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## **The role of digital media in the environmental activism**

### **Abstract**

The goal of this research is to show the results of the study of the role of social media in digital environmental activism as an example of Georgia. In the last few years there are a few studies which discuss digital environmental activism but this kind of research has not been conducted in Georgia, which emphasizes novelty and relevance. Methods of this study are semi-structured interviews with active users of the social media platforms and a qualitative content analysis of digital environmental activists' pages on Facebook. As for the research questions, what is the role of digital media in environmental activism? Which social media platforms are used by activists? Which type of the activism is used by Georgian digital environmental activists? According to the results of this study, slacktivism is mainly observed in Georgian social media, when people try to express their position with electronic petitions, express position by avatar frames or using hashtags. There are some platforms on Facebook where environmental activists are united, but until now, there was only 1 case that actively collected citizens on the social media platform – Facebook – movement of “MyCityKills”. As the questioned respondents emphasized, despite the existence of environmental groups or pages on Facebook, it is still passive activism. It was the only case of manifestation of not only environmental activism, but also civil digital activism in general, when thousands of young volunteers mobilized through Facebook and on June 13, 2015, to clean the environment of Tbilisi affected by the flood and help people affected by the disaster.

**Keywords:** digital environmental activism, digital media, social media, facebook, environmental communication.

### **Rola mediów cyfrowych w aktywizmie ekologicznym**

#### **Streszczenie**

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie wyników badania roli mediów społecznościowych w cyfrowym aktywizmie ekologicznym na przykładzie Gruzji. W ciągu ostatnich kilku lat przeprowadzono kilka badań, które analizują cyfrowy aktywizm ekologiczny, jednak tego rodzaju analizy nie zostały przeprowadzone w Gruzji, co wskazuje na nowość i trafność zaproponowanego tematu. W prezentowanym badaniu zostały zastosowane metody częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów z aktywnymi użytkownikami platform mediów społecznościowych i jakościowa analiza treści stron cyfrowych aktywistów ekologicznych w sieci społecznościowej Facebook. Pytania badawcze: jaka jest rola mediów cyfrowych w aktywizmie ekologicznym? Jaki typ aktywizmu stosują gruzińscy cyfrowi aktywiści ekologiczni? Zgodnie z wynikami tego badania slakttywizm

obserwuje się głównie w gruzińskich mediach społecznościowych, gdy obywatele próbują wyrazić swoje stanowisko za pomocą petycji elektronicznych, wyrażają stanowisko za pomocą ramek awatara lub używając hashtagów. Na Facebooku istnieją pewne platformy, na których zjednoczyli się aktywiści ekologiczni. Jednakże do tej pory stwierdzono tylko jeden przypadek, gdzie aktywnie zebrali się obywatele na platformie mediów społecznościowych – Facebooku. Był to „MyCityKills”. Jak podkreślali respondenci, pomimo istnienia grup ekologicznych lub stron na Facebooku, jest to nadal bierny aktywizm. Dotychczas był to jedyny przypadek manifestacji nie tylko aktywizmu ekologicznego, lecz także obywatelskiego aktywizmu cyfrowego w ogóle. Tysiące młodych wolontariuszy zmobilizowało się za pośrednictwem Facebooka w dniu 13 czerwca 2015 roku. Celem spotkania było oczyszczanie ulic Tbilisi zalanych w wyniku powodzi i pomoc ludziom dotkniętym katastrofą.

**Słowa kluczowe:** cyfrowy aktywizm ekologiczny, media cyfrowe, media społecznościowe, Facebook, komunikacja ekologiczna.

## Introduction

The environmental issue is one of the global challenges which faces all Countries but for the Georgian media, it is not current or a priority to cover it. This is confirmed by the studies and monitoring carried out on this topic in the Georgian media. According to the results of the first media monitoring conducted in 2012, the Georgian media was rarely interested in environmental issues (problems) and this had mostly a campaign character<sup>1</sup>.

