Digital Strike: Monetizing Online Engagement and Content for Myanmar's Spring Revolution

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Digital networks and social media are increasingly becoming spaces with high political stakes as well as great economic gains. This paper contributes to the ongoing debate concerning the relationship between economic and political motivations, particularly the observation that economic factors often drive the creation of politically charged content (Grohmann & Ong, 2024). We present a case in which the roles of economic and political incentives are turned on their head, the creation of seemingly nonpolitical content with the purpose of generating money for a political cause. The mechanism through which this inversion is possible is the second finding of this paper: A network of politically motivated internet users coordinate themselves to create, interact with, and watch content for the purpose of income generation through advertisement revenue, which is not for the content creators or users but for a commonly shared political goal. This phenomenon is analyzed in the highly contentious and violent political context of the coup, the Spring Revolution, and the ongoing civil war in Myanmar. In our analysis, we draw from theories of eco-nomic incentives in online content creation, click farms, and financial resource mobilization for collective action as well as algorithmic resistance.

Keywords: Algorithmic Resistance; Click Work; Digital Economy; Myanmar; Spring Revolution

INTRODUCTION

The profound impact of online content on the political landscape is undeniable in many countries. Online communication has become essential for the offline coordination of social movements (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). Moreover, content creators such as influencers can have substantial influence on popularizing goods as well as ideas, and can earn a considerable income while doing so (Brown & Hayes, 2008). In the political realm, enabled by the low cost and accessibility of the internet, modern social movements increasingly utilize the internet to mobilize as well as to distribute resources. (Hyper)Connectivity brought about by online communications, especially social media platforms (and increasingly nonsocial algorithmic platforms), has also resulted in mass dissemination of mis- and disinformation, challenging long-standing democratic institutions and inciting sectarian violence (Amnesty International, 2022; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bleier et al., 2024; Cosentino, 2020; Fink, 2018; Liang, 2022; Wang, 2020).

This paper presents a case study in which the same economic mechanisms are flipped, and where mundane content instead functions as a vehicle for a political purpose.

Recent literature on the creation of mis- and disinformation has identified that, alongside top-down organized, ideologically driven groups of like-minded individuals posting emotional clickbait content, economic incentives are strong enough to motivate the creation of disinformation by individuals without having political or ideological ties to the content (Grohmann & Ong, 2024; Ong & Cabañes, 2019; Ong & Tapsell, 2022). Next to this economic act of posting politically laden content, recent studies have shed light on the workings of click farms and the related engagement market of selling likes and followers. This engagement-as-a-service phenomenon appears to consist of loose hierarchical structures where people are employed to perform such actions for financial rewards (Grohmann et al., 2022; Lindquist, 2018, 2022; Lindquist & Weltevrede, 2024).

This paper builds upon these two strands of literature that identify economic factors as key incentives for particular types of online engagement and content. A new case study is introduced, where cases of political content created for economic motivations are turned on their head: (seemingly) nonpolitical content is being created for the purpose of generating money for a political cause. The mechanism through which this is possible is analyzed as a network of politically motivated internet users coordinating themselves to create, interact with, and watch content for the purpose of income generation through advertisement revenue, which is not for the content creator or user but rather for a commonly shared political goal. This phenomenon is observed in the highly contentious and violent political context of the coup, the Spring Revolution, and the current civil war in Myanmar.

The outline of the paper is as follows: The first section outlines the background, and introduces the case of digital strike. The second section, the methods section, discusses how data was gathered. The third section reflects on the researchers' particular standpoint and potential ethical risks given the highly contentious circumstances of their research. The fourth section presents the findings. These results are theoretically interpreted and put in dialogue with existing research in the fifth section, the discussion. This focuses on economic incentives in online content creation, click farms, and financial resource mobilization for collective action as well as algorithmic resistance. The conclusion summarizes the key findings and points to future research.

BACKGROUND

In June 2021, in the midst of a renewed armed resistance against the Myanmar military junta, a Facebook page was set up by resistance groups and Burmese diaspora, with the proclaimed purpose of raising money for the ongoing Spring Revolution. This group created websites hosting ad networks such as Google AdSense, and directed Burmese internet users to visit these sites. In essence, they created a type of click farm based on the mass participation of politically active citizens with the explicit aim of raising funds for resistance efforts against the junta. Other groups sprung up as well, raising funds for a range of political causes related to the Spring Revolution, from supporting the civil disobedience movement to helping internally displaced people due to renewed fighting.

Beyond click farming, YouTube streaming campaigns akin to those found in K-Pop fandom culture were also organized in close collaboration with K-pop fan groups and internet users who were keen to oppose the junta and support the ongoing revolution (Fadhila, 2021; Kim & Hutt, 2021). The people participating in such activities came to be known as "clickers" and this form of fundraising activity online came to be known as digital strike. Three years on, digital

strike has become a crucial part of the resistance's resource strategy, gaining endorsement from political bodies such as the *National Unity Government* (NUG) and prominent resistance leaders. In a speech at a fundraising event in Japan in November 2023, NUG Minister of Foreign Affairs Daw Zin Mar Aung even mentioned digital strike as a key reason for the success of the Spring Revolution.

