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# The Salt March Today: Gandhian Lessons for Social Media Activism

*Kristóf Oltvai and McLane Sellars*

From his 1906 Transvaal march to his 1947 fast unto death in Calcutta, Mahatma Gandhi's career in peaceful protest was as diverse methodologically as it was geographically and historically expansive. The "Great Soul" saw his efforts for Indian self-rule or *swaraj* as "experiments with truth," and so he often adjusted his methods of resistance against injustice based on his situation, aim, or personal spiritual positionality. Fasts, strikes, walk-outs, speeches, and a revolutionary press all played key roles in a movement that spanned two continents. Common to all of his activism, however, was the principle of *Satyagraha*, meaning "truth force," and eventually, this term was applied to all the acts of large-scale, nonviolent resistance Gandhi organized or inspired. Many of Gandhi's initiatives did not pan out; indeed, much of his spiritual vision for India remains totally unrealized. Nonetheless, if there was one high point of the Indian independence movement, it has to be the 1930 "Salt Satyagraha" or "Dandi March," an event so successful and so quintessentially Gandhian that at the turn of the third millennium, *The Economist* noted retrospectively: "more than any other event, the salt march, exemplifying his tactic of non-violence, gave India's struggle for liberation its Gandhian stamp."<sup>1</sup>

The Salt Satyagraha began the morning of March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1930, when Gandhi and a cohort of seventy-eight trained activists departed from their intentional community in Sabarmati, marching southeast towards the coast near Dandi, a small village in Western India.<sup>2</sup> Their aim was to defy the monopoly on salt imposed by the British, and by collecting naturally occurring salt from the seashore, defy the British Raj. Gandhi's march lasted three and a half weeks, covered 240 miles, and drew hundreds of thousands of onlookers and participants.<sup>3</sup> Local, national, and international media news outlets excitedly covered the suspenseful procession, which commanded enormous popular attention. After collecting salt at Dandi before a crowd of 12,000, Gandhi continued down the coast, teaching coastal communities how to produce their own salt and giving speeches on Indian home rule. Over 60,000 were jailed as a result of participating in the nonviolent protest.<sup>4</sup>

1 "The decline of empire: Gandhi, salt, and freedom," *The Economist*, December 31, 1999.

2 Dennis Dalton, *Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 91.

3 Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 20.

4 *Ibid.*, 21.

Superficially, this may seem similar to previous *satyagrahas*. What then made the Salt March so distinct and successful? And how can its lessons be borne out in our world 85 years later?

If we look at the historical record, we see that the Salt Satyagraha's success can be largely attributed to two things: inclusivity and publicity. First, the Salt Satyagraha was a very inclusive, participatory campaign, and Gandhi's choice of salt as political symbol was central to this goal. The British monopoly and taxation on salt, first imposed in 1882, was for Indians a daily reminder of British rule, as salt was a primary dietary need.<sup>5</sup> This act particularly oppressed the poorest classes who already struggled to make ends meet. Among them, peasant women felt this oppression most keenly, as obtaining salt was vital to managing the household. By making salt collection his the central focus of his campaign, Gandhi created avenues of protest for people who otherwise had few political outlets, thus inviting hundreds of thousands to the struggle for Indian independence. The Salt March also made local participation easy. As Gandhi made his way down to the Dandi coast, he visited dozens of villages, recruiting followers and urging resistance to British rule. At one point, so many people joined the campaign that the column of marchers extending behind Gandhi reached a length of two miles.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the entire Salt Satyagraha, from its choice of salt as a symbol to its act of a cross-county "march," was innovatively participatory.

Second, the Salt Satyagraha was a remarkably well-publicized event. As scholar Dennis Dalton says, Gandhi "provided ample advance publicity" and timed the march to the advantage of the press, which helped to expand the already significant international interest in Gandhi's political activity.<sup>7</sup> He let both domestic and foreign newspapers know about the March, and the latter's coverage became very important in gathering foreign support for the home-rule movement. The media coverage even involved documentary filmmakers, a novelty at the time.<sup>8</sup> What's more, given the length of the march and the pre-announced final destination, the whole campaign was laden with ever-increasing suspense as onlookers waited with bated breath for Gandhi to collect salt in Dandi. Gandhi's sense of timing and political artistry helped play up the event and bring it to a larger audience.

The Salt Satyagraha was therefore successful not because it diverged from previous resistance initiatives, but because it combined all the separate elements of the Gandhian philosophy into a kind of "perfect storm." It was Gandhi at his

5 *Ibid.*, 91.

6 Homer A. Jack, *The Gandhi Reader: A Source Book of His Life and Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1956), 237.

7 Dalton, *Gandhi*, 107.

8 *Ibid.*

prime: a skilled orchestrator of social movements with an ability to weave an inclusive and highly publicized protest. Comparable to the context of Gandhi's work, the twenty-first century likewise needs well-organized political action. So how can Gandhi speak to us today?

One of the most prominent and promising developments in social activism is the use of social media, which has helped start large-scale movements like the Arab Spring and Euromaidan. Commentators have praised the potential of social media networks for creating political change. And it makes sense: if we compare social media activism to Gandhi's activism, it seems the case that social media can one-up the level of inclusivity and publicity that made older social movements such as Gandhi's so successful. After all, social media activists have an incredibly pervasive and interconnected network at their fingertips, with approximately 1.4 billion people using Facebook on a regular basis.<sup>9</sup> Activists can enter into the world of everyday social interaction with great ease, making a seemingly typical website home to political protest, just as Gandhi imbued an commonplace household item with political meaning on the public scale. This digital innovation has the potential to be far more inclusive and public than Gandhi's movements, which were limited by the technology of his time.

