The Death of Hashtags: Algorithmic Suppression and The Silencing of Digital Activism

Prince Kumar
Central University of Rajasthan

***Abstract*—Hashtags once stood at the heart of digital activism. Movements like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #FarmersProtest showed how a simple phrase could gather thousands of voices, spread across platforms, and become a symbol of solidarity. Hashtags worked like short cultural texts, easy to repeat, easy to share, and powerful in uniting communities. Today, however, hashtags are losing their power. Platforms like Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) no longer use hashtags as a main way to increase visibility, and in many cases, activist hashtags have been directly blocked, hidden, or pushed down by algorithms.**

The aim of this paper is to study this decline, what I call the "death of hashtags." It focuses on how hashtags are being suppressed, both through state orders and platform policies. The paper uses two case studies: the temporary blocking of #FarmersProtest hashtags on Twitter under government pressure, and the removal of Palestinian activism posts on Meta platforms. The method is a qualitative analysis of these events, supported by media reports, platform announcements, and scholarly discussions.

The originality of this work lies in shifting attention from celebrating hashtag activism to exploring why hashtags no longer work as they once did. The expected finding is that hashtags are being replaced by algorithm-based feeds, where platforms control what becomes visible. This change makes it harder for activism to trend, and raises larger questions about authorship, access, and memory in digital spaces. However, the "death" framing does not imply that activists have surrendered. The paper also traces how movements adapt, resist, and find new pathways when the old tools of mobilisation are taken from them.

***Index Terms*—hashtags, digital activism, algorithm, suppression, cultural memory, platform governance, digital authoritarianism**

I. INTRODUCTION

There was a time, not long ago, when the internet felt like it had a public pulse, and you could find it by following a hashtag. A simple phrase became a digital rallying cry, a way for thousands of scattered people to speak in a single, thunderous voice. For a moment, a hashtag could transform a personal grievance into a global movement. We saw it with #BlackLivesMatter, which turned a declaration of grief into a worldwide protest against injustice, and with #MeToo, which broke decades of silence and held powerful figures to account. These were not just clever tags; they were public squares built in real-time, providing what scholar Zeynep Tufekci calls the "signal and narrative capacity" for movements to find their footing and tell their own story (Tufekci 192–193, 203).

Yet even in those hopeful early days, we should be careful not to overstate what hashtags could do. The same movements that erupted with astonishing speed often struggled with what Tufekci describes as the "tactical freeze": a difficulty in converting viral attention into sustained organisational power (Tufekci 71–72). Hashtag activism was always somewhat fragile, dependent on fleeting public attention, prone to slacktivism, and vulnerable to co-optation. What has changed, however, is that the very infrastructure that made this activism possible has been redesigned, and not in activists' favour.

The digital ground has shifted beneath our feet. The public square is being privatised. The user-driven, chronological feeds that allowed these movements to flourish have been replaced by opaque, algorithmically curated spaces. Instead of a public bulletin board where everyone sees the same messages in the order they were posted, our feeds now act more like personal shoppers, showing us only what the platform predicts we want to see. In this new world,

the power of a hashtag to create a spontaneous, collective moment has been critically weakened. A movement can be shouting online, yet many of us will never hear it.

This paper will argue that the decline of the hashtag as an activist tool is not an accident, but the direct result of deliberate design choices made by social media platforms, often accelerated by government pressure. By analysing specific cases such as the overt blocking of the #FarmersProtest in India, and the persistent censorship of Palestinian activism on Meta's platforms, we can see a clear pattern emerge. These platforms are not neutral hosts for conversation but powerful "custodians" that actively shape what is seen and said, as Tarleton Gillespie has argued (Gillespie 22). Their systems, built to maximise engagement and minimise controversy, have created an environment that is increasingly hostile to the messy and unpredictable nature of grassroots dissent. This dynamic can be understood as part of a broader pattern of what scholars have begun calling digital authoritarian capitalism: a condition in which the commercial logic of platforms and the censorial impulses of states converge to produce new, scalable forms of control over public speech (Zuboff 8–12).

The aim here is to move the conversation beyond celebrating the past successes of hashtag activism and instead critically examine its fragile present. The "death of the hashtag" does not mean people have stopped using them. It means their fundamental function, to allow users to create and follow a public conversation outside of the platform's control, has been systematically dismantled. This represents a profound shift in power, from the people who create the content to the platforms that control its visibility. Understanding how this happened is crucial for anyone who believes the internet should remain a place for public voice and not just personal entertainment.