An American researcher Prof. Freedman who conducted the study on the coverage of environmental issues in Georgian media mentioned that, “despite major ecological challenge [...], news organizations in Georgia provide little environmental coverage to their audiences.”<sup>2</sup> As he emphasized, it should be explained with four main reasons: shortcomings of journalists and news organizations; access to information and news sources; lack of priority; and lack of public demand<sup>3</sup>.

A recent study on this topic, which was conducted by Westminster Foundation, identifies 7 challenges and gaps why climate and environmental issues are covered by Georgian media less and superficially: “lack of priority; lack of effective training; Awareness, sensitivity, and basic climate literacy; Information sources and access to public information; Limited specialization of journalists; Engagement with different stakeholders; Lack of resources.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T. Izoria, *Media Coverage of Environmental Protection Issues*, MDF, 2012, (available in Georgian) [https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//Garemos\\_dacviti\\_sakitxebis\\_gashukeba\\_qartul\\_mediashi.pdf](https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//Garemos_dacviti_sakitxebis_gashukeba_qartul_mediashi.pdf) (accessed on: 20.09.2024).

<sup>2</sup> E. Freedman, *Not a priority: Barriers to environmental reporting in the Republic of Georgia*, “Applied Environmental Education & Communication” 2021, No. 20(2).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> N. Janashia, G. Gverdsiteli, L. Kavtaradze, “*Capacity Challenges, Gaps and Needs Assessment of Georgian Media for Improved Climate and Environmental Reporting*”. Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD). Tbilisi, 2022 <https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/media-coverage-climate-change-and-environmental-issues> (accessed on: 20.09.2024).

In the era of digital media when the way of spreading information has been changed, it is interesting how environmental communication is used in order to engage audience in Georgia. So, the goal of this research is to show the results of the study of the role of social media platforms in the digital environmental activism as an example of Georgia.

Based on this goal, the research has two main tasks – the first involves the study of environmental social media groups, and the second, the analysis of qualitative interviews conducted with active users.

## Literature review

Over the last few years there are a few studies which discuss digital environmental activism. Pickerill examined relationship between the tactics and strategies of the environmental activism movements in UK and their use of computer mediated communication<sup>5</sup>.

As Thaler and his co-authors mentioned, “the communication opportunities offered by the still relatively young blog and social networking platforms have created new strategies for environmental activism and will likely create more in the future.”<sup>6</sup>

As Hindmarsh and Calibeo emphasized, social and digital media are already assisting environmental movements to participate in pressure politics more successfully<sup>7</sup>.

Jacqmarcq investigated the connections between environmental activism and technologies and according to his research, “the emergence of digital technologies has impacted the environmental movement by increasing the speed and scope of its messages worldwide.”<sup>8</sup> Kaur and Chahal examined in their study social media usage, environmental concerns, and characteristics that promote pro-environmental behavior among users<sup>9</sup>.

Kavada & Specht<sup>10</sup> investigated the ways in which environmental movements use digital mapping and visual storytelling to plan events, manage their membership, and increase public awareness. These technologies, which range from digital mapping to livestreaming, Instagram to hashtags, assist in forming narratives and enable movements to communicate with one another beyond barriers and concerns.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Pickerill, *Cyberprotest: Environmental activism online*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2003.

<sup>6</sup> A.D. Thaler, K.A. Zelnio, A. Freitag, R. MacPherson, D. Shiffman, H. Bik, M.C. Goldstein, C. McClain *Digital environmentalism: tools and strategies for the evolving online ecosystem. Environmental leadership*, “A reference handbook” 2012, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> R. Hindmarsh, D.L. Calibeo, *The potential of new and social media for environmental activism*, ed. S. Miniti, “Sociotechnical Environment” 2017, Milano, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> M. Jacqmarcq, *Environmental activism in the digital age*, “Flux: International Relations Review” 2021, No. 11(1), p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> A. Kaur, H.S. Chahal, *Role of social media in increasing environmental issue awareness*, “Researchers World” 2018, No. 9(1), pp. 19–27.

