



Public Sphere in Digital Age: An Analysis of Transformation of Societies through Digital Activism

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ABSTRACT

In the age of globalized media and digital societies, social media reinvented the concept of the public sphere and changed the relationship between political authorities and masses. In terms of public discourse social networking sites like twitter (now X) has a history of upended the level of communication and provided a platform to the voiceless and faceless part of the society. Although now twitter has a new name but it is continued to be the major social media platform for opinion formation and dissemination. This digital sphere is transforming the societies on global level. Now, the responsible 'Netizens' of a nation are putting their efforts to bring free speech and open access to technology. This study aims to understand the relevance of the public sphere in the digital age. This secondary data-based research investigated the pattern of emerging activism through the internet after the birth of Twitter and managed to develop a diagram to check the fact that how are social media becoming the digital public sphere. This study used a systematic approach to finding and reviewing the literature to meet the objectives. The data has been collected from the internet using 5 step standard filtration processes. The finding of this study established the fact that social media gave wings to the

common people to protest against the policymakers and ill society norms. The core idea of the public sphere has changed its face in some aspects but its relevance is still intact.

1. Introduction

“The rise of the Internet has brought about resurgence (renewal) of scholars applying theories of the public sphere to Internet technologies” (Edgerly et al, 2012; Jansen & Keis, 2005).

The new tools for communication (digital) like social media reinvented public sphere’s concept and conditions of relation between political authorities and masses. Social networking sites like FaceBook, Twitter (now X) and others has upended the level of communication (in terms of public discourse) and provided a platform to voiceless and faceless part of the society where they can collaborate, coordinate and can engaged in a public debate. (Gladwell, 2010).

Internet is considerably an ideal communication tool for point-to-point communication and can be called a digital public sphere because it has the power for opinion formation on any topic and public has its access in both online and offline bases. (Warnick, 2007).

The concept of ‘Public Sphere’ given by renowned German cultural critic Habermas is becoming prominently important in digital age where every social media user can raise their voice for opinion formation and can participate in social change debates via blogging **or social** networking sites. Now a days, many researcher are trying to test the concept of Public Sphere in the 21st century and found that the seminal study *“The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere”* (Habermas 1989) by social theorist Jürgen Habermas’s has its relevance in modern time when social media has overpowered the opinion formation and democratic debate concept digitally it has prominently visible for the topic of a research.

“Society engaged in critical public debate” (Habermas, 1989)

The existing literature on public sphere divided public sphere in two groups one is ‘Public’ and ‘Private’ based on its major condition, requirements and other core concepts. Most of the work done on the public sphere was somewhere and somehow related with the given aspects of public sphere by Habermas in his book *“The structural transformation of the public sphere”*. The emanate scholars like

Calhoun and Fraser's work was based on public sphere and it was highly influenced by the original concept of public sphere. "Counter Public" (Fraser,1998) concept of public sphere was based on "*the bourgeois*" (Habermas, 1962) and later on "Counter Public" idea of public sphere inspired Calhoun (1998) to work on the democratic potential of Internet in public sphere concept. Many contemporary researchers believe that the original concept of public sphere is the one and the only approach to solve the problems of life and order of the democratic society. (Ruiz et. al., 2011)

World of Netizens

Netizen (**Hauben, 1996**): Citizens of a nation who use internet to initiate and participation in political and social debate for the change. Netizen is an urban phenomenon which built by combining two words 'Inter-net' and 'Cit-izen'. Officially the internet pioneer and author Michael F. Hauben coined this term in 1993 in his article "Common Sense: The Impact the Net Has on People's Lives".

This study also aims to understand the relevance of public sphere in the digital age. Research conducted in 2011 stated "*Twitter reveals a variety of interesting clues about different kinds of protests. An overarching point of these analyses is that viewing Twitter as a communication update service may not distinguish the most intriguing downloaded by dimensions of Twitter in contentious politics.*" (Segeberg, 2011) so from the year twitter started (2007) activism norms has been changed. Twitter became the face of activism. This study will examine the pattern of emerging activism online after twitter.