II. LITERATURE AND BACKGROUND

When hashtags first burst onto the scene, researchers were understandably optimistic. The early scholarship on digital activism often reads like a story of empowerment, focusing on how platforms like Twitter gave a megaphone to the voiceless. Studies documented how movements could bypass traditional news channels, build massive communities seemingly overnight, and organise real-world action with incredible speed. In her analysis of modern protests, Zeynep Tufekci highlighted how these tools provided the "narrative capacity" for a movement to define itself and tell its own story, free from outside interpretation (Tufekci 192–193). The hashtag was seen as a democratizing force, a tool that levelled the playing field between ordinary citizens and powerful institutions.

But that early promise was built on a technological foundation that no longer exists. The major shift, and the central focus of more recent scholarship, has been the rise of the algorithmic feed. Platforms moved away from the simple, chronological timelines that gave users direct control over what they saw. Instead, they developed complex curation systems designed to predict what content would keep each user scrolling longer. As Tarleton Gillespie explains in his work, platforms are not neutral containers for information but active "custodians" that constantly make hidden decisions about what content gets promoted and what gets buried (Gillespie 22). This change fundamentally altered the power dynamic, moving control away from the user and handing it to the platform's black-box algorithm.

The concept of the "black box" here deserves elaboration, for it is central to the argument of this paper. In the context of platform governance, the black box refers to the proprietary algorithmic systems whose internal logic is invisible not just to users and activists but also to researchers and regulators. Frank Pasquale has argued extensively that the opacity of corporate algorithms constitutes a fundamental challenge to democratic accountability. These systems make consequential decisions about visibility, reach, and public discourse, yet they operate behind a wall of trade secrecy and technical complexity that shields them from scrutiny (Pasquale 3–6). For digital activism, this opacity means that when a hashtag fails to trend, when a post loses reach, or when a movement's content disappears, the affected users cannot know whether it was a matter of low engagement, a deliberate policy choice, or a silent government order. The black box, in this sense, is not merely a technical feature; it is a political instrument.

This algorithmic environment has created new, and often less visible, methods for controlling speech. Beyond outright deleting a post, platforms now have a suite of "softer" moderation tools, from shadow

banning (making a user's content invisible to others without their knowledge) to downranking (algorithmically reducing a post's reach). This reality is where corporate policy and state interests can easily align. Governments can now pressure platforms not just to remove content, but to simply make it disappear from feeds. This reflects a core argument from scholars like Safiya Umoja Noble, who shows that algorithms are never truly objective; they reflect the biases of their creators and can systematically marginalise certain viewpoints, a process she calls "algorithms of oppression" (Noble 2–3). For activists, this means their message can be silenced without a single takedown notice ever being sent.

Beyond the canonical Western literature, scholars working on the Global South have offered critical perspectives on how platform governance operates differently, and often more coercively, outside the Anglo-American context. Payal Arora has challenged the techno-utopian narrative by examining how marginalised communities in the developing world engage with digital platforms under conditions of deep inequality, where access itself is mediated by corporate gatekeepers (Arora 15–20). Sanjay Srivastava's work on Indian digital culture provides useful context for understanding how the state's relationship with technology companies is shaped by the intersection of nationalism, surveillance, and market liberalisation. These perspectives remind us that the story of hashtag suppression is not only a story of Silicon Valley design choices but also of geopolitical power, postcolonial information asymmetries, and the uneven application of platform rules across different political contexts.

While there is plenty of research celebrating the birth of hashtag activism and a growing body of work on the dangers of algorithmic bias, a gap exists in connecting the two. Much of the literature treats these as separate subjects. Fewer studies have focused specifically on how the architectural shift toward algorithmic curation has directly caused the decline of the hashtag as a primary tool for political organising. This paper aims to bridge that gap. It moves past the question of whether hashtags can be successful and instead asks why they are increasingly failing, focusing on the platform mechanics that have systematically neutralised their power.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to reveal, behind the scenes of policy, design, and political pressure, how these factors lead to the seizure of hashtags' power, what I call the "death of hashtags," with attention to both state orders and platform policies. 'Death' here is used as a metaphor to study the lost power of the hashtags, while remaining mindful that transformation or depoliticisation might more precisely describe the process. A qualitative approach has been taken in this study to understand the decline. This method enables us to explore the deeper story and context behind the digital shift, instead of counting posts or measuring an immense quantity of data. The goal is to understand and investigate the "how" and "why" by analysing documents, credible news sources, and public discourse that explains how the hashtag lost its power as a tool for grassroots mobilisation.

