”

1.1. Background and Context

The current state of our highly digitised, globalised society has facilitated the ability for information to travel, and be interacted with, at unprecedented rates (Dumitrescu, Nițu and Savin 2019; Burlacu et al. 2021; Skare and Riberio Soriano 2021), creating a complex interface between events and people, and the reactionary patterns associated therewith. These patterns have given rise to three entangled forms of engagement in the online world: visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility. Hereafter, these digital forms of engagement, which make up this study’s paradigm of visibility, will be collectively referred to as ‘the visibility complex.’

For as long as technology has existed, the question of its effects and influence has been at the foreground of societal concern and curiosity. These concerns have orbited around both optimistic and cynical predictions of the impact that technology could have on human society, as well as the subsequent response to various socio-political matters. This is closely related to the visibility complex, seeing how the various reactionary patterns which have emerged amongst both consumers and prosumers of content have begun to significantly influence the way in which people, culture, events, movements, and phenomena are perceived and engaged with (Manyika et al. 2016; Crenshaw and Robison 2006). The ways in which society responds in terms of activism, for example, is being fundamentally changed through our constant and close interaction with technology – and, with humanity’s growing, heavy reliance on technology, and the innovations of artificial intelligence, cybernetics, and machine learning, digital interaction and response habits have become increasingly predictable. Therefore, in much the same way that algorithms have created predictable virtual trends, the

reactionary habits of virtual communities have simultaneously become predictable in their reactionary patterns.

Based on this understanding, it is possible to investigate the matter of digital activism and the patterns of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility which are afforded to different content. Because of the fluctuating nature of digital visibility, which is to be discussed in more detail further along this study, digital activism, in its current form, “presents several challenges to remain a sustainable endeavour for socially active groups that engage in media content production and distribution across social media” (Hutchinson 2019, 35). However, with further analysis of the virtual state of visibility, along with its creation, effects, benefits, weaknesses, and most importantly; its counterparts, a framework could be established from which problem-solving may draw. In other words, because visibility is a key concern for most across social media platforms, “where visibility tactics are often embedded into the production process itself” (Hutchinson 2019, 35), it would be a beneficial contribution to better understand the visibility complex, and how it may affect the content, the people, and the ideologies to which it is subject.

1.2. Aims and Purpose of the Study

The aim of this research is to contribute to a larger body of work centralised around the visibility complex – which includes not only the different forms of visibility (invisibility and hypervisibility), but also the elements which *promote*, or *gatekeep*, visibility. Accordingly, the key idea of the following study is the digital visibility complex, as well as the way in which this paradigm affects participatory response. First, for the purpose of examining the nuances of digital visibility, various elements which inform visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility will be identified and dissected in an attempt to grasp an adequate understanding of what informs digital visibilities, and why such visibility holds vital power. This will include a critical examination of participatory culture, and algorithmic bias. Thereafter, having established a firm understanding of digital visibilities, the role of algorithms therein, and the participatory patterns of the general public in terms of response, these explorations will be applied through examples of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility in the media (particularly relating to marginalised groups and their

experiences with representation and online visibility). This will be done in order to present real-life examples of how different forms of visibility can either empower or destroy a cause.

Therefore, in summary, the key aims of the following study are: To explore the visibility complex; to understand algorithms, their biases, and their role in generating visibility; to analyse and apply the workings of participatory culture to the subject of visibility; and, to understand the synergy of these aims in order to generate a framework through which to investigate the successes or failures of digital activism. The objectives of the following study are, then, as follows: To establish a contextual definition of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility; To further understand the interrelation between visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility; To distinguish the relationship between digital visibility and power; To understand the role of algorithms in visibility and online activism, and; To critically assess effects of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility on marginalised groups (through the use of both theory, and case studies).

1.3. Research Question(s)

Though an abundance of research has been conducted on the separate concepts of digital visibility, digital participation, digital activism, and the representation of marginalised groups, the literature which considers these elements in a collective way is sparse. Thus, the question I wish to address in this study, is how these various elements inform, harm, and/or enable one another. Furthermore, I aim to critically explore the question of how to reorient digital representations of marginalised groups, and, moreover, how to facilitate a sustainable and efficient form of digital activism.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

1.4.1. Exploring Bentham and Foucault's Panopticism

The academic conversation surrounding the link between power and visibility has been one of growing contextual relevance in contemporary society. Arguably, one of the most influential voices on this matter has been the seminal thinker Michel Foucault, whose theories on the interplay between visibility and power have shaped much of the theoretical framework regarding visibility and its effects on the paradigm of social

control. Interested predominantly in the nuances of power and social change, Foucault (1977) researched the role of visibility in acquiring power and knowledge, two concepts he often used interchangeably. Foucault's most notable work comes from his study of the origins of the prison, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), in which he explored the invention of the Panopticon. Relatedly, the Panopticon was originally developed by English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham, who invented a prison system (the Panopticon) to be a social control mechanism that would become a comprehensive symbol for modern authority and discipline in the western world (Joukowsky 2010). The Panopticon controlled inmates by creating a simple "imbalance of reciprocal viewership: whereas the inmates could be viewed at all times by a guard positioned in the central tower, this source of power was conversely concealed from the inmates" (Foucault 1995, 201). The interplay between visibility and invisibility, the seer and the seen, caused the prisoners to amend their behaviour according to the Panopticon's omnipresence. This prompted Foucault to remark that "visibility is a trap famously... he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes

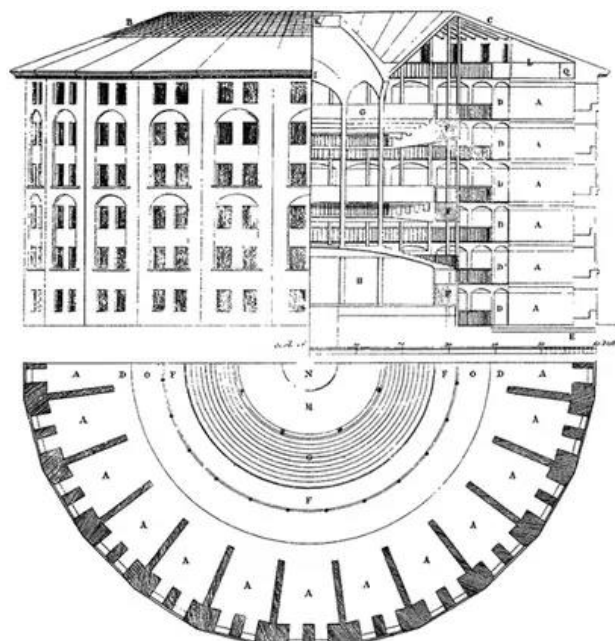


Figure 1: Blueprints of Bentham's Panopticon (Reveley c. 1791)

responsibility for the contains of power... he becomes the principle of his own

subjection¹” (1995, 201). Accordingly, the idea of visibility being a trap has translated into multiple aspects of current social exchange, in modified ways – but the key factors have remained the same. These key factors are as follows: visibility is a form of discipline; visibility facilitates control; and those who control visibility control power over subjects.

The trap, then, that visibility causes, is that the fear of observation by superiors is predominantly greater than the motivation to do wrong (within the context of the Panopticon). Within the larger context of society, and using Panopticism as a framework for understanding the relationship between visibility and control, the trap is that the fear of observation by society is predominantly greater than the motivation to resist societal pressures. What’s more, is that when visibility is viewed from the perspective of a trap, it helps to explain the actual and real condition of an individual “when the supervisor or controller, which warranties order in the individual, becomes invisible” (DeLillo 1997) – which is much the case when referring to a notion as abstract as society.

An important distinction here, is the difference between the Panopticon, and the concept of Panopticism. On the one hand, the Panopticon is Bentham’s model for physical surveillance, described by Foucault (1977) in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, as “a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.” The Panopticon, then, refers to a form of external surveillance, with the specific purpose of inducing, in the inmate, a “state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1977). On the other hand, the concept of Panopticism – although it is based on Bentham’s Panopticon – was introduced by Michel Foucault as a way of indicating a form of internal surveillance, where the watcher ceases to be external to the watched. Rather than *external* actions, the gaze of the watcher is *internalised* to such an extent that each subject, or ‘prisoner’ (economic agent/worker), becomes their own ‘guard’ (Foucault 1977).

¹ Here, Foucault describes how the mere possibility of being watched compels individuals to regulate their own behaviour, thus creating a self-perpetuating system of control. This principle has been applied to numerous domains, from corporate surveillance to digital platforms, illustrating how visibility governs social interactions and power dynamics.

1.4.2. *Visibility and Late Modern Panopticism*

More recently, considering Bentham's Panopticon and Foucault's Panopticism (through a contemporary lens) means coming to the understanding that "the panopticon has moved beyond prisons and workplaces and now encapsulates society as a whole," and for this reason, "it is important to view society through a more panoptic lens" (Sheridan 2016, 1). Essentially, this perspective alludes to the permanence of surveillance within the modern digital paradigm, and, alongside this modern comparison, it must also be mentioned that the concept of visibility has majorly increased in complexity. This is because, as society has evolved, so have the effects of visibility – which has steadily gone from disciplinary, to normalised, to desired (at least, within the digital perspective). One way in which to understand this is through first understanding the disciplinary power of visibility, as put forth by Foucault. In his essay, *Disciplinary Power*, Marcelo Hoffman (2011) offers a digestible overview of the Foucauldian disciplinary model, wherein he explains how Foucault breaks people down to the concept of 'bodies,' and this is the process through which people are subjected to the modalities of power, and consequently, become part of the disciplinary system. The ideal for the hierarchal power is "to have docile bodies, i.e., bodies that do what they are told in as expedient a manner as possible" (Sheridan 2016, 2). In other words, a late modernised form of Panopticism "breaks down what differentiates people from those around them to make them more easily moulded and made to fit a specific image that is most beneficial to the reigning hierarchic power" (Sheridan 2016, 2).

Of course, the modern conception of Panopticism is far more subtle and evolved in operation than its ancestral models and is largely facilitated through digital participation and visibility – where, in order to be visible, one must participate. This, essentially, brings an evolution of disciplinary power and its relationship to visibility, seeing as visibility has become a sought-after experience, and it is, rather, the threat of *invisibility* which serves as the disciplinary element. To elaborate, visibility has become a sought-after experience because with visibility, comes the power of recognition, which enables a broader opportunity for both representation, and mobilisation. Therefore, in order to avoid *invisibility*, society strives for visibility through conforming to online participatory norms, and, in return, attaining various levels of visibility in the process. In

this way, the notion of visibility still holds a version of Benthamite control, though the Panopticon no longer exists as a large watchtower in the centre of a circular prison – rather, it has been recast in algorithms. Theorist Shoshana Zuboff, through her seminal book *In The Age of the Smart Machine* (1996), documented the more primitive stages of this through her exploration into how smart machines have changed the landscape of Panopticism, through arguing that “the counterpart to the central observation tower has become a ... screen. The web of windows is replaced by procedures for data entry,” or “the control interfaces that record operator inputs” (Zuboff 1996, 323) – which, now, relates most intrinsically with algorithms, especially regarding social media.

Correlatively, in his 1999 text, “The End of Privacy: How Total Surveillance Is Becoming a Reality,” Reginald Whitaker discusses a more modern version of Panopticism, and how this late modern version differs from the original conception. He explains the difference through two primary elements: first, the late modern ‘panopticon’ is decentralised; and second, those who are subjected to the Panopticon are subjected consensually (Whitaker 1999). Essentially, at the core of Bentham’s Panopticon, was a “godlike sovereign authority radiating out from the inspector’s command and control centre” (Whitaker 1999, 140), which, years later, was furthered by Foucault and his theories on visibility, discipline, and control in terms of socio-political matters. However, bringing an even more contemporary perspective, one must realise that these conceptualisations of visibility are no longer contextually relevant to the socio-cultural or politico-economic climate of today, but they *do* serve as the framework for the modern Panopticon, where information technologies offer the potential for “real rather than faked omniscience” (Whitaker 1999, 140). As such, society has reached a point where individuals are now subjected to a far more metaphorical gaze, which manifests its power in terms of rendering subjects as visible, invisible, or hypervisible.

1.5. Research Methodology

In order to explore, contextualise, and comment on the nature of digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility within the chosen socio-cultural contexts, a qualitative methodology will be used to conduct and organise the concurrent research. The

methodology which, arguably, will best facilitate this study is discourse analysis – and as such, the following research will be presented in congruence with this methodology.

Discourse analysis, in its capacity as a qualitative research methodology, originates from the discipline of sociology, with its main purpose being rooted in “examining the way knowledge is produced within different discourses and the performances, linguistic styles and rhetorical devices used in particular accounts” (Snape and Spencer 2003, 200). Furthermore, discourse analysis has multiple disciplinary origins – sociology, socio-psychology, anthropology, linguistics and philosophy, communications studies, and literature (Grant et al. 2005). With this type of diversity in perspective, it brings a multidisciplinary perspective – which best suits a study of multiplicity.

Through the explorative facilitation of discourse analysis as the predominant research approach, the key concepts of the study – being the visibility complex, contemporary digitised society, and the fundamental concept of an algorithmic-steered cyber-culture – will be analysed through the methodological understanding and analysing of texts and research, which will allow for established theory to *enable* and serve as a *framework* for further interpretations. This will be done in order to contribute to the already-existing contextual body of work. Moreover, according to Jankowicz (2005, 229), discourse analysis is of particular relevance when listening to people's own narratives of a situation – in other words, the biographical approach. This approach will be considerably valuable for analysing the various experiences of visibility, invisibility and hypervisibility as they relate to different marginalised groups and socio-political movements. In light of this, the methodology of discourse analysis can be argued as the best way to allow for the researcher, according to this study's particular content, to place research within a particular social context, and this will be critical in the facilitation of peer-reviewed theories in their roles as research-based frameworks for the study's context. As such, discourse analysis will serve as an efficient tool when applied to the paradigm of online visibility and its associated nuances and theoretical considerations.

Additionally, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) interpret discourse itself, within the context of discourse analysis, to be something which cannot be produced without context, and something which cannot be understood without taking context into consideration. In their research, they state that “discourses are always connected to

other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently” (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 277) – in other words, the methodology of discourse analysis allows for a whole range of situational factors, including the surrounding political, economic and social context. This, in turn, insinuates that discourse analysis “is an analytic technique rather than a theory,” and it includes internal methods such as content analysis, narrative analysis, conversational analysis, participant observation, and social constructivism (Grant et al. 2005). Arguably, the biggest advantage of discourse analysis, specifically *critical* discourse analysis, is that it challenges “the taken-for-granted nature” of a subject (Sitz, 2008), and as such, serves as an unrelenting critical tool.

Relatedly, and considering that discourse analysis draws its research by analysing a body of data in order to draw meaning, there will be various case studies introduced along with the body of supporting theories. These case studies will be analysed within the larger context of the study, and serve to strengthen the research.

An example of this would be the documented response to artist and activist Ai Weiwei in his cinematic work, *Human Flow*, a 2017 documentary following the plight of refugees and forced migrants across the globe. The documentary became somewhat of a sensation across the digital sphere – Facebook, Twitter², and Instagram became flooded with pro-refugee posts – millions of people digitally voiced their outrage at the lack of human rights experienced by refugees, as well as sympathy for the immense loss they endured in fleeing their homelands. However, in 2019, Weiwei released a second documentary, which was made up of footage he had not used in *Human Flow*, titled *The Rest*. This second documentary was a show of disappointment on the part of Weiwei, made in response to how very little had changed since the release of *Human Flow*, and how quickly those heart-wrenching stories were forgotten and discarded, replaced by whichever emotive socio-political cause caught the public eye next. Human flow thus experienced a few weeks of digital hyper-visibility, in which no real change occurred, and minimal donations were made. No policies were changed, and the refugees seen in the first documentary were mostly still in the same position, if not a worse one, by the release of the second documentary. The awareness, which had been viral, remained almost

² In July 2023, Twitter was officially renamed X. However, this dissertation retains the use of “Twitter” to align with the historical and cultural context during the time most movements discussed in this study occurred.

exclusively in the digital sphere – not spilling over into any effective action or initiative – and, as quickly as Human Flow became sensationalised, it was forgotten. This is just one example of the fluctuating nature of digital visibility and the problems associated with today’s participatory culture.

Just as Weiwei’s failed activism represents the fleeting nature of hypervisibility, more examples hereafter will include case studies showcasing the effects of other variations of visibility – including, contrarily, the benefits of hypervisibility, and the effects of manipulated visibility. These examples will include (but are not limited to) online movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, as well as the role of social media in political matters (for instance, the Russian Influence Campaigns).

This study also applies discourse analysis as a nuanced tool for unpacking the narratives, framing strategies, and rhetorical choices employed in digital activism campaigns. Specifically, the method focuses on analysing digital texts – such as social media posts, hashtags, visual content, and associated media coverage – to identify patterns in how these campaigns construct meaning and mobilise audiences. By examining themes, metaphors, and linguistic strategies, the analysis captures how campaigns (case studies) like #MeToo and #HumanFlow navigate visibility, amplify marginalised voices, and engage with public discourse in algorithmically mediated spaces. Furthermore, this approach contextualises the findings within the broader dynamics of digital activism, such as algorithmic amplification and the shaping of public opinion. To ensure robustness, the analysis integrates multiple data sources and interprets them within the unique sociocultural and political contexts of the selected case studies, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how discourse influences both digital and real-world activism.

The visibility complex, as explored throughout this study, thus reveals itself as a nuanced and multifaceted paradigm that defines the interplay between visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility in the digital age. It underscores how digital platforms act as both amplifiers and gatekeepers, shaping public discourse and influencing power dynamics. Visibility emerges as a critical tool for representation and empowerment, providing marginalised groups with avenues to challenge dominant narratives, gain recognition, and advocate for social justice. However, this empowering potential is intricately tied to the risks of misrepresentation, exploitation, and the erosion of agency.

The interplay between visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility highlights the ambivalence of digital platforms. Visibility, while a desirable state, can be distorted into hypervisibility or invisibility through systemic inequalities, algorithmic biases, and societal power structures. Marginalised individuals often face these dual threats, experiencing either hypervisibility that objectifies and commodifies their identities or invisibility that excludes and erases their experiences. These distortions reinforce existing hierarchies, as those who control visibility maintain power over those rendered invisible or hypervisible.

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the visibility complex demands a critical lens. It requires us to question not only what is made visible but also how and why certain narratives are amplified while others are suppressed. Scholars like Brighenti (2007), Buchanan and Settles (2019), and Mateus (2017) remind us that visibility is never neutral; it is a dynamic, contested space shaped by cultural, social, and technological forces. This underscores the importance of approaching visibility as both a site of opportunity and a locus of struggle.

Ultimately, the visibility complex serves as a conceptual framework for understanding the socio-political stakes of digital visibility, where recognition, agency, and power intersect. By analysing the dynamics of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility, this study aims to deepen our understanding of how digital platforms mediate representation, influence social interactions, and shape the broader public sphere in our increasingly networked society.

1.6. Literature Review

1.6.1. Visibility, Invisibility, and Hypervisibility

The following will explore the new modalities of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility (often referred to collectively in this study as the visibility complex) engendered by Web 2.0, with a particular focus on the related function of social media networks. Thus, to understand and elaborate upon the nuances of visibility, each of the three concepts must first be individually defined. Vision, in this context, extends beyond its physiological definition as the ability to see; it encompasses the interpretative processes through which individuals and societies construct meaning. As Mirzoeff (2011) argues, vision is

shaped by cultural, social, and political forces that influence what is prioritised or obscured, making it a critical element in how individuals and groups engage with the digital world. Closely tied to vision is visibility, which, within the context of this study, can be defined as the extent to which one is fully regarded and recognised by others (Buchanan and Settles 2019, 1). More specific to the study's digital context, visibility is often considered a "desirable state" within the contemporary virtual paradigm, particularly when "people can control their visibility" (Lollar 2015). Having digital visibility, then, implies that individuals or groups are predominantly perceived in the way they desire, across a myriad of new media, with adequate levels of online engagement and exposure. This aligns with Turkle's (1995) analysis of self-expression in virtual spaces, where individuals construct and project their desired identities, and Rheingold's (1993) concept of virtual communities, which emphasises how online networks facilitate shared participation and interaction. These dynamics highlight the empowering potential of digital visibility while underscoring its dependence on intentional identity construction and networked interactions.

Accordingly, this kind of visibility could enable an empowerment of people's sense of belonging, an important notion in a world where isolation comes easily. However, having established that digital visibility may affirm a person or group's sense of validity, it must be acknowledged that the concept of visibility holds far greater complexities when it expands into the social and digital sphere.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial to understand visibility through distinguishing its characteristics within the context of this study. At the substantive level, "visibility lies at the intersection of the two domains of aesthetics (relations of perception) and politics (relations of power)" (Brighenti 2007, 325). As Brighenti (2007) argues, visibility shapes how individuals and groups are perceived and recognised within the digital sphere. Moreover, *recognition* and *control* are understood and explained as two opposing outcomes of visibility, which constitutes visibility as a complex experience which is largely steered through the intention of either becoming visible, or granting visibility. Visibility is often distorted by systemic inequalities, as Buchanan and Settles (2019) highlight, leading to *hypervisibility* or *invisibility* for marginalised groups. In this case, visibility could facilitate both the honest representation of an entity, group, phenomenon, or concept, or the control of its perception. This concept of visibility is also

one of the key aspects political philosophers (as well as sociologists and communications theorists) have “traditionally associated with the public sphere” (Brighenti 2010, 7). In light of this, visibility is becoming increasingly important in “conceiving the public sphere with the rapid uptake of digital social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.),” given not only the increasing visual nature of such media but also given “the various ways in which such media enable different individuals, groups and institutions, and associated ideas and discourses, to see and be seen (or hear and be heard)” (Dahlberg 2018, 1). As Castells (2001) notes, social media has redefined the concept of the public sphere, transforming it into a networked space where visibility, self-expression, and engagement are mediated by algorithms and platform design. Boyd (2014) further explores this dynamic, identifying the tensions between visibility and privacy in online spaces, particularly among marginalised groups seeking representation.

Visibility can also be seen as a metaphor for knowledge – but “it is not simply an image: it is a real social process in itself” (Brighenti 2007, 325). This notion of perception, as developed by Goffman (1959), links visibility to identity performance, where individuals strategically navigate social contexts to shape how they are perceived. Building on this, Brighenti (2007) identifies visibility as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, encompassing relational, strategic, and procedural factors that inform how knowledge and perception intersect with the visible. Accordingly, with knowledge being the base of action, the expected reactions to viewing the visible range from “thought, awareness, understanding, appreciation, recognition, talk” to “manipulation and control” (Brighenti 2010, 3). McLuhan’s (1964) seminal work on media extends this discussion by examining how media technologies amplify certain forms of visibility while rendering others invisible, creating new power dynamics. And, based on this understanding of visibility, there have been several areas in sociological literature where the issue of visibility appears, “from gender to minority studies, from communication studies to the theories of power” (Brighenti 2007, 325).

Associated with these areas, and within the context of digital visibility, there are “a few key features of visibility we must account for: relationship, strategy, field and process” (Brighenti 2007, 325) – all of these being the factors which inform the knowledge shared through the various forms of visibility. Accordingly, with knowledge being the

base of action, the expected reactions to viewing the visible range from “thought, awareness, understanding, appreciation, recognition, talk” to “manipulation and control” (Brighenti 2010, 3). Furthermore, the following question can be proposed to further investigate the digital visibility complex – “what happens if these looking relations in all their variety occur, not between single identifiable individual entities, but within multiplicities?” (Brighenti 2010, 3). In other words, “does the existence of collectives of viewers change the nature of looking, and if so, how?” (Brighenti 2010, 3). The goal of this study, however, is not to provide a dichotomic answer to this question, but rather, to complexify this understanding of visibility. As such, visibility, in this case, will be approached as “a phenomenon that is inherently ambiguous, [and] highly dependent upon contexts and complex social, technical and political arrangements” (Brighenti 2010, 3). In fact, from a social-theoretical point of view, visibility is interesting precisely because “it allows us to enhance our understanding of the social as simultaneously a material and immaterial phenomenon – or better, as a specific prolongation and convergence between the layer of the material and that of the immaterial in the constitution of the social” (Brighenti 2010, 4). Visibility, then, can also be seen as a social dimension, in which “thresholds between different social forces are introduced,” and, in this sense, “the visible can be conceived of as a field of inscription and projection of social action” (Brighenti 2010, 4).

This concurrently leads into the socio-political stakes entailed by online visibility, which holds the imbuelement of desire, passion, and power – which enable the creation of social response and interaction. This relation between visibility and the public sphere (in this case, social media sites) alludes to the visibility of “norms and political power,” which grants the public the freedom to form and make visible ... their opinions through participation in rational public debate” (Dahlberg 2018, 1). Hence, “visibility can be deployed ... to help conceive the relation between the public sphere and contemporary media communication” (Dahlberg 2018, 1), and visibility can be controlled in attempts to create a desired public perception. With this in mind, it is exceedingly important to recognise the power of what drives visibility in our current society – which, in the case of online visibility, is the algorithm (which is to be further inspected in this study).

Based on these understandings of visibility, its two main variations can be better understood. Invisibility and hypervisibility represent distortions in visibility – for example,

“the way that marginalised group members' visibility is controlled by dominant group members distorts how individuals within marginalised groups are perceived and recognised” (Buchanan 2019, 4), and considering this, it is important to acknowledge that “little attention has been given to issues of invisibility and hypervisibility” (Buchanan and Settles 2019, 1) – which exist in tandem with visibility, and are therefore important to contextualise and define *alongside* visibility.

On the one hand, *Invisibility*, within the broader context as well as that of digitality, contrasts visibility insofar as it refers to “a state or condition where an individual,” or group, “is not fully recognised and[/or] valued” (Brighenti, 2007; Simpson and Lewis, 2005). However, understanding invisibility to be the binary opposite of visibility is problematic in the sense that invisibility is *a part* of visibility, or, rather, the absence or withholding of it. One can deduct, then, that invisibility denies people recognition, validation, and even opportunity, because when visibility is denied, so is power. This is to be understood strictly within the context of the visible being representation, and the invisible being the withholding or squandering of representation. On the other hand, *hypervisibility*, which essentially represents a superlative form of visibility, is problematic in that it has given rise to “new forms of opacity that are formed not through secrecy but by its opposite, pan-visibility” (Mateus 2017, 109). Paradoxically, by amplifying visibility, “media create new forms of invisibility” (Mateus 2017, 109) – which essentially, alludes to the loss of agency and control the participatory subject experiences when they enter a state of (often fleeting) hypervisibility. As such, hypervisibility not only counteracts the control experienced by the visible – due to the digital process of the phenomenon which occurs during the process of becoming hypervisible – but, additionally, this also reinforces that “visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility are interrelated phenomena” (Fryberg and Townsend, 2008), on account of their inability to exist without the contrast of their counterparts. Additionally, when hypervisible, “reality becomes thick but disorienting,” and when things are disproportionately seen, “we cannot see beyond what is presented to us” (Mateus 2017, 110). As such, visibility becomes a problematic notion “not because concealment threatens it, but mostly because visibility has been transformed in a kind of ideology of transparency that dissolves the conventional frontiers between visibility and invisibility” (Mateus 2017, 111). In other words, visibility becomes problematic when it is used as an object of strategic use and management.

