

THE ACTIVIST ALGORITHM PROJECT. FINAL REPORT

Evidence, wishes
and needs

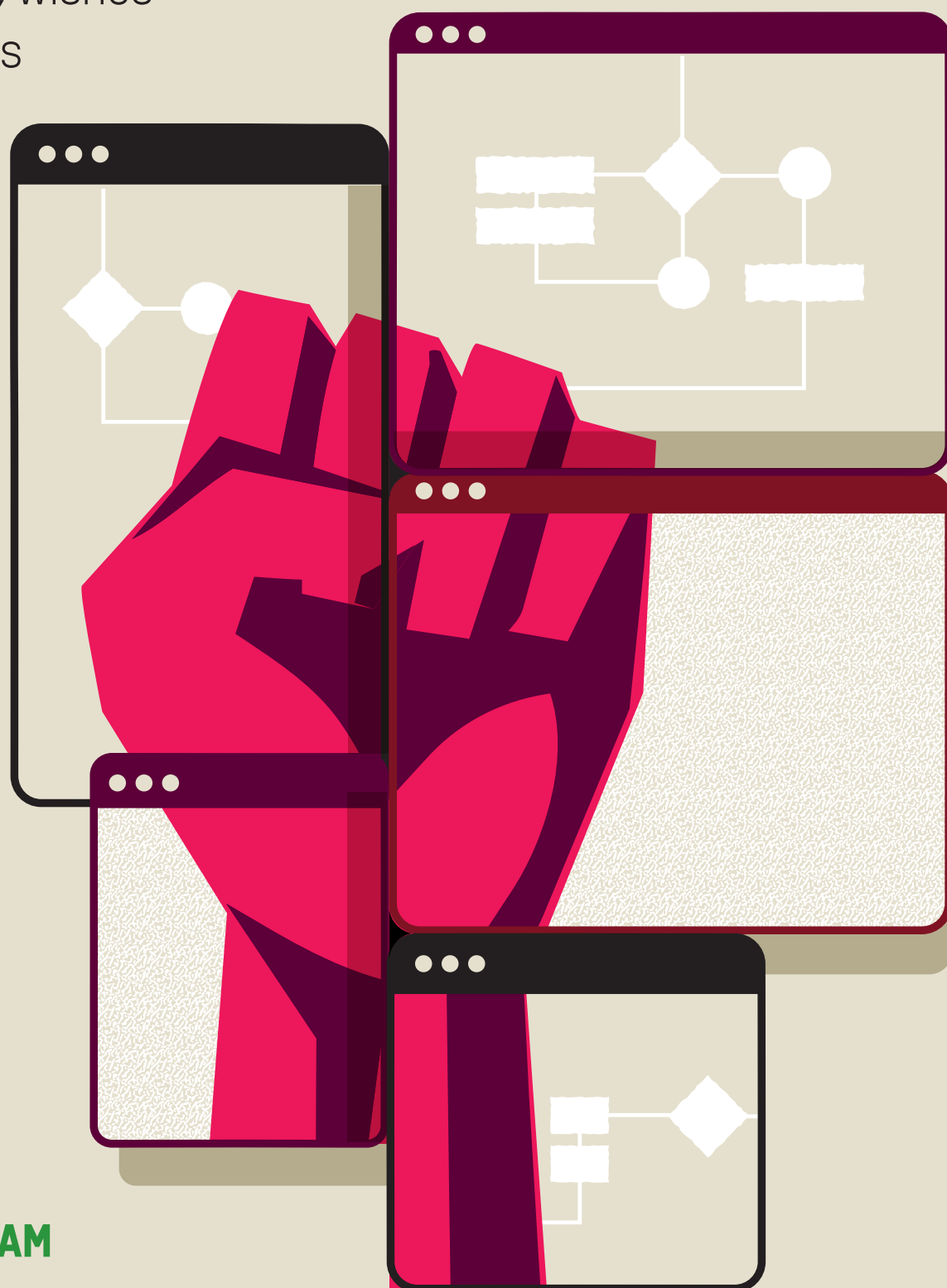


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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1

These algorithmic systems are neither spontaneous nor uncontrollable processes, but rather tools introduced by the companies that own the platforms to ensure their objective is met: maximising their profits

1.2

The aim was to create a space for discussion and collective action

CONTEXT

The digital environment is now an almost unavoidable part of our lives. Many aspects of our lives, from work to our dealings with the government, and even our personal relationships, often flow through undersea cables, data centres or satellites in the form of bits that manifest themselves in our interactions with apps.

These platforms have a complex and ambiguous status. We have often interpreted them as public spaces, but in reality, they are the private property of companies and entrepreneurs whose aim is to maximise their profits. It has come to be accepted that social media is more like a vast shopping centre than a public square; yet it is also a vital space for social movements.

The expansion of artificial intelligence has exacerbated this situation because the dynamics within these digital spaces are governed by complex algorithmic systems that are designed to decide everything from which content is given the most visibility to what data is collected from users, including which materials are deleted or how interactions between users are channelled. These algorithmic systems, however, are neither spontaneous nor uncontrollable processes, but rather tools introduced by the companies that own the platforms to ensure their objective is met: maximising their profits. The fact is that these decisions, which are entirely beyond the control of organisations, social movements and activists, are influencing and, in some ways, shaping the way we carry out activism.

WHAT IS THE ACTIVIST ALGORITHM?

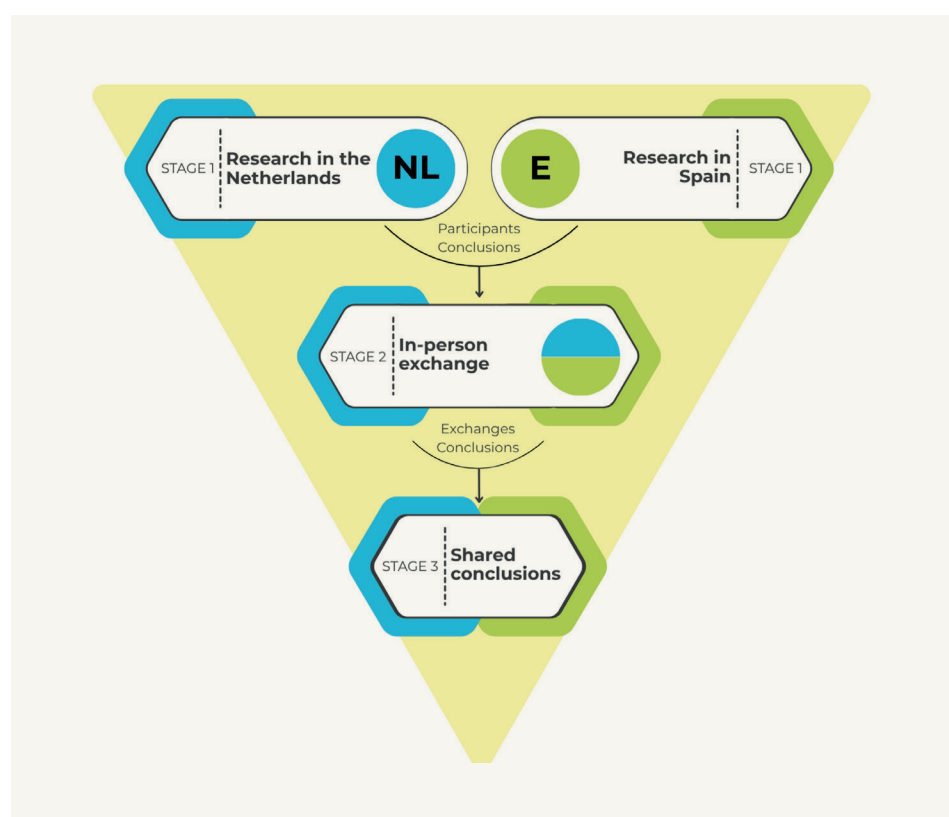
In light of the situation described above, Oxfam Novib and Oxfam Intermón have sought to contribute to a vital discussion currently taking place within many civil society organisations.