The research draws on several key sources of public information to build this analysis. Media reports from established news outlets provide a real-time account of suppression events as they unfolded, capturing the immediate public reaction and official explanations. Additionally, official statements from the platforms themselves, such as blog posts, interviews of C-level executives, and policy updates, offer direct insight into how these tech giants, like Meta and X, justify their design changes and moderation choices. These corporate texts are critically examined alongside news reports from digital rights advocacy groups, which often present a crucial counter-narrative based on their own investigations into censorship and algorithmic bias. Moreover, existing scholarly work provides the theoretical foundation for understanding these dynamics.

The paper uses the case study method to bring these broad trends to life. This approach is particularly useful for understanding complex situations in their real-world setting. Rather than speaking about suppression in the abstract, this research zooms in on two specific, well-documented instances: the state-ordered blocking of #FarmersProtest hashtags and the persistent removal of Palestinian activism on Meta platforms. These cases serve as concrete illustrations of the different ways, both overt and subtle, that activist speech is being neutralised online. It is worth noting that the Palestinian case, while particularly well-documented, is not an isolated exception; it is

better understood as an exemplar of new forms of digital repression being tested and refined, forms that can and have been deployed against other communities and in other political contexts.

The core of the work is synthesis. It involves weaving together these different sources, journalism, corporate statements, advocacy reports, and academic theory, to build a coherent and persuasive argument. This approach recognises a key challenge in studying digital platforms: we cannot see inside the "black box" of their proprietary algorithms. Researchers and the public are often left to analyse the outputs of these complex systems without ever understanding their internal logic, a problem that scholars like Safiya Umoja Noble and Frank Pasquale have identified as a major barrier to accountability (Noble 2–3; Pasquale 3–6). Therefore, this methodology relies on interpreting the visible effects of these systems and the public justifications given for them to understand their impact on digital activism.

IV. CASE STUDIES OF HASHTAG SUPPRESSION

Government Pressure and the #FarmersProtest

For months, the digital heartbeat of India's massive farmers' protest was found on Twitter. As hundreds of thousands of farmers camped on the outskirts of Delhi to protest new agricultural laws, hashtags like #FarmersProtest and #ModiPlanningFarmerGenocide became vital tools for communication and global outreach. They were used to share real-time updates from the protest sites, document clashes with police, and rally an enormous wave of international support from the Indian diaspora and celebrities. This was hashtag activism in its classic form: a decentralised, citizen-led effort to hold power to account on a global stage.

The situation changed dramatically in February 2021. The Indian government, viewing the online conversation as a threat to public order, issued a series of legal demands to Twitter under Section 69A of its IT Act, a powerful law that allows the state to block online content. The government ordered the platform to take down hundreds of accounts, including those of journalists, activists, and a prominent news magazine. Crucially, the government also moved to suppress the hashtags themselves. Suddenly, a tag that had been a vibrant stream of information was either blocked or severely restricted within India (Ellis-Petersen). The effect was immediate and jarring. For users inside the country, the central nervous system of the protest's information campaign was severed.

Unlike the subtle, algorithmic silencing, this was a hard, overt act of state-directed censorship facilitated by a corporate platform. Twitter found itself in an impossible position, caught between its public commitment to free expression and the legal realities of operating in one of its largest global markets. In a public blog post, the company explained its actions, stating it had withheld a portion of the accounts and hashtags "within India only" but had not taken action on the accounts of journalists or activists, arguing that doing so would violate Indian law and their fundamental right to free expression ("Updates on Our Response to Blocking Orders from the Indian Government"). This created a bizarre, fractured information landscape where a user in London could see a completely different version of the #FarmersProtest conversation than a user in Delhi.