This means that the concept of visibility “contains new complications as media heighten the potential for visibility,” yet, “by amplifying visibility they create new forms of invisibility” (Mateus 2017, 111). Therefore, In this study, the notion of visibility will be assessed through both its beneficial and problematic relationship with media and communication technologies. McLuhan’s (1964) exploration of media as “extensions of man” provides a framework for understanding how communication technologies mediate human perception, enabling visibility while simultaneously shaping its scope and impact. This duality, as Turkle (1995) and Boyd (2014) note, highlights how media can empower individuals by granting visibility but also constrain agency through surveillance, algorithmic control, and the commodification of online interactions.

Correlatively, studies conducted by Nicole Buchanan and Isis Settles (2019) further reinforce the aforementioned positions of hypervisibility and invisibility, through the finding that, for marginalised individuals, “hypervisibility and invisibility are contrasts to visibility and represent different manifestations of the same oppressive forces – subjugation and devaluation” (Buchanan and Settles 2019, 2). Moreover, hypervisibility and invisibility both “reflect distortions of individuals and the groups to which they belong, and both function to maintain a social hierarchy where marginalised groups are constrained to the periphery” (Buchanan and Settles 2019, 2). In other words, to be rendered *invisible* or *hypervisible* can be problematised in light of the damage to identity, validity, and belonging correlated with both concepts – including, especially, the lack of control which both invisibility and hypervisibility cause for the subject of their effects. Therefore, according to Buchanan and Settles (2019), invisibility and hypervisibility can, arguably, be conceptualised as forms of identity-based mistreatment, which not only create an impasse for the marginalised, but also work in direct opposition to the benefits and affirmation of visibility. Accordingly, and in agreement with media theorists such as (but not limited to) Fryberg and Townsend (2008), Mateus (2017), Brighenti (2007), Simpson and Lewis (2010), and Buchanan and Settles (2019), it can be argued that digital visibility creates a desirable space wherein those who obtain it hold an advantage of control over those who either have too little visibility, or those who have too much.

1.6.2. Algorithmic Biases

Having built a contextual understanding of digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility, it must be noted that, equal in importance to these notions, is the identification of how and why people, groups, ideologies, and/or movements attain the various degrees of visibility previously discussed. Accordingly, considering the *how* leads us directly to the *algorithm* – and, considering the *why* leads us to *algorithmic bias*. To be clear, an algorithm, in its broadest definition, is a structured sequence of rules or instructions that direct computers and virtual networks on how to transform a set of facts about the world into useful information. As Bucher (2012) notes, algorithms act as gatekeepers of digital visibility, determining which content gains prominence and which remains obscure. These structured mechanisms essentially program machines, ‘teaching’ them how to process and respond (or, ‘behave’) in ways that shape visibility dynamics across digital platforms. Algorithms, then, play a central role in social media platforms, curating the content users see by privileging certain posts and interactions over others. However, algorithms are not neutral; they often reflect the biases of their human creators and the limitations of their training data. As Johnson (2020) highlights, these biases can perpetuate systemic inequalities through their design and implementation. This phenomenon, known as algorithmic bias, occurs when “an algorithmic decision creates unfair outcomes that unjustifiably and arbitrarily privilege certain groups over others” (Le 2021). This is critical within the context of virtual culture, as algorithms shape participatory norms and digital visibility by amplifying content aligned with their preferential programming, while suppressing others, thereby perpetuating systemic inequities. In other words, algorithms indeed act as the gatekeepers to online visibility – meaning, when content is aligned with an algorithm’s preferential programming, that content will generate more visibility and engagement.

To fully grasp the relationship between algorithms, power, and visibility, Taina Bucher (2012) provides a solid, real-life example of this relationship through her investigation into the Facebook algorithm and how it both enforces, and is shaped by, a reversal of the Foucauldian theory of visibility. Bucher (2012, 1174) notes that, essentially, becoming visible is to be selected by the algorithm. Bucher designed a

framework for her research by reversing Michel Foucault's notion of Panopticism.³ She argues that the regime of visibility constructed by algorithms imposes a "perceived 'threat of invisibility' on the part of the participatory subject," which in effect reverses Foucault's notion of "surveillance as a form of permanent visibility" (Bucher 2012, 1164). This means that according to Bucher, participatory subjectivity is not constituted through the imposed threat of an all-seeing vision machine, but "by the constant possibility of disappearing and becoming obsolete" (Bucher 2012, 1164). This theory is based on the premise that visibility functions "as a reward, rather than as punishment, as is the case with Foucault's notion of Panopticism" (Bucher 2012, 1174). With this, Bucher reinforces the work of Lollar (2015), and Buchanan and Settles (2019) – amongst others – in their assertions that visibility is a desirable digital state, as opposed to invisibility and hypervisibility as fundamentally harmful to the subject of participation.

It can subsequently be argued that the visibility associated with Web 2.0 certainly connects to the notion of empowerment, as it has "greatly expanded the social field of becoming recognised as a subject with a voice" (Bucher 2012, 1164). Accordingly, becoming visible, "or being granted visibility" (Bucher 2012, 1165), is a highly contested game of power in which social media plays a crucial role. The emphasis here is on creating cultural and theoretical critiques of how the world is contained within code and that whoever owns the code, holds an enormous reservoir of power over participatory trends. Considering this, it can be argued that social networking sites (social media), which are guided by algorithms, can act ideologically, in that these platforms are able to choose what to make visible, invisible, and hypervisible; causing a clear discrepancy between what social media platforms allow their users to see, versus what their viewers want to see (Johnson 2020).

Understanding algorithms, therefore, requires that certain trends and agendas are emphasised over others, seeing as algorithms are "not merely modelled on a set of pre-existing cultural assumptions, but also on anticipated or future-oriented assumptions about valuable and profitable interactions that are ultimately geared

³ Panopticism here refers specifically to the metaphor used by Foucault to explore the relationship between "1.) systems of social control and people in a disciplinary situation and, 2.) the power-knowledge concept" (Mason 2022). As established in this study's theoretical framework, in his view, power and knowledge comes from observing others.

towards commercial and monetary purposes” (Bucher 2012, 1169). With specific reference to the algorithmic structure of most social media platforms, Bucher notes (2012, 1175) how algorithms favour and thus award visibility to users who participate, communicate, and interact. Consequentially, the participating subjects are ‘trained’ by the algorithmic mechanisms of social media platforms to respond in a way which could create more visibility. Algorithms not only reward users with visibility, but also punish them with the threat of invisibility, and even ‘destroy’ via the implementation of hypervisibility. Correlatively, an important consideration regarding Bucher’s work is that, in 2012, at the time of her research, Facebook was using the EdgeRank algorithm for its newsfeed. However, since about 2013, the Facebook algorithm has changed multiple times – and has since developed the ability to take over 100,000 factors into account (Cinelli et al. 2021). To be clear, this means that Bucher’s argument has *increased* in validity over the years, alongside the increase in algorithmic capacity, in regard to algorithmic bias and its usage for advertising revenue, ideological interpellation, and personalisation.

Synchronously, the process of cybernetic automation and programming is not limited to machines. That is, it must be acknowledged that human beings, in fact, are programmable species. Correlatively, this is not limited to biological programming, but extends to cultural and social condition (Bach 2021). This is because of how, within the context of human nature, there is a primal need to belong, and to conform to a larger entity. This is important within the context of this study, because cyberculture has largely been moulded around the primal desire of people to belong, and to be seen. Accordingly, understanding how intrinsic it is within human nature to be validated by others, and to feel the affirmation of inclusion, brings new dimension to how detrimental the isolating effects of *invisibility* and/or *hypervisibility* may be for an individual or group.

This idea is developed further by Gabrielle Johnson, amongst many others, in his “Algorithmic Bias: on the Implicit Biases of Social Technology” (2020), wherein he discusses machine learning programs, and how they “inherit social patterns reflected in their training data without any directed effort by programmers to include such biases” (Johnson 2020, 9941). According to this understanding, the interconnection between human and machine bias becomes easier to grasp – and in exploring the relationship between machine bias and human cognitive bias, unavoidable similarities arise between

algorithmic and cognitive biases, which “indicate a disconcerting sense in which sources of bias emerge out of seemingly innocuous patterns of information processing” (Johnson 2020, 9941). As argued by Johnson (2020, 9941), machine learning is used to capitalise on “statistical regularities in human-generated datasets,” which tend to pick up “social patterns that manifest in human behaviour and that are reflected in the data on which it is trained.” An important consideration here is that, in most cases of algorithmic bias and the resulting prejudice, programmers are not explicitly writing biases toward marginalised demographics into their software’s code – instead, it “appears the biases in some sense implicitly emerge from the algorithms’ operating on the data, mimicking the biases reflected in the data themselves,” meaning that the existence of algorithmic biases “undermines the assumptions that computer-based decision-making is more objective and accurate than human decision-making or that it is entirely free from the social and political values humans exhibit” (Johnson 2020, 9942).

The way these biases manifest themselves in terms of online visibility, as argued by Bucher, can be discussed further in terms of how influence and visibility are negotiated on social media platforms. Algorithms, as argued by media theorist Kelley Cotter, are “said to affect social realities, often in unseen ways” (2018, 895). Cotter makes this claim based on the “thematic analysis of online discussions among Instagram influencers,” after observing that “influencers’ pursuit of influence resembles a game constructed around ‘rules’ encoded in algorithms” (Cotter 2018, 895). Moreover, Cotter refers to this as the “visibility game,” which is based on “Instagram’s algorithmic architecture” (Cotter 2018, 895). This visibility game “present[s] the interdependency between users, algorithms, and platform owners and demonstrates how algorithms structure, but do not unilaterally determine user behaviour” (Cotter 2018, 895). Consequentially, it can be argued that, although algorithms function mainly behind the scenes with many users unaware of their presence (Eslami et al. 2015; Rader et al. 2018), they still undoubtedly play an important role in determining and structuring our online experiences (Beer 2009; Bucher 2012; Cheney-Lippold 2011; Gillespie 2014). As Bucher (2012) highlighted, algorithmic ranking determines who and what gains visibility on social media – as such, through establishing the various conditions by which social media users are seen, “algorithms serve as disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe participatory norms” (Cotter 2018, 896). In other words, while there is a growing concern that

algorithms exercise too much power in influencing social realities (Beer 2009; Gillespie 2014; Kitchin and Dodge 2011), “little research has addressed knowledge-building and interpretive processes surrounding algorithms as a window into the complexities and extent of algorithmic power” (Cotter 2018, 896).

Moreover, an important element of this study is its emphasis on transnational digital activism. Because digital technologies have drastically changed the scope of activism, digital activism has become a tool to encourage and mobilise both regional and transnational forms of collective action that “engage political opponents primarily via online spaces and tactics” (Source and Delia 2022, 158). Moreover, the transnational would not exist without the regional, and both will be taken into account in the chosen case studies – however, while digital technologies have afforded “new spaces of political interaction and new tactics for activist intervention” in the regional sphere (Source and Delia 2022, 158), most forms of contemporary activism make use of digital technologies to a considerable transnational extent, “for organisational, mobilisation, and amplification purposes” (Source and Delia 2022, 158). Additionally, it is important to note the use of the term transnational, rather than international, “as the latter often implies a centre and a periphery,” whereas transnational has “more of the grassroots character and allows enough conceptual flexibility to parse apart various dimensions of activist causes and practice” (Source and Delia 2022, 158).

1.6.3. Participatory Culture and Digital Activism

With the established understanding of algorithms, algorithmic bias, cybernetics, and the various nuances of digital visibility, a framework can be established for understanding the participation and response of digital participants. In fact, social media has become an important element within socio-political activities, as it allows easier access for the public to engage with, and participate in, the political realm. As a result, the public can be easily and effectively mobilised (Porlezza 2019; Krumins 2019). Therefore, due to the increased interactivity and the growing prominence of social networking sites, many scholars promulgate the “potentials of the Web to trigger participation, a new interactivity and, eventually, more transparency, accountability, and responsiveness” (Porlezza 2019, 1). Consider, however, on the other hand, that a reinforcement learning

algorithm could conceivably be used to influence a person's political beliefs, or "subtly manipulate them into taking actions they would otherwise not consider" (Krumins 2019). Accordingly, something which needs to be considered is that many of our essential ideas about the world, the core beliefs which govern our decisions, such as purchasing products, social or romantic decisions, or even socio-political opinions and voting, are easily manipulated. Furthermore, the model of algorithm frequented by social media sites is programmed to learn how a person responds to content by assessing their response (in the form of interaction), and, as a result, these algorithms serve to methodically adjust what becomes, and stays, visible on a user's social media feed (Krumins 2019). As such, the algorithm controls the elements which guide a person toward participation. In most cases, the intention behind participation is profitability.

In terms of participatory culture, Henry Jenkins (2006) – a well-known and widely celebrated media professor – is best known for his theories on 'convergence culture' and 'participatory culture'. The latter has been central to various scholars' theorising about online media, and Jenkins's concept of participatory culture has become a key term used within a wide range of scholarly fields (Ihlebaek 2018, 1801). Jenkins (2006) conceptualises participatory culture as a shift from passive media consumption to active user engagement. He conceived that participatory culture "understands media interaction as being marked by both consumptive and productive practices," meaning that it "complicates earlier conceptions of the media fan/audience as a passive receptor of culture..., instead reconceptualising the media consumer as active and able to negotiate and participate in the construction of cultural texts" (Keller 2012, 343).

It has also been argued that participatory culture points to "both descriptive and aspirational dimensions," where the former refers to "how participatory practices and forms of cultural production are carried out" (Ihlebaek 2018, 1801). Participatory practices "can inspire agency and empowerment among different groups" (Ihlebaek 2018, 1801). Accordingly, participatory culture serves as a framework through which to address a multitude of complex and parallel developments – in economic, political, social, technological, and cultural spheres – that contribute to a deeper understanding of influence and "how agency and participatory practices are formed, challenged and changed" (Ihlebaek 2018, 1801).

Relatedly, the evolution of social media has been inextricably linked to social movements around the globe, as these platforms undoubtedly possess the capacity to help users “produce content, interact with each other and share participatory information” (Bayat 2000). However, in the context of digital platforms, Cotter (2018) extends this discussion by highlighting the role of algorithms in shaping participatory norms. She argues that algorithms structure user engagement by creating a ‘visibility game,’ wherein content creators must adapt to algorithmic priorities to gain visibility and sustain audience interaction. It is, however, important to acknowledge that due to personal biases, algorithmic biases, and the potential for misrepresentation, social media platforms can take away a subject’s agency just as quickly as they grant it.

1.6.4. Net-Activism and Slacktivism

Considering the compulsive nature of participatory culture, as well as the undeniable impact of the digital scape, many have argued in favour of the benefits of digital influence in socio-political spheres – especially regarding its potential in the realm of activism and philanthropy. Traditionally, before its tremendous migration to the digital landscape, activism and associated movements were slower-growing, and there were countless hours spent on “forming and deepening social connections, strengthening and testing the fibre of [a] movement,” and ensuring commitment to a cause (Malchik 2021). Considering the apparent link between gradually building up an activist community while systematically constructing support around a specific cause, and the long-term success of a movement, traditional activism finds its primary strength in its longevity of effect and loyal base of volunteering. However, with the emergence of digital activism, a new paradigm of rushed, speedy protest cycles was introduced, where “a focus on media and communication aspects of social movement organisation and an increasingly swift rate of technological change” began to “[give] an impression of accelerated rhythms of political shifts” (Kaun and Uldam 2017, 2099). These rhythms of political shifts have, in turn, created a space of acceleration of digital content and distribution, leading to fleeting hypervisibility.

Moreover, two dominant online activist responses can be identified, namely: net-activism, and slacktivism. In terms of the political immediacy social media provides,

coupled with the fact that “activism has continued to evolve since the emergence of social media,” it cannot be denied that social media is often authentically used as “a strategic means for activism, [where] like-minded people in the social media communication environment can easily come together and facilitate collective action to change society or social problems” (Chon and Park 2019, 75). Moreover, these notions are important to incorporate into the pre-established understanding regarding the desirability of digital visibility, over that of invisibility or hypervisibility.

Accordingly, and in relation to the context of the various forms of visibility, one can distinguish between the helpful and harmful variations of these digital activism methodologies. When referring to net-activism, one can utilise synonymous terminologies such as ‘digital campaigning,’ ‘digital activism,’ and ‘e-activism’ (Cabrera, Matias and Montoya 2017). In using these terms as a frame of reference, one can deduct the definition of net-activism to be a positive use of electronic communication technologies – especially (but not limited to) social media networks. These efforts are channelled, not only to encourage, but also to precipitate change, through mobilising elements of the public and allowing for the spread of, awareness of, and campaigning for socio-economic and political issues, at what are often fast and effective rates (Edwards 2013). In other words, net-activism uses internet technologies for “cause-related fundraising, community building, lobbying, and organising,” which renders a digital activism campaign “an organised public effort” that makes “collective claims on a target authority, in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media” (Edwards 2013). This form of online activism, arguably, leads to the desired form of visibility, which represents a person, group, ideology, or movement, in an enabling, steady, and authentic way.

On the other hand, and in contrast to net-activism, the term ‘slacktivism,’ which is also synonymous with ‘clicktivism,’ refers to the simple measures used to support an issue or social cause, involving virtually no effort on the part of participants (Cabrera, Matias and Montoya 2017). Slacktivism is most commonly associated with social media engagement, such as sharing, liking, or commenting on posts, which allegedly promotes awareness for socio-political causes and injustices. It is also associated with actions like signing and sharing online petitions, joining cause-related social networking groups, or tagging others in the cause-related content (Karpf 2010). However, for the most part, it pertains primarily to the bare-minimum of participatory activism by those on social

media – hence, its other name, ‘clicktivism,’ which refers to the simple reflex of clicking the ‘like’ button on a post, to imply support for the cause in question. Importantly, the main difference between net-activism and slacktivism relates to how net-activism actively seeks to bring about real change in the world, and grant enabling forms of visibility. In contrast, slacktivism merely grants a false sense of participant gratification to its exponents, which is largely devoid of tangible results or a deep commitment to a cause. Slacktivism also generates hypervisibility, which often catapults a subject into becoming ‘viral,’ but often leaves said subject forgotten after the fleeting nature of algorithmic conditioning. Furthermore, considering both net-activism and slacktivism, the main differentiation is as follows: the former is often successfully converted into real and meaningful participation and response, whereas the latter can be, and often is, an empty, inefficient, and usually even harmful response to serious socio-political events.

1.7. Overview of Chapters

This dissertation begins by introducing the central themes of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility within the context of digital activism. It outlines the research objectives, the significance of the study, and the methodological approaches employed to explore these complex dynamics in contemporary society.

In the first chapter, the exploration of the study’s paradigm of visibility is initiated, focusing on how algorithms govern participation by determining what is visible and what remains obscured. This section draws on Taina Bucher’s insights on algorithmic governance and highlights how digital platforms shape societal perceptions, referencing key thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

The second chapter critically investigates the role of algorithms in regulating visibility across major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. It analyses the influence of algorithmic gatekeeping on which voices are amplified or silenced, as well as the ethical implications surrounding algorithmic bias and its broader societal impact.

In the third chapter, the focus shifts to the intersection of visibility, power, and identity. This chapter delves into how power dynamics shape the experiences of individuals and groups in the digital realm, discussing concepts of recognition and

representation. It emphasises the struggles for visibility faced by marginalised communities and the ways in which they negotiate their identities within systemic inequalities.

The fourth chapter presents case studies of prominent digital activism movements, such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. It illustrates how these movements leverage visibility to effect social change, evaluating the successes and challenges activists encounter while navigating the complexities of digital visibility, along with the ramifications of algorithmic control on their efforts.

Finally, the fifth chapter synthesises the findings of the research, reflecting on the implications of visibility dynamics for contemporary activism and social justice. It suggests avenues for future research, emphasising the necessity for continued critical engagement with the intersection of technology, visibility, and power in shaping societal narratives.

CHAPTER 2: THE VISIBILITY COMPLEX

Foucault (1975):

“Power operates through the control of visibility and the construction of knowledge, shaping what is seen, known, and valued in society.”

In today's digital era, the notions of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility have evolved, becoming deeply intertwined with the algorithms that govern our online interactions. From the philosophical foundations of power dynamics to the complexities of digital platforms, the dynamics surrounding visibility in modern society are intricate and multifaceted. As individuals and communities navigate the digital landscape, they encounter algorithmic gatekeepers that dictate which content receives prominence, is suppressed, or fades into obscurity. This chapter delves into the complex relationship between visibility and algorithms across various social media platforms, illuminating how these digital systems shape our perceptions, interactions, and societal narratives. By scrutinising the algorithms of prominent platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, alongside discussions of social and cultural erasure, contemporary Panopticism, and algorithmic bias, this chapter explores the mechanisms through which visibility is established, contested, and regulated in the digital age. Adopting a critical perspective, it aims to uncover the ramifications of algorithmic gatekeeping on digital visibility, highlighting the biases, inequalities, and power dynamics inherent in today's online environments.

2.1. Degrees of Visibility: Physical, Philosophical, and Sociological Dimensions

The concept of visibility includes within itself a multiplicity of contexts and definitions, ranging from the physical, to the philosophical, sociological, and digital. At its core, the definition of visibility can, as an umbrella statement, be seen as the *quality* or *state* of being visible. Therefore, an important notion, especially within the context of this study, is to note that being visible has much to do with the *quality* of visibility – meaning that

visibility, instead of being a binary concept, exists in varying degrees. In this study, these degrees of being visible will be distinguished as visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility. By starting with an exploration of visibility in the physical realm, we can establish a foundation from which to extend our analysis into philosophical, sociological, and digital domains. This approach allows us to grasp the intricate dynamics of visibility and its nuanced implications across different spheres of human experience and interaction.

Within a physical context, being visible represents “a complex property of the physical environment, involving such factors as illumination, the presence of obstacles, and the distance between an observer and an object of interest” (Perkins 1992, 40). Moreover, being physically visible is a core characteristic of objects, individuals, and groups, since they can be directly, physically observed – this is, subsequently, an especially important aspect of our everyday perception of the world. Notably, physical visibility can be influenced by various factors, including lighting conditions, distance, transparency, and the presence of obstacles. For instance, if an object is obstructed by another object, it may not be physically visible from a particular vantage point.

Accordingly, in everyday life, physical visibility, also acknowledged by philosophers of optics such as Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen), is often used to describe the state of being seen or noticed by others. Ibn al-Haytham, often regarded as the father of modern optics, made groundbreaking contributions to the study of light and vision. His influential work, *Book of Optics (Kitab al-Manazir)*, laid the foundation for understanding how light interacts with surfaces and how we perceive the world (Ibn al-Haytham 1989; Smith 2001). Philosophers of optics, including Alhazen and others studied by Lindberg (1976), contributed significantly to understanding the mechanics of visibility by addressing how light interacts with objects and observers, and how this process shapes perception. This distinction is important because visibility within this context is synonymous with being perceived.

This idea of perception becomes increasingly important because it alludes to the notion that visibility goes much further than its biological and pragmatic understanding. Of course, physical visibility is a relatively well-understood concept. However, in tandem with perception, which already moves in the realm of sociopsychology beyond physical visibility, the term ‘visibility’ also holds significant relevance in both social and philosophical discourse.

In the philosophical realm, visibility is intricately intertwined with notions of consciousness, perception, and reality. Scholars such as Mirzoeff (2011) and Butler (2009) contend that the act of seeing extends beyond mere physical sight, encompassing interpretation and comprehension. Mirzoeff unveils the complexities inherent in human perception and the construction of meaning. Together, they underscore that perception isn't a passive process but rather an active interaction with sensory stimuli, shaping our reality.

Transitioning into the sociological sphere, visibility becomes entangled with power dynamics, representation, and identity. Esteemed scholars such as Butler emphasise the social nuances of visibility, highlighting its correlation with social standing and acknowledgement within a community or society. According to Mohabeer (2022), visibility extends beyond the physical to include these social dimensions, influencing how individuals are recognised and positioned within societal structures. Frey-Heger and Barrett (2021) expand this discussion by addressing visibility as a mechanism of recognition and exposure, particularly in the context of refugee crises, illustrating how visibility can affect individuals' social standing and access to acknowledgement. Here, visibility isn't solely shaped by individual actions but is also influenced by societal norms, prejudices, and structural inequalities.

In this context, certain groups or individuals may find their visibility dictated by dominant narratives and prevailing power structures, often leading to their marginalisation or underrepresentation. Consequently, visibility emerges as a pivotal battleground in the struggle for social justice and equitable representation. Marginalised communities frequently advocate for heightened visibility as a means of challenging entrenched power dynamics and securing acknowledgment within society.

Furthermore, by synthesising the insights of Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1994), Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look* (2011), and Butler's *Frames of War* (2009), a profound comprehension of the philosophical and sociological dimensions of visibility is attained. Together, these scholars underscore the intricate interplay between perception, power, representation, and identity, highlighting the pivotal role of visibility in shaping our comprehension of the world and our position within it. The understanding of visibility from a philosophical standpoint, as explored in Mitchell's work, involves delving into the intricate aspects of human perception and the construction of meaning. Meanwhile,

Mirzoeff and Butler examine visibility in the sociological context, where it becomes tied to issues of power, representation, and identity. Within social frameworks, visibility often becomes linked to an individual's social status and their capacity to be recognised and acknowledged within a specific community or society. Consequently, visibility emerges as a key factor in struggles for representation and social justice, as marginalised or underrepresented groups, as noted by Mirzoeff and Butler, often seek greater visibility to challenge existing power structures and attain recognition.

Furthermore, the philosophical and sociological concepts of visibility are closely intertwined with the notion of recognition. Recognition, in this sense, pertains to the act of acknowledging individuals as equals and respected members of society. The recognition of one's identity, experiences, and contributions play a crucial role in shaping individual and collective self-worth, as well as influencing the distribution of power within social systems. Building upon this understanding, and in congruence with this study, the idea of visibility and recognition is made up of an amalgamation of perception, interpretation, understanding, power, representation, and identity.

In order to further grasp the philosophical significance of visibility, and its most prominent symptom, recognition, one can turn to the ideas and writings of German philosopher, Georg Hegel. Hegel argued that recognition is essential for human development, and in his most influential work, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1910) Hegel argued that recognition is central to human consciousness, as well as social interaction. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel [1807] 2018, 229) writes, “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognised’”, meaning, essentially that recognition is a fundamental human need, which arises from our desire for validation from others. According to this understanding, recognition, at its most basic level, involves “the process of mutual acknowledgement between two individuals, whereby each recognises the other as an independent self” (Zurn 2011, 71). This recognition allows individuals to establish a sense of identity and belonging within a larger social context.

Hegel delves into the intricate dynamics of recognition within society, emphasising its intimate connection with power dynamics and social hierarchies. According to him, recognition is far from neutral; it's heavily influenced by prevailing

societal structures (Hegel [1807] 2018, 111). The dominant group dictates the terms of recognition, while marginalised groups struggle to secure acknowledgment (Hegel [1807] 2018, 143). Hegel's insights underscore the crucial role of interpersonal relationships in shaping individual self-awareness and social identity, a perspective that still continues to influence contemporary thought (Hegel [1807] 2018, 147).