The Activist Algorithm aims to provide further insight into this process and the influence that algorithms exert on activism. The case of algorithmic management of social media is the most obvious, but there are other contexts and situations in which social organisations and activists find themselves influenced by an algorithm, whether they realise it or not. One need only consider the facial recognition mechanisms that are increasingly being incorporated, for example, into the “control” of demonstrations¹²; the management of biometric data, which is becoming increasingly common in migration policies^{3 45}; or the scoring systems used to determine access to various public services^{6 7}; to name but a few examples.

Through The Activist Algorithm project, the aim was to create a space for discussion and collective action, in which activists and social organisations would not only contribute their direct experience, but would also play a leading role throughout the entire process. The project was structured around two parallel research initiatives in the Netherlands and Spain, both with a

similar focus, alongside a face-to-face meeting to exchange views and explore synergies. The objectives were to systematise knowledge; gather the experiences of activist groups' interactions with algorithms; identify the effects of algorithmic systems on activism; and foster a transnational and intersectional space for devising shared and collective strategies and measures.

PROJECT COMPONENTS



1.3

WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS DOCUMENT AND HOW IT WAS PRODUCED. STRUCTURE OF THIS DOCUMENT AND METHODOLOGIES USED IN ITS PRODUCTION

The aim of this document is not only to present the shared conclusions of the The Activist Algorithm project, but also to share some of the preliminary findings gathered during its development and, ultimately, the process itself. The design of the various steps and components has been interpreted as part of the research practice. The final result was not the sole objective. The process itself provided valuable information. That is why this document seeks to bring together the accumulated results of the various elements that made up the project.

This first section explains the rationale behind the project and its components, as well as the context that justifies it.

The second chapter details the research components, specifically the two studies carried out in parallel but independently in the Netherlands and Spain. As each of these two studies offers results that are valid in their own right for the geographical areas in which they were conducted, the studies are explained separately, first by providing a summary based on the corresponding research reports. However, as the project aims to draw conclusions more suited to a European regional framework, at the end of this second part, the partial conclusions of the two studies are brought into relation with one another through a comparative analysis of the reports' findings. The aim, therefore, at the end of the second part, is to highlight the specific characteristics of each geographical context, but also the common challenges faced by European activists, beyond national borders.

DOCUMENT STRUCTURE



The third section focuses on the in-person meeting held in Barcelona, at which members of the two activist groups that had taken part in the research in the Netherlands and Spain were able to exchange their experiences and concerns directly, discuss issues and begin to explore shared responses to the impact of algorithms on their work. That third part has been produced as a report of the various discussion forums at the face-to-face meeting, based on direct observation. It also serves as a collation of preliminary conclusions, through the analysis and assessments of the author of this report, who has followed the entire project process. During their debates and discussions, the two groups of activists took into account the evidence gathered in the research and enriched it with their direct experiences and shared reflections.

For this reason, the conclusions, which are merely outlined at the end of the document, form part of a fourth section that has drawn lessons from all the steps and components. An attempt has been made to allow the lessons and evidence from each of the components to be distilled.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO CROSSED VIEWS

2.1

A LOOK AT THE NETHERLANDS

2.1.1

METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH

In the Netherlands, the research and consultation work was led by Afef Abrougui, a researcher at Fair Tech, and carried out with a group of eleven activists. The evidence-gathering work in the Netherlands combined desk research with the organisation of focus groups and individual interviews with activists. The first part of the work enabled the construction of a theoretical and documentary foundation, a framework which, by examining journalistic and documentary sources, has mapped the presence of algorithmic systems in the field of activism. This documentary review has also allowed for the compilation of previously identified warnings and precautions, based on complaints or episodes already documented. Similarly, the documentary research provides an overview of the main regulations applicable to algorithmic systems in the Netherlands, focusing on European legislation, particularly the AI Act and the Digital Services Act (DSA), both of the European Union.

The members of the activist group took part in a focus group session to gather accounts of their interactions with algorithmic systems in their day-to-day activities as activists, and to identify the critical issues and most pressing needs relating to this phenomenon.

Three of the group's participants underwent in-depth interviews to gather their contributions in greater detail. The group of participants was deliberately chosen to include activists with experience across different fields, precisely to obtain an overview that would be relevant to the situations faced by a wider range of groups. In this regard, the activists were involved in various causes, including activism around climate change, Palestinian solidarity, digital rights, transgender rights, migrant and refugee rights, anti-militarism, and housing. Most of these areas of activism corresponded to the sectors that had been identified in an earlier phase of the research as areas in which activists are experiencing a greater impact from algorithmic systems or are more affected by the shrinking of civic space in the country.

Activists are experiencing a greater impact from algorithmic systems

Participants were selected from the researcher's contacts, groups with which Oxfam is carrying out other activities, responses to a call for participants on a digital platform, and the networks of allies and other organisations associated with Oxfam. The aim was to find activists who had identified a negative impact of algorithmic systems on their social engagement activities. The willingness to participate and the selection process were strongly influenced by the context of the shrinking civic space faced by civil society organisations, and the mistrust and caution this provokes.

The focus group and individual interviews have enabled the collection of the participating activists' experiences, but have also served to gather concerns within the social organisations regarding the influence that algorithmic systems have on their activities. They have, for example, highlighted concerns within

There is no in-depth understanding of how these algorithms work

the activist community regarding the use of algorithmic systems in mass surveillance. These two methodologies have also facilitated the exchange of strategies for resisting the impacts of algorithmic systems. Generally speaking, these are very intuitive measures, as there is no in-depth understanding of how these algorithms work. Participants have shared their experiences of how to deal with these situations and have begun to discuss collective action.

