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WHERE IS THE GLOBAL SOUTH? A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF GEOPOLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN DIGITAL ACTIVISM RESEARCH

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Context

Recent research has problematised the missing “voices” in digital activism research. Rega and Medrado (2019; 2021) are among those scholars to argue that the majority of studies are written from a Global North perspective. Other scholars have linked these skewed representations to choices made in research methodologies. For example, some scholarship has identified the prevalence of prominent Western social media platforms in activist and political research (e.g. Özkula, Reilly, & Hayes, 2021; Ruess et al., 2021). Other studies have more broadly problematised Western or Global North foci in digital media research and called for critical data studies and internet research methods to be de-westernised, internationalised, or decolonised (e.g. Arora, 2019; Badr & Ganter, 2021; Bosch, 2022; Milan & Treré, 2019; Mutsvairo, 2019; Schoon et al., 2020).

As such, there is a need for interrogating whether digital activism research is inclusive and representative of non-Western perspectives, both in terms of case studies and methods. However, it is often difficult to link digital activism research to specific geographic locations due to the universality of hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and the fact that these networked publics are often geographically dispersed rather than situated in a single country (alongside wider issues of defining what has been termed the “Global South”, see Khan et al., 2022). In response to this issue, this paper sets out to explore the geographic foci of digital activism research to date through a systematic review of journal articles published between 2011 and 2018.

Methodology

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This paper presents the results of a mixed-methods systematic review of empirical journal articles (N=315) published on this topic. The study implemented principles from high quality systematic reviews towards creating a reliable corpus, including focused research questions, a set of hypotheses, a defined methodology with inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the application of a search strategy and review protocol. The corpus was created by running queries spanning 21 relevant keywords describing digitally enabled activism (e.g. digital activism, online activism) on the Scopus database, with cross-checks on Google Scholar. Queries were limited to searches of article titles, abstracts, and keywords, initially producing a sample of 2,668 articles within the 'Social Sciences' category. The corpus was then filtered to articles published in academic journals, which were peer-reviewed prior to publication, empirical in nature, and fitted Karatzogianni's (2015) definition of digital activism.

These articles were manually coded to identify specific attributes such as the methods of data collection and analysis, including whether digital data was used as a source. The corpus was further analysed on which actors and regions were represented in these articles, with a specific focus on whether they were situated within the Global South or outside of what has been described as the "Global Majority" (i.e. beyond a North-South dichotomy). Coded categories included the choice of case study, its origin and location, the country of affiliation for lead authors, and the platforms being studied (including what platform choice implied about the captured communities). This part of the coding was conducted towards capturing a general sense of diversity and spatial representation in digital activism research, above all in relation to the emergence of software-based digital methods. The final corpus consisted of 315 articles published between 2011 and 2018, of which 117 articles used exclusively traditional research methods and 198 articles included digital data as a source.

Results & implications

The results show that digital activism articles are skewed towards non-region-specific and high-visibility social media groupings (e.g. hashtag publics) and wider social movements, rather than particular demographics or regions. This was particularly the case in platform-based research (i.e. digital data sources), an issue partly tied to the regionally diffused nature of digital platforms. As such, the majority of articles did not focus specifically on communities from Global South or semi-periphery countries. These findings raised questions around (a) what Global South in digital networks and communities entails, and (b) whether digital activism produces a view into disadvantaged, marginalised, or under-represented social groups. Thus, the Global South and other countries outside of the global geopolitical majority appear to be under-represented in digital activism research, but the extent of this disparity is hard to assess. The findings show that digital activism research using digital data largely studies visibility and specific types of it: privileged demographics and popular platforms in the Global North. We term these "*Northern Visibilities*".

The paper concludes by proposing a future research agenda for digital activism researchers which redresses this imbalance in favour of digital activism research from

and within the Global South/Minority. Specifically, we argue that researchers should diversify their methodological approaches towards stakeholder inclusion, capturing contextualised data, and more variation in the platforms they study. Such research would be more inclusive of hitherto marginalised activist voices as well as better capture how digital activism operates in contexts outside the Global North.

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