

The Influence of Social Media in the French Yellow Vests Movement

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Abstract

The French Yellow Vests Movement has gained a notable prominence in the theatre of global social issues. Social media played a significant role in this protest, which served as an attempt to challenge the status quo of political power. Digital platforms have played important roles in a variety of popular movements in recent years, so it was considered that the rise of the movement should also be only possible with the help of social media. Digital platforms allow greater communication between protesters and even between protesters and police when compared to traditional media. As has shown, social media can be a valuable tool for communication and in such a way can also represent an obstacle to the authorities. Radio and television are less likely to be influenced by the actions of the authorities. The main focus of the study was to discuss the effectiveness and scope of social media in the French Yellow Vests Movement. The analysis also compares previous protests in France with the Yellow Vest protests to come up with some conclusions about the possible broader outcomes. Broad, but accessible language was used as to allow this essay's readers to learn from its text and understand its scope. The conclusion does not elaborate as much on the limitations of the study as it does on the findings. It might prove a useful example for social activists, researchers interested in the area of 'Social Media and Politics', or the wider public. At the time of editing, the protests showed no signs of abating, while supporters from Belgium, the Netherlands or Italy emerged. An examination of the French Yellow Vests Movement seems, therefore, as a particularly appropriate topic. After nearly nine months of almost continuous weekend protests, the French Yellow Vests Movement still has an unclear endgame. Movements in France, followed by tax justice protests, were the second wave in the spring of 2019, now joined by antipension reforms. Anti-government protests also spread throughout the country, often with violence, and while in the capital Paris they are smaller – Yellow Vests'

violence is now subdued, indicating possible protest fatigue – their broad acceptance among the wider public does not seem to diminish. Paradoxically, this wavering situation may also be what distinguishes the movement from much shorter-lived predecessors.

Keywords Yellow Vests Movement, social media, protests, political power, digital platforms, communication, activism, France.

2. Introduction

In October 2018, days before its official launch, a Facebook event titled Yellow Jackets all on the street, BLOQUONS TOUT – Act 1 (November 17th), went viral on social media. It called for a series of blockades on French roads across the country, underscoring the widespread dissatisfaction brewing in several socio-economic groups. What started as a tax rebellion against the fuel seepage increases quickly mushroomed into a larger social movement with national and international repercussions, uniting under-represented people from the urban to the rural and suburbs. Drawing on a critical, empirical analysis of social media data, the reflective essay seeks to address the influence of digital technologies in mobilizing and sustaining the French Yellow Vests Movement (YVM). In so doing, the essay contends that social media were integral to both the catalyst and durability of the YVM (Dhillon, 2014).

The revolution will not be viral or televised, has been the chorus on both the traditional and social media-driven resistance; the Yellow Vests Movement is a case in point. In the national and international ecosystem of social movements sponsored by social media platforms, Yellow Vests appear to have shown a strong anti-system origins and a leaderless, non-hierarchical, and plural body. These demographics were irrelevant in the analysis of previous movements mostly led by powerful organizations, as trade unions or well-structured groups as 15M, Occupy Wall street, Indignados, or organizations as Black Lives Matter, which swiftly implemented effective communication. The Yellow Vests revolution was socially constructed, echoes a sizeable census from conversation and political pamphlets: they are described as artisans, freelance, day labourers, single mothers, retired men and women living on the poverty line, former middle classes, and low-income workers. Disparate in terms of ages, education, and professions, they nevertheless share a

strong sense of dispossession; from democratic deficit at a national level – notably because of Macron’s jupiterian presidency – to fears and frustration related to the aftermath of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic; and controversial laws for public and transport workers and pensioners (Reungoat et al., 2022). However, the common denominator of most Yellow Vests has been living in precariousness for years.

3. Background of the French Yellow Vests Movement

On 18 of November, 2018, the French Yellow Vests Movement (Mouvement des Gilets Jaunes or YV) emerged as spontaneous, leaderless, nationwide, street protests. The collective did not have spokespeople or official demands, and decision-making was horizontal and reached by consensus during large assemblies in French cities. Emails, surveys, and Facebook pages suggested the plurality of the movement opposed aggressive fuel tax increases, increased living costs, inequalities, and favoritism toward the capital at the expense of other regions (Lüders et al., 2021). In the beginning, the YV were comprised of working-class French citizens under a tightened range of income amongst the most economically deprived citizens in a wider international comparison. Nonetheless, earning a substantial income was irrelevant to predict support for the YV.