The research includes in-depth case studies that help to specify the impacts described by the sample of activists in specific situations, such as that of an activist involved in the climate justice, solidarity with Palestine, anti-militarism and housing rights movements, who shared the impact that the suspicion of being systematically monitored – and the real possibility of actually being so – has on all areas of her life (professional, social or emotional). Another in-depth exploration focused on a climate activist, and a third case study documented the experiences of an activist in the solidarity movement with Palestine.

2.1.2

CONTEXT

The component of the project carried out in the Netherlands has been implemented against a backdrop of deep concern regarding the gradual shrinking of civic space is evident in the course of the research. Mass surveillance, the repression of dissent and the negative and concrete consequences for activists due to their commitment recur persistently, both in the accounts of their experiences and in the concerns expressed by the participants.

The research itself notes how the CIVICUS observatory downgraded the rating of Dutch civic space from 'open' to 'narrowed' in 2024⁸, a rating that remained unchanged in 2025⁹. In that assessment, the organisation attributed this narrowing of civic space to "a persistent policy of repression of peaceful protests involving mass arrests, particularly against climate protests and demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine". Climate justice, gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights, asylum and migrants' rights, the movement in solidarity with Palestine, and minority rights are some of the areas most affected by this trend towards the restriction of freedoms.

This context, understood in a broad sense¹⁰, is reflected with particular intensity in the digital environment in which algorithmic systems operate, and research has shown how this shrinking of civic space¹¹ has resulted in a particularly hostile digital space^{12 13}.

Shrinking of civic space has resulted in a particularly hostile digital space

In this climate of threats to freedoms, some of the experiences shared by participants in the activist group have confirmed the influence of this general context on the experience of activism (particularly in the areas mentioned above). On the one hand, the testimonies of the activists participating in the discussions show how awareness of the mass surveillance mechanisms deployed by the authorities acts as a deterrent. They refer both to those deployed on the streets, exploiting the functionalities of algorithmic systems to analyse the data collected, and to the digital environment through the monitoring of activity. And

their comments show, in some cases, how they have been directly affected; but they also point to the caution triggered by news reports about these systems. One of the participating activists explains how these consequences play out in the social, emotional and professional spheres, because mistrust towards anyone one interacts with becomes entrenched, generating unease and isolation, and ultimately limiting activity on social media. Without delving into the systematisation of the main findings of the research and sticking to the contextual approach, a dynamic of self-censorship and a sense of insecurity among the activists is evident.

2.1.3

The failure of legislation to address the diversity and complexity of algorithmic systems

KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH IN THE NETHERLANDS

► **EXISTENCE OF A WEAK REGULATORY FRAMEWORK:** This is one of the key findings of the research carried out in the Netherlands. This refers both to the failure of legislation to address the diversity and complexity of algorithmic systems and the corporate structures of the companies that implement them; and to the lack of effective tools to implement and enforce such regulations, which often renders regulatory efforts ineffective.

► **CONCERNS ABOUT A DRIFT TOWARDS RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIL LIBERTIES:** There is a constant concern among civil society organisations and activists, which is particularly evident in the perception of increased mass surveillance of critical voices. The conclusion drawn from discussions with key stakeholders highlights a recurring sense that digital tools and algorithmic systems are playing a fundamental role in this rise in surveillance.

This concern is reflected in the increasingly common use of systems for collecting and managing biometric data, for example through cameras with facial recognition systems, or the use of recordings made at protests or demonstrations in public spaces. But it also refers to the systematic collection of data by the police, combining in-person methods (such as ID checks) with data derived from social media activity. And to reports confirming that some police units use algorithmic systems to categorise the behaviour of certain individuals, and that this process is riddled with biases and inaccuracies that can seriously affect people's lives—for example, when a person taking part in a demonstration in solidarity with Palestine is automatically deemed a Hamas sympathiser.

This process is riddled with biases and inaccuracies that can seriously affect people's lives

► **SPECIFIC IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WAY ACTIVISM IS CARRIED OUT:** The participants in the research speak of mechanisms such as "self-censorship, exhaustion and a sense of insecurity and surveillance" arising from constant tension. These same activists describe how this situation affects them, both in terms of social and political engagement, and on a personal, social and even professional level. The research offers a clear and direct conclusion:

“AS A RESULT OF THIS SURVEILLANCE, ACTIVISTS MAY EXPERIENCE PARANOIA, STRESS AND FEELINGS OF ISOLATION. THEY ARE ALSO CONCERNED THAT THEIR FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT WILL BE RESTRICTED IF THE DATA COLLECTED ON THEM IS SHARED WITH FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS.”

► **SHAPING PUBLIC DISCOURSE:** The evidence gathered during the investigation highlights how content moderation and recommendation algorithms (two of the most influential algorithmic systems in the functioning of social media) shape public discourse through their decisions, which, moreover, appear to be clearly biased. With regard to content moderation algorithms, which operate by removing content and even blocking user profiles for breaching platform usage rules, documented cases have been collected of apparently arbitrary blocks of groups linked to very specific issues.

Restrictive measures have been observed affecting organisations related to sexual and reproductive health or sexual and emotional diversity, after algorithmic systems labelled their posts as content related to “human trafficking for sexual exploitation” or “prescribing medication”. Similarly, climate activists have observed similar situations. Another critical area of activism relates to issues more closely tied to geopolitics; for example, there are repeated documented cases of content blocks linked to solidarity with Palestine, which are often deemed to be violent, hate-inciting or glorifying terrorism.

Advertising by social organisations and NGOs on social media has often faced formal barriers imposed by platforms on political content, as confirmed by the testimonies of some research participants. However, curiously, advertisements from established political parties manage to circumvent this ban.

► **SHADOWBANNING:** Similarly, algorithmic recommendation systems, which formally track users’ actions and interactions on social media to offer them content best suited to their interests, also appear to be skewing the formation of public opinion. Based both on documented cases and the experiences of research participants, the so-called ‘shadowbanning’ seems to be a constant feature for content related to solidarity with Palestine¹⁴. Various participants have reported how their content, for example regarding the attack on Gaza, receive fewer views than their other posts, without any explanation.

These algorithmic systems, however, do not prevent certain content from reaching people with diametrically opposed views, which sometimes leads to waves of hatred and hostility. This has been observed by climate activists and those defending the rights of transgender people, who claim that some of their content forces them to interact with and respond to a barrage of extremely hostile negative messages. To the extent that some participants have indicated that they have left the social media platforms where they received the most hate.

Restrictive measures have been observed affecting organisations related to sexual and reproductive health or sexual and emotional diversity

The so-called ‘shadowbanning’ seems to be a constant feature for content related to solidarity with Palestine

► **THE ROLE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS:** Deserves particular attention in the conclusions of this research. On the one hand, because they are used as a tool to generate content that is subsequently used in smear campaigns and harassment of social organisations, NGOs or activists, and in disinformation operations in general, but also, on the other hand, because of the role played by the responses provided by chatbots in shaping public opinion and decision-making.

