Critical Review of Ethan Zuckerman's Perspective on social media and Civic Movements: A Case Study of Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper is based on a critical review of Ethan Zuckerman's two-dimensional model of civic engagement, described as "Thin vs Thick Participation" and "Voice vs. Instrumental Action," by using the concept of social movements in the global south, primarily Pakistan. While slacktivism may popularize digital activism, this study contends that even low-effort online actions can play a significant role in transformation through the setting of public discourse and building support, which creates pressure on institutions. This paper uses three case studies, the Lawyers' Movement (2007–2009), the Justice for Zainab campaign (2018), and the Students' Solidarity March (2018–present), to show how national political structures and digital platforms mediate various combinations of thick/thin and voice/instrumental strategies. In order to more accurately assess the potential and constraints of social movements in postcolonial contexts, the study recommends expanding Zuckerman's model by including a third axis, historical power dynamics, and global hegemonies. This enhanced framework provides a more nuanced understanding of civic engagement in developing nations where online protest operates within structural constraints.

***Keywords**: Social Media Activism, Civic Movements, Case Study, Ethan Zuckerman, Digital Protest, and Civic Engagement.*

1.   Introduction

Social media plays a crucial role in our everyday lives, impacting everything from our communication and recreation patterns to cultural trends, global political debates, economic concerns, and social movements. The media is acknowledged by politicians, scholars, artists, and professionals in a variety of fields as a powerful and useful instrument for explaining social movements and political shifts in society (Zuckerman, 2016). Political sociologists have recognized the importance of past developments in communication technology. Although there has been a rich debate on digital activism within the developed countries, the evolving role of social media in third-world countries has not been adequately captured in the literature review. The paper will attempt to fill that gap by evaluating how social media affects modern movements and proposing a revision of theoretical models, which is the application of the dual-axis model of civic participation and outcomes by Zuckerman, which compares the Thin and Thick Engagements to the Voice and Instrumental Effects, to add more understanding to the successes and failures of movements in the global south (Hammad, 2022).

As Anderson (2006) emphasizes, the press played a key role in spreading nationalist causes, and newspapers played a central role in the 19th century in spreading social movements just as radio and television did in the 20th century and do in the present (Tilly, 2004). Not only did these technologies allow controversial politics, but they also affected the nature of social movements. In the modern online space, social media networking has become a transformative tool of activism. A 2021 study by Cervi and Marin-Llado indicates that the application of social media with regard to politics has been on the rise in the last ten years. Social media such as TikTok, which feature entertaining videos, are starting to become platforms to discuss politics and activism. Political narratives rely on viral content and digital stories to appeal to emotions, simplify complicated problems, and make one feel part of a community. Viral content may assist social movements and give them a temporary boost, but it is also associated with the risk of misinformation distribution (Jenkins et al., 2020).

Society is entering a new era characterized by citizens who are more knowledgeable and actively involved in political life. This shift is marked by a growing demand for transparency, participation, and genuine democratic engagement. In this context, civil society, especially protest movements, is expected to adopt innovative digital tools to support and accelerate this democratic transition. If the history is analysed in depth, it can be seen how the media has long played an important role in mobilizing civil society. The society is moving into a new era where people are more informed and are participating actively in political life (Zuckerman & Gessen, 2019).

This change is characterized by increased calls for transparency, participation, and real democratic practice. Since in this regard, the civil society, particularly the protest movements, is likely to embrace creative digital technologies to facilitate and speed up this democratic shift, it would be explored that the media have long been influential in terms of mobilizing the civil society (Gazia et al., 2024). The Arab Spring was a movement of revolutions in the Middle East, in such countries as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and also in about 17 countries that defied authoritarian regimes in a move to bring power back to the people. This was the Arab Spring, which was a revolution of uprisings in the Middle East, including Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, among many others, which amounted to approximately 17 states that revolted against the authoritarian regimes in an attempt to bring the people back to power. The Arab Spring did not start on social media; however, social media played a role in counterrevolution (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013).

