

**Digital Activism:  
Efficacies and Burdens of Social Media for Civic Activism**

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**Abstract**

This article explores digital activism among Lebanese social movement organizations (SMOs) using a social movements theoretical framework. . It highlights the commonly used digital and social media tools for activism, and analyzes their perceived benefits and disadvantages. The study used a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative interviews, focus group, and participant observation methods. It found that digital activism is on the rise, and that social media platforms offer many perceived benefits for activism work, but also create significant obstacles in both the digital and offline realms. As such, this article offers recommendations, based on best practices, to bolster the efficacy of digital activism in Lebanon.

**Introduction**

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, academics debated the role digital and social media played in these uprisings. Much of the discussions centered on Egypt and Tunisia, where the most successful revolts took place. Other Arab countries like Lebanon, where the outcomes varied between repeated failures and incremental successes, remained overlooked, despite offering a rich experience and comprising a vibrant civil society. Accordingly, this study explores digital activism in Lebanon, particularly because of its unique socio-political context, its avant-garde position in the region, and its growing pulse of activism. The study investigates how local activists utilize digital and social media. It explores the perceived benefits and burdens of such platforms—a matter not greatly addressed in the literature (Garrett, 2006)—and the broader implications for digital activism in society.

In this study, *digital activism* refers to the use of digital technologies to facilitate change in the political and social realms (Joyce, 2010). These tools include the Internet in its various applications, mobile phones, and other digital devices. The term *Social Movement Organization* (SMO) encompasses non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and activists. Social movements are shared feelings or activities that aim towards changing social systems or social relations (Ash Garner and Zald, 1987).

**Literature Review**

Despite attracting many scholars recently, research on digital activism in the Arab world remains rare, especially country-specific and empirically driven research. This section starts with a theoretical framework for the study and then discusses the three factors of this framework in the Lebanese context.

***Digital Media and Social Movement Theory.*** This study uses a social movements theory analytical lens. Various social sciences disciplines have studied the effects of new media technologies on social movements, offering a wide range of disconnected scholarship on the matter. Garrett (2006) advanced a theoretical framework that built on the commonly used McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) framework in an attempt to align the diverse studies and methods into a more coherent body of literature. This study adopts the same framework that

explains social movements through “three interrelated factors: mobilizing structures, opportunity structures and framing processes” (Garrett, 2006, p. 203). Mobilizing structures entail the formal and informal organizations and relationships and familiar forms of protest that enable citizens to organize themselves into social movements. Opportunity structures are the political structures and opportunities that facilitate or constrain a movement’s action. Finally, framing processes refer to the collective efforts and processes engaged in interpreting events, advancing perspective, constructing realities, unifying visions and perspectives, and contesting opposing discourses. The rest of this section is organized according to these three factors.

***Framing Opportunities: Lebanon’s Diverse Media Landscape and Fractured Public Sphere.***

Freedom of speech and assembly, and the right to dissent, have long been suppressed in most Arab countries. Freedom House (2011) considers all but three countries in the region ‘Not Free.’ Kuwait, Lebanon, and Morocco are considered ‘Partly Free.’ The controversial source notwithstanding, it is hard to deny that most Arab governments are closed, authoritarian, and oppressive, albeit to varying degrees (Barakat, 1993).

In comparison, Lebanon’s curious political system has historically offered its population greater civil liberties. These freedoms nevertheless remain checked by rampant political and economic corruption stemming from rigid nepotistic alliances backed by sectarian institutions and clerics (Khashan, 2011; Makdisi et al., 2010). According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Lebanon ranks 134 out of 183 countries (Transparency International, 2010).

Censorship in Lebanon is nowhere near as stringent as in its regional counterparts, although journalists and bloggers self-censor for personal safety (Alabaster, 2011). Lebanon has a long tradition of press freedom, though nearly all media have ties to political groups (Al-Najjar, 2011), creating limited opportunities for advancing independent perspectives or contesting opposing discourses without appearing as a partisan.

Moreover, while the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, religious discrimination remains rampant. Sectarian affiliation regulates day-to-day affairs and major life decisions (Haddad, 2002; Ofeish, 1999). Furthermore, each sect has its own laws for dealing with family and personal-status matters (Shehadeh, 1998). In the absence of strong secular forces in the country, this sectarian environment results in a fractured public sphere, divided essentially into smaller sectarian public spheres (Dawahare, 2000) that rarely interact despite overlapping interests.