Objective

- To find out the one study each on social media and digital activism from 2007 to 2016.
- To test the idea of public sphere on the findings of the studies in order to see the how social media becoming the digital public sphere.
- To understand the relevance of public sphere in the digital age.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used the systematic approach for finding and reviewing the literature to meet the objectives. Researcher conducted the literature search keeping in mind the purpose and objective of the study. The section criteria for selecting the research papers were based on objectives, Theoretical framework, Methodology, Findings of the studies.

Sampling

The study is aim to understand the existence of public sphere in the digital age. The sampling was done considering the objective of the study and a filtration process was used for the final selection of the papers. The time period selection has been done on the basis of twitter foundation and first hash tag (#) Year (August, 2007) because Hash Tag and twitter is considered as a face of online activism.

Search Process: A systematic search process was adopted in steps by step process for desired result.

Step: 1 Keyword Search filter (Year Wise) (2007 to 2016)

The keywords like ‘digital activism’ ‘opinion formation’ ‘public participation online’ ‘social media’ were used for first stage filtration for selecting the studies. The database used for the study was only digitally available data and mostly search was done on Google scholar and some other famous research based sites like research gate. After, year wise search (2007 to 2016) total 160 selected based on keywords.

Step: 2 Availability filter

Paid research papers were not used for this study only paper available through open sources included. The second filter used for the selection was availability of the full paper in .pdf format. Total 50 papers were selected after availability filter.

Step: 3 Titles scanning filter

A title of the study considered to be the whole summery of the paper. So, based on the title scanning the third filter was used for short listing the papers. Total 40 papers selected.