Hegel's philosophical inquiries into recognition and perception can be intricately linked to the concepts of visibility. Visibility, in both philosophical and social contexts, involves how individuals and ideas are perceived and understood within a given framework. Hegel's assertion that perception is a dynamic, active process where the mind engages with the external world (Hegel [1807] 2018, 111) aligns with the philosophical concept of visibility. Seeing is not just about physical sight but also about interpretation and understanding, echoing Hegel's idea that “the way we take in perception is no longer something that just happens to us like sense-certainty; on the contrary, it is logically necessitated” (Hegel [1807] 2018, 111).

Hegel's idea that perception involves grasping both the particular and universal aspects of an object parallels the sociological dimensions of visibility. In society, visibility is shaped by how individuals and groups are recognised and represented. This resonates with Hegel's notion that “the object is perceived as both a particular and a universal; as a universal the object participates in being, in coming into being; as a particular the object is non-being” (Hegel [1807] 2018, 143). Just as perception allows objects to transcend their particularities and become part of a universal principle, marginalised groups in society seek recognition and inclusion within broader social frameworks.

Moreover, Hegel's concept of appearance highlights its role in mediating understanding. He states, “appearance is the meeting of being and understanding, through the self-determination of being” (Hegel [1807] 2018, 147). This underscores how visibility in society reveals the underlying power dynamics and social structures. The interplay between visibility and invisibility, or being seen and not seen, reflects the complex nature of social recognition and the struggle for equitable representation.

Hegel's insights into perception and recognition offer profound perspectives on the concept of visibility. His emphasis on the active engagement of the mind with the external world, the simultaneous grasping of particular and universal aspects, and the

role of appearance in mediating understanding, all underscore the richness and complexity of visibility in shaping our consciousness and social reality. Through Hegel's philosophical lens, we can better understand how visibility operates not just as a sensory phenomenon but as a fundamental process through which meaning, recognition, and social identity are constructed.

For example, Charles Taylor's work puts forth the idea that visibility is a crucial aspect of personhood and identity, as it enables the individual to be recognised by others in a meaningful way (Taylor 1994). Taylor, like Hegel, believes that the philosophical and social concept of visibility is closely related to the concept of recognition, seeing as recognition refers to the notion that individuals must be acknowledged as equal and respected members of society (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1995; Butler 2006, 15). Axel Honneth, a German philosopher and Professor for Social Philosophy, also emphasises the importance of recognition in shaping social relationships and argues that it is an essential component of social integration, as well as a basic human need (Honneth 1995). Thus, a person's visibility is an essential aspect of their social identity as it enables them to fully participate in public life (Young 2003, 6). In this sense, visibility (and recognition) becomes a form of social justice that enables individuals to access opportunities and resources that would otherwise be denied to them (Ahmed 2014, 47). Accordingly, these philosophical perspectives emphasise the importance of visibility and recognition in fostering equitable and inclusive societies, and are infused with many different aspects of both social and political life.

Visibility can, therefore, be viewed as the foundation for addressing a fundamental human need. The ways in which people are recognised can shape their quality of life and determine a collective or inner sense of value, or lack thereof. This can, for example, range from the applause from an audience, to receiving praise from a mentor, to fighting for equality as a marginalised group, or being rejected because of a criminal record. Subsequently, because of this fundamental urge to be fairly represented and recognised, visibility plays a significant role not only in the formation of individual identity and representation, but also in the collective evolution of human culture.

Furthermore, although the philosophical and sociological definitions largely intersect, where philosophical visibility predominantly highlights the importance of representation and recognition, social visibility often refers to the degree to which

individuals or groups are recognised and valued in society. These degrees of visibility can be determined by a range of factors, including race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and class. These factors can intersect in complex ways, leading to different levels of visibility for different groups – for example, women and people of colour have historically been marginalised and underrepresented in various social, economic, and political institutions (Crenshaw 1989, 1245). This has resulted in their invisibility in society and has limited their opportunities to access resources and participate in decision-making processes. In contrast, white men have historically enjoyed a high degree of visibility, often being overrepresented in positions of power and influence across various domains, including politics, media, and academia. As Dyer (1997) argues in *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, whiteness has frequently been positioned as the unmarked norm, granting white men the privilege of being seen as universal and authoritative. This overrepresentation is further reinforced by systemic structures that perpetuate inequities in representation and access to power (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Consequently, their dominance in visible positions has contributed to the marginalisation or invisibility of other groups, framing the dynamics of visibility as deeply rooted in societal hierarchies and historical privilege. Thus, by employing an exploration of visibility showcasing the dynamics of racial and gender bias within sociological contexts, one can gain an enhanced comprehension regarding the varying degrees of visibility, namely invisibility and hypervisibility.

2.1.1. The Plight of Invisibility: Insights from Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man”

Firstly, when exploring invisibility, the work of Ralph Ellison and his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, may be useful. Ellison’s novel explores the experiences of an African American man who is struggling to find his place in society during the 1930s and 1940s in the United States, and the novel is narrated by an unnamed protagonist who refers to himself as an ‘invisible man.’ This character is a young, educated Black man who grew up in the South and went to New York City in pursuit of opportunity. However, he quickly realises that despite his education and ambition, he is invisible to the white-dominated society around him (Ellison 1952). Through his encounters with the various situations and characters in the novel, the narrator is subjected to prejudice and violence, from both

white individuals and from members of his own community. He also grapples with questions of identity and purpose, as he tries to find a way to live authentically in a society that refuses to see him as a whole person. Relatedly, Ellison created a narrative largely relevant to the aforementioned concepts of recognition and representation, and how the socio-political factors which inform visibility are at the core of these issues. When applied as a metaphor to the struggle of various marginalised groups for visibility, recognition, and representation, the ‘invisible man’ can be seen as representative of these groups in a larger social context – especially, within a more modern context, in reference to digital visibility, which will be further explored in the oncoming research.

Nathaniel Rich provides some guidance and critique that sheds light on Ellison’s protagonist’s journey of self-discovery. According to Rich (2017), Ellison’s hero embarks on a process of negation, where he explores his identity by rejecting the societal norms and expectations imposed upon him. Through his encounters and experiences, the narrator becomes disenchanted and disgusted with the oppressive nature of society, leading him to a profound realisation of his own powerlessness. This recognition of his limited agency within the social structure becomes a catalyst for his search for identity and purpose. As the narrator undergoes an ongoing process of disillusionment, he begins to understand that in order to establish a genuine sense of self and find meaning in his life and community, he must actively forge his own identity. This entails breaking free from the normative and hegemonic definitions of race, class, and personhood that confine and marginalise him. The narrator realises that progress and personal growth lie in the act of self-recognition and the cultivation of an authentic identity that transcends societal expectations.

However, while Ellison’s protagonist often embodies the marginalising effects of invisibility, the novel also subtly acknowledges that invisibility can be more than a disempowering condition. Scholars such as Brighenti (2007) argue that invisibility can be strategically wielded as a form of resistance, allowing individuals to evade oppressive systems of surveillance and domination. In this sense, invisibility enables a kind of autonomy, wherein individuals or groups operate beyond the reach of hegemonic powers. For example, the narrator’s retreat from society into invisibility at the end of the novel can be read not only as an act of despair but also as a reclamation of agency, a refusal to participate in systems that dehumanise and exploit. This dual nature of

invisibility – as both marginalising and empowering – adds complexity to its conceptualisation and highlights its contextual variability, which will be further examined in Chapter Four.

The significance of recognising one's individuality is eloquently reinforced in the Epilogue, where the narrator reflects on the consequences of invisibility. The narrator says that “when one is invisible, he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending on who happens to be looking through him at the time” (Ellison 1952, 444). In this, he expresses how being rendered invisible distorts his perception of moral values, and he realises how the shifting nature of these concepts is determined by the perspectives and biases of those who observe him, emphasising the complex subjectivity of societal judgment and the malleability of moral standards.

Through these insights, readers can discern that a central aim of the novel is to convey the chaotic disillusionment and obscured development of identity that accompany the experience of sociocultural invisibility. Ellison's portrayal of the narrator's journey highlights the dehumanising effects of societal marginalisation and the profound impact it has on one's search for selfhood. By exploring the themes of powerlessness, identity construction, and the distortion of moral values, Ellison invites readers to critically examine the social forces that shape individual identity and the necessity of self-recognition in navigating a complex and unjust world. Accordingly, we find a representative within Ellison's protagonist for the plight of invisibility and a directory for understanding invisibility as a concept within the context of this study.

2.1.2. Navigating the Paradoxes of Hypervisibility: Amplification, Scrutiny, and Marginalisation

The final degree of visibility, *hypervisibility*, is a concept that has gained significant attention in contemporary discourse on identity and social visibility. A relatively new term, *hypervisibility* was coined by both activists and scholars, such as Michele Wallace

(1990), Bell Hooks ⁴(1989 and 1992), Frantz Fanon ⁵(1967), Rinaldo Walcott ⁶(2016), and many more, in an attempt to explain the experience of heightened visibility and surveillance – particularly as experienced by marginalised individuals and groups. The term thus encompasses the phenomenon where certain identities or attributes become overly visible and are subject to scrutiny and stereotype. This degree of visibility is often disproportionate and can lead to increased vulnerability and marginalisation. In this regard, hypervisibility can be defined as not simply being seen or perceived, but being seen in ways that “constrain, stigmatise, and limit agency” (Chan 2016). In effect, hypervisibility represents the heightened visibility of marginalised individuals/groups in the public sphere, often resulting from the intersection of various social, cultural, and technological factors.

Moreover, hypervisibility serves as a representative of the paradoxical nature of visibility, where increased presence can lead to both positive and negative consequences (Hill 2018). As scholar Amara Hill aptly puts it, “Hypervisibility means being seen, but not necessarily being understood or respected” (Hill 2018). Thus, in contrast to the often-positive connotations of well-represented and well-balanced social visibility, hypervisibility can “render individuals and communities overly conspicuous, vulnerable to surveillance, and open to exploitation” (Caswell 2019). Correlatively, the amplified visibility that comes with hypervisibility often leads to heightened scrutiny, increased exposure to stereotypes and prejudices, and a loss of agency in controlling one's own narrative. While hypervisibility may provide some visibility and recognition, it frequently comes at the cost of autonomy and over-exposure. Thus, the concept of hypervisibility highlights the complexities of visibility dynamics and serves as a reminder that excessive visibility can have profound negative implications for individuals and communities.

⁴ A prominent cultural critic and feminist theorist, Bell Hooks has written extensively about the hypervisibility of Black bodies, particularly in the context of race, gender, and representation.

⁵ In his seminal work "Black Skin, White Masks," Fanon (1967) explores the psychological impact of racial visibility and the colonial gaze, which can be related to the concept of hypervisibility.

⁶ A cultural theorist who has engaged with the idea of hypervisibility in relation to Black queer identities, examining how hypervisibility can lead to both recognition and surveillance.

2.2. Visibility and Power: Unravelling the Dynamics of Panopticism, Recognition, and Resistance

The concept of visibility, within the scope of this study, cannot be separated from the concept of power. Based on the understanding of visibility being linked to perception, recognition, and representation, one can emphasise the importance of social visibility as a fundamental aspect of societal dynamics, hierarchies, and relationships of power. As explored earlier, the theory of Panopticism offers valuable insights into the intricate relationship between visibility and power. Furthermore, by examining the concept of visibility through the lens of Panopticism, we gain a deeper understanding of how visibility is used as a tool for the exercise and perpetuation of power, and how individuals navigate and negotiate their visibility within social structures. By exploring these visibility-linked power dynamics, we gain valuable insights into the complex ways in which power operates within society and the ways in which visibility can be both empowering and oppressive.

Initially, Panopticism refers to a system where subjects are exposed to constant surveillance, without knowing exactly when they are being watched. In this case, the threat of being observed serves as the catalyst for psychological effects, leading to self-discipline and conformity. The uncertainty of visibility becomes a mechanism of power as individuals regulate their behaviour to align with societal norms, avoiding potential punishment or judgment (Foucault 1977). This internal regulation allows those in positions of monitoring and observing, especially those who can control what is visible and to whom, to exert significant control over the shaping of perception and representation—not only of individual subjects but also of groups, concepts, and socio-political or cultural movements. Foucault's theory of Panopticism thus serves as a foundation for understanding the link between power and visibility, especially when examined from a more evolved and current societal perspective, as will become clear later in this chapter.

Foucault (1975) argues that “power operates through the control of visibility and the construction of knowledge, shaping what is seen, known, and valued in society.” This theory has avidly manifested in today's world. In more contemporary social contexts, visibility undoubtedly plays an even more crucial role in various power dynamics.

Institutions such as schools, workplaces, and public spaces employ various mechanisms of observation and surveillance, such as the proliferation of CCTV cameras, social media monitoring, and online tracking, all of which serve to further intensify visibility (Lyon 2003, 246). This constant presence of surveillance mechanisms has allowed the ongoing dance between visibility and observation to infiltrate almost all spheres of life, both professional and personal. Visibility, as such, has become “a mechanism through which power is exercised and maintained. It is not just about being seen but also about being surveilled, disciplined, and controlled by the gaze of those in power” (Mulvey 1975, 11). Additionally, one must actively consider the power held by those who determine how and why visibility is granted, regulated, or withheld. This is essential to understanding the nuances of visibility because “those who control the means of representation have the power to shape how individuals and groups are perceived and understood.” This is because “power is not simply a possession but a network of relationships and discourses that operate through visibility” (West 1990, 39).

To gain a clearer understanding of the power behind visibility and the human element therein, one can refer back to Hegel's theories on recognition. In agreement with Foucault, Hegel's concept of recognition highlights the inherent link between power, visibility, and identity formation. According to Hegel, “recognition by others is essential for the development of self-consciousness and the attainment of social standing” (Hegel [1807] 2018). In this framework, “visibility becomes a crucial mechanism through which power is asserted and maintained, as those who are recognised hold the power to shape the narratives and norms that govern social relations” (Hegel [1807] 2018). This connects Hegel's concept of recognition to power dynamics and visibility, emphasising how the recognition and acknowledgment by others contribute to the construction of individual and collective identities, as well as the distribution of power within society. Coupled with Foucault's theories on power and surveillance, we can further analyse the intricate relationship between recognition, power dynamics, visibility, and control mechanisms within societal structures.

Foucault's theories highlight the pervasive presence of power in various forms, including disciplinary power and the panopticon, where surveillance becomes a tool for maintaining social order and exerting control. In this context, recognition operates as a mechanism through which power can be exercised and maintained. Individuals and

groups who possess the power to grant or withhold recognition hold the ability to shape and define the identities of others, reinforcing existing power structures or challenging and subverting them. Furthermore, the act of being seen and acknowledged by others not only validates one's existence but also influences their access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility. Thus, recognition, power dynamics, visibility, and surveillance intersect in complex ways, shaping the social fabric and determining the distribution of power within society.

With the modernisation of society, culture, politics, and technology, Panopticism has evolved into a system that “relies on the normalisation of surveillance, where individuals willingly participate in their own monitoring and discipline.” This is largely due to “the ubiquity of smartphones and social media platforms,” which have facilitated this process, as people are now willing to “share personal information and engage in self-surveillance” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 619). The allure of social media platforms, for instance, lies in their ability to foster a sense of connectivity and visibility, leading people to willingly participate in a perpetual cycle of monitoring and scrutiny. This shift highlights how the evolving dynamics of power and surveillance intersect with the individual's desire for recognition, social validation, and participation, as analysed through Hegel's work. As individuals willingly offer up their personal lives for public consumption, the boundaries between private and public become blurred, and the mechanisms of control and power operate more subtly, exerting influence through the internalisation of surveillance norms and practices (Fuchs 2017).

Nicholas Mirzoeff's contributions to the understanding of visibility and power dynamics extend this discussion by focusing on visual culture and the politics of representation. Mirzoeff (2011) argues that visibility is a key battleground where power relations are both established and contested. He posits that “visibility is not a pure perception of the visual but a multisensory understanding of the world that is historically specific and culturally inflected” (Mirzoeff 2011, 6). This perspective underscores the idea that what is visible, and how it is interpreted, is deeply intertwined with power structures and cultural contexts.

Mirzoeff further explores the notion of “counter-visibility,” which refers to the ways marginalised groups can resist dominant visual narratives and create alternative representations that challenge the status quo. This concept aligns with Foucault's and

Hegel's theories by emphasising how visibility can be a site of both oppression and resistance. According to Mirzoeff, counter-visibility involves "the right to look, to contest the authority of the visual regime and to assert a different perspective" (Mirzoeff 2011, 479). This approach highlights the potential for visibility to empower marginalised groups by allowing them to reclaim their narratives and assert their presence in the public sphere.

Considering that visibility exists in various stages, it is also important to understand how power links to both invisibility and hypervisibility, respectively. This is important because "power operates through systems of visibility ... invisibility [and hypervisibility], dictating who is seen and heard, and whose experiences are rendered invisible" (Mohanty 1988, 75). Firstly, within the discourse of visibility and power, the concept of invisibility emerges as a crucial counterpart that is intrinsically linked to powerlessness. Invisibility, as previously discussed, refers to the state of being unseen, unrecognised, or disregarded within social structures and systems of power. An important dynamic to keep in mind is that invisibility often arises as a consequence of societal norms, prejudices, and hierarchies which prioritise certain identities or characteristics while marginalising others. Those rendered invisible are denied access to resources, opportunities, and social recognition, which in turn perpetuates their powerlessness. The absence of visibility also means a lack of representation and influence within decision-making processes, leaving individuals at the mercy of those in positions of power. Moreover, invisibility is closely tied to the dynamics of surveillance and control. In a society that thrives on visibility, being rendered invisible can result in a loss of autonomy and subjectivity.

Invisibility also manifests in the form of social and cultural erasure, which is "a process by which certain individuals or groups are excluded from representation, rendering their experiences and contributions invisible in narratives, histories, and media portrayals" (Puar 2017, 9). This erasure further reinforces power imbalances, perpetuating dominant narratives and maintaining the status quo (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). In sum, invisibility and powerlessness are deeply interconnected. The denial of visibility deprives individuals of agency, recognition, and the ability to challenge oppressive structures. It establishes and perpetuates a power imbalance that sustains social injustices and reinforces systems of control. By perpetuating invisibility, societal

structures continue to marginalise certain groups and maintain their dominance, hindering progress towards a more equitable and inclusive society. This is important to understand when delving into the dynamics that exist within the fluctuant nature of visibility.

2.3. The Digital Visibility Complex: Navigating Recognition, Representation, and Algorithmic Control

In the digital realm, visibility remains an important concept that continues to intersect with philosophical and sociological understandings. Having laid the groundwork for comprehending visibility within philosophical and sociological frameworks, we can now delve into analysing the digital visibility complex specifically. Digital visibility refers to “the degree to which individuals, content, or online activities are perceptible, discoverable, and accessible within digital platforms and networks. It encompasses both intentional acts of self-presentation and the broader dynamics of visibility and recognition within digital spaces” (Gillespie 2014, 154). In other words, as society becomes increasingly interconnected through online platforms and social media networks, the concept of visibility has taken on expanded dimensions, and within these expansions, there has been a paradigm shift in how individuals and communities interact and construct their social identities within the digital age. Furthermore, “digital visibility encompasses the ways in which individuals and groups are represented, recognised, and made visible within online spaces,” (boyd 2014, 39), which is essential in terms of understanding the dynamics of online participation and influence (which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3).

In our digital age, social visibility has evolved into digital visibility, marking a profound shift in how individuals and ideas are portrayed and perceived online. This encompasses various dimensions, spanning personal branding to the promotion of social causes. While it presents new avenues for connection and advocacy, it also introduces hurdles such as information overload and misrepresentation. A grasp of digital visibility is crucial for adeptly navigating the intricate terrain of the online sphere. Facilitated by technological progress and the interconnectivity of social platforms, digital visibility offers a potent means for individuals to assert their identities online and

garner recognition across diverse audiences. Through platforms like social media, forums, and virtual communities, individuals can showcase their thoughts, talents, and experiences to a global audience, transcending geographical constraints. Yet, digital visibility has also become integral to modern social existence, offering avenues for self-expression and connection while posing challenges related to privacy, authenticity, and managing online interactions. Therefore, comprehending how visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility manifest in digital spaces provides valuable insights into the dynamics of online visibility.

It is important to note that, to be digitally visible means more than just to occupy space on digital platforms. Rather, it means that there is a semi-constant or constant interaction taking place between netizens and a person, company, group, or movement's content. In other words, digital visibility encompasses not only being present in the virtual space but also actively participating and engaging with others. It reflects the intricate interplay between technology, culture, and social relationships, shaping how individuals are seen, acknowledged, and validated within the digital realm. Therefore, to have digital visibility in its balanced form, within the context of this study, means that an entity has online recognition, representation, and various forms of engagement.

Moreover, having digital visibility, and being well-represented online (and, to a certain degree, being digitally omnipresent within certain spheres), can bring several benefits – one of which is an increase in various opportunities. This is because digital visibility is a powerful tool that allows individuals and groups to amplify their reach, attract a larger audience, build brand recognition, engage with their target market, and forge meaningful connections. More benefits of digital visibility would be knowledge sharing and influence, which allow people to stay well-informed on any political or social issues/news. Notably, digital visibility also involves “the construction and dissemination of digital identities, where certain voices and perspectives may be amplified or marginalised” (boyd 2014, 39) – synchronously, the idea of being ‘marginalised’ or ‘amplified’ aligns with the concepts of digital invisibility and hypervisibility.

On the one hand, for instance, digital invisibility refers to the state in which “individuals, groups, or content are marginalised, overlooked, or intentionally rendered unseen within digital spaces” (Nakamura 2021, 9). This process involves “the erasure or

lack of representation, recognition, or access to resources and opportunities within digital platforms and networks” (Nakamura 2021, 9) – a direct juxtaposition to the advantages of digital visibility. Thus, while digital visibility opens doors to expanded reach, audience engagement, and professional opportunities, digital invisibility entails being excluded or ignored within the digital realm. It perpetuates inequalities and hinders individuals or groups from fully participating in the digital landscape, limiting their ability to express themselves, share their perspectives, and access resources or opportunities. The consequences of digital invisibility can be far-reaching, reinforcing existing power imbalances and further marginalising those already on the fringes of society.

On the other hand, digital hypervisibility refers to “the heightened and exaggerated visibility of individuals, groups, or content within digital spaces,” and this process involves “being highly visible, often due to factors such as viral content, online activism, or intense scrutiny” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 103). Moreover, advancements in technology and the proliferation of social media platforms have significantly impacted hypervisibility, allowing the potential to amplify marginalised voices and challenge dominant narratives, yet also exposing individuals to heightened levels of scrutiny and harassment, and risking the eroding of longevity. Digital hypervisibility can result in positive and negative consequences, “including increased attention, exposure, or vulnerability” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 103). This kind of digital hypervisibility is deeply entangled with power dynamics and social hierarchies, and can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, “it can bring attention to social issues and mobilise collective action,” but on the other hand, “it can reinforce stereotypes, objectification, and tokenism” (Hooks 1992). This delicate balance between visibility and the risk of perpetuating harmful narratives underscores the complex nature of digital hypervisibility. As a result of this fragile balance, marginalised groups striving for greater representation and recognition often find themselves caught between the desire for visibility and the pitfalls accompanying it.

Referring back to Foucault’s theories on Panopticism, and the modernisation of these theories, one can further acknowledge how digital visibility, platforms, and technologies enable “the collection, aggregation, and analysis of vast amounts of personal data, creating a form of ‘digital panopticon’” in which we willingly participate (Zuboff 2019, 5). This concept of a digital panopticon underscores the pervasive

surveillance and monitoring facilitated by digital participation. With the rise of digital platforms and technologies, our actions and behaviours are constantly observed, recorded, and analysed, contributing to a sense of constant visibility and self-regulation. Digital representation, whether visible or hypervisible, therefore, acts as a catalyst for the functioning of the digital panopticon, where our voluntary participation in online activities and the sharing of personal data allows for the consolidation of power and control. The very nature of digital visibility, while offering certain advantages, such as expanded reach and opportunities, also creates the conditions for the surveillance apparatuses to flourish, perpetuating the dynamics of the panopticon in the digital realm. Importantly, this idea of modern Panopticism and digital visibility is largely facilitated through one key factor: the algorithm, which also serves as the catalyst for digital visibility and the gatekeeping of its different forms.

2.4. Algorithms and Computer-Generated Bias

Digital visibility is intricately connected to algorithms, as they play a “significant role in determining what content is shown, promoted, or suppressed within digital platforms” (Gillespie 2018, 80). Algorithms thus virtually shape the visibility “of individuals, groups, and content by influencing their discoverability, reach, and prominence in users' feeds or search results” (Gillespie 2018, 80). Moreover, “the algorithms and platforms that shape our online experiences often play a role in determining who is visible and who remains invisible, thereby influencing access to information, resources, and opportunities” (Noble 2018, 5). These digital gatekeepers, which are algorithms within themselves, wield significant influence over the visibility of individuals, groups, and content in the digital landscape through their algorithms and recommendation systems. However, it's imperative to recognise that this authority isn't impartial; rather, it has the potential to perpetuate biases, uphold prevailing inequalities, and magnify the voices and viewpoints of those already privileged in society. This is because algorithms play a central role in “the contemporary panoptic assemblage, as they sort, filter, and prioritise information, shaping what is made visible and what remains invisible” – in other words, “they act as the 'eyes' of the panopticon, regulating individuals' online activities”

(Crawford and Schultz 2014, 13)⁷. Furthermore, algorithms operate by “constantly monitoring and analysing individuals' digital traces. [They] feed on the data we generate, turning [the data] into actionable knowledge that shapes our visibility and influences the choices available to us” (Tufekci 2014, 10).

In light of this, and in order to unpack the role of algorithms in digital visibility, one must first have a sound frame of reference for how they function. Essentially, algorithms are sets of rules or procedures which “transform input data into desired outputs. They rely on mathematical and computational techniques to process and analyse data, making predictions, recommendations, or decisions based on patterns and correlations” (O'Neil 2016, 5). Algorithms operate by “processing vast amounts of data, searching for patterns, and using statistical models to make predictions or classifications,” and, furthermore, they are designed to “optimise certain objectives, such as maximising engagement, relevance, or profitability” (boyd and Crawford 2012, 668). As such, algorithms are predominantly designed to process data, identify patterns, and make decisions or recommendations (Lohr 2018). Furthermore, these complex computational tools rely on a combination of mathematical models, statistical analysis, and predefined rules to analyse input data and generate output based on specific goals or objectives (Lohr 2018). They play a crucial role in filtering and curating content, providing personalised recommendations, and optimising user experiences.