This fractured public sphere and its corresponding partisan media ecosystem impose on the country’s citizens a sectarian lens for interpreting any national or local issue, potentially limiting and distorting framing opportunities for activists who champion even the most non-partisan public causes.

***Lebanon’s Mobilizing Structures: Civil Society and its Causes.*** Over the past two decades, the Arab world has witnessed unprecedented population growth accompanied by a region-wide ‘youth bulge.’ By 2003, youth under the age of 24 made up 50% to 65% of the population, a rate that continues to expand (Fuller, 2003). In Lebanon, youth aged 15-24 comprised 19.5% of the population in 2007 (Central, 2007).

Accompanying this growth is an expanding civil society. In 2005, the official number of NGOs in Lebanon surpassed 3,500 (UNDP, 2009). This large number of organizations for a population of four million parallels the large number of issues facing youth.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese rallied in favor of or in opposition to the government. Also common are demonstrations and rallies to champion civil rights and liberties of citizens or others living or working in Lebanon. Local SMOs, which operate openly and legally, spearhead many of these protests that vary from women's rights to advocating for cheaper Internet access.

While Lebanese women enjoy many of the same rights as men, they experience social and legal discrimination. Paramount among these are discriminatory laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody (Shehadeh, 1998). Lebanese women married to non-citizens cannot transfer citizenship to their children and do not receive equal social-security provisions (Farhood, 2009). Women are severely underrepresented in political office and in the news industry (IWMF, 2011). Furthermore, men convicted of honor crimes against women usually receive lenient sentences, if any adjudication takes place at all (Freedom House, 2011).

Refugees, minorities, and migrant workers have few rights under Lebanese law. While some progress has been made to combat arbitrary detention, inhumane treatment, and torture of refugees and illegal immigrants, officials often don't enforce regulations pertaining to these matters (Freedom House, 2011). The nearly 350,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon are denied citizenship and civil rights and face arduous restrictions on working, building homes, and purchasing property (Hanafi and Tiltz, 2008). Migrant workers, particularly female domestic workers, often face exploitation, and physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Human Rights Watch (2008) revealed more than one migrant domestic worker dies each week in Lebanon. Most of them die either by suicide or by falling from buildings while attempting to escape from their employers.

While most SMOs operate openly and legally, the case is different for Lebanese groups that advocate LGBTQ rights, as homosexuality remains illegal. However, such SMOs are publicized and relatively outspoken, especially in Beirut, and homosexuals enjoy a certain degree of freedom unthinkable in other Arab countries (Hardy, 2010).

Moreover, Lebanon's brittle infrastructure and struggling economy attract sporadic popular protests. The government still rations both water and electricity, and the high cost and low speed of telecommunications and Internet services garner heavy criticism (Anderson, 2011). Public and private sector employees went on industry-specific strikes several times over the past few years, and general labor strikes took place to condemn the high cost of living, inflation, low minimum wage, and lack of jobs. Other areas of concern have a weaker sense of urgency, such as environmental protection and the preservation of cultural hallmarks, but they continue to witness growing support.

Despite major defects in government policies and legislation, Lebanon offers a hospitable environment for activism. The delicate political balance between the various religious sects paradoxically sustains sanctuaries and spaces for freedom, and the country's notable history of a vibrant civil society provides a strong tradition for future activism. The combination of comparatively wide margins of freedom, numerous grievances, a significant number of activist organizations, and a generation of disaffected youth adept at utilizing digital and social media hints at the makings of a robust civil society.

***Lebanon's Opportunity Structures: The (Dis)Enabling Digital and Legal Environments.***

The Arab world comprises 40-60 million Internet users, with estimates reaching 100 million users by 2015 (Arab, 2009). However, studies show these Internet users are more interested in entertainment and networking rather than political activism. Melki (2010) found only 5% of

youth in Lebanon, Jordan, and the UAE used social media for political activism, while 84% used them for fun and to connect with friends (p. 21). Nevertheless, the use of digital media to facilitate the uprisings across the Arab world is part of a widespread increase in digital activism (Jansen, 2010; Raynes-Goldie and Walker, 2008).

