



TRAPPED IN THE PLATFORM:

How Digital Activism Feeds the System It Seeks to Resist



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→ INTRODUCTION

Social movements in the digital age are increasingly mediated by the infrastructures of platform capitalism, a system where digital platforms serve as the central intermediaries for economic and social activity.¹ This model has not only reshaped labor and communication but has also become a new terrain for social movements, offering both tools for mobilization and new forms of constraint. Platforms such as social media, ride-hailing, and delivery apps now shape not only how people work and communicate but also how they resist and express solidarity. Optimists like Shirky argue that social media has lowered barriers to collective action by enabling people to "organize without organizations."² These platforms allow individuals or groups to actively become catalysts of digital social movements, thereby promoting grassroots self-organisation.³ Digital networks, as Castells puts it, create "autonomous communication networks", empowering grassroots actors to bypass traditional institutions and mobilize at extraordinary speed and scale.⁴

Yet scholars have also pointed to the fragility of such mobilizations. Because digital activism relies on media visibility, it can be fleeting and vulnerable to shifting attention cycles.⁵ Poell suggests that sustaining long-term pressure through "hashtag movements" remains challenging, as platforms continually reconnect users with new content.⁶

¹ Yin Liang, Jeremy Aroles, and Bernd Brandl, "Charting platform capitalism: Definitions, concepts and ideologies," *New Technology, Work and Employment* 37, no. 2 (2022): 308–327, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12234>.

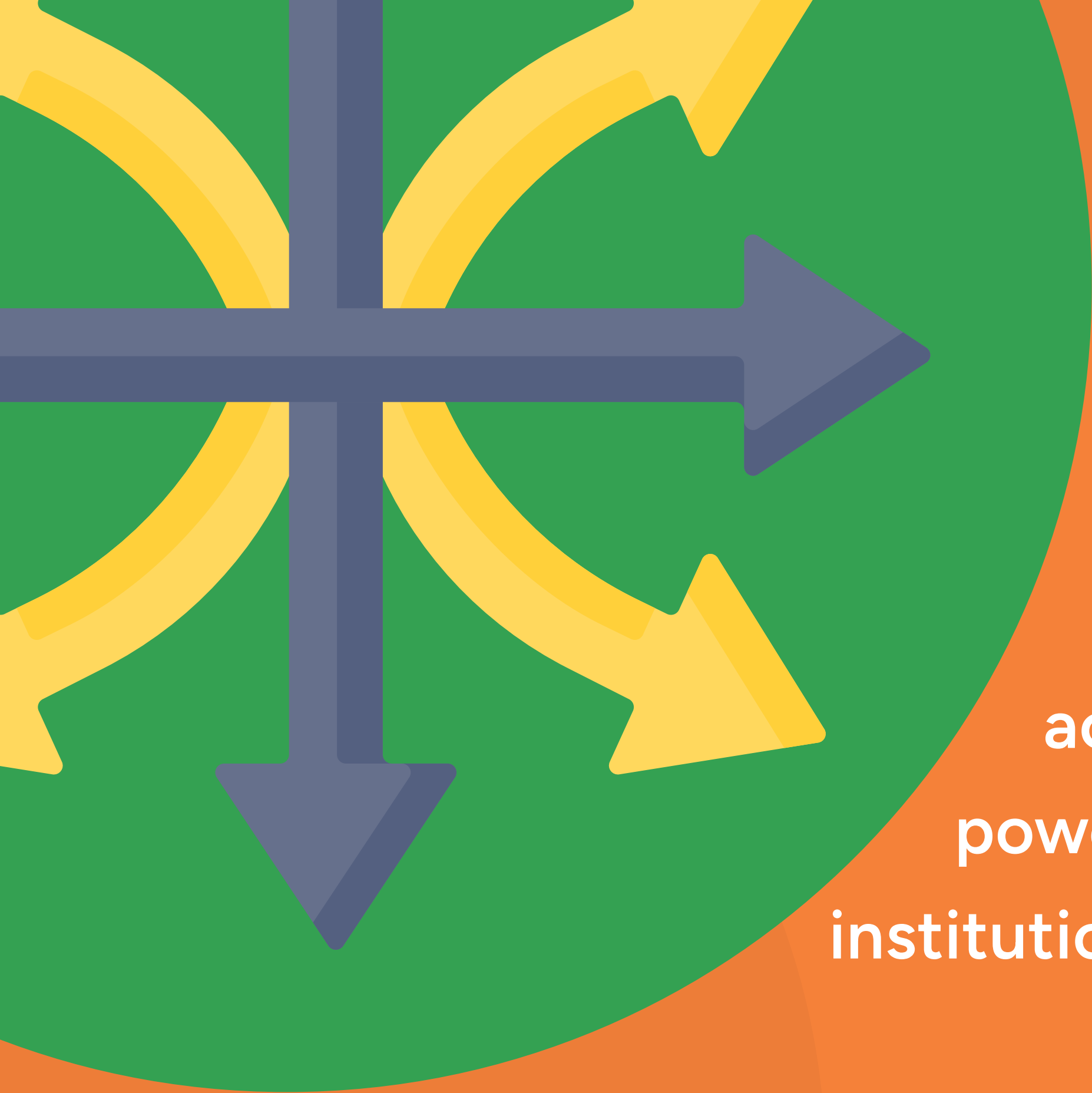
² Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

