

# Performing Resistance — Political Activism and Digital Theatre on Social Media Platforms

<sup>1</sup>Mr. Prashraya Khare, <sup>2</sup>Mr. Rahul Tiwari

<sup>1</sup>Student, <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Head of Department

<sup>12</sup>MFA School of Performing Arts

<sup>12</sup>Sanjeev Agrawal Global Educational University, Bhopal

**Abstract**—Social media platforms have become stages for a new kind of political theatre—one where performance, activism, and digital spectatorship converge in real time. This paper examines how TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) function as sites of performative resistance, transforming users into actor-activists whose bodies, voices, and creative labour constitute a distributed form of political theatre. Drawing on performance studies, digital activism scholarship, and the emerging concept of "expressive citizenship," the study analyses three modes of platform-native political performance: viral protest choreography on TikTok, Instagram-carousel activism-as-dramaturgy, and hashtag-driven narrative campaigns that function as participatory theatre without walls. Case studies include the 2024 student-led protest performances following the Gaza solidarity encampments, the Indian farmers' protest digital theatre ecosystem (2020–2021 and ongoing), and climate activism performances orchestrated through TikTok. The paper argues that platform-specific affordances—duet stitching, algorithmic visibility, ephemeral story formats, and remix culture—do not merely disseminate political content but fundamentally shape the dramaturgy of contemporary resistance. The study also interrogates the tensions inherent in this mode: the risk of performative slacktivism, algorithmic suppression of dissenting voices, and the uneasy relationship between authentic political commitment and the attention economy's demand for constant performance. In theorizing social media as a theatrical infrastructure for political resistance, the paper contributes to interdisciplinary conversations spanning performance studies, media theory, and the study of digital social movements.

**Index Terms**—digital activism, social media theatre, protest performance, TikTok activism, expressive citizenship, political theatre, algorithmic resistance

## I. Introduction

On any given day, a TikTok user scrolling through their feed might encounter a teenager performing a choreographed dance to a remixed political speech; an Instagram carousel breaking down labour law violations through illustrated slides; an X thread that unfolds like a one-act play, complete with dramatic reveals and audience participation through quote-tweets. None of these would traditionally be called theatre, yet each deploys theatrical mechanisms—embodied performance, narrative structure, character, spectacle, direct address to an audience—in the service of political persuasion. They are acts of performance that are also acts of resistance, staged not in black-box theatres but on the infinite scroll of social media platforms.

This convergence of performance and political activism is not historically unprecedented. Theatre has served as a vehicle for dissent since Aristophanes lampooned Athenian politicians, through Brecht's epic theatre, to the street performances of ACT UP and the anti-globalization movement. What is new is the infrastructure: algorithms that determine who sees what, platform affordances that shape what kinds of performance are possible, and an attention economy that rewards the spectacular, the emotionally charged,

and the instantly legible. On social media, the street protest and the theatre piece collapse into a single form—the political performance post.

This paper theorizes social media activism as a mode of digital theatre, examining how platform-native performance practices constitute a new dramaturgy of resistance. It asks three guiding questions. First, what theatrical mechanisms—embodiment, narrative, spectacle, audience engagement—are operational in social media political performance? Second, how do platform-specific affordances shape the form and efficacy of these performances? And third, what are the tensions, limitations, and ethical complexities of a mode of activism that must compete for attention in the same feeds as lifestyle content and advertising.

## II. Theoretical Framework: Theatre, Activism, and the Digital Stage

### Political Theatre and Its Digital Extension

Political theatre, in its most expansive definition, is any performance that intervenes in public discourse to challenge power structures, expose injustice, or mobilize collective action. Augusto Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed* positioned spectators as "spect-actors"—participants capable of intervening in the dramatic action and, by extension, in the social realities the drama modelled. Boal's framework was built for physical workshops in community settings, but its logic extends naturally to social media, where the boundary between spectator and performer has been structurally dissolved. Every user is potentially a spect-actor: scrolling (watching) and posting (performing) within the same interface.

Hans-Thies Lehmann's (2006) *Postdramatic Theatre* provides another useful lens. Postdramatic performance de-centres narrative coherence in favour of experiential intensity, fragmentation, and the foregrounding of the performer's body as a site of meaning. TikTok political performance, with its rapid cuts, decontextualized audio, and emphasis on affective impact over linear argument, is postdramatic in its very structure. A fifteen-second video of a protester singing while being arrested does not make an argument in the traditional sense; it produces an experience, and the experience is the argument.

### Expressive Citizenship and Performed Identity

Recent scholarship on digital activism has introduced the concept of "expressive citizenship"—a model in which publicly voicing political views through media production functions as a primary mode of political participation, particularly for demographics with limited access to traditional political structures (Ms. Magazine, 2024). For young women, queer people, and others historically marginalized from formal politics, performing political identity on social media is not a substitute for "real" activism but a reconstruction of what political citizenship means.