RESEARCH METHODS

The goal of the research project is to document and understand how a digital community organizes itself around shared political convictions, making use of the platform economy to raise resources to achieve political goals. As will be discussed in the next section, due to the contentious and sensitive context of the research, we decided upon this particular research goal as a way to protect the people behind the anonymous names on the platforms as well as ourselves. Consequently, little can be said about the motivations and experiences of those participating. Instead, insights into the organization of the network are provided.

The analysis is based on online data directly available through various social media platforms. Working with the assumption of the dominance of Facebook in this region (Ong & Toh, 2023; Tähtinen, 2024), we started gathering data there. Two sets of data were collected and analyzed. First, information on digital strike groups and support groups was gathered. Digital strike groups are designated as those directly involved in organizing activities to generate advertising revenue, such as running YouTube channels, mobile games, news reading applications, and websites. Support groups, on the other hand, are not directly involved in these activities but are organized to support and supplement them, as well as to assist the clickers participating in digital strike. These groups are further discussed in the findings section.

Beginning with the first digital strike group that was set up in June 2021, snowball sampling was used to gather data of other digital strike and support groups included in cross-promotional campaigns as well as via related content and page recommendations from respective platforms. Access to Facebook groups was obtained either because they were open access and public or through a request to the group admin (for which no verification process was required). Some groups allowed entry after filling out a single-question form in which both options led to approval. Additional information was obtained from news reports and social media posts by key resistance figures and organizations.

Second, financial information published by digital strike groups was used to calculate the amount of money raised and donated to resistance groups. Data from 11 prominent digital strike groups, where aggregated donation information was available, was selected. Money donated was calculated based on the information published by these groups on their respective Facebook pages. Donations made by the digital strike groups to resistance groups and causes are confirmed through donation certificates and receipts given out by the receiving organizations. All the digital strike groups that we have documented publish revenue earnings as well as donation certificates received from resistance groups.[1]

[1] The receiving organizations, if they have a Facebook page, also publish these donation certificates and receipts. For instance, after a digital strike group donated a certain amount of money to NUG's Ministry of Defense (MOD) in a given month, both the Facebook pages of the digital strike group and MOD would post the donation certificate, hence confirming that the donation was made.

In total, our analysis includes 52 digital strike groups (operating 40 YouTube channels, 52 Facebook pages, 35 Telegram channels, 46 mobile applications, and 41 websites) and 11 support groups (4 Facebook groups, 5 Facebook pages, and 2 Telegram channels).

RESEARCH ETHICS AND RESEARCHERS' POSITIONALITY

The research methods in this paper were, for a large part, shaped by research ethics considerations. This project has posed dilemmas on how to observe most ethically, how to present the results, and whether to continue with the publication at all. In this section, some of these dilemmas are discussed along with the ways in which they influenced decisions regarding the research methods. Concerns about potential dual use of the research results are also highlighted and addressed.

This case study contains a wealth of information but is also of a contentious nature. In essence, what is observed is an online social movement that has discovered new and highly effective means to raise money for their cause, where participants are unable to donate money themselves and where the rest of the world shows little interest in the conflict. This means that there is a lot at stake both in terms of the feasibility of future earnings (can the research findings interfere with the effective workings of the system?) as well as the safety of the people involved (can the findings pose a danger to the people behind the nicknames or to the researchers themselves?).

Ultimately, a research design was chosen that minimizes interference with the people involved, focusing instead on the how questions that can be inferred through simple observation. Put differently, the decision was made to focus on the structure itself rather than the individuals involved. On one hand, this goes against some standards of ethnographic research as it does not allow us to gather thick data. On the other hand, this means that it was not necessary to gather sensitive data about these individuals who went through efforts to remain anonymous for good reason. When considering this, we drew upon similar discussions in recent online ethnography regarding the anonymity of the researchers and the function of so-called lurking (Cera, 2023; Ferguson, 2017; Forberg, 2021; Forberg & Schilt, 2023). In studies into QAnon forums, for example, researchers discuss the dilemma of making themselves known as researchers and gathering thick data, reflecting on the spectrum between public and private and the different conditions under which to safely and fairly research vulnerable people (Cera, 2023; Forberg, 2021; Forberg & Schilt, 2023).

In the context of violent war and with the apprehension that this is the first exploration into the phenomenon, a research approach that leaned more to the safer side was selected. Therefore, the focus of this paper is placed on the conceptual aspect of the digital strike movement rather than on the individuals involved. Thus, insights were derived from observation alone. Instead of gathering extensive data, illustrative screenshots were taken to explain and highlight important features of the movement. Only a few of these screenshots, obtained from open and public Facebook groups (accessible with just a Facebook account) or from groups with more than a few thousand members, have been selected for publication. No personal data was gathered. In addition to this, the amount of money raised was calculated from posts published on public Facebook pages to estimate and get a sense of the financial significance of the movement.

In addition to considerations of how to ethically engage in this research and gather information, we recognize that our research has potential dual use implications. Three possibilities for dual use are identified: by the military junta, by the platform companies, and by malevolent movements. First, there is the risk that the findings expose the movement to the military junta.