The other historical case, which is the struggle for independence of Indo-Pakistan, used the print media to reach the masses, albeit gradually, through the leaders. Comparing this, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine proved to be a faster mobilization process, which revealed how the changing communication tools could speed up the democratic momentum (Karatnycky & Ackerman, 2005). The modern technological world has turned into a strong and fast-growing catalyst, and social media enables people all over the world to express their views. In the absence of social media, contemporary movements would not have met their intended results as amicably and fast. This paper analyses the application of the Two-Dimensional Model of civic

engagement of Ethan Zuckerman, Thin vs. Thick and Voice vs. instrumental, to social movements in Pakistan.

2.   Research Question

RQ1: How do changes of digital activism in a postcolonial, developing place better fit Zuckerman's idea, and what needs to be changed in the model to make it more global?

3.   Method

This paper uses a qualitative, interpretive approach by critically reviewing Zuckerman's framework and conducting comparative case studies of three significant Pakistani movements: the Lawyers' Movement (2007–2009), the #JusticeForZainab campaign (2018), and the Students' Solidarity March (2018–present). These cases are examined through Zuckerman's "Thin/Thick" and "Voice/Instrumental" axes to evaluate the model's explanatory power and its limitations in the Global South.

3.1   Data Sources

The sources of secondary data in this research project involve articles published in major newspapers like DAWN, Gulf News, and BBC as sources of comprehensive coverage of the three case studies. These articles are important sources of information on the campaign of Justice for Zainab and the Solidarity March of the Students that were documented in real-time regarding the events, societal responses, and media framing of these phenomena.

·   Justice For Zainab (2018): The articles by DAWN and Gulf News were considered to trace the public outrage, media coverage, and government reaction to the tragic event of Zainab Ansari's rape and murder. The social media-led movement called the Justice for Zainab campaign resulted in widespread protests and demands to take action. DAWN News (2018) and Gulf News (2018) coverage were useful sources of information regarding the way people organized online using hashtags, and also the offline protests that happened simultaneously. These sources contributed to emphasizing the

transition between online communication (the popularity of the hashtag) and street demonstrations and activism.

· Solidarity March by students (2018–present): The articles of the Students' Solidarity March in DAWN were utilized to analyse the development and mobilization of student movements in Pakistan. Such movements required the restoration of student unions and improved educational reforms. This data was supplemented by research articles in scholarly resources, which gave background information about the political situation under which the student activism took shape in Pakistan. The nationwide participation and the expectations of educational reforms were documented in coverage in DAWN (2019).

· Lawyers Movement (2007-2009): In the case of the Lawyers Movement, academic works, including Ahmed and Stephan (2010) and Phelps (2009) articles, offered a deeper discussion of the goals, leadership, and tactics of resistance used by the movement. Research papers talked about lawyers applying offline (protests, sit-ins) and online (blogs, YouTube) modes to pressure the judiciary to be independent and reinstate Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. These academic sources and newspaper articles, put together, made a wholesome picture of the Lawyers' Movement and how the traditional media and the new digital tools contributed to the success of the Lawyers' Movement.

4. Data Analysis

The newspaper articles in the DAWN, the Gulf News and the BBC newspaper were examined using the thematic analysis to identify the key patterns and themes in its coverage of these movements. It focused on how the movements were framed by media and the levels of participation by the populace and the efficacy of online movements compared to offline demonstrations. In the Lawyers Movement case, academic research was used to contextualize how the movement was being framed in the media during the censorship in the bigger political context of Pakistan. This study contributed to the mapping of the movement onto the Thin/Thick and Voice/Instrumental framework proposed by Zuckerman, which enabled a more in-depth insight into how both

online and offline strategies were applied by political actors to reach their objectives.

The analysis integrated the secondary information of the newspaper articles with the theoretical framework which gave a strong idea of the meeting points of media, digital activism and social movements. The case studies of Justice for Zainab and Students Solidarity March were considered in terms of how digital activism could support offline protests and the Lawyers Movement was considered as an example of thick-instrumental activism, with the combination of grassroots organization and strategic use of the media.

4.1   Thick & Thin, Voice and Instrumental Scale

Ethan Zuckerman explores online civic engagement using a two-dimensional scale in his article "New Media and New Civic." The first dimension distinguishes between "thin" and "thick" participation. According to Zuckerman, thin participation involves low levels of time and effort, including actions like updating a Facebook profile picture or signing an online petition. The minimal engagement he observes that can be involved in thin engagement is merely to sign a petition or support a campaign fund, which is what organizers demand of the masses.