This reframing matters for the present study because it shifts the analytical lens from effectiveness (did the performance achieve a measurable political outcome?) to meaning (what does it mean for people to perform political commitment through the available cultural forms of their time?). It also challenges the persistent dismissal of social media activism as "performative" in the pejorative sense. All political action is, to some degree, performative—it must be witnessed to have effect. The question is not whether social media activism is performative but what kind of performance it is and what its conditions of production reveal about power, visibility, and voice in the digital public sphere.

## Algorithmic Dramaturgy

A third theoretical pillar concerns the dramaturgical role of algorithms. In traditional theatre, dramaturgy refers to the structuring of performance elements—pacing, emphasis, the arrangement of scenes—to produce meaning and affect. On social media platforms, algorithms perform a parallel function: they determine the order in which content appears, which performances are amplified and which are suppressed, and what the "audience" actually sees. Algorithmic dramaturgy is not neutral; it is shaped by platform business models that prioritize engagement, which in turn rewards content that provokes strong emotional reactions—outrage, shock, inspiration, humour.

This has profound implications for political performance. Activists must craft their performances not only for human audiences but for algorithmic distribution systems that have no political commitments and no interest in truth. A protest performance that is aesthetically powerful but fails to generate engagement metrics may simply never be seen. Conversely, a performance that distorts or simplifies a political message may achieve viral reach precisely because of that simplification. The algorithm, in this sense, is a co-author of digital political theatre—one whose creative imperatives (maximize watch time, provoke shares) may be directly at odds with the political imperatives of the human performer.

### III. Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis and case study methodology to examine political performance on social media platforms. The approach is interpretive rather than quantitative, attending to the aesthetic, narrative, and performative dimensions of selected examples rather than measuring reach or engagement metrics.

### IV. Case Selection Criteria

Cases were selected to represent diverse political contexts, platform ecologies, and performance modes:

1. TikTok protest choreography surrounding the 2024 campus solidarity encampments and related movements—a case of embodied, music-driven political performance designed for algorithmic distribution.
2. Instagram carousel activism deployed during the Indian farmers' protest (2020–2021) and its digital afterlife—a case of visual-didactic performance blending graphic design, narrative sequencing, and audience mobilization.
3. Hashtag-driven narrative campaigns including climate activism performances on TikTok (2022–2024)—a case of distributed, participatory performance where individual posts function as scenes in a larger collective narrative.

## Analytical Approach

Analysis proceeded through close reading of selected posts, threads, and campaigns as performance texts, attending to: (a) embodiment and presence—how the performer's body is deployed as a political sign; (b) narrative structure—how posts construct dramatic arcs within platform constraints; (c) audience

engagement mechanisms—how duets, stitches, comments, and shares extend the performance; and (d) platform affordances—how specific technical features shape the form the performance takes.

## Case Study Analysis

### Case Study 1: TikTok Choreography as Protest Performance (2024)

In 2024, campus encampments and solidarity actions spread across universities globally, and TikTok became a primary site for both documenting and performing resistance. What emerged was a distinctive genre of political performance: short-form videos in which protesters danced, sang, or performed symbolic actions set to music, often repurposing trending sounds for political ends. These were not incidental recordings of protest but deliberately composed performances designed for the platform's vertical format, its duet and stitch capabilities, and its algorithmic preference for music-driven content.

The theatrical mechanisms at work are instructive. First, the performer's body functions as a site of political signification—a protester dancing in front of riot police creates a visual contradiction (joyful movement versus authoritarian stasis) that carries political meaning without requiring verbal argument. Second, the use of trending audio embeds the political performance within a broader cultural vernacular, making it legible to audiences who might not seek out explicitly political content. Third, the duet function allows other users to perform alongside the original video, creating a distributed ensemble performance in which thousands of individual bodies collectively constitute the political action.

This mode of performance aligns with what the digital activism scholar cited earlier termed "expressive citizenship"—political participation through creative media production rather than through traditional channels (Ms. Magazine, 2024). The young people performing protest choreography on TikTok are not merely documenting activism; they are making activism through performance, constructing political identity in real time for an audience of peers.

Yet the algorithmic conditions of this performance cannot be ignored. TikTok's recommendation system rewards content that generates strong engagement signals—likes, shares, comments, completion rate. Political performances that provoke outrage or controversy may be algorithmically amplified, while those that make nuanced arguments may be invisible. The platform's content moderation policies further complicate the picture: political content that falls afoul of vague "community guidelines" may be shadow-banned, a form of algorithmic suppression that operates without transparency or accountability (Mashable, 2024). Activists thus find themselves performing on a stage where the lighting director has political opinions but will not declare them.