However, when considering the success of social media in propagating political and social activism, the record is mixed. In 2012, for example, over 100 million YouTube users viewed the viral "KONY 2012" video, encouraging viewers to pressure the U.S. government to send troops to Central Africa and capture rebel warlord Joseph Kony. The movement gained ground for a time, raising \$28 million for the video's creators, Invisible Children, Inc. By 2014, however, the *Washington Post* was asking if "Stop Kony" had been "a failure."<sup>10</sup> Kony himself was still at large, his militant organization still strong. Invisible Children itself faced dire financial struggles as donations had suddenly stopped pouring in. Very little change actually occurred besides accruing poorly-allocated funds. The *Washington Post* asked a particularly poignant question about this fiasco and, more generally, the role of social media in activism efforts: "Once you have the online support, how do you use it for real world impact? It's an important question, and if an answer could be found it may point to better things."<sup>11</sup>

The Arab Spring is a poignant counterexample. Researchers and the media have long noted that social media was critical in organizing protests across the

9 "Leading social networks worldwide as of March 2015, ranked by number of active users (in millions)," *Statista*, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>.

10 Adam Taylor, "Was #Kony2012 a failure?," *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/12/16/was-kony2012-a-failure/>.

11 *Ibid.*

Arab world from Morocco to Syria, protests that would eventually lead to six governmental collapses and three civil wars. If we look to the archetypal example of Egypt, scholars agree that initially, social media activism resembled the techniques of the “Stop Kony” movement. Information about the Mubarak government’s wrongdoing and criticism directed against it were shared across social media platforms, resulting in a generalized “awareness.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the Arab Spring resulted in profound social change. So what was the difference between Arab Spring and KONY 2012? And, more broadly, what can sustain social media activism?

Throughout his life, Gandhi stressed the importance of action over empty discussion and philosophizing, which was reflected in his insistence on finding accessible ways for Indians to become politically involved. Yet it must also be noted that these avenues of involvement were always deeply physical, allowing for individuals to use their bodies. In the Salt Satyagraha, Gandhi empowered the masses to physically involve themselves by collecting salt; all of the preliminary discussion, awareness, and publicity of the issues at hand moved beyond themselves towards actual physical action. On the other hand, KONY 2012, while highly public and accessing millions more people than Gandhi, stayed mostly within the realm of the virtual and discursive. Beyond clicking a button on a website to donate money or the vague call to “pressure your government,” the cause provided no opportunities for involvement. Viewers had little physical outlet for their new awareness of the issue besides token support, perhaps “liking” a page or sharing a video, contributing to the ultimate failure of the movement to create lasting change. Whereas Gandhi’s movement was action-oriented and profoundly democratic, KONY 2012 was stuck in the realm of the virtual with little avenue for everyday people to become more meaningfully and actively involved. Even empirical research, such as a 2014 study carried out at the University of British Columbia, confirms the importance of this Gandhian insight, finding that individuals are actually *less* likely to participate meaningfully in a cause when limited to “liking” a page or displaying a small symbolic token, such as a ribbon. Rather, what *does* motivate individuals is the ability to express their values and convictions in a meaningful, physical way.<sup>13</sup>

This creation of meaningful, physical means of political action – rather than

12 M. Rabin dranath and Sujay Kapil, “Social Media and the Arab Spring,” *Media Watch* 6, no. 1 (2015): 130, <http://www.mediatewatchglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/1bktk6nnh1tkkqhw15f6w2h/Media-Watch-January-2015-Issue-0011715.pdf#page=126>.

13 Kirk Kristofferson, Katherine White, and John Palozo, “The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 6 (2014): 1149-66.

virtual, token support – defined the impact of the Arab Spring as well.<sup>14</sup> Facebook events, for example, were used to organize real-world protests. Activists used text messaging and distributed flyers to spread the word to those without Internet access. It was when the people started showing up *en masse* in physical form, and not just posting and tweeting about alleged injustices, that the Egyptian government began to take the protesters' grievances seriously. Eventually, Internet companies themselves became directly involved, allowing protesters to "text to tweet" in order to get around the Mubarak regime's web blackout. Discourse moved from being "internal" to the Internet platform to being "external" and affecting everyday activity.<sup>15</sup>

If social media activism truly wants to capitalize on its potential for inclusivity and publicity, it must learn to point beyond its own networks. Social media activism has the ability to transform platforms of everyday interaction into places of protest and political change. To succeed, though, it must recognize that it cannot be the be-all-end-all of protest. Social media must move beyond the digital space and into the physical, beyond token "likes" into meaningful effort, if it is to be truly effective. Gandhi, ever a man of action, would have nothing less.

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14 This is not to say that the Arab Spring was a "success," or even that it has ended. Its consequences are still ongoing in the form of civil war in Libya and Syria – a historical development definitively antithetical to the nonviolent Gandhian ethic. In some Arab countries, protests only incited minor changes. News media have gone as far to call Tunisia the Arab Spring's "sole success story" ("Why Tunisia, the Arab Spring's sole success story, suffers from Islamist violence," *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2015). We are merely suggesting that the Arab Spring was effective in mobilizing citizens. As *The Economist* points out, however, the liberatory effects of the Arab Spring may yet be consummated: "The Arab Spring was always better described as an awakening: the real revolution is not so much in the street as in the mind . . . the journey may take decades. But it is still welcome" ("The Arab Spring: has it failed?," *The Economist*, 13 June 2013). Gandhi's goals for India were similarly not all achieved, or if so, sometimes incurred the cost of violence (e.g. the Partition).

15 Rabindranath and Kapil, "Social Media and the Arab Spring," 129.

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