Since algorithms are not neutral or objective entities because they are developed and implemented by humans, it means they can inherit biases, reflect societal values, and impact decision-making processes. This flaw in the algorithmic makeup is called algorithmic bias, and it refers to “the systematic and unfair outcomes that result from the use of biased data, flawed algorithms, or discriminatory design choices” (Noble 2018, 9). Algorithmic bias is concerning because, if left unchecked, “these biases can be amplified and perpetuated, leading to unequal treatment and unfair outcomes” (Diakopoulos 2019, 19). In other words, algorithmic bias can contribute to the

⁷ Some important texts that have been published recently on the biases of algorithms: *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* by Ruha Benjamin (2019); *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* by Safiya Umoja Noble (2018); *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* by Cathy O'Neil (2016); *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* by Frank Pasquale (2015); *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* by Meredith Broussard (2018); *Technically Wrong: Sexist Apps, Biased Algorithms, and Other Threats of Toxic Tech* by Sara Wachter-Boettcher (2017).

reinforcement of existing inequalities and discrimination in various domains, and, relatedly, it can disproportionately impact marginalised communities, perpetuate stereotypes, and further entrench social disparities. The use of algorithms thus has significant ethical and social implications, as they are increasingly being used to automate decision-making processes that affect people's lives.

Furthermore, algorithms can be given a clearer context through analysing their role in our experience with social media and various social networking platforms. One example of how an algorithm is used in social media is the algorithm that determines the content shown in a user's feed. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok employ complex algorithms to curate and personalise the content that appears on users' feeds based on a range of factors such as “user engagement, relevance, and personalisation to determine the content that is displayed to users” (Lampe et al. 2014, 321). These algorithms consider a user's past behaviour, such as the posts they have interacted with, liked, or shared, as well as their demographic information, interests, and social connections – all in order to provide them with content that is more likely to capture their attention (Lampe et al. 2014, 321).

Additionally, the algorithms associated with social networking sites analyse the data extracted from user interactions and engagements to prioritise and display content predicted to be most relevant and engaging to the user (Bakshy et al. 2012; Cramer et al. 2011). These algorithms consider several factors, including the recency of posts, the popularity of content among the user's connections, and the user's demonstrated preferences. Moreover, engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares are taken into account by the algorithm to assess the quality and relevance of the content. By employing these factors and metrics, social media algorithms aim to personalise the user experience and optimise content delivery to enhance user satisfaction and interaction (Davis et al. 2016; Jørgensen et al. 2019).

However, algorithmic curation can have unintended consequences – for instance, it can create echo chambers. Echo chambers refer to the phenomenon in which social media algorithms “prioritise and reinforce content that aligns with users' existing beliefs and preferences, creating a filter bubble that shields individuals from diverse perspectives and alternative viewpoints” (Pariser 2011, 9). In other words, social media algorithms can contribute to the formation of echo chambers by selectively

exposing users to content that confirms their existing beliefs and preferences, and this can “create a feedback loop where individuals are continuously exposed to similar viewpoints, reinforcing their own biases and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives” (Barberá et al. 2015, 710). This can, in turn, also contribute to the spread of misinformation or amplify certain voices over others, potentially influencing public opinion and shaping users' perspectives. Notably, this also links with digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility, seeing as algorithmic gatekeeping plays a significant role in determining the visibility and exposure of content on social media platforms. Consequently, echo chambers not only restrict the availability of diverse information but also contribute to the spread of misinformation and the amplification of certain voices over others.

In reference to algorithmic gatekeeping, for example, one can look at how, by creating echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs and preferences, social media algorithms contribute to digital invisibility. Digital invisibility, as previously established, refers to the phenomenon where certain perspectives, voices, or marginalised groups may be excluded or underrepresented in the content shown to users. As algorithms prioritise and reinforce content that confirms users' existing beliefs, individuals may become unaware of alternative viewpoints and diverse perspectives, further reinforcing their own biases (Pariser 2011; Barberá et al. 2015).

At the same time, social media algorithms can also contribute to digital hypervisibility. Digital hypervisibility, of course, refers to the overexposure or amplification of certain voices, content, or individuals on social media platforms. When algorithms prioritise popular or highly engaging content, they can inadvertently amplify the visibility of specific voices or perspectives, potentially leading to the dominance of influential figures or the spread of misinformation (Pariser 2011; Barberá et al., 2015). This can influence public opinion and shape users' perspectives, potentially resulting in skewed or imbalanced understandings of various issues. As a result, while algorithmic curating on social media platforms is intended to personalise content and improve user experiences, it certainly facilitates a space where echo chambers are unintentionally created, thus affecting the digital landscape in negative ways.

Another consequence of algorithmic curating and gatekeeping on social media platforms is the potential for content homogenisation. As algorithms prioritise popular and engaging content, there is a risk of reducing the diversity and variety of content available to users (Gillespie 2018, 185). This can lead to a narrowing of perspectives, where unique or niche content may struggle to gain visibility and reach a broader audience. As a result, users may be exposed to a limited range of ideas, opinions, and information. Furthermore, the influence of algorithms on content visibility can have significant real-world implications. For example, in the realm of news consumption, algorithms may prioritise sensationalist or emotionally charged content, as these tend to generate higher engagement (Tufekci 2014, 77). This may result in the spread of misinformation or the prioritisation of clickbait headlines, potentially distorting public discourse and undermining the reliability of information. Additionally, the commercial interests of social media platforms can also impact content visibility, as well as further reinforce algorithmic bias. This is because algorithms often prioritise content from advertisers or influential figures with large followings, further amplifying their visibility and potentially overshadowing content from smaller creators or grassroots movements.

Based on the foundation of biased programming, echo chambers content homogenisation, information distortion, and the amplification of certain voices over others, one can begin to understand the implications of algorithmic bias and its influence on digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility. Acknowledging the multifaceted impacts of algorithmic bias is crucial for fostering a diverse, inclusive, and well-informed online environment. Although algorithms are intended to enhance user experiences through content personalisation, their unintended consequences demand careful consideration.

Furthermore, algorithmic bias can distort information by perpetuating and amplifying existing biases and reinforcing dominant narratives, and, as algorithms prioritise certain content based on engagement metrics, such as likes and shares, they may inadvertently amplify sensationalised or clickbait-style content, overshadowing more nuanced or substantive discussions. This distortion can skew public opinion and lead to a distorted understanding of complex issues.

2.4.1. Unpacking the Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Visibility Dynamics

We can now delve further into the contemporary digital landscape, where social media platforms have become the prominent spaces where people connect, share ideas, and engage in online discourse. However, beneath the surface lies a complex interplay of algorithms that shape our online experiences, and these algorithms, driven by various factors previously discussed, inadvertently introduce biases that can influence the content we see, as well as the visibility of certain individuals or groups. This phenomenon of algorithmic bias manifests itself in different ways across platforms, creating a dynamic spectrum of digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility. When applied to social media in particular, there are many concerning patterns of skewed visibility which come to light across social networking sites.

One of the primary examples of these algorithmic inclinations can be found in the social networking site, Facebook. Facebook's algorithm, known as the 'News Feed' algorithm, is designed to "prioritise content that is likely to generate high user engagement, such as likes, comments, and shares" (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015, 1130). It aims to "deliver content that is relevant and engaging to individual users, based on their past behaviour and interests" (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015, 1130). In other words, the aim of Facebook's algorithm is to prioritise content that generates high user engagement and relevance. This means that it favours content that receives a significant number of likes, comments, and shares. Moreover, Facebook's algorithm "gives preference to content that keeps users on the platform for longer periods of time," as well as "content that sparks emotional reactions, like heartfelt stories or controversial topics" (Roose 2018).

This algorithmic bias on Facebook can result in a range of outcomes regarding digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility. Firstly, it can lead to the visibility of popular content, which is more closely aligned to the algorithms favouring programming, amplifying its reach, and ensuring it appears prominently in users' news feeds. This can benefit individuals, groups, or socio-political topics which already have a significant following or generate prominent levels of engagement. Conversely, based on its visibility priority, it can create a sense of invisibility for less popular or niche content, as it may struggle to gain traction and visibility among a broader audience, in turn sabotaging the exposure and reach of marginalised voices. Furthermore, Facebook's algorithm can contribute to hypervisibility, where certain content or individuals receive an excessive

amount of attention and exposure. This can lead to the amplification of controversial or sensationalist content, potentially overshadowing more nuanced or less attention-grabbing information. Essentially, Facebook's algorithm shapes the digital landscape by favouring engagement-driven content which aligns with attention-grabbing topics, which can both enhance visibility for popular entities and inadvertently perpetuate biases in visibility.

Another platform worth exploring is Instagram. Although both Facebook and Instagram are social media platforms owned by Meta, they differ significantly in their features, user base, and overall functionality. Instagram, for instance, is primarily centred around visual content, enabling users to share photos and videos enhanced by filters, along with features such as Stories, Reels, and IGTV. These visual elements allow Instagram to uniquely reinforce the dynamics of digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility.

While Facebook supports a broader range of content types and interactions, Instagram's emphasis on visual storytelling sets it apart, yet its underlying algorithm operates in a manner similar to Facebook's. Both platforms rely on engagement-based ranking systems designed to maximise user interaction and retention. These algorithms evaluate metrics such as likes, comments, and shares to deliver personalised content tailored to user preferences (Constine 2018). As Mosseri (2018) explains, Instagram's algorithm prioritises "meaningful interactions," mirroring Facebook's approach to fostering user engagement and sustaining active participation.

However, with a pronounced emphasis on visual content, the algorithm fosters hypervisibility for posts that garner elevated levels of likes, comments, and saves, as well as content that encourages user interactions through its dynamic features. This inclination towards visual engagement may enhance visibility for visually captivating and popular content, potentially overshadowing other forms of content or perspectives. Conversely, content that does not align with Instagram's visual-centric focus might face invisibility or reduced visibility, impacting the reach of diverse voices or non-visual content creators. Thus, Instagram's algorithm plays a significant role in shaping digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility on its platform, highlighting the impact of content format and user engagement in determining the content that users see.

Shifting our attention to Twitter, another influential social media platform which is primarily text-based (which has become popular for not only its social features, but also for its reputation for sharing political opinions), we can explore how its algorithm influences the *digital* visibility complex. While Facebook and Instagram prioritise user engagement, Twitter takes a slightly different approach to organising its content. Unlike Facebook's and Instagram's algorithmic feed, Twitter's default timeline displays tweets in reverse chronological order, with the most recent tweets appearing at the top. However, Twitter introduced an algorithmic element called the 'Home' timeline, which can also curate tweets based on user preferences and engagement patterns. Moreover, Twitter's algorithmic timeline "uses machine learning techniques to predict which tweets a user is most likely to engage with and displays them higher in their timeline" (Bovet and Makse 2019, 274). Therefore, content that generates high engagement, sparks conversations, or aligns with the user's interests is more likely to appear prominently on their timeline.

In terms of invisibility, Twitter's algorithm may inadvertently contribute to the reduced visibility of certain content or voices. The fast-paced and real-time nature of Twitter's timeline can make it challenging for less popular or niche content to gain traction and remain visible amidst the constant stream of tweets. Additionally, Twitter's algorithmic feed may prioritise content from verified accounts, influential figures, or popular topics, potentially overshadowing lesser-known voices, or perspectives. Conversely, hypervisibility on Twitter can occur when certain content or individuals receive an extraordinary amount of attention and exposure. Viral tweets, trending hashtags, or controversial discussions can quickly gain momentum and dominate users' timelines, creating a state of hypervisibility. This can both amplify the reach of impactful content and contribute to the amplification of sensationalist or polarising narratives.

Concurrently, what these social media sites and their algorithms have in common with most other social networking algorithms is that they cannot be separated from the biased gatekeeping of visibility. Therefore, the algorithms used by social media platforms exhibit unfair or discriminatory behaviour towards certain individuals or groups, which is an important understanding to grasp when analysing the role of algorithms in what grants visibility, what causes invisibility, and what prompts hypervisibility. Additionally, the

biases seen in these social media platforms can emerge due to various factors, such as biased training data, flawed algorithms, or underlying societal biases.

In elaboration of such societal biases, one can reference racial and ethnic bias, which has become a prominent aspect of algorithmic bias in social media. Research has revealed instances where algorithms used for content moderation disproportionately target or censor posts from marginalised communities, resulting in unequal treatment and the silencing of voices (Eubanks 2018). Similarly, gender bias is another prevalent concern, as algorithms may exhibit biases in ad targeting or reinforce gender stereotypes through content recommendations (Noble 2018). These biases can manifest in the selective display of job ads or the perpetuation of gendered roles and behaviours (Noble 2018). This is concerning because these biases perpetuate systemic inequalities and hinder progress towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

To summarise, the algorithms employed by social media platforms play a significant role in shaping digital visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility. Facebook's algorithm prioritises engaging and attention-grabbing content, leading to the visibility of popular entities while potentially marginalising niche or marginalised voices. Instagram's algorithm, focusing on visual content, enhances the visibility of visually captivating posts but may overlook non-visual content, regardless of the validity of the content. Twitter's algorithm emphasises user engagement can amplify viral content while reducing visibility for lesser-known voices. Furthermore, racial, ethnic, gender, political, and socioeconomic biases can emerge, resulting in unequal treatment, silencing of voices, perpetuation of stereotypes, and exclusionary practices. These biases hinder progress towards an inclusive and equitable society and contribute to the formation of echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. Therefore, understanding and addressing algorithmic bias is crucial for fostering a more diverse, inclusive, and informed digital ecosystem⁸—particularly when applied to content of an urgent or serious

⁸ The dynamics of a digital ecosystem revolve around the interaction between users, platforms, and algorithms, creating a complex environment where visibility, participation, and influence are constantly negotiated. As van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) argue, digital ecosystems function as socio-technical systems, where platforms mediate interactions between users and content through algorithms that prioritise engagement and monetisation. These systems, described as “datafied ecosystems,” integrate user behaviour into feedback loops that influence content delivery and visibility. Furthermore, Gillespie (2018) highlights how platforms shape their ecosystems through algorithmic governance, setting the rules and incentives for participation, which in turn affect the distribution of power and agency within these spaces.

nature, such as socio-political movements, marginalised populations, and important world events.

In retrospect, this chapter has illuminated the complex interplay between visibility, invisibility, hypervisibility, and algorithms in today's digital landscape. Specifically, it has delved into the philosophical roots of power dynamics and examined the real-world effects of algorithmic gatekeeping on social media platforms. Through the lens of social and cultural erasure, we've highlighted how certain individuals and communities experience marginalisation and exclusion from digital narratives, perpetuating existing power imbalances and reinforcing societal disparities. Additionally, we've explored the concept of modern Panopticism, illustrating how algorithms enable widespread surveillance and control online, shaping our behaviours and interactions.

Furthermore, the discussion on algorithmic bias has underscored the ethical and social implications of algorithmic decision-making, revealing how biases contribute to systemic inequalities and hinder progress towards inclusivity. By analysing the algorithms of major platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, it has been shown that digital visibility is both constructed and contested, often marginalising voices and perspectives from underrepresented groups.

In essence, this examination has sparked critical reflection and called for proactive measures to address the biases and power dynamics inherent in algorithmic gatekeeping. It advocates for the creation of a more equitable and inclusive digital environment, one that amplifies diverse voices and promotes meaningful participation for all individuals and communities. Thus, moving forward, the next chapter will delve into the realm of social media activism, exploring how digital platforms have become powerful tools for social change and collective action. By examining the ways in which activists utilise social media to raise awareness, mobilise supporters, and advocate for various causes, we will uncover the transformative potential of online activism in challenging existing power structures and effecting positive change. Through theoretical analyses, we will illuminate the strategies, successes, and challenges faced by social media activists, shedding light on the complex interplay between digital technology, activism, and social change.

CHAPTER 3: DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Safiya Noble (2018):

“The algorithms are not neutral; they reflect the biases of the world we live in. But understanding this opens the door to redesigning them to better serve justice.”

In the following chapter, we will explore the rise and significance of digital activism, a form of modern activism that increasingly relies on the power of the internet and social media platforms. This will be followed by an examination of the concept of social media activism, looking at how online platforms have transformed traditional approaches to social and political causes. Furthermore, we will be highlighting the ways in which social media enables the rapid spread of information, amplifies marginalised voices, and allows global movements to mobilise more effectively.

We will also delve into how the interplay between digital visibility and algorithms shapes the landscape of activism today. While the transformative potential of social media is undeniable, this chapter will also address the challenges that come with it, including issues such as algorithmic biases, misinformation, and the risk of performative activism. To provide deeper insights, one can look at theories such as Networked Activism and Amplification Theory. These theories will help explain how digital technologies have changed the nature of activism, shifting from traditional, hierarchical models to more decentralised, networked approaches. We will also look at how media plays a role in amplifying social movements and shaping public discourse.

In addition, we will explore both the empowering aspects of online activism and the potential pitfalls, such as slacktivism, clicktivism, and virtue signalling. These challenges will be considered within the broader context of how activists strive to balance digital visibility with meaningful, long-term engagement. Thus, by unpacking the complex workings of social media activism, this chapter will provide a nuanced understanding of its potential to drive societal change, setting the stage for further exploration of its real-world effectiveness in the sections that follow.

3.1. Conceptualising Social Media Activism

Social media activism, also referred to as digital activism or online activism, leverages social media platforms and digital tools to “promote and advocate for social and political causes,” encompassing the “mobilisation of individuals and communities to raise awareness, organise collective action, and enact social change through online platforms” (Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016, 4). At its core, it embodies the transformative potential of the internet in fostering participation, engagement, and activism (Castells 2015, 249).

As Manuel Castells (2015, 249) highlights, digital activism has redefined public spaces by creating “networks of communication and mobilisation,” enabling previously marginalised voices to challenge dominant power structures and advocate for social justice. This shift aligns with the emergence of “networked publics,” a concept explored by danah boyd (2010), where social media platforms function as digital meeting grounds that amplify marginalised perspectives. These platforms, boyd argues, serve as both facilitators of collective action and shapers of public discourse, bridging geographical and social divides.

Gerbaudo (2018, 101) underscores the immediacy and accessibility of social media activism, describing it as a tool that “enables the rapid dissemination of information and fosters real-time organisation.” This immediacy facilitates cross-border solidarity, evident in movements such as #MeToo, where activists harnessed social media to unite global audiences around shared concerns. Similarly, Tufekci (2017) illustrates how digital platforms allow activists to bypass traditional gatekeepers like mainstream media, providing a direct pipeline to global audiences while fostering a sense of agency and ownership over narratives.

However, scholars such as Papacharissi (2015) caution that this participatory culture is not without limitations. She argues that while social media creates opportunities for engagement, it also amplifies “echo chambers” and risks promoting performative actions over substantive commitments (72). Similarly, Morozov (2011) critiques the “illusion of participation” that often characterises digital activism, warning

of slacktivism—symbolic gestures such as likes and shares that fail to translate into meaningful change.

Despite these challenges, the participatory ethos of social media activism remains a defining feature. Jenkins (2006) emphasises that participatory culture transforms users from passive consumers to active participants, a process amplified in the digital age. By enabling diverse forms of engagement—ranging from online petitions to multimedia storytelling—social media fosters inclusivity and democratisation, empowering individuals to contribute meaningfully to collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

Conceptually, social media activism encompasses several key facets, recognising the transformative potential of online platforms in shaping public discourse and mobilising collective action. As Gerbaudo (2018, 101) highlights, social media activism is characterised by “its ability to rapidly disseminate information, engage a wide audience, and facilitate collective action in real-time.” This virtual space allows individuals, regardless of geographical boundaries, to come together and engage with issues of shared concern. By facilitating the rapid dissemination of information, amplifying marginalised voices, and enabling the formation of online communities around specific causes, social media has become a powerful tool for activism.

Many have embraced social media activism as a replacement for traditional methods of raising awareness and mobilising the masses, given its ability to exponentially speed up these processes. However, this acceleration presents both opportunities and challenges—a duality that will be explored further.

Building on the critical discussions of participatory culture and its role in digital visibility mechanisms, it is crucial to explore the various motivations and psychological drivers influencing individual participation in the digital era. Participation today is influenced by a dynamic interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, where intrinsic motivations include a genuine interest in a cause, the desire for community belonging, and personal growth (Fuchs 2014; Jenkins et al. 2016). Recognition and validation within online networks serve as strong intrinsic motivators, driving active engagement (Papacharissi 2015). On the other hand, extrinsic motivations such as social recognition, influence, and even financial rewards significantly shape participation (Van Dijck 2013). Additionally, the psychology behind participation involves understanding cognitive

biases, such as confirmation bias, where individuals are drawn to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, thereby fostering echo chambers (Sunstein 2018).

As individuals harness the interactive capabilities of social networking platforms, they transition from passive observers to active contributors, embodying the principles of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). Social media activism, rooted in this ethos, empowers users to collaboratively shape cultural and socio-political narratives, transcending geographical barriers to foster global solidarity (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Through digital platforms, diverse voices converge to challenge established norms and advocate for transformative change (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). However, amid the potential for empowerment, algorithmic biases pose a formidable challenge, distorting narratives and diluting the efficacy of activism efforts (Noble, 2018). Relatedly, in *Hybrid Media Activism* (2018), Emiliano Treré highlights the profound impact of algorithms in filtering and presenting information, which can both empower and constrain social movements by shaping what is visible and how narratives are constructed (Gillespie 2014, 167; Constantinou and Kallinikos 2015, 54). Thus, grasping the essence of social media activism necessitates an understanding of its profound impact on shaping perceptions, challenging power dynamics, and amplifying collective voices within the interconnected digital realm.

Moreover, social media activism embraces the participatory ethos of online platforms, enabling individuals to contribute actively through diverse avenues (Chadwick 2017). Beyond merely sharing information, users engage in multifaceted activism, spanning from online petitions to multimedia content creation and fundraising campaigns (Earl and Kimport 2011). This participatory dimension enhances the potential for collective action and societal transformation, democratising activism and fostering inclusivity (Earl and Schussman 2010). As Chadwick (2017) asserts, social media activism heralds a paradigm shift in social and political movements, democratising grassroots organising and empowering individuals with access to online means to advocate for change from the comfort of their digital spaces, thereby transcending traditional barriers to entry.

Thus, within the framework of this study, social media activism as terminology can be seen as an amalgamation of participatory culture, digital visibility, and mobilisation. Importantly, and building upon the foundations established in Chapter

One, it becomes apparent that algorithms perpetuate inherent biases alongside the multifaceted catalysts of digital visibility, thus collectively shaping the complex experiences of netizens and dictating the informational landscape they are exposed to. Treré (2018), in the chapter “Algorithmic Power, Politics, and Social Movements,” provides insight into how algorithms can both suppress and amplify political voices, thus playing a dual role in shaping the effectiveness of activism (Woolley and Howard 2016, 4885-4886). Therefore, in the scope of the digital age, visibility is not a mere product of coincidence, but a product meticulously curated, choreographed, and algorithmically influenced. Social media platforms, through their elaborate algorithms, amplify certain narratives, rendering them more visible while relegating others to the periphery. This dance of visibility wields immense power, allowing marginalised voices to ascend from obscurity. However, it is crucial to consider the biases embedded in these algorithms – biases that stem from the human inputs that shape and govern them – which can perpetuate inequalities.

Treré (2018) also discusses the role of algorithms in shaping the digital environment, emphasising how algorithmic biases can influence the visibility of content and reinforce existing power structures. As such, it is crucial to acknowledge the dual nature of social media activism. On one hand, it acts as a platform that amplifies unheard voices and incites action. On the other hand, it is a space where the dangers of manipulation, echo chambers, and misinformation are significant. This complicated nature is deeply ingrained in the current social media environment, which “fails to address the aspirations of citizens in seeking information from opposing views” (France 2017, 2).

As France (2017, 1) notes, “The rise of social media has changed the availability of publicly available information and shared experiences.” Essentially, while traditional news outlets and other information sources still exist, the dominance of consumer sovereignty on social media platforms has led to a shift in how information is accessed and consumed. This shift can contribute to the creation of information bubbles and limit exposure to diverse perspectives.

In the realm of social media activism, user behaviour and engagement are undoubtedly pivotal. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have provided users with tools that act as digital megaphones, seemingly making them key players in

modern activism. However, while appealing, this perspective may lean towards a techno-optimistic view reminiscent of the late 90s and early 2000s cyber-optimism, such as that expressed by Mark Poster. This view risks oversimplifying the complexities of the contemporary digital landscape. As Clough (2018) and Couldry and Mejias (2019) have argued, the dynamics of digital media are far more intricate and entangled with issues of affect, control, and exploitation. While social media platforms may appear to democratise activism, they also impose their forms of measurement and control, subtly shaping user behaviour and limiting the scope of genuine activism. The so-called 'democratisation' of activism must be critically examined in light of these considerations, recognising that the power dynamics inherent in digital media may undermine the very goals they purport to support.

User behaviour is then characterised by the rapid dissemination of information through shares, retweets, and likes, creating a virtual ripple effect that can hypothetically achieve global reach within minutes. However, in the same way that users create content, they are also created by the platforms they engage with. Social media's potential as a dynamically beneficial tool in activism requires engagement to transcend passive observation; it must involve active participation in dialogues, campaigns, and movements. This happens when users do not merely consume content but rather co-create it, fostering a dynamic ecosystem where diverse voices converge. This dual process of creation underscores the role of digital tools in fostering civic participation and democratic engagement.

Activists can bypass traditional gatekeepers like mainstream media and political institutions, directly communicating their messages to a global audience. While this direct and immediate connection between activists and their supporters can facilitate the rapid spread of information, organisation of protests or events, and solicitation of resources or donations, it also raises concerns in the current global moment marked by widespread disinformation and misinformation. Optimistically speaking, these platforms provide powerful tools for advocacy and mobilisation; however, the same channels that empower activists can also be exploited to spread misleading or false information, complicating the public's ability to discern credible messaging.

One of the foremost concerns in the realm of digital activism is the authenticity of online engagement. While the internet offers a platform for voicing opinions and

participating in socio-political discussions, it is prone to the pitfalls of performative activism and the echo chamber effect. Often, individuals may engage in activism primarily for appearances rather than out of genuine commitment to a cause. This performative aspect can dilute the authenticity of online discourse, where likes, shares, and retweets overshadow meaningful, tangible actions. Moreover, the echo chamber effect – where individuals are primarily exposed to information and viewpoints that align with their pre-existing beliefs – further undermines genuine engagement and critical dialogue.

In *The Revolution That Wasn't* (2019), Jen Schradie critically examines the widely held belief that the internet and digital technologies inherently promote more egalitarian participation in collective action and social movements. Despite the internet's ability to theoretically reduce the costs of organising and participating in movements, Schradie reveals that digital democracy is not as inclusive as it appears (Olson 1965; Gerwitz 2018). Additionally, the attention-driven market of social media platforms, motivated by profit, may not align with public responsibility. As France (2017) argues, this profit-driven nature limits these platforms' capacity to address the negative consequences of their design, raising concerns about the potential adverse impact of social media on society.

Despite these challenges, it is essential to acknowledge both the opportunities and limitations of social media activism. These platforms have indeed opened new avenues for civic engagement and grassroots organising, allowing for broader participation and the rapid spread of information. However, they also introduce significant constraints. The ease of participation and the quick dissemination of content on social media can lead to the oversimplification of complex issues, reducing nuanced debates to superficial soundbites. Additionally, the fragmented nature of online activism often makes it difficult to sustain long-term engagement and translate digital momentum into concrete, offline actions. This raises important questions about the inclusivity of digital democracy, as disparities in digital engagement persist. For example, resource limitations among working-class organisations can significantly hinder their ability to maintain a robust online presence, as highlighted by Warzel and Thompson (2020). This study's conceptualisation of social media activism underscores its dual nature, reflecting the evolving interplay between participatory culture, digital visibility, and mobilisation in reshaping civic engagement and influencing societal change.