It is observed that the junta-controlled newspapers have regularly issued warnings to the public, advising against participation in online activities affiliated with the digital strike movement. This suggests that the junta is already aware of the phenomenon. Furthermore, some aspects of digital strike have been covered by major international media outlets (Paddock, 2022). Attempts have already been made by the junta to hamper the movement, such as doxing campaigns which target individuals who are believed to have taken part as clickers, or by banning popular VPN services. However, these measures have only been partially successful and we do not believe that the findings from this research will improve the junta's capabilities in this regard.

Second, it would be possible for the findings to be used by platforms to ban the involved groups or to demonetize their digital assets. For this reason, care has been taken in the research design to ensure that none of the groups are exposed or named. It must also be noted that the phenomenon is not limited to activities deemed inauthentic by platforms or against their monetization rules.[2] For instance, activities such as organized mass streaming can also be observed in K-Pop fandom culture (Fadhila, 2021; Kim & Hutt, 2021). That is, from our observations, the digital strike movement is not making money out of activities currently deemed against the monetization policy of the platforms.

Third, the research findings could serve as inspiration for malevolent movements that might use the structures described to gather money for malicious intentions. It has been observed, based on the data, that this movement has generated substantial revenues through its organizations. We are apprehensive that similar methods can be used by other movements with harmful political ideals or just for financial gain. However, even if the findings presented might inspire the creation of such a system, they would not provide substantial aid or expertise in implementing it. Additionally, platforms and their monetization models evolve over time, meaning that what works today may not work in the future. Keeping a system like the one described operational requires continuous tinkering and experience-based knowledge. Lastly, it cannot be determined whether this phenomenon is the first of its kind; only, it is the first, to our knowledge, to have been studied.

FINDINGS

Money Raised

It was found that a total of USD 5.2 million was raised and donated to various resistance forces and causes by 11 digital strike groups between June 2021 and December 2022. This figure can be considered significant, given that the funds were raised during the crucial early period of the revolution. Additionally, three digital strike networks that were directly operated by Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs) were identified. These three networks consisted of YouTube channels, news reading apps, and websites. In their communication with audiences, the use of VPN services with locations set to countries such as the US, UK, and Japan was emphasized with the purpose of maximizing revenue for their respective channels. The three groups also explicitly stated that their purpose was to raise funds for resistance efforts. This is another indicator of the effectiveness of digital strike as an avenue for resources for resistance groups in the Spring Revolution.

[2] Social media platform governance includes a process of deleting or inactivating accounts which are deemed by the platform to be "inauthentic". Different definitions are used across platforms (see Google, 2025; Meta, 2025).

Transparency

One of the key features observed in the operations of digital strike groups is transparency regarding revenue from advertisements. Almost all of the digital strike groups observed regularly publish their earnings as well as donations made on their Facebook pages. Live streaming of advertisement earnings was even observed in one group. Figure 1 shows a monthly earnings report published by a digital strike group, while Figure 2 shows donation certificates published by a digital strike group which it has received from resistance groups it has supported. A possible reason for this is to reaffirm to donors that the money is actually used for proclaimed purposes. In this sense, publishing donations and earnings publicly helps digital strike groups gain legitimacy which can be difficult in a highly decentralized movement. Besides the functional role of transparency, one could also interpret this through the more culturally embedded lens of merit making and charitable giving prevalent in Myanmar society (Dove, 2017; Hsu, 2019; McCarthy, 2016).

Figure 1. Monthly earning report published by a digital strike group. (Facebook, screenshot by the authors)

Figure 2. Donation certificates from resistance groups published by a digital strike group. Certificates are given out by resistance groups to donors including digital strike groups. (Facebook, screenshot by the authors)

Political Nature and Goals

Even though they are participating in commercial-like activities using business models deployed by commercial click farms and online content creators, digital strike groups are very clear about their political aims and goals. Two types of content created by digital strike groups were observed. The first type of content is aimed at income generation and here various platforms are used. This could be in the form of audiobooks on YouTube, latest news on news reading apps, or blog posts that have high *cost per mille* (CPM) rates, such as travel blogs or websites giving financial advice.[3] These types of content are similar to generic content that can usually be found in the online content industry. It was observed that some of this type of content is created using crowdsourcing strategies. Several groups can be seen working with volunteers to create content for their apps, websites, or YouTube channels. Figure 3 shows a news reading app where users can send in their own poems and novels, and Figure 4 shows a call for self-recorded audiobooks by a YouTube channel run by a digital strike group. There was even a Telegram channel where volunteers help translate Burmese language content into English so that they can be published on websites for monetization.

[3] CPM rates reflect how much money a content creator or publisher gets from advertising networks for every 1,000 views.