One of the examples given is particularly illustrative. According to the research, based on various cases:

“DURING THE 2025 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS, THE ROLE OF AI CHATBOTS AND AI SEARCH FUNCTIONS CAME UNDER SCRUTINY DUE TO THE INACCURACY AND UNRELIABILITY OF THE INFORMATION.”

One such example is, in fact, an investigation by the Autoriteit Persoonsgegevens (AP) (the Dutch Data Protection Authority), which led it to “warn voters not to trust the voting advice provided by AI chatbots”, because:

“WHEN VOTERS ASKED CHATBOTS WHICH PARTY TO VOTE FOR, THE CHATBOTS WERE MORE LIKELY TO RECOMMEND THE TWO LARGEST PARTIES IN PARLIAMENT AT THE TIME (...), IN WHAT THE RESEARCHERS DESCRIBED AS A SIGNIFICANT DISTORTION AND POLARISATION OF THE DUTCH POLITICAL LANDSCAPE.

According to the research findings, each of these factors influences the way activism plays out, whether due to issues that may seem trivial—such as avoiding certain words that could lead to content being blocked—or more serious ones, such as deciding to remain silent to protect one’s mental health in the face of waves of hate. In this regard, the research reflects the activists’ weariness when it states:

“OVERALL, THERE WAS A PREVAILING SENSE OF EXASPERATION AMONG THOSE TAKING PART IN THE DEBATE, WHO FELT THAT THEIR MESSAGES WERE NOT GETTING THROUGH AND DID NOT KNOW WHERE TO TURN.”

This impression is evident from some of the participants' direct and unequivocal comments:

"THE SITUATION IS GETTING WORSE AND WORSE. WE HAVE NOWHERE TO GO. THERE'S NO WAY TO FIGHT IT. IT'S SAD."

2.2

2.2.1

The research intentionally focused on the use of algorithmic systems on social media platforms

A LOOK AT SPAIN

METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH

In the case of the component developed in Spain, the research was led by Marta G. Franco, from Laintersección, and Alejandra de Diego Baciero, from Komons, and drew on the participation of a group of 17 activists engaged in feminist, anti-racist, climate, queer, linguistic and anti-fascist activism. These are activists with different approaches to their own work, but for whom the communication process plays a very significant role, and who channel a large part of that work towards the use of social media platforms.

The researchers began their work, as in the case of the Netherlands, with documentary research and a literature review. The research intentionally focused on the use of algorithmic systems on social media platforms. This enabled them to establish a framework for the rest of the study, to systematise and classify the areas where social media incorporate mechanisms based on artificial intelligence, and to identify other implementations of algorithmic systems that, in one way or another, affect and influence the activists.

In this way, six functionalities have been identified on social media in which algorithmic systems come into play, leading to decisions (automatic, though intentional) that ultimately affect activists: content analysis, content recommendation, moderation, the automation of interactions, generative AI, and behavioural prediction models. The specific influence of each of these will be reflected in the summary of the research findings, but this framework allows us to map the relationships that activists establish with these algorithmic systems in their interactions on social media.

The impressions, experiences and uncertainties of the activists participating in the sample group were gathered by the researchers through individual interviews with each of them. Subsequently, two collective online sessions were held, which served to stimulate debate and validate the main preliminary conclusions. The research has compiled three in-depth case studies, drawn from the experiences of three participants: one relating to linguistic activism, another to alternative media, and a third to attempts to leave social media platforms.

The research also aimed to strengthen the skills and capacities of the participating activists, in this case solely through the exchange of these

experiences. For this reason, one of the sessions focused on the mechanisms each of the activists uses to tackle the problems they encounter when interacting with algorithmic systems, as well as on a contribution from the researchers (experts in digital strategy) regarding certain strategies and measures to try to maximise the impact of actions on social media.

2.2.2

There is a growing social awareness of the need to regulate the digital space

CONTEXT

The context in which this research is being conducted in Spain is shaped, fundamentally, by two trends that link social and political activism with the digital environment. Firstly, there is a growing social awareness of the need to regulate the digital space, particularly artificial intelligence and activity on social media. Secondly, the rise of ultra-conservative and anti-rights discourses, alongside growing support for far-right parties, is seen as a constant threat to the principles of global justice.

In the first sense, there is a growing call to establish limits and controls on artificial intelligence, whether from the perspective of safeguarding fundamental rights (privacy, personal integrity, non-discrimination, decent work, etc.), which are systematically threatened by developments driven by large technology corporations; or from the apocalyptic stance regarding the 'existential risk' attributed to artificial intelligence. This also includes the algorithmic systems operating on social media. At the same time, there has been an unmasking of the addictive patterns deliberately sought and exacerbated by the companies that own the networks, and an accumulation of evidence of how they commodify user data. This evidence, however, coexists with the paradox of the extensive use of social media: the fact that society is becoming increasingly aware of the hidden intentions of the companies that own these networks has not been resulted in a mass exodus from their platforms.

The rise of the corporate-backed far right is a reality at the ballot box on a global scale

The second pillar of the context in which this research is framed is, in fact, closely linked to the first. The rise of the corporate-backed far right is a reality at the ballot box on a global scale and is a constant threat to activists who, in various ways, are pursuing a framework of global justice. The spread of discourses linked to this phenomenon (sexist, heteropatriarchal, transphobic, racist, anti-immigration, xenophobic, climate change denialist, amongst other extremes) is closely related to young people's ¹⁵ increased exposure to these ideas via social media ¹⁶. And with all this comes the growing perception that these narratives receive preferential treatment on social media ¹⁷, compared to discourses calling for justice, equity and democracy ¹⁸.

2.2.3

KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH IN SPAIN

► **FEELING OF HELPLESSNESS:** One of the first and most significant conclusions reached by the research concerns the feelings experienced by activists when confronted with the workings of algorithmic systems. They feel that the apparent arbitrariness of the decisions leaves them in a helpless position

► **THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW THESE SYSTEMS WORK:** They feel a need to understand how these systems work, moving beyond mere intuition and the ‘urban myths’ shared amongst advanced social media users in an attempt to find explanations.

When it comes to content analysis systems, for example, the label that the relevant system assigns to a piece of content is decisive. When a post is automatically labelled as “political”, it will automatically receive less visibility, be shared less widely, and is more likely to be blocked as inappropriate¹⁹. However, there is no clarity as to why a specific piece of content receives that classification, and among the suspicions expressed by the participants are such everyday situations as talking about climate change, using one of the minority languages in Spain, such as Catalan, Basque or Galician, or using Arabic words.

On the other hand, the mechanisms responsible for content recommendations amplify, for example, racist content, because it generates more interactions and that is the objective of these tools²⁰.