3.1.1. *Unveiling the Mechanisms: Theoretical Perspectives on Networked and Amplified Activism*

In order to gain a more extensive understanding of social media activism, the following two theories/models provide valuable insights: Networked Activism Theory, which elucidates the transformative impact of digital communication technologies on contemporary activism, and, secondly, Amplification Theory, which illuminates the intricate relationship between media and activism, underscoring the media's ability to amplify specific social issues, risks, or events.

First, we look to Networked Activism Theory – also known as Networked Social Movements Theory. At its core, Networked Activism Theory proposes that “digital technologies and online platforms have transformed the nature of activism by enabling decentralised, interconnected networks of individuals to organise and mobilise for social and political change” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 14). As such, it emphasises the role of “horizontal communication, collaboration, and the fluid exchange of information in contemporary activism” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 14). In other words, this theory explains how modern social and political movements leverage digital communication technologies and networks, such as social media, to rally, organise, and advocate for their causes. It primarily emerged as a response to the increasing role of social media in shaping contemporary activism. This paradigm shift is thus encapsulated by the proposition put forth by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), who, in essence, contend that these technologies have orchestrated a metamorphosis in the very core of activism itself.

To gain a deeper understanding of Networked Activism Theory, it is essential first to consider the intent of modern social and political movements, which increasingly harness the power of digital communication technologies to advance their agendas. Social media platforms, in particular, have become crucial conduits for these movements to gather momentum, rally support, and amplify their voices. What was once viewed as a virtual realm detached from the physical world is now recognised as a dynamic space for assembly. In Leah Lievrouw’s *Alternative and Activist New Media* (2023), underscores how digital technologies have profoundly influenced contemporary

protests, creating a shifting landscape of power struggles where activists must continuously adapt to the technological environment.

However, this idealised view often overlooks the complexities and challenges inherent in digital interactions. While these platforms bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds, they can reinforce existing divides or create new forms of exclusion, rather than purely fostering a shared purpose. In response to the growing influence of social media, Networked Activism Theory offers a framework for understanding the intricate dynamics that underpin contemporary activism. It highlights the transition from traditional, top-down organisational structures to more democratised, collaborative models that aim to embrace inclusion and the free flow of information (Earl and Kimport 2011, 3). In essence, this theory captures the evolution of activism from a linear path to a networked tapestry, interwoven with the threads of digital connectivity.

The chapter “Mobilisation in the Age of Algorithmic Media” in Lievrouw's work further explores how the diffusion of digital technology into the lives of activists and the general public is reshaping the nature of protests. It emphasises that the technological environment, rather than any specific technology, has far-reaching implications for modern protests, creating a dynamic landscape of power struggles where communication and mobilisation unfold through continuous tactical measures and countermeasures (Ganesh and Stohl, 2013, 427–8).

Secondly, one can look to Amplification Theory, a framework that delves into the elaborate interplay between media and activism. Amplification Theory delves into the interplay between media and activism, underscoring the media's role in magnifying specific social issues, risks, or events. As Shirky (2011, 17) explains, media acts as an amplifier, intensifying the visibility of certain causes or events. This theory provides insights into “how the structure and dynamics of media platforms can contribute to the spread and resonance of content,” as well as how media can reinforce specific narratives (Bruns 2019, 2).

In the digital age, where information spreads rapidly, media becomes a potent force for disseminating activist messages and shaping their impact. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, for instance, serve as amplifiers for activist causes, enabling the rapid spread of information to a global audience. However, this amplification is not

always neutral. Algorithmic biases embedded in these platforms often prioritise content that drives engagement, potentially distorting the narrative or sidelining less ‘profitable’ voices (Noble 2018). These dynamics highlight the dual-edged nature of amplification, where visibility brings both opportunities and challenges.

In a digital age where information travels rapidly and widely, media undoubtedly serves as a potent force for both the dissemination of activist messages and the elevation of their impact.

To grasp the essence of Amplification Theory, one must recognize the symbiotic relationship between algorithmic media and activism. Platforms like Alphabet/Google, Amazon, Apple, Meta/Facebook, and Microsoft play pivotal roles in shaping public discourse, benefiting from activist content that drives user engagement. Gillespie (2018) highlights how platforms prioritise emotionally engaging content through algorithms optimised to maximise interaction, which in turn generates advertising revenue. Similarly, Zuboff (2019) underscores how user data and attention are commodified into profitable predictive products.

Activists strategically leverage these platforms to amplify their causes, but the relationship is not without ethical concerns. Noble (2018) and Tufekci (2017) explain that algorithmic amplification often prioritises sensational or polarising content, which aligns with platforms’ objectives of sustaining user retention.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that algorithms do not function as neutral amplifiers. Algorithmic biases, inherent in the design and operation of these digital platforms, can significantly influence which narratives are amplified. As Noble (2018) notes in *Algorithms of Oppression*, these biases often prioritise sensational or polarising content, sidelining nuanced or less ‘profitable’ voices. Gillespie (2018) describes this as the “curatorial bias” of platforms, where algorithmic decisions determine which stories gain visibility and which remain obscured.

This selective amplification can reinforce existing power structures or contribute to the spread of misinformation, complicating the role of digital media in activism. For example, while movements like #BlackLivesMatter gained visibility due to their compelling narratives and viral content, other grassroots campaigns often struggle to achieve similar traction. This uneven amplification reflects broader issues of inequality

within the digital sphere, where certain causes are magnified while others remain marginalised.

However, amplification can also play a transformative role when it successfully elevates marginalised voices and grassroots movements. For instance, social media networks have enabled underrepresented groups to challenge established narratives and bring overlooked issues to the forefront of public consciousness. These instances highlight the dual-edged nature of amplification—while it can perpetuate existing inequities, it also offers a powerful mechanism for fostering inclusivity and driving meaningful societal change.

Amplification Theory acknowledges that the influence of algorithmic media is not passive but rather an active and powerful force in shaping discourse and the impact of activism. The integration of algorithmic biases into this framework further highlights the complexity of digital media's role in contemporary activism, where the amplification of messages is shaped not only by the content itself but also by the underlying biases of the algorithms that distribute it.

In “Algorithmic Power, Politics, and Social Movements,” Treré (2018) delves into the profound impact of algorithms on political processes, particularly through the lens of computational propaganda and the manipulation of digital spaces. A key aspect of this manipulation is the deployment of political bots—algorithms designed to mimic human behaviour on social media. These bots have been used globally to sway public opinion, spread propaganda, and create misleading perceptions of popularity (Woolley and Howard 2016, 4885–4886).

Extending this discussion, Feenstra et al. (2017) examine how movements like the Indignados strategically leveraged digital platforms to engage with and challenge mainstream media on their terms (Feenstra et al., 2017). This engagement is crucial to understanding the broader dynamics at play in digital activism.

Amplification Theory offers a comprehensive lens through which to analyse how both traditional and digital media—especially algorithm-driven platforms—shape the trajectory and influence of activism. This theory underscores the dynamic interaction between activists and digital giants, highlighting that the amplification of messages, issues, and events is central to the effectiveness of modern social and political movements. Algorithmic media, in particular, play a pivotal role in extending the reach

and impact of information, bringing both positive and negative consequences. As Shirky (2011, 17) suggests, while amplification can broaden the scope of activism, it also risks distorting messages, fostering echo chambers, and reinforcing existing power dynamics within the digital media landscape.

By integrating the role of algorithms into this framework, Amplification Theory encourages critical reflection on how media content, algorithmic processes, and user behaviour collectively shape the outcomes of activism and influence broader public discourse. While amplification can elevate causes to global prominence, it also introduces challenges such as curatorial biases, misinformation, and the pressure to adapt messaging for algorithmic preferences.

Ultimately, Amplification Theory provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the intricate relationship between media and activism. Movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter exemplify how amplification can serve as a powerful force for societal change when leveraged effectively. However, harnessing this potential requires intentionality and resilience to navigate the challenges that come with it.

The practical relevance of Amplification Theory becomes evident in these movements, where social media platforms amplified grassroots efforts to global prominence. As Tufekci (2017) notes, the viral spread of #MeToo on platforms like Twitter and Instagram transformed personal stories into a collective reckoning on gender-based violence. Similarly, #BlackLivesMatter gained traction through the widespread sharing of real-time footage of police brutality, forcing traditional media outlets to cover these incidents extensively. These examples illustrate how algorithmic amplification can elevate marginalised voices and challenge dominant narratives, aligning with the theory's central premise of media as an agent of visibility.

However, the amplification of activist narratives is not without complications. As Noble (2018) highlights in *Algorithms of Oppression*, the algorithms powering social media platforms are far from neutral amplifiers. Their prioritisation of engagement often favours sensational or polarising content, sidelining nuanced or less 'profitable' voices. This dynamic reflects what Gillespie (2018) describes as the "curatorial bias" of platforms, where algorithmic decisions determine which stories gain visibility and which remain in the shadows. For instance, while #BlackLivesMatter benefited from amplification, other grassroots movements with less media-friendly narratives often

struggle to achieve similar visibility, underscoring the uneven power dynamics inherent in algorithm-driven media.

As such, both Networked Activism Theory and Amplification Theory illuminate crucial aspects of how contemporary activism functions within the digital landscape. They offer insights into how digital platforms facilitate the decentralised and networked nature of modern movements, as well as how media amplifies and shapes the impact of these movements through the interplay of algorithms, biases, and visibility dynamics. These theories thus provide a foundation for understanding the complexities and challenges of social media activism in today's interconnected world.

3.2. Opportunities and Challenges of Social Media Activism

In the contemporary era of global interconnectedness, social media has undeniably transformed the landscape of activism, offering unprecedented opportunities for individuals and collectives to engage with social and political causes. This digital revolution, however, is not without its complexities and challenges. Social media platforms have facilitated a profound shift in how activism is conducted, enabling a more democratised and globally visible form of engagement. Yet, this transformation is multifaceted, requiring careful examination of both its empowering potential and the new dynamics it introduces, such as algorithmic biases and the spread of misinformation.

To fully grasp the ramifications of this paradigm shift, it is crucial to explore both the opportunities and the inherent challenges presented by digital visibility in online activism. This exploration must account for the dual nature of social media's impact—on one hand, promoting the democratisation of activism by making it more accessible and inclusive, and on the other hand, amplifying the risks of oversimplification, echo chambers, and the disproportionate amplification of certain voices over others. This nuanced understanding is essential to appreciate the true potential and pitfalls of digital activism, particularly in how it influences public discourse and shapes the efficacy of social and political movements.

The democratisation of activism through digital visibility has rendered the domain of activism more egalitarian and inclusive. Historically, activism was predominantly tied

to established organisations, influential figures, and substantial financial resources. However, the advent of social media has obviated these traditional barriers, fostering a significant change in social and political participation dynamics, as articulated by Bimber et al. (2005). This transformation underscores the burgeoning accessibility and inclusivity of activism facilitated by digital platforms, empowering individuals and marginalised groups to partake in activism, articulate their concerns, and galvanise support for social and political change, as elucidated by Earl and Kimport (2011).

Social media platforms offer unique opportunities for amplifying marginalised voices, providing a forum for individuals who may not have access to traditional media outlets. This amplification can lead to increased visibility for underrepresented issues and communities, fostering greater awareness and engagement. By enabling the formation of global networks, social media connects activists across borders, facilitating the rapid dissemination of information and the organisation of events and campaigns, thus enabling activists to mobilise supporters quickly and efficiently (Bosch 2017, 1–4).

Moreover, social media allows for the democratisation of information, enabling a more participatory form of activism where individuals can contribute to the creation and dissemination of content. This participatory nature of social media activism can lead to more inclusive and diverse movements, as individuals from different backgrounds collaborate and share their perspectives. Additionally, the use of digital tools and platforms allows for the rapid organisation of events and campaigns, enabling activists to mobilise supporters quickly and efficiently. This speed and efficiency can be particularly advantageous in responding to urgent social and political issues, where timely action is crucial.

In addition to these advantages, social media activism can also facilitate the creation of alternative narratives, challenging dominant discourses and offering new perspectives on social and political issues. This ability to shape public discourse is particularly valuable in a media landscape where traditional outlets may be biased or controlled by powerful interests. By providing a platform for diverse voices, social media can contribute to a more pluralistic and democratic public sphere. Moreover, social media activism can also lead to increased accountability, as activists can use these platforms to hold institutions and individuals responsible for their actions. The

transparency and visibility afforded by social media can serve as a powerful tool for exposing wrongdoing and advocating for justice.

While social media activism offers unprecedented opportunities for civic engagement, it also presents significant challenges, particularly concerning algorithmic biases. These biases, embedded in the algorithms that prioritise content based on user engagement, can profoundly influence the visibility and reach of activist content on social media platforms. By amplifying certain voices and suppressing others, algorithms can inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics, leading to the marginalisation of underrepresented groups and the perpetuation of dominant narratives. This dynamic poses a serious threat to the effectiveness of social media activism in challenging the status quo (Gillespie 2014, 167; Constantinou and Kallinikos 2015, 54).

In her book *The Revolution That Wasn't* (2019), Jen Schradie delves into these issues. Schradie explores how resource disparities among different groups can further exacerbate the challenges posed by algorithmic biases. She argues that rather than bridging inequalities, digital activism has the potential to widen them, as those with more significant resources are better positioned to navigate and exploit the algorithmic landscape. This insight underscores a critical tension within social media activism: while these platforms have the potential to democratise participation, the underlying algorithmic structures and resource imbalances can undermine this potential, limiting the ability of marginalised voices to effectively challenge dominant power structures (Bennett 2020, 6).

Another challenge is the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms. The rapid spread of false or misleading information can undermine the credibility of activist movements and contribute to public confusion. In a digital landscape where information is abundant but often unverified, distinguishing between accurate and inaccurate content can be difficult. This challenge is compounded by the fact that social media platforms are often driven by engagement metrics, which can incentivise the spread of sensational or polarising content, regardless of its accuracy. As a result, misinformation can quickly gain traction and influence public opinion, potentially derailing activist efforts and leading to unintended consequences.

Furthermore, social media activism is susceptible to the risks of performative activism and slacktivism. Performative activism refers to actions taken primarily to gain social recognition or approval rather than to effect meaningful change. Slacktivism, on the other hand, refers to minimal or symbolic actions, such as liking or sharing a post, that give the illusion of participation but have little impact on the ground. Both of these phenomena can dilute the effectiveness of social media activism, leading to superficial engagement with issues rather than a sustained commitment to change.

Moreover, the inherent design of social media platforms, which prioritises content that generates high levels of engagement, often leads to the amplification of extreme or divisive viewpoints. This algorithmic tendency fosters the creation of echo chambers, where individuals are predominantly exposed to information that aligns with and reinforces their existing beliefs, thereby intensifying the polarisation of public discourse. The echo chamber effect not only stifles constructive dialogue and critical thinking but also diminishes the likelihood of individuals engaging with opposing viewpoints or considering alternative perspectives. As a result, this polarisation can lead to the fragmentation of activist movements, with different factions within a movement becoming increasingly entrenched in their positions, less willing to collaborate, and more resistant to compromise.

Moreover, Ames and McDuffie (2020) explore how digital platforms, while facilitating democratic participation, simultaneously contribute to the polarisation of public discourse and the fragmentation of movements. Their analysis underscores the dual nature of social media—its capacity to unite and divide—which reflects the complexities and challenges of using digital spaces for activism. This tension between the potential for widespread democratic engagement and the risk of deepening divisions within both the public sphere and activist communities highlights the paradox inherent in digital activism. While social media can mobilise broad coalitions and elevate marginalised voices, it also risks exacerbating ideological divides, undermining the cohesion needed for sustained collective action.

Additionally, social media activism is not immune to surveillance and repression by state and corporate actors. Governments and corporations can monitor online activity, track the movements of activists, and use digital tools to suppress dissent. This can include tactics such as censorship, the use of surveillance technology to monitor

and harass activists, or the manipulation of online content to discredit or undermine activist movements. The risks associated with digital surveillance are particularly acute in authoritarian contexts, where governments may use social media as a tool for social control rather than empowerment.

Finally, the digital divide poses a significant challenge to the promise of social media activism. While these platforms hold the potential to democratise civic engagement, they remain inaccessible to many due to factors like geography, infrastructure, and socioeconomic status. In regions where internet access is limited or unreliable, the ability to participate in social media activism is severely constrained, leading to the exclusion of marginalised groups and the reinforcement of existing inequalities. This divide undermines the inclusive potential of digital activism, as those without access are left out of critical conversations and movements. Moreover, Bruce Mutsvairo's *Digital Activism in the Social Media Era* (2016) explores this tension, emphasising how access to digital technologies can indeed empower marginalised voices but also underscores the limitations imposed by structural inequalities, especially in developing contexts Watkins (2009).

In essence, social media platforms furnish individuals with a potent forum to articulate their concerns and advocate for change sans the exigency of institutional patronage. Iconic movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter exemplify how grassroots campaigns can burgeon organically, resonating with the collective consciousness and spotlighting the transformative power of personal narratives shared online. These grassroots movements underscore the emancipatory potential of digital visibility in amplifying the voices of marginalised communities, hitherto sidelined in conventional modes of activism (Bimber et al. 2005). By virtue of amplification theory, social media emerges as a veritable catalyst for the magnification of diverse perspectives, endowing voice to erstwhile underrepresented cohorts. This ethos of inclusivity undergirds a more nuanced and robust discourse within activism, thereby enhancing the efficacy of the movement and dismantling entrenched barriers to participation (Bimber et al. 2005). Thus, the democratisation of activism transcends mere solicitation of participation; it constitutes a celebration of diversity and inclusivity, fostering a more equitable and representative landscape of social and political engagement.

Moreover, within the domain of online activism, an additional substantial boon arising from digital visibility resides in its unparalleled global reach and influence. In this epoch of digital proliferation, erstwhile formidable geographical barriers have been rendered virtually inconsequential in the context of mobilisation and impact. Primarily, social media platforms emerge as potent conduits for activists to establish connections with kindred spirits and organisations spanning the globe. Within the digital milieu, movements seamlessly traverse physical boundaries, fostering a palpable sense of solidarity among individuals united by shared concerns and aspirations. This interconnectivity engenders a sprawling global network of support, exponentially amplifying the efficacy of advocacy endeavours. For instance, environmental activists can effortlessly collaborate with counterparts from disparate continents, pooling their resources and collective wisdom to confront formidable global challenges such as climate change (Earl and Kimport 2011).

As posited by Earl and Kimport (2011), digital activism inherently boasts a capacity for global reach, harnessing online platforms to transcend geographical confines. The interconnected nature of the internet furnishes digital activism with the capability to disseminate information, rally supporters, and sway audiences on a global scale. Similarly, Chadwick (2017) underscores the global reach of digital activism as a consequence of its ability to surmount traditional communication barriers. Social media platforms and online networks facilitate the connection between activists and diverse audiences, nurturing cross-cultural collaborations, and amplifying the impact of social and political messages on a global platform.

Furthermore, the visibility conferred by digital platforms is, in myriad cases, exceedingly remarkable. It is owing to the unique capability of social media activism to thrust pressing issues squarely into the limelight of global public consciousness. Visual narratives, whether conveyed through images, videos, or compelling anecdotes propagated across the digital expanse, harbour the potential to attain viral status, captivating the undivided attention of millions worldwide. This heightened visibility precipitates substantial pressure on governments, corporations, and institutions, necessitating their acknowledgement and engagement with the urgent concerns championed by activists. Consequently, it renders it increasingly challenging for these

entities to evade or discount the fervent calls for action emanating from the digital sphere.

As clarified by Chadwick (2017), the global impact of digital activism on public consciousness is characterised by its ability to transcend physical and cultural boundaries. Through online networks, it engenders the dissemination of information, the cultivation of shared narratives, and the cultivation of global awareness regarding social and political issues. Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) expound on the contribution of digital activism to the shaping of global public consciousness by providing a platform for diverse voices and perspectives to resonate on a worldwide scale. Through online engagement, it fosters a sense of interconnectedness and awareness of social and political issues transcending national borders.

However, from the perspective of this research, it is essential to recognise that these opportunities come with challenges. Algorithmic biases, the spectre of misinformation, and the risks of performative activism and surveillance complicate the landscape of digital activism. As Raman and Muzikowski (2023) succinctly put it, digital activism is “a moving space between more features and access and an inevitable tussle with algorithms and fake news.” This underscores the need for a critical evaluation of the reach, engagement, and real-world impact of social media activism to temper optimism with an understanding of its limitations.

The evolving nature of these campaigns, while significant, must be understood within the broader context of both digital and real-world divides. While activists often rely on key metrics to gauge reach and engagement, the depth of insights these metrics provide may be overstated, and their applicability across diverse contexts remains a subject of debate. Therefore, while the recalibration of activist strategies in the digital era is a noteworthy development, it is essential to substantiate these claims with empirical evidence and to temper optimism with a critical understanding of the limitations and potential downsides of this shift (Anderson and Rainie 2021). As Johnson (2024) notes, “Engagement metrics of online campaigns are important indicators of effectiveness. With the widespread use of the internet and social media, these metrics offer profound insights into the visibility and resonance of activist efforts.”

In this evolving landscape, the intersection of digital and real-world activism epitomises the multifaceted, transformative nature of online advocacy. Social media

campaigns go beyond the virtual buzz, extending to the shaping of tangible real-world events with the capacity to bring about change. Smith (2024) correctly points out, “Online platforms have created a sense of global solidarity, where activists can connect and mobilise with unprecedented speed and reach, transforming digital engagement into tangible real-world impact.” This is further justified by Davis (2019), arguing, “Accordingly, this study assumes that opinion expression and discussion in social media are related to offline activism. Social media activism not only facilitates online engagements but also transpires into real-world political actions.” We thus fully grasp—through detailed analysis of reach, engagement, and real-world ripple effects—the depth and nuances of digital visibility within the current activist landscape.

The affordances of social media are just revolutionary – the way they have changed the fundamental assumptions of how individuals and groups interact on matters that relate to social and political causes. These are dynamic canvas boards upon which activists can vividly paint messages that will reach out to the rest of the world. Social media has provided an unparalleled opportunity for the fast and vast sharing of news, updates, and critical information. It has become a global bulletin board where everything posted goes viral in milliseconds and interests millions. This increased visibility compels governments, businesses, and other institutions to consider the concerns of activists – an amplification of activist power that has been beyond imagining. As Williams (2024) puts it, “By using digital platforms with global reach, social media activism encourages both online advocacy and offline activity, illustrating a potent reciprocity between the two.”

Still, the role played by social media does not just end with broadcasting but extends further and more profound as it is a master builder of communities and networks. Resourcefulness allows people with similar interests to converge through Facebook groups or Twitter Communities to discuss experiences and give a nod of support over what they are yet coordinating their activism efforts. Such digital communities provide the platform for idea exchange and support mobilisation, which begets belonging and a sense of shared purpose that propels collective action. It allows more prosperous and more nuanced conversations to breed within activism and ultimately makes it more effective. Indeed, these platforms serve as modern-day town squares where individuals from all walks of life can convene, deliberate, and collaborate

in pursuit of common goals. As Washington and Marcus (2023) notes, online hashtags and campaigns can significantly influence real-world outcomes, highlighting the vital connection between digital and physical activism. This relationship is crucial for understanding how people engage in democratic processes.

One of the most compelling things about social media activism is the capacity for mobilisation and coordination of actions. It moves beyond just talk; it spices up action. Social media platforms are equipped with many tools to help activists set up events, run petition campaigns, start fundraising drives or boycotts, and call on their supporters to organise collective actions. The core power of social media is in providing the ability to mobilise people for real-world protests, volunteer efforts, or advocacy campaigns. It is the loudspeaker outlet of a call to action that transcends geography and connects people across the globe with a common purpose. However, as (APCO Worldwide 2024) explains, unlike traditional donations or on-the-ground activism, it's challenging to gauge the tangible impact of social media activism. However, when combined with other approaches, social media's broad reach and ability to engage people can significantly enhance the overall effectiveness of a cause.

Still more captivating is its direct interaction with the authorities and public figures. The traditional barriers that used to separate the public figure from 'the rest' are fading much faster. Tweets, comments, or direct messages are direct, interactive ways that put public figures on the spot regarding actions and decisions, hence promoting transparency and accountability. Social media enables access to influential figures and democratically provides a direct pipeline from activists to policymakers and change-makers across the globe. This does not merely raise the voice in very critical issues but also can create pressure for reform that transforms the very nature of power and influence. Social media is more than just a messaging tool. It is a platform for fostering dialogue, catalysing change, and holding the powerful to account for their actions.

Speaking further from a critical stance, Johnson (2023) argues, "Analyses of campaigns where online activism did not materialise into tangible real-world impact offer invaluable insights. The impactful campaigns often demonstrate high levels of digital engagement that translate into offline actions." This means there is still a lot to prove in terms of social media activism. Nevertheless, through detailed analysis of

reach, engagement, and real-world ripple effects, we can better understand the depth and nuances of digital visibility within the current activist landscape.

In conclusion, social media activism represents a powerful force for social and political change, offering unprecedented opportunities for individuals and groups to engage with causes, amplify marginalised voices, and mobilise for collective action. However, this digital revolution is not without its complexities and challenges. The dual nature of social media activism, where platforms can both empower and marginalise, necessitates a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and limitations presented by digital visibility and participation.

While social media platforms have undoubtedly transformed the landscape of activism, enabling a more democratised and globally visible form of engagement, they also introduce new dynamics into the activism landscape, such as algorithmic biases, misinformation, and the risks of performative activism and surveillance. Furthermore, the digital divide remains a significant barrier to inclusive participation, highlighting the need for ongoing efforts to address these disparities and ensure that social media activism remains a force for positive change.

Through the exploration of Networked Activism Theory and Amplification Theory, this chapter has provided valuable insights into the transformative impact of digital communication technologies on contemporary activism, as well as the intricate relationship between media and activism. By recognising the opportunities and challenges inherent in social media activism, we can better understand its role in shaping public discourse, challenging power dynamics, and influencing societal change in the digital age.

To navigate the complexities of social media activism effectively, a nuanced and cautious approach is essential. While addressing algorithmic biases is crucial, it requires sustained pressure on platform developers to prioritise transparency and accountability—goals that may face significant resistance (Gillespie 2014; Constantinou and Kallinikos 2015). The development of alternative media channels or open-source platforms could help create more equitable spaces, though these solutions face their own challenges in terms of adoption and impact. Combatting misinformation is a daunting task that requires not only robust fact-checking mechanisms but also a significant increase in digital literacy—efforts that are necessary but difficult to

implement at scale (Bennett 2021). Moreover, fostering deeper engagement in activism remains a challenge, as the allure of performative actions often overshadows more meaningful involvement, making it difficult to bridge the gap between digital and offline activism (Johnson 2023). Protecting activists from surveillance and repression involves not just technological solutions, like secure communication tools, but also broader legal and political advocacy—efforts that are often met with substantial obstacles, especially in authoritarian contexts (Oriare 2009; Williams and Mano 2017). Addressing the digital divide is critical, yet it is a persistent issue that requires significant resources and coordinated global efforts to ensure broader access to digital tools, particularly in marginalised communities (Watkins 2009). While social media has the potential to be a powerful tool for social and political change, realising this potential will require overcoming significant challenges and acknowledging the limitations inherent in digital activism.