³ Ana Cardoso, Marie-Claude Boudreau, and João Carvalho, "Think Individually, Act Collectively: Studying the Dynamics of a Technologically Enabled Civic Movement," in *International Conference on Information Systems* (Milan, 2013).

⁴ Manuel Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society," *International Journal of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 238–266.

⁵ Carol C. Gould, "Transnational Solidarities," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2007): 149–164; Thomas Poell, "Social Media, Temporality, and the Legitimacy of Protest," *Social Movement Studies* 19, no. 5–6 (2020): 609–624.

⁶ Thomas Poell, "Social Media, Temporality, and the Legitimacy of Protest," *Social Movement Studies* 19, no. 5–6 (2020): 609–624.



Delicath and Deluca refer to this as an "image-event," in which movements focus on being demonstrative and attention-catching.⁷ In this view, social media-enabled activism risks becoming more symbolic than substantive, powerful at generating visibility but weak at securing institutional transformation.

This essay builds on but departs from these debates. While scholars focus on enabling capacities or fragility, less attention has been given to how digital activism becomes absorbed into the very infrastructures it seeks to challenge. In this essay, I adopt a political economy approach to argue that digital activism does not exist outside platform capitalism—it emerges through and is mediated by it. Acts of solidarity and resistance interact with infrastructures designed for extraction, where monetization and co-optation work hand in hand. Platforms turn activism itself into both a tool of governance and a source of profit. My goal is not to dismiss the agency or creativity of activists, but to explicate how platform architectures structure one of the grounds on which resistance takes place. Understanding these constraints is itself a precondition for more effective resistance.

The case of Affan Kurniawan in Indonesia illustrates this paradox. During the protests in late August and early September 2025, driven by public anger over the government's decision to raise parliament members' salaries amid widespread economic hardship and exploitation of gig workers, Affan, a 21-year-old delivery driver, was run over by an armoured police vehicle while on his way to deliver a customer's food order.⁸ People across Indonesia and Southeast Asia later expressed solidarity by buying food for online drivers (*ojol*) who joined the demonstration through Grab and Gojek, two major service platforms in Indonesia where Affan worked at. This case merits closer attention because it represents a compelling and contemporary example of cross-border solidarity in the digital age.⁹

⁷ John W. Delicath and Kevin M. DeLuca, "Image Events, the Public Sphere, and Argumentative Practice: The Case of Radical Environmental Groups," *Argumentation* 17, no. 3 (2003): 315–333.

⁸ Initiatives for Workers Solidarity in Asia Pacific, "Stand in solidarity with the Indonesian people! Protect workers from state violence! Justice for Affan Kurniawan!," August 30, 2025, accessed October 22, 2025, <https://apwork-sol.org/stand-in-solidarity-with-the-indonesian-people-protect-workers-from-state-violence-justice-for-affan-kurniawan/>.

⁹ Amorisa Wiratri and Sugiyanto, "SEAbings: When sending food turns into a gesture of solidarity among Southeast Asians," *The Conversation*, September 9, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/seablings-when-sending-food-turns-into-a-gesture-of-solidarity-among-southeast-asians-264495>.

Yet every gesture of support also generated revenue and data for the very platforms implicated in Affan's precarity. This essay uses this case to argue that digital-age social movements risk not only their short-lived nature but also political-economic capture. Acts of resistance that flow through platform infrastructures are in danger of being translated into revenue streams and governance tools for the systems they seek to challenge.

ECONOMIC CAPTURE IN PLATFORM CAPITALISM



After Affan's death drew widespread attention on X and TikTok, an X user from Bangkok discovered that Grab allowed customers abroad to place food orders for drivers in Indonesia.¹⁰ This went viral, prompting people across borders to purchase meals as a show of support. In response, Grab and Gojek reintroduced the "treat your driver" feature, with Grab confirming that most orders originated from Southeast and East Asia.¹¹

These acts concurrently benefitted the very companies engaged in Affan's exploitation. Each food order generates not only commission revenue for drivers but also valuable behavioural data and engagement metrics for Grab and Gojek. Gestures of resistance were routed through the infrastructures whose business models depend on the systemic precarity that produced Affan's vulnerability.¹² This systemic precarity is a core feature of the platform economy, where workers are often misclassified as "partners" to deny them basic labor rights, a practice Arif Novianto terms "bogus partnership." This arrangement creates a state of "super-exploitation" where the risks of business are offloaded onto the workers, while the platforms profit from their labor without providing the protections of formal employment.

¹⁰ Mun Lee Huey and Hendra Asprihanto, "Indonesian Protests Draw Regional Solidarity with Food Orders for Delivery Drivers," Channel NewsAsia, 2025.

¹¹ Huey and Asprihanto, "Indonesian Protests."

¹² Arif Novianto, "Revisiting employment standards: Informalized formal job and bogus partnership in platform courier work," Critical Sociology, (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205251377006>; Arif Novianto, "The partnership trap in the Indonesian gig economy," developingeconomics.org, June 20, 2021, <https://developingeconomics.org/2021/06/20/the-partnership-trap-in-the-indonesian-gig-economy/>.

The fuel to people's rage—Affan and the majority of *ojol* drivers' situation, working for both Grab and Gojek simultaneously to survive—reflects what Sarkar calls the core mechanisms of platform capitalism and algorithmic labor.¹³ First, platforms depend on digital rent-seeking, extracting value not only from labor but also from the commodification of data. Second, they impose algorithmic control through rating systems and automated wage-setting. Third, they treat precarity itself as a strategy, fragmenting labor and minimizing employer responsibility.¹⁴ These mechanisms ensure relentless insecurity while platforms accumulate ever-expanding surplus value.

This essay argues that these same mechanisms extend to solidarity expressed afterward. When people purchased meals for drivers, the platforms profited twice: First, from the restaurant commissions, ranging between 20–30% per order, and second, from the valuable behavioral data generated by these transactions.¹⁵ Platforms monetized both the precarity that triggered solidarity and the solidarity that responded to it.

This aligns with what Langley and Leyshon describe as the architecture of circulation control. Platforms are not neutral service providers.¹⁶ They are designed to capture and capitalize on every goods, idea, labor, and even emotion circulated on the platform.¹⁷ According to Langley and Leyshon, the so-called "sharing economy" thrives by turning idle assets, user creativity, and social interactions into revenue streams.¹⁸ The innovation of platforms lies in enabling "everyone to become a supplier with the click of a button," while ensuring the platform remains the indispensable intermediary that monetizes every transaction.¹⁹

The '*treat your driver*' feature fits into this logic. Social media platforms like X benefitted from the spread of Affan's story, driving clicks and advertising traffic. At the same time, Grab and Gojek capitalized directly from the surge in orders and clicks from their platforms, embedding resistance itself into their revenue streams. Social media platforms especially stand out as prime examples of digital economic circulation: they rely on user-driven activity as raw material for extraction and capitalization.²⁰

¹³ Sayan Sarkar, "Platform Capitalism and the Gig Economy: Surplus Value Extraction in the Age of Algorithmic Labor," *Critical Sociology* 51, no. 3 (2025): 287–304.

¹⁴ Sarkar, "Platform Capitalism," 287–304.

¹⁵ Fauzan Akbar Adi Munawar and Ainur Rohmah, "Commission Deductions from Online Food Delivery Sales for MSMEs from the Perspective of Positive Law and Islamic Law," *Iqtishodia: Jurnal Ekonomi Syariah* 9, no. 2 (2024): 42–53; Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon, "Platform Capitalism: The Intermediation and Capitalisation of Digital Economic Circulation," *Finance and Society* 3, no. 1 (2017): 11–31.

¹⁶ Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon, "Platform Capitalism: The Intermediation and Capitalisation of Digital Economic Circulation," *Finance and Society* 3, no. 1 (2017): 11–31.

¹⁷ Langley and Leyshon, "Platform Capitalism," 11–31.

¹⁸ Langley and Leyshon, "Platform Capitalism," 11–31.

¹⁹ Sebastian Olma, "Nevermind the Sharing Economy: Here's Platform Capitalism," *Institute of Network Cultures Blog*, 2014.

²⁰ Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon, "Platform Capitalism: The Intermediation and Capitalisation of Digital Economic Circulation," *Finance and Society* 3, no. 1 (2017).



This logic is not simply opportunism, but is structural. Platforms are compelled to capture, process, and monetize all flows without exception. Social movements, then, are just another form of circulation and value stream. The Affan case highlights the precarious conditions of gig workers and also a deeper paradox: in the digital age, even an act of justice risks becoming another commission, dataset, or profit stream. This is problematic to the extent that resistance becomes visible through capture and that visibility is made conditional on profitability. When acts of justice are absorbed into the same circuits of data and revenue that sustain exploitation, their political force is then diluted. Dissent remains possible, yet it must constantly adapt within infrastructures that measure and monetize its moves. Recognizing this reveals how the conditions of resistance are uneven from the beginning.





THE POLITICAL-ECONOMIC LOGIC OF CAPTURE IN PLATFORM CAPITALISM

The systems that extract economic value also manage political resistance, converting dissent into forces that sustain rather than disrupt processes of accumulations. Value capture enriches platforms while also providing political leverage, centering them as significant intermediaries between the state and their citizens. Thus, the systems that enable organizing also limit the extent to which protests can spread. Outrage may circulate rapidly, but platforms and states absorb it into profitable, manageable arrangements.

Upon Affan's death, demonstrators used TikTok Live to document events in real time. Yet as Gillespie argues, content moderation is never neutral.²¹ Platforms build "algorithmic checkpoints" and "cautious solutions" to minimize political risk before governments intervene.²² Gillespie calls this "moderation by nation," where platforms "pick and choose what they deliver to whom" in line with local rules.²³ Compliance is then built into the infrastructure.

This logic appeared in Indonesia on August 31, 2025, when TikTok suspended livestreaming nationwide for "safety concerns" during protests.²⁴ The government denied issuing the order, calling it TikTok's decision.²⁵ But voluntary restrictions rarely occur in a vacuum.²⁶ Platforms anticipate state preferences and act preemptively. A crucial tool for documenting abuses disappeared overnight, while mainstream television turned a blind eye.²⁷ The infrastructure that enabled resistance became the one that contained it.

²¹ Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

²² Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*.

²³ Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*.

²⁴ Achmad Imam Fajriadi, "TikTok Suspends Live Feature in Indonesia Due to Escalation of Violence in Protests," *Tempo*, August 31, 2025.

²⁵ "Gov't Denies Media Gag as TikTok Suspends Live Amid Protests," *Antara News*, August 31, 2025.

²⁶ Nuurianti Jalli, "When TikTok Live Went Dead in Indonesia: Digital Sovereignty and Systemic Risk," *South China Morning Post*, 2025.

²⁷ Asia Justice and Rights, "Protecting the Right to Protest: International Solidarity with Indonesia," press release, September 2, 2025.

This exemplifies "public–private entanglement in content moderation."²⁸ Platforms and governments do not act in isolation. They work together through formal regulation, revolving doors of personnel, and shared interests in stability. Hence, platforms align with government priorities before giving any explicit order.²⁹ In Indonesia, this has been the precedent for years: from Whatsapp and Twitter shutdowns during post-election riots of May 2019, to the forced ban of TikTok Shop that led to its merger with Tokopedia.³⁰ These precedents teach platforms that survival depends on compliance, even without being asked.

But containment does not happen only through shutting down features. Both companies and governments also deploy symbolic gestures to channel dissent into safer, more manageable expressions. Bowen calls this "symbolic corporate responsibility," a gesture that recognizes social problems while avoiding structural change.³¹ Grab and Gojek blacked out their logos and reintroduced the "treat your driver" feature, gestures that showed empathy while leaving the exploitative logics of gig work untouched. Politicians did the same. Puan Maharani, Speaker of the House of Representatives, offered Affan's family a motorbike; President Prabowo Subianto paid a condolence visit.³² These were carefully calibrated responses. Enough to project concern, not enough to commit to reforms on labor protections or police accountability.

LABOR RIGHTS

²⁸ Mathieu Fasel and Sophie Weck, "Between Regulation, Pressure and Collaboration: The Public–Private Entanglement in Content Moderation," *Journal of Digital Media Policy* 16, no. 2 (2025): 145–162.

²⁹ Nuurianti Jalli, "When TikTok Live Went Dead in Indonesia: Digital Sovereignty and Systemic Risk," *South China Morning Post*, 2025.

