

Deepening Democracy Through a Social Movement: Networks, Information Rights, and Online and Offline Activism

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This research studied the dynamics of online and offline activism among networks of organizations and social activists across India involved in the globally recognized Right to Information movement. Our overarching research question examined how a network of organizations and activists grew global, national, and local collective action strength, outreach capacity, and recognition for their grassroots innovations online and offline in a landscape of digital inequality. This qualitative study, which used a purposive sample of activists and organization representatives ($N = 72$) and supplementary data, found that online activism increased in recent years; yet, the movement conducted most of its campaigns offline, with social media used to exercise geographic reach, amplify messaging, and pressure government and corporate interests. The movement built collective strength online and offline through unifying cross-cutting campaigns, innovations, and cross-network alliances with diverse constituents. It also sustained initiatives that built broad-based inclusive relationships across Indian society that became known around the world.

Keywords: information rights, social movements, online and offline activism, India, digital inequality

India is approaching a decade and a half of citizen use of a landmark law (Right to Information Act, 2005) advanced by a globally recognized grassroots social movement that has worked to extend public information rights to citizens across the country. Through requesting and obtaining public records, citizens in the Right to Information (RTI) movement have uncovered small and major cases of corruption. Movement activists run online and offline anticorruption campaigns and other information rights-based initiatives, targeting issues that impact poor or marginalized citizens and others.

One of the movement's latest struggles was against an amendment that would weaken the progressive Right to Information Act (RTIA), a campaign that was carried out over a year. Digitally, activists

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barraged public officials with text messages (Press Trust of India, 2019), a newly launched #DontAmend RTI Twitter campaign (Ranjan, 2019), and a change.org petition with more than 284,600 signatures linked to #SaveRTI. Offline, there were large-scale marches, protests, sit-ins, and meetings with lawmakers.

This study investigates the dynamics of a network of organizations and activists within India's RTI movement and how they grew global, national, and local strategies, and outreach and recognition using online and offline methods. With more than half of the countries in the world having freedom of information (FOI) laws (AccessInfo Europe & Centre for Law and Democracy, 2020), India's collective action citizen approach stands out as among the most innovative. This research explores how grassroots initiatives bridge digital inequality barriers, reaching a wide spectrum of actors ranging from transnational and intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations, to national and state politicians and bureaucracies and to individuals and communities of the most marginalized across India.

Minimal communication research has focused on grassroots collective action related to information rights, which has become a global exemplar for social change activism (Camaj, 2018; Pinto, 2009). Previous interdisciplinary FOI or RTI research has focused on offline regional and global movements among elite actors rather than other sectors of society. Moreover, these movements have propelled information rights onto national agendas for legislative adoption (Pinto, 2009; Relly, 2012) rather than focusing on postadoption initiatives to keep the rights alive through activism and using the legislation across the breadth of society from elites to the most marginalized citizens.

Another line of research has examined media agenda-building between civil society and journalists related to FOI laws (Camaj, 2018; Relly & Pakanati, 2018). Camaj's (2018) work, for example, examines media agenda-building processes between one nongovernmental organization in Bulgaria and journalists in the country.

A thin line of social movement research has focused on class inequalities and other demographics related to digital activism, and most countries studied have been in the West with a few exceptions. Although this strand of online social movement scholarship has investigated inequality in mobilization initiatives (Schradié, 2015), little literature has focused on highly socioeconomically stratified societies (Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Harlow, 2017). Moreover, there is little social movement research that has traced grassroots work that began before online activism became a phenomenon and that exists to the present, using social media along with offline activity to empower citizens from varying levels of power and powerlessness (Schradié, 2015).

Given this dearth of literature connecting social movements, digital inequality, and a wide demographic of social network participants focused on information rights, as in the Indian RTI movement, our overarching research question studies the dynamics of how networks of organizations and activists grew the movement in India and beyond while bridging the chasm of digital inequality. This qualitative research, which does not privilege online activism, builds on social movements and social change literature (Diani, 1997; Gamson, 1988) in general, along with online and offline activism research (Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Lehman Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010; Min, 2010; Schwittay, 2011) and the issue of digital inequality (Earl, Hunt, Garrett, & Dal, 2018; Haight, Quan-Haase, & Corbett, 2014; Harlow, 2017; Schradié, 2011,

2013, 2015, 2018; Van Laer, 2010) in a global context in which most countries with information rights-based legislation are emerging economies. The study uses a constructivist approach to examine dynamics of civil society organization (CSO) and social activist network activity aimed at advancing knowledge, use, and activism around information rights online and offline. It also analyzes ways in which these grassroots groups and social activists connect, defying odds of geographical spread (Mitra, 2017, p. 111) and unifying despite differing economic realities, cultural and educational backgrounds, and occupational paths.

India's Social Movements and Information Rights

The best-known social movement in India is the nine-decade quest for independence from Britain (1857–1947) in which activists pressed for equality and secularism. In postindependence India, collective action¹ campaigns have been carried out over the years to address social injustices. Social movement activity² increased in the 1960s, addressing issues related to farmers, indigenous peoples, industrial workers, human rights, poverty, and the environment (Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Mitra, 2017). India's Right to Information Act was adopted in 2005 after more than a decade of the social movement's struggle with legislation drafts, campaigns, and negotiations dating back to the movement's work in the 1990s (Roy & MKSS Collective, 2018; Singh, 2007).