► **SHADOWBANNING:** Similarly, participants have highlighted the recurring instances of that hidden and silent blocking known as a shadowbanning. At the same time, as a contribution to the racist drift of social media, they warn of how these platforms serve as a megaphone for other content which, although not explicitly racist, may incorporate discriminatory discourse that ends up normalising narratives based on xenophobic principles and, in doing so, reinforcing polarisation.

Exposure to the blocking of content or even of profiles is considered a constant threat due to the lack of clear criteria and the difficulties in interacting with the platforms when submitting claims or lodging complaints.

► **THE CONTINUED SPREAD OF HATE SPEECH:** This is compounded by the firm conviction that, despite their fears and these supposedly swift content moderation measures, hate speech continues to be disseminated and, in fact, they themselves are often the target of these attacks. Moderation mechanisms are also deliberately used to target them, for example, through campaigns reporting account hijacking, which force them to prove their identity to the platforms, causing inconvenience and harm.

► **INCREASED PRESENCE OF BOTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA:** Another finding regarding the operation of algorithmic systems is their use, specifically, in the form of bots—fake profiles (non-human) that automate posting and are used in smear campaigns²¹, disinformation or harassment of activists²².

Exposure to the blocking of content or even of profiles is considered a constant threat

The participating activists devote a great deal of time and effort to adapting to 'the algorithm'

► **THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI TOOLS:** This tools also attracts a certain amount of attention from activists in several respects.

- The observed increase in synthetic content.
- Its use in the generation of political deepfakes and manipulated images.
- A certain reluctance to use them, as a measure of political consistency given that they are controlled by tech companies.
- The shortcomings in the results, like the lack of availability of automatic subtitling systems in languages other than the mainstream ones.

► **LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF THE MECHANISMS UNDERLYING BEHAVIOURAL PREDICTION** The researchers have drawn attention to the fact that the activists have not discussed the behavioural prediction models used by the platforms (which analyse users' usage patterns) and which form the basis for identifying addictive behaviours. This silence may be due to the fact that the activists have little knowledge or awareness of the influence of these systems, which may ultimately also serve the purposes of mass surveillance; or it may be because they consider the issue irrelevant, or felt that this was not the appropriate forum to address it.

► **THE 'TYRANNY OF THE ALGORITHM':** The participating activists devote a great deal of time and effort to adapting to 'the algorithm' (in reality, the set of algorithms that come into play in their social media activity), in what some have described as 'the dictatorship or tyranny of the algorithm'; that the need for time and effort is constant, because the rules of these systems change repeatedly; and that part of this adaptation involves changing the way they would like to communicate (and therefore the way they would carry out their activism) in order to achieve greater reach for their content. This dynamic constantly generates conflict and doubt as to whether they are communicating what they want or what the platform wants.

These adaptation mechanisms to 'please' the algorithm include issues such as the suitability of the format; the use of certain words or, rather, the omission of some to avoid content being blocked on topics that may prove contentious (for example, in posts related to the attack on Palestine); the exclusion of certain topics (in what could be considered a form of self-censorship); the occasional use of controversy or polarisation, which platforms reward with increased visibility; or the prevalence of personal imagery.

► **IMPACT ON COMMUNICATION STYLES:** If one analyses the consequences of all these aspects in detail, as has been done in the research, it becomes clear that the implications are fundamental. These algorithmic constraints ultimately influence such crucial aspects as the way in which topics are explained (the formats), the topics covered, the approach taken, the tone employed, or the language used. Activists express their concern about striking a balance and ensuring that the goal of achieving as wide a reach as possible does not end up undermining the meaning of what they do, yet even they themselves face doubts in this regard.

In the case of female users, the level of abuse and harassment increases exponentially, and even more so as it intersects with other axes of oppression

All these aspects warrant, and indeed require, detailed study, but there is one consequence that takes on particularly heart-wrenching overtones and which, at the risk of it going unnoticed by those unfamiliar with the world of social media, is important to highlight. This concerns what is formulated in various parts of the research as “the centrality of the personal image” or “visibility through the body and the exposure of the self”. Algorithmic systems prioritise content in which the user’s figure appears directly, but in a potentially hostile context such as that of social media, this means choosing between achieving reach and exposing one’s own body to criticism and insults. In the case of female users, the level of abuse and harassment increases exponentially, and even more so as it intersects with other axes of oppression (racialised bodies, non-conforming body, etc.). In this way, these committed content creators find themselves forced, for example, to weigh up, in the context of their activism, the prospect of undergoing a process of raw, public sexualisation, with the psychological impact this may have and the influence it exerts on the decision to remain committed.

All the impacts of adapting content to the “tyranny of the algorithm” also form part of the research findings, ranging from self-censorship or fear, to a tendency towards hastiness and superficiality in arguments, through to interaction with offline activist spaces, or burnout and the need to seek alternatives.

► **TIPS AND TRICKS FOR DEALING WITH ALGORITHMIC SYSTEMS:** The measures that each activist intuitively incorporates into their social media activity have also been shared within the group and summarised in the form of research conclusions to facilitate collective learning. Tips for configuring platforms to try to reduce exposure to hate speech; content optimisation mechanisms that activists feel work; the search for alternative platforms that are less hostile and polarised; experiences of self-organisation and coordination; and mechanisms for reporting and complaining about abuse.

This last section, in fact, constitutes the most practical conclusion and, from the research, looks to the future in the form of proposals for collective defence strategies.

2.3

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONCLUSIONS OF THE TWO SCENARIOS

2.3.1

MAIN DIFFERENCES

The main difference between the research carried out in the Netherlands and in Spain lies precisely in the political context in which it was conducted. Although the research designs were similar (though not exactly the same, as explained previously), this context has determined the other differences between the two components. This situation is not a drawback; in fact, it was one of the project’s strengths: approaching the same phenomenon from two countries with very similar legal frameworks (in both, regulations driven by the European Union constitute the bulk of the regulatory corpus) but which currently find themselves in different political situations.

The drift towards the restriction of freedoms, and a worrying increase in both repression and surveillance of dissidents and activists

As already noted in the overview of the research carried out in the Netherlands, the institutional climate towards dissent, protest and criticism is more hostile than in Spain. The activists participating in the research have highlighted the trend towards the closure of civic space they observe in the country, the drift towards the restriction of freedoms, and a worrying increase in both repression and surveillance of dissidents and activists in the areas they have focused on (climate activism, anti-racism, and the defence of the rights of marginalised groups ranging from the migrant population to the homeless, from asylum seekers to LGBTQIA+ people, from Muslims to the Palestine solidarity movement).

In this context, digital tools and, in particular, algorithmic systems are seen as a potential risk for reinforcing an institutional framework of systematic surveillance.

In the Spanish context, however, the recurring threat lies with groups linked to the rise of the far right, which have made social media one of their preferred platforms for propaganda and persuasion. Research carried out in Spain suggests that these circles are responsible for turning social media into a hostile environment, with content characterised by hate and polarisation.

