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Gandhi in the age of Social Media: Digital Activism, Misinformation and the challenge of Peaceful Resistance in Online Spaces

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Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance has influenced global movements for over a century. However, in today's digital era, his principles encounter unique challenges. This paper explores how Gandhi's core ideas of Satyagraha, ahimsa, and moral persuasion translate to social media activism while facing issues like algorithmic amplification, misinformation, polarisation, and digital violence. By analysing contemporary movements and case studies, it argues that while Gandhi's ideas remain relevant for digital activism, they must be adapted to tackle the specific challenges of online spaces. The conflict between Gandhi's focus on truth and the engagement-driven nature of algorithms creates a critical dilemma for modern activists. This paper examines both the opportunities and limitations of Gandhian nonviolence in a world where algorithms influence discourse, misinformation spreads rapidly, and peaceful movements are exposed to new kinds of digital violence.

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1. Introduction:

Gandhi's legacy endures in unique ways over time. His image is on currency and monuments, his quotes feature on inspirational posters, and his name is often used to assert moral authority. But what does Gandhi truly represent in 2024 and the future? More importantly, how do his ideas align when we're organizing protests via Twitter, building movements through TikTok, and striving for social change in spaces engineered for engagement over enlightenment?

The urgency of the question arises because social media has established itself as the main space for social movements. From the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter to climate activism and farmer protests in India, digital platforms now serve as the backbone of modern activism. However, these platforms function on principles vastly different from the world Gandhi knew. Algorithms tend to favour outrage over subtlety. Misinformation spreads rapidly, and echo chambers deepen existing beliefs. The concept of peaceful persuasion through moral clarity becomes more complex when messages compete with millions of others, each vying for visibility on these platforms.

1.1. Gandhi's philosophy is built on key principles: Satyagraha (truth-force), ahimsa (non-violence), swaraj (self-governance), and the idea that moral persuasion can turn enemies into allies. These concepts arose from specific historical contexts and were practiced through direct, face-to-face actions like salt marches, sit-ins, and boycotts, which demanded physical presence and created powerful moral arguments. In contrast, social media activism is different—it's more dispersed, often anonymous, mediated by algorithms, and governed by different power structures. This paper argues that Gandhi's ideas remain highly relevant for digital activism, but only if we recognise both their ongoing strength and their genuine limitations in today's online environment. The question isn't whether Gandhi still matters, but whether his methods can adapt while staying true to their core principles.

1.2. Satyagraha and the problem of algorithmic truth: Gandhi's core philosophy centres on Satyagraha, often called "truth-force" or "soul force." This concept goes beyond simply speaking the truth; it involves living and embodying truth so entirely that the moral legitimacy of one's stance becomes unmistakable. For Gandhi, truth was neither abstract nor relative but a powerful force capable of moving mountains through consistent, non-violent resistance rooted in absolute moral clarity. A prime example is the 1930 Salt March, where Gandhi walked 240 miles to the Arabian Sea to produce salt—an act of civil disobedience against the British salt monopoly. The significance wasn't just in making salt but in the moral clarity of the act. An ageing man choosing to challenge an unjust law through direct action made the message clear. The images spread widely, the story became iconic, and ordinary Indians immediately understood the importance. There was no ambiguity—no room for manipulation or deception. The truth was embodied in the action itself.

Digital activism attempts a similar goal but faces inherent contradictions. Hashtags like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #FarmersProtest have rallied millions by condensing complex issues into shareable messages. Videos of police brutality online echo Gandhi's Salt March by making injustice visceral and undeniable. A 9-minute clip of George Floyd's death conveyed more impact than many academic papers on systemic racism. Thus, social media has democratised documenting injustice and made it impossible for the powerful to ignore.

Here's where the situation becomes complex. Social media platforms prioritise engagement over accuracy. They promote content that attracts attention, whether it's deep moral messages or false information. The algorithms don't differentiate between authentic justice movements and organised disinformation efforts. Both types of content are boosted if they attract clicks, comments, and shares. This creates a core conflict with Satyagraha, which relies on the clear recognition of truth.