Estimates place the number of Internet users in Lebanon at one million, about 30%-35% of the population (Index Mundi, 2009). This puts Lebanon above the average Arab penetration rate of 24.9% (International, 2010). This relatively high penetration rate is somewhat compromised by high cost, sub-par speed, and reliability of Internet services. For instance, as of 2009, less than 5.3% of the population had broadband connections (International, 2010). Out of 174 countries, Lebanon ranks 163 in download speed, and second to last in upload speed (Net Index, 2011), while Internet services overall remain expensive and confined to certain areas (Sakr, 2011). Nevertheless, 98% of Lebanese online use social media (Mourtada and Salem, 2011), and a government initiative in November 2011 brought 3G network capabilities to urban users, and slightly lowered the cost of DSL; a timid effort to catch up with many Arab countries that offer better and cheaper internet access.

Unlike most Arab countries, however, Lebanon has an Internet freedom rating of 20/20, with no evidence of website filtering or blocking (Mourtada and Salem, 2011). Likewise, 'academic freedom is firmly established and rights to freedom of association and assembly are generally unrestricted' (Freedom House, 2011, para. 18). Nonetheless, Lebanon's media laws prohibit insulting the president (Freedom House, 2011), and 'authorities have incarcerated individuals who have expressed opinions deemed offensive to government authorities' (Ghannam, 2011: 9). Such cases remain rare, however, and create news and public protests that almost always result in a swift release.

Therefore, Lebanon offers a requisite free environment and an active, albeit fractured, online public sphere. Countered by technological impediments and some legal restraints, it is an environment that presents its own set of inquiries for Lebanese digital activism. As such, this study asks the following question: What are the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using social media for activism?

### **Methodology**

This study used a combination of focus groups, observational methods, and in-depth interviews with key members of Lebanese SMOs. This approach allowed for rich data that provides insight into under-explored topics and unique social situations (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Using purposive sampling, the researchers conducted one-on-one in-depth elite interviews with 32 individuals from 23 SMOs (Appendix A). Based on a review of all civil society causes being actively pursued today, the included SMOs encompassed a sufficiently representative sample of civil causes under focus in Lebanon. Interviews took place at organizations' head offices, lasted one hour, and were digitally recorded, and names of participants remained confidential.

The researchers also conducted a two-hour focus group, which included seven SMOs, and observed four public events that SMOs advertised through social media. This observation approach aimed to explore activists' use of digital tools to plan and organize events. Data collection spanned one year, ending in 2012.

The interview instrument comprised 15 guiding questions to highlight the social media tools SMOs used, and the benefits and disadvantages accompanying their use. The focus group questions expanded on the major issues revealed by the interviews to obtain concrete cases. After

transcription and data cleaning, the researchers reviewed the data through inductive analysis to ‘identify salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief’ (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 154).

Researchers faced some limitations, including time constraints and the sensitive nature of some organizations’ causes. While the categories of causes included represent the major issues under focus in Lebanon, the participants do not represent all Lebanese SMOs.

## Results

Digital activism in Lebanon remains in a developmental stage but continues to spread rapidly. The degree of online engagement varies from one SMO to another, depending on the goals of each organization, the resources available to it, and the perceived benefits and disadvantages associated with the use of digital tools.

**Commonly used tools.** The most commonly used digital platforms by SMOs are official websites and Facebook groups (Table 1). The majority of participants (16 organizations) also use Twitter to varying degrees. Most SMOs also use YouTube to share pre-existing video content relating to their causes, and several have their own YouTube channels. For example, IndyACT—a collective of environmental and cultural activists—has a YouTube channel that displays videos about climate change, traffic pollution, racial discrimination, and footage of protests and illegal practices.

**Table 1**

Social Media tool	Facebook	Website	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	Flickr	Other
n (%) of Organizations (n= 23)	22 (96%)	21 (91%)	16 (70%)	13 (57%)	12 (52%)	5 (22%)	7 (30%)

*Table 1: Number of organizations’ that use various digital and social media platforms*