### Case Study 2: Instagram Carousels and the Indian Farmers' Protest (2020–2021)

The Indian farmers' protest against agricultural reform laws generated a massive digital theatre ecosystem that extended far beyond the physical encampments at Delhi's borders. On Instagram, a distinctive form of political performance emerged: the illustrated carousel post. These posts—typically ten slides combining typography, illustration, data visualization, and photography—functioned as miniature dramatic works. Slide one posed a question or made a provocative claim; subsequent slides built the argument through evidence and narrative; the final slide issued a call to action (share this, donate here, show up at this location).

This carousel format is, in effect, a scripted monologue adapted for the Instagram feed. It has a dramatic arc (problem, complication, resolution), it addresses an audience directly, and it relies on visual rhetoric—colour, composition, the sequencing of images—to produce affective response. Unlike the TikTok protest performance, which foregrounds the embodied presence of the performer, the carousel performance foregrounds design as dramaturgy. The "performer" may be invisible—an anonymous graphic designer working from a bedroom—but the performance is no less theatrical for that.

The farmers' protest digital theatre was notable for its decentralized and multilingual character. Accounts run by students, journalists, farmers' unions, and diaspora communities produced carousels in Hindi, Punjabi, English, and multiple regional languages, creating a networked performance that was simultaneously local and global. This decentralization echoes the distributed agency model that Karen Barad (2007) theorizes: the "performance" of the protest was not located in any single post or account but emerged from the intra-action of thousands of posts, shares, comments, and offline actions.

The limitations of this mode are equally significant. Carousel activism depends on the audience's willingness to swipe through ten slides—a high bar in an attention economy optimized for rapid scrolling. The format also privileges those with design literacy and access to design tools, potentially excluding voices that lack these resources. And like all platform-dependent performance, it is vulnerable to algorithmic changes: an Instagram update that deprioritizes carousel posts in favour of Reels can render an entire mode of political theatre obsolete overnight.

### **Case Study 3: Climate Activism and Hashtag Theatre on TikTok (2022–2024)**

Climate activism on TikTok has produced a form of political performance that might be called "hashtag theatre"—distributed performances united by a common tag rather than a common physical space. Campaigns like #ClimateEmergency, #FridaysForFuture, and #EndFossilFuels function as theatrical seasons: each post is a scene, each creator is a performer, and the collective narrative is built through the accumulation of individual contributions.

What distinguishes this mode is its participatory dramaturgy. A single post—a teenager holding a hand-painted sign, a scientist explaining tipping points with props, a comedian satirizing oil company advertising—becomes a prompt for others to respond, remix, or extend. The duet and stitch features formalize this participation: one user's performance literally shares the screen with another's, creating a dialogue that neither controls. This is Boal's forum theatre rendered in algorithmic form—the audience intervenes not by stepping onto a physical stage but by stitching their performance alongside the original.

Climate hashtag theatre also reveals the tension between moral urgency and platform logic. Climate communication requires sustained attention to slow-moving, complex phenomena; TikTok rewards brevity, novelty, and emotional intensity. Performers must compress ecological catastrophe into formats designed for entertainment, producing what one might call the "tragedy of the fifteen-second form." The risk is not that the performance fails but that it succeeds on terms that undermine its content—that an audience moved by a beautiful climate video scrolls immediately to a makeup tutorial, the affective charge dissipated before it can translate into action.

## V. Findings and Discussion

### The Theatrical Grammar of Platform Activism

Across the three case studies, several recurring theatrical mechanisms emerge. Embodiment is central: the protester's body, whether dancing on TikTok, illustrating a carousel, or speaking to camera, functions as both medium and message. The body says, "I am here, I am at risk, I am performing my commitment through my physical presence"—even when that physical presence is mediated through a screen.

Narrative compression is equally central. Platform formats enforce brevity: fifteen seconds, ten slides, 280 characters. Political performers must construct complete dramatic arcs within these constraints, relying on implication, symbolism, and emotional shorthand. This compression can produce remarkable aesthetic density—a single TikTok might compress exposition, conflict, and call to action into less time than a traditional play takes to dim the lights. But it can also flatten complexity, reducing political positions to slogans and structural analysis to vibes.

Audience participation, the third mechanism, is built into the infrastructure. Every share, comment, duet, or stitch extends the performance and potentially alters its meaning. The audience is not a passive receiver but a co-creator, and this co-creation is visible—the performance includes its own reception as part of its form. A political TikTok that generates thousands of duets is not merely "going viral"; it is generating a distributed ensemble performance in which the original performer loses authorial control, for better and worse.

### The Paradox of Performative Activism

The charge of "performative activism"—that social media political performance is shallow, self-serving, and substitutes posting for substantive action—is the most persistent critique of the forms examined here. The critique has merit: posting an infographic is not the same as organizing a union, and the attention economy incentivizes performances of commitment that may not correspond to offline action.