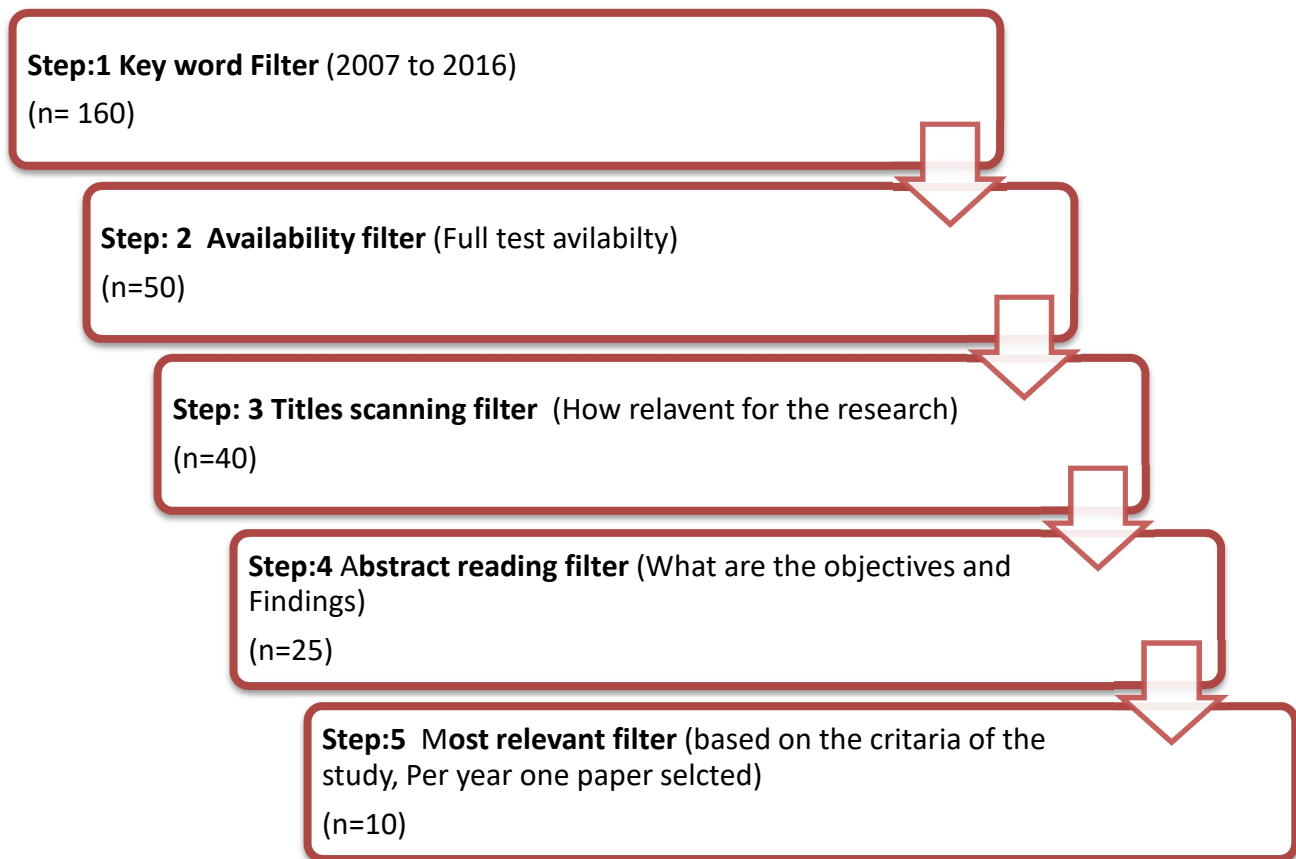
Step: 4 Abstract reading filter

After title filtration remaining articles were eliminated on the bases of their objective and findings. Total 25 papers selected.

Step: 5 Year wise suitability filter

The final selection was based on the year wise suitable studies falling under the criteria of presented study. Using the above filtration process out of 25 research papers finally 10 papers selected for the review. (See Fig.1)

Filtration process (Fig.1)



Data Type: Secondary

Data: Research papers

Review Norms: Study Area (key words), Objective, Methodology, Findings

Key words for paper selection: Social Media, Online Journalism, Public participation, Public Sphere, Activism

Secondary Data Analysis:

After the 5 step filtration process total 10 studies were selected for analysis. The research papers selected for this study are retrieved on the bases of study objective and findings of the research connected somewhere with Public Sphere and social media. The selected papers are listed below:

S. No.	Year	Title	Theoretical framework	Methodology
1.	2007	“The benefits of Facebook ‘friends’: Social capital and college students’ use of online social network sites”	Individual difference theory	Survey (Students)
2.	2008	“Finding High-Quality Content in Social Media”	Selectivity theory	Survey and content analysis
3.	2009	“Reader Comments to Online Opinion Journalism: A Space of Public Deliberation”	Gastil’s (2008) conceptual definition of deliberative public conversation	Content Analysis
4.	2010	“Technology uses in campus activism from 2000 to 2008: Implications for civic learning, (2010)”	The key components of rational learning and Leadership (McMahan et. al, 2007)	Survey and Interview
5.	2011	“Public Sphere 2.0? The Democratic Qualities of Citizen Debates in Online Newspapers”	Habermas Public Sphere discursive ethics.	Content Analysis, Interview, Survey
6.	2012	“Social media and the organization of collective action: Using Twitter to explore the	Collective Action and social media	Case Study

		ecologies of two climate change protests”	theory	
7.	2013	“YouTube, Twitter and the Occupy movement: Connecting content and circulation practices”	Social media theories	Content Analysis, Opinion Pole
8.	2014	“Examining the role of social media in effective crisis management: The effects of crisis origin, information form, and source on publics’ crisis responses”	Crisis management norms and social media theories	Case study and Interview
9.	2015	“Social media and the transformation of activist communication: exploring the social media ecology of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests”	Social movement theory and various communication models	Case study
10.	2016	“Social media as Public Sphere: A stakeholder perspective”	Habermas Public Sphere and Stakeholder theory	Review of Public Sphere and Stake holder theories.

Data Analysis

The papers were selected on the bases of their objective and findings. Based on the objective and the findings of the selected studies the conditions of the public sphere tested on them.

All the selected research were studied deeply and summarized on the basis of core objective and findings as listed below:

Year	Core Objective	Core Findings	Steps to become a Digital Public Sphere
2007	Examine the relationship between the use of Face book and the development of social capital.	Face book minimized the barriers of communication and fear of communicating with strangers and empowering social communication process.	Removing communication barriers
2008	To find out how Social Media is addressing the quarries of community	Social media community becoming the answer of every question and popular choice for knowledge gratification.	Digital platform are becoming the teachers
2009	To look at the specific readers comments section of online opinion journalism and provide a unique and constructive space for public discourse.	Deliberation of thoughts: Reader's comments on online news websites debates are analytic and social process of deliberation.	Social Media enhancing opinion formation
2010	To Investigates the pattern of campus activism through technology.	Twitter became an impotent factor for collective action on the digital platform; which plays an essential role in changing the dynamics of activism.	'Twitter' can built Advocacy Groups
2011	Find out that how technologies infuse protest ecologies and decided Twitter's hash tag activism as their primary focus for investigation.	The second face of Activism 'twitter': Twitter as an impotent factor for collective action on the digital platform; which plays an essential role in changing the dynamics of activism.	Becoming the face of Activism

