



## VOICES IN CONFLICT: THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

A social movement is an organized advocacy effort by a group of people to support or oppose social change. The media has a significant impact on public conversation and perception by disseminating information, creating narratives, and inspiring people. It also makes it possible to strategically position social concerns within broader geopolitical frameworks. This paper investigates the complex relationship that exists between the media and social movements, asserting that the media facilitates collective action as well as acting as a battleground. The study looks at a variety of media venues, both digital (social media platforms) and conventional (print and broadcast), to show how these channels disseminate information, influence public opinion, gather resources, and create narratives around important social issues. The multifaceted role of the media in contemporary activism is illustrated via case studies of movements including The Nirbhaya Movement, The Youth Climate Movement (YouNGO), CAA, NRC Protest, Farmer's movement, and Reclaim the Night, Reclaim the Rights. This research examines the dialectical relationship between media representations and grassroots action using a theoretical framework that blends political communication and media sociology. The results demonstrate that, despite its potential to magnify marginalized viewpoints, the media may also reinforce prevailing discourses, necessitating cautious engagement with media narratives.

**Keywords:** *Social Movements, Media Influence, Grassroots Activism, Public Perception*

#### Introduction

The link between social movements and the media has become a crucial area of study in today's culture, with an emphasis on the media's dualistic role in both encouraging and discouraging collective action. Social movements, which are characterized as coordinated advocacy efforts with the goal of enacting social change, mostly depend on the media to voice their grievances, enlist support, and shape public opinion. In an effort to clarify the complex relationship between social movements and the media, this research makes the case that although the media serves as a vital conduit for social concerns, it also acts as a battlefield where competing narratives compete for dominance.

In the digital age, the media landscape has changed significantly, with social media platforms playing an increasingly significant role as crucial venues for action. Through these channels, information may be disseminated quickly, grassroots organization can be facilitated, and marginalized voices can be empowered to speak their demands and experiences (Lee, 2020). Nonetheless, conventional media – print and broadcast journalism, in particular – retains a strong influence over public perceptions by means of selective reporting and framing. Because of this, there is a dialectical tension that characterizes the relationship between social movements and the media. In this conflict, movements seek to profit from media exposure while also addressing the risk of distortion and marginalization.

Since the media reflects society changes and influences cultural norms and habits, the relationship between media and social change is both dynamic and robust. In all of its manifestations, the media plays a significant role in raising public awareness of pressing problems including injustice, poverty, and human rights abuses. It motivates people to act, either by criticizing those in positions of power or organizing protests. Because of its role in social development, the media may advocate for human rights, healthcare, and education, promoting equality and social justice. By spreading important information, promoting engagement, and influencing public ideals in both positive and negative ways, the mass media also has an impact on social life. The media can encourage societal change, but it can also inhibit advancement and uphold the status quo. The Arab Spring, anti-apartheid demonstrations, and the Civil Rights Movement are historical instances that show how important media, especially social media,

has been organizing, bringing attention to issues, and pressuring governments to make changes (Media and Social Change: How Media Channels Shape Societal Transformation, 2023).

### **Review of Literature**

In their study, the authors examined how social media may help movements scale up – a process that are called internal movement strengthening and/or expansion. They emphasized the potential of social media for fostering connections, organizing participants and material resources, building coalitions, and spreading alternative narratives by drawing on “Black Lives Matter” (BLM), a case study that involved both an examination of public social media accounts and interviews with BLM organizations. The authors also looked at the risks and challenges of scaling up with social media. Although the benefits of social media use outweigh the risks, the study found that cautious management of online media platforms is necessary to reduce the real, physical risks that social media might provide to activists (Mundt et al., 2018).

The dynamics of social movements and protests depend heavily on the media. The context that modern social movements operate in is evolving due to new media platforms and technology that enable new identities, organizational structures, and practices. They assessed recent research on how the media environment both shapes and is influenced by movements, as well as how shifts in the media landscape have brought about a change in the consequences of activism, mobilization, and engagement. In their conclusion, they make the following recommendations for further research in this quickly evolving field: investigate how media are enhancing, altering, or diminishing movements’ ability to mobilize support, shape broader identities and attitudes, and obtain new advantages from targets and authorities; expand knowledge of media in movements; engage more with scholarship in related fields that study politics, media, and communication; and develop new analytical and methodological skills for new media (Caren et al., 2020).