Conversely, thick participation requires more time, critical thinking and administrative abilities to comprehend what is needed and what must be done. Zuckerman goes further to explain that to have a thick engagement, the campaigners expect the people to involve themselves by generating innovative ideas, strategic thinking, media declarations, research, contemplation or helping to solve the problems. In this regard, campaigners have a precise objective but would want the people to give their input to influence the course of their activities. The second axis is that of Voice and Instrumental action, which is designed to impact particular policies and foster more global cultural shifts witnessed in the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States (Zuckerman, 2014).
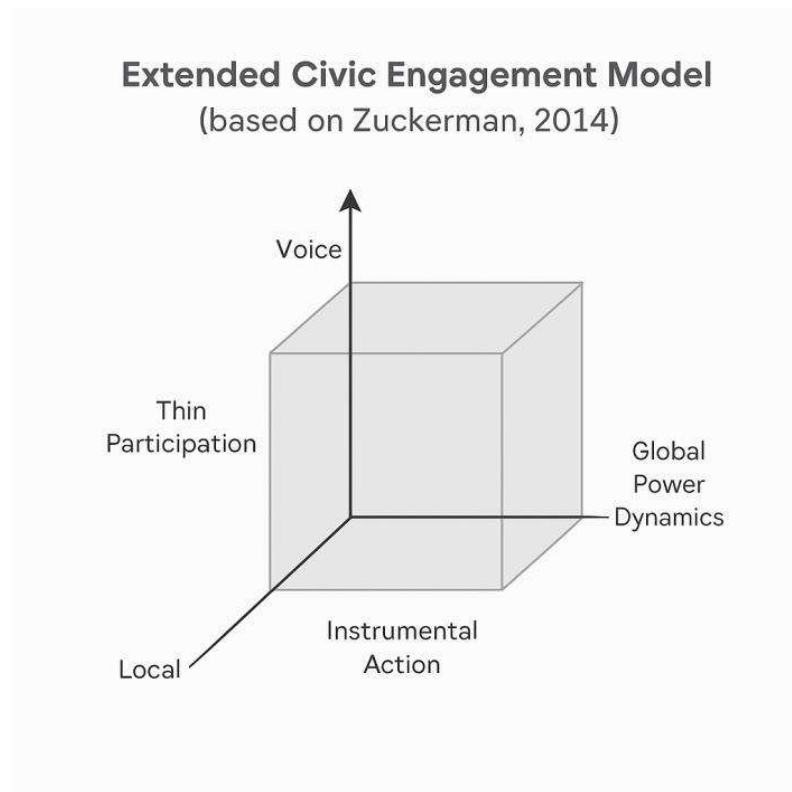
Figure 3.1 Thick and Thin Style

4.2 Raising Awareness via Slacktivism and Minimal Voice-Based Engagement

Contemporary media and social media have reorganized the traditional strategy of violent civic action into a system of non-violent opposition, thus promoting social transformation through non-violent methods. Digital activism is the best place where different causes can be successfully promoted. Social media has helped many movements to reach a wider audience especially the ones who do not want to attend to street activism. Digital activism involves the use of internet communication devices, including emails, blogs, and social networking platforms, to ensure greater awareness and promote socio-economic and political change within and outside the country. Yet there is a type of online activism called Slacktivism that has been criticized as weakening real world activism. It can easily form a misconception that one is achieving something when in reality, there is no tangible activity happening, which leads to a negligible political and social effect (Evgeny & Zuckerman, 2014). It is opposed because in spite of the slow

results, digital activism is an important activity that helps to inform the population by using blogs, e-mails, social media communication, and help to communicate the importance of different issues and raise the consciousness of the masses.

In one instance, the ALS Association introduced the IceBucketChallenge online in order to create awareness about the Lou Gehrig disease which is a terminal illness. In 2014, it was also participated by numerous individuals dumping ice water on themselves and uploading the videos into the social media followed by nominating their friends to either repeat it or donate to help fund ALS research. ALS has already collected over $15.6 million fund. The contestants of the challenge were normal individuals, politicians, celebrities and even top CEOs, including the founder and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg who was nominated in this contest and accepted. CEO and chairman of Microsoft, for this challenge and he accepted.