Ad hoc online groups quickly emerged on Facebook in advance of the first protest and played an instrumental role in disclosing practical information about scheduled demonstrations. Many additional Facebook groups and pages were created that called for equalized social rights and gave the opportunity for the movement to build a shared goal. The proliferation of misinformation, the most prominent of which presented the mobilization as driven by extreme right or left parties, weakened efforts to mobilize the undecided or to impart cohesive demands to the movement. Spontaneous offline protests grew as many YV supporters who sympathized with the goals promoted online on this topic felt the incentive to participate in street demonstrations. In June 2019, the last protest took place.

4. Role of Social Media in Social Movements

With the emergence and rapid development of the Internet, the influence of external non-governmental organizations in social movement activities has become more concentrated. Social movement organizations and individual activists use Twitter to

frame social issues and organize campaigns. The use of Twitter as a new tool may promote the development of conflict and facilitate social mobilization (Wang, 2019). The rise of social media has altered the landscape of contemporary social struggles. Historically marginalized populations experiencing various forms of inequality vocalize their grievances and challenge the status quo through platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Some early studies embrace an optimistic view on the contribution of social networking sites to social movements, a number of recent researches have evaluated the uses and impacts of social media mostly in a more critical tone.

Since 2010, a social media-related concept that has been most covered in recent debates is surely “the Facebook and Twitter revolution.” Opinions diverge over the potential of online social networks for effectively mobilizing supporters: hope has been raised by the role of social media during catastrophic incidents, but at the same time, concerns about both the questionable efficacy and the disruptive nature of Internet-based activism have also been voiced. This study attempts to contribute to this largely unresolved debate by investigating how social media shape a movement against social inequalities in French society. Founded upon the recognition of the multi-faceted functions that social media assumes in social struggles, the Yellow Vests Movement provides a stimulant case in which the short-term dynamics of the social movement, concurrent with the 11 weeks of action happening in the streets across France, can be analyzed. The research design includes a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods with a focus on data gathered from digital platforms. The transition of discussion from traditional newspapers, television and radio to digital media leads to the modification of social conflicts. The variable factors inspiring public upsurge can be diverse.

5. Key Events and Discourse in the French Yellow Vests Movement

The movement of Yellow Vests has evolved dramatically since its inception in France in mid-November 2018. The movement has had left very conflicting legacies; that of the expression of profound discontent with the government’s tax policy, and that of violent radicalism. The public sphere is located both on the Internet and on social media sites, where different actors fight for the media output as soon as events occur. Memes, images, videos, hashtags and posts are shaped by participants or actors in the

public sphere and grassroots content enters a larger circulation when shared. A movement or event gains visibility if given prominence on a news site, is followed by a media echo effect of further coverage based on the first articles.

When a protest is taking place, Luxembourg Gardens in Paris for instance, the movements are shown by social networks users who post images and news in real-time on different platforms, launching discussions on the event. Importantly, online discussions about the movement bring to light those societal debates and division that authoritarian media do not cover. This study of the French Yellow Vests movement aims to examine various content that have circulated online during the manifestation of the movement. On digital platforms, discussions are translated into written text that echoes the feelings and demands of the Yellow Vests (Hui Xian Ng & M. Carley, 2023). At a local, national or even international level, there has been an exchange of information on the movement's events and techniques of action. Social media notably contributed to the movement's mobilization. On digital platforms, some hashtags such as #GiletsJaunes and #YellowVests, or trends like the online broadcast of the event, made the manifestation more visible. A screenshot of a meme or a violent act shot on video can be understood without further context and shared widely. Enterprises, medias, public figures or ordinary citizen have posted on the movement since its first demonstration. Provocations or calls for violence were spotted on the web, showing a degree of orchestration around violent schemes. After breakdowns of violence taken on 2 December and 8 December, some posts called President Macron to act more toughly against "vandals". Videos taken during the demonstration are shared on the web, showing controversial police actions such as the use of rubber bullets, tear gas or the beating of protesters. Subsequently, this violent action of the police is also shown on accompanying images.

6. Impact of Social Media on Mobilization and Organization

The mobilization and organizing role of social media in the Yellow Vests movement is rigorously explored. Evidence is presented on the facilitation by digital platforms of protest coordination and discussion among participants. In particular, the movement adopted specific tools to ease the communication and coordination among activists, as event pages, group chats, etc (Wang, 2019). The swift open to anyone post of new events and happenings provide an illustrative example on how, through social media,

fast pre-set actions can be prepared by activists. The evidence shows that such speed in set up allows for prompts and unpredictable actions. In this sense, the analysis contributes to the growing body of research that provides evidence of the unconventional mobilizations and dynamics of the new wave of social media coordinated mobilizations, able to bring to the streets previously non-organized groups of population (William Koen, 2014). Furthermore, it is argued herein that the widespread discussion and call of action for 9th December allowed for a demonstration that was more unitary and general than what followed.

On the other hand, the study shows that the same social media and horizontal structure that allowed for a swift and surprising mobilization may be to some extent save for the current stall in mobilization and coherence within the GJV. This is the result of the dual role as gathered in the qualitative research of social media, perceived as an effective tool able to overcome the limits of traditional and top-down trade union activism, but also a potential fragmentation force that is hard to control when the endorsement passes to the more mainstream figures and people unexperienced in new forms of protest. This contrast between the actual practices in the streets and the debate on social media uses to some extent echoes the results of a recent contribution on the demand of Gilets Jaunes on social media and contrast it to the movement practices. Due to its non-conclusive outcomes, this part warrants further investigation and quantitative evidence.

7. Challenges and Criticisms of Social Media in Activism

Online activism is facing a re-evaluation as misinformation and digital surveillance become growing hazards for contention on social media platforms. With this in mind, the primary goal of this analysis section is to point out the challenges and criticisms posed to social media after the critical observation of the French 'Yellow Vests' Movement, in hopes of offering a new perspective on the theme of internet and activism by building upon recent discussions.

A first issue that cyber-activism is heavily criticized for is the spread of misinformation. Even if it's politically meaningful and an inspiring contentious movement, it can be fake. Many activists on the ground would agree with the initiator of the movement against Wall Street capitalism. Nevertheless, the 'Occupy' movement emerged in America inspired by the previous significant mobilization in Spain.

Nobody should be tricked into consuming a fake rose handled by the subjugator before sinking into a bathtub full of money next to a bottle of champagne. Fake is fake. For sure, misleading and fake though including RIC is against Macron; however, many information producers spread extreme fabrication since the inception of the French 'Yellow Vests' Movement, positioning this very movement as a fake protest. Therefore, many meaningful debates on lots of unanswered demands in this research are hard to take place. When social media enables the multiplicity of actors, it also fosters numerous fragmented battles surfacing. A big act as a response is solicited, rumour spreading is the logical outcome.

A second critical standpoint is in regard to the possible surveillance which can be worsened through the use of social networks as organizing tools. While the Internet has long been a significant factor in mobilizing contentious events standing against the authority, it also becomes an enormous threat. Over twenty-one years, constant governmental monitoring has undermined earlier revelations. Although technologies have drastically changed since, exposing the potential of social networking to immediate suppression by direct repression, given growing concerns on the Paris case, is an essential point not to be overlooked. This scrutiny comprises one's electronic footsteps secured during any device mediated action. The increasing porosity among all interactions is a major disturbance in regard to the contentions of the 'Yellow Vests'. The diffusion of faked readings on one side from a biased media, and on the other side from a network shutting down 'serious' participants of the movement that undermine violence since 2017, divides protesters and observers' citizenship. Due to their original modest score on social networks, online 'Gilets Jaunes' are almost inevitably considered as "conspirationnistes".

8. Comparative Analysis with Other Social Movements

The global upsurge of social movements in the early 21st century is claimed to be greatly enhanced by the advent of social media platforms (Wang, 2019). A wave of political unrest across the globe such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Movement in the USA, UK, and South Africa, Euro Crisis protests, Los Indignados in Spain, Greek Revolts, and London riots has demonstrated the integrated partnership between social media and protests or activism. A comparative approach is taken in looking at the digital activism of the French Yellow Vests Movement with a historical context and

globally influencing political, economic, social events. Attention is paid to a broader spectrum of social movements and protest activities of the new millennium, the Occupy Wall Street Movement in the USA, and solidarity direct-action protest in front of New York Stock Exchange of South African investors, Occupy JSE after Wall Street Occupy, UKUncut Movement in the United Kingdom, and the Save The Arctic Campaign, popular demonstrations targeting financial institutions and corporations as the main pillars and catalyst for social and economic hardship involving social media tools. Particularly, the comparison between these movements examines the strategies, tools, and mechanisms employed in using social media, the goals, the kind of protests, protests and languages, context; pre-existing political, economic, or social events, post-protests generated protests, and outcomes and consequences. The similarities and differences between them would then present the comprehensive understanding of how social media activism works under the pressure of certain circumstances. Parallels can be drawn in using social media platforms in resistance to political oppression such as the Arab Spring in 2011 (William Koen, 2014). However, the unique and chaotic characteristics of the French Movement and the political, cultural, and historical specificity of France, in general, has proven that the pattern or form of activism does not always result in comparable results.

9. Conclusion and Future Directions

The French Yellow Vests demonstrated the potential of a social movement to change its tactics. This is a sign that, in an evolving storm, it is important for social movements to adapt constantly. This shake-up also showed the power of communication, the capacity of a movement to reinvent its form. Now, given that demonstrations have faded and that Friday gatherings have been mostly restricted, it will be interesting to examine how the movement has radicalized and pursued its battles off-line. It could be revealing to inquire how the movement has impacted political and social policy when affordances sacrificed had a cost. Ultimately, both directly and with echo chambers, the capacity of this movement to convey its message through social media will be examined and quantified (Van Den Bergh, 2016).

At the point of her birth, the turbulence and origin of the movement is paramount. The strategies that are put in place in the aftermath will be mentioned subsequently, as well as the opposition complaints about Yellow Vests. To take back the online

discourse, an analysis should aim to delineate the metrics surrounding the movement's peak and its "loss" because communication seems to have been a key issue. Major issues arising as a result will concern the extent to which online dynamics affect or exert a different trajectory than street demonstrations. French culture argues that "street" is a privileged place of protest. Has digital platforms extended the debate though it has lost a lot of offline support? There are still pertinent concerns about the gap between the digital and analog realms, stratification of users, and the algorithmic distortions of opinions.

Interviews are so far a good source of qualitative data; it will be an integral part of this work. But this survey would benefit, of course, by interviews specifically conducted for the topic. They will attempt briefly to synthesize what has been raised. "Gilets Jaunes" were born in May 2018, but it was only in the fall of the storm that they broke out. At origin, financial dissatisfaction. Many relate to social media to get together and discuss; see the shape of protests elsewhere and build communication networks. A questionable Facebook "event" by a woman having nothing to do with demonstrations brought 300,000 "dislikes" and views outraged. A survey to uncover social and discursive features of its discourse.

One point to emphasize first is that desocialification affects the relation to violence a movement may entertain. An effectively mobilized nation is a well-knit nation, since the cores of the movement do not accept such disruptive actions and value better communication rather than confrontation. Violent fights and destruction have mostly been denounced by the main group whilst other factions more extremist have supported them. On the contrary, social platforms provide leverage for manipulation, as many issues are put on the table, calls are passed, and echo chambers rebuild the representation of the movement itself. This issue has been emphasized by its opponents—for the right, Marine Le Pen sympathizes with the cause but not with the way it is carried out; in a rather polemical address at the Assembly, Nathalie Loisé hardened it even more by underlining, in a tough, government-like speech, all the misdeeds of the demonstrations and the rout of the movement. It is suggested that "France Insoumise" explicitly praises the resurgence of the struggle but condemns concomitantly each of the party's actions, by playing the violence card.

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