3.3. Navigating the Complexities of Online Activism: Insights into Algorithmic Influence and Activist Engagement

Thus, in considering these inner workings of social media activism and the factors which inform it, one can thoroughly dissect the phenomena of visibility within the context of online activism. Accordingly, in the ever-evolving landscape of digital spaces, a multitude of theoretical perspectives on visibility emerge, illuminating the complex interplay between technology, society, and individual identities. These perspectives offer profound insights into the ways we navigate the digital realm, shaping the contemporary discourse on online presence and surveillance. Among these theoretical lenses, two familiar standout paradigms warrant closer examination and further elaboration: Panopticon theory and Intersectionality theory.

Panopticon theory, as previously discussed, introduces a concept that transcends the physical boundaries of Jeremy Bentham's iconic prison design. In our digital age, it contends that the panopticon has shifted beyond its traditional confines, seeping into every facet of our online lives. Digital platforms, with their inherent power to monitor, record, and analyse user behaviour, serve as the new-age watchtowers. Much like the watchful prison guards, algorithms observe our every click, like, and share,

scrutinising our digital existence. In this digital Panopticon, the dynamics of visibility have shifted from the physical to the virtual. The gaze is now both embodied and algorithmic, reflecting an evolution that retains the historical dimensions of Foucault's embodied gaze while introducing the algorithmic mechanisms of digital platforms. This duality profoundly influences our online behaviour and personal privacy, presenting implications that are deeply significant yet not entirely understood.

Intersectionality theory, on the other hand, adds a nuanced dimension to our understanding of visibility in digital spaces by acknowledging that visibility is not a one-size-fits-all concept. This theoretical framework recognises that individuals experience visibility in different ways and emphasises that “social identities and systems of oppression intersect and interact in complex ways” (Crenshaw 1989, 140). It underscores the interconnected nature of “categories such as race, gender, class,... sexuality,” and socio-economic status, “highlighting how they mutually reinforce and shape experiences of privilege and marginalisation” (Crenshaw 1989, 140). Within the context of online activism, intersectionality helps us appreciate how different facets of identity intersect and influence the ways in which individuals are seen, heard, and treated in digital spaces.

By applying intersectionality theory to online activism, we can better understand how these intersecting identities shape not only the visibility of individuals but also their capacity for engagement and influence within digital platforms. For instance, the way algorithms amplify or suppress voices can vary significantly depending on the intersecting identities of users, thus impacting their ability to participate effectively in digital activism. This perspective invites a deeper inquiry into how digital platforms, which often operate under the guise of neutrality, may perpetuate systemic inequalities by privileging certain identities over others.

While Panopticon theory focuses on the overarching surveillance mechanisms that govern online visibility, intersectionality theory brings attention to the differential impacts of these mechanisms across diverse groups. This complementary perspective enriches our analysis by highlighting the importance of considering how multiple identities intersect to affect the experience of visibility in the digital realm. Therefore, both theories together provide a more holistic understanding of the complexities of online activism, where the dynamics of power, surveillance, and identity all converge.

3.3.1. The Role of Digital Presence in Shaping Social Causes: Leveraging Visibility for Impactful Advocacy

In contemporary times, a social cause that effectively maintains a strong, balanced, and reliable presence on social media reaps a multitude of benefits. Foremost among these is the ability to leverage social media's vast reach to raise awareness. The role of social media in information dissemination is pivotal, "transforming the way information is shared, consumed, and engaged with. Social media platforms act as dynamic networks that enable rapid and widespread distribution of information, shaping public discourse and influencing opinions" (boyd and Ellison 2008, 211). The digital sphere, thus, serves as an unparalleled platform for this scale of information dissemination, due to its ability for swift connection with global audiences (Chaffee and Metzger 2001, 343). Concurrently, visibility becomes a facilitator of sorts, helping a social cause by becoming an effective tool for educating, enlightening, and engaging a diverse array of people who might otherwise remain unaware. This heightened awareness, in turn, broadens the base of support, as individuals from varied communities and backgrounds, exposed to the cause through their social media feeds, are more likely to empathise and become active advocates – especially in light of how social media in turn also "empowers individuals to participate in the creation and sharing of content, [thus] democratising the flow of information and contributing to a more decentralised and diverse media landscape" (Chaffee and Metzger 2001, 343).

In other words, consistent and balanced visibility on social media plays a crucial role in fostering trust and a sense of legitimacy. According to Bucher, legitimacy on social media is closely tied to perceptions of authenticity and reliability. Users bestow legitimacy upon information and interactions they deem genuine, credible, and aligned with their expectations of ethical behaviour on the platform (Bucher 2017, 287). In the digital landscape, the credibility of online information often hinges on the frequency and quality of content sharing. A social cause that occupies various platforms consistently and fairly exudes reliability and unwavering dedication, resulting in increased support through donations, volunteers, and different types of collaborations.

The trustworthiness established through consistent visibility and ethical engagement on social media platforms thus leads individuals to contribute their time,

financial support, and personal commitment to a cause perceived as authentic and trustworthy. As Gillespie (2018) notes, in the context of social media, legitimacy is moulded by a platform's adherence to ethical standards, commitment to user privacy, and transparency regarding its algorithms and content moderation practices. Legitimate social media spaces are those users trust to provide a safe, authentic, and reliable environment (Gillespie 2018, 196). Therefore, a strategic and ethical approach to social media engagement not only enhances a cause's credibility but also encourages meaningful support from the audience.

Furthermore, the sustained presence of a social cause on social media is crucial for its enduring relevance and adaptability in an ever-changing environment. In our fast-paced world, consistent interaction with the audience acts as a compass, guiding the cause to stay attuned to contemporary issues and respond swiftly to emerging challenges. This ongoing engagement not only fosters a sense of community but also positions the cause as a reliable source of timely and pertinent information. It serves as a conduit for the rapid dissemination of updates, the launch of impactful campaigns, and the issuance of urgent calls to action (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007, 1157). The true significance of a well-maintained social media presence lies not just in visibility but in its agility. A cause that remains socially visible and deeply engaged with its online community becomes a dynamic force, capable of addressing new concerns with precision. By harnessing the collective strength of its digital supporters, the cause can transform online visibility into real-time impact, effecting meaningful change precisely when needed most (Hollenbaugh and Ferris 2014, 1321).

However, while sustained visibility on social media can indeed bolster a social cause's resilience and reach, it is crucial to approach this with caution. The assumption that consistent visibility automatically guarantees trust, influence, and long-term impact overlooks the complexities of the digital landscape. For instance, social media algorithms often prioritise content based on engagement-driven metrics rather than substance or significance. This can force a cause to constantly adapt to algorithmic whims, sometimes at the expense of its core message or values. Furthermore, the pursuit of visibility can lead to performative activism, where the appearance of engagement is mistaken for meaningful action. The pressure to remain visible may drive

causes to focus more on optics and less on the groundwork necessary for genuine, lasting change.

Additionally, there is the risk of burnout among both activists and audiences. The relentless demand for visibility can strain resources and lead to diminishing returns as audiences become desensitised or overwhelmed by the sheer volume of content competing for their attention. Visibility does not necessarily equate to control over the narrative. In an age of misinformation and digital manipulation, a cause's message can be easily co-opted, distorted, or diluted, potentially undermining its original goals.

In essence, while visibility on social media is undoubtedly valuable, it must be balanced with a critical awareness of these potential pitfalls. Sustainable impact requires more than just visibility; it necessitates thoughtful strategy, genuine engagement, and resilience in navigating the ever-changing dynamics of the digital realm.

3.3.2. From Affective Visibility to Empty Gestures

When it comes to visibility, a fine line emerges between affective visibility and empty visibility – and within the understanding of this, one becomes better acquainted with the concepts of slacktivism, clicktivism, and virtue signalling. These concepts encapsulate forms of activism which demand minimal effort and commitment, primarily manifesting through online activities such as liking, sharing, or clicking on social media posts. Concurrently, virtue signalling, the act of expressing moral or ethical beliefs to demonstrate one's goodness or righteousness, often without corresponding actions, has become a prevalent aspect of online discourse.

Affective digital visibility entails the authentic and emotionally resonant presence of individuals or content online, evoking emotional responses and connections beyond mere visibility (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 42). Conversely, empty digital visibility refers to a superficial online presence lacking genuine emotional connection or impact, often prioritising quantity over quality (Hogan 2010, 65).

The apparent dichotomy between low effort and high visibility defines slacktivism and clicktivism, which involve straightforward actions like endorsing online petitions or adapting profile pictures to signal support for causes. While these activities can raise

awareness, concerns arise regarding their substantive impact and depth of engagement with core issues.

Moreover, critiques of slacktivism and clicktivism highlight their superficial nature, but it's essential to recognise their value as entry points for broader engagement and awareness-raising. Even forms of empty visibility can contribute to the larger ecosystem of social change by inspiring deeper involvement and offline action (Morozov 2009, 30). Correlatively, useful activism contrasts with slacktivism by emphasising meaningful, impactful, and sustained actions that extend beyond online gestures (Dijck and Poell 2013, 27). This comparison underscores the distinction between superficial actions and deeper contributions to societal change.

Virtue signalling, then, adds another layer to the discourse, with expressions of moral or ethical beliefs online often being contested for their authenticity. The ascendancy of social media platforms significantly fuels and amplifies these phenomena, creating a virtual space for activism while raising concerns about the algorithmic reinforcement of echo chambers (Tufekci 2017, 41; Gillespie 2018, 179).

Additionally, critics argue that slacktivism and clicktivism may embody tokenism, offering symbolic gestures without genuine engagement with social issues. For instance, Evgeny Morozov, in *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011), critiques the superficial nature of online activism, coining terms like “slacktivism” and suggesting that such activities often serve as substitutes for more meaningful, offline activism. Similarly, Malcolm Gladwell, in his article “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted” (2010), argues that social media-driven activism lacks the deep personal connections and commitment required for significant social change, positioning slacktivism and clicktivism as poor alternatives to traditional forms of activism. Henry Giroux also discusses the dangers of slacktivism in *The Violence of Organised Forgetting: Thinking Beyond America's Disimagination Machine* (2014), highlighting how such activities can lead to passive engagement and fail to challenge underlying power structures effectively. Moreover, Zeynep Tufekci, in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017), acknowledges the role of social media in mobilising protests but warns of the limitations of clicktivism, particularly its inability to replace the sustained, organised activism crucial for long-term change. These concerns suggest that

slacktivism and clicktivism may not only dilute the impact of activism but also overshadow enduring efforts for societal change.

While online activism offers convenient entry points for engagement and awareness-raising, distinguishing between symbolic gestures and substantive actions remains crucial. By navigating the fine line between accessibility and meaningful impact, individuals and movements can harness the power of digital visibility to drive tangible social change. Furthermore, addressing virtue signalling prompts a deeper examination of motivations and encourages genuine, sustained efforts for societal betterment.

3.3.3. Beyond the Spotlight: Exploring Digital Invisibility and its Nuances

The discourse surrounding the visibility-invisibility continuum in the digital landscape transcends mere discussion of the advantages and complexities of online presence. It also encompasses the notion of digital invisibility, a pivotal yet often underestimated aspect (Bucher 2012). Within this relatively uncharted domain, influential factors emerge that shape online narratives. Digital invisibility plays a significant role in moulding these narratives, often operating within a nebulous realm that gives rise to issues commonly associated with conspiracy theories (Marwick and Lewis 2017). While one might argue that concerning harmful content, the balance tends to favour content moderation, the purpose here is not to support or refute that argument. Instead, this discourse explores not only the drawbacks of the 'visibility at any cost' ethos, particularly for marginalised communities, but also the dangerous aspects of conspiracy theories that foster an 'us versus them' mentality.

As established earlier, the content encountered in the digital milieu is subject to algorithmic biases. The algorithms governing our digital interactions tend to favour certain content types based on our preferences and past engagements, while also incorporating values and perspectives that shape the broader digital narrative (Noble 2018). Content moderation, on the other hand, strives to balance freedom of expression with harm prevention, grappling with the challenge of filtering conversations that may be driven by transient emotions (Gillespie 2018). Platforms act as digital gatekeepers, maintaining the delicate balance between free speech and harm prevention, akin to enforcing community standards (Gorwa 2019).

The digital realm is shaped by conflicting forces: algorithmic biases and moderation biases, which can result in inconsistent regulation of speech, including hate speech (Caplan 2018). Therefore, understanding and navigating the algorithms that dictate digital spaces is imperative for those concerned with the future of the information landscape (Pasquale 2015). Recognising digital invisibility as a strategic choice is particularly crucial for activists, especially in repressive regimes where maintaining anonymity is vital for personal safety (Deibert 2013). However, digital invisibility also poses a unique challenge in a technology-dominated era, where anonymity can lead to a diminished voice and influence (Chun 2016). The struggle for visibility in the ubiquitous digital realm raises an important question: is it possible to avoid becoming “invisible” when online presence is crucial for maintaining influence? In a landscape where losing one’s platform can mean losing one’s voice, digital invisibility seems more like a threat than an option, underscoring the precarious balance between maintaining visibility and ensuring security.

Within this context, digital activism is frequently misconstrued, with activists grappling with the dilemma of balancing visibility and security (Earl and Kimport 2011). The risk of falling into digital invisibility adds another layer of complexity, as activists strive to sustain their platforms and voices while navigating the challenges posed by surveillance and online threats.

Thus, recognising digital invisibility as a strategic decision is paramount for activists operating under oppressive regimes or constant surveillance. For these individuals, concealing their identities is crucial to the continuation of their efforts, making digital invisibility a significant conundrum in an era dominated by technology. This raises the question: how can individuals who seek obscurity in cyberspace effectively reach audiences in the tangible world? The reality, more often than not, is that invisibility leads to inaudibility or, at the very least, a muted voice.

Navigating the strategies associated with being seen or unseen presents another significant challenge for activists. The landscape of digital activism is increasingly complex and often misunderstood. For those operating within this virtual domain, the issues are anything but straightforward. Activists beyond the protection of Western democratic safeguards must adopt markedly different approaches to ensure their safety and the effectiveness of their web-deployed, real-life strategies. The challenges of digital

invisibility are further compounded by issues such as tokenism and the substitution of online actions for real-world deeds. Additionally, the algorithms underpinning social media platforms construct elaborate, simulated environments where nearly everything and everyone is likeable.

The primary concern lies in rendering online activism accessible and effective while compelling the system to undergo tangible, measurable change. The peril is that if the online realm mandates virtuous decision-making without addressing systemic issues, then genuine change is neatly sidestepped. The important question becomes: Online activism may seem morally upright, but how frequently does it genuinely effectuate the envisioned change? This critical question will be the focus of the next chapter, where we will delve into case studies and empirical data to assess the actual impact of online activism. We will explore whether digital movements have succeeded in translating their virtual momentum into real-world policy reforms and societal shifts, or if they fall short of creating lasting change. Additionally, we will investigate how digital movements can sometimes be co-opted for manipulation and serve governmental agendas, thereby complicating the narrative of online activism as an unequivocal force for good. By examining these outcomes, we aim to understand the true efficacy of online activism in driving systemic transformation and the potential pitfalls that may undermine the (mostly) good intention of digital activism.

CHAPTER 4:

COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES: HYPERVISIBILITY DOOMED?

Zeynep Tufekci (2017):

“The power to dictate which stories matter and which do not, to render some narratives visible while hiding others, is the very essence of power in an age of networked communication.”

Continuing the exploration of social media activism, this chapter delves into a series of comparative case studies that illuminate both the moments of triumph and the instances where digital mobilisation encounters significant challenges. As we traverse the landscape of online advocacy, it becomes clear that the narrative of success is frequently juxtaposed with narratives of failure. Each case study serves as a distinct thread in the rich fabric of digital activism, revealing stories where the anticipated impact and transformative potential of social media are manipulated, fall short, or succeed.

Understanding what constitutes a successful social media activist movement is crucial for comprehending the broader implications of digital activism. A successful movement typically achieves its goals by maintaining sustained engagement, garnering widespread public support, and driving tangible societal or policy changes. For instance, the #MeToo movement succeeded by leveraging digital visibility to expose systemic issues of sexual harassment and assault, leading to significant cultural shifts and legal reforms⁹. In contrast, an unsuccessful movement might generate initial interest but fails to sustain momentum or effect change, often due to a lack of clear goals, strategic missteps, or the overwhelming influence of competing narratives. An example of this is the #SeekingHumanity movement, which, despite its noble cause, struggled to maintain relevance and impact over time, ultimately failing to bring about the desired awareness and action regarding the global refugee crisis.

⁹ The success of the #MeToo movement is evidenced by several measurable outcomes. Culturally, the movement increased global awareness and public discourse around gender-based violence, with its hashtag being used in over 85 countries (Gill and Orgad 2018). Legally, the movement spurred significant reforms, such as stricter workplace harassment policies in industries like media and entertainment (Fileborn 2019). These developments highlight the movement’s dual impact in transforming both public consciousness and institutional practices.

However, this raises a crucial question presented in Chapter 3: while online activism often appears morally commendable, how frequently does it actually and actively lead to the anticipated change? Through a critical lens, we examine the complexities which permeate these instances, unravelling the multifaceted reasons behind the often-unmet promises of social media as a catalyst for change. In dissecting these cases, we aim not only to comprehend the limitations and dangers but also to distil lessons that can inform and refine the strategies of future digital activism movements. Understanding the nuanced interplay between hypervisibility and its outcomes is crucial in the multifaceted landscape of digital activism. This chapter delves into three distinct dimensions of digital movements, each illustrating the potential and pitfalls of online activism.

We begin with an exploration of Algorithmic Manipulation, focusing on Russian influence campaigns that sought to exploit and manipulate the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement with an agenda-fuelled intention. By analysing these covert operations, we uncover how algorithms can be weaponised to amplify divisive narratives, erode trust, and distort authentic grassroots efforts. This chapter will thus dissect the methods employed by these campaigns, shedding light on the dark underbelly of social media's algorithmic architecture.

Next, we turn our attention to Failed Hypervisibility with a case study on the #SeekingHumanity movement. Inspired by Ai Weiwei's documentary *Human Flow* (2017), this initiative aimed to bring global attention to the refugee crisis. Despite its noble intentions and initial surge of interest, #SeekingHumanity struggled to maintain momentum. We will investigate the factors contributing to its decline, examining how the transient nature of online engagement and the influx of new, clickbait-worthy causes can undermine sustained advocacy.

Finally, we celebrate Successful Hypervisibility by examining three powerful movements: #MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, and #AmINext. Each of these campaigns has leveraged digital visibility to effect profound societal change. From exposing widespread sexual harassment to challenging entrenched rape culture and galvanising South Africans to confront gender-based violence, these movements exemplify how sustained online activism can lead to tangible outcomes. Through detailed analysis, we will explore

the strategies that enabled their success, the challenges they navigated, and the broader implications for future digital advocacy.

As we navigate these diverse narratives, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of hypervisibility in digital activism. By comparing and contrasting these movements, we seek to draw valuable insights into what makes digital campaigns succeed or falter, offering lessons that can inform and inspire future efforts to harness the power of social media for social good.

4.1. A Case Study of Algorithmic Manipulation: Russian Influence Campaigns and #BLM

To understand how algorithms shape public perception and engagement, we need to delve into the evolution of social media activism, especially amidst state efforts to regulate internet communication. Poell (2015) highlights a significant rise in internet censorship methods, where the focus has shifted to redirecting online user activity rather than outright content blocking (OpenNet Initiative, 2023). Algorithms act as gatekeepers to digital visibility, reflecting not only existing cultural assumptions but also anticipating profitable interactions (Bucher 2012). Furthermore, reinforcement learning algorithms can significantly influence political beliefs and actions (Krumins 2019).

A striking example of this manipulation is seen in Russian influence campaigns, which have utilised social media bots¹⁰ and trolls¹¹ to infiltrate platforms and spread divisive content. The Mueller Report, officially titled “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election,” was released in 2019 by Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III. It details the findings of the investigation, which was initiated to explore Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election, possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia, and potential obstruction of justice by President Donald Trump (Mueller 2019).

The report is divided into two volumes. Volume I: Russian Interference outlines how Russia interfered in the 2016 election. It describes how the Internet Research

¹⁰ Social media bots are “automated programs used to engage in social media. These bots behave in an either partially or fully autonomous fashion, and are often designed to mimic human users” (Cloudflare 2024).

¹¹ Trolling is defined as “antagonising others online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content. Internet trolls aim to provoke an emotional response and are trying to engage in a fight or argument” (MIT Social Media Hub 2023).

Agency (IRA), a Russian organisation, conducted social media campaigns to influence public opinion and how Russian intelligence agencies hacked into email accounts associated with the Democratic Party and released stolen emails through organisations like WikiLeaks (Mueller 2019). Volume II: Obstruction of Justice investigates whether President Trump obstructed justice in relation to the investigation. It examines multiple actions by Trump and his associates to determine if they intended to interfere with the investigation (Mueller 2019).

The report confirms that Russia engaged in a comprehensive and systematic effort to influence the 2016 presidential election. However, it did not establish that the Trump campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government. Mueller's team outlined several instances where President Trump might have obstructed justice. The report does not conclusively determine that Trump committed a crime, but it also does not exonerate him. Instead, it leaves the question open, stating that Congress has the authority to conduct its own investigation into the matter (Mueller 2019).

The Internet Research Agency (IRA), a Russian organisation, played a central role in these influence campaigns. According to the Mueller Report (2019), the IRA used fake social media accounts to create and promote content designed to incite discord and amplify societal divisions within the United States. These accounts posted on various topics, including race relations, immigration, and political controversies, to target different groups with tailored messages aimed at sowing discord. One notable example is the “Blacktivist” Facebook page, which was created by the IRA. The page masqueraded as a grassroots African-American activist group and gained more followers than the official Black Lives Matter (BLM) page. It shared inflammatory content that exaggerated racial tensions and sought to undermine the legitimacy of the BLM movement. Posts from “Blacktivist” often featured provocative and misleading headlines intended to provoke strong emotional responses and deepen societal divisions (Mueller 2019).

Another example is the “Heart of Texas” Facebook page, also run by the IRA. This page targeted Texans with content promoting secessionist views and anti-immigrant rhetoric. The page organised real-world events, such as rallies, which were promoted online. In some cases, these events led to physical confrontations between opposing groups, further inflaming tensions and divisions within the community (Mueller, 2019).

On Twitter, the IRA used thousands of bot accounts to amplify divisive content. Depending on the agenda, these bots retweeted messages from both pro- and anti-Trump accounts to create an illusion of widespread support or opposition. They also used hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, and #MAGA to infiltrate discussions on both sides of the political spectrum. This tactic helped to amplify controversial topics and create echo chambers that reinforced existing biases and polarised users (Howard and Kollanyi 2016).

Instagram is another platform on which the IRA was active. They created posts targeting different demographic groups with content to exploit social and political issues. For example, some posts targeted African-American communities with messages that aimed to exacerbate feelings of injustice and frustration. In contrast, others targeted conservative groups with anti-immigration and pro-gun rights content. The visual nature of Instagram makes it an effective tool for spreading visually appealing but misleading or divisive content (Mueller 2019). The IRA also used YouTube to disseminate video content. They created and promoted videos that featured fake news stories, conspiracy theories, and inflammatory rhetoric. These videos were shared across social media platforms to reach a wider audience. The use of video content allowed the IRA to create more engaging and persuasive messages, which were often more effective at spreading disinformation and inciting emotional responses than text-based posts alone (Mueller 2019).

By comprehending these methods, such as manipulating algorithms and exploiting social media platforms, we can devise plans to safeguard and bolster democratic processes and social causes in today's digital world. Acknowledging and dealing with these strategies is vital for upholding the credibility and impact of social movements in the digital age. Through spreading divisive content, these campaigns fostered distrust, sowed discord, and siphoned resources, ultimately diminishing the effectiveness of these movements in driving meaningful change (Howard and Kollanyi 2016). Recognising these tactics is imperative for formulating strategies to fortify and defend social movements in the digital era.

Overall, the Russian influence campaigns, particularly through the utilisation of social media manipulation tactics, serve as a compelling case study for understanding the exploitation of algorithms to magnify messaging, enhance the prominence of specific

narratives, and mould public opinion and engagement within social movements. These campaigns underscore the intricate interplay between visibility, algorithmic governance, and the dynamics of digital activism. They offer invaluable insights into how visibility can be engineered, and algorithms can be strategically harnessed to disrupt social movements, aligning cohesively with the research objectives concerning the digital visibility complex and the pivotal role of algorithms in shaping participatory culture.

4.2. A Case Study of Failed Hypervisibility: #HumanFlow

Turning our attention to another compelling case study, we explore the #HumanFlow movement, inspired by acclaimed artist Ai Weiwei. Weiwei, an eminent Chinese artist and activist, centres his artistic endeavours on themes of heightened visibility, activism, and protest. His diverse portfolio, spanning sculpture, photography, architecture, and performance art, critically reflects on political and social landscapes. Weiwei's creations frequently draw attention to the transient nature of media scrutiny and its deep impact on pivotal societal issues. Through his digital platform, Weiwei meticulously documents human rights violations and advocates for global awareness and response, emphasising the critical role of visibility in contemporary activism. Despite enduring significant personal repercussions for his advocacy efforts, Weiwei garners international acclaim as a symbol of resistance and a forceful proponent of human rights. His works are showcased worldwide, providing a platform to spotlight issues extending beyond Chinese borders, notably focusing on the global refugee crisis.

Relevant to this study, Weiwei's impactful documentary *Human Flow* provides an in-depth exploration of the global refugee crisis. Through a compelling visual narrative, the film emotionally examines the extensive human displacement caused by various factors such as conflict, persecution, climate change, and economic struggles. Weiwei embarks on a journey across 23 countries, capturing the experiences of refugees living in challenging conditions, including precarious camps, treacherous sea voyages, and confrontations at borders. The documentary aims to humanise the overwhelming statistics often associated with discussions on refugees by shedding light on personal narratives and individual struggles. Employing poignant cinematography and heartfelt interviews, Weiwei showcases the fortitude and dignity of displaced individuals while

offering a critique of the political and social frameworks that inadequately respond to the crisis.

Born from the profound narrative woven in the film, the #HumanFlow movement echoed across various digital platforms, sparking conversations, sharing personal stories, and urging collective action in response to the global refugee crisis. The resonance of Weiwei's poignant storytelling fostered a sense of urgency and compassion among participants in the digital realm. However, the narrative of #HumanFlow, like many social media movements, encountered the intricate dynamics that often accompany online advocacy. Despite the initial surge of engagement, the sustained momentum waned over time, making it a case study for failed hypervisibility in social media activism. This shift in attention is emblematic of the transient nature of online activism and the challenges inherent in translating virtual enthusiasm into tangible, impactful change. The complexities of the global refugee crisis, combined with the fast-paced nature of digital platforms, posed hurdles in maintaining sustained engagement and transforming awareness into practical support for those affected.

As we look closely at the journey of the #HumanFlow movement, we will also be peeling back the layers to understand the depth of social media activism. The ups and downs of this movement offer a glimpse into the bigger picture of digital advocacy, prompting us to take a thoughtful look at how online stories can impact real change in the world around us, or become additional noise in the overwhelming surge of fleeting hypervisibility.