This episode starkly illustrates how platforms, when pressured by a powerful state, can become instruments of control. The blocking of the hashtags was not about community guidelines or algorithmic errors; it was a clear political decision to stifle dissent. For activists on the ground, the impact was profound. It sowed confusion, disrupted communication networks, and forced them to constantly invent new, slightly altered hashtags in a cat-and-mouse game to evade the government's digital blockade (Perrigo). This constant need to adapt drains energy and splinters the focused messaging that gives a movement its power.

Yet the activists' response also reveals a crucial dimension of agency that must not be overlooked. Rather than simply being silenced, the farming communities and their supporters improvised. They shifted to alternative hashtags, migrated conversations to platforms less susceptible to Indian government pressure, and leveraged international solidarity networks to amplify their message from outside the country's geofenced walls. The cat-and-mouse game, exhausting as it was, also demonstrated the resilience and tactical creativity of grassroots movements in the face of state censorship.

Ultimately, the #FarmersProtest case serves as a powerful example of how the global public square is not truly global. It can be geofenced and censored at the border, with platforms acting as the digital customs

agents. It shows the clear limitations of relying on a corporate, centralised platform for political organising when that corporation's business interests are at odds with the movement's goals. The promise of a borderless digital conversation gave way to the harsh reality of national law, demonstrating that a hashtag's power is only as strong as the political environment will allow it to be.

Palestinian Activism on Meta Platforms

For Palestinian activists and ordinary citizens, social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook have long been a critical lifeline. In a media landscape where their voices are often marginalized, these platforms offered a direct channel to the world, a way to share firsthand accounts, document human rights issues, and organize in real time. During moments of intense conflict, such as the forced evictions in Sheikh Jarrah in 2021 or the violence that followed October 7, 2023, hashtags became essential tools for bearing witness. They allowed users to create a living archive of events as they unfolded, bypassing traditional news gatekeepers to show the world their reality.

However, this reliance on Meta's platforms has been met with a consistent and systemic pattern of suppression that goes far beyond simple content removal. This censorship is not a single action but a multi-layered system of control that operates through both automated and human means. An in-depth investigation by The Markup in 2024, which analyzed thousands of Instagram posts, found that the platform heavily demoted nongraphic images of war, deleted captions and hid comments without notification, erratically suppressed hashtags, and denied users the option to appeal when the company removed their comments, including ones about Israel and Palestine, as "spam" (Uzcátegui-Liggett and Apodaca). This creates an environment where users are left guessing whether their content is being seen at all, a phenomenon that Human Rights Watch has described as a form of digital censorship that silences and gaslights an entire community.

Much of this suppression is driven by Meta's own systems, which are notoriously bad at understanding political and cultural context. Common political slogans like "From the river to the sea" and even calls for a "Ceasefire Now" were repeatedly removed under the guise of being "spam," even when the context clearly showed they were not. In one widely reported incident, Instagram's auto-translation feature converted bios containing the English word "Palestinian," the Palestinian flag emoji, and the Arabic phrase "alhamdulillah" (meaning "praise be to God") into the phrase "Palestinian terrorists are fighting for their freedom", a grotesque mistranslation that was only corrected after public outrage and reporting by 404 Media. Furthermore, even the neutral, journalistic mention of the word "Hamas" often triggered immediate content removal, a blunt enforcement of policy that ignores Meta's own rule allowing for neutral discussion. These systemic failures have led to the suspension of prominent Palestinian journalists and activists, effectively silencing key voices at critical moments.

This technological bias is reinforced by corporate policy. Meta's "Dangerous Individuals and Organizations" (DIO) policy, which dictates what content is considered supportive of terrorism, has been heavily criticized for being overly broad and unevenly applied. The Human Rights Watch report, "Meta's Broken Promises," found that this policy unfairly curtails the speech of Palestinians and their supporters, often conflating legitimate political expression with support for violence. The result is a digital environment where the simple act of posting a news photo, using a common Arabic phrase, or even a relevant hashtag can lead to a user's voice being systematically diminished. It is a prime example of how platform architecture and corporate policy, whether by design or by default, can work in concert to suppress a specific political movement.

It is essential to frame this case not merely as an isolated crisis response but as an exemplar of how new forms of digital repression are being tested and normalised. The tools deployed against Palestinian content, automated moderation at scale, broad "dangerous organisations" designations, opaque appeal processes, and algorithmic downranking, are not unique to this conflict. They constitute a template that can be, and already is being, applied to other marginalised communities and political movements around the world. The Palestinian case is instructive precisely because it reveals the full architecture of suppression in its most developed form.