However, the critique also rests on a dubious distinction between "authentic" and "performative" political action. All political action is performed for an audience—the protest march is a theatrical form as much as the TikTok video, complete with costumes (the uniform of the movement), choreography (the route of the march), and script (the chants). The relevant question is not whether an action is performative but whether the performance is politically effective and ethically grounded. Dismissing all digital political performance as "slacktivism" ignores the ways that online performance can build solidarity, disseminate information, and mobilize offline action—functions that theatrical performance has served for centuries.

The more pressing concern is the structural asymmetry between the activist-performer and the platform that hosts their performance. The platform extracts value from the performance (engagement data, advertising revenue) while reserving the right to suppress it through opaque moderation systems. The activist performs resistance on a stage owned by the forces they may be resisting. This asymmetry is not unique to digital theatre—physical theatres also have owners and gatekeepers—but the scale and invisibility of algorithmic control intensify it.

## Algorithmic Suppression and Censorship Risk

A significant finding concerns the vulnerability of digital political performance to both overt and covert suppression. Platforms may remove content that violates community guidelines—a mechanism that, while ostensibly neutral, disproportionately affects political speech that challenges state or corporate power (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2024). More insidiously, shadow-banning and algorithmic deprioritization can render content effectively invisible without any notification to the creator, creating a situation where activists perform to an empty house without knowing it.

This suppression operates as a form of digital dramaturgy—it shapes what performances are possible by determining which ones reach an audience. The activist's creative labour is thus doubled: they must craft a compelling performance and also navigate an algorithmic system designed, in part, to contain and defuse political content. Some activists have developed counter-strategies, using coded language, euphemisms, and platform-switching to evade suppression. These strategies are themselves a form of performance—a meta-theatrical layer in which the activist performs compliance with platform norms while smuggling political content through.

## Implications for Practice and Research

For theatre practitioners, the study suggests that social media is not merely a promotional tool for physical theatre but a theatrical medium in its own right—one with its own dramaturgy, its own modes of embodiment, and its own audience dynamics. Training programmes that prepare students for careers in performance should engage seriously with platform-native political theatre as a practice, not an afterthought.

For activists, the findings underscore the double-edged character of platform-dependent performance. Social media offers unprecedented reach and participatory potential, but it also embeds political expression within extractive attention economies and subjects it to algorithmic governance. Effective digital political theatre requires not only creative skill but also strategic literacy about the infrastructures on which it depends.

For researchers, the field invites further empirical work: longitudinal studies of how specific campaigns use performance, comparative analysis of platform-specific dramaturgical affordances, and close examination of the relationship between online performance and offline political outcomes. The intersection of performance studies and digital activism scholarship remains under-theorized, and the rapid evolution of both platforms and political movements ensures that the object of study is perpetually in motion.

## VI. Conclusion

Social media platforms have become the most visible and contested stages for political performance in the contemporary world. The dance video in front of riot police, the ten-slide carousel explaining a protest, the hashtag campaign weaving thousands of individual posts into a collective narrative—these are not degraded forms of political theatre but its current, vital expressions. They extend a lineage that runs from the Greek chorus through the street performances of twentieth-century social movements, adapting theatrical mechanisms to the affordances and constraints of algorithmic distribution.

The dramaturgy of digital resistance is shaped by forces beyond the performer's control: the attention economy that rewards spectacle over substance, the algorithmic systems that determine visibility, and the

platform policies that constrain political speech under the guise of content moderation. To perform resistance on social media is to perform on a stage where the architecture itself is political—where every creative choice is also a negotiation with platform power.

Acknowledging these constraints does not diminish the significance of the form. On the contrary, it clarifies what is at stake. The young people choreographing protest dances, the designers building carousel arguments, the climate communicators compressing catastrophe into sixty seconds—they are not merely documenting resistance. They are making theatre in the fullest sense: live, embodied, addressed to an audience, structured for affective impact, and oriented toward changing how that audience sees and acts in the world. The stage may be new, but the impulse is ancient, and it remains one of the most powerful tools that people have for speaking truth to power when power would rather they stayed silent.

## References

- [1] Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- [2] Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Pluto Press.
- [3] Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic theatre*. Routledge.
- [4] Mashable. (2024, December 23). 2024: A year of digital organizing from Palestine to X. [mashable.com](https://mashable.com)
- [5] Ms. Magazine. (2024, December 9). Not your mother's activism: Young women's political expression on social media. [msmagazine.com](https://msmagazine.com)
- [6] National Coalition Against Censorship. (2024, August 19). Artists, free speech orgs to protest suppression of artistic expression by social media companies. [ncac.org](https://ncac.org)
- [7] Rachimoellah, M., Lubis, P. H., & Utimadini, N. J. (2024). Digital activism and political change: Challenges of social media's impact on political development. *MEIS: Media and Interdisciplinary Studies*, 11(2). [scholarhub.ui.ac.id](https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id)