The #HumanFlow movement stands as a poignant example that vividly illustrates the intricate dynamics of hypervisibility within digital activism. Originating from Ai Weiwei's documentary *Human Flow*, this movement swiftly gained momentum across digital platforms, drawing global attention to the refugee crisis. However, this surge in visibility, while undoubtedly impactful, brings forth its own set of challenges. In the realm of digital activism, the phenomenon of hypervisibility presents a dual-edged sword. On one hand, it serves to amplify the reach and resonance of a cause, captivating a diverse audience and fostering awareness on a global scale. Yet, simultaneously, it poses significant risks, including the potential for oversimplification and dilution of the underlying message. As danah boyd elucidates in her work on "Visibility and Visibility Management," the management of visibility within the social media ecosystem is a

pivotal undertaking. boyd asserts, “Visibility is a key dynamic in the social media ecosystem. It is what makes information propagable” (boyd 2010, 49). Effective management is essential to ensure that the engagement spurred by heightened visibility translates into meaningful, sustained action rather than superficial gestures.

Moreover, the hypervisibility of social issues, such as #HumanFlow, on digital platforms may inadvertently perpetuate detrimental effects, including oversimplification, sensationalism, and the spread of misinformation. Gaye Tuchman's insights, highlight how the oversimplification of complex problems into easily digestible narratives for mass consumption can hinder nuanced discussions and contribute to shallow engagement. Tuchman explains that this can “hinder nuanced discussions and contribute to the spread of misinformation and shallow engagement” (Tuchman 1978, 112). This underscores the need for a nuanced approach to managing visibility within digital activism endeavours. Additionally, Safiya Umoja Noble's research in “Algorithms of Oppression” (2018, 134–135) brings to the forefront concerns regarding algorithmic biases that may exacerbate existing inequalities and marginalise certain voices within the broader narrative. Noble's work highlights how algorithms can perpetuate stereotypes and impact the visibility of marginalised voices. In the context of the #HumanFlow movement, with its far-reaching global impact, these concerns surrounding algorithmic biases add another layer of complexity to the already intricate dynamics of hypervisibility.

As we delve deeper into the paradoxes embedded within the journey of hypervisibility, we aim to not only understand the nuances of individual movements but also distil broader insights that can inform future digital activism endeavours. By dissecting the experiences of #HumanFlow and other similar movements, we endeavour to ensure that the heightened visibility achieved translates into tangible, positive impacts in the real world. Digital activism, when effectively managed, can become a powerful tool for advocacy, as noted by Smith: “Digital activism has become a powerful tool for refugee activism, offering a platform for displaced individuals and communities to share their stories, connect with supporters, and advocate for their rights. Social media, in particular, plays a crucial role in amplifying the voices of refugees on a global scale” (Smith 2018, 3).

However, this hypervisibility can sometimes be the very element that sends movements into eventual invisibility. The surge of attention and engagement often wanes as the digital sphere is continually inundated with new causes that compete for attention. Each new, clickbait-worthy cause can divert the audience’s focus, leading to the rapid decline of momentum for previous movements. The #HumanFlow movement, for instance, experienced this shift as initial fervour gave way to new trending issues. This phenomenon highlights a critical vulnerability in digital activism: the ephemeral nature of online attention. Thus, online movements will benefit from finding strategies to sustain engagement beyond the initial surge of visibility to achieve lasting impact.

At the onset of 2017, discussions surrounding the documentary *Human Flow* began to gain traction as its announcement and promotional initiatives unfolded. A notable upsurge in mentions of #HumanFlow was evident around the time of its premiere at the prestigious Venice Film Festival in September 2017, underscoring the heightened interest and media attention surrounding the event. Subsequently, another peak in discussions arose in October 2017, aligning with the cinematic debut of “Human Flow,” catalysing further discourse and engagement across social media platforms (Weiwei Films 2024; Fagerholm 2017; Nicholson 2018; Reed 2017). Following the initial buzz and

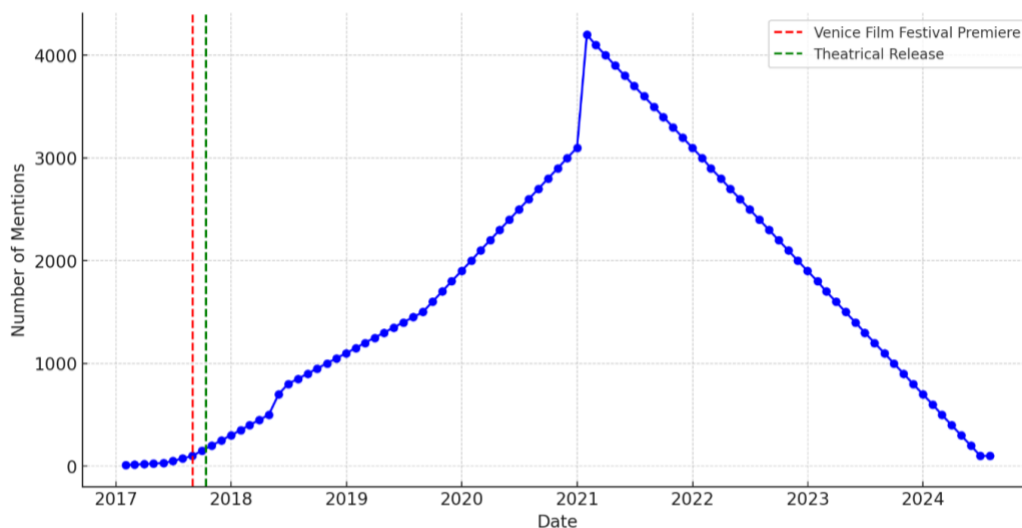


Figure 2: Social Media Mentions of “Human Flow” Over Time (Ai Weiwei Films 2024; Fagerholm 2017; Nicholson 2018; Reed 2017). Graph created by author.

theatrical release, there was a gradual decline in mentions as the documentary transitioned to streaming services, and public attention shifted towards emerging content and contemporary affairs.

Subsequently, in 2019, Ai Weiwei released a second documentary in the *Human Flow* series, titled “The Rest.” This film provides another stark examination of the refugee crisis in Europe, focusing on individuals stranded in limbo due to inadequate policies and fleeting media attention. Weiwei documents their daily lives and struggles, emphasising the need for sustained engagement and support while critiquing the transient nature of hypervisibility and its real-world effects (Weiwei 2019). By humanising the refugees and critiquing the response initiated by *Human Flow*, Weiwei calls for a more complex and active understanding and commitment to addressing the ongoing crisis.

In “The Rest,” Ai Weiwei underscores how quickly media attention and public interest shift away from refugee crises, leaving those still in desperate need behind (Weiwei 2019). By offering personal glimpses into the lives of displaced individuals, the documentary advocates for a more profound and enduring commitment to addressing humanitarian challenges (Doe 2020, 113) – not only in terms of the refugee crisis, but within the larger context of online activism.

Informed by this information, we can deduct that the #HumanFlow movement, despite its compelling narrative and initial surge of engagement, ultimately failed due to several interrelated factors highlighting the inherent challenges of digital activism and hypervisibility. Firstly, the transient nature of online attention on social media platforms, characterised by a constant influx of new trends and causes, led to a decline in sustained engagement as public focus shifted elsewhere (Ai Weiwei Films 2024; boyd 2010). Additionally, the refugee crisis is a deeply multifaceted issue that, when simplified for social media, often results in a superficial understanding and engagement from the audience (Tuchman 1978). This oversimplification hinders the development of a deep, lasting commitment to the cause. Moreover, the movement lacked effective strategies to maintain long-term momentum, contributing to its decline after the initial impact (Smith 2018). Algorithmic biases on social media platforms also played a role, affecting the visibility of important issues and voices within the movement and challenging its ability to maintain a consistent and broad reach (Noble 2018). The oversaturation of social media content created an environment where causes must compete for attention,

leading to audience fatigue and desensitisation (boyd 2010). Furthermore, the movement struggled to translate online enthusiasm into tangible, real-world actions, facing difficulties in mobilising its audience to take significant steps to impact the refugee crisis (Smith 2018). Finally, media coverage and public interest can be fickle, quickly moving on to new stories and crises, which contributed to the decline in visibility of the #HumanFlow movement (Ai Weiwei Films 2024). Understanding these factors can help future digital activism efforts navigate the challenges of hypervisibility and work towards creating sustained, impactful change.

Although we have seen #HumanFlow as an unsuccessful case of hypervisibility, there is a lesson to be learnt, which may have been implied (if not fully executed) by Ai Weiwei's second film, *The Rest*, which delves deeper into the refugee crisis and focuses on the aftermath of the initial stories told in *Human Flow*. Interestingly, while #HumanFlow failed to maintain sustained visibility, its decline underscores the strategic potential of invisibility.

As explored in Chapter 2 through Ellison's *Invisible Man*, invisibility can offer a form of autonomy, allowing movements to retreat and refocus their strategies away from the immediate pressures of public scrutiny. In this context, invisibility does not always signify failure or irrelevance but creates a protective space where movements can re-evaluate their messaging, develop more cohesive strategies, and mitigate the risks of algorithmic biases that favour sensationalism over depth.

Brighenti (2007) emphasises that invisibility functions as more than a state of marginalisation – it is a relational and strategic process that can shield groups from the exploitative dynamics of hypervisibility. In the digital landscape, where movements are often judged by their virality, invisibility offers an opportunity to rebuild narratives with greater intentionality and nuance. For instance, the fleeting engagement experienced by #HumanFlow might have been mitigated by a deliberate withdrawal to recalibrate its framing and re-engage audiences with more targeted and sustained messaging.

Moreover, invisibility as a strategic tool aligns with Goffman's (1959) theory of performance, where the “backstage” becomes a critical space for preparation. Movements like #HumanFlow could use periods of reduced visibility to refine their narrative “performances” and re-enter the digital stage with renewed clarity and purpose. This kind of intentional retreat contrasts the common perception of invisibility

as a weakness, reframing it as a dynamic and empowering strategy within the competitive realm of digital activism.

The potential for invisibility, then, to act as a shield against hypervisibility's pitfalls – such as sensationalism, oversimplification, and burnout – highlights its practical value for digital movements. By leveraging periods of reduced visibility, activists can better navigate the demands of algorithmic platforms, maintain control over their message, and ensure that their advocacy remains both impactful and sustainable in the long term.

Furthermore, as we transition to the next subsection, it is essential to acknowledge the transient nature of hypervisibility in social media activism. While a movement may initially capture widespread attention, sustaining that attention remains a significant challenge. As boyd (2010) and Noble (2018) suggest, managing hypervisibility demands strategic planning and continuous effort to adapt to the rapidly evolving digital landscape. Without these strategies, movements risk fading as new causes emerge, each seeking their moment in the spotlight.

In the following subsection, we will examine case studies where hypervisibility led to tangible change and successful activism, shedding light on the strategies and factors that contributed to their effectiveness. By exploring these examples, we aim to uncover how digital movements can transcend the ephemeral nature of online attention and achieve lasting impact.

4.3. Successful Hypervisibility: #AmINext, A Real-Life Case Study

Exploring the triumphs of digital activism, we turn our gaze to influential movements such as #MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, and #AmINext within the South African context. These movements serve as powerful testaments to the transformative influence wielded by visibility. The genesis of #MeToo blossomed into a global force, strategically leveraging hypervisibility to confront pervasive issues of sexual harassment and assault. Following this, #EndRapeCulture gained momentum, challenging societal norms and institutional responses to gender-based violence. Similarly, #AmINext thrust the urgent issue of femicide into the limelight, harmonising individual narratives with a collective outcry for change. These case studies, like brushstrokes on the canvas of activism, illuminate the

strategic artistry of employing hypervisibility as a catalyst for change while navigating the intricate challenges that arise in the realm of digital visibility.

Over the past few years, South Africa has grappled with an alarming surge in gender-based violence (GBV), cementing it as one of the most pressing social issues in the country. The female homicide rate in South Africa is roughly 24.6 per 100,000 population—nearly six times the global average (Ballard 2023). This crisis has seen women and girls facing disproportionate levels of violence, both in public and private spheres, with harrowing statistics revealing the extent of the epidemic. According to official statistics, South Africa consistently records some of the highest rates of rape worldwide (Washington and Marcus 2023). Despite enacted legislation and general government action, there has only been a 6% decrease in rape rates in South Africa since 1996 (Ballard 2023). This pervasive issue has been compounded by deeply entrenched societal norms that often perpetuate victim-blaming and silence survivors (Smith 2022). Gender-based violence is deeply ingrained in homes, workplaces, cultures, and traditions, necessitating significant social and legislative reforms to combat this widespread issue (Williams 2023). South Africans see gender-based violence as the most important women's rights issue that the government and society must address (Johnson 2023). Despite legislative efforts and public campaigns aimed at curbing GBV, the challenge remains formidable, demanding a concerted and sustained effort from all sectors of society to foster a culture of zero tolerance towards gender-based violence (Johnson 2023).

4.3.1. The #MeToo Movement in South Africa

The #MeToo movement, which gained global traction in October 2017 after a tweet from actress Alyssa Milano, resonated deeply in South Africa. Statistics reveal a grim reality: female homicide in South Africa is five times higher than the global average (Statistics South Africa 2018, 9), with one of the highest rape rates at 138 per 100,000. One in three women experiences intimate partner violence (South Africa, Office of the President 2020, 26; Cheema and Mitchell 2023, 145). In the wake of #MeToo, women from diverse backgrounds shared their experiences of sexual harassment and assault, highlighting the widespread prevalence of gender-based violence in domestic spaces, workplaces,

universities, and public areas (Burke 2017). The movement gained significant momentum in South Africa in 2018 and 2019, increasing awareness and calling for systemic change. A pivotal moment was the Women's March in August 2018, where numerous South African women demanded justice for survivors and stricter laws against offenders (Cohen 2018). The #MeToo movement encouraged many to break their silence and sparked essential conversations about the need for comprehensive solutions to combat sexual harassment and assault (Makou 2018).

Cheema and Mitchell note that “#MeToo influenced social justice activism in South Africa by demonstrating the potential of social media to mobilise and effect change” (Cheema and Mitchell 2023, 141). This underscores the transformative power of digital platforms in advancing the fight against gender-based violence. The movement has had a profound global and local impact, significantly influencing policies and discussions on sexual harassment and gender-based violence in South Africa. In response to public outcry and advocacy campaigns inspired by #MeToo, the South African government introduced a trio of gender-based violence (GBV) amendment bills in 2021. These reforms, aimed at strengthening protections for survivors, included measures to expand the definition of sexual offences, improve reporting mechanisms, and enhance penalties for perpetrators (Parliament of South Africa 2021). Additionally, the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (2020–2030) was adopted to address systemic challenges and coordinate efforts to combat GBV at a national level (Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities 2020). These developments highlight how the #MeToo movement catalysed critical policy discussions and legislative action in South Africa.

Furthermore, online digital activism has been pivotal in propelling the #MeToo movement forward in South Africa, harnessing the power of social media to amplify voices, mobilise supporters, and drive change. The campaign surged in popularity on social media as activists and survivors bravely shared their experiences, inspired by the global movement. A marked increase in social media interactions occurred in late 2017 and early 2018, mirroring the worldwide rise of #MeToo conversations. South African online platforms were flooded with discussions on gender-based violence and harassment, with activists and ordinary citizens actively participating in the dialogue (Nefdt 2023; Gordon 2023). This period of heightened online engagement coincided with

real-life activism events, including protests and public gatherings. Notably, the #TotalShutdown march in August 2018 united thousands of women across the country against gender-based violence, showcasing the impactful overlap between online discourse and on-the-ground activism.

Digital activism has also facilitated the formation of online communities where survivors and allies can find support and solidarity. These virtual spaces provide a lifeline for individuals who might feel isolated due to societal stigma, fostering a sense of collective empowerment (Meyer, Whittier, and Robnett 2016). Organisations like The Justice Desk, People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA), Soul City Institute, and the Tears Foundation harness social media to support survivors. The Justice Desk utilises platforms like Facebook and Instagram to share educational material, stories of survivors, and resources to raise awareness and push for policy changes (The Justice Desk 2024). Similarly, POWA leverages social media to reach out about their counselling and legal services, fostering a community of support for women and children affected by gender-based violence (Naledi-Kuali 2024). The Soul City Institute focuses on empowering young women and girls through their online campaigns, offering educational content and support resources (Soul City Institute 2024). The Tears Foundation operates a 24-hour helpline and shares educational material and survivor accounts on social media, aiming to break the stigma surrounding sexual violence and encourage survivors to seek assistance (Tears Foundation 2024).

The #MeToo movement in South Africa has emboldened many to share their stories and has ignited vital conversations about the urgent need for comprehensive solutions to combat sexual harassment and assault (Gouws 2019). Shared narratives within these communities encourage more people to come forward and contribute to the movement's growing momentum. Smith (2024) notes, "Collective empowerment in online communities is driven by shared narratives and common goals, encouraging more individuals to come forward and contribute to the movement. This collective sense of purpose can transform personal struggles into a powerful, united front."

Despite the successes, the challenges of digital activism should not be overlooked. The transient nature of online attention can make sustaining long-term engagement difficult (Johnson 2024). The fast-paced internet environment means online support can quickly wane, making digital activism most effective for short-term

campaigns. As Miller (2024) explains, “Since the internet is fast-paced, online support is quick to die out so online activism works best for quick, short-term campaigns.” Furthermore, the vast reach of social media can sometimes lead to oversimplification of complex issues. While hashtags and viral posts are effective in raising awareness, they can reduce multifaceted problems to easily digestible narratives, potentially missing deeper, systemic changes needed to address the root causes of gender-based violence (Tuchman 1978, 112).

Despite these challenges, the #MeToo movement's digital activism in South Africa has undeniably made significant strides in changing the landscape of social justice activism. The movement has driven legislative reforms, reshaped corporate policies, and fostered critical dialogues on gender equality and consent. In response to #MeToo, South African companies reassessed internal policies on sexual harassment, implementing robust reporting mechanisms, gender sensitivity training, and accountability initiatives. The movement also spurred discussions on consent, gender equality, and healthy relationships in educational settings, with schools and universities initiating programs aimed at empowering students to recognise and address problematic behaviours. Mahlangu asserts, “#MeToo has become a rallying cry for survivors of sexual harassment and assault, empowering them to speak out and demand change” (Mahlangu 2021, 13). While its direct influence on specific policies varies, #MeToo has undeniably catalysed efforts to combat sexual harassment and gender-based violence, laying the groundwork for a more equitable society and inspiring movements like #EndRapeCulture and #AmINext.

4.3.2. The #EndRapeCulture Movement in South Africa

The #EndRapeCulture movement has been a vital force in South Africa, working to dismantle harmful societal norms and beliefs that fuel sexual violence. The movement saw a surge in support during the “Reference List” protests at Rhodes University in April 2016, where students exposed a list of alleged rapists on campus, demanding greater action against sexual violence (Smith 2016). This protest was a turning point, highlighting the need to confront rape culture within academic institutions. In 2018, the movement continued with impactful demonstrations at the University of Cape Town (UCT), as

students rallied for improved support for survivors and more effective prevention strategies (Petersen 2018). These mobilisations under the #EndRapeCulture banner have heightened awareness and prompted policy changes, striving to foster safer spaces and challenge the normalisation of sexual violence in South African society (Makhubu 2018).

Building upon the momentum of the #MeToo movement, South Africa witnessed the emergence of the #EndRapeCulture movement, a grassroots campaign aimed at confronting the pervasive culture of sexual violence and challenging societal attitudes that enable it. Rooted in solidarity and resistance, #EndRapeCulture sought to dismantle the structures perpetuating sexual violence, shedding light on the intersecting factors of power, privilege, and patriarchy that underpin such atrocities. Cheema and Mitchell (2023) highlight the movement's impact, stating it “was successful in raising awareness of rape culture and sociocultural mechanisms which allow and enable rape.” Orth, Andiaptin, and van Wyk's (2020) study of Facebook comments related to #EndRapeCulture found that the campaign increased public conversations about sexual violence, impacted public discourse, and highlighted the lack of male mobilisation in the struggle against rape culture.

Furthermore, the movement catalysed tangible changes at the institutional level, particularly within South African universities. Gouws (2019) notes that broad nationwide student engagement brought significant institutional changes, with university management appointing task teams to investigate policies and claims of rape culture. Naido (2018) highlights improvements in security measures, stronger support systems for victims, better disciplinary procedures, and a zero-tolerance approach toward sexual violence at various campuses. Despite these advancements, #EndRapeCulture faced challenges in reaching communities outside universities, as Cheema and Mitchell (2023, 149) point out. This limitation led to the emergence of #AmINext, a social movement that mobilised women on a larger scale while being uniquely South African. This subsequent movement was strongly influenced by #MeToo and served as a testament to the enduring impact of digital activism in catalysing social change and challenging entrenched systems of oppression (Cheema and Mitchell 2023, 149).

The #EndRapeCulture movement began with university protests, highlighting the power of grassroots activism in driving societal change. As stated previously, by

leveraging social media, the movement created a platform for survivors and activists to express concerns, raise awareness, and gather support. This digital activism has amplified voices, caught the attention of policymakers, and engaged the public, fostering an informed citizenry. One notable success is the movement's influence on policy changes within academic institutions. The establishment of task teams and zero-tolerance policies towards sexual violence are direct results of persistent student activism, reflecting an acknowledgment of the need to address systemic gender-based violence in educational settings (Fisher et al. 2018).

The #EndRapeCulture movement's connections with other initiatives, such as #MeToo and #AmINext, underscore the vital role of solidarity and collective action in combating sexual violence. The rise of #AmINext, in particular, illustrates how social movements can adapt to emerging challenges and extend their influence. However, the #EndRapeCulture movement has encountered difficulties in extending its reach beyond university campuses, especially in marginalised and rural communities. This limitation underscores the need for more inclusive strategies to ensure that all voices are heard and that efforts to combat sexual violence are truly comprehensive.

Despite these challenges, the #EndRapeCulture movement has made significant strides in raising awareness and driving institutional changes within South Africa. Its effective use of digital platforms and its influence on movements like #AmINext highlight the power of sustained grassroots efforts. However, the movement must continue to strive for greater inclusivity to ensure that its impact resonates across all sectors of society.

As Cheema and Mitchell (2023, 149) point out, while #EndRapeCulture made significant progress within higher education institutions, it struggled to reach communities outside of universities. This gap led to the emergence of #AmINext, a movement that mobilised women on a much larger scale while still being distinctly South African. Influenced by the global #MeToo movement, #AmINext served as a powerful testament to the enduring impact of digital activism in catalysing social change and challenging entrenched systems of oppression.

4.3.3. The #AmINext Movement in South Africa



Figure 3: Uyinene's Murder Sparks Action. Image source: Namhla Monakali, Five Years Later: Uyinene Mrwetyana's Legacy Inspires GBV Transformation, News24, December 10, 2024. <https://www.news24.com/news24/community-newspaper/peoples-post/five-years-later-uyinene-mrwetyanas-legacy-inspires-gbv-transformation-20241210>.

Amid the escalating gender-based violence in South Africa, a nation grappling with one of the highest rates of rape and femicide globally, a pivotal moment crystallised on August 24, 2019. On this day, a nineteen-year-old university student, Uyinene (Nene) Mrwetyana, went to a local post office in broad daylight, only to tragically fall victim to a heinous crime. According to Cheema and Mitchell (2023), Uyinene was raped and brutally murdered by a post office worker, her untimely death sending shockwaves throughout the nation. The brutality of her demise not only stirred public outrage but also laid bare the stark reality of the government's failure to protect its women. "Uyinene's rape and murder ignited several days of protest initially in Cape Town and later across other provinces of South Africa, highlighting the alarming rates of femicide" (Smith 2023, 1).

In response, a groundswell of collective anger and grief erupted across South Africa, coalescing into a powerful social media movement known as #AmINext. This movement, echoing the sentiments of the global #MeToo movement, served as a poignant call to action, mobilising women from all walks of life to demand accountability, justice, and systemic change in the face of rampant gender-based violence. Inspired by #MeToo, South Africa's own versions, #AmINext and #IamNene, started trending nationwide. Uyinene's death "became grotesquely emblematic of the government's complete failure to protect women" (Cheema and Mitchell, 2023). The hashtag quickly culminated in a mass protest "consisting of South African women (and men) of all walks of life, from the whole country. They marched to parliament to demand that the

government give a stronger response to GBV” (Cheema and Mitchell, 2023). “The movement was understood to raise consciousness on GBV, encourage action against GBV, challenge rape culture and create a sense of community among victims and those engaging in the movement” (Smith 2023, 39).

During apartheid, sexual violence was widespread yet underreported due to social and legal constraints. The legacy of this period continues to influence present-day societal norms and behaviours (Jewkes et al. 2002; Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, 2012). Today, South Africa has some of the highest rates of GBV globally. It is estimated that a woman is murdered every three hours in South Africa, with the country ranking fourth worldwide for female interpersonal violence (Wilkinson 2020). Despite constitutional protections and various gender equality commissions, GBV remains rampant. This ongoing violence is exacerbated by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and a lack of effective law enforcement (Government ZA 2020; Gqola, 2007).

Movements like #AmINext, which gained widespread attention after the murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana in 2019, have empowered survivors to share their stories and seek justice, often anonymously. While these platforms have provided a vital space for expression, there is growing scepticism about the effectiveness of online activism. As Smith (2023, 3) critiques, “the minimal effort required in social media activism has brought into question the effectiveness of online movements in bringing about change.”

In South Africa, raising awareness and mobilising against gender-based violence now primarily occurs through social media platforms like Instagram. As Smith (2023, 2) observes, “Social media has created an easily accessible space that encourages debate and engagement on social injustices.” Hashtag activism is central to these platforms, enabling the creation of supportive communities and the rapid dissemination of critical information. This often leads to heightened public awareness and increased pressure on authorities to respond (Mendes et al., 2018).

The #AmINext movement is a striking example of this, as the hashtag generated significant awareness following Uyinene Mrwetyana's tragic death. What makes this movement particularly powerful is not only the personal stories shared in its aftermath but also the role social media plays as a 21st-century equivalent of word-of-mouth. The digital dynamics of virtual activism allow for both community-building and the

distribution of vital information, intensifying public pressure on authorities to address the issue.

However, despite the popularity of this form of activism—especially among younger generations—its impact is increasingly being questioned. Critics argue that the ease of participation may undermine its effectiveness. Smith (2023), in “A Necessary but Insufficient Condition: The Performativity of Virtue through Social Media Activism,” raises an important critique, questioning whether the public performance of virtue that often accompanies online activism truly contributes to meaningful change or merely offers a superficial display of engagement.

These movements – #MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, and #AmINext – have significantly influenced South Africa's approach to gender-based violence (GBV) and women's rights, resulting in notable policy, public awareness, and institutional reforms. In 2020, South Africa introduced the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, which aims to tackle GBV with comprehensive prevention strategies, reforms in the criminal justice system, and enhanced support for survivors (Government ZA, 2020). Earlier, in 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the Emergency Response Action Plan (ERAP) on Gender-Based Violence, allocating funds to initiatives combating femicide and aiding GBV survivors (Cook 2020). Public awareness efforts have been critical, particularly following the murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana, which triggered the #AmINext movement and widespread protests highlighting the issue of GBV (Dalvit 2021).