2012	How hash Tag and social media uniting people for a cause in physical space (#Occupy)	Digital to Physical: New technologies are combining virtual and physical activism. They are bridging the gap digital and physical. Hash Tag means Activism: Hash tag is allowing people to unit for a cause.	Activism going digital to Physical via Social Media
2013	To know how you-tube is becoming the new public Sphere	Social media are new public sphere: Social networking sites like you tube provide the platform for public debate and opinion formation.	Social Media: The new public sphere
2014	Objective : This article examines the use of social media by intervention agencies during a crisis,	Social media can manage crisis in PR: social media is facilitating PR industry in their crisis management.	Social Media can manage crisis in PR
2015	Various advocacy groups have used social media to extend their reach and calls for action.	Findings: Social media facilitating civic engagement and collective action: Social media is changing the dynamics of collective action and enhancing civic engagements.	Facilitating civic engagement and collective action
2016	examine the traditional public sphere existence in digital social media age	Findings: Unbalanced yet powerful: the debates on social media are unbalance in nature but still they have the power for opinion formation and to bring change in the society.	Social Media: Unbalanced yet Powerful public sphere

3. RESULT

Every year the new chapter adds in the research focused on social media and digital activism from 2007 to 2016 researcher examined the different aspects of public sphere, activism, and collective action in digital age. In each study public participation, opinion formation, social and political debate and social engagement were visible. The four condition of public sphere i.e. a platform where people can construct their opinion and majority of the public can participation in the debate to bring the social change. All the above listed research fulfills the conditions of public sphere. A summarized chart had been prepared based on the each study and each year bases. (See fig.3)

Pattern of Year wise progress in digital public sphere

In 2007 Face Book is started removing the communication barriers. In 2008 Digital platform are becoming the teachers of the society. Every person with any question can find the answer for their quarries'. So their knowledge about society has been increased. Till 2009, people became familiar with digital technology then Social Media stated enhancing the thought process of the society. Till 2010, society became well informed and started using twitter and found that a site like twitter can build Advocacy Groups for debates. Till 2011, social media started becoming the face of Activism and in 2012 online activism started going digital to Physical via Social Media. 2013 can be considered as the landmark because this year social media became the new face of public sphere. In 2014, researcher found out that social media can manage crisis in Public Relations. In 2015, social media started Facilitating civic engagement and collective action. Finally in 2016, researchers found out that Social Media is Powerful public sphere but unbalanced in the terms on participation and opinion formation. (See Fig. 1)

Public sphere in digital sphere: Only Terminology changed not relevance

The concept of public sphere denotes that there should be a space (virtual or physical) where the citizen of the democratic nation can come together for a opinion formation which should be related to common good and social change e.g. economic and political. The re-vitalization of any democracies society is somewhere related to the democratic debate principals of public sphere.(Nordquist,2016) (Naughton, 2009). "*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*" was originally written in German by Habermas and published in 1962 in Germany. Later this book was translated into English in 1989 considering its great relevance and importance for the world. In the translated version, the famous