Blogging falls behind other social media. However, most participants consider blogging to be a critical and underutilized tool for activism, and expressed plans to use it in the future. Nevertheless, 11 out of the 23 organizations have at least one blog. A handful of organizations have multiple blogs, each dedicated to specific causes. In addition, a few tech-savvy organizations use blogging platforms, such as WordPress, to manage their websites, which has allowed for greater efficiency, creative control, and cost effectiveness in their work. Flickr and other photo-sharing applications are not widely used, but some plan to add them to their digital repertoire. Others say such applications are unnecessary because of the photo-sharing capabilities of other social media, such as Facebook. Founder of Save Beirut Heritage—an initiative to protect historical buildings—says rather than assign a few individuals to upload images to Flickr, all 8,600 of their Facebook followers post images of structures at risk of demolition, posting comments in the same space. Other digital and social media tools SMOs use include Grou.PS, LinkedIn, Skype, StumbleUpon, Storify, Slideshare, and Sribd. While only six organizations use one or more of these applications, most recognize their availability and usefulness. However, most SMOs hesitate to incorporate more tools because they require additional time and personnel (see RQ2). Furthermore, beyond smartphone versions of the widely used social media tools, participants do not use mobile phone applications extensively. Using mass SMS tends to be expensive. In addition, up until November 2011, when the government reduced Internet cost and introduced 3G, mobile Internet had been very slow and expensive. In sum, while Lebanese

SMOs extensively use popular social media tools, most do not use the less known platforms—especially mobile apps.

*Perceived benefits and disadvantages of social media.* When investigating the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using digital media for activism, the study found considerable overlap across SMOs. Many perceptions stem from the basic characteristics of new media platforms (Flanagin and Metzger, 2008; Lai and Turban, 2008; Langlois et al., 2009; Mansell, 2002). Others pertain to Lebanon's political and cultural milieu.

The major benefits of social and digital media for Lebanese SMOs pertain to publicity and communication, organization and collaboration, fundraising and accountability, accessing information, and circumventing censorship.

*Achieving instant visibility inexpensively.* Lebanese SMOs perceive rapid exposure and visibility, both in mainstream and digital media, as the greatest advantage social media can offer. Nascent groups particularly see these tools as valuable, especially when targeting young activists. Digital platforms allow activists to reach broader audiences inexpensively, particularly youth because they rely less on mainstream media. Although television remains the main source for news, few Lebanese youth regularly read newspapers or listen to radio, and the majority relies on online sources (Melki, 2010).

SMOs recognize these trends. An activist with refugee-rights group Frontiers-Ruwad insists, Lebanese youth 'don't read newspapers and are turning more to online sources.' Environmental group Green Line Association confirms, 'exposure via social media lets us reach younger audiences we were unable to reach before. Twenty years ago we were reaching mostly environmental experts... Now we have a larger pool of potential followers.'

Exposure is even more critical for nascent organizations. The founder of Migrant Workers Task Force explains, 'We are new and small and don't have the funds to publicize ourselves, but we were able to achieve instant visibility via social media.' Their supporters even include international activists, something unimaginable without social media.

Additionally, digital platforms allow activists to reach audiences in under-represented and inaccessible areas. Historically, activism centered on Beirut, and SMOs had difficulty accessing rural areas. Today, explains the founder of Migrant Workers Task Force, 'you can reach millions who are otherwise inaccessible, especially those living outside of Beirut. Many from these areas initiate contact themselves after seeing us online.'

Moreover, SMOs realize social media often help them attract mainstream media coverage, locally and internationally. For example, women's rights activists made significant progress in 2011 with the help of social media. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Women's Day, activists organized multiple events, including two awareness marches. Nasawiya, one of the organizing SMOs, advertised the events almost exclusively online, via Facebook, websites, blogs, and online forums. While the turnout was not staggering, both events received substantial local and international news coverage. Beyond these events, women's rights groups rely heavily on digital tools to promote public events and increase community dialogue. The cumulative effect, in combination with strategic litigation and advocacy, led to significant successes, for example the implementation of tougher sentences for honor crimes in 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2011) and the passing of a law on domestic violence in April 2014 (Anderson, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Similarly, Animals Lebanon campaigned in 2010 to shut down a circus accused of animal abuse. The group launched the campaign through Facebook, and their email list and website. It succeeded in shutting down the circus for one month. More importantly, the publicity surrounding the campaign garnered attention from local and international media and broad support from animal advocacy groups, leading to the first animals' rights legislation in Lebanon. In 2011, Animals Lebanon presented the draft law to the Lebanese Minister of Agriculture (Al-Quntar, 2011) and began campaigning, primarily via social media, to collect 25,000 signatures to support the bill in parliament. In about two months, the petition collected 12,600 signatures, over half of which were collected online.