The authors’ study examines the ways in which alternative and social media platforms aided in mobilizing people during Hong Kong’s pivotal pro-democracy Umbrella Movement. According to a poll of 769 students from eight public universities, these media types encourage participation in social movements through a variety of mechanisms. Social media serves as an echo chamber, generating a feeling of agreement that encourages involvement and shapes attitudes in favor of protest. In contrast, alternative media acts as an attitude enhancer, enticing even more individuals to get involved. The direct and indirect effects of media consumption on political involvement were examined using structural equation modeling (SEM). The measurement model fit was first evaluated using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which comprised two factors related to digital media consumption, two mediating variables, and two variables related to political activity. Hence, the study highlighted how different media formats have different impacts on grassroots mobilization (Shen et al., 2019).

The authors’ study looked at two key factors that affect whether (and how) activists use mass media: (1) the target audience for activist communications, and (2) the relative openness of the media system. These two factors can help one better understand how activists use media for a variety of reasons in different political contexts, going beyond simply focusing on media outcomes and outlet types (traditional or Internet Communication Technology). This theory highlights how government demands change in commercial media (like music and books), conventional media (like mainstream news), and Internet Communication Technology (ICT), which in turn affects how activists utilize these tools to further their political goals. This study highlights the success of this tactic while also highlighting the difficulties and risks connected to having a variety of options across media systems, using the body of research on social movements and mass media (Rohlinger & Corrigan-Brown, 2018).

### **Research Methodology**

This study investigates the complex relationship between media and social movements, emphasizing how media facilitates collective action and serves as a battleground for contesting social issues through a qualitative approach. A thorough content analysis was employed to study how both traditional (print and broadcast) and digital (social media) platforms disseminate information, influence public opinion, and create narratives around critical social movements. The movements chosen for the study includes the Nirbhaya Movement, Youth Climate Movement (YouNGO), CAA-NRC Protest, Farmer’s Movement, and Reclaim the Night, Reclaim the Rights.

The term “mass media” describes communication channels that have a large audience. Radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, records, movies, and digital media such as blogging, social networking, and gaming are the eight categories of mass media. Because it disseminates movement ideas to a wider audience and grants members influence over institutional and political processes, the media is crucial to the study of social movements. Movements depend on mass media because they enable them to influence public attitudes toward social and political concerns and inspire a wider audience to act (Rohlinger, 2022).

### **Content Analysis**

#### **a) The Nirbhaya Movement:**

The Nirbhaya Movement began in reaction to the violent gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman in Delhi on December 16, 2012. The act aroused significant indignation in India and beyond, emphasizing the chronic problem of violence against women. Following the tragedy, large-scale protests erupted in several locations, demanding justice and institutional reform. Demonstrators demanded tighter legislation against sexual violence and an end to social attitudes that condone such behavior. The movement sought to raise awareness about gender-based violence, seek legislative reforms, and promote cultural change in attitudes toward women. The hashtag *#JusticeForNirbhaya* became a rallying cry among

campaigners. The campaign resulted in the creation of new legislation, such as the Criminal Law (Amendment Act) of 2013, which increased the penalty for sexual offenses. In India, it triggered ongoing discussions about women's empowerment and safety.

**b) The Youth Climate Movement (YouNGO):**

The Youth Climate Movement, often associated with initiatives like “Fridays for Future,” emerged as a global reaction to the escalating climate crisis. Young activists like Greta Thunberg, who started going on school strikes to call for action on climate change, helped it gain momentum. In an effort to stop climate change, the movement has planned several protests and strikes throughout the world. To raise awareness, millions of people have taken part in worldwide climate strikes, particularly on Fridays. The main objective was to put pressure on governments to change their policies by solving environmental injustices, reducing carbon emissions, and switching to renewable energy sources. The movement emphasizes intergenerational justice and the duty of current generations to provide a sustainable planet for future generations. Since many governments and organizations now acknowledge the gravity of the situation, the movement has had a considerable impact on public debate over climate action. Additionally, it has sparked policy debates at global forums like the UN Climate Change Conferences and youth-led projects.

**c) CAA, NRC Protest:**

In December 2019, the Indian government enacted the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which aimed to give non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries a path to citizenship. A project called the National Register of Citizens (NRC) was intended to list all of India's legitimate citizens. Due to their perception that the CAA was discriminatory and unlawful, protests broke out all throughout India, particularly among students and minority populations. Large-scale protests, sit-ins, and vigils were held in Hyderabad, Delhi, and Kolkata, among other locations. The protests argued for the rights of all people, regardless of faith, and attempted to challenge the CAA and NRC on the grounds of equality and secularism. Activists opposed what they saw to be an authoritarian agenda while working to uphold India's constitutional values (Nagarwal, 2021). The demonstrations brought India's issues with citizenship, identity, and religious discrimination to the attention of the world. The protests have sparked continuing debates over nationalism, secularism, and the place of minorities in Indian society, even though the CAA is still in place.