In the same year (2024), when violence in Gaza intensified, and humanitarian issues were on the agenda, the global focus shifted towards the area, as the campaign SaveGaza and Free Palestine began to gain momentum in the Internet. The digital platforms have been instrumental in media propaganda of the Palestinian cause. Activists resort to social media and blogging to receive awareness and share first-hand experiences, as well as elicit support of Palestinian rights. Real time documentation and exposure of the abuses has been made possible through the digital media and has resulted in the creation of a new level of accountability of the perpetrators, and helped in increasing awareness in the world. This online activism growth was crucial in awareness and mobilization of people around the world. This is an outburst of social movements in TikTok as young Palestinians shared short videos of their daily life in the occupied territory, acts of violence by settlers or soldiers, and curses and protests. The videos were very instrumental in getting the attention of a younger international audience through some innovative and effective means of attracting attention to the Palestinian struggle. (Abbas et al. 2022).

Though its critics discount it as an empty 'slacktivism,' The movement triggered large scale protests in major cities like London, New York, Istanbul,

and Karachi, where millions of people took to the streets. Influencers, scholars, and medical professionals, among other figures of influence, used their online platforms to give increased attention to voices in Gaza and demand the media and political forces to act on the same. Even though the geopolitical complexities of the situation are still very high, the need of ceasefire, economic boycotts, and diplomacy demanded by the world has been only increased. This shows how online campaigns can evolve into major types of civic activity. They demonstrate that activism through the internet can usually be significant in terms of creating awareness, shaping out discourse, and creating a social drive. Although the change can be slow, the power of the collective digital voice can be used as a platform of real change.

A good example is the Egyptian Revolution, which was instigated by the social media, and this led to a considerable turnout of civic interest. This movement enabled people to know how the police acted and treated the citizens in Cairo, Egypt, through the different online platforms. Although social media played a major role in planning the protests in both Tunisia and Egypt, the resolutions were very different. In Egypt, the protests were much bloodier and intricate. The Egyptian protests as described by Tufekci (2014) in her article in Policy and Internet was faced with significant difficulties and ended up killing approximately 800 individuals in the process of the protests. As a result, the Internet played a vital role in motivating people into protesting, transforming into a large group of 500,000 members, as an organization, which exerted political pressure in achieving their objectives, known as Thick. This concerted effort eventually forced the long serving dictator Hosni Mubarak to step down and leave power in the hands of the military that promised to hold elections in line with what the Egyptian people wanted. It is interesting to note that this whole movement was done in the absence of any known traditional political leadership in the country.

4.3 Mass Media Participation and Social Movements in Pakistan: Zuckerman's Thin–Thick and Voice–Instrumental Framework

4.3.1 Media and Political Context in Pakistan

The incorporation of new technologies has also contributed a lot in the strengthening of the influence of traditional news and print media into a shift of the model of social communication waiting to one which is characterized as an instant access and consequently has affected the dynamics of political communication. In Pakistan, which is a developing nation, the emergence of the new media and communication technologies is still at the infant stage and this is happening against the background of a fight between democratic principles and the legacies of an authoritarian rule.

Regarding media and politics, the formal legislations of Pakistan purport to protect the freedom of speech; nevertheless, they also allow far-reaching prohibition. Article 19 of the Pakistani constitution provides freedom of speech and press, but with the exception of any reasonable restrictions connected with religion, national security, or the state of law (Usman & Mujaddid, 2023). These limitations are usually imposed by the government in practice. As an illustration, in 2007, the state of emergency was declared by the General Musharraf who suspended the entire television broadcasts in the country. Activists responded by choosing the Internet as the medium of dissent. In recent years, with an explosion in the size of online population in Pakistan, the government has acted on occasions of blocking social media platforms (including twitter and YouTube) when the protest is at a peak. In turn, Pakistani social movements often have to find their way in a media environment that is prone to censorship or even co-optation of traditional sources, which makes digital platforms indispensable when it comes to both visibility and organization (Usman, & Mujaddid, 2023).