Furthermore, co-founder of Social Media Exchange Beirut (SMEX) attributes the success of the 2010 efforts to halt a parliamentary vote on an e-transaction law to the tactical use of blogs. The law in question aimed at regulating online transactions, but many perceived that its broad scope and vague wording threatened online freedom of expression and violated Internet privacy (Malo, 2010). Beyond publicizing the issue on SMEX's website, the group's members, along with other SMOs, each blogged about it in detail. The multiple blogs attracted a larger audience and promoted the issue in various discussion forums and on social media. The online publicity then drew international media attention, subsequently attracting the local media, who had initially ignored the issue. Within 24 hours, SMEX and other groups began receiving inquiries from politicians asking why the law should not pass. Ultimately, the vote was delayed.

*Communicating with ease, breadth, and versatility.* Lebanese SMOs perceive the ease, breadth, and versatility of communication as important benefits of digital media, allowing them to share information in ways unthinkable before and to use the same information for multiple purposes.

This applies even to the most primitive use of online media. The founder of Palestinian Civil Rights Campaign Lebanon admits his group has not used digital platforms effectively, as its online presence only constitutes a website. Nonetheless, he says that 'the ease of instant and elaborate communication as a tool for advocacy is incalculable, from sharing photos and PDF documents and academic studies, to chatting and spreading the word.' These general attributes of the medium offer significant advantages in Lebanon, since addressing the rights of Palestinian refugees remains largely absent from mainstream media (Kawzally, 2009).

Moreover, digital media's versatility permits various uses of information beyond mere dissemination. It allows activists to bolster the credibility of their communication and hold officials and journalists accountable. Ontonet, a group promoting faster and affordable Internet, considers this advantage paramount. 'When we meet with politicians, we record everything and Tweet it live. It provides a record they cannot deny and gives us more credibility while simultaneously sharing information,' which is also archived for future use. A Syrian anti-government activist based in Lebanon reiterates this advantage. 'Most reporters reach us through Twitter today. We conduct entire interviews through that platform, and people can see the questions and answers live.' This virtual exchange has largely replaced traditional reporting on Syria since the government denies most foreign correspondents entry. It simultaneously offers a de-facto watchdog mechanism that promotes accurate journalism, particularly in Syria's case, as most media have become active propagandists, for or against the government (Dagher, 2012).

Furthermore, social media and blogs offer a richer dialogue, where activists can act as mediators between the public and Lebanese officials. Ontonet activists assert, 'we are not only asking our questions; we are asking everyone else's questions too.' Kahn and Kellner (2004) stress, 'blogs make the idea of a dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue and commentary central and emphasize the interpretation and dissemination of alternative information to a heightened

degree' (p. 91). SMOs emphasize this perception of blogging as more dynamic and interactive than traditional websites. KAFAs media officer explains, 'it's the interaction and feedback that matters, and blogging gives you a space to explain and interact more than just a static website.'

*Internal organization, external collaboration, and stronger relationships.* SMOs depend on social media to organize events internally, build coalitions, collaborate on initiatives, and strengthen relationships with supporters. Many SMOs depend on digital tools to organize day-to-day operations. Flip the Switch, a group advocating faster and affordable Internet, has two Facebook pages, 'a private page for organizing meetings and coordinating internally, and a public page where people can show support.'

Some SMOs emphasize the importance of social media tools in strengthening relationships with supporters and deepening the commitment of volunteers through continuous feedback and online interaction. Co-founder of the youth-publication *Hibr* and social media initiative AltCity says that for two years *Hibr's* creators managed the newspaper online without having met most volunteer writers and bloggers in person, nor had the volunteers met one another. In 2011, when AltCity debuted its first public event, 'the interaction element in social media encouraged the online community to meet in person.' Similarly, co-founder of SMEX says their online presence contributed not only to an increase in the number of volunteers and trainees, but also to stronger relationships with what have now become their customers. 'The hard numbers kept going up, but the quality of the relationships were also intensifying, so much so that we had to think of a way to give us greater financial control over our initiatives.' SMEX expanded its non-profit group into a hybrid structure by creating a for-profit branch, SMEX&CO, which now supports and funds the non-profit arm.