**d) Farmer's Movement:**

The Indian government's implementation of three agricultural rules in September 2020 sparked the farmer's movement, which was mostly driven by farmers from Punjab and Haryana. Farmers believed that these laws will favor large corporations at their expense and weaken the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system. Farmers demanded that the limitations be lifted and thus they organized sizable demonstrations, including a protracted sit-in at Delhi's borders. Many organizations showed sympathy, and the movement attracted national and international attention. The elimination of harmful legislation, the guarantee of MSP for crops, and the defense of farmers' rights were the primary demands (Behl, 2022). The project aimed to raise awareness of the rural suffering that Indian farmers face. The campaign successfully brought farmer rights and agricultural policy to the public's attention. Even if the limitations were later lifted in November 2021, the protests continued to raise questions about agricultural reforms and the future of farming in India.

**e) Reclaim the Night, Reclaim the Rights:**

In response to the increase in violence against women and societal perceptions that placed the blame for sexual assault on the victims, the “Reclaim the Night” campaign emerged in the late 1970s. It began in the UK and has now spread to other countries, advocating for the protection of women in public settings. To address women's fear of public spaces, the group plans marches and other events, often at night. Participants advocate for women's rights and autonomy while calling for an end to sexual assault and harassment. The main objective is to promote gender equality while reclaiming public spaces for women. The movement emphasizes that women need to feel safe and empowered to move around freely without worrying about harassment or assault. The movement has influenced laws meant to improve women's safety, strengthened communal ties, and improved awareness of sexual assault. It also prompted similar demonstrations throughout the globe, highlighting the importance of women's rights and gender equality. The Reclaim the Night, Reclaim the Rights movement was reignited in 2024 by the horrifying rape and murder of a young woman at RG Kar Medical College in Kolkata, which brought attention to the ongoing issue of violence against women in public settings. Anger and protests were sparked by the horrific murder when news was out, especially among women's rights groups and activists who took to the streets to call for justice and better living conditions for women. Usually held at night, these demonstrations symbolized the reclaiming of public spaces that had previously been closed to women out of fear of violence.

**Role of Media**

**Nirbhaya Movement:** Due to its widespread media coverage, the December 2012 horrific gang rape and murder in Delhi provoked international outrage. For months, the topic was in the public view because of the constant updates from television channels that depicted the outrage and the rallies that followed. News networks' interviews with activists, scholars, and survivors emphasized how urgently sexual assault laws need to be amended. To increase public awareness of the systemic nature of sexual assault, radio stations all throughout India broadcasted interviews with activists and legal professionals. Newspapers' in-depth reporting of the victim's story, protests, and later legislative changes like the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act kept the Nirbhaya case in the public eye (Rajan et al., 2022). Editorials, opinion pieces, and campaigner interviews all promoted cultural and legal

reforms to better protect women. Social media users shared information, petitions, and case updates under the hashtag *#JusticeForNirbhaya*, which became a global craze. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were used by activists to plan demonstrations, share testimonies from survivors, and influence lawmakers to enact stronger laws to stop sexual assault. Using these numerous media platforms, the Nirbhaya Movement became a powerful force for change, not only in India but globally as well, sparking a broader conversation about women's safety and gender-based violence.

**Youth Climate Movement:** By regularly broadcasting Greta Thunberg's impassioned speeches and youth-led climate strikes, television played a significant role in highlighting the seriousness of the climate crisis. Together with coverage of international gatherings like the UN Climate Change Conferences, these broadcasts forced governments to act and it raised public awareness of climate change. People were able to better understand the global consequences of climate change by turning the abstract concept into concrete, accessible impacts through news articles and television documentaries. In vulnerable and rural areas with limited internet access, radio has emerged as a key medium for spreading climate-related information. Particularly in remote areas, community radio stations were crucial in bringing attention to the need for youth involvement and climate action. Thunberg's lectures and student-led initiatives helped to transform the public conversation on climate change, and newspapers both locally and globally reported on climate strikes and the growing demands for climate justice on a regular basis. Meanwhile, social media played a major role in the Fridays for Future campaign's growth. The campaign became one of the biggest and most successful social media-driven campaigns in history as a result of Greta Thunberg's tweets, videos, and posts, which inspired global solidarity. Teenage activists were also able to organize strikes and engage millions of people.