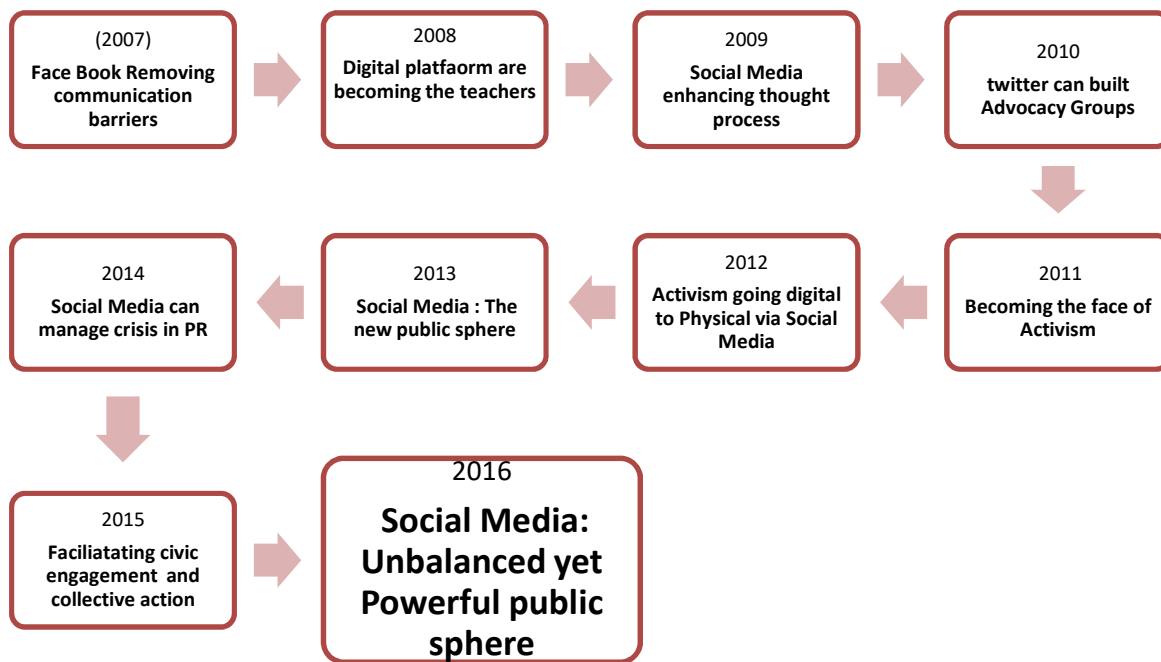
argument about the alleged demise of the public sphere by Habermas was put forward and it sunk from the level of critical discourse in the 19th century to merely affirmative publicity in the 20th century.

"By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body." (Der Öffentlichkeit,1962; Habermas et. al.,1974).

This is a Jürgen Habermas, passage from *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 1962. Excerpt translated as "The Public Sphere" and published in *New German Critique*, 1974) (Nordquist, 2016)

Fig.1

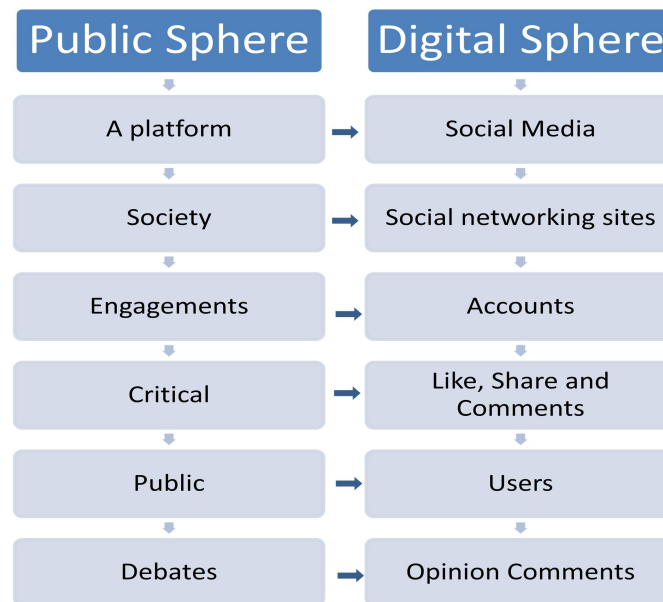
The step by step pattern of social media research leads to digital sphere



Relevance of Public sphere in digital age: Habermas says public sphere is where *"society engaged in critical public debate"*. After understanding what Hebermas means by public sphere and studied the literature available on public sphere and digital media peripheries; researcher breaks down ‘public

sphere’ on the bases of its definition (Habermas, 1989) and ‘digital sphere’ on its several democratic and participatory factor in comparison with the definition 6 keywords as the new words used for public sphere in digital age.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN DIGITAL AGE



Public sphere do have relevance in digital age. The words or the packaging may be changed but the content is still the same. In the digital age only the terminology has been changed but the core idea of public sphere is still being followed on major social media sites. The difference is; on digital platform the society is social networking sites and society participate in the debate via login into their social media accounts. The critical part is like share and comments by users as public. The nature of debates is more opinion based but every user has full freedom to put forward their point of view.