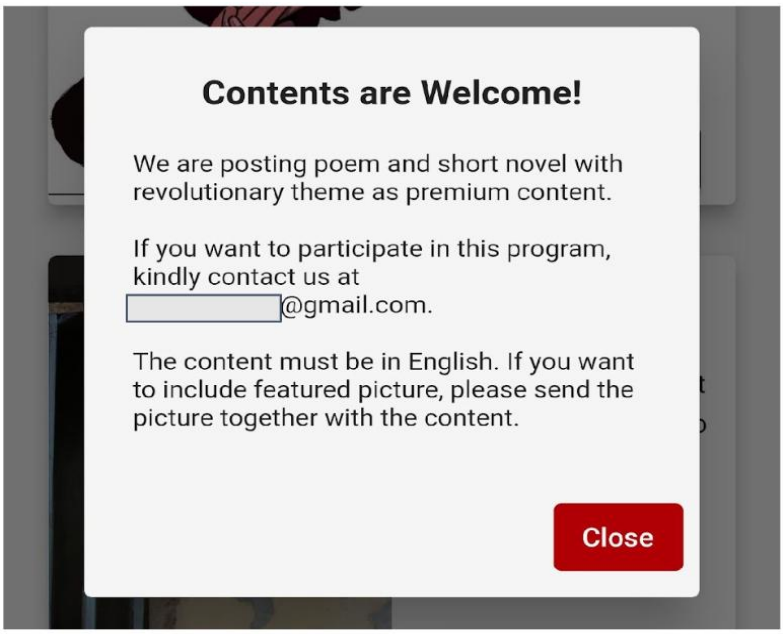

Figure 3. A news reading app calling for volunteers to send in their writings. (Mobile application)

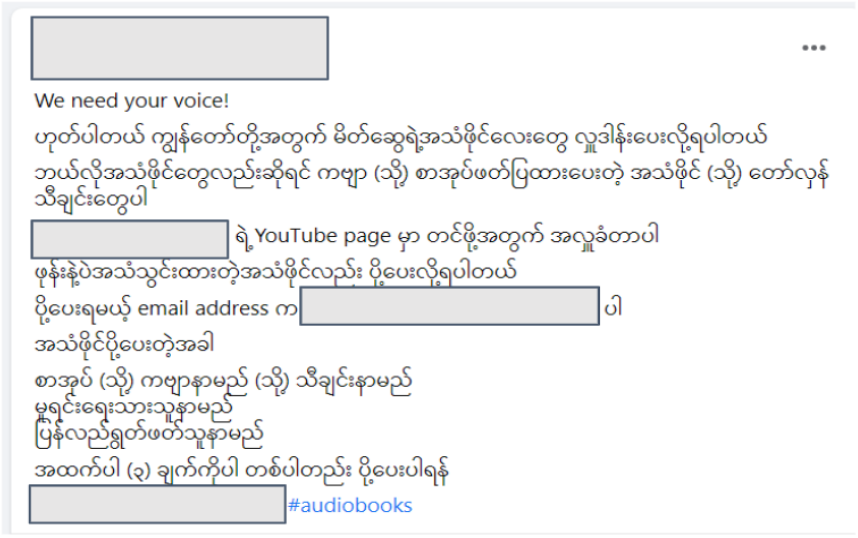

Figure 4. A YouTube channel run by a digital strike group asking for volunteers to record audiobooks for the channel. The announcement was made via the digital strike group's Facebook page. (Facebook, screenshot by the authors)

The groups also have their own Facebook pages where they publish their advertisement earnings and communicate their goals and aims to clickers and the general public. This is the second type of content, and it is used primarily as a form of public relations messaging; here the message is clearly and explicitly political in nature and specifically relates to raising funds for the Spring Revolution. Figure 5 is an example of a digital strike group's Facebook page, which uses a quote from Tayzar San, a prominent resistance figure, to promote the movement.

Figure 5. A digital strike group using a quote by resistance figure Tayzar San. (Facebook, screenshot by the authors)

Advertisement-Based Revenue

It was observed that digital strike groups exist alongside groups that seek donations or organize crowd-funding campaigns online. That is, digital strike groups were primarily set up to generate revenue from advertising alone. Digital strike is in fact often promoted as an alternative to directly donating money, especially for those who cannot afford to do so. While some support groups do accept small donations for the purpose of buying mobile data top-up cards or premium VPN accounts, evidence suggests that these can be also donated in-kind.

Voluntary Participation

From our observation of the 52 digital strike groups and 11 support groups, there was no evidence that the clickers are provided with monetary incentives for their time and efforts. Participation seems to be purely on a voluntary basis. It is also important to note that content consumption is not the primary reason for clickers to engage with digital strike groups and their revenue-generating content. This is evident from instructions to create authentic behavior as well as features that focus only on advertisement revenue generation. For instance, Figure 6 shows a feature in a mobile game developed by a digital strike group where users can simply watch advertisements instead of playing the game. The feature also displays a rough estimate of how much money the clicker has raised by viewing the advertisement. We observed that other apps have similar features where users are given points based on the number of advertisements they have watched.

Figure 6. A feature inside a mobile game developed by a digital strike group where users can watch advertisements without playing the game. (Mobile game)

Support Groups

One core feature of the digital strike phenomenon that was observed is the support groups. These groups do not seem to be directly affiliated with digital strike groups but are similarly organized on a voluntary basis. In general, we found three types of support groups. The first type is organized as Facebook groups. Here the admins organize 'clicking campaigns' where various digital strike apps are listed, and a daily engagement target, such as viewing a certain number of advertisements or obtaining points within specified apps, is set. Participating clickers in such campaigns simply need to submit screenshots of their interactions with the listed apps and the admins in turn give out a personalized (based on the username, generally nicknames) 'certificate of participation'. In a way, these support groups gamify digital strike for the participating clickers. Figure 7 shows an example of a daily click challenge created by a support group, while Figure 8 shows certificates given out to those who have participated in such an event.