**CAA-NRC Protests:** Television networks, which captured video of massive rallies across India, particularly those led by students and minority groups, were instrumental in drawing public attention to the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the public Register of Citizens (NRC). Due to widespread media coverage across the nation, the protests were seen as a component of a broader national conversation about human rights, citizenship, and secularism rather than as isolated incidents. By voicing their concerns and disseminating information on sit-ins, protests, and other kinds of resistance, radio stations – especially local and regional stations – amplified the voices of demonstrators. Additionally, these stations fostered discussion on the alleged danger to minority rights posed by the CAA and NRC. Newspapers played a crucial role in shaping the discussion by giving both supporters and detractors of the divisive policy a platform. Deeper conversations on nationalism and secularism in India were sparked by the press's employment of editorials, opinion articles, and investigative studies to help the public understand the sociopolitical implications of the CAA and NRC. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are now essential for sharing updates, planning protests, and thwarting misinformation. As soon as hashtags like *#NoToCAA* and *#IndiaAgainstCAA* gained attraction, millions of people – mostly students – used them to plan protests, share images and stories, and foster global solidarity.

**Farmer's Movement:** In order to ensure that the farmers' demands were not overlooked, television networks were crucial in documenting the farmers' protracted sit-ins, especially those that took place close to Delhi's boundaries. The massive media attention gave the campaign a worldwide platform and raised awareness of India's agricultural predicament around the world. Images of farmers enduring harsh weather conditions and refusing to back down from the government inspired sympathy and support both at home and abroad. Radio broadcasts were a vital source of information in rural regions where many farmers lacked internet connection, keeping people informed about the ongoing protests and the government's response. Local radio stations played a crucial role in discussing the effects of agricultural policy and disseminating the opinions of farmers. Newspapers were also disseminating the farmers' grievances because they gave them a platform to be heard by urban audiences who would not have otherwise taken an interest in the issue. Print media used investigative reporting, letters to the editor, and in-depth analysis to place the demonstrations within the broader narrative of India's agricultural misery. Social media, meanwhile, has transformed into a powerful tool for organizing and garnering global attention. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were flooded with images, slogans, and comments calling for the controversial farm law to be repealed. By bridging the gap between urban and rural India and fostering a sense of global solidarity, hashtags like *#FarmersProtest* and *#IAmWithFarmers* contributed to the movement's increased visibility.

**Reclaim the Night, Reclaim the Rights:** By showcasing women reclaiming public spaces at night through marches, vigils, and speeches, television significantly contributed to the Reclaim the Night campaign's awareness-raising. By humanizing the issue of sexual assault, its coverage helped a wider public understand it. Prominent broadcasts highlighted the connection between gender equality and public safety, which helped the cause grow outside of the UK and spur action globally. The message was largely disseminated by radio, especially community stations, especially in areas with little access to other forms of media. It aired event notices, activist first-person narratives, and discussions on gender violence, women's autonomy, and public safety. In-depth editorials, investigative reporting, and newspaper coverage of the campaign portrayed sexual assault as a societal problem rather than a personal one. The public conversation on women's safety changed as a result of the print media's coverage of marches, legislative changes, and survivor testimony. Social media has developed into a powerful organizing tool, enabling activists to plan events, share personal stories, and spread messages through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In addition to providing a forum for survivors to speak and inspire others to act, hashtags like *#ReclaimTheNight* and *#MeToo* promoted global solidarity. Traditional media, including print, radio, and television, were crucial in drawing public attention to the tragic RG Kar case. By providing in-depth coverage of the crime, demonstrations, and victim testimonies, traditional media fueled public outrage and maintained the focus on gender-based violence. Demands for further legal protections were highlighted in TV shows and publications, which framed the crime as a component of a more significant, systemic issue that required urgent

social change. However, modern media, especially social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, have proven to be powerful tools for organizing at the grassroots level. Campaigners were able to immediately reach audiences throughout the world by avoiding traditional media. Together, traditional and digital media ensured the campaign's global relevance and urgency by amplifying it. By calling for justice and a social shift toward gender equality, this partnership laid a solid basis for group action.