Although Zuckerman model offers a useful framework in comprehending the nature of digital civic participation, this paper states that it needs to be adjusted to take note of the distinct socio-political realities of developing countries. The paper adds to this discussion by suggesting the addition of the third-dimension historical power relations and postcolonial

situation and thus rendering the model more globally applicable and analytical.

4.3.2   Case Study: The Lawyers' Movement (2007–2009)

The Lawyers Movement started in March 2007 after President Musharraf dismissed Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, sparking a countrywide campaign on the issues of judicial independence. Phelps (2009), reports that about 80,000 lawyers took the streets all over Pakistan with the express goal of restoring Chaudhry and restoring the rule of law. The demonstrations and motorcades were marked by immense participation as the people continued with intensive and active activities within two years. The government reacted by harsh repression, such as beatings and arrests, and a media blackout, especially by blocking independent television news reporting. Nevertheless, the protesters used online resources: attorneys and their followers posted videos on YouTube and shared the news via email and mobile phones (Usman, & Mujaddid, 2023).

The Lawyers' Movement, as described by Zuckerman, is characterized by a mixture between a high degree of engagement and a defined instrumental purpose. The leaders wanted real institutional change (the reinstatement of the court) as opposed to symbolic protest. At the same time, the movement created a strong popular support of democracy and rights. As an example, even casual movements like wearing black coats became a very important symbolic centre of interest. These grassroots organizing (thick) and strategic media usage to create awareness (voice) combination was ultimately successful: when the people started pressuring Musharraf to reinstate the judges, the judges were restored to office in July 2007 (an instrumental outcome) Phelps (2009). Finally, Lawyers Movement was a classic upside-down example of Zuckerman thick-instrumental quadrant, which was enhanced with various thin activities (e.g., blogging, SMS alerts) that reinforced its message (Phelps, 2009; Swarthmore College. (n.d.).

4.3.3   Case Study: #JusticeForZainab (2018)

In January 2018, the tragic rape and murder of seven-year-old Zainab Ansari in Kasur ignited widespread public outrage. According to Global Voices, by

January 11, approximately half a million social media users had engaged with the hashtag #JusticeForZainab (Jamal & Saleem, 2018). This digital initiative coincided with protests across the country, involving students, lawyers, and parents (Jamal, S., & Saleem, A., 2018). For instance, on the day of Zainab's funeral, rallies advocating for child protection and the apprehension of the perpetrator took place at Karachi's press club.

According to Dawn News, social media outrage over the police's alleged inaction has significantly increased across Pakistan (Ansari, Guramani, & Riaz, 2018). The BBC reports that since January 9, the hashtag #JusticeForZainab has been used more than 600,000 times on Twitter. Furthermore, within that same period, almost 30,000 public Instagram posts had related hashtags (Pierpoint, 2018).

According to Zuckerman's concept, low-effort, voice-oriented engagement was the main characteristic of the #JusticeForZainab movement. Retweets, changing one's profile photo, and candlelight vigils—all of which are frequently associated with "slacktivism"—were common ways for participants to show their support (Jamal, S., & Saleem, A., 2018). The primary goals of these acts were to increase public opinion and hold authority responsible. Hundreds of people took part in street marches demanding police reform, but there were also elements of more significant activity. The movement's goals were to challenge the social taboo around talking about sexual violence and to put pressure on the government to improve child protection legislation and punish the criminal. In this case, the voice-oriented component of Zuckerman's engagement spectrum predominates due to the substantial dependence on social media.

4.3.4 Case Study: Students' Solidarity March (2018–present)

Beginning in late 2018, Pakistani students started annual Solidarity Marches in support of substantial educational reforms and the restoration of student unions. This movement had spread throughout the country by 2019. Dawn claims that on a single day in November 2019, students, activists, and allies marched under the banner of Student Solidarity in almost fifty locations,

delivering a list of demands that included improvements to educational facilities and the reinstatement of student unions.