Furthermore, some SMOs use social media for building coalitions and coordinating with other organizations, a crucial factor for sustainable change (Jad, 2004; Khattab, 2010), although the outcome has not always been positive because competition between the SMOs over scarce funding and media recognition often impair collaboration. Communication coordinator at Nahwa Al-Muwatiniya says more coordination between SMOs is badly needed, as most of their activities overlap, and the best outcomes have been the result of collaborative efforts. Indeed, Lebanese feminist activists partially attribute the relative success of the women's rights movement to a commitment to collective action. On the other hand, most SMOs blame the fragmentation within the anti-sectarian movement for its recent failure. In 2011, the movement organized several marches that drew protestors from all over Lebanon, the largest of which was 10,000 strong ('The Arab Awakening,' 2011). The initial increase in numbers signaled a growing movement. However, several subsequent rallies saw minimal participation and raised questions about the movement's sustainability (Sikimic, 2011). The movement ended up in a stalemate soon after its inception due to fragmentation and infighting over goals, strategies, and disputed leadership and recognition. 'The public got confused and annoyed, and support for the overall cause diminished.'

Nevertheless, SMOs who have succeed in building successful coalitions highlight the important role of social media in strengthening such alliances. Green Line Association Director says, 'We heavily depend on digital media to organize events... and collaborate with other initiatives outside of Beirut.' In 2011, the group held simultaneous activities for World Environment Day in three Lebanese cities, collaborating with three other organizations, without meeting them in person.

*Boosting fundraising and accountability.* Most SMOs realize funders are increasingly discriminate and cautious, due to the high number of NGOs and the ease in creating them (Wehbi and El-Lahib,



2007). However, many also argue that having a digital presence increases the credibility of an SMO and allows funders to keep track of their work. A few SMOs even said funders initiated contact with them as a result of their online presence. Co-founder of Kunhadi believes a strong online presence is proof that an organization is serious. 'We are receiving more funding because we have real-time activities and events that generate visible results.' Although activists realize that digital media cannot replace conventional fundraising methods, many believe a strong online presence strengthens their proposals. 'Having 2,000 Twitter followers shows funders that people are interested in our work, and we have the means to reach them,' says Hibr co-founder. Conversely, the relative ease of establishing presence online leads to increased competition over funding, which hinders inter-organizational collaboration.

*Circumventing censorship and facilitating access to information.* Despite the relative lack of censorship in Lebanon, the digital realm allows SMOs to circumvent censorship involving controversial topics like Palestinian rights, LGBTQ rights, and certain areas of women's rights. For example, Palestinian Civil Rights Campaign Lebanon say mainstream media significantly edit their press releases to censor sensitive topics (Kawzally, 2009). Online, however, the group self-publishes the unedited versions, which are more powerful; loaded with striking imagery, historical anecdotes, and emotive terminology.

Although less controversial, certain cultural and artistic initiatives often face censorship too. 'The level of censorship in films, music, literature, even theater, is surprising,' says an activist at Ashkal Alwan. 'Digital media help counteract the efforts of the General Security sensors, who still have a comfortable margin of digital illiteracy, but this continues to decrease.... We now realize that Facebook and E-mail are monitored.'

As drafts of media laws shuffle through the Lebanese parliament (Alabaster, 2011), activists eagerly await whether the outcome will allow more or less online freedoms. Meanwhile, activists are split between those who feel they have complete freedom online and those who publish cautiously, fearing increased monitoring, censorship, and repercussions.

Moreover, activists complain about the lack of freedom of information laws, despite the submission of various draft laws to parliament over the past two years (Maharat, 2010). A Nahwa Al-Muwatiniya activist complains, 'it's really difficult to get information from the government. The long procedure and rigid bureaucracy is so discouraging.' Even public information required by existing laws, such as media ownership records, are virtually inaccessible to the general public, and official registries require authorized lawyers before access is granted (Melki et al., 2012). CRTD-A once launched a project on civil marriage and nationality rights. They needed data on the number of civil marriages in Lebanon, 'but the Minister of Interior wouldn't allow us access.'

Other advantages of social media are easy access to international information sources, and the ability to quickly share local official information, for those willing to put the time and effort into acquiring it. In addition to all these advantages, social media also offer significant burdens. In fact, the majority of participants said digital tools often fail to meet activists' needs and sometimes encumber their work.

*Overwhelming demands meet limited resources and skills.* The ease, immediacy, and interactivity digital media offer have unavoidable consequences: the challenge to continuously respond, monitor, and update information. 'It takes time and skills, and no matter how much you follow up, there's more to be done,' complained CRTD-A's director. Most SMOs realize, without proper monitoring, digital platforms can do more harm than good (Breindl, 2010; Kahn and Kellner, 2004), and negative information can jeopardize an organization's image and undermine its cause.