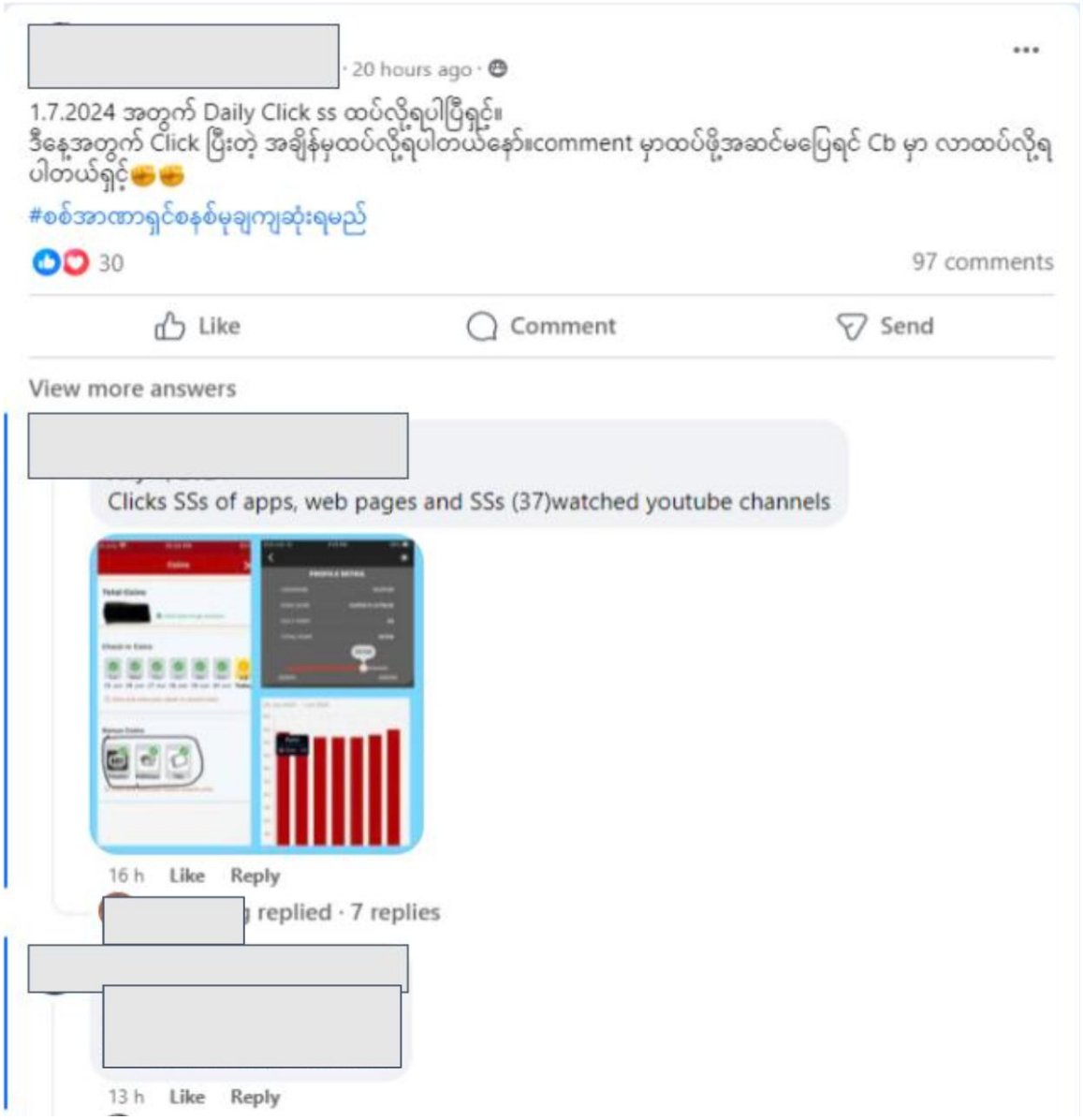

Figure 7. Daily click challenge posted by an admin for a digital strike support group. (Facebook, screenshot by the authors)

Figure 8. Certificates given out by a digital strike support group for clickers participating in daily click challenges. (Facebook, screenshot by the authors)

The Facebook groups also function as information sharing platforms where clickers exchange information about which digital strike apps have active advertisements and which VPN locations have high CPM rates in real time. This helps to maximize earnings from advertisements for the digital strike groups in two ways. First, interacting with apps with active advertisements makes sure a clicker's time and efforts are fully monetized. Second, CPM rates differ by a large margin depending on the users' country, with CPM rates for Global North countries (or corresponding IP addresses) generating the most income. In Figure 9, an admin of a support group shares the names of VPN services and country IPs where advertisements are active.