India's progressive RTI, as citizens call it, contains basic provisions similar to other countries in the world that give rights to citizens to request and obtain information from local, state, and national government. However, there are many reasons to study the movement that has galvanized around information rights in India. Among the more than 125 nations with FOI legislation, the Indian RTIA ties for number seven in the world for its strength in providing citizens with rights to access public information (Access Info Europe & Centre for Law and Democracy, 2020). The legislation and activism around the law has been a global model for other countries because of its rights-based citizen equity component, offering free public records access to the poor and assistance for disabled individuals (Right to Information Act, 2005).

This social movement in India serves as an important case study for a number of reasons, including the rights in the scope of the RTI law; the rapidly rising use of social media in the country; and the nation's population and size, along with the diversity of its citizens' socioeconomic backgrounds, given that, among the country's 29 states, there is immense heterogeneity. The study, which draws on historical accounts of civil society³ and social activist⁴ grassroots work in the years leading up to the adoption of India's RTIA and the early years of the legislation (Roy & MKSS Collective, 2018; Singh, 2007), fills an important gap in the literature related to social movement activity around RTI or FOI legislation, economic and social inequality, and online and offline activism.

¹ *Collective action* is defined as actors coming together "in a variety of ways to coordinate their actions" (Oliver, 1993, p. 293).

² *Social movements* refers to continuous collective actions "outside of legitimated institutions of social power" (Hertog, 2008, p. 1).

³ We define *civil society* as "groups of people who come together to shape rules, affect institutions, and put pressure on elected bodies" (Mitra, 2017, p. 106).

⁴ *Social activist*, a local term, describes those performing activist work around RTI.

Online and Offline Activism and Digital Inequality

Social movement literature has focused on social class inequality, often examining how some form of deprivation drove citizens to participate in initiatives to improve civil rights for those with less power; however, little research links these movements with social media and digital inequality (Schradie, 2015, p. 52), much less information rights. Since the 1990s, there has been academic work focused on those who have been left behind by the digital revolution. However, we argue that privileging technology in research as central to social movements and not acknowledging offline activity can be problematic in some cases. Focusing on "resource-poor" citizens and issues with online political participation may amplify existing inequalities (Min, 2010; Van Laer, 2010, p. 347). As Castells (2007) notes, technology generally is not the heart of social movements. However Harlow and Harp's (2012) study with participants in the United States and Latin America found that online activism was a "precursor to offline activism" and that online sites "were important or very important for organizing, mobilizing, informing, and promoting debate" (pp. 204, 207–208); however, heavy lifting in person was key. Although democratic participation may improve with Internet access, this phenomenon is not distributed equally across socioeconomic groups, making "democratic pluralism promises fall short" (Schradie, 2018, p. 69) for digital activism.

Scant research has focused on social class, inequality, and digital activism (Schradie, 2015, 2018), and only a strand has studied the relationship between online and offline activism of social movements in the Global South (Harlow, 2017). Research on digital inequity goes beyond Internet penetration and online access. A host of socioeconomic factors impacts who uses digital technologies and participates online and who does not (Harlow, 2017; Schradie, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018). Drawing on survey data, Schradie (2011) found a class-based gap among online participants with digital content, an issue that can lead to underrepresentation of working people online, creating an imbalance in perspectives (pp. 145–146). Schradie (2013) also found that educated adults are more likely to post digital content than less educated adults. Other factors related to class, race, age, literacy, quality of online access, gender, caste, or location/geography have led to digital divides, either on the Internet generally or on social media more specifically (Chadha & Harlow, 2015, pp. 675–676; Min, 2010; Schwittay, 2011). However, one study in Canada demonstrated that once access barriers are surmounted with online social networks, income does not predict usage, although education remains a persistent factor related to usage (Haight et al., 2014; Schradie, 2015). Other factors potentially inhibiting online participation that may or may not intersect with socioeconomic classifications include deficits in time, digital skills, and motivation (Lehman Schlozman et al., 2010, p. 488). Research has shown that activists in demonstrations who find out about them online tend to be younger, the most educated, and most politically engaged (Van Laer, 2010).

In studies in North America, women dominated social media use early on (Haight et al., 2014), whereas in India, men are more likely than women to use social media (28% of men use social media, most commonly Facebook and Twitter, and only 11% of women use them) (Poushter, Bishop, & Chwe, 2018). Nonetheless, social media use more than doubled in a five-year period in India from 8% of adults in 2013 to 20% in 2017 (Poushter et al., 2018). Digital divide theory suggests that the gap will eventually dissipate and that the phenomenon is only an early adopter lagged effect related to those with elite backgrounds and eventually other groups will catch up (Schradie, 2012).

The uptick in social media use in India occurred in 2008 during the Mumbai terror attacks, which included many digital eyewitness accounts (Schwittay, 2011, p. 360). Usage grew the following year during India's national election—referred to as India's "first digital election"—in which the now ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, used social networking communities to engage various groups (Schwittay, 2011, p. 362). Yet, it is important to note, in a cross-national survey of 11 emerging economies, India ranked lowest among nations believing that social media give people the ability to provide a meaningful voice in the political process (Smith, Silver, Johnson, Taylor, & Jiang, 2019, p. 4). The heaviest users of the Internet in India are between 18 and 36 years old; moreover, the most educated Indian citizens are five times more likely than less educated individuals to use it (Poushter et al., 2018).

Grassroots movements in India were slow to use the Internet for activism. The year before the launch of this study, Chadha and Harlow (2015) noted "despite the so-called digital revolution, social movements remain relatively absent from the online realm, and traditional grassroots movements have been slow to embrace new digital technologies" (p. 676). Scholars have found that Indian activists had little time to use social networking sites and low digital participation was a key challenge. More than one third (35%) indicated that lack of access to the Internet was an issue and nearly a third (31%) mentioned that lack of technical skills was a barrier (Chadha & Harlow, p. 680). Furthermore, a Pew survey indicated that social media use was 31% among Indian respondents and willingness to debate political issues on social media was 21 percentage points higher for the more educated individuals surveyed than the less educated (Smith et al., 2019). Like Internet penetration, India's smartphone use is lower than many emerging economies, with 20% of adults using social media (Poushter et al., 2018). Others have noted that even with digital divide issues often leaving marginalized groups out, at the very least the digital sphere has provided platforms for issues involving these groups (Chibuwe & Ureke, 2016, p. 1250).

Although there is no question that collective actions have risen globally with the growth of Internet use, it is important to acknowledge that political, societal, legal, economic, cultural, and historical contexts play an important role in the dynamics, processes, and outcomes of online campaigns (Earl et al., 2018, pp. 356–357). We suggest that this would be the case with information rights-based campaigns in richly diverse countries such as India, a nation with 22 official languages, where more than half of the workforce is made up of the working poor (living on \$3.10 a day, Purchasing Power Parity, or US\$1,132 a year), two thirds of its citizens live in rural areas, and where nine of 10 information requesters are men⁵ (World Bank, 2017, 2018). India also has issues with prejudice online and offline against Dalit people, a group formerly known as an "untouchable" caste of oppressed peoples who are discriminated against, even though the constitution outlaws prejudice based on caste. Others from ethnic, tribal, and religious minority groups have been harassed or forced off Twitter by troll armies (Safi, 2018; Soundararajan, 2018). Little research has looked at the issue of social inequality and online and offline activism and how the impact of online openings would not always be dictated by technology but by interplays of historical context; political, economic and sociocultural conditions; and circumstances (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 8). It is clear that social movement mobilization is increasingly enhanced by digital openings and India's growth in online access is steadily rising. It is for all of these reasons that studying online and offline

⁵ Analyses indicate that in one year in which 1 million RTI requests were filed, 8% were from women (Bhardwaj et al., 2015).

activism in the RTI social movement in India is important to understanding the advancement of equity, social change, and ultimately democracy related to information rights.

Method

This research studied networks of organizations and social activists and their online and offline strategies to advance democratic participation and social change through information rights and activism. Our overarching research question studied the dynamics of how these networks grew global, national, and local initiatives; outreach; innovation; and recognition while bridging the chasm of digital inequality. We received institutional approval for the research and constructed a purposive sample of potential study participants to recruit from two publicly available lists. We began with a list from the movement's most far-reaching collective, the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), which included seven co-conveners and 21 members of the Working Committee. The second list was the only publicly available contact list of RTI social activists and CSO representatives ($N = 152$) across India. We also employed a snowball method. As Figure 1 demonstrates, these two lists covered a majority of states in India.

We developed a 35-item questionnaire to study how networks formed and mobilized and how organizations and social activists engaged online and offline with one another and various other publics at the local, state, national, and transnational levels. We recruited CSO representatives and RTI social activists who were based in 17 cities and towns in the northern, central, southern, western, and eastern regions of the country. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were audio recorded with permission of participants between October 12, 2016, and June 4, 2017. We used social media accounts, organizational reports, and other information to supplement interview data beyond the fieldwork period. The audio recordings in English and Hindi were transcribed, or translated and transcribed, by trained Indian research assistants. The study used open coding to analyze the data. Study participants are identified by bracketed numbers in the Findings section.

Sixty-one CSO representatives (84.7%) and 11 social activists (15.3%) were interviewed ($N = 72$). More than three fourths of the participants ($n = 54$, 75%) identified as male and 25% identified as female ($n = 18$). Respondents were 20 to 85 years of age (mean age = 47.03 years, median = 44.5 years, $SD = 14.41$). The majority of participants had a bachelor's degree or higher education (92.7%), three participants (5.5%) had a high school diploma, and one participant (1.8%) did not have a high school education.



Figure 1. Study participant locations and geographic spread of the movement.

Findings

Social movements generally grow out of multiple spheres and often are established through “collaborative networks,” which may be disparate groups working together (Lim, 2018). This study investigated those online and offline associations with the Indian RTI movement, which includes networks at the global, regional, national, state, and local levels (see Figure 2). Social movement networks exhibit a range of characteristics that may be horizontal (nonhierarchical) or vertical (hierarchical) and may have shared or contested goals (Castells, 2007). Activists across India describe the movement as nonhierarchical; yet, those most involved with online and offline national-level campaigns and initiatives tend to be movement “superactivists” with the most social capital who move in circles that include political leaders, governments, educated elites, academics, middle-class organizers, and the poor.

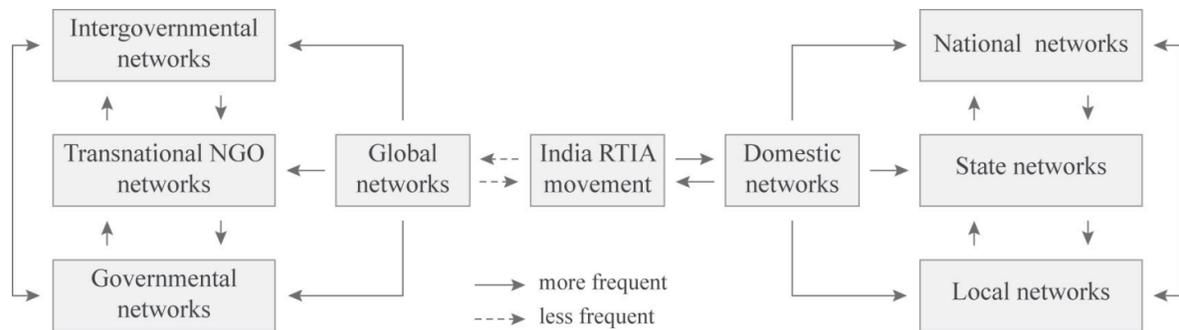


Figure 2. Global and domestic network interaction in the India Right to Information movement sphere. RTIA = Right to Information Act; NGO = nongovernmental organization.

Unlike many emerging economies that have adopted FOI/RTI laws after being pressured by supranational organizations to do so (Relly, 2012), India's RTI movement is homegrown. At the same time, as Figure 2 demonstrates, a limited number of superactivists and organization representatives in the Indian RTI movement have participated in global and regional information rights-based initiatives that advance democratic governance, including the U.N. Convention Against Corruption Coalition and fora for the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Movement principals are on advisory boards or are project partners with transnational nongovernmental organizations, such as the Open Society Institute and Transparency International [101–107, 111], and regional networks, including the South Asia Right to Information Advocates Network, set up by RTI advocates from India [104]. A movement leader noted, "We have partnerships with many campaigns on Right to Information in the region. . . . Thanks to Internet and e-mail, there is a lot of communication that happens" [104].

Although the social movement around India's RTI legislation and related activism is known globally, our study found that most of the movement's on- and offline focus is domestic. The movement has included elites, but largely comprises nonelites, with a grassroots constituency of hundreds of organizations and individuals from diverse backgrounds across the country. The heart of the movement takes on information rights-based issues for citizens, including the most marginalized.

National Networks

The study identified at least eight areas that the movement collectively galvanizes around online and offline to advance participative democracy and social change through numerous channels for cultivating information rights. Figure 3 shows the movement's key strategies identified in the study, all of which have an online and offline component, and generally include individuals from a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, depending on individual and group capacities.

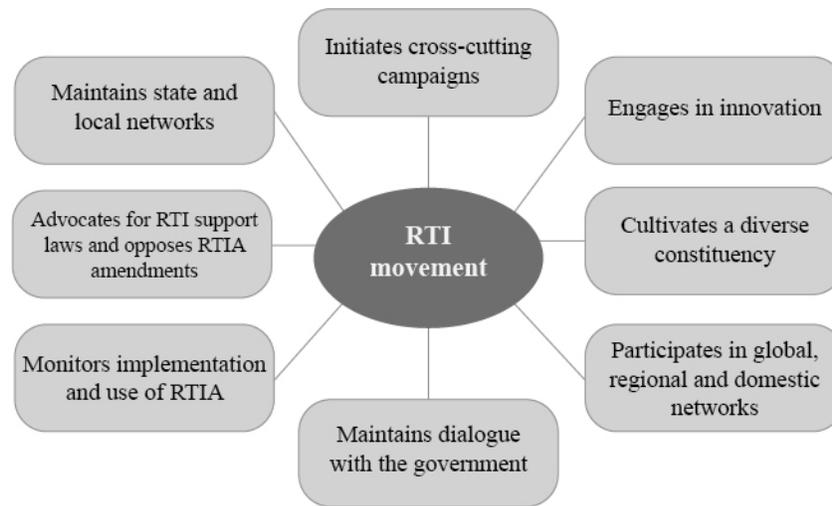


Figure 3. Descriptive characteristics of online and offline activities within the Right to Information (RTI) movement. RTIA = Right to Information Act.

The movement's campaigns have covered economic, societal, political, legal, and cultural issues and have taken advantage of digital platforms; however, in no way do they exhibit "techno-utopian discourse" (Lim, 2018, p. 93), nor do they look to social media or news media as catalysts. Rather, our research found that activists in the movement use digital platforms more as a way to exercise geographic reach, amplify messaging, and pressure politicians and corporate interests.

From the early 1990s to the present, the movement has spent decades building formal and informal networks around the country—from the poorest communities to the highest levels of government. According to a leader in the movement and co-convenor of the NCPRI,

The right to information is part of a larger framework for citizens' participation in democracy. . . . Poor people and marginalized communities cannot fight on their own and for them networking is important for establishing their point of view. . . . The Indian discourse on right to information has differed a lot [from] . . . so many of the past experiences with access to information or freedom of information in the world because poor people connected it with their life and livelihood issues. [114]

The NCPRI has co-convenors who coordinate information flow to Indian states around the country. A working committee builds initiatives and online and offline campaigns at the national, state, city, community, neighborhood, and village levels [101–143, 145–169, 174, 260]. More than 70 organizations have been part of the NCPRI [143], although there are other organizations beyond the collective also focused on information rights. Unlike many movements, individuals with low income and limited capacity to read or write are the heart of the movement. Their presence is notable during campaigns, protests, marches, and sit-ins, most of which are documented in video or photos that frequently are pushed out on social media.

To situate the people's information rights collective in digital terms, at the time of this study, the NCPRI's bilingual English-Hindi Facebook site had more than 1,800 followers with no Twitter account; however, movement activists post from personal or other organizational social media accounts, a factor that is more organic than organized. For example, one of the lead c-conveners of the NCPRI in Delhi, @AnjaliB_, had more than 22,700 followers on Twitter (opened in 2014) and more than 3,900 tweets, some of them announcements of campaigns, statements, and video impressions of the state of information rights. Globally known social and political activist @Aruna Roy, a movement leader, had more than 10,250 followers on Facebook (opened in 2011) that she posted on regularly; a Twitter account (started in 2011) had more than 165 followers and three tweets. NCPRI co-convener Nikhil Dey had more than 4,150 followers on Facebook (started in 2011), and his grassroots organizational account @nikhilmkss had more than 8,830 followers on Twitter (launched in 2014) with 7,104 tweets. Another co-convener in the southern city of Hyderabad, @rakeshdubbudu, who is the founder of the public information portal Factly, had more than 1,200 followers on Twitter and more than 2,110 tweets in the last 10 years, with a Facebook account of more than 2,120 followers. There is wide variation in digital connectedness in the movement because of the diversity in movement participants and the apparently loosely connected aspect of online activism [143]. The movement is digitally connected through online channels and is strong in "that we have so much communication, so . . . that anything that happens anywhere in the country, we immediately get to know" [143]. This often happens through WhatsApp groups.

A longtime scholar and early leader in the movement indicated that one of the original challenges of connecting activists, grassroots groups, and organizations is connecting RTI to other rights-based projects, whether online or offline:

Movements look at their own work in silos. . . . So one of our tasks was to take seven to eight years to try and establish people working in other areas so that RTI was cross-cutting. . . . And we actually set up a strategy to do this. . . . We had representatives from . . . leading groups--child rights, labor rights, women's rights and empowerment and safety, Dalit rights, the environment, social justice, public interest litigation, human rights, and transparency in the public distribution of food. [106]

As those in the movement use the RTIA across campaigns, "it makes for a very interesting kind of network. It's not a strong network; it's a loose network" [114], which in part, along with the many languages in the country, makes tracing social media accounts a challenge.

Subnational Networks

The RTI movement consists of linkages of networks and subnetworks across the country. There are RTI "manches" (or RTI forums) at the state level [120]. Hundreds of groups focus solely on RTI; at least every city has one [109, 110]: "We are working together because we are ideologically like-minded people and we are fighting for the same cause" [174].

Although the number of social media users is a fraction of India's population (Chadha & Harlow, 2015), online activism infuses many of the RTI initiatives and campaigns. However, outreach to many of the poorest communities remains face-to-face because of weak or no Internet capacity in inner city urban communities or villages, limitations with literacy, linguistic differences, income constraints, and limited

access to mobile technology. An estimated 1 billion Indian citizens do not have smartphones, although more than 300 million do, close to the U.S. population and the second highest in the world (Iyengar, 2017; Safi, 2018, para. 14). Moreover, in the next decade, online growth is expected to be sizable, with hundreds of millions more Indian citizens expected to be online (Safi, 2018).

In the early years of defying geographical constraints in a country the size of India, social activists, RTI advocates, and CSOs formed Yahoo and Google groups to discuss RTI action campaigns and other activities [109]. Now, similar work often is done via Facebook and WhatsApp groups [110]. This shows the early adoption and integration of ICT in the movement, and later adaptability with changes in ICT. One organization leader in Bhopal, in the central region of the country, noted,

For different groups we use different media. For example, for people in the slums we can't use Google mail, so we are using WhatsApp or Facebook, or we are doing the one-to-one thing. . . . The connectivity is very poor. . . . It is very difficult to reach out through the Internet. One to one is best. For our messages to college people, we use Gmail. [178]

In recent years, some events have been streamed on Facebook Live. Although these platforms often have a modest amount of activity, there have been some exceptions, such as the Twitter account "RTI India – Online RTI," which had 26,800 tweets and 33,600 followers on March 15, 2020.

Increased digital connectivity in India has made more RTI activism possible with digital usage reaching more than half a billion of the 1.369 billion people in 2019 ("Internet Users in India," 2019), enabling social activists and members of CSOs to share announcements, public records, and decisions in the courts online [101–103, 143]. RTI activists and advocates also post information rights-related PSAs on YouTube featuring edgy cinematography, rough-cut videos, or even cartoon characters demonstrating use of the RTIA along with other activism regarding the environment, corruption, poverty, and other societal issues, many with voiceovers in Hindi and English with subtitles (FreedomInfo.org, n.d.). A well-known YouTube video that went viral on Twitter was based on RTI requests for information about mercury-contaminated land at multinational Unilever's abandoned thermometer factory near the southern hill station, Kodaikanal. A rap video set to the music of Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" was led by Chennai rapper Sofia Ashraf and included lyrics critical of the British–Dutch transnational company. The "Kodaikanal Won't" video was tweeted to Minaj's millions of fans (Mackey, 2015) [156, 157] admonishing, "Unilever. Clean up your mess." According to an environmental activist in the southern state of Tamil Nadu,

The whole legal case was backed by information we got via RTI. . . . All of us campaigned together and we made the video. . . . A lot of strategy went into the video. . . . The victims got compensation in the sense that the court ordered compensation and Unilever was forced to pay up. . . . Extremely powerful in the sense that the video kind of accelerated . . . years of struggle, right, in like six months. [156]

Another approach to RTI activism has included creating occasional flash crowds through social media. For example, in a northern city in Rajasthan, where by most accounts the movement began, an RTI social activist sent a Facebook post out to his then-7,000 "friends" on the platform, noting that he would be

going to a public hospital to request information about why there were so few doctors tending to patients there. Two thousand Facebook “friends” showed up at the hospital to support him as he made a request to inspect hospital records “because of doctors sidelining work through personal clinics in their homes and other irregularities at the hospital” [126]. According to a law student social activist, “The condition of the hospital is very good now” [138]. This type of ingenious social media and in-person engagement that addresses public accountability issues is among many innovation hallmarks of the movement.

Growing diversity in the information requester community is an ongoing area of outreach. Although women are involved with global, national, state, and local leadership in the movement, audits show that women are 8–10% of the applicants. Only 20% of applicants were from villages (RTI Assessment and Advocacy Group & Samya-Centre for Equity Studies, 2014; RTI Assessment and Analysis Group & National Campaign for People’s Right to Information, 2009), which activists indicated is a reflection of a cultural phenomenon. Moreover, there is a recognition that those participating in the early days of the movement now are nearly 30 years older and there is a need to ensure that leadership continues with new generations of activists and supporters. In central India, one RTI social activist [178] indicated that a seven-day RTI campaign “reached around 800 youth and we have created a WhatsApp group . . . and we are in regular touch.” In our study, there is no doubt that our purposive sample skews older, more male, and more educated; yet, there have been trainings for women to learn to lead in the movement. Although there is creativity in the movement related to digital work, our fieldwork indicates that most community outreach and advocacy related to RTI requests and activism are still face-to-face and grassroots. A co-convenor of the NCPRI who runs an online site that largely uses public records for data and interactives noted,

While technology is also becoming an enabler, in one sense it is also a barrier, especially for the marginalized and the people at the grassroots. . . . I can use my smartphone . . . everything. . . . But imagine somebody who cannot, or who cannot read and write. . . . That’s the reason why we work with some governments at the grassroots level to put [RTIA] information out in other ways like wall paintings or putting [paper] information out for inspection. [143]

Grassroots Networks, Innovation, and Social Change

Grassroots initiatives to promote the use of the RTIA and activism around it have continued throughout the years of the movement, and media have been a viable channel for communication as scholarship has noted elsewhere (Sobieraj, 2010). Initially, “to disseminate the RTI Act to the masses, we made films . . . 15 to 30 minutes each” [109]. On All India Radio, there was a national program titled “Right to Know,” and movement activists tracked the names of the call-ins to build the base [109]. There have been state and national RTI help lines and call centers in at least six of the official languages [109]. One volunteer-run call center in a western state received an average of 1,600 calls a month about the RTIA [171]. These broad uses of media and connecting with legacy news organizations have amplified movement messaging and recognition (Relly & Pakanati, 2018).

More than a decade after the national RTI law was adopted, hundreds of activists and CSOs still are conducting trainings across the country [104, 105, 109, 110, 112, 113, 120, 125, 138, 165, 171]. Other

forms of outreach include digitally wired RTI busses or caravans—some with posters, flags, slogans, and tag lines—that are donation-funded projects running in some parts of the country [116, 133, 134]. Familiar folk or religious songs with RTI lyrics are used for skits and plays that village citizens perform, acting out scenarios that include requesting information in government offices, which many marginalized citizens would have never considered possible [116, 120, 133, 134]. Those “who used to hesitate before going to [government] offices for any of the grievances or public services can now establish communication . . . and ask for anything” [133].

Bottom-up approaches are at the heart of the movement. According to a leader of a statewide grassroots organization, “We don’t develop any strategies without the consultation of the community. . . . There is no campaign without the community” [156]. This phenomenon of inclusion is emblematic of the authenticity and glue that bind the movement. Communities are asked what they need from the government and then are assisted with making requests under the RTIA for issues such as food ration cards, pensions, and subsistence income not received.

Social activists, CSOs, and RTI advocates also interact with government and communities to push for innovation, information rights awareness, and social change. There are public school textbooks for social science and civics courses with a chapter on RTI. There is an RTI syllabus created by one of the leading organizations regulating schooling, the National Council of Educational Research and Training; there are RTI-focused college courses and certificate programs; and nongovernmental organization-run magazines and a wire service focused on RTI-related work [104, 105, 109, 117, 121, 122]. One digital innovator believes in thinking big about ways to share information digitally with the unlettered:

I think that the future would be technology, but technology that can act as an enabler rather than a barrier. . . . It has to be customized to the local needs. . . . Local languages are going to be the key. . . . Bridge the barrier so that we can go to the next level. So all this information is useful to everybody, not just those who have access to technology, but how do we take it to them? That is the next step. [143]

Campaigns for Companion RTIA Legislation and the Struggle to Prevent Amendments

The RTI movement has used a multipronged strategy online and offline to advocate for legislation to strengthen the environment for information rights and accountability. The movement has advocated for adopting and operationalizing RTI support legislation such as whistleblower protection, national anticorruption oversight, and judicial accountability legislation. When drafting legislation, various versions are shared online:

It is a participatory process. . . . A small group writes it and then they discuss it among a bigger group and then they go to an even larger group, share it and say, “Give your comments.”. . . Or otherwise if there is a government act or draft . . . we circulate it and ask people for their views, have discussions on that, translate it . . . so that people can understand it. [122]

The movement also has taken to the streets to protest initiatives that would weaken the RTIA: "Every single time the government has tried to introduce amendments to the Right to Information, citizens have mobilized in different ways" [111]. In Fall 2018, for example, hundreds of citizens from 13 states in India marched to the Parliament in Delhi to protest proposed amendments to the RTIA, which they argued would weaken the law that had empowered and helped millions of citizens across the country (Bhardwaj, 2018, paras. 1, 5). Protesters carried signs emblazoned with slogans such as "Don't Amend the RTI Act!," "Save RTI, Save Democracy," and "#SaveRTI" as they walked peacefully to the final destination.

We followed the #SaveRTI hashtag to gather data on the movement's online "voice" for this study and to observe social media activity during that campaign. The tweets largely were related to proposed RTIA amendments over time and often had a political tone and contained voices of resistance and resilience. Although amendments that would have weakened the legislation to the Right to Information Act arose shortly after the law was adopted in 2005 (Singh, 2007), the #SaveRTI hashtag was first used in 2012 during a campaign to prevent the ruling party from amending the RTIA at that time. The hashtag received 268 tweets from February 12, 2012, to November 15, 2018, when the concerns about the RTIA amendments were most in play and temporarily thwarted. More than half the census of tweets (55.2%) that we evaluated were in 2018, with 6% of all the tweets posted by politicians. This demonstrates, to an extent, how online social media have been embraced much more recently given that the hashtag had been around for six years.

The Twitter accounts of those using the #SaveRTI hashtag ranged from five followers all the way to 8.14 million followers, retweets from zero to 8,447, and "likes" from zero to 20,717. The tweet with the most "likes" and retweets came from the official account of Rahul Gandhi, then president of the Indian National Congress, who also had the most followers. A July 18, 2018, tweet reads,

Every Indian has the right to know the truth. The Bharatiya Janata Party [ruling party of current prime minister] believes the truth must be hidden from the people and they must not question people in power. The changes proposed to the RTI will make it a useless Act. They must be opposed by every Indian. #SaveRTI.

Other tweets included protest announcements and other rallying messages. For example, social activist @shaileshgan tweeted on July 15, 2018, "#SaveRTI If any changes are made to our RTI, it will impact our fundamental right and we will not allow it" and @sns_india tweeted on October 11, 2018, "#SaveRTI to save democracy. Join us at the protest march today in Delhi." Although Twitter only has an estimated 34.4 million active users a month in the country (Safi, 2018), the online and offline activist pressure appeared to make a difference that year. Parliament dropped the amendment at the end of 2018, then moved the legislation forward by Summer 2019, weakening the law after the national election.

Offline and Online Campaigns to Monitor RTI Implementation and Thwart Violence

In another initiative, the NCPRI and its partners have carried out major social science-style monitoring audits of the use, implementation, news reporting, and governmental decision making related to the RTIA [104, 106, 111–113]. Coalitions of academics, CSOs, and others have conducted multiple waves of audits with tens of thousands of interviews and public records requests, and hundreds of focus groups

(RTI Assessment and Advocacy Group & Samya-Centre for Equity Studies, 2014; RTI Assessment and Analysis Group & National Campaign for People's Right to Information, 2009) [104, 106, 111–113]. National RTI movement leaders and others interact with state and central government officials about their findings [104–107, 110–113, 143, 160, 162, 164, 165, 171, 172].

Another collective online and offline initiative has been ongoing because concern about violence against RTIA requesters has grown as activists and others who uncover corruption have been killed or assaulted in attempts to silence the unearthed findings (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2020). One network developed an entire online and offline system of reporting on acts of violence to address the issue of impunity. According to a co-convenor of the NCPRI, "The working committee has members in each state. . . . Any incident of any attack in any state . . . depending on the gravity, we give notice to the larger group" [143]. As Figure 4 demonstrates, when an information request is about a potentially sensitive issue, there is a call for mass numbers of activists and others across the country to file the same RTIA request. One activist explained, "All of them cannot be threatened, all of them cannot be killed. So, it is not one person who can be targeted" [171]. If an individual information requester receives a threat, there is a procedure: Officials and news media are contacted and the complaint about the threat is posted online.