Here, too, activist agency deserves recognition. Palestinian digital activists have developed a sophisticated repertoire of counter-tactics: using "algospeak" (substituting "G4z4" for "Gaza,"

watermelon emojis for the Palestinian flag), migrating to platforms with less aggressive moderation, creating community archives outside of Meta's ecosystem, and coordinating documentation drives to preserve evidence that platforms might erase. These strategies, while born of necessity, represent a form of digital resistance that complicates any simple narrative of passive victimhood. Activists are not merely being silenced; they are also fighting back, even as the terrain shifts beneath them.

The cumulative effect is a form of digital erasure. It isolates activists, sows distrust, and severely hampers their ability to document their experiences and advocate for their rights on a global stage. This case study demonstrates a mature and multifaceted system of suppression where flawed technology, biased policies, and external political pressures converge to create a hostile environment for dissent, fundamentally breaking the promise of social media as a space for marginalised voices.

Policy Shifts and Algorithmic Changes

The power of the hashtag in its early days came from its simplicity and the user-centric design of social media platforms. Feeds were largely chronological. If you followed a hashtag, you saw a real-time, unfiltered stream of every public post that used it. This structure was inherently democratic; it gave an equal starting point to every voice, allowing movements to build momentum organically from the ground up. Over the past decade, however, platforms have systematically dismantled this architecture, replacing it with a far more complex and opaque system driven by algorithms designed not for civic organisation but for user retention.

This shift was not a single event but a gradual evolution, a series of policy changes and interface updates that collectively recentralized control in the hands of the platform. Each change, often framed as an improvement to the "user experience," subtly altered the flow of information, making it harder for activists to guarantee their message would reach its intended audience.

Documenting Major Platform Policy Changes

Date	Policy / UI Change	Effect on Hashtags	Implication for Activism
Oct 29, 2020 (US)	Instagram temporarily removed the "Recent" tab on hashtag pages during the U.S. election period (Togoh).	Cut off chronological browsing of fresh posts under a tag; discovery leaned toward curated "Top."	Reduced ability for fast-moving campaigns to surface new posts via tags, especially during time-sensitive events.
Apr 19, 2022	Instagram tested removing the "Recent" tab more broadly, showing only "Top" and "Reels" on hashtag pages (Malik).	Shifted hashtag pages from open streams to ranked, engagement-heavy views.	Fewer entry points for small or new activist accounts to be seen through tags.
Dec 13, 2024	Instagram removed the option to "follow" hashtags, stopping tag-follow content from appearing in feeds (Hutchinson).	Hashtags no longer inject posts into feeds for followers of a tag; tags work mainly for search and categorisation.	Harder to build momentum through tag-follow audiences; more dependence on algorithmic recommendations.
Jan 10–11, 2023	Twitter made the algorithmic "For You" timeline the default view on iOS and web before later "remembering" user's choice (Clark).	Discovery centred on recommendations over reverse-chronological viewing and tag streams.	Trending attention became more platform-curated, weakening organic lift from hashtags alone.
Ongoing (help policy)	X explains that Trends are algorithmic and personalised by location, follows, and interests ("X Trends FAQ").	Trending tags/topics are not purely volume-driven; visibility depends on the ranking system.	Activist hashtags may not trend universally, even with high use, limiting coordinated visibility.

Jun 27, 2025	X banned hashtags in paid ads and updated ad quality rules to prohibit hashtags in ad copy (Hutchinson, "X Bans Hashtags in Promoted Posts").	Removes hashtags from sponsored placements; fewer paid routes to rally around a tag.	Activists and NGOs lose a signalling tool in promoted posts; campaigns must lean on copy, keywords, and targeting instead of a shared tag.

The core of the problem lies in the fundamental change of who controls what you see. In the past, you, the user, were in the driver's seat. You chose who to follow and which hashtags to track, and the platform delivered that content in a straightforward, chronological order. Today, the algorithm is the driver. It watches what you like, what you share, and how long you linger on a post, and then it builds a personalized feed designed to keep you scrolling. As a business model, this makes perfect sense; as a tool for civic discourse, it is deeply problematic.