Activists have creatively adapted Gandhian principles to online spaces. Digital campaigns for climate change, gender justice, and Labour rights have employed hashtags to foster collective awareness around specific issues. The #MeToo movement, though decentralized, was fundamentally rooted in Satyagraha: women publicly sharing their truths, establishing an undeniable record of sexual harassment and assault that could not be ignored or dismissed. The repetitive nature of these accounts became a form of evidence; when thousands of women recount similar experiences, the pattern itself serves as proof. Likewise, the 2019-2020 farmer protests in India, mainly organised offline, gained significant visibility through social media documentation. Videos of farmers marching, enduring harsh weather, and confronting police violence circulated globally, drawing international attention. Activists used social media to challenge government narratives and mainstream media dismissals. Thus, social media became a tool for amplifying Satyagraha rather than replacing it, magnifying what was already unfolding on the ground.

1.3. Ahimsa in digital spaces: redefining non-violence: Gandhi's ahimsa, commonly understood as non-violence, extended beyond merely refraining from physical force. It involved a holistic commitment to reducing harm: not injuring animals, conserving resources, avoiding exploitation, and importantly, not nurturing hatred. Ahimsa was a proactive principle; rather than the absence of violence, it emphasised fostering compassion, empathising with others' viewpoints, and keeping the door open for reconciliation.\

This raises specific challenges in digital environments where verbal and psychological cruelty are widespread. Online harassment, cyberbullying, doxxing, and coordinated hate campaigns fall into a grey area between Gandhi's strict definition of non-violence and what we might term 'epistemic violence'—the harm caused by silencing, misrepresentation, or dehumanisation through language. Despite this, many modern digital movements strive to embody ahimsa principles. Feminist online movements, though sometimes harsh in their critique of patriarchy, often prioritise education rather than punishment. Climate activists generally avoid violent language, focusing instead on moral persuasion. Mental health campaigns promote compassion while addressing systemic issues. These movements understand that even when highlighting injustice, they can do so in ways that maintain human dignity.

Challenges arise when movements engage with dishonest actors or when algorithms favour sensational content. A thoughtful, compassionate critique risks being overshadowed by more sensational messages. A movement advocating for ahimsa could see its hashtags hijacked by trolls or its message warped by coordinated disinformation campaigns. The structure of social media itself promotes escalation, drama, and confrontation. In response, some activist groups have developed ethical guidelines for digital activism. These emphasise calling-in rather than calling-out, shifting conversations to private messages instead of public shaming, and fostering spaces of compassion even while addressing injustice. Such communities aim to apply Gandhian non-violence principles to digital activism, recognising that social media as a tool can encourage violence, but the movement can choose to resist.

1.4. Collective mobilization without hierarchy: Gandhi's innovative approach demonstrated that non-violent resistance could grow exponentially. He proved that everyday people, united without a central authority, could challenge powerful empires. The salt march, for example, was not led by a single command but inspired countless individuals to engage in civil disobedience based on common values. This decentralized, principle-driven activism was groundbreaking. Today, social media has shown it can effectively support this kind of dispersed activism. Movements like Black Lives Matter explicitly chose distributed leadership over hierarchical structures. Anyone can initiate a protest locally, join a larger movement, and act independently without central approval. This concept reflects Gandhi's belief in empowering ordinary people to act in alignment with shared principles without needing constant oversight**.**

The 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, the Arab Spring protests, the 2017 Women's March, and ongoing climate strikes all utilised social media's power to coordinate actions across widespread networks. A single compelling image or message can go viral worldwide, inspiring similar actions in various cities without direct coordination. The hashtag serves as the organising core, and the shared message acts as the connective tissue. This decentralised, non-hierarchical approach offers real benefits for upholding ahimsa principles. Hierarchical, centralised movements can develop internal violence, where the leader's directives become law, dissent is seen as betrayal, and the movement begins to mirror the oppressive systems it opposes. Conversely, Decentralised movements based on shared principles tend to sustain more genuine non-violence since they lack a single authority demanding obedience or engaging in corrupt compromises. Nonetheless, this distributed structure also exposes movements to risks of infiltration, manipulation, and hijacking

by bad actors. Without clear leadership and boundaries, a movement can compromise its integrity, as malicious participants might adopt its identity while violating its core principles. This challenge remains the most significant obstacle to preserving Gandhian non-violence within digital, decentralised movements.