2.3.2

MAIN SIMILARITIES

Beyond the differences outlined in the previous section, once the discussion turns to the activities of activists on social media, a great many similarities emerge:

- The first of these is, without doubt, the shared frustration at the opacity and arbitrariness with which algorithmic systems on social media appear to operate. Groups in both countries agree, for example, that their views are not treated in the same way as those of extremist groups that deny rights and advocate discriminatory policies.
- They share a parallel experience of violence in the digital sphere. Activists who have participated in the two geographical components agree that hate is gaining ground on social media platforms that are becoming increasingly hostile to debate and exchange, and that algorithmic systems favour the dissemination of the most belligerent content, which further fuels polarisation.
- Both groups share a concern regarding the functioning of the algorithms that handle content tagging, content recommendations and the moderation of posts.
- There is an awareness, accompanied by a certain sense of powerlessness, that these algorithms shape the way they carry out their activism. In addition to the issues mentioned, alongside the role of generative AI tools in creating deepfakes and manipulated images for disinformation campaigns and to automate waves of harassment against activists, are some of the most obvious shared concerns.

Hate is gaining ground on social media platforms that are becoming increasingly hostile to debate and exchange

- There has been agreement on the need to understand how the algorithmic systems operating on social media work. Although, as mentioned in the previous section, the approaches of the two geographical groups differ slightly, the lack of transparency is a shared concern.
- The consequences for social and political debate of this arbitrariness and of the power to shape public discourse held by the companies behind social media platforms.

CROSS-CUTTING CONCLUSIONS FROM THE RESEARCH

HIGHLIGHTS IN THE NETHERLANDS

REGULATORY WEAKNESS

The regulatory framework and enforcement mechanisms have proved insufficient to counteract the negative effects.

SHRINKING OF CIVIC SPACE

Increased surveillance, repression and criminalisation of protest through digital tools, the collection of biometric data and the profiling of activists based on their online activity.

CONNECTING AND ENGAGING WITH OFFLINE SPACES

Activists highlight the need to strengthen links with offline spaces for activism and with other ways of bringing communities together, given the difficulties and threats that persist in an increasingly hostile digital environment.

COMMON TO BOTH RESEARCH

MODELLING PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Social media algorithms shape and influence public discourse by removing content, blocking accounts or restricting 'political' content. This removes part of the discussion and amplifies the discourse that is more discriminatory in nature.

POWERLESS IN THE FACE OF THE ARBITRARINESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

A lack of understanding of the criteria for moderating, tagging or classifying content, or for removing posts, creates a sense of helplessness, arbitrariness and unequal treatment. The need to adapt to constant changes in these terms of use only adds to the uncertainty.

SHADOWBAN OR THE HIDING OF POSTS

Activists report instances of their content being unjustifiably restricted in terms of visibility and reach—a practice known as shadowbanning—and attribute this to the issues they address in their activism.

PERSONAL IMPACTS

The violence and hatred to which activists are exposed, coupled with the feeling of being under constant surveillance, leads to self-censorship, paranoia and isolation, and causes stress, exhaustion and a sense of insecurity. Some leave social media due to hate speech and violence.

INCREASED USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

There has been a rise in generative artificial intelligence and synthetic content on social media, which is fuelling disinformation campaigns as well as waves of harassment and attempts to discredit activists and social organisations. This technology is behind the increase in the presence of bots and fraudulent users.

HIGHLIGHTS IN SPAIN

RISE OF DISCRIMINATORY SPEECH

Discriminatory speech is becoming increasingly prevalent on social media and is being amplified. Polarisation fuels the engagement that social media platforms seek, but it also fosters a climate of hatred and violence.

SHRINKING OF CIVIC SPACE

Increased surveillance, repression and criminalisation of protest through digital tools, the collection of biometric data and the profiling of activists based on their online activity.

THE TYRANNY OF THE ALGORITHM

Concerns about adapting to the demands of moderation and recommendation algorithms in order to achieve the widest possible reach for politically engaged discourse. This jeopardises the objectives and ways of engaging with social media that activists consider most authentic.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL IMAGE

One aspect of social media has a particularly significant impact: the central role played by one's personal image. Activists need to put themselves out there in order to increase their reach. Female activists are particularly affected by this, as the level of violence directed at them is even higher and includes constant sexualisation.

CHAPTER THREE

SHARING IDEAS TO BUILD TOGETHER

3.1

AN IN-PERSON MEETING TO SHARE THE FINDINGS

The in-person meeting between representatives of the two groups involved in each of the research projects took place on 20 and 21 April 2026 in Barcelona, attended by twenty-one participants: ten associated with the research carried out in the Netherlands and eleven linked to the research conducted in Spain. The discussions took place under Chatham House Rules by agreement of the attendees and aimed to exchange the findings of the two research projects, establish mechanisms for connection and interaction between the two groups of activists, and create a starting point for a collaborative dynamic between activists from different regions with shared interests, enabling them to think and imagine these solutions together.

3.1.1

A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE CONTEXTS

Clearly, the discussion during the face-to-face meeting has highlighted the value of including two different geographical contexts within the project—each with its own specific characteristics and similarities—not only to enrich the conversation but also to identify new challenges and alternative ways of addressing threats. The exchange and the dynamism of the formal sessions quickly highlighted each group's interest in their counterpart's experience, and the questions raised highlighted a willingness to explore differences as a way of drawing inspiration from different experiences.

The contribution of the research group from the Netherlands brought to the fore the characteristics of a context in which a narrowing of civic space and a curtailment of freedoms are perceived, and in which the administration is seen as a threat, with a logic of institutionalised repression of dissent and increased surveillance by the state apparatus. A context of this nature, which is the daily reality for the group from the Netherlands, aroused the interest of the research group in Spain because it was interpreted as a plausible scenario in the run-up to a general election that would bring about a change of government, with a greater presence of the right and the far right. As one of the activists from the research group in Spain noted with a touch of sarcasm:

**“PERHAPS WE ARE NOT SO FAR FROM
A SITUATION IN WHICH IT WOULD BE IN OUR
INTERESTS TO HAVE FOREIGN ALLIES WHO CAN
TAKE ACTIVISTS INTO THEIR HOMES”**

Another distinctive feature of the Dutch context that emerged, and which sparked particular interest during the discussion, was the emphasis on linking online and offline activism. The strategy proposed by the Dutch activists to strengthen in-person links and move alliances beyond the digital sphere opened up a possible complementary response for the group of Spanish activists to a situation that seems difficult to resolve: that of changing the tone on social media and curbing

hatred and hostility through greater transparency on the part of the companies that manage these platforms.

In the case of the contributions from the group of Spanish activists, three issues particularly caught the Dutch group's attention and formed the focus of a significant portion of the questions and discussions:

1. the prominence that platforms give to the physical presence of the body in content,
2. the specificities of linguistic activism,
3. the experiences of self-organisation and coordinated action amongst the committed content creators themselves.