Figure 9. An admin of a support group shares the names of VPN services and country IPs running active advertisements. (Facebook, screenshot by the authors)

The second type of support group is mostly set up as Facebook pages. These Facebook pages are dedicated to educating people on how to participate in digital strike and to providing technical information and how-to guides such as the use of VPN services. Another type of information that is typically provided is on how to generate real or authentic views for mobile applications and websites. This includes guides on how a clicker should interact with the apps and advertisements, so that their behavior is deemed authentic by the platforms to avoid demonetization. Additionally, the support groups also provide information on newly established digital strike groups and act as watchdogs against potentially fraudulent groups that might be using digital strike for commercial purposes without really providing donations to resistance groups. Finally, the third type of support group operates as Telegram channels where clickers can request mobile data top-ups or premium VPN accounts. Such services require a verification process and proof that one is an active clicker.

DISCUSSION

In this section, our findings are put in dialogue with four themes in the literature. First, the function of labor or economic incentives in the creation of online content is discussed, following arguments made by Rafael Grohmann and Johnathan Ong (2024) as well as Johan Lindquist and Esther Weltevrede (2024). Second, we reflect on how the role of clickers can be interpreted as holding space between crowdfunding (Vromen et al., 2022) and click farms (Lindquist, 2018, 2022). Third, through the lens of financial resource mobilization for social movement theory (Edwards & McCarthy, 2007), it is argued that digital strike combines self-production and appropriation in an innovative manner. Fourth, the digital strike phenomenon is interpreted within the algorithmic resistance framework presented by Tiziano Bonini and Emiliano Treré (2024). In doing so, our analysis starts from interpreting the economic setting of our case in light of recent debates on this topic. It then moves to the role of politics and social movements. It ends with the argument that this novel phenomenon is an innovation for social movements to acquire financial resources by a gaming of the digital attention economy.

Digital Labor and Authenticity Governance

Looking at the content creators' motivations, it has recently been argued that, alongside political drivers for content like disinformation, economic incentives shape the creation of online content. In their introductory chapter to a special issue on this topic, Grohmann and Ong (2024)

write that "disinformation-for-hire" is a "valuable analytical frame" since it "lays bare disinformation as a product of commercial and political complicities in the late capitalist arrangement of transnational digital industries" (p. 2). That is, the framework shows not only how commercial structures play an important role in content creation through the selling and buying of content, clicks, likes, and followers, but also how the transnational, global nature of today's digital platforms and finance systems shape behavior.

About this type of content, Grohmann and Ong (2024) say that one can identify a particular labor hierarchy with, at the top, steerers of the particular content (for example, PR firms or political consultants). In the middle of the hierarchy platform are workers who ride the wave of this type of content (for example, influencers), and at the bottom are low-earning click workers who get financial rewards for clicking, liking, following, and interacting with the content provided by the mid layer, which ultimately also benefits the top layer.

In the case of digital strike, all three layers can be identified, yet the commercial incentives run slightly differently. At the top of the hierarchy are the (resistance) groups who end up receiving the donations, which are gathered by the middle group, constituting the organizers of the groups and pages and that receive the advertisement revenue; they then donate it to the top of the hierarchy, the on-the-ground groups they support. The lowest layers in this hierarchy are the clickers who spend their free time watching the videos, or pretending to read the blog articles, following the tips on how to engage.

Yet, the relation between these different positions within this hierarchy are rather blurred. For instance, there have been cases in which the groups receiving donations would upload a video describing their situation, acting almost as online influencers. Moreover, the clickers themselves also organize in support groups, informing each other about the most lucrative methods and providing a network of support.

Furthermore, the transnational dimension of the political economy is clear in this case. Despite the political cause being local, the network itself is dispersed and relies on diaspora networks. Moreover, the economic model buttresses on the inequalities of the global market, where advertisements viewed in the US, UK, or Japan come with higher revenue than advertisements watched from Myanmar. At the same time, however, the value of the advertisement income from the Global North is worth more in the Global South, just by the sheer difference in purchasing power parity. Thus, the global business characteristics of the online advertising industry is put to use by the movement in these two ways.

Importantly, digital strike networks do not deal with disinformation as the click-baiting, emotionally-riling content that has been shown to lead to catastrophic consequences (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Cosentino, 2020), including in Myanmar (Amnesty International, 2022; Fink, 2018). The majority of the content is mundane and generic, such as audiobooks, travel and finance tips, and video games. So rather than profiting from disinformation, our case study falls more in line with what Lindquist and Weltevrede (2024) describe as the "engagement-as-a-service" market but from the position of the content creator. The term is introduced to move beyond the dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic behavior of clickers. However, digital strike and its content include other types of online services such as mobile games and apps. This is in contrast to the creation or sharing of disinformation to gain traction of followers, as is central in the concept of "disinformation-for-hire" (Grohmann & Ong, 2024).

In line with what is described about the engagement-as-a-service industry, a cat-and-mouse game was observed in which the digital strike groups try to outrun the platforms' demonetization rules in cases of what is described as inauthentic behavior. In order to stay one step ahead, the support communities, for instance, advise clickers about how to read an article

to create the highest revenue. Tips and tricks are shared frequently and a continuous tinkering and updating of strategies was observed. More provocatively, one could wonder at this point what authenticity really ought to mean in this context, where there is genuine motivation to click and watch content, but for goals not primarily related to the content itself.