This shift was not a single event but a gradual erosion of user control, a series of deliberate policy changes and interface updates that collectively recentralized power in the hands of the platform. On Instagram, this process became particularly clear through its handling of hashtag pages. In a move that signaled a major change in philosophy, the platform temporarily removed the "Recent" tab from hashtag pages for users in the United States during the 2020 election period (Rodriguez). This decision directly severed the real-time, chronological view that is crucial for following fast-moving events. By forcing users to view only the algorithmically selected "Top" posts, the platform took control of the narrative, making it much harder for new, time-sensitive information to surface. This temporary measure was a sign of things to come, as the platform later tested removing the "Recent" tab more broadly, further cementing a hashtag's role as a curated gallery rather than an open public stream. This trend culminated in the eventual removal of the ability to "follow" hashtags, fundamentally altering their function. A hashtag was no longer a content stream you could subscribe to; it was reduced to a simple categorization label, placing the burden of discovery entirely on the platform's recommendation algorithms.

A parallel evolution took place on Twitter, now X. The most significant change was making the algorithmic "For You" timeline the default view for all users in early 2023. This immediately shifted the center of gravity on the platform away from the reverse-chronological feed that activists relied on for organizing. The raw, unfiltered firehose of a protest hashtag was pushed behind an extra click, while the main feed prioritized algorithmically selected content. This control extends even to what becomes visible on a national scale. The platform's "Trends" are no longer a pure reflection of post volume but are personalized based on a user's location, interests, and follows. This means an activist hashtag could be used by hundreds of thousands of people but still fail to achieve universal visibility, fracturing a movement's ability to create a shared, global moment. This control over both organic and paid reach was further tightened when X banned the use of hashtags in paid ad copy, removing a key tool that organizations and NGOs used to amplify their campaigns and rally support around a unified tag.

These changes have profound implications for activism. The replacement of chronological discovery with algorithmic curation means that a movement's visibility is no longer primarily determined by its supporters but by a platform's opaque engagement metrics. Activist content, which can be raw, urgent, and disruptive, is often at a disadvantage against the highly polished, emotionally resonant, or controversial content that algorithms are tuned to promote. This creates an environment where activists are forced to constantly guess what the black box wants, draining energy from organizing and messaging. The digital town square has not just been rearranged; it has been placed under the control of a new gatekeeper who decides which voices get a megaphone and which are left to whisper in the background.

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The case studies of the #FarmersProtest and Palestinian activism, when viewed together, reveal the two primary mechanisms behind what this paper calls the "death of the hashtag": overt, state-directed suppression and covert, systemic suppression. The first is a clear and forceful act of censorship. In the case of the farmers' protest, the Indian government's legal orders forced Twitter's hand, transforming the

platform from a global public square into a series of fenced-off national courtyards. This was a top-down attack on a hashtag's function, where the state identified a specific conversation and used its sovereign power to demand its platform partner sever the connection. The suppression was visible, publicly debated, and enacted through direct legal force.

In stark contrast, the censorship of Palestinian content on Meta's platforms illustrates a more subtle and perhaps more insidious form of control. This is not a single government order but a systemic bias built into the very architecture of the platform. It operates through what Safiya Umoja Noble would term "algorithms of oppression," where flawed automated systems, culturally ignorant moderation policies, and overly broad definitions of "dangerous organizations" converge to disproportionately silence one side of a political conflict (Noble 2–3). This form of suppression is harder to prove and even harder to fight. Users are not met with a clear notice of government censorship but with a disorienting series of shadowbans, removed comments labeled as "spam," and account restrictions with no clear explanation. It creates a state of digital gaslighting, where activists are left to wonder if they are being silenced or if they are simply not interesting enough for the algorithm.

Despite their differences, both forms of suppression are enabled by the same fundamental shift in platform design: the move from chronological, user-controlled feeds to curated, algorithmic ones. This architectural change is the critical vulnerability that both states and corporate policies exploit. In the early days of hashtag activism, a platform would have had to manually delete every single post to stop a movement, a near-impossible task. Today, control is centralized. An algorithm, or the policy that governs it, acts as a powerful gatekeeper. This turns platforms into what Tarleton Gillespie calls "custodians" of public discourse, entities that are not just hosting conversations but are actively shaping them through hidden decisions about what gets seen and what fades into obscurity (Gillespie 197–198). Whether the pressure to turn the key comes from a government letter or an internal policy meeting, the result is the same: the platform holds the power to diminish a movement's reach.