Moukawimoun's co-founder shared a negative discussion thread that arose when the organization posted a list of censored books on Facebook, as part of their campaign 'Stop Cultural Terrorism.' The list included *The Diary of Anne Frank*, 'and people started condemning us as Zionists and pro-Israeli, which completely derailed the conversation.'

In addition, digital activists face a constant battle with spammers (Joyce, 2010). Assistant Director of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, says failing to monitor online spaces can turn an SMO's digital platforms into 'spaces for parasitic discussions' and tools for promotion of unrelated events and products. However, most SMOs have limited resources and personnel to meet the demands of continuous monitoring. The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECORVAW) would like to incorporate more online tools, but they 'need someone who has the skills and knowledge to provide full-time assistance and work only on social media, but we don't have the budget for that.' Some solve this problem by limiting their social media presence. But even for those who can afford a dedicated media person, finding activist-minded individuals who possess digital skills and a strong background in communication remains a problem. The subsequent sections discuss the most needed skills, which in addition to digital skills include strategic communication, critical thinking, and writing and language proficiency.

*Strategic communication and critical thinking.* SMOs realize that simply running a digital platform does not translate into utilizing it purposefully, and although the pool of potential activists with strong digital skills continues to grow, many still lack strategic communication and critical thinking skills. Beyond simply updating information, many SMOs express the need for a clear communication strategy, which increases the effectiveness of reaching intended audiences and managing negative feedback. One activist states, 'many know how to use Twitter, but few can use it strategically to attract media attention.' Social media coordinator for the road safety initiative Kunhadi admits, 'We need training in using Twitter and Facebook to create more interaction and achieve specific purposes.' Many SMOs suggest that universities offer digital activism courses, where students learn activism and advocacy principles in addition to digital and strategic communication skills.

Poor critical thinking abilities further compound the problem. 'Activists lack critical thinking skills for gathering credible information... rather than spreading rumors.' To most, critical thinking skills comprised abilities to identify reliable information sources, substantiated and attribute arguments, and counter rumors and propaganda.

*Language dilemmas.* Most SMOs who participated in this study use English exclusively for their online activities. None exclusively use Arabic. Only six have a complete Arabic version of their website or Facebook group, while a handful have limited Arabic content. But this conflicts with Lebanon's language realities. While English is widely used inside Beirut and among affluent and educated urbanites, Arabic remains dominant elsewhere, particularly outside the city and among older and less-affluent demographics (Diab, 2000).

Likewise, Arabic remains the primary and official language of government and politicians. Co-founder of UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM-D&R), which raises awareness of Lebanon's violent past, asserts; 'Our target, politicians and officials, uses Arabic. It's ridiculous to address them in English, whether offline or online.'

But shifting exclusively to Arabic creates significant burdens. The pool of qualified activists with strong command of Arabic continues to dwindle, as English has become the preferred language of educated urbanites—the group most likely to possess the requisite digital skills. Additionally,

abandoning English disconnects SMOs from their potential funders. Moukawimoun's co-founder resolves this dilemma by 'going trilingual,' but few can afford this solution.

Furthermore, many migrant workers, refugees, and other disenfranchised groups neither read Arabic nor English. Initiatives targeting them in English remain ineffective. A Frontiers Ruwad activist notes, 'Social and digital media are restricted in Lebanon to groups that are generally middle class, have access to Internet, and speak English. This excludes the beneficiaries of our work.'

*Access to Internet.* Limited access to the Internet presents another significant obstacle to digital activism. While SMOs rely on social media to reach audiences beyond Beirut, limited Internet access in most rural areas significantly curtails their efforts. For example, rural residents in north and south Lebanon are a prime focus for environmental preservation initiatives. A Green Line Association activist explains, 'Many people we want to reach there aren't social media users. Many villages still don't have Internet, and we sometimes can't even reach them through traditional media.'