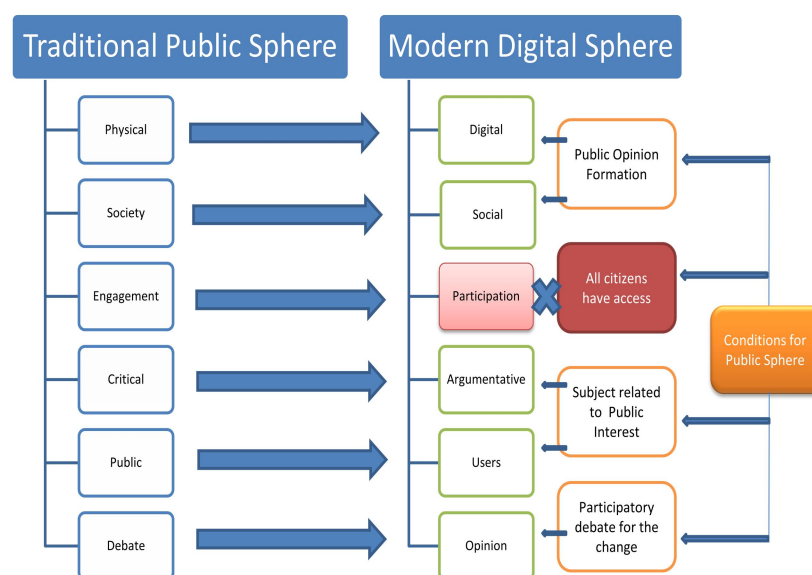
So, in digital age as well the relevance of public sphere is shining as it is and facilitating society with a framework of activism.

Public sphere in digital age in Indian context: an overview

All the presented studies were conducted out of India. This study is based in India so understanding public sphere in digital age in Indian context became desirable.

1. **A platform: “.....by ‘public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life.....”**
(Habermas et. al., 1974): Yes, Now internet and social media became a ‘Realm’; not only for Indian society but also for the whole world. Social networking sites became the part of the Netizen’s fundamental needs and a platform for public discourse.
2. **Opinion formation: “....in which something approaching public opinion can be formed...”**
(Habermas et. al., 1974): Yes, The urban and educated society of India is using internet and participating in the debates. Every user have their opinion on the discussion issues on the social networking sites
3. **Access: “....access is guaranteed to all citizens...”** **(Habermas et. al., 1974): No,** the digital literacy level of India limits people to participate in online debates. Only few portion have accesses to the technology and very few know that how to use it.
4. **Debate for the change: “.....a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body....”**
(Habermas et. al., 1974): Yes, A part of social media and internet users can be called “...a portion of public sphere...”. We can also call them the Inventor or early adopters and opinion leaders to bring the change; they are the one who initiate the public debate and sometime pursue to a level which leads to form a public body. (Nirbhaya, teen talak case

TPS V/S MDS



4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study will enhance the literature based on the understanding of public sphere in the digital age. The finding of this research establishes the fact that in the era of social media public sphere has full relevance. May be its changed its face in some aspects but the core idea is still intact. The research shows that social media gives wings to the common people to protest against the policymakers and ill society norms. Technologies and digital platform have made a chain of week section of the society; which do not have the motivation and energy to fight against the system earlier but now they can raise their voice only pressing a button of 'follow' and 'like'(Gladwell, 2010).

Face Book and twitter minimized the barriers of communication and fear of communicating with strangers (Ellison, 2007). Many researchers acknowledged commuter mediated communication as a future face of activism and public discourse. . The Hash Tag symbol became the synonyms of a public debate online in most of the cases and twitter became the face of providing the strong platform for stating and participating in any public debate Hash Tag.

Face Book users are more politically engaged than others because different online actions like watching, sharing, or signing petitions on the digital platforms help them to participate and collaborate with the debate. Activism on social media provides grand scheme of civic engagement (Badger, 2011).

In the age of digital media as well public sphere holds its complete relevance in many cases. At the end of this study the researcher found out that from participation to opinion formation and form debating for the social and political change to bringing the change public sphere is the core framework. This study adds a drop in the ocean of the literature available on public sphere, computer mediated communication and digital activism.

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