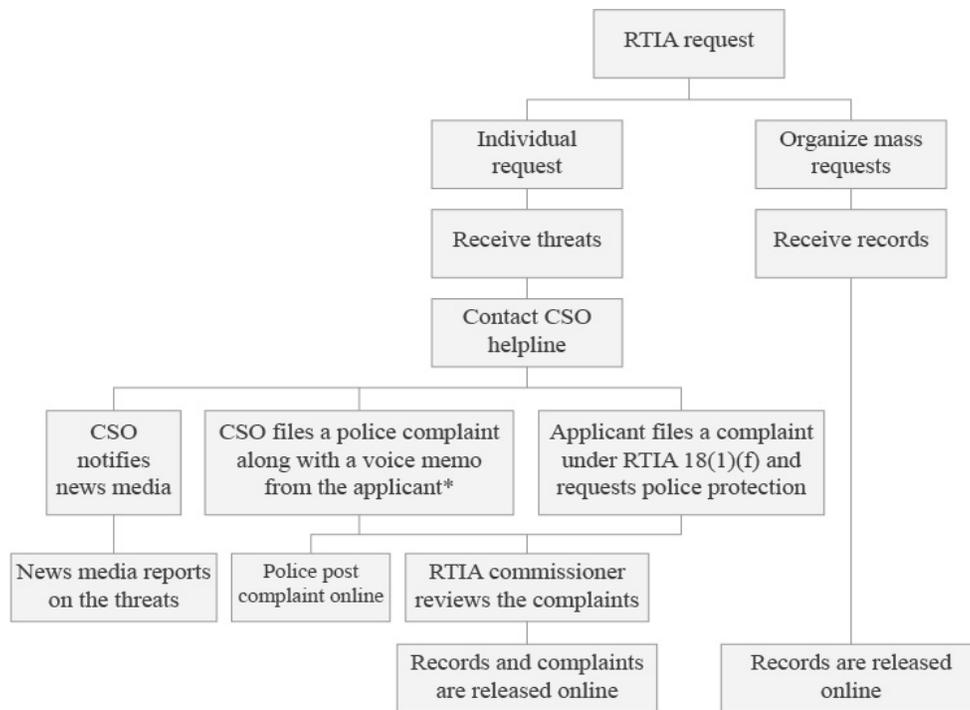


Figure 4. Online and offline collective model for reducing Right to Information Act (RTIA) requester risk of aggressions. CSO = civil society organization. *With permission of the applicant.

The safety model is a demonstration of one of many examples of proactive collective action within the movement. The procedure for reporting requester risk of aggressions has created a digital footprint on ways to address threats and violence against social movement activists [104, 171] focusing specifically on work that involves public accountability through use of the RTIA. This system puts those harassing, threatening, and in worse cases killing activists on the record in a very public way.

Strategy, outreach, and innovation developed around monitoring the use and implementation of the RTIA and unexpected behaviors around the legislation are important lessons for activists and organizations in other countries. Online and offline methods of monitoring government performance and holding bad actors to account are groundbreaking initiatives in the RTI movement.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article describes online and offline activism among networks of organizations and social activists across India in the globally recognized Right to Information movement that is nearly three decades old. We examined the dynamics of how a network of activists, organizations, and public interest groups advanced strategies and outreach related to information rights in the RTI movement—online and offline—and ways grassroots initiatives aim to bridge digital inequality, reaching thousands of communities, including those that historically have been marginalized. We studied loosely connected activism and outreach around information rights at the global, national, state, and local levels more than a decade after the Indian Right to Information Act was adopted and as social media use was starting to grow in India and the movement.

Our research found that study participants in the movement appear to strive for a nonhierarchical approach (i.e., horizontal; Castells, 2007) to activism using language that forges collective identity and appears to avoid contested power relations. We would be remiss not to note that the more central, or “superactivist” (Mercea, 2012) study participants, bring their social capital to the movement, connecting digitally and offline to a broad range of actors, some the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Reciprocally, our observations show that those who are marginalized in society bring meaning and social capital to the movement. In essence, including individuals and communities that are marginalized were and are a large part of what brings meaning to the RTI movement. Although linguistic constraints, closed online group activity, and the loose nature of the RTI movement’s networks kept us from studying social media users more broadly, and vast accounts of online posts more specifically, we consider this qualitative study a start on this line of research.

Without a doubt, the movement plays a distinct role in advancing information rights-based causes and addressing societal inequities that they amplify on digital platforms and other media. These online and offline initiatives appear to have applied pressure on public officials and to have led to social change in some cases, including the adoption of accountability legislation; instatement of some RTI activist protections; reduction in marginalized citizens being taken advantage of; and connections to political elites, government, and prominent others in the service of access to information rights. We found that study representatives participate in or lead online and offline cross-cutting campaigns and cross-network alliances with diverse constituents, and sustained initiatives to build broad-based coalitions. These wide-ranging although loose

and largely decentralized horizontal networks are among the key factors that scholarship (Diani & Mische, 2018) indicates could lead to a social movement's growth and sustainability.

Organizations and social activists in the movement demonstrate innovative blended online and offline strategies to advance social change by holding government and others accountable through information requests that track public sector activity and then amplify those findings through an array of innovative communication methods. Extrapolating from this study's findings, our research supports other scholarship that suggests that democratic pluralism has not been reached on the Internet. In most countries, at least for a small sector of the population, this would be axiomatic. We suggest that this largely shows how much promise may be ahead for developing online innovations.

Our study indicates that online RTI movement activity has grown modestly in recent years, well after the surge in online activity in the country, which supports other research findings (Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Schwittay, 2011). This in part could be explained by the founding of the movement well before social media emerged, the median age of study participants being above the country range for heaviest social media usage, and the low proportion of Internet users in general in the total population in the country. However, we suggest that privileging online activity, which the movement does not do, would be the antithesis of a key focus: the right to information.

As scholars have noted (Schradie, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018; Van Laer, 2010), it is important to question whether the Internet has exacerbated or reinforced inequalities inside movements. Although movement activists often work directly with marginalized individuals, many of these movement participants do not read or write, much less post to social media. Subsistence living standards make social media activism an incongruity to everyday life for many. Study participants indicated that in the most impoverished communities, digital connectivity is weak and that face-to-face activism is most prevalent. Movement superactivists noted that future goals include innovations around digital tools to breach this chasm.

We note that this study has limitations. Given that our study is a purposive sample of organizations and social activists, it is not possible to generalize about digital engagement or inequality beyond the movement that we studied. Furthermore, the study represents a limited period for the movement, which is bound to transform online and offline as time progresses and new challenges are faced.

Future comparative research could study the dynamics of online and offline activism in the poorest communities in India where RTI legislation is used and activism is prevalent. Other research could focus on media coverage of the movement or the content of a limited number of social media accounts of central RTI social activists. It is doubtful that there are other countries that match the level of activism in India related to the movement around information rights. Comparative work in this area would be important in other emerging economies.

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