Taken together, it can be argued that what was observed is similar to the entanglement of political and commercial motives described by Grohmann and Ong (2024) but in a mirrored manner. In the original theory by Grohmann and Ong (2024), economic incentives drive the production of political content. In our case, we see a mirror image. It is the political incentives that drive the creation of content for the purpose of acquiring financial gains. Where, in the original instance, the politically-riling content features were almost a by-product of making the economic mechanism work, in our case it is the politics that incentivize economic activity. Yet, to make the economic mechanism work in the case of digital strike, the majority of the content is not politically riling. The politics are not primarily in the content that drives economic revenue. Instead, the politics are implicit (or seemingly lacking altogether) in the content, yet they still drive economic revenue.

Put differently, the absence of explicit political content is not a bug but a feature of the digital strike movement's entwinement of politics and commerce. This turns Grohmann and Ong's (2024) logic on its head while following the same intuition about the entanglement relation between economic and political motives. In this case, the content need not be particularly click-baiting to fulfill its purpose. Income from, for instance, video streaming campaigns are generated because of the political support linked to the video but not necessarily the content of the video itself. Hence, in contrast to disinformation, there is a reversal of the role of economics and politics, the politics being implicit whilst the economics are more explicit.

Between Crowdfunding and Click Farms

In recent years, there has been growing attention to the phenomenon of click farms, or what Grohmann and Ong (2024) describe as the lowest tier in their digital labor hierarchy: digital sweat laborers. Various studies describe the incentives, working conditions, and motivations of the people involved in these click farms (Lindquist, 2018, 2022; Grohmann et al., 2022). An important characteristic is that individuals who engage in click farming activities do so to gain a small revenue for their efforts – that is, it is led by monetary incentives. The digital strike phenomenon seems to have a lot in common with these click farms. The internal structuring of the groups and business models deployed are similar to click farms (Lindquist, 2018, 2022): The people spending time clicking and watching content are called 'clickers', and the main incentives are monetary.

However, digital strike fundamentally differs from the click farm economic model in that the monetary incentives are not catered towards one's own financial benefit but rather to the (political) groups involved. The clickers do not engage to earn money, but to donate to their political cause. A theme in the click farm literature is the meager money clickers make and hence their exploitation (Grohmann et al., 2022). Yet in the case of digital strikers, no money reaches their hands at all: The purpose is to donate.

In other words, they donate their time. This marks a distinction from crowdfunding initiatives worldwide, where a call is made to fund a particular cause through microdonations, following the philosophy that many hands make light work (Vromen et al., 2022). We speculate two reasons why the organizers might have opted for this donation of watching advertisements rather than the more common microdonations.

First, many participants in digital strike likely have limited financial resources, even for microdonations, but have time to contribute by watching advertisements. Given the violent crackdown on dissidents by the Myanmar junta following the coup and the Spring Revolution, it may have been safer and more convenient to invest time from the safety of one's home, protected by a VPN, rather than participate in riskier on-the-ground protests. Moreover, for members of the diaspora, not being in physical proximity may have also driven their decision to channel time and energy into political action online, where direct participation was otherwise impossible. However, this remains a chicken-or-egg question, and more research would need to be done to show whether this intuition is generally correct. It remains unclear whether the absence of financial resources initially motivated the design of this model or if it simply attracted people with limited means afterward. Further research is needed to determine whether financial constraints or the desire to invest time and engage in an online community were the primary motivators for participation.

Second, and related to this, the findings in this paper suggest that the advertisement-based model might attract more revenue not only due to the financial constraints of the donors but also because of the model's potential profitability. The main indicator for this is the donation of premium VPN accounts and mobile prepaid cards to clickers, which seems to imply that such costs are at least covered by the revenue generated from advertisements. However, this is speculative and requires further research to confirm. Another consideration is that advertisement revenue might be a more accessible money stream, as it flows through digital advertising networks, which may be less closely monitored than other financial channels.

Financial Resource Mobilization Through Collective Action

As said, although the clickers participate in digital labor, there is no typical producer-consumer relationship, since the products (webpages, videos, games) are but a means for the clickers to produce advertisement revenue. Instead, the phenomenon at hand is best described as an online social movement, gathering around a political cause with the aim of generating financial resources for the Spring Revolution. Through the lens of resource mobilization theory for social movements (for an overview, see Edwards & McCarthy 2007, Edwards et al., 2018), digital strike innovates on currently known mechanisms to gather financial resources through collective action.

Within resource mobilization theory, distinctions are made between five different types of resources (moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material) and four means to get access to these resources (self-production, aggregation, appropriation, and patronage) (Edwards & McCarthy 2007). For our case, the interplay between some of these is intriguing. First, one could say that human resources are used to generate material (namely, financial) resources (Edwards & McCarthy 2018, p. 80). In particular, human resources such as skills and expertise in the form of setting up the networks and teaching peers about etiquette, including the use of the correct VPN location, are used. And labor is drawn from in the form of clicking. Both will be elaborated and theorized further below.