Social media platforms reward the presence of bodies (and users' faces) with greater visibility, this increases the exposure of activists

In the first case, accounts of how social media platforms reward the presence of bodies (and users' faces) with greater visibility, and how this increases the exposure of activists—and (especially) women activists—to violence, hate, harassment and even sexualisation, opened up a line of inquiry that some of the Dutch activists considered under-explored. The consequences of this increased exposure and its impact not only on the way activism is practised and experienced but also on the health of the activists themselves particularly caught the attention of their colleagues from the Netherlands.

As for the second issue, the Dutch activists clearly recognised a parallel between the situation of minority languages in Spain and in the Netherlands, which they had not previously noticed, and were surprised that there were such efforts to bring concerns regarding the survival and normalisation of some of the co-official languages in Spain into the digital sphere. After listening to the demands of a Galician-speaking activist²³ from the Spanish group, one of the participants from the Dutch group admitted:

“IT IS TRUE THAT IN OUR COUNTRY IT WOULD NEVER OCCUR TO ANYONE TO SHARE CONTENT IN ANY OF THE REGIONAL LANGUAGES.”

Finally, the explanations regarding spaces for coordinated content creation that offer an alternative to the dominant social media platforms—such as the experience of the Pantube content creators' collective—also caught the attention of some of the activists from the Dutch group. Initiatives for collective construction and the creation of alternative spaces through concerted and self-organised actions were also presented as one of the possibilities for building new scenarios more suited to the principles and values of the activists.

ENABLERS AND DISABLERS

The in-person meeting provided an opportunity to compare notes and discuss the potential opportunities that are emerging, as well as the various factors that could help foster a beneficial algorithmic framework for activism. However, participants were also able to identify factors that could prove detrimental and have the potential to hinder or block efforts to create such a space.

Most of the facilitating factors can be grouped into:

- The previous or parallel experiences of activists and organisations in organising themselves outside the digital space within other types of communities.
- The importance of fostering alliances and building cohesive communities that enable joint strategic planning and break the isolation of groups. Strategy design can range from engaging with the media to strategic litigation
- The possibility of increasing understanding of how these algorithmic systems work and of fostering interest and concern among different communities.
- The opportunity to raise awareness of how these algorithmic systems influence the practice of activism and can come to condition or shape it. Striving for a balance between achieving the widest possible reach and maintaining a distinct online presence; or, seeking alternative digital spaces as alternatives to the dominant commercial social media platforms, for example in the Fediverse.

At the same time, there are factors that hinder the coordination of collectives and the design of strategies aimed at combating the effects of algorithmic systems on activism. These identified obstacles can be grouped as follows:

- The power imbalances between the actors involved in this process. Given that large and powerful technology companies control these platforms, it is necessary to identify what the business model is and who profits from it. But at the same time, it is necessary to highlight spaces of resistance to the impact of algorithmic systems and to study the digital tactics of companies and governments.
- The process of closing civic space, through the use of digital tools to intensify surveillance and the criminalisation of protest.
- The ethical dilemma accompanying our presence on these platforms, which includes recognising them as a factor that exacerbates inequalities, but also the dilemma between abandoning them and ceding the space to discourses that deny rights, or staying and attempting to continue to exert influence. And at the same time, the certainty that activists are no more immune to the addictive qualities of social media than other users.

The process of closing civic space, through the use of digital tools to intensify surveillance and the criminalisation of protest.

3.2

AFTER THE ANALYSIS COMES ACTION. NOTES FOR JOINT PROPOSALS

The in-person meeting between representatives of the two groups involved in each of the research projects took place on 20 and 21 April 2026 in Barcelona, attended by twenty-one participants: ten associated with the research carried out in the Netherlands and eleven linked to the research conducted in Spain. The discussions took place under Chatham House Rules by agreement of the attendees and aimed to exchange the findings of the two research projects, establish mechanisms for connection and interaction between the two groups of activists, and create a starting point for a collaborative dynamic between activists from different regions with shared interests, enabling them to think and imagine these solutions together.

3.2.1

HOW TO CAPITALISE ON OPPORTUNITIES

Some of the issues highlighted by the activists taking part in the meeting point to opportunities that can be seized in a more or less direct and immediate manner. These proposals offer possibilities for relatively generic courses of action, that is to say, more guidelines and approaches to action than concrete actions. In any case, in some instances, these guidelines steer the development of efforts and work in such a precise direction that they ultimately lead to specific proposals for action, even if that is not the initial aim of this reflection. Among the guiding principles identified during the shared discussion, the following stand out:

- Channelling the growing awareness of the effects of social media and the algorithmic systems that govern their operation, towards educational and awareness-raising initiatives on digital rights in the broadest sense.
- Strengthening the research pathway. The activists participating in The Activist Algorithm agree on the need to learn about how algorithmic systems work and, to this end, consider it important to delve deeper into knowledge-generation experiences. For example, regarding the exploitation of addiction mechanisms by platforms ²⁴.
- Improve understanding of the political economy of artificial intelligence, how money flows and how large corporations profit from these technologies. The proposal is to apply transparency criteria and ensure that the knowledge generated can form the basis for campaigns to highlight the role of tech platforms.
- Work on developing platforms to harness or 'capitalise on' the social discontent perceived in relation to social media. This line of work also envisages strengthening and supporting alternative platforms that are already in operation (such as those included in the Fediverse). This work would include "building" audiences, in the sense of fostering a willingness among groups and communities to seek alternatives. In any case, caution is advised regarding the ownership of most critical digital infrastructure, which creates dependencies beyond the choice of platforms (cables, servers, data centres, etc.).
- Reflect on the use of alternative platforms to try to reach a conclusion on what is the best channel for disseminating and sharing the efforts of civil society organisations concerned about this phenomenon.

- Strategically plan the presence of social organisations in the digital environment. Precisely because of all the implications that have become evident regarding the online presence and the arguments for and against it.
- Increase efforts towards standardising algorithmic audits and other campaigns aimed at algorithmic transparency. Make such measures more routine and ensure that the results of these audits and analyses are disseminated through publications and reports.
- Minimise the use of cloud services and the digital environment in general to reduce demand for tools based on artificial intelligence and the infrastructure that supports them. Strengthening offline connections is a way to counteract this minimisation effort.
- Keep open the possibility of opting, on an ad hoc and alternative basis, for direct action measures, as one of the traditional strategies of activism that need not be ruled out simply because attention is being focused on the digital space.

3.2.2

LOOKING FOR VIABLE SOLUTIONS. REALISTIC PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Beyond the general and indicative lines of work, the activists taking part in the in-person meeting of The Activist Algorithm proposed specific actions that could pave the way for collaborative work in the near future, at least in terms of planning. The discussions highlighted the possibility of initiating the planning of two relatively concrete and immediate actions, of strengthening a line of work linked to these actions in the medium term, of adopting a strategy for collective action, and of fostering a dynamic of connection among the participants:

ACTION 1: Develop and launch an algorithm observatory, a repository detailing how social media's algorithmic systems work, which can be updated and adapted to constant changes. This is a fairly viable action, but the scale and ambition must be carefully considered to gauge the required capacity correctly.