³⁰ Fanny Potkin, "Indonesia Curbs Social Media, Blaming Hoaxes for Inflaming Unrest," *Reuters*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/indonesia-curbs-social-media-blaming-hoaxes-for-inflaming-unrest-idUSKCN1SS1LV/>; "Indonesia Blocking Social Media to 'Maintain Democracy,'" *DW*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/indonesia-blocking-social-media-to-maintain-democracy/a-48858283>; "Indonesia's TikTok Shop Ban Reveals Mixed Feelings on E-commerce Revolution," *Al Jazeera*, October 4, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/10/4/indonesias-tiktok-shop-ban-reveals-mixed-feelings-on-e-commerce-revolution>.

³¹ Frances Bowen, *After Greenwashing: Symbolic Corporate Environmentalism and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³² "Gov't Denies Media Gag as TikTok Suspends Live Amid Protests," *Antara News*, August 31, 2025.



Ahmad et al. describe this as woke-washing.³³ This occurs when corporations or officials appear to align with social issues but avoid meaningful change. Rather than signifying progress, such gestures translate inequality into marketing language. This is not mere hypocrisy but an ideological function of neoliberal capitalism—converting ethical gestures into moral capital that stabilises existing hierarchies.³⁴ It blurs real conflicts of interest, making exploitation appear as shared virtue.

These dynamics reveal that containment is not merely political but structural to the political economy of platform capitalism. As Earl et al. note, contemporary repression relies on blurred boundaries between state and private actors, where platforms sometimes act on their own, sometimes in league with governments, and sometimes even on their behalf.³⁵ This appears effective to the extent it unfolds through the same infrastructures that movements rely on to organize, potentially channeling resistance into safer forms that leave capital and state power intact.

The Affan case is more than a fleeting moment of outrage, but a lens into the political economy architecture of the platform system. Resistance may surface, even go viral, yet may be swiftly neutralized through corporate design and regulatory complicity. Demands for justice are translated into compliance, data, and public relations, while structures of exploitation remain untouched.

³³ Nuurrianti Jalli, "When TikTok Live Went Dead in Indonesia: Digital Sovereignty and Systemic Risk," South China Morning Post, 2025.

³⁴ Asia Justice and Rights, "Protecting the Right to Protest: International Solidarity with Indonesia," press release, September 2, 2025.

³⁵ Jennifer Earl, Thomas V. Maher, and Jennifer Pan, "The Digital Repression of Social Movements, Protest, and Activism: A Synthetic Review," Science Advances 8, no. 10 (2022): eabl8198.

CONCLUSION



Beyond asking whether digital social movements can deliver justice or warning about their episodic nature, this essay argued that they cannot be understood apart from platform capitalism's infrastructures. Digital activism today flows through platforms built to monetize and control. Resistance against exploitation generates profit because platforms are designed to capture every order, click, and stream.

Platforms do not simply react to state pressure—they anticipate it. Their business models depend on smooth relations with governments, requiring moderation systems and compliance mechanisms. Livestreams are suspended, content is filtered, symbolic gestures rolled out. All signaling responsiveness while leaving structural exploitation untouched. The paradox, then, is structural. The very infrastructures that allow movements to spread are built to capture them within the same political-economic logic that monetizes engagement and manages dissent.

Yet recognizing this capture does not mean giving in to determinism. The solidarity for Affan built real transnational ties, TikTok Live enabled unprecedented documentation of state violence, the virality of his story forced public acknowledgment that might otherwise have been silenced. These are genuine, tangible achievements.

The argument here is not that resistance is futile, but that the terrain is uneven. Platforms and states operate on infrastructures built to absorb and profit from dissent far more efficiently than activists can resist them. As Pratamawaty notes, activists exercise "imagined affordances": they perceive and repurpose what technology makes possible, even within constraint.³⁶ But such improvisation carries an unbalanced burden. Movements must continuously innovate to stay visible, while platforms only need to adjust algorithms or suspend features to regain control.

Breaking this cycle requires more than tactical adaptation. It requires reimagining infrastructures where digital activism is maintained rather than monetized, and where governance is based on care, not control. Acknowledging the depth of structural capture is not defeat. Rather, it is the first step toward creating systems that refuse to reproduce the same extractive logics.

³⁶ Benazir Bona Pratamawaty, "Social Media Activism and Digital Authoritarian Drift in Flawed Democracies: The Case of Indonesia," *Dialogues on Digital Society* 2, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/29768640251383985>.

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