1.5. The misinformation crisis and Satyagraha's foundation: The core challenge is that Satyagraha relies on the power of truth. Gandhi believed that through consistent, non-violent affirmation of the truth and highlighting its moral importance, people would eventually recognise and accept it. However, this idea falters when misinformation spreads faster than factual information, algorithms prioritise falsehoods for engagement, and people live in separate informational worlds. The covid-19 pandemic made this clear: false vaccine claims quickly spread on social media, while accurate data lagged behind. This wasn't simply a matter of honest disagreement; it was deliberate disinformation aimed at sowing doubt and confusion. No amount of Satyagraha—persistent, truthful effort—could overcome the imbalance created by coordinated disinformation and decentralised fact-checking.

The 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections exhibited comparable patterns. Coordinated disinformation efforts sought to weaken democratic engagement. Bots spread divisive content, while foreign entities manipulated stories. Truth-focused activists were overshadowed by others whose aim was not truth but power, with confusion itself serving their objectives.

Gandhi's method relied on a common informational space, where both British and Indians shared a similar understanding of reality. Disputes mainly concerned interpretation and interests, not basic facts. Social media, however, has fractured this shared reality into multiple different ones. Millions believe conflicting facts about climate change, elections, public health, and crime—not because they've reasoned differently, but because their feeds present them with different information. This poses a challenge for Satyagraha: if truth itself becomes fragmented and disputed, how can one practice truth-force? If opponents reject your fundamental facts, how do you persuade them through moral clarity? Digital activists dedicated to Gandhi's principles must find ways to address this core breakdown of shared reality.

Some groups have responded by concentrating more on grassroots, hyper-local organising to address misinformation directly through conversations within specific communities. Others have adopted educational strategies, teaching media literacy and critical thinking skills. Additionally, some movements have tried to expose and counter disinformation campaigns head-on, although this approach demands substantial resources and technical skills that many grassroots movements do not possess.

1.6. Polarisation and the destruction of intermediary spaces: Gandhi's vision of social change relied on creating spaces where enemies could see each other's humanity. The Salt March succeeded partly because it fostered a visceral encounter between coloniser and colonised. British soldiers faced Indians willing to endure beatings rather than submit, and the willingness to accept suffering without violence moved people. Over time, it chipped away at the wall of indifference. Social media promised unprecedented connection and understanding but instead fuelled polarisation. Algorithms favour content that provokes strong emotions like outrage, fear, or tribalism, as it boosts engagement—usually through content that confirms existing beliefs and sparks reactions. Consequently, people tend to interact only with those who agree with them, viewing opponents as enemies rather than fellow humans with motives they can understand. This contradicts Gandhi's philosophy, which depends on seeing opponents as individuals who can be persuaded or understood, maintaining their human dignity even when opposing their actions. Yet, social media algorithms tend to promote dehumanisation, reducing complex people to stereotypes, caricatures, and enemies.

The polarization also affects tactics. When online environments turn purely adversarial, upholding the non-violent principle becomes more challenging. If your opponent is seen as an

outright enemy—someone to be defeated rather than persuaded—non-violence might be mistaken for weakness. This leads to justifications for harsh language, mockery, and the belief that the usual rules don't apply to those behaving badly. Warfare logic begins to influence behaviour.

Contemporary activists have sought to counteract this polarization through diverse approaches. Some prioritize bridge-building and seek common ground, even with those holding fundamental disagreements. Others focus on narrative efforts to tell stories that humanize individuals often depicted as caricatures. Additionally, some establish spaces specifically intended for dialogues across differences, though such spaces are still rare and fragile, especially on conflict-oriented platforms.