*Over-reliance on social media, Slacktivism, and the echo-chamber effect.* Despite praising the benefits of social media, most SMOs stress the importance of balancing online and offline activism. Several participants referred to the Arab uprisings, criticizing terms like 'Facebook Revolution' that overemphasize the role of social media. This 'social media hype' has led to the growing trend of *slacktivism*: online activism that has no tangible outcome (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza, 2013). Most participants mentioned the negative repercussions of 'click-based activism,' noting that it can undermine the work of dedicated activists by discouraging from real engagement. Indeed, the shift towards online activism has meant a shift away from conventional activism (Morozov, 2009). 'Re-Tweeting, liking a group, or sharing a post does not make you an activist, compared to those who are meeting with people and taking to the streets,' complained one activist. Most SMOs remain wary of online feedback and complain that online activism rarely generates offline results. Participants overwhelmingly pointed to Facebook's *events* tool. IndyACT's Communication director says, it is difficult to gauge how many attendees will show up to an event because those who confirm attendance on Facebook are substantially more than those who show up. Some activists estimate only 10% of those who click 'attending' will actually attend.

Additionally, activists complain that online activism often creates an echo-chamber effect, where communication only reaches the same narrow circle of activists. Founder of Lebanon's Time, an initiative to increase dialogue on Lebanese socio-political issues, complains, 'While you might think you're connecting online with other groups, you often end up reaching the same like-minded supporters.'

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Lebanese SMOs credit recent achievements, at least in part, to increased exposure facilitated by social media. SMOs recognize digital media's capacity to quickly and inexpensively reach broader and otherwise inaccessible audiences, and to effectively promote causes and increase visibility in local and international media. They rely on digital platforms to inform the civic-minded about events, create interactive dialogue, coordinate work internally, organize actions and build coalitions externally, bridge online and offline activists, and strengthen relationships with volunteers. They view the ease and breadth of communication through social media as particularly beneficial, given their ability to effectively disseminate rich information and foster engagement, while circumventing traditional channels and their censors, and accessing information that remains difficult to reach. Furthermore, some SMOs praise social media's versatility and capacity to update information live while simultaneously documenting and

archiving records, which turns them into effective methods for communicating with politicians and journalists while providing immediate evidence to the public. This in-turn boosts activists' credibility both in holding officials and journalists accountable and in attracting funding.

The findings pertaining to advantages of social media are consistent with the literature, but Garrett (2006) notes few studies have focused on the disadvantages. As such, this study found that these benefits are often checked by the realities of limited resources to initiate and maintain digital platforms, by the internet's slow speed, high cost, and limited reach, and by the lack of individuals skilled not only in digital media, but also in strategic communication, language and writing abilities, critical thinking, and advocacy work. In addition, social media create a demand to continuously monitor, respond, and update information while simultaneously combating spam and rumors. Moreover, disadvantages include a growing culture of 'slactivism' that discourages serious activists, and creates a bloated impression of mass social movements online. This illusion is quickly deflated by a reality check when 'click-based activists' are called to the streets. This indirectly supports Bimber's (2001) findings that increased communication capacity does not necessarily translate into increased political participation. Some SMOs, however, devised ways to deal with this problem, and most recognize that digital media cannot replace many real-world activities (Bennett, 2003). 'In the end, activism has always been—and always will be—about people, people who show up in person' (McCafferty, 2011: 18). In addition, digital media's utility remains limited in the face of deeper structural concerns affecting all aspects of Lebanese society and largely symptomatic of the deeply rooted sectarian system. This is something all participants identified as a crucial obstacle to activism, and indirectly responsible for the rampant infighting within coalitions working on similar issues. The limitations also manifest in the fragmentation of civil society as a whole, the constant threats to online privacy and freedom of expression, and the lack of legislation and government support. Unfortunately, the majority of Lebanese still subscribes to confessional political alliances based on sectarian religious ascription (Cammett and Issar, 2010). This makes bottom-up reform and grassroots efforts difficult, as even the most apolitical initiatives metamorphose into sectarian debates.

Based on these findings, the study proposes the following recommendations for improving digital activism in Lebanon: First, increase collaboration and formation of SMO networks. Rather than allowing competition and minor differences to deter cooperation, activists can benefit from combining their efforts via joint funding and collaborative efforts (Wehbi and El-Lahib, 2007). External mediators, such as academics and universities, can help facilitate and act as hubs for such networks, while offering training and guidance. Second, improve strategic communication, critical thinking, and digital media skills by having universities offer courses and workshops that combine these skills. Finally, to better understand the obstacles and devise solutions, foundations and universities should encourage research revolving around digital activism. Researchers may replicate this study to other Arab countries, include quantitative methods and larger samples, and compare digital activism across countries. Longitudinal studies tracking progress of specific SMOs, such as the anti-sectarianism movement, could highlight the development of social media in activism and unveil lessons for improving future digital activism.

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