<sup>10</sup> A. Kavada, D. Specht, *Environmental movements and digital media*. “In The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Movements” 2022, Routledge, pp. 538–551.

Social media users can influence changes in the environmental sector on a variety of topics and broaden the public's reach<sup>11</sup>. As Sherman<sup>12</sup> et. al. as well as Finjan<sup>13</sup> noted, the rise of social movements addressing environmental issues has been strongly tied to the function of social media, which has encouraged users to become more politically aware and involved than ever.

Some authors named environmental activists as an “eco-influencers”,<sup>14</sup> it is also interesting, the emergence of term “green-fluencers”. “Recently, “green” influencers (“greenfluencers”), who post content on the topic of sustainability, have emerged”<sup>15</sup>.

In another study, which discusses environmental protection communication on the example of Instagram, according to the authors, that social media activism depends on personal and visual storytelling, as well as proactive activities, to involve the public in sustainable and cost-effective solutions to the environmental crisis<sup>16</sup>. In environmental activism, there are two types of the digital activism: “fast activism”<sup>17</sup> and “slacktivism” as a slow, passive activism<sup>18</sup>; “Slacktivism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is difficult to assess how important environmental issues really are to individuals who join online communities. On the other hand, ease of integration is important for environmental movements”<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Sharma, H.G. Gosai, V. Singh, *Role of Global Media and Social Media in Raising Environmental Issues* [in:] *Environmental Activism and Global Media: Perspective from the Past, Present and Future 2024*, eds. P. Singh, B. Ao, Dr Medhavi, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham 2024, pp. 99–115.

<sup>12</sup> A. Scherman, S. Valenzuela, S. Rivera. *Youth environmental activism in the age of social media: the case of Chile (2009–2019)*, “Journal of Youth Studies” 2022, No. 25(6), pp. 751–770.

<sup>13</sup> D. Finjan, *The Role of Social Media – Led Environmental Activism: An Exploration of Environmental Activism Targeting Fast Fashion on TikTok* (Doctoral dissertation, Université d'Ottawa| University of Ottawa), 2024.

<sup>14</sup> G. San Cornelio, S. Martorell, E. Ardèvol, *Environmental Influencers on Instagram: Connections and Frictions Between Activism, Lifestyles and Consumption*, „AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research” 2021, <https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/12238/10420> (accessed on: 20.09.2024).

<sup>15</sup> H. Knupfer, A. Neureiter, J. Matthes, *From social media diet to public riot? Engagement with “greenfluencers” and young social media users’ environmental activism*, “Computers in Human Behavior” 2023, 139:107527.

<sup>16</sup> G. San Cornelio, S. Martorell, E. Ardèvol, *It is the Voice of the Environment that Speaks, Digital Activism as an Emergent Form of Environmental Communication*, “Environmental Communication” 2024, No. 18(4), pp. 375–389.

<sup>17</sup> S. Harlow, D. Harp, *Collective action on the Web: A cross-cultural study of social networking sites and online and offline activism in the United States and Latin America*, “Information, communication & society” 2012, No. 15(2), pp. 196–216.

<sup>18</sup> A. Delfanti, A. Arvidsson. *Introduction to digital media*, John Wiley & Sons, New York 2019.

<sup>19</sup> A.D. Thaler, K.A. Zelnio, A. Freitag, R. MacPherson, D. Shiffman, H. Bik, M.C. Goldstein, C. McClain, *Digital environmentalism...*, pp. 364–373.

As Hoang emphasized, “social media cannot replace traditional activism methods, but to be used in combination with activism protests.”<sup>20</sup> Saikia and Hazarika<sup>21</sup> discussed challenges and opportunities of environmental activism in the digital age. Baran & Stoltenberg discussed in their mixed-methods systematic literature review and they highlighted the ideas, methodologies, and empirical foci of research on digital environmental/climate activism<sup>22</sup>.