The paradox is that efforts to bridge divides can sometimes backfire. Opponents of a movement may pretend to be allies, participate in seemingly sincere conversations, and then use the information they gather to spread disinformation. This makes trust risky. In this way, digital spaces can undermine Gandhian principles by promoting suspicion and hindering genuine dialogue.

2. Digital Violence and New Forms of harm: Gandhi's concept of ahimsa prohibited violence, which historically primarily referred to physical harm. The tools of violence included fists, weapons, and sometimes structural harm through economic systems. In digital spaces, new forms of violence have emerged: doxxing (publishing private information to enable harassment), coordinated harassment campaigns, revenge porn, and psychological torture via persistent humiliation. While these digital acts can sometimes target powerful institutions—such as exposing corporate misconduct or government corruption—they are often weaponised against vulnerable groups like women, minorities, and activists. For example, a woman speaking out about sexual harassment may face organized online retaliation, and advocates for marginalized communities risk doxxing and targeted harassment. Movements committed to ahimsa face difficult choices: should they participate in digital spaces where violence is widespread and risk corruption, or refuse to engage and leave these platforms to bad actors? Alternatively, they might develop defensive strategies by investigating perpetrators, reporting coordinated attacks, and avoiding becoming perpetrators of digital violence themselves.

Some activist communities have responded by developing a nuanced understanding of online harassment as a control tactic. They have established support networks for victims, documented coordinated attack patterns to show that what appears to be grassroots criticism is often orchestrated, and collaborated with platforms to remove accounts involved in harassment. In doing so, they aim to practice ahimsa while protecting their communities from digital violence. Other activists have wrestled with the ethics of doxing, especially when targeting individuals they believe are causing serious harm. Some argue doxing is justified against corporate executives responsible for environmental damage or government officials enabling violence. Others contend that doxing still breaches ahimsa principles by intentionally subjecting people to harassment and can harm social movements by portraying them as violent or vengeful.

These are real dilemmas without straightforward solutions. Gandhi's philosophy doesn't entirely equip us for a world where harm can happen instantly across the globe, where coordinated harassment can destroy a person's social identity, and where violence is often covert and hard to detect.

2.1. Authenticity, co-option, and bad-faith actors: Gandhi's personal authenticity was vital to his movement's influence. He lived by his principles—wearing homespun cloth, practising celibacy, and leading a simple life—without any discrepancy between his preachings and actions. This unity of belief and behaviour strengthened his moral authority beyond what empty rhetoric could offer. Today, social media makes authenticity more crucial yet harder to verify. Movements succeed when they seem genuine, originating from real individuals sharing real experiences instead of corporate or government messaging. However, social media also facilitates deception—

bots impersonate people, state actor's craft fake identities, and coordinated fake accounts simulate grassroots support for engineered causes. These issues challenge efforts to embody Gandhi's authentic resistance online. How can activists demonstrate the alignment of belief and practice digitally? How can they preserve integrity amid bots, trolls, and bad-faith actors? How can anyone trust online interactions?

Movements inspired by Gandhi's principles often face co-opting and distortion. Corporations adopt Gandhi images and quotes to appear ethical, despite engaging in labour exploitation. Politicians invoke Gandhi to justify actions he would oppose. Trolls fabricate fake Gandhi quotes to mock non-violent movements. The language and symbols of Gandhian activism become weapons against those movements. This weaponisation is partly inevitable, as opponents always try to discredit and distort social movements. However, social media's algorithms can rapidly amplify false or misleading information, far beyond previous limits. For instance, a false meme claiming Gandhi supported violence can go viral in hours, spreading confusion about Gandhi's true views and the sincerity of modern movements.

3. Synthesis: adapting Gandhi for digital activism: *So how do we proceed? Is Gandhian non-violence viable in digital spaces, or is it a beautiful philosophy rendered obsolete by contemporary technologies and dynamics?*

Gandhi's core principles remain deeply relevant and powerful. His dedication to truth, non-violence, and the belief in human moral transformation offer essential qualities that strategic or cynical activism often lack. Movements rooted in Gandhian values tend to be more sustainable, uphold ethical standards better, and achieve lasting social change more effectively than those focused solely on power. However, the ways these principles are applied must adapt. Digital activists can't simply copy Gandhi's 20th-century methods onto 21st-century platforms without adjustments. Instead, they need to craft new practices that respect Gandhian ideals while tackling modern issues like algorithmic manipulation, misinformation, polarization, and online violence. This requires several things-

First, movements should invest in understanding platform mechanics, algorithm functions, misinformation spread, and how coordinated harassment campaigns operate. This technical literacy must be combined with their commitment to non-violence, using this knowledge to protect communities rather than weaponize it.

Second, they need to strengthen boundaries around who is part of their communities and what behaviours align with their principles. While remaining open and non-violent, movements should clearly stand for their values and reject bad-faith participation. Distributed movements require mechanisms to preserve integrity without centralised authority; shared values and community enforcement are essential.

Third, they must focus on direct relationship-building and community organising alongside digital activism. Social media is a tool, but real transformation occurs through face-to-face interactions, community power-building, and relationships based on trust and shared goals. Social media amplifies but cannot replace these bonds.

Fourth, they should better communicate what Gandhian non-violence truly entails. Distorting Gandhi's philosophy into naive passivity weakens activists today. Non-violence is not weakness; it's a demanding, courageous, and disciplined commitment that requires more strength than violence. Activists must clarify this, rejecting the misconception that non-violence means passive acceptance.

Finally, movements need to embrace experimentation and learning. These challenges are new: practising Satyagraha in algorithmic spaces, maintaining ahimsa amid digital violence, building across polarised informational ecosystems—these questions lack fixed answers. Movements must try new approaches, learn from successes and failures, and refine their strategies continuously.

Conclusions and Suggestions: Gandhi passed away in 1948, murdered by someone who believed he hadn't gone far enough in opposing colonialism. He never encountered the internet, social media, or the specific issues of algorithmic boosting and coordinated digital disinformation. Nonetheless, his essential ideas remain highly relevant. The belief that persistent, truth-based, non-violent resistance can effect monumental change is still valid and not made obsolete by social media. In fact, in a world where military might doesn't solve core problems and legitimacy becomes increasingly important, this insight gains even more significance. You cannot achieve justice solely through force; instead, real progress requires convincing people to work together to build a better society.

The understanding that movements must reflect their core values—where the means are as significant as the ends—and that our approach to opponents influences our moral identity stays vital. Movements that forsake non-violence or resort to dehumanisation and digital violence might achieve tactical wins but risk losing their moral essence.

The idea that ordinary individuals, following shared principles without any central authority, can bring about remarkable change is evident every day on social media. Hashtags have inspired millions, videos have ignited worldwide movements, and everyday people with phones have exposed injustices in ways that have shifted political landscapes. However, Gandhi's philosophy also provides an essential warning about the relationship between means and ends. It emphasizes that achieving just societies requires just methods, that how we treat those in power while opposing their actions is significant, and that preserving our humanity and that of our opponents is fundamental to true liberation.

In the era of social media, digital activism will persist regardless of whether it aligns with Gandhi's legacy. However, movements that deliberately incorporate Gandhian principles—such as upholding truth despite difficulties, practicing non-violence even when violence seems easier, and recognizing opponents as human despite dehumanization—are more likely to foster a just, equitable, and peaceful world that most of us aspire to live in.

Gandhi's significance is unquestionable; the real question is whether we possess the courage and wisdom to truly uphold his principles in an increasingly complex and technologically advanced world. As Gandhi consistently emphasised, this challenge is essentially moral and spiritual in nature. No technology can solve it for us; it is a matter we must address ourselves.

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