

# Student Movements and Democratic Communication in Indonesia: Social Media Mobilization during National Policy Protests

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## Abstract

Student movements have historically played an important role in Indonesian political change, while social media has increasingly transformed how demonstrations are organized, communicated, and interpreted. This article examines the relationship between student activism and digital political communication during national policy protests in Indonesia. Using qualitative social movement and digital discourse analysis, the study explores mobilization messages, hashtags, organizational networks, livestreaming, and interactions between students and broader online communities. The article argues that social media reduces organizational barriers and enables rapid coordination across universities and regions. Digital platforms also allow protesters to communicate directly with the public without depending entirely on traditional media coverage. However, rapid mobilization can create challenges involving misinformation, fragmented leadership, and online polarization. The study proposes a hybrid mobilization framework in which physical demonstrations and digital communication operate as interconnected spaces of political participation. The article concludes that Indonesian student movements continue to function as important democratic actors while adapting their organizational strategies to contemporary communication technologies.

*[Gerakan mahasiswa secara historis memainkan peran penting dalam perubahan politik Indonesia, sementara media sosial semakin mengubah cara demonstrasi diorganisir, dikomunikasikan, dan diinterpretasikan. Artikel ini mengkaji hubungan antara aktivisme mahasiswa dan komunikasi politik digital selama protes kebijakan nasional di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis gerakan sosial kualitatif dan analisis wacana digital, studi ini mengeksplorasi pesan mobilisasi, tagar, jaringan organisasi, siaran langsung, dan interaksi antara mahasiswa dan komunitas daring yang lebih luas. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa media sosial mengurangi hambatan organisasi dan memungkinkan koordinasi cepat di berbagai universitas dan wilayah.]*

*Platform digital juga memungkinkan para pengunjung rasa untuk berkomunikasi langsung dengan publik tanpa sepenuhnya bergantung pada liputan media tradisional. Namun, mobilisasi yang cepat dapat menciptakan tantangan yang melibatkan misinformasi, kepemimpinan yang terfragmentasi, dan polarisasi daring. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja mobilisasi hibrida di mana demonstrasi fisik dan komunikasi digital beroperasi sebagai ruang partisipasi politik yang saling terkait. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa gerakan mahasiswa Indonesia terus berfungsi sebagai aktor demokrasi yang penting sambil menyesuaikan strategi organisasi mereka dengan teknologi komunikasi kontemporer.]*

**Keywords:** Student movements, political communication, social media, protests, Indonesia

## Introduction

Student movements have historically occupied an important position in Indonesia's democratic transformation. The political significance of students became particularly visible during the Reformasi period, when university students contributed substantially to political pressure against the New Order regime. After 1998, however, student activism entered a substantially different political environment. Students operated within a formally democratic system in which political expression was constitutionally protected, while simultaneously facing new forms of institutional, economic, and communicative constraint. The emergence of social media subsequently transformed the infrastructure through which political participation could be organized. Political communication increasingly moved beyond meetings, campus organizations, newspapers, and street demonstrations toward digitally networked environments. This transformation is important because social media does not merely accelerate communication; it changes how individuals connect, construct political identities, circulate grievances, and participate in collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Tufekci 2017).

The theoretical literature on digitally mediated collective action provides an important starting point for understanding this transformation. Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theory of connective action argues that digital media facilitate personalized forms of political participation in which individuals can contribute to collective causes without necessarily joining conventional organizations. Earl and Kimport (2011) similarly demonstrate that digital technologies can alter the costs and organizational structures of activism. These perspectives challenge the assumption that effective social movements must always depend on centralized organizations. Nevertheless, Tilly and Tarrow (2015) emphasize that contentious politics remains embedded within organizational resources, political opportunities,

collective claims, and relationships between challengers and authorities. The Indonesian student movement therefore requires an analytical framework that recognizes both networked participation and continuing organizational structures.

Empirical research demonstrates that social media has become increasingly significant for youth political participation in Indonesia. Saud et al. (2020) show that social media contributes to the digitalization of youth political participation, while Ida et al. (2020) demonstrate the relationship between social media use, political learning, and political participation among young people in Indonesia and Pakistan. Saud and Margono (2021) further argue that Indonesia's development of digital democracy has created new opportunities for youth participation. These findings suggest that social media is politically consequential not simply because young Indonesians use digital platforms extensively, but because such platforms facilitate political information, discussion, identity formation, and participation. Digital communication consequently needs to be examined as part of the broader infrastructure of democratic citizenship.