Some studies discuss digital environmental activism in different countries. Tuli and Danosh presented example on India;<sup>23</sup> Sherman et. al. analyzed case of Chile<sup>24</sup>, Ermolaeva et. al. discussed Russian case<sup>25</sup>; Susanto et. al., studied Indonesian case<sup>26</sup>; etc., But this kind of research has not been conducted in Georgia, which emphasizes novelty and actuality of this study.

## Methodology

This exploratory study draws upon on a qualitative approach. The data used for this study were collected by two methods: *qualitative content analysis* of digital environmental activists’ pages on Facebook and the *semi-structured interviews* with active users of the social media platforms.

For the qualitative content analysis were selected two most popular pages on Facebook: “My City Kills”<sup>27</sup> (135.000 like and 254.000 followers) and “The Problems of my City”<sup>28</sup> (open page with 49.100 members). This decision is explained by their popularity. Both groups have a one owner and despite the existence of other Facebook groups and pages (“The Greens Movement of Georgia”<sup>29</sup> has 7.000 like and 7.600 followers;

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<sup>20</sup> P. Hoang, *The role of social media in modern environmental activism* <https://tippiphuong-hoang.wordpress.com/2016/09/09/the-role-of-social-media-in-modern-environmental-activism/> (accessed on: 24.09.2024).

<sup>21</sup> P.P. Saikia, S. Hazarika, *Construction of Environmental Activism in the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities*, „Environmental Activism and Global Media: Perspective from the Past, Present and Future” 2024, pp. 157–182.

<sup>22</sup> Z. Baran, D. Stoltenberg, *Tracing the emergent field of digital environmental and climate activism research: A mixed-methods systematic literature review*, “Environmental Communication” 2023, No. 17(5), p. 466.

<sup>23</sup> N. Tuli, A. Danish, *Construction of natures and protests on Instagram: A study of virtual environmental activism in India during the COVID-19 pandemic*, “Networking Knowledge” 2021, No. 14(2), pp. 160–191.

<sup>24</sup> A. Scherman, S. Valenzuela, S. Rivera, *Youth environmental activism in the age of social media: the case of Chile (2009–2019)*, “Journal of Youth Studies” 2022, No. 25(6), pp. 751–770.

<sup>25</sup> P. Ermolaeva, E. Yu, O. Basheva, *Digital environmental activism as the new form of environmental participation*, “Sotsiologicheskoye obozreniye” 2020, No. 19(3), pp. 376–408.

<sup>26</sup> N. Susanto, M.H. Thamrin, *Environmental Activism and Cyber-advocacy on social media: A Case Study from Indonesia*, “JKAP Jurnal Kebijakan dan Administrasi Publik” 2021, No. 25(2), pp. 148–166.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064883552283> (accessed on: 30.09.2024).

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/433242727252688> (accessed on: 30.09.2024).

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100066990818971&sk=about> (accessed on: 30.09.2024).

“Green Alternative”<sup>30</sup> – 32.000 like and 33.000 followers; “Mtwaneebi (Greens)”<sup>31</sup> – 10.000 like and 12.000 followers; etc.), which post about environmental pollution, deforestation, logging, as well as planting trees, cleaning the environment, other facts, there are only two cases when citizens actively unite on the social networking platform Facebook – the movement “My City Kills” (“ჩემი ქალაქი მკლავს”) and “Problems of My City”.

That was the reason for the selection of these 2 group and page for the study. The research objects were posts; photos and videos.

The following categorizations and codes were used for the qualitative content analysis:

- I. air: 1.air pollution; 2.air measurement; 3. vehicle exhaust; 4. etc.
- II. water: 1. safety of drinking water in Tbilisi; 2. safety of drinking water in the regions; 3. etc.
- III. soil: 1. soil pollution; 2. household waste problem; 3. building construction waste problem; 4. etc.
- IV. other environmental topics.