What makes this dynamic particularly concerning is its alignment with the broader logic of what Shoshana Zuboff has theorized as surveillance capitalism: a system in which the extraction and commodification of user behaviour data becomes the primary source of profit, and in which the shaping of user behaviour, including what they see and do not see, becomes a core business function (Zuboff 8–12). When this commercial logic intersects with state power, the result is a form of digital authoritarian capitalism in which the suppression of dissent is not merely a side effect of algorithmic design but a structural feature of a system that prioritises engagement over expression, order over assembly, and profit over protest. The case studies examined in this paper sit squarely at this intersection: state censorship is facilitated by corporate infrastructure, and corporate moderation is inflected by state pressure, creating a feedback loop that neither purely government-driven nor purely market-driven models of censorship fully explain.

The black-box problem, discussed earlier in the literature review, finds its most concrete expression here. In the #FarmersProtest case, the suppression was at least visible: users received error messages, news outlets reported the blocking, and Twitter itself published a blog post explaining its position. The black box, in this instance, was partially opened under public pressure. In the Palestinian case, however, the box remains firmly shut. Users cannot see the algorithm's decision tree. They cannot know whether a post was downranked because it violated a content policy, because an automated system mislabelled it, because a government sent a removal request, or simply because the engagement metrics did not favour it. This opacity, as Pasquale has argued, fundamentally undermines the possibility of accountability (Pasquale 3–6). Without transparency, there can be no appeal; without appeal, there can be no justice.

The ultimate effect of this shift is a profound transfer of power from the public to the platform. The "signal and narrative capacity" that Zeynep Tufekci identified as the core strength of early social media movements is now mediated by a black-box algorithm whose priorities are engagement and profit, not civic discourse or human rights (Tufekci 203). Activists are no longer simply speaking to the public; they are performing for an algorithm, constantly trying to figure out the magic combination of words, images, and timing that will grant them visibility. This drains energy, forces self-censorship, and makes organizing unpredictable. The "death of the hashtag," therefore, does not mean people have stopped using the '#'

symbol. It means its original function as a tool for decentralized, user-driven public assembly has been dismantled. It has been demoted from a rallying cry to a simple metadata tag, useful for categorization but stripped of its power to guarantee a shared, real-time conversation outside of the platform's control.

VI. CONCLUSION

The era of the hashtag as a truly democratic force for online assembly appears to be over. While the '#' symbol remains a ubiquitous feature of social media, its original function has been fundamentally broken. The shift from chronological feeds to opaque, algorithmic timelines has transferred power from the hands of users to the platforms themselves. This architectural change created the core vulnerability that has allowed for the hashtag's decline, making it susceptible to both overt government pressure and the more subtle, systemic biases of corporate policy.

The case studies of the #FarmersProtest and Palestinian activism demonstrate the two faces of this new reality. In one, we see the visible hand of state censorship using legal force to silence dissent. In the other, we see the invisible hand of algorithmic curation and biased policies creating a hostile environment for marginalized voices. Both paths lead to the same destination: a digital public square that is less a space for free assembly and more a tightly controlled environment where reach is a privilege granted by the platform, not a right earned by the people. Taken together, these cases illustrate the emerging logic of digital authoritarian capitalism, a system in which commercial imperatives and state censorship reinforce each other through the shared infrastructure of algorithmic control.

Yet the story does not end with suppression. As this paper has shown, activists have not simply accepted the death of their tools. They have adapted, innovated, and fought back: inventing new hashtags, deploying algospeak, building alternative archives, and migrating to platforms outside the reach of the governments and corporations that seek to silence them. This resilience is not incidental to the argument; it is central to it. The death of the hashtag is not the death of digital activism. It is a transformation of the conditions under which activism operates, and activists are, as they always have been, the first to respond to shifting terrain.

Ultimately, the death of the hashtag is not about the disappearance of a symbol. It is about the loss of a mechanism for unfiltered, real-time, collective action. Activists today must navigate a landscape where their ability to be seen and heard is no longer guaranteed by the power of their message but is instead subject to the whims of an algorithm they cannot see and policies they did not create. The spirit of protest will undoubtedly endure, but it must now find new tools and new pathways, because the digital ground on which it once organized has irrevocably shifted beneath its feet.

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