The relationship between digital communication and participation is also evident beyond Indonesia. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) found that using social media for news was positively associated with social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. Their findings indicate that the political consequences of social media depend partly on informational practices: citizens who use digital networks to obtain and discuss political information may develop stronger participatory orientations. This argument is relevant to student activism because protest mobilization depends on the circulation of information about political issues, organizational activities, and collective opportunities. Social media therefore becomes politically meaningful when information consumption is connected to discussion and action rather than remaining passive exposure (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012).

Indonesian research further demonstrates that political discussion mediates the relationship between social media use and participation. Intyaswati and Fairuzab (2023), examining university students, found that online political talk plays an important mediating role in online political participation. This finding is significant because it challenges technologically deterministic assumptions that access to social media automatically generates political engagement. Instead, political communication becomes consequential through interaction, discussion, interpretation, and exchange. Student movements therefore need to be understood not only as organizations that distribute information but also as communication communities in which political meanings are negotiated. The ability to transform social media use into democratic participation depends substantially on whether users encounter opportunities for meaningful political conversation (Intyaswati and Fairuzab 2023).

Previous research specifically examining Indonesian student demonstrations reinforces this argument. Kusumo and Perdana (2022), studying the September 2019 student demonstrations, found a connection between offline demonstrations

and digital actions through personal action frames. Their study demonstrates that Indonesian student activism increasingly combines physical protest with digitally mediated participation. Rather than treating online activism as an alternative to street protest, the evidence suggests that the two forms can operate simultaneously. Similarly, Sinurat (2023) demonstrates how the Cipayung Group employed digital activities in protests concerning fuel-price increases, illustrating that established student organizations can appropriate connective-action practices without abandoning organizational structures. These findings indicate the emergence of a hybrid organizational model.

The 2019 and 2020 protest waves provide particularly important cases for understanding this hybrid model. Wahyuningroem et al. (2024) analyzed Twitter activity associated with #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw and found that young people occupied central positions in both online and offline movements. Their research demonstrates a reciprocal relationship: online activity contributed to the growth of offline protest, while physical demonstrations generated additional online communication. This evidence is particularly relevant because it challenges a binary distinction between digital and physical activism. Instead, student movements should be understood as operating across interconnected communicative spaces in which digital visibility, physical participation, and political identity continuously reinforce one another (Wahyuningroem et al. 2024).

Other studies similarly identify collective identity as a central dimension of digitally mediated protest. Sutan (2024), comparing the Indonesian Omnibus Law protests with Hong Kong's 2019–2020 protests, shows how social media contributed to collective identity formation through actor clusters and oppositional content. The importance of collective identity is also consistent with Klandermans's (2004) argument that participation in social movements is influenced by social-psychological processes through which individuals perceive themselves as members of a collective cause. Digital platforms provide additional mechanisms through which these identities can be expressed and recognized. A hashtag, visual symbol, slogan, or shared narrative can consequently function as an identity marker that links otherwise dispersed participants.

Research on #ReformasiDikorupsi provides further evidence concerning digital citizenship. Ramadhani et al. (2024) demonstrate that social media facilitated citizen engagement through the #ReformasiDikorupsi movement. Their study indicates that hashtags can function as instruments of political mobilization by connecting public dissatisfaction with digitally visible forms of participation. This finding complements Wahyuningroem et al. (2024) by showing that digital participation is not limited to student organizations themselves. Broader groups of digital citizens can become involved through sharing, commentary, documentation, and political discussion. Student movements therefore increasingly operate as catalysts within wider networks of civic participation rather than as isolated organizations.

Digital activism also depends on motivations and political beliefs. Suwana's (2020) study of the Save KPK movement demonstrates that young Indonesian activists were motivated by experiences, beliefs, and the desire to provide credible political information. Importantly, the study shows that activists viewed accurate information as essential to counter misinformation and sustain political participation. This finding is especially relevant to contemporary student movements because digital communication creates both opportunities for mobilization and risks associated with unreliable information. Digital activism should therefore be understood as a communicative practice requiring credibility and trust rather than merely as the rapid dissemination of political content (Suwana 2020).

The broader digital-cultural context further reinforces the political significance of youth participation. Saud et al. (2023) demonstrate that young people's digital cultures can support networking, civic engagement, and political participation in virtual environments. Their findings suggest that digital political participation cannot be separated from the cultural practices through which young people communicate. Political activism is increasingly embedded in everyday digital practices involving visual communication, sharing, commentary, and network building. Consequently, contemporary student movements need to adapt political communication to the cultural environment of digital youth rather than relying exclusively on conventional organizational communication.

Recent Indonesian scholarship also emphasizes the risks accompanying these opportunities. Rachimoellah, Lubis, and Utimadini (2024) argue that social media can reduce participation barriers and expand political mobilization while simultaneously intensifying disinformation and polarization. Their analysis is important because it demonstrates that digital platforms are politically ambivalent. The same infrastructure that facilitates democratic participation can also generate echo chambers, ideological fragmentation, and misleading information. Pratamawaty (2025) similarly highlights the possibility of digital authoritarian drift in flawed democratic contexts. Digital visibility therefore creates a political paradox: activists gain unprecedented opportunities to communicate, but their communication may also become subject to new forms of contestation and control.

Nugroho (2025) provides more recent qualitative evidence concerning #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw, finding that social media facilitated rapid mobilization, broad participation, collective identity, and solidarity among young activists. This finding strengthens the argument that social media should be considered a mobilization infrastructure rather than merely a promotional tool. At the same time, digital mobilization remains dependent on political circumstances and organizational capacities. The contribution of the present article is therefore to integrate these strands of scholarship into a hybrid mobilization framework that explains how organization, connective action, political framing, and democratic communication interact within Indonesian student movements (Nugroho 2025).

The central research problem is therefore: How does social media transform Indonesian student movements in mobilizing participants, constructing political narratives, and communicating democratic demands during national policy protests? This question generates three analytical concerns. First, how does digital communication alter the organizational structure and participation costs of student movements? Second, how do digital platforms function as spaces for political framing and democratic communication? Third, what limitations emerge from disinformation, polarization, surveillance, counter-narratives, and platform dependence? The article argues that social media produces a hybrid mobilization model in which physical organization and digital connectivity are not competing forms of activism but interconnected dimensions of contemporary democratic participation.

Methodologically, this article employs qualitative social movement analysis and digital discourse analysis. The analysis focuses on scholarly research and publicly documented communication surrounding major Indonesian policy protests, particularly #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw. The analytical categories are mobilization, collective identity, political framing, democratic communication, misinformation, counter-narratives, and organizational resilience. The study does not claim that social media independently causes protest. Instead, it examines how digital affordances interact with political grievances, organizational structures, youth identities, and existing networks of contention. This approach follows the broader understanding of contentious politics developed by Tilly and Tarrow (2015), while incorporating the digitally mediated forms of connective action identified by Bennett and Segerberg (2012).

The article contributes in three ways. First, it connects connective-action theory with empirical research on Indonesian student activism by demonstrating that digitally mediated participation does not eliminate organizations but restructures their relationship with participants. Second, it conceptualizes social media as a democratic communication space in which student movements produce political frames, circulate evidence, and contest dominant interpretations. Third, it demonstrates that the democratic potential of digital activism must be evaluated alongside its vulnerabilities, including misinformation, polarization, surveillance, and digital authoritarian tendencies. The article therefore moves beyond the assumption that social media is inherently democratizing or inherently destructive. Its consequences depend upon how activists, organizations, citizens, platforms, and political institutions interact.

## **Social Media and the Transformation of Student Mobilization**

The first dimension of hybrid mobilization concerns the reduction of participation and coordination costs. Traditional student demonstrations require considerable organizational resources: meetings, recruitment, transportation, information distribution, leadership coordination, and physical communication. Digital

platforms alter these requirements by allowing information to reach dispersed participants almost instantaneously. Earl and Kimport (2011) argue that digital technologies can lower the costs of organizing activism, while Bennett and Segerberg (2012) demonstrate that personalized digital participation can facilitate collective action without requiring every participant to join a formal organization. In Indonesia, this dynamic is visible in the September 2019 demonstrations, where online activity complemented large-scale physical mobilization (Kusumo and Perdana 2022). Social media therefore expands the organizational capacity of student movements by accelerating communication and reducing informational barriers.

Nevertheless, lower organizational costs should not be interpreted as the disappearance of organization. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) emphasize that contentious politics depends on sustained interaction among challengers, authorities, and political audiences. Student organizations remain important because they provide leadership, logistics, political education, and decision-making structures. Digital networks can distribute information quickly, but they do not automatically determine protest locations, negotiate political demands, provide legal support, or coordinate physical security. The Indonesian case therefore illustrates a hybrid structure. Kusumo and Perdana (2022) show that the 2019 student movement combined organizationally enabled action with personal action frames. Digital communication expanded individual participation while established organizations retained important coordinating functions.

Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) concept of connective action helps explain why individuals can participate without becoming formal members of student organizations. A participant may share a hashtag, circulate an infographic, comment on a political issue, or livestream a demonstration without attending organizational meetings. Such activities contribute to movement visibility even when they are not directly controlled by organizational leaders. This personalization can increase the movement's reach because participants do not need to adopt a uniform organizational identity. At the same time, it creates difficulties concerning strategic coherence. The Indonesian experience therefore suggests that connective action is most powerful when it interacts with organizationally enabled action rather than replacing it.

The Cipayung Group provides another example of this organizational adaptation. Sinurat (2023) shows that established student organizations employed digital activities when protesting fuel-price increases. The significance of this case lies in demonstrating that digitally mediated activism is not restricted to decentralized or informal networks. Established organizations can incorporate connective-action practices into their existing structures. Social media can therefore become an extension of organizational activity. Formal groups maintain leadership and organizational identity while using digital platforms to expand communication and participation. This finding challenges the assumption that digital activism

necessarily represents a break from traditional organizational politics (Sinurat 2023).

The reduction of participation costs also broadens the social composition of protest. Saud et al. (2020) show that social media contributes to the digitalization of political participation among Indonesian youth. Young people who may not identify with formal political organizations can participate through digital practices that fit their everyday communication habits. This is particularly significant for student movements because university populations are heterogeneous. Not all students belong to activist organizations, yet many possess social media accounts and digital networks. Digital platforms consequently provide an entry point into political participation for individuals who might otherwise remain outside formal movement structures.

Political discussion represents the mechanism through which this technological possibility becomes substantive participation. Intyaswati and Fairuzzab (2023) found that online political talk mediates the relationship between social media use and political participation among university students. This finding suggests that merely distributing protest information is insufficient. Participants must also interpret, debate, and discuss political claims. Student movements that encourage discussion can transform social media from an announcement system into a political learning environment. The distinction is important because democratic mobilization requires participants to understand the reasons for political action rather than simply respond to emotionally compelling messages.

The importance of information is also demonstrated by Suwana's (2020) analysis of the Save KPK movement. Activists considered credible information essential for countering misinformation and maintaining political participation. This finding has direct implications for student mobilization. Rapid communication is valuable during protests, but inaccurate information can undermine trust and produce unnecessary risks. Student organizations therefore require communication practices that verify information before amplification. Credibility becomes an organizational resource because participants need reliable information concerning protest schedules, political demands, institutional responses, and developments during demonstrations.

Digital mobilization also changes the relationship between individual participation and collective identity. Klandermans (2004) argues that social movement participation is shaped partly by collective identification and social-psychological processes. Sutan (2024) demonstrates that social media contributes to collective identity formation during the Indonesian Omnibus Law protests. Hashtags and shared visual symbols provide participants with mechanisms for recognizing one another as members of a common political cause. Digital identity does not eliminate individual differences; rather, it creates a symbolic framework through which diverse participants can perceive their actions as connected.

Wahyuningroem et al. (2024) provide particularly strong evidence that collective identity developed across online and offline environments. Their analysis

of Twitter data concerning #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw demonstrates that youth occupied central positions in the digital movement and that online and offline mobilization reinforced one another. This reciprocal relationship means that social media should not be treated as a preparatory stage before physical protest. The demonstration itself generates photographs, videos, slogans, testimonials, and other materials that subsequently circulate online. Online communication therefore continues after physical action and can extend the political life of the protest (Wahyuningroem et al. 2024).

Ramadhani et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate how #ReformasiDikorupsi functioned as an instrument of digital civic engagement. Hashtags allowed citizens to enter a political conversation without necessarily joining formal organizations. This finding expands the concept of student activism beyond students themselves. Student movements can act as initiators of broader digital civic participation in which citizens, journalists, civil society organizations, and youth communities contribute to the circulation of political messages. The movement consequently becomes a networked political arena rather than a closed organizational structure.

Nugroho (2025) further shows that social media can rapidly mobilize Indonesian youth and strengthen collective identity in #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw. His qualitative findings indicate that online campaigns amplified physical protest and generated solidarity among young activists. This evidence strengthens the argument that digital communication is an organizational multiplier. However, rapid mobilization can also produce short-lived engagement. A participant may contribute to a viral campaign without developing sustained political involvement. The movement's long-term capacity therefore depends on whether digital attention can be converted into organizational continuity, civic education, and repeated participation (Nugroho 2025).

The international theoretical literature helps explain this problem. Tufekci (2017) argues that networked movements can achieve unprecedented speed and scale but may simultaneously experience organizational weaknesses concerning strategy, negotiation, and institutional adaptation. This insight is applicable to Indonesian student movements. Social media enables large numbers of participants to mobilize quickly, yet rapid mobilization does not necessarily produce agreement about political goals or negotiation strategies. The organizational challenge is therefore to preserve the flexibility of networked participation while developing sufficient strategic capacity to sustain political pressure.

The hybrid media system perspective developed by Chadwick (2013, 2017) further clarifies how student movements interact with traditional media. Social media does not simply replace newspapers, television, and professional journalism. Instead, activists, journalists, political actors, and citizens increasingly operate within interconnected media environments. A protest video uploaded by students may be reported by journalists; a television report may then be circulated through social media; activist commentary may subsequently reinterpret the report. Political communication consequently becomes iterative and hybrid. Student movements

can gain greater visibility while remaining connected to established media institutions.

The first discussion therefore demonstrates that social media transforms mobilization through a combination of speed, accessibility, personalization, and network expansion. Yet the evidence does not support a technological-determinist conclusion. Digital platforms become politically effective when embedded within organizational resources, collective identity, political discussion, and credible information practices. The Indonesian student movement is best understood as a hybrid mobilization system in which organizationally enabled action and connective action coexist. This interpretation incorporates the organizational insights of Tilly and Tarrow (2015), the connective-action framework of Bennett and Segerberg (2012), and the empirical findings concerning Indonesian student movements (Kusumo and Perdana 2022; Sinurat 2023; Wahyuningroem et al. 2024).

## Social Media as Democratic Communication and Political Framing

The second dimension concerns the transformation of student movements into producers of political meaning. Protest does not simply involve assembling participants; it requires explaining why a policy is considered problematic, who is responsible, and what political principles are at stake. Social media enables activists to communicate these interpretations directly to citizens. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) demonstrate that social media use for news can be associated with civic and political participation. In the context of student protest, digital platforms therefore provide both informational and participatory functions. Activists can circulate policy explanations while simultaneously inviting audiences to comment, share, and participate.

Political framing becomes especially important when protests concern complex legislation. The Omnibus Law, for example, involved legal, labor, economic, and institutional questions that could not easily be reduced to a single slogan. Social media enabled activists to translate complex issues into infographics, short videos, explanatory threads, and visual messages. Sutan (2024) demonstrates that social media content contributed to collective identity formation during the Omnibus Law protests. The significance of these practices lies in their ability to connect technical policy debates with broader values such as democracy, justice, labor rights, and political accountability.

Hashtags function as particularly important framing mechanisms. #ReformasiDikorupsi does not simply identify a collection of posts; it presents an interpretation of political change by connecting contemporary policy disputes to concerns about the direction of Reformasi. #TolakOmnibusLaw similarly establishes opposition as a shared political identity. Wahyuningroem et al. (2024) demonstrate that these hashtags became central components of youth digital

participation. The hashtag therefore operates simultaneously as an indexing device, symbolic identity, and political frame.

Collective identity is strengthened when participants repeatedly encounter shared symbols and narratives. Klandermans (2004) emphasizes the role of collective identification in motivating movement participation. Social media increases opportunities for such identification because participants can continuously observe others expressing similar grievances. A student who sees thousands of users discussing the same issue may perceive political participation as socially meaningful and collectively supported. Sutan's (2024) analysis of the Omnibus Law protest confirms that social media contributed to the construction of collective identities among protest actors.

Digital communication also expands opportunities for political education. Saud et al. (2023) show that digital cultures can facilitate civic engagement and political participation among youth. Student movements can use these digital environments to explain institutional procedures, legal provisions, democratic principles, and policy consequences. Such communication transforms activism into a form of informal civic education. The democratic value of this practice is significant because citizens who understand policy issues are better positioned to evaluate government decisions and participate meaningfully in public debate.

Nevertheless, political education requires a balance between accessibility and accuracy. Complex policy questions often need simplification before they can circulate effectively on social media. Excessive simplification, however, can distort political information. Suwana (2020) demonstrates that activists in the Save KPK movement considered truthful information important for sustaining participation and combating misinformation. The lesson is that student movements should develop layered communication strategies: concise content can attract attention, while detailed explanations and source documentation can provide substantive context.

Political communication also increasingly occurs outside conventional media gatekeeping. Chadwick's (2013, 2017) hybrid media-system framework explains how political actors operate simultaneously across traditional and digital media. Student activists can publish their own statements, videos, photographs, and livestreams rather than depending entirely on journalists. This capacity can strengthen democratic communication because protesters can challenge interpretations they consider inaccurate. At the same time, professional journalism remains important for verification and contextualization. Digital activism should therefore be seen as adding communicative capacity rather than eliminating traditional media.

The ability to document demonstrations is particularly important. Physical protests produce events that may be interpreted differently by protesters, authorities, journalists, and other observers. Videos and photographs recorded by participants provide alternative documentation. When circulated online, such material can become evidence in public debates about police conduct, protester behavior, or

government responses. Digital documentation therefore performs an accountability function. It creates records that can challenge official interpretations and allow citizens to evaluate political events independently.

The communicative role of activists is supported by Suwana's (2020) finding that credible information was central to the Save KPK movement. The value of digital activism was not simply its ability to produce large quantities of content but its ability to communicate information that participants considered trustworthy. This distinction is essential for student movements. Visibility without credibility may create temporary attention but weakens long-term political influence. Credibility therefore becomes part of movement strategy rather than merely an ethical concern.

Digital political discussion also creates opportunities for persuasion. Intyaswati and Fairuzzab (2023) demonstrate that political talk mediates the relationship between social media use and political participation. This suggests that the democratic significance of social media is strongest when communication involves interaction. A movement that communicates only with supporters may reinforce internal identity but have limited capacity to persuade undecided audiences. Student activists therefore need to communicate across political boundaries by explaining demands in terms accessible to citizens who do not share the movement's ideological assumptions.

Saud and Margono (2021) situate these developments within Indonesia's broader movement toward digital democracy. Youth participation increasingly occurs within online environments in which political information and civic expression are integrated into everyday communication. This transformation creates opportunities for students to become more visible political actors. Their political claims can circulate nationally without requiring extensive financial resources or institutional access. Digital democracy consequently lowers some barriers between citizens and political communication, although it does not eliminate inequalities in digital literacy, access, or influence.

Saud et al. (2020) similarly show that social media contributes to the digitalization of youth political participation. The implication is that contemporary student movements should not be evaluated exclusively according to physical attendance. A participant who contributes through digital dissemination, political discussion, visual production, or online documentation may perform an important political function even without attending a demonstration. This expands the conceptual boundaries of political participation and helps explain why contemporary youth movements may appear less organizationally stable while remaining politically influential.

The democratic communication process, however, is vulnerable to fragmentation. Rachimoellah, Lubis, and Utimadini (2024) identify polarization and disinformation as significant obstacles to effective digital political engagement. Political messages can circulate within ideological communities and become increasingly detached from opposing perspectives. This produces a dilemma for student movements: strong internal communication may increase solidarity while

simultaneously reducing external persuasion. Democratic communication requires both collective identity and openness to disagreement. Activists must therefore develop communication practices that preserve movement identity without transforming disagreement into political exclusion.

The second discussion demonstrates that social media has expanded the communicative role of student movements. Students increasingly act not only as protesters but also as political educators, information producers, documentarians, and narrative entrepreneurs. The democratic importance of this transformation lies in the ability to bypass some conventional communication barriers and provide citizens with alternative sources of political information. Yet the effectiveness of this function depends on credibility, contextualization, and willingness to engage broader audiences. Digital visibility becomes democratically meaningful only when it contributes to informed public discussion rather than merely increasing the volume of political content.

### **Digital Contestation, Disinformation, Polarization, and Democratic Resilience**

The third dimension concerns the limits of digital mobilization. Social media is not a neutral environment in which all political actors possess equal communicative power. Governments, political parties, civil society groups, activists, journalists, influencers, and anonymous users operate within the same platforms. Rachimoellah, Lubis, and Utimadini (2024) emphasize that social media simultaneously expands political mobilization and creates problems of disinformation and polarization. Consequently, student activism should be understood as a contested communicative process in which political actors compete to define events, identities, and legitimacy.

Disinformation is especially problematic during moments of rapid mobilization. Protests often involve uncertain information about locations, arrests, police actions, government statements, or legislative developments. Activists may feel pressure to distribute information quickly, while verification requires time. Suwana's (2020) research on the Save KPK movement demonstrates that credible information was considered important precisely because misinformation could undermine political participation. This finding remains relevant to student movements: digital speed is valuable only when accompanied by mechanisms for verifying claims.

Digital misinformation also affects movement credibility. If an activist account distributes inaccurate information, audiences may generalize that error to the movement itself. This is especially problematic for decentralized movements in which there is no single authority capable of correcting every message. Student organizations therefore need recognizable official accounts, transparent correction mechanisms, and clear distinctions between organizational statements and

individual opinions. Such practices can reduce reputational risks without eliminating decentralized participation.

Polarization creates a different problem. Rachimoellah, Lubis, and Utimadini (2024) argue that social media can intensify political polarization through echo chambers and fragmented information environments. Student movements may benefit from strong internal solidarity, but excessive ideological homogeneity can reduce interaction with wider publics. Political communication becomes less persuasive when audiences perceive protest messages as belonging exclusively to a partisan community. Democratic activism therefore requires the capacity to maintain collective identity while remaining communicatively open to citizens outside the movement.

The problem of polarization can also be understood through the hybrid media system. Chadwick (2017) demonstrates that contemporary political communication involves interactions among old and new media rather than a simple transition from one system to another. Student movements therefore encounter multiple interpretive environments simultaneously. A protest statement may circulate on social media, appear in news reports, become the subject of television discussion, and then return to social media in altered form. Each transition can introduce new interpretations. Movements must consequently maintain communicative consistency across different media environments.

Tufekci (2017) identifies another vulnerability of digitally networked movements: rapid mobilization can produce organizational weaknesses. Movements may gather large numbers of participants without developing structures capable of negotiating with political institutions. The Indonesian student movement illustrates this tension. Hashtags can rapidly create political visibility, but policy change requires sustained advocacy, institutional negotiation, legal analysis, and continued public pressure. Digital mobilization is therefore an important first stage of political contention but cannot substitute for long-term organizational capacity.

Pratamawaty (2025) places these challenges within the broader problem of digital authoritarian drift. Digital technologies can increase citizens' communicative capacity while simultaneously expanding opportunities for political monitoring and control. Activists who use public platforms to organize protests also create digital traces that may increase their visibility to authorities. The democratic advantage of digital communication is therefore accompanied by new vulnerabilities. The more movements depend on digital infrastructures, the more important questions of privacy, security, surveillance, and platform governance become.

This creates a paradox of visibility. Student movements need visibility to attract participants and influence public opinion, but visibility may increase exposure to harassment or surveillance. Individual participants can become identifiable through their digital activities even when they do not hold formal organizational positions. The unequal distribution of these risks is significant because politically experienced organizations may possess greater capacity to

protect activists than individual participants. Hybrid mobilization must therefore incorporate not only communication strategies but also mechanisms for participant protection.

The commercial structure of social media platforms introduces another limitation. Platforms are designed around algorithms, attention, and engagement rather than democratic deliberation. Emotionally provocative content may receive greater visibility than complex policy explanations. Student movements may consequently face incentives to simplify or dramatize political messages. This does not mean that activists should reject visual or emotional communication, but it demonstrates why democratic communication requires multiple layers. Attention-generating content should be connected to detailed explanations, evidence, and opportunities for substantive discussion.

Digital activism can nevertheless strengthen democratic accountability. Ramadhani et al. (2024) demonstrate how #ReformasiDikorupsi facilitated digital civic engagement, while Wahyuningroem et al. (2024) show that online and offline movements reinforced one another. These findings suggest that digital platforms can help citizens observe political events, document grievances, and communicate criticism. Democratic accountability therefore extends beyond immediate policy outcomes. Even when governments do not immediately concede to protest demands, digital documentation can preserve evidence and sustain public discussion.

Collective identity can also provide resilience during periods of political pressure. Sutan (2024) shows that social media contributes to identity formation during protest. Shared identities can help participants interpret political setbacks not as individual failures but as collective experiences. Klandermans (2004) similarly emphasizes the importance of collective identification for sustained participation. Digital communication enables these identities to be repeatedly reinforced through symbols, narratives, and interaction. Nevertheless, identity can become exclusionary if it is constructed primarily through antagonism toward political opponents.