As it was mentioned above, for the research was used another qualitative method as well – the semi-structured interviews with Facebook users. At the whole 23 semi-structured interviews were taken from 1 September till the end of December 2023. As for the selection, purposive sampling was used. 17 interviews were taken online (using Facebook Messenger) and 6 – face to face in Tbilisi, Capital City of Georgia.

From the 23 respondents 3 respondents were digital environmental activists and other – volunteers, members of most popular Facebook group “My City Kills” and “Problems of My City.”

As for the research questions, these are the following:

RQ1. What is the role of the digital media in environmental activism?

RQ2.Which type of the activism is used by Georgian digital environmental activists?

## **Main results**

### **Main findings of semi-structured interviews**

As most of the interviewed respondents think, the issue of environmental protection is not relevant for the Georgian media and they only cover current news.

The Georgian media covers environmental problems only when the impact on the environment is very obvious and natural disasters have ended with victims..(One of the respondents).

The media often follows the agenda of what is happening at that moment, and every minute we have to live surrounded by a lot of news. Consequently, the media also mostly chooses

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/greenalt> (accessed on: 30.09.2024).

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/mtsvaneebi> (accessed on: 30.09.2024).

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on the actual issue of that moment, therefore, other important topics, for example, environmental protection, sometimes do not get into the media's attention (One of the respondents).

As it was showed by the qualitative research, most of the questioned respondents think that digital media has a crucial and significant role in terms of strengthening the digital environmental activism:

Digital media has a huge role in environmental activism, because it actively invades people's daily lives, it is through social media that we learn where and what is happening (One of the respondents).

In digital media, it is much easier to plan various activities and announce events. A number of such activities were planned in the direction of environmental protection, for example, one of them was a cleaning campaign, which many citizens joined, like me. The information was spread through digital platforms and that's how the story reached people (One of the respondents).

As they mentioned, it is also possible to produce and distribute various video clips, and it is also possible to spread information about various activities through cards. And the role of digital media in terms of environmental education is also quite large. The media should promote the dissemination of accurate and useful information about environmental protection.

As it was revealed by the study, mainly Facebook platform is used by digital activists. On the Facebook there are some pages and groups but last time TikTok appears too.

Facebook remains one of the most popular social networks in Georgia, and Georgian environmental protection volunteers also use this platform.

Although Facebook is more common, TikTok has recently become quite popular, where videos about environmental protection are posted. Yesterday I came across one of the similar videos about climate change, where it was briefly and quite informatively explained what the so-called climate change and global warming means and why it is dangerous, these brief reels are very useful... (One of the respondents).

What types of activism is used by volunteers? As revealed by this research, activism is not very active, it's more passive because they are active in social media, but they don't join in any action in the Streets.

Digital activism has recently become more active, which was caused by the popularity of social media. Any activist, volunteer or organization can share their opinion or plan a campaign using online platforms. (One of the respondents).

Quite often, they publish the facts of environmental pollution, deforestation, as well as logging, environmental cleaning, etc.

They are active, they mainly plan events, they spread similar information online. Recently, the preparation of videos in this direction has become relevant. Activists also spread news on their social platforms and also use official online media pages to spread information promptly. Cooperation between them is very important” (One of the respondents).

Respondents emphasized that, social media campaigns are sometimes very effective.

For example, the protests started against the construction of Namakhvan Power Station, were initially spread through social media, and the results are visible. The construction of this Electric Power Station was stopped. The problem of the transfer of Racha forests has also been solved, also thanks to the activity of social media (One of the respondents).

However, as research participants noted, volunteer activity is mostly limited to signing electronic petitions, setting up avatars’ frames, hashtags, uploading photos or videos to Facebook groups, which are related to one or another environmental problem.

As it was revealed by qualitative interviews, if social media activities and campaigns are not reduced, public awareness will be affected and problems will be solved.