Additionally, campaigns like #TotalShutdown and the #100MenMarch have been instrumental in mobilising public opinion and fostering a collective stance against GBV (Dalvit 2021). Educational institutions have also responded by implementing stricter policies and support systems to address sexual harassment and assault, including the creation of dedicated GBV response units and training initiatives for staff and students (Vetten 2021). Furthermore, the South African government has bolstered funding for shelters, legal aid, and psychological support services for GBV survivors, demonstrating a broader commitment to strengthening support structures for those affected (Vetten 2021). These combined efforts underscore the transformative impact of these movements in advancing the fight against gender-based violence in South Africa.

The #AmINext movement in South Africa gained significant momentum following the tragic murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana on August 24, 2019. This incident sparked widespread outrage and led to a surge in social media activity as South Africans used the hashtag to share their stories of gender-based violence (GBV) and demand systemic change. The movement saw a considerable increase in mentions and engagement, becoming a rallying cry for those affected by GBV (Raborife 2019; Masemola 2019). The peak of the #AmINext movement occurred in the weeks following Mrwetyana's murder, particularly in early September 2019. During this period, social media platforms were inundated with posts using the hashtag, reflecting the collective anger and call for action against GBV. This digital activism was mirrored by substantial offline protests, with large demonstrations held in major cities and university campuses across South Africa (Masemola 2019; Hyman et al., 2019). The movement not only raised awareness but also pressured authorities to take more decisive action against GBV, leading to a greater societal focus on the issue.

Although the initial surge in mentions gradually declined, the #AmINext movement continued to be a significant part of the conversation on GBV in South Africa. The sustained engagement indicates that the movement managed to keep the issue in public discourse, contributing to ongoing advocacy and pressure on authorities to address the crisis (Mogoatlhe 2023; Masemola 2019). This continued engagement is crucial for maintaining awareness and pushing for long-term systemic changes.

The #AmINene hashtag also gained traction around the same time, often used interchangeably with #AmINext. Both hashtags became symbols of the broader fight against GBV, representing the shared experiences and demands for justice from South African women. The integration of these hashtags helped to unify the digital activism efforts, creating a stronger collective voice against GBV. The combined use of #AmINext and #AmINene underscored the pervasive nature of GBV in South Africa and highlighted the urgent need for systemic reform (Foreign Affairs Review 2019; Meltwater 2019). The #AmINext and #AmINene movements in South Africa have played a pivotal role in raising awareness about gender-based violence and pushing for systemic change. The initial surge in social media mentions and the subsequent sustained engagement reflect the movements' significant impact on public discourse and advocacy efforts. By integrating

these hashtags, South Africans have created a unified front in the fight against GBV, demonstrating the powerful role of digital activism in driving social change.

4.4. A Comparative Analysis of the Effects of Visibility

To synthesise the insights discussed, Table 1 summarises key factors across three case studies: Algorithmic Manipulation (#BLM), Failed Hypervisibility (#HumanFlow), and (Possible) Successful Hypervisibility (#MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, and #AmINext). The table provides a comparative framework for understanding the dynamics of visibility in digital activism, focusing on visibility strategies, algorithmic influences, and public engagement.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis

Factor	Algorithmic Manipulation (#BLM)	Failed Hypervisibility (#HumanFlow)	Possible Successful Hypervisibility (#MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, #AmINext)
Visibility Strategy	Exploited by external actors (Russian bots and trolls) to amplify divisive content.	Initial surge due to a powerful documentary but failed to sustain momentum.	Strategic use of personal narratives and hashtags to maintain engagement.
Algorithmic Influence	Algorithms prioritised divisive and sensational content, undermining genuine activism.	Algorithmic bias favoured sensationalist content over nuanced narratives, limiting impact.	Algorithms boosted viral hashtags and personal stories, sustaining visibility over time.
Framing	Manipulated framing by external actors to distort the movement's message.	Effective initial framing but couldn't maintain interest amidst competing causes.	Consistent framing of personal stories and widespread social issues kept the movements in the spotlight.
Public Engagement	High initial engagement but driven by manipulated content, leading to distrust.	High initial engagement but quickly waned due to lack of sustained interest.	High and sustained engagement through continuous sharing of personal stories and collective action.
Sustainability	Short-term visibility led to scepticism and internal divisions.	Short-lived visibility; failed to convert initial interest into long-term support.	Long-term visibility achieved through continuous mobilisation and advocacy.

<i>Impact on Policy</i>	Limited due to the undermining of the movement's credibility.	Limited policy impact due to brief engagement and attention span.	Significant policy impact and legislative reforms influenced by sustained activism.
<i>Community Support</i>	Fragmented due to manipulated narratives causing internal conflict.	Initial support fragmented over time as attention shifted to new issues.	Strong and growing support through building a sense of solidarity and community.
<i>Challenges</i>	Combating misinformation and restoring trust within the movement.	Overcoming the transient nature of digital attention and competition with other causes.	Addressing the potential for oversimplification and maintaining long-term engagement.
<i>Opportunities</i>	Developing strategies to counteract algorithmic manipulation and misinformation.	Finding ways to sustain engagement and interest beyond initial visibility.	Leveraging digital platforms for continuous advocacy and legislative change.

The analysis of these digital activism movements—#BlackLivesMatter (BLM), #HumanFlow, and the combined efforts of #MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, and #AmINext—sheds light on the delicate balance between visibility and impact in the online world. Each of these movements offers a window into how social media can either elevate a cause or, at times, derail it, depending on how visibility is managed. The comparative table highlights several key factors that differentiate the dynamics of algorithmic manipulation, failed hypervisibility, and possible successful hypervisibility. By closely examining these movements, it becomes clear how digital activism can either thrive or falter depending on the strategies employed, the role of algorithms, and the engagement of public and political stakeholders.

As highlighted in Table 1, the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement exemplifies the challenges of algorithmic manipulation in digital activism. What began as a powerful cry for justice became entangled in external interference, particularly from Russian bots and trolls that exploited social media algorithms to amplify divisive content. This manipulation distorted the movement's core message and fostered an illusion of support that lacked authenticity. The case underscores Foucault's (1977) concept of surveillance, where visibility becomes a tool for reinforcing power structures. BLM's experience serves as a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities of digital activism, emphasizing the need for strategies to maintain authenticity and counteract external manipulation.

Building on the vulnerabilities highlighted in the #BLM movement, it is essential to explore how algorithmic manipulation reflects deeper socio-technical dynamics. The exploitation of algorithms by external actors underscores Foucault's (1977) concept of surveillance and control, where visibility becomes a mechanism for reinforcing power structures. In this context, digital platforms function as modern panoptic spaces, amplifying divisive content that fragments movements. This dynamic challenges activists to navigate algorithms strategically, ensuring their messaging remains authentic and resistant to distortion. Algorithmic manipulation in this instance illustrates the complexity of digital activism, demonstrating how visibility, when exploited, can deepen social divisions rather than foster unity.

The #HumanFlow movement, detailed in Table 1 under Failed Hypervisibility, illustrates the challenges of sustaining engagement in a fast-paced digital environment. Initially propelled by Ai Weiwei's emotional documentary on the global refugee crisis, the movement struggled to maintain visibility as newer causes gained traction. This decline highlights McLuhan's (1964) theory of media as extensions of perception, where platforms amplify fleeting attention spans and prioritize sensationalism over depth. The movement's short-lived impact underscores the necessity for activists to continuously reframe narratives and engage audiences to sustain momentum amidst competing digital content.

The #HumanFlow experience highlights the challenge of keeping a cause alive in the fast-paced world of digital media, where yesterday's news quickly becomes today's afterthought. The decline of #HumanFlow's visibility illustrates the precarious nature of sustained engagement in a fast-paced digital ecosystem. Despite the emotional impact of the initial documentary, the movement struggled to maintain relevance as newer causes emerged. This phenomenon reflects McLuhan's (1964) theory of media as extensions of perception, where platforms amplify fleeting attention spans and prioritise sensationalism over nuance. It serves as a reminder that even the most compelling stories require strategic planning and continuous effort to stay relevant, particularly when algorithmic biases favour sensationalism over nuanced narratives. To counteract these challenges, movements must adapt their framing strategies, continuously re-engaging audiences while competing with the rapid churn of digital content.

In contrast, movements like #MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, and #AmINext, highlighted in Table 1 under Possible Successful Hypervisibility, demonstrate the transformative potential of sustained visibility in digital activism. By strategically using personal narratives and hashtags, these campaigns exemplify Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture, where individuals co-create content and build collective agency. This participatory approach not only sustained engagement but also fostered a sense of solidarity, as Brighenti (2007) notes, by framing personal experiences within broader societal issues. These movements effectively turned online visibility into meaningful cultural and legislative change.

These movements managed to break through the noise not just by being visible, but by maintaining meaningful visibility over time. They built communities, influenced policies, and brought issues like sexual harassment and gender-based violence into the spotlight. Their sustained visibility resulted in significant policy changes, showing the power of continuous mobilisation and advocacy. Movements like #MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, and #AmINext demonstrate how strategic visibility can foster both cultural and legislative change. The use of personal narratives and hashtags reflects Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture, where individuals co-create content and build collective agency. This participatory approach not only sustains engagement but also establishes a sense of community solidarity, as noted by Brighenti (2007), who conceptualises visibility as a relational and strategic process. By framing individual experiences within broader societal issues, these movements ensured their messaging resonated across diverse audiences, sustaining both visibility and impact over time. However, their success also came with challenges, such as the risk of reducing complex issues to simple hashtags. It is a delicate balance between raising awareness and ensuring that the nuances of these issues are not lost in the digital shuffle, underscoring the need for thoughtful framing and consistent advocacy.

The comparative analysis of these movements reveals the complex interplay between visibility, algorithmic influence, framing, and public engagement in determining the success or failure of digital activism. Each case study offers important lessons for future activists. The role of algorithms is crucial: in movements like #MeToo, algorithms boosted viral hashtags and personal stories, ensuring sustained visibility, while in #BLM and #HumanFlow, algorithms prioritised divisive or sensational content, undermining or

limiting their impact. The comparative analysis reveals the dual nature of algorithms in shaping digital activism. While algorithms amplified #MeToo's visibility by boosting viral hashtags, they undermined movements like #BLM and #HumanFlow by prioritising divisive or sensational content. This duality reflects the paradox of algorithmic governance, as highlighted by Gillespie (2018), where platforms simultaneously empower and constrain activism. This underscores the need for activists to navigate these systems strategically, developing approaches to mitigate algorithmic biases and ensuring their movements align with platform dynamics without sacrificing authenticity.

Framing also plays a pivotal role in whether a movement thrives or falters. In #BLM, external manipulation led to distorted public understanding, eroding trust and undermining the movement's message. By contrast, #MeToo's consistent framing, linking personal stories to widespread societal issues, kept the movement in the spotlight and resonated with a broad audience. This demonstrates the importance of relatable, consistent framing in sustaining public engagement.

Community support is another key factor. #BLM experienced fragmentation due to manipulated narratives, while #HumanFlow saw initial support fade as attention shifted to other causes. In contrast, #MeToo, #EndRapeCulture, and #AmINext maintained and grew their support through fostering a strong sense of solidarity and community, proving that collective action and engagement are critical to a movement's sustainability. However, even successful movements face challenges, such as the risk of oversimplification and the need to sustain long-term engagement.

Despite these challenges, each movement presents opportunities for future activism. #BLM highlights the need for strategies to counteract algorithmic manipulation and misinformation. #HumanFlow's failure to sustain engagement underscores the importance of extending public interest beyond initial visibility. Finally, movements like #MeToo demonstrate the potential to leverage digital platforms for continuous advocacy and policy change, providing a blueprint for future digital activism. The challenges and opportunities outlined in the table underscore the importance of framing and community support in sustaining digital activism. Movements like #BLM faced fragmentation due to manipulated narratives, while #HumanFlow struggled to overcome the transient nature of digital attention. In contrast, #MeToo's consistent framing and emphasis on collective identity fostered a strong sense of solidarity, as theorised by Goffman (1959). This

highlights the critical role of community-building in maintaining momentum and translating visibility into tangible change.

Building on these insights, the following additional observations provide deeper perspectives on the findings of the table, shedding further light on the complexities of digital activism and its outcomes:

One significant observation is the role of emotional narratives in sustaining visibility and engagement. Movements like #MeToo and #HumanFlow effectively leveraged emotional narratives, but their outcomes were markedly different. While #MeToo's consistent framing of personal stories helped sustain public engagement, #HumanFlow struggled to maintain visibility after its initial surge of attention. This discrepancy highlights the importance of pairing emotional resonance with a clear call to action or a structure for continued engagement. As Castells (2012) argues, emotional narratives in networked movements must connect to actionable strategies to maintain momentum over time.

Another key insight is the fragmentation of community support observed in the case of #BLM, which contrasts sharply with the sense of solidarity fostered by #MeToo and #EndRapeCulture. External manipulation of algorithms led to distrust and divisions within the #BLM movement, while #MeToo's cohesive messaging fostered a unified community. This underscores the importance of maintaining a consistent narrative and leadership to build collective resilience. Brighenti's (2010) concept of visibility as a relational field supports this, emphasizing how cohesive messaging strengthens collective identity and enhances the sustainability of a movement.

The temporal dynamics of digital activism also emerge as a critical factor. Movements like #MeToo achieved sustained visibility, while #HumanFlow and #BLM experienced shorter-lived engagement. This can be understood through McLuhan's (1964) theory of media amplification, where the longevity of a movement depends on its ability to continuously adapt its framing and messaging to the shifting interests of audiences and platform dynamics. Sustained visibility requires strategic adjustments that keep a movement relevant in an ever-changing digital environment.

A recurring theme in the analysis is the dual nature of algorithms, which can either amplify or undermine digital activism. Movements like #MeToo benefited from algorithms that boosted viral hashtags and personal narratives, while #BLM and

#HumanFlow faced challenges due to algorithmic biases that prioritized divisive or sensational content. This duality reflects Gillespie's (2018) theory of algorithmic governance, which argues that algorithms are not neutral tools but are shaped by socio-political biases and platform priorities. Activists must develop algorithmic literacy to anticipate and counteract these biases, ensuring their movements align with platform dynamics without compromising authenticity.

Framing and public engagement also play a pivotal role in the success or failure of digital activism. The success of #MeToo can be attributed to its consistent and relatable framing, which connected personal narratives to broader societal issues. In contrast, #BLM faced challenges due to external manipulation that distorted its framing, and #HumanFlow struggled to maintain audience interest due to inconsistent messaging. Goffman's (1959) framing theory supports the idea that movements thrive when their narratives resonate with audience values and expectations, underscoring the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation of messaging.

Finally, the analysis highlights policy impact as a key measure of a movement's success. Movements with sustained visibility and consistent framing, such as #MeToo, achieved significant policy changes, while others like #BLM struggled to translate visibility into tangible outcomes. This aligns with Tarrow's (2011) theory of contentious politics, which posits that successful movements build bridges between grassroots mobilisation and institutional change. By connecting online visibility to real-world actions, movements can achieve meaningful and lasting impact.

Together, these case studies illustrate the complex interplay between visibility, framing, algorithmic influence, and public engagement in shaping the success or failure of digital activism. They offer critical lessons for future movements, underscoring the importance of strategic planning, algorithmic literacy, and cohesive messaging to sustain visibility and achieve tangible impact. Ultimately, navigating the dual-edged nature of digital visibility requires a balance between seizing opportunities and mitigating risks, ensuring that movements can capture attention while fostering lasting change.

However, visibility in the digital age remains a double-edged sword—it holds incredible potential to drive meaningful social change, yet it must be carefully managed to avoid pitfalls such as manipulation, fleeting engagement, and superficiality. Moreover, the experiences of BLM, #HumanFlow, and the successes of #MeToo, #EndRapeCulture,

and #AmINext illustrate how digital campaigns can not only capture public attention but also sustain engagement and generate lasting impact. Ultimately, the challenge lies in ensuring that the bright light of hypervisibility endures long enough to truly make a difference.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Virginia Eubanks (2018):

“Just because technology can be used to control and exclude doesn’t mean it has to be. We can choose to use technology to include, empower, and uplift.”

5.1. Summary of Chapters

This dissertation has been a journey through the intricate terrain of digital activism and the dynamics of the visibility complex, exploring how digital platforms both empower and challenge activism.

Chapter One provided an introduction to the key concepts of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility, establishing the framework through which digital activism was examined. The literature review highlighted the critical role of algorithms in shaping online visibility and their influence on social movements.

Chapter Two, then, offered a detailed analysis of algorithmic gatekeeping, revealing how the invisibility and amplification of voices are mediated by these technologies. The ethical concerns around algorithmic bias and its impact on marginalised communities were explored in depth.

Following this, Chapter Three focused on hypervisibility and its paradoxes, revealing how issues that gain rapid visibility online can suffer from simplification, co-optation, or even backlash. The chapter also examined the tension between sustaining digital attention and pursuing long-term activism goals.

Furthermore, Chapter Four investigated participatory culture and the rise of digital slacktivism, discussing the gap between superficial online engagement and meaningful offline action. It also explored strategies used by movements to foster deeper and more meaningful participation.

Finally, Chapter Five synthesises these themes into a broader reflection on the limitations and possibilities of digital activism in the current age, addressing the conflicts and tensions that have emerged and offering suggestions for future research and action.

5.2. The Dynamics of the Visibility Complex

This dissertation has explored the intricate dynamics of the visibility complex within the context of digital activism, uncovering how visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility are mediated by algorithmic systems. The research underscores that visibility is not a static state, but a dynamic process shaped by socio-political forces and technological structures. As digital platforms become increasingly influential in shaping public discourse, the implications of this visibility complex for activism are profound.

At the heart of the digital visibility complex lies the algorithm—an invisible yet powerful force that curates our online experiences. Algorithms determine which voices are amplified and which are silenced, often reinforcing existing power structures rather than challenging them. The power of algorithms lies in their ability to invisibly shape public discourse, creating echo chambers where certain views are perpetuated while others are marginalised. This raises critical questions about the role of technology in democratic societies and the ethical responsibilities of those who design and control these algorithms.

5.3. The Double-Edged Sword of Hypervisibility

Hypervisibility, as explored in this dissertation, presents a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can propel marginalised issues into the global spotlight, garnering support and catalysing change. On the other hand, hypervisibility often comes at the cost of depth and nuance, reducing complex issues to digestible soundbites. The rapid cycle of digital media means that movements can achieve widespread visibility but may struggle to sustain attention or translate online momentum into offline action. This creates a paradox where increased visibility can lead to increased vulnerability, exposing movements to co-optation, misrepresentation, backlash – and, ironically, eventual obscurity.

5.4. Challenges of Participatory Culture

The complexities of participatory culture in the digital age reveal both its empowering potential and its limitations. While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for participation, they also foster a culture of slacktivism, where engagement is superficial and fleeting. The ease with which users can participate in online activism—through likes, shares, and hashtags—can create the illusion of impact without the substance of real-world change. This poses a significant challenge for activists who must navigate the tension between broadening participation and ensuring that such participation translates into meaningful action.

5.5. Realisations and Reflections

Throughout the research, several key realisations have emerged, each shedding light on the evolving nature of digital activism. The realisation that algorithms are not neutral but are imbued with biases that reflect and reinforce societal inequalities is critical. This understanding calls for greater scrutiny of how algorithms are designed and deployed, particularly in contexts that affect public discourse and civic engagement. Activists must be aware of the ways in which algorithms can amplify certain voices while marginalising others, and they must seek strategies to counteract these biases.

Hypervisibility, while a powerful tool, is often unsustainable. The fleeting nature of digital attention means that movements must constantly innovate to remain in the public eye. This can lead to strategic compromises, where the pursuit of visibility overshadows the pursuit of substantive change. Movements must, therefore, be strategic in their use of hypervisibility, recognising that it is not an end in itself but a tool that must be carefully managed.

The research also highlights the challenges of digital participation. While participatory culture has democratised access to activism, it has also diluted the quality of participation. Activists must find ways to foster more profound, more meaningful engagement, moving beyond the surface-level interactions that typify much of digital activism.

5.6. Conflicts and Tensions in Digital Activism

These reflections have also brought to light several conflicts inherent in the landscape of digital activism. One of the most significant conflicts is the tension between visibility and accurate representation. As movements gain visibility, there is a risk of their messages being diluted or distorted by external forces, including the media, corporations, and even well-meaning allies. This can lead to a situation where the movement's original goals are overshadowed by the demands of maintaining visibility, resulting in a loss of agency and authenticity.

Furthermore, while digital platforms enable movements to reach a global audience, this global reach can sometimes dilute the local impact of activism. The focus on global visibility can overshadow the specific needs and contexts of local communities, leading to a disconnect between online activism and on-the-ground realities. This tension highlights the need for a balance between global and local strategies, ensuring that the voices of those most affected are not drowned out by the noise of global discourse.

The fast-paced nature of digital media creates a conflict between the desire for sustained activism and the reality of ephemeral digital attention. Movements must constantly innovate to remain relevant, yet this constant need for novelty can lead to burnout and a loss of focus on long-term goals. This tension underscores the importance of building resilient movements that can withstand the pressures of the digital environment while maintaining a clear focus on their objectives (arguably, the #MeToo movement and its associated movements have done relatively well in perpetuating this type of focus and longevity).

Additionally, while digital platforms are often praised for their inclusivity, the reality is that access to these platforms is uneven, leading to a conflict between the ideal of digital inclusivity and the exclusivity experienced by those without access to technology. This raises important questions about the true reach of digital activism and its ability to represent the voices of all marginalised groups. Activists must consider how to bridge these digital divides and ensure that their movements are truly inclusive.

5.7. Limitations of the Study

While this dissertation offers critical insights into the dynamics of digital visibility and activism, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations.

Firstly, the research is primarily focused on theoretical analysis and is based on a review of existing literature. The absence of primary empirical data, such as interviews or case studies, may limit the ability to fully capture the lived experiences of activists in various contexts. Future studies could benefit from a more ethnographic or participatory approach to complement the theoretical framework.

Secondly, the rapid pace of technological change means that the findings of this study are situated within a specific moment in time. As digital platforms evolve, new algorithmic practices and forms of engagement may emerge, which could alter the dynamics of visibility discussed in this study.

Finally, the inherent complexity of algorithms and the opaque nature of proprietary platforms pose a challenge for researchers seeking to fully understand the mechanisms of algorithmic visibility. Access to more transparent data from social media companies would greatly enhance future research.

5.8. Contributions to Digital Culture and Media Studies

It is my hope that this dissertation makes valid contributions to the academic fields of media studies and digital culture. By critically examining the influence of algorithms on digital visibility, it seeks to add depth to the understanding of how technological systems, often perceived as neutral, are in fact embedded with biases that reflect and reinforce societal power structures. This analysis is crucial for media studies, where the relationship between technology and society is a central concern.

Moreover, this research introduces the concept of the visibility complex—comprising visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility—as a framework for understanding the dynamics of online representation. This concept contributes to digital culture studies by highlighting the multifaceted nature of digital visibility and its impact on social movements, public perception, and identity formation.

In bridging the gap between traditional theories of media and power, such as Foucault's Panopticism, and contemporary digital practices, this research provides a

deeper theoretical understanding of how power operates through visibility in the digital age. This perspective is invaluable for both media studies and digital culture, offering insights into the ways power is now mediated by algorithms rather than solely by human actors.

The practical insights offered for digital activism are another key contribution. By exploring the strategic use of visibility, one can address the tensions between gaining visibility and maintaining control over representation, offering a critical perspective on the potential and limitations of digital activism. This is particularly relevant for scholars interested in the effectiveness of online social movements and the role of digital platforms in activism.

Finally, this body of work contributes to discussions on participatory culture, particularly by challenging the assumption that greater participation automatically leads to greater empowerment. It argues for a more critical approach to understanding digital engagement, which is a valuable contribution to media and cultural studies, where the implications of participatory media are a key area of interest.

5.9. Suggestions for Future Research

Looking to the future, several key strategies can be suggested to address the challenges and leverage the opportunities identified in this research. There is an urgent need for greater transparency and accountability in how algorithms operate, particularly on social media platforms. Activists should advocate for policies that require platforms to disclose how their algorithms work, including the criteria they use to promote or demote content. This would enable a more informed public discourse about the role of algorithms in shaping visibility and could lead to the development of fairer, more equitable digital spaces.

Movements should be strategic in their use of hypervisibility, recognising that it is a powerful tool that must be managed carefully. This might involve using moments of hypervisibility to draw attention to key issues while also building long-term strategies that sustain engagement beyond the initial burst of attention. Activists should also be prepared to counteract misrepresentation by maintaining control over their narratives and being clear about their goals and values.

To counter the ephemerality of digital attention, movements must focus on building resilience. This could involve developing diverse strategies that include both online and offline actions, ensuring that the movement can adapt to changing circumstances. Additionally, fostering deep connections within communities and building strong networks of support can help sustain momentum even when digital attention wanes.

Activists must be conscious of the digital divide and work to make their movements as inclusive as possible. This might involve using a variety of platforms and communication methods to reach different audiences, including those with limited access to technology. Additionally, movements should consider how to support digital literacy and access in marginalised communities, ensuring that these voices are included in the broader conversation.

Finally, there is a need for greater critical digital literacy among activists and the public. Understanding how digital platforms work, including the role of algorithms, data privacy, and the implications of digital surveillance, is crucial for effective activism in the digital age. Educational initiatives that promote critical engagement with technology can empower activists to navigate the digital landscape more effectively and advocate for more just and equitable online spaces.

5.10. Final Reflections

The visibility complex in the digital age presents both challenges and opportunities for activists, particularly those advocating for marginalised groups. Through this research, I have gained a deeper understanding of how visibility, whether granted or denied, plays a crucial role in shaping the lives of those on the margins of society. Digital platforms offer unprecedented avenues for bringing attention to these issues, but they also come with significant risks. Algorithms that control visibility can amplify voices, but just as easily suppress them, often reinforcing existing inequalities rather than challenging them.

For marginalised groups, the quest for visibility is fraught with complexities. While being seen can provide a platform for advocacy and change, it also opens up the possibility of misrepresentation, exploitation, and heightened vulnerability. Hypervisibility can expose these groups to intense scrutiny and backlash, while

invisibility continues to sideline their voices and experiences. What I have learned is that visibility in itself is not inherently empowering—it is a double-edged sword that must be wielded with care.

This research is important because it critically examines these dynamics, offering a more nuanced perspective on how visibility operates within digital spaces. It challenges the simplistic notion that increased visibility is always beneficial and highlights the need for strategies that consider the risks and limitations involved. By focusing on these issues, this work contributes to a better understanding of the complexities faced by marginalised groups in the digital age and offers insights into how they can navigate these challenges more effectively.

Looking to the future, it is essential to approach digital activism with a critical awareness of these realities. While there is potential for digital tools to support meaningful change, they are not a panacea. The work ahead involves not just harnessing these tools, but also critically assessing how they are used and who they ultimately serve. The lessons from this dissertation underscore the importance of striving for a digital landscape where all voices, particularly those that have historically been silenced, can be heard and respected. The path forward is uncertain and filled with challenges, but with careful consideration and a commitment to equity, there is hope for a more just and inclusive future.

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