Nugroho (2025) indicates that Indonesian youth activism benefits from the ability of social media to create solidarity and amplify physical protests. This finding suggests that digital communication can contribute to resilience when it strengthens interpersonal and collective connections. However, resilience should not be equated with permanent online activity. Sustainable movements require institutional memory, leadership development, political education, and mechanisms for transferring experience to future activists. Digital platforms can preserve information and connect participants, but organizations remain necessary for maintaining continuity.

The broader political-learning dimension is important here. Ida et al. (2020) demonstrate the relationship among social media use, political learning, and participation. If digital activism is accompanied by political learning, participation can extend beyond episodic protest toward broader civic engagement. Students

may learn about legislative institutions, constitutional rights, political accountability, and policy processes through participation in digital movements. The democratic significance of activism therefore depends partly on whether it produces learning that remains after the immediate protest has ended.

Saud et al. (2023) similarly show that digital youth cultures can contribute to civic engagement and political participation. Their findings support the argument that contemporary political participation should be understood within the everyday digital environments of young people. Activism can emerge from ordinary practices of communication rather than from formally political spaces alone. This creates opportunities for democratic inclusion but also means that political communication increasingly competes with entertainment, commercial content, and misinformation for users' attention.

The final implication concerns how the effectiveness of student movements should be evaluated. Conventional assessments often focus on the number of protesters, media coverage, or immediate policy concessions. Digital activism requires broader indicators: network durability, narrative persistence, information credibility, cross-group communication, political learning, and capacity to withstand counter-narratives. Wahyuningroem et al. (2024) demonstrate that online and offline movements can reinforce one another, while Tufekci (2017) warns that rapid networked mobilization may create organizational vulnerabilities. Effectiveness therefore depends on whether digital visibility can be transformed into sustained democratic capacity.

Taken together, the third discussion demonstrates that digital mobilization produces both democratic opportunities and structural vulnerabilities. Social media can expand accountability, visibility, political learning, and participation, but it can also intensify misinformation, polarization, surveillance, and platform dependence. The Indonesian student movement therefore illustrates neither an inherently democratizing nor inherently authoritarian technological process. Instead, digital activism becomes democratically productive when it is supported by credible information, organizational resilience, inclusive political communication, and institutional accountability. The hybrid mobilization framework proposed in this article consequently places democratic resilience at the center of the relationship between social media and student activism.

## Conclusion

This article has examined how social media transforms Indonesian student movements in the context of national policy protests. The first major conclusion is that digital communication does not replace physical organization; rather, it creates a hybrid mobilization structure in which connective action and organizationally enabled action operate simultaneously. Social media reduces informational and participation costs, expands networks beyond formal organizations, and allows individual users to participate through personalized communication. At the same

time, student organizations remain important for leadership, logistics, political education, and strategic coordination. Evidence from the 2019 student demonstrations, the Cipayung Group, #ReformasiDikorupsi, and #TolakOmnibusLaw demonstrates that online and offline activism are mutually reinforcing rather than separate political spheres (Kusumo and Perdana 2022; Sinurat 2023; Wahyuningroem et al. 2024; Nugroho 2025). The main research problem can therefore be answered by conceptualizing contemporary Indonesian student activism as hybrid democratic mobilization.

The second conclusion is that social media has transformed students into political communicators as well as political protesters. Digital platforms enable students to construct political frames, circulate information, create collective identities, document demonstrations, educate citizens, and challenge dominant interpretations. This communicative function is especially important because political participation increasingly depends on information and discussion. Research on Indonesian youth shows that political talk, political learning, and digital culture are connected to participation (Ida et al. 2020; Intyaswati and Fairuzzab 2023; Saud et al. 2023). Nevertheless, democratic communication is not guaranteed by technological access. Disinformation, polarization, counter-narratives, surveillance, and platform dependence can weaken the democratic potential of digital activism. The effectiveness of student communication consequently depends on credibility, contextualization, openness to broader audiences, and organizational accountability.

Future research should develop the hybrid mobilization framework through longitudinal and mixed-method research. Quantitative social network analysis could examine how hashtags, activist accounts, journalists, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens interact across different stages of protest. Qualitative interviews could investigate how student organizations make decisions concerning digital strategy, information verification, collective identity, and risk management. Comparative research could examine whether the patterns identified in #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw also characterize later student movements. Future research should additionally investigate digital authoritarianism, platform governance, algorithmic visibility, and the long-term political learning generated by digital protest. Such research would help determine whether contemporary student movements are developing into durable democratic institutions of youth participation or primarily functioning as episodic networks of contentious politics.

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