The Students' Solidarity March employed a hybrid approach; updates on Facebook and Twitter successfully disseminated information to large audiences, while its planning and organizing involved limited online interaction. The gathering on the ground has drawn thousands of kids. Restoring unions and reducing educational disparities were the movement's main objectives. Zuckerman's concept places the SSM in the middle, combining substantial preparation and mobilization with limited coordination, and striving for both the manifestation of a student identity (voice) and institutional reform (instrumental). Crucially, social media helped these marches spread widely throughout many cities, even if the main demands were for specific legislative reforms. (Gabol et al., 2019).

5.   Comparative Analysis

The three case examples highlight different aspects of Zuckerman's framework for participation. The main focus of the Lawyers' Movement was thick-instrumental activism, or active and goal-driven campaigning. The main goal of widespread, continuous street demonstrations was the reinstatement of the judges who had been removed. The campaign employed a variety of media strategies, including YouTube videos and petitions, especially when there was little television coverage (Usman & Mujaddid, 2023). However, the campaign's successes were primarily due to the strength of constant public protests.

As previously noted, the Pakistani lawyers' movement is a prime example of how grassroots, organized campaigns brought people together in the fight for constitutional rights (Mahmood & Yasmin, 2019). Conversely, contemporary movements often use social media to spread their messages faster, operate in a more decentralized manner, and draw global attention. Examining these two tactics demonstrates the remarkable impact that digital tools have had on modern activism. In contrast, the #JusticeForZainab movement took a quieter method (thin-voice strategy), combining quick, easy digital activities with small-scale protests to spark a national conversation

about children's rights. This demonstrates that even if significant changes to the legislation may not happen right away, a large number of people's combined efforts can generate public pressure and raise awareness of crucial concerns. The student unions coordinated large-scale demonstrations in several locations, marches, and internet campaigns. In addition to emphasizing the significance of youth empowerment, participants demanded substantive reform, particularly the reinstatement of student unions. Social media was crucial to the preparation and promotion of these movements in Pakistan.

During periods of censorship, such as in 2007, activists used all available media channels, making digital tactics a minimum necessary to express their concerns (Usman, & Mujaddid, 2023). Conversely, when social media was available, it amplified the collective voice, as demonstrated by #JusticeForZainab (Jamal, S. and Saleem, A. 2018). However, none of these movements depended exclusively on online engagement; robust, face-to-face mobilization remained essential for exerting pressure. In summary, the application of Zuckerman's model indicates that social movements in Pakistan often integrate various forms of engagement. The Lawyers' Movement utilized media to establish a robust grassroots campaign, while #JusticeForZainab leveraged media to convey a more subtle expression of solidarity, and the Students' March integrated both approaches. Each instance featured aspects of public expression and practical goals, albeit in varying degrees. Collectively, they demonstrate that even within a limited media-political environment, digital activism (subtle and expressive) and traditional protests (robust and goal-oriented) frequently work together to promote social causes. (Keegan et al., 2018).

6.   Conclusion

Through the lens of three significant Pakistani social movements, this paper examines Ethan Zuckerman's civic participation model. It was discovered that although the model does a good job of capturing different aspects of participation both online and offline, it is unable to adequately explain movements influenced by colonial legacies, authoritarian media restrictions, and uneven global power relations. To better represent the realities of activism

in the Global South, the article suggested extending the model in three dimensions. Future studies could compare movements in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in order to empirically evaluate this extended paradigm in additional postcolonial situations. The ways that digital tools continue to change the lines between "thin" and "thick" interaction in politically limited situations may also be the subject of future research.

7.   Suggestions and Proposals

Is there a necessity for an additional comprehensive model that takes into account the political and social behaviours of individuals in developing regions to assess and forecast the effectiveness of a movement? Alternatively, could Zuckerman's two-dimensional model be expanded into a three-dimensional framework, one that incorporates Thin versus Thick Engagement along one axis, Voice versus Instrumental outcomes on a second, and the evolving power dynamics between dominant regimes and opposing global forces over time on a third, to better analyse the varying outcomes of global independence movements? For instance, this could include contemporary global political challenges such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict influenced by American capitalism, the Indian occupation of Kashmir in the context of British imperialism and American capitalist interests, the Irish struggle, or the resistance of Native Americans against European colonialism, as well as the efforts of industrial Europe to undermine the Muslim dominance of the Ottoman Empire from the mid-19th century.

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