ACTION 2: Produce toolkits with practical tools available to social organisations that have less technical knowledge of social media activity.

LINE OF WORK: Development of specific campaigns based on the insights gained from the observatory's work, to be rolled out in the medium term.

COLLECTIVE ACTION STRATEGY: Propose actions and training materials through which participating activists and organisations can share their knowledge with other groups, with the aim of strengthening the collective's skills.

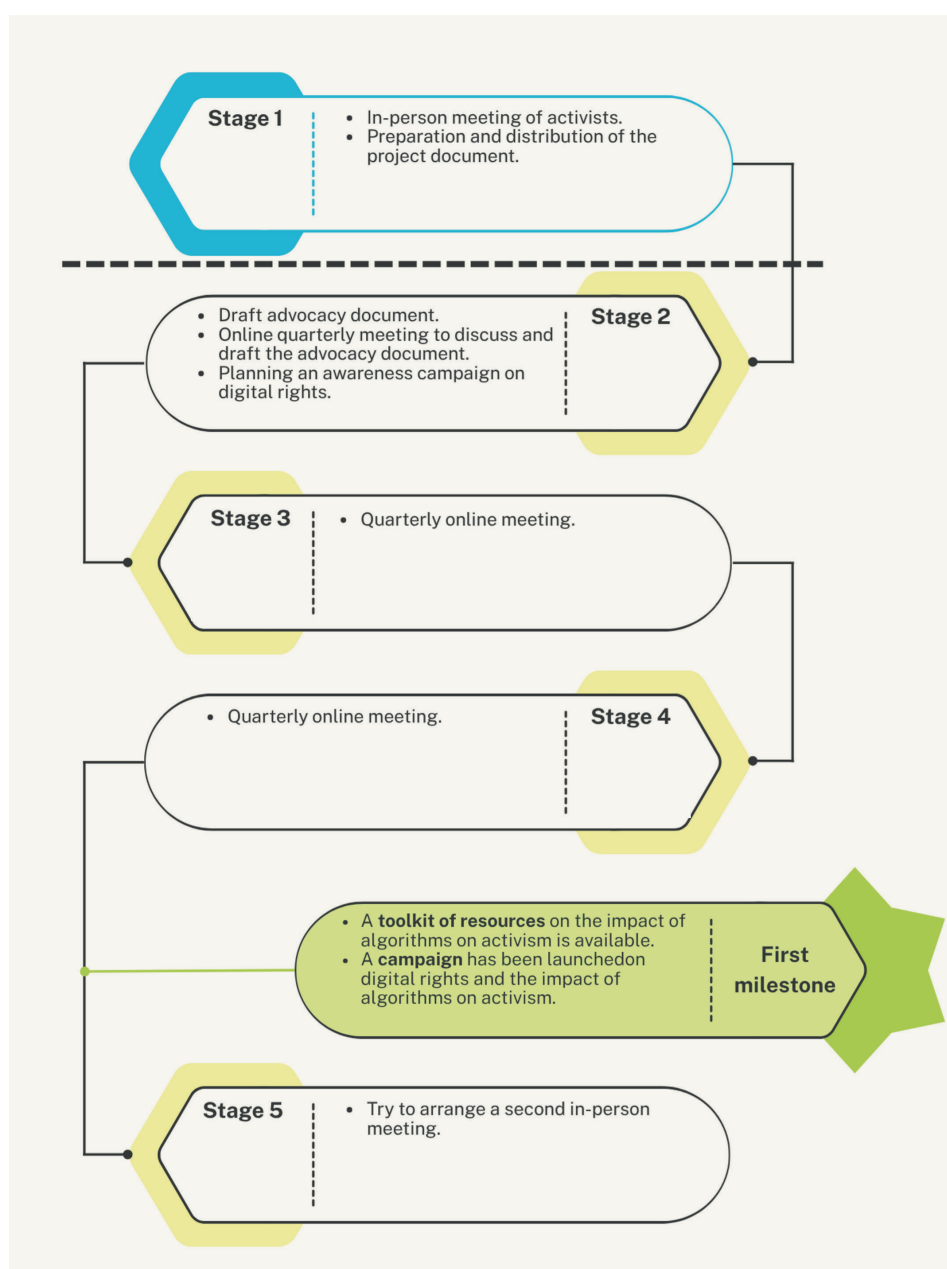
NETWORKING DYNAMICS: Seek to consolidate face-to-face contacts in order to strengthen cohesion among participants. To this end, events related to digital rights could be utilised, which would also enable connections with other organisations and groups with shared interests and further expand the collective's knowledge.

A PROPOSAL FOR THE NEXT STEPS.

JOIN US IF YOU SHARE THESE CONCERNS

One of the recurring themes of the in-person meeting, which reflects the project's overall focus, was the participants' expressed desire to strengthen the connections forged and to continue with the approach of collective development. Following the discussions and based on the content of the debates, a proposal for the next steps was drawn up, addressing the concerns raised by the group of participants. This is not intended to be an action plan, but rather an expression of intent, given the uncertainties surrounding the project's future.

The following plan aimed to organise and schedule the possibilities for implementing the actions deemed important, as well as some options for maintaining contact within the group through participation in events on digital rights in Europe.



A DIGRESSION: WHAT HAS BEEN LEFT OUT OF THE PROJECT?

There are many aspects that have been left out of the scope of The Activist Algorithm. The implications of algorithmic systems and artificial intelligence on activism are so diverse that the project has had to focus solely on one aspect of this impact—the one considered to be the most widespread and fundamental. Both the two parallel research projects and the discussions during the face-to-face meetings have sought to clearly define their scope of intervention, to prevent a lack of focus from undermining the usefulness of the work. However, participants with specific interests have highlighted certain other implications that would be worth bearing in mind, so that the analysis can be expanded if necessary or incorporated into potential future developments.

It has been considered important to identify these areas and systematise them, simply to make them clear and ensure they can be easily retrieved should the need arise.

- Highlighting the failures of digital regulation implementation in the EU (e.g. the Digital Service Act, the AI Act, and others) which have failed to curb the rise in online violence. This ties in with the debate on the appropriateness of new proposals such as the regulation known as “Chat Control 2.0”, which introduces the scanning of messages on digital platforms (and the breaking of end-to-end encryption) to “prevent and combat online child sexual abuse”²⁵.
- To explore in greater depth the role of the public sector, both in terms of the use of algorithms in public services and the debate on the advisability of nationalising certain companies in the technology sector.
- Prepare for a scenario of a radical closure of the digital civic space, by improving knowledge and practices regarding digital security and encryption. And also by increasing knