




Research Article

Breaking Barriers: Digital Activism's Role in Changing Morocco's Political Landscape

 Hafssa Chahbane^{1*}, Khalid Houssaini²

¹Faculty of Letters, Dhar El Mahraz, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco

²ENCG, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco

Corresponding Author: *Hafssa Chahbane 

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14628898>

Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>Fueled in large part by the rise of digital activism, Morocco has witnessed in recent years a profound shift in its political and social landscape. With the widespread adoption of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, ordinary citizens, especially youth, are increasingly using these tools to voice dissent, challenge long-standing political norms, and demand change. In a country where traditional political expression has often been restricted, digital activism has allowed marginalized voices to challenge long-standing power structures, advocate for social justice, and mobilize for political reforms. Yet, this newfound freedom of expression has not come without its challenges. The Moroccan government, wary of the growing influence of digital activism, has resorted to censorship, surveillance, and legal repercussions to maintain control over the flow of information. Despite these efforts, digital activism continues to play a pivotal role in shaping Morocco's political discourse, providing a platform for movements calling for greater social justice, political reform, and human rights. On this basis, specifically focusing on the Moroccan Outlaws Movement which has emerged in response to the country's legal framework, this article aims to highlight how activists have mobilized online to challenge laws as it also aims to explore the transformative role of digital activism in Morocco's political landscape, focusing on how social media platforms have become powerful tools for freedom of speech and social change.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 19-11-2024 ▪ Accepted: 28-12-2024 ▪ Published: 10-01-2025 ▪ IJCRM:4(1); 2025: 11-15 ▪ ©2025, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes <p>How to Cite this Manuscript</p> <p>Chahbane H, Houssaini K. Breaking Barriers: Digital Activism's Role in Changing Morocco's Political Landscape. International Journal of Contemporary Research in Multidisciplinary.2025;4(1): 11-15.</p>

KEYWORDS: Digital Activism, Freedom of Expression, Hashtag Movements, Social Change, Social Media Platforms.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the intersection of digital activism and legal reform has become an important topic of research, particularly in countries where traditional methods of protest are limited. Scholars have extensively examined the way social media serves as a tool for political dissent, enabling activists to bypass state-controlled media and challenge laws perceived as unjust. In the global context, social media platforms like Instagram have become essential for grassroots movements, enabling them to mobilize rapidly, spread awareness, and engage in digital forms

of civil disobedience. In this context, John Rawls' 1971 civil disobedience theory suggests that non-violent resistance to unjust laws is a morally justified act of protest. Hence, thanks to the rise of social media, digital activism today functions as a modern form of civil disobedience, where activists use online platforms to challenge the status quo and call for legal reform. Given this, media dependency theory stipulates that the more social media gratifies netizens' needs, the more reliant they become on using it, and thus, the more important it becomes in their daily lives. In the case of digital activism, social media

provides a crucial lifeline, allowing its users to bypass the state's monopoly on information and raise awareness about laws that limit their freedoms. Consequently, in situations where traditional media is heavily censored or controlled by the state, individuals turn to alternative media sources, such as social media platforms, either for information, social interaction, or emotional engagement (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

Accordingly, social media's pervasiveness as well as its borderless nature has facilitated the formation of digital communities, or as articulated by Adrienne Russell (2010), "networked publics". This concept refers to the kind of spaces which are created by digital platforms where people come together to form new kinds of communities that are not bound by physical or geographical limitations. In these online spaces, individuals are able to connect, organize, and engage with others who share similar interests, values, or political goals, regardless of their location. These networked publics not only provide a space for activists to voice their demands but also enable solidarity-building across regional, national, and even international borders, fostering a transnational movement for legal reform. These digital spaces, or what Castells (2015) defines as the "new public sphere", do not simply report the facts but they actively construct the meaning of those facts by selecting specific elements to highlight, thus Framing Theory. Developed by Erving Goffman (1974) and further expanded by scholars like Robert Entman (1993), Framing Theory focuses on the way media and activists shape public perception by presenting particular issues in a way that emphasizes certain aspects while downplaying others. The core idea is that the way information is framed can influence how people interpret an issue, shaping public opinion and ultimately driving social and political action. Actors of this emerging landscape aim to harness the power of communication to shape public opinion and stimulate debate through the discourse production process. The key tools used to establish and navigate virtual communities within this dynamic public sphere are keywords (Scott, 2018). Hashtags, in particular, are often utilized as frameworks for collective action as they provide a "discursive power to galvanize the voiceless into intimate publics that produce a coherently robust form of activism online, particularly among those left out of the traditional mainstream media discourse" (Chen & Barner, 2018, p. 197). In this sense, hashtags play a pivotal role in digital activism, acting as powerful tools for organizing, amplifying, and mobilizing social and political movements. In Morocco, where freedom of expression has historically been restricted, hashtags have become a means of bypassing traditional media censorship and drawing attention to critical issues (Fuchs, 2017). They provide a platform for individuals to voice dissent, share experiences, and rally support for causes that may otherwise be marginalized. Hashtags also enable the rapid spread of information, creating virtual communities of solidarity and resistance (Tufekci, 2017). By trending on social media platforms, these hashtags can pressure governments, raise awareness on global stages, and spark real-world change, making them indispensable in reshaping the political landscape (Gerbaudo, 2012).

2. METHODOLOGY

To analyze the digital movement advocating for the abolition of restrictive laws in Morocco, this article will employ a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The primary methodology will involve a content analysis of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, where the movement's activists have mobilized to discuss and campaign against these laws. This will include analyzing hashtags, posts, and online petitions to trace the evolution of the movement, key messages, and the strategies used to garner support. Additionally, interviews will be conducted with key activists, legal experts, and human rights organizations to gain insight into the challenges faced by digital activists, their motivations, and the impact of their online campaigns on public opinion and policy discourse. Case studies of specific events, such as viral campaigns or protests inspired by digital activism, will be examined to assess the movement's effectiveness in influencing legal and political reform. Furthermore, secondary sources, including academic literature, reports from human rights organizations, and news articles, will be used to contextualize the movement within Morocco's broader political landscape and legal framework. This mixed approach will allow for a comprehensive understanding of how digital activism is challenging Morocco's legal system and advocating for social change.

3. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Case Study: Moroccan Outlaws Movement

On January 14, the Court of First Instance in Tetouan, located in northern Morocco, sentenced Hanae to one month in prison for charges of extramarital sex and indecent assault after a former partner shared a private video of her online. A digital campaign emerged in Morocco advocating for the repeal of Article 490 of the Penal Code which criminalizes consensual sexual relations outside marriage. The initiative, called "Moroccan Outlaws," was launched on social media to show support and solidarity with Hanae, also known as "Moulat Al Khimar." Supporters of the campaign view Article 490 as a violation of personal freedoms, calling it "liberticidal." However, many Moroccans argue that the law is aligned with Islamic principles and serves to prevent the normalization of premarital sex. In response to what they see as a challenge to Moroccan and Islamic values, opponents of the campaign initiated a counter-movement, using the #Keep490 hashtag to express their views. Karima Nadir, an activist and spokesperson for the Moroccan Outlaws movement, called for the repeal of laws that perpetuate violence against women and restrict individual freedoms in Morocco. Other public figures, including Moroccan-French actress Sarah Perles, also voiced their support for the #STOP490 movement. Perles later revealed that she had been targeted with verbal threats and defamatory comments from opponents of the campaign, accusing her of advocating "for the Moroccan elite." In response, the actress took to Instagram to explain her support for what she described as a revolutionary movement for personal freedom and democratic rights. Perles emphasized that those with privilege do not require her advocacy, as they already have access to resources such as

private accommodations and top-tier healthcare, including safe abortion services. She further explained that Article 490 disproportionately affects those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who lack access to proper healthcare and sex education, thus reinforcing societal inequalities. Asmae Lamrabet, a well-known Moroccan scholar, Islamic feminist and former director of the Center for Women's Studies in Islam (CERFI), expressed her support for the repeal of Article 490

during a heated national debate on the matter. Lamrabet argued that the article was "contradictory to Muslim ethics and ethics in general." While she recognized that Islam prohibits sex outside of marriage, she condemned the use of the penal code to infringe upon individuals' privacy and personal lives by imposing legal punishment.



Illustration: Moroccan Outlaws' post on Instagram celebrating the government's decision to revise the Family Code after the National digital petition.

The main findings of this research are divided into four key areas, each shedding light on a different aspect of the impact of digital activism in Morocco: the creation of a digital public sphere, the emergence of two contrasting political ideologies, the mobilization of youth and marginalized groups, shifting power dynamics, and citizen empowerment.

1.1. Creation of a Digital Public Sphere

Thanks to the internet, traditional methods of communication have been transformed, creating new spaces for public debate and engagement. Expanding on Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere, which traditionally described a space where citizens could freely debate ideas without interference from government or elite groups, Moroccan Outlaws takes Instagram as a digital public sphere where they can speak on behalf of several individuals to discuss societal issues, exchange ideas, and engage in political dialogue. Through the rise of the internet and social media platforms, individuals now have access to unprecedented opportunities for public participation. This shift from traditional media to digital spaces has democratized discourse by providing marginalized voices, particularly youth



Illustration: Moroccan Outlaws' post on Instagram celebrating the news of banning marriage certificates during hotel Check-Ins.

and activists, with a platform for expressing their opinions and organizing movements. As a result, public engagement in Morocco has expanded beyond the boundaries of mainstream media, creating a space where citizens can engage in direct political dialogue, mobilize protests, and challenge power structures. By participating in a simple hashtag campaign, Instagram users can voice their concerns about several issues they have been. However, while this digital public sphere promotes greater inclusion and interaction, it also raises concerns about misinformation, digital divides, and censorship, which hinder the full realization of its potential. Nonetheless, the digital public sphere in Morocco represents a fundamental shift in how public discourse is shaped, reflecting broader global trends toward digitalization and democratization of communication.

1.2. Emergence of Two Contrasting Political Ideologies

The emergence of at least two contrasting political ideologies such as the liberal and the conservative has been a defining feature of this study's findings. As online platforms such as Instagram have become central spaces for political debate and activism, distinct ideological divides have surfaced, largely influenced by both domestic socio-political contexts and global

trends. On the one hand, liberal voices, often representing urban youth, progressive movements, and civil society organizations, advocate for greater political freedoms, human rights, and reforms in Morocco's governance. They use digital platforms to promote democratic values, gender equality, and social justice, emphasizing a more open and inclusive political environment.

Conversely, conservative ideologies, which are often aligned with traditional values, religious institutions, and rural communities, emphasize the preservation of Morocco's cultural and religious identity. These groups use the digital sphere to rally against perceived foreign influences and advocate for the protection of national traditions and stability.

This ideological polarization has created a dynamic political landscape in Morocco, where both sides compete for influence, often clashing over issues such as freedom of expression, religious freedoms, and the pace of socio-political change. Therefore, while the digital public sphere has allowed for the amplification of these diverse viewpoints, it has also deepened societal divisions, highlighting the complex intersection of digital media, political ideologies, and social movements in shaping Morocco's future.

1.3. Mobilization of Youth and Marginalized Groups

The digital landscape in Morocco has played a pivotal role in the mobilization of youth and marginalized groups, facilitating their active participation in political and social movements. Traditionally excluded from mainstream political discourse due to social, economic, or cultural barriers, these groups now have unprecedented access to platforms for organizing, expressing dissent, and advocating for change. Social media platforms such as Instagram have become vital tools for youth to voice their concerns, particularly on issues like unemployment, education, gender equality, and political reform. The ability to mobilize quickly and efficiently through digital networks has enabled young people and marginalized communities to challenge long-standing political structures, demand greater representation, and raise awareness about their struggles. Additionally, these platforms have fostered cross-generational and cross-cultural alliances, amplifying the reach of local movements and connecting them to global discussions on rights and justice. While this digital empowerment has led to tangible political engagement, such as participation in protests or online petitions, it has also sparked a wider cultural shift, with youth and marginalized groups increasingly defining the narrative of Morocco's political and social transformation. However, the increasing visibility of these groups also brings risks, including targeted state surveillance, censorship, and online harassment, which may hinder the continued mobilization efforts. Despite these challenges, the digital sphere remains an essential tool in empowering the youth and marginalized communities to advocate for their rights and shape Morocco's future political landscape.

1.4. Shifting Power Dynamics and Citizen Empowerment

The findings of this study have also revealed the extent to which the rise of digital activism in Morocco has led to a significant

shift in power dynamics, enabling citizens to challenge traditional power structures and assert their influence in the political sphere. Social media and digital platforms have democratized access to information and communication, allowing ordinary citizens to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and directly engage with political leaders, institutions, and global audiences.

This shift has empowered previously marginalized groups, such as youth, women, and activists, to amplify their voices and mobilize around social and political causes. For example, online campaigns and protests have successfully challenged policies, called attention to issues like corruption and human rights abuses, and facilitated a more transparent political discourse. As a result, citizen empowerment has become more pronounced, as individuals now possess the tools to hold the government accountable, demand social change, and influence public opinion. However, while these digital tools have enhanced citizens' ability to participate in political processes, they have also exposed them to new risks, including government surveillance, censorship, and online harassment, which can undermine the very empowerment they seek to achieve. Nevertheless, the shifting power dynamics enabled by digital activism have reshaped the landscape of political engagement in Morocco, offering new possibilities for democratic participation while also presenting challenges that must be addressed to ensure sustained citizen empowerment.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article highlights the transformative role of digital activism in Morocco, offering a fresh perspective on how social media and hashtags are reshaping the political landscape. By focusing on the unique dynamics of Morocco's digital activism, it underscores how online platforms have provided a powerful tool for political expression, enabling citizens to bypass traditional barriers of censorship and state control. The article contributes to existing literature by shedding light on how digital tools have facilitated new forms of mobilization and solidarity, particularly in a region with a history of political repression. Furthermore, it emphasizes the interplay between digital activism and the broader social and political context, offering insights into the potential of online movements to foster tangible social change. This analysis provides valuable knowledge for policymakers, activists, and scholars interested in understanding the evolving relationship between technology, social movements, and political reform in the Arab world, and serves as a foundation for future research into the long-term effects and challenges of digital activism in Morocco and beyond.

For future research, there are several key areas that could further deepen our understanding of digital activism in Morocco and similar contexts. First, studies could explore the long-term impact of digital activism on political and social change in Morocco, particularly how online movements translate into tangible policy shifts or grassroots mobilization. Additionally, research could examine the role of social media platforms in amplifying marginalized voices, especially in rural areas or among disenfranchised groups. Comparative studies between

Morocco and other North African countries could offer valuable insights into regional similarities and differences in the use of digital tools for activism. Lastly, the intersection of digital activism and state responses, such as surveillance, censorship, and legal reforms, merits closer scrutiny to understand how governments adapt to or attempt to control the digital space. These areas of study could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and potential of digital activism in the Arab world.

REFERENCES

1. Ball-Rokeach SJ, DeFleur ML. A dependency model of mass-media effects. *Communication Research*. 1976;3(1):3-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365027600300101>.
2. Castells M. Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication*. 2007;1:238-266.
3. Chen GM, Pain P, Barner B. "Hashtag feminism": Activism or slacktivism? In: Harp D, Loke J, Bachmann I, editors. *Feminist Approaches to Media Theory and Research. Comparative Feminist Studies*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90838-0_14.
4. Entman RM. Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*. 1993;43(4):51-58.
5. Entman RM. Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*. 1993;43:51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.
6. Fuchs C. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. Sage Publications; 2017.
7. Gerbaudo P. *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. Pluto Press; 2012.
8. Rawls J. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1971.
9. Russell A. Networked publics: The role of social media in political mobilization. In: *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*. Routledge; 2010. p. 97-113.
10. Scott K. "Hashtags work everywhere": The pragmatic functions of spoken hashtags. *Discourse, Context & Media*. 2018;22:57-64.
11. Tufekci Z. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale University Press; 2017.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.