Second, self-production and appropriation are relevant in analyzing the mechanisms involved in generating income. Regarding the former, it has been theorized how social movements can create income through collective actions of its members. This can be done offline through the organizing of events, thereby simultaneously engaging (more) people in their movement and producing material resources. Examples include walk- or run-a-thons, fairs for secondhand goods or food, or car washing actions (Edwards & McCarthy, 2007). Online, studies have shown how these tactics have extended to include, among others, crowdfunding

campaigns on social media platforms (González-Cacheda & Cancela Outeda, 2022; Vromen et al., 2022). Ultimately, to generate money, Edwards and McCarthy (2007) argue, social movements always depend on "asking fellow citizens and/or those in charge of other organizations for financial contributions" (p. 138).

Although digital strike does require asking, it is not money they ask for. Instead, as discussed above, they ask for time. We think this a marked change and innovation. All strategies mentioned above to combine collective action with acquiring money involve the direct donation of money by others (walk- and run-a-thon, selling of goods) or directly by oneself (crowdfunding). The digital strike movement's ability to generate cash without actually asking for it seems a new phenomenon enabled by the attention- and advertisement-based global digital economy.

Moreover, this new means to financial resources is not only based on self-production but also involves a type of appropriation. It involves self-production because digital strike relies on the participation of members and associates of the movement – there can be no successful resource mobilization without the clickers clicking. At the same time, the mechanism through which this production generates income is by means of appropriating the digital advertisement economy. Where appropriation is generally thought of as "exploitation of the previously aggregated resources of other groups" (Edwards & McCarthy, 2007, p. 134), digital strike does not take from other social movements but from the diffuse and splintered setup of the online advertisement industry. The section below interprets this type of appropriation of resources in light of recent theory on algorithmic resistance.

Digital Strike as Algorithmic Resistance

In their book *Algorithms of Resistance* (2024), Tiziano Bonini and Emiliano Treré theorize how people find ways to resist or subvert the power algorithms hold over their lives. At the margins of power, individuals "game the system", exercising what the authors call "algorithmic agency" or a "reflexive ability" to manipulate algorithms to serve their own needs (pp. 6-8, 19). This resistance takes various forms, and the specific framework developed by Bonini and Treré (2024) is the one we focus on in this discussion.

Bonini and Treré (2024) discern two axes, the first distinguishes between strategic and tactical agency depending on the resources available in terms of time, capital, and expertise. In the case that time, capital, and expertise are available, there is a possibility to strategically engage with the algorithms, for instance, through coding or buying advertising space. If, on the other hand, resource availability is limited, the interventions are of a more tactical nature. The second axis asks whether the behavior falls in line with the neoliberal, individualist, competitive ideology on which the platform is based or whether it deviates from this by championing solidarity, sharing, and ideology over economics, for instance.

Digital strike does not align with the ideology of the platforms it operates on, and functions primarily through tactical rather than strategic means. Based on the ideology of solidarity, sharing, and donating time, people are motivated to join in support of the Spring Revolution. Rather than working for their own financial gain, they donate time and effort to generate income for the political cause they believe in. This stands in contrast to the rationale based on economic incentives seen in the engagement-as-a-service, disinformation, and click farms industries (discussed above) where motivation is often understood through a neoliberal, rational-choice lens, focused on self-interest and personal gain.

Regarding available resources, the system is designed to allow people to contribute whenever they have spare time, rather than requiring large, continuous time investments. Moreover,

the setup does not require much capital. In fact, as discussed previously, one reason for this particular model might be the overall lack of sufficient funds.

One could argue that the support groups exhibit more strategic behavior, especially in sharing and donating VPNs and prepaid cards. However, in comparison to large PR campaigns or salaries of software developers, this can still be considered tactical. Presumably, the most valuable resource the network possesses is a particular type of expertise, namely the knowledge of how these advertisement networks operate and how to game the platform's authenticity monitors. This is indeed quite a specific type of expertise, yet at the same time does not require a university degree or extensive experience, which makes us consider it to ultimately also be tactical rather than strategic.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted how, in parallel with the Spring Revolution in Myanmar, an online revolution in the form of the digital strike has emerged. This online environment and ecosystem was designed to raise funds for the revolution by leveraging the online advertising industry that lies at the heart of the profitability of platform giants. We found that, in addition to physical protests and direct donations, a network of Burmese internet users donated their time, converting it into advertising revenue to support their political cause. Interestingly, the content they engaged with to generate this revenue was neither political nor disinformation; rather, it consisted of mundane, generic content.

In this study, we have observed this movement and aimed to conceptualize the phenomenon in contrast to disinformation and click farm studies. While economic incentives were a driving force, we found that, in this case, these incentives were grounded in principles of solidarity and resistance, rather than the self-interested logic of the Homo economicus. Participants also developed extensive support networks beyond their clicking activities.

Future research could expand geographically to other regions to assess whether this form of online resistance is unique to Myanmar. Additionally, more in-depth studies could provide greater insight into individual motivations and the structure of the system. Conceptually, further exploration could focus on the relationship between the economic, political, and ideological positions of both content creators and clickers.

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