### **Discussions**

1. Social media, print, radio, and television have all made major contributions to the growth of social movements. Significant demonstrations were sparked by television broadcasts that brought situations like Nirbhaya to the attention of the world. Print media influenced public opinion through editorials and investigative reports, as exemplified by the Farmer's Movement, while radio allowed participation in remote areas where internet access was scarce. With hashtags like *#JusticeForNirbhaya*, *#FridaysForFuture*, and *#FarmersProtest* helped to generate momentum and link activists worldwide. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were also essential for planning protests and fostering international solidarity.
2. In initiatives like the CAA-NRC marches and the Youth Climate Movement, youth played a crucial role in inspiring action. The Fridays for Future movement, which was started by Greta Thunberg's school strikes, inspired youth across the world to call for immediate climate action. In a similar vein, university students spearheaded the CAA-NRC demonstrations in India, particularly in Delhi. A key component of the Youth Climate Movement was intergenerational justice, which emphasized the responsibility of the present generation to build a sustainable future for the next generation. This declaration, which promoted global unity, was widely disseminated on social media and in international settings.
3. Social movements may be both supported and misrepresented by the media. The media fueled negative impressions during the CAA-NRC demonstrations by characterizing the gatherings as violent or disruptive and claiming that they posed a threat to India's democratic values or national security. Opponents of the movement often propagated this narrative. The media, especially social media, offers a platform for refuting these portrayals, nevertheless. In order to dispel myths and raise awareness and support for the protests, activists used social media to share personal stories, eyewitness accounts, and real-time updates.
4. The 2020 agricultural policies of the Indian government, which farmers believed would favor large corporations and threaten the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system, served as the impetus for the Farmer's Movement. The campaign's promotion was greatly aided by the media. While print media used investigative reporting to reveal farmers' issues and sway public opinion, television and radio brought attention to the protests at Delhi's borders. Global support was coordinated via social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter, where hashtags like *#FarmersProtest* helped to link people worldwide and raise awareness. This movement serves as an example of how the media can elevate marginalized viewpoints and turn regional issues into international debates about agricultural rights and policy.
5. Significant media attention was given to the Reclaim the Night campaign, which combats victim-blaming attitudes and violence against women. Television shows of women marching at night helped to normalize women's access to public areas and upend long-standing customs. By offering platforms for discussions on sexual abuse, legal changes, and victim testimonies, radio and print media helped raise awareness. Women may share their own tales and mobilize support using social media, especially with hashtags like *#ReclaimTheNight* and *#MeToo*, which magnify worldwide discussions. The movement is a prime example of how the media, especially online, can shape public perceptions of gender violence and promote feminist causes.

### **Key Takeaway**

Social media has developed into a vital tool for spreading information, planning protests, and encouraging international cooperation among communities. By avoiding the gatekeepers of traditional media, hashtags and viral content allow grassroots efforts to reach a global audience and advanced causes. Conventional media, such as radio, television, and newspapers, are crucial in legitimizing movements and offering in-depth coverage, editorial, op-ed, that increases public understanding of complex issues, even as social media encourages mobilization and also it increases public awareness and keep people informed. As seen by the Farmer's Movement and the Youth Climate Movement, the media also contributes to the transformation of local concerns into global ones, highlighting how interconnected the world is now. As evident in the Nirbhaya and Farmer's Movements, when media-driven activism led to significant legislative improvements, the media increases public awareness and exerts pressure on lawmakers to address urgent issues. Additionally, by using images and testimonies to inspire empathy, coordinate action, and shape public opinion, visual media humanizes social concerns.

### **Conclusion**

Both traditional and digital media have a significant impact on social movements, inspire group action, and foster international solidarity in today's interconnected globe. This study demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between media and social movements. The media serves as a battlefield for competing narratives even as it elevates marginalized voices, raises awareness, and promotes legislative action. Movements like the Youth Climate Movement and the Nirbhaya demonstrations show how the

media can be a site of contestation as well as a platform for visibility. For instance, social media gives activists the ability to get around established gatekeepers, gather support, and organize protests, yet conventional media outlets still define issues, validate movements, and influence public opinion. This study demonstrates that, as opposed to being a passive tool, the media actively participates in the successes and challenges of movements. As seen by the Farmer's Movement and #Reclaim the Night, local issues can garner international attention, but they also run the risk of oversimplifying or distorting complex circumstances. Lastly, society is reflected in the media, which draws attention to both its injustices and its aspirations for reform. The relationship between social movements and the media will grow more crucial in creating a society that is more just and equal as long as movements continue to use media channels for advocacy.

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