As the questioned respondents noticed, despite the existence of environmental groups or pages on Facebook, activism is still passive. Most of them emphasized that it was the only case of manifestation of not only environmental activism, but also civil digital activism in general, when thousands of young volunteers mobilized through Facebook on June 13, 2015, to clean the environment of Tbilisi affected by the flood and help people affected by the disaster.

### **Main findings of qualitative analysis of social media pages**

As it was revealed by this study of Facebook groups and pages, over 5 years, there are up to 15 thousand solved problems. Social activists who strengthened the public desire to save the capital city. These young people, with the help of the public, talk about the main problems which worry everyone and try to find the ways to solve them every day – The movement “My City Kills” appeared 5 years ago.

Activists of this page demanded the replacement of yellow minibuses and taxis in order to reduce emissions in the city. And now they are fighting to eliminate ecological and social problems, to improve the quality of air, food and water. From its start to the present day, their team has been constantly working to solve pressing problems for society. This is a voluntary movement. They do everything voluntarily. At this stage, 35 people from different professions, from students to lecturers, are united in the team. The founder of this movement is a public relations and marketing specialist. He is not an ecologist by profession, simply, this situation and life made him decide go in this direction.

This movement uses the experience gained in the process of work to strengthen environmental communication, to raise awareness – to give a public lecture in various directions, make a presentation at the schools, etc.



As a result of analyzing the short videos and photos in the posts in these Facebook groups, I identified the following topics:

- Air: air pollution; air measurement; vehicle exhaust; request to ban dry processing of stone;
- Water resources: how safe is water in Tbilisi or the regions; Cleaning of rivers that connect to drinking water by volunteers;
- Soil pollution, household waste problem; the problem of construction waste; Cleanup of construction debris in the vicinity of the Tbilisi Sea area;
- Planting trees near the Tbilisi Sea;
- Actions against illegal constructions and ongoing constructions in parks and recreational areas;
- The so-called Eco-influencer – recording of videos by famous people.

As it turned out of the qualitative content analysis of these groups, it was revealed that not only the activists of this movement, but also the volunteers of the group post photos or videos related to specific facts.

Although the activity is passive and only a small number of people go to the specific actions planned through social media, the role of social media is important. On the one hand, in some cases after being tagged in the Facebook group, these specific problems are solved by the relevant authorities and on the other hand, they raise public awareness on environmental protection issues.

## Conclusions and discussions

According to the results of this study, the role of social media platforms is very crucial on the one hand, in terms of digital environmental activism and on the other hand, in terms of the strengthening of environmental education.

However, it was revealed by semi-structured interviews, slacktivism is mainly observed in Georgian social media platforms, when people try to express their positions with electronic petitions, by avatar frames or discussing the posts, using hashtags but in the most cases, without solving problems. This causes critical attitudes.

The results of the study showed that, digital environmental activism is not very active movement in Georgia but volunteers are trying to use different campaigns and strategies in order to raise public awareness on climate and environmental protection and on the other hand, to draw the attention of competent people to solve these specific problems. And thus, the role of social media is evidently increasing day by day.

So, this study outlined advantages as well disadvantages of digital environmental activism. As a positive side explored that it can mobilize digital activists and users with the innovative tools of social media platforms, as well strengthening of environmental education.

As a negative side is passive activism because these digital tools can mobilize of users, but the negative side is that while it can mobilize users, it does not result in large-scale civil protest.

The limit of this study was the fact that it was focused only to study Facebook groups because it is the most popular social media platform in Georgia, but Instagram and TikTok becoming more and more popular with the new generation, probably environmental movements will also use these social media platforms to attract and engage young people.

For Future research could be interesting explored in more details the role of social media on environment protection for the different platforms and by extending this study, it would be also interesting to analyze the similarities and differences of strategies and campaigns, and the opportunities for further development of digital environmental activism.

Also, for further studies could be expanded with comparative studies to not only examine the issue at the national level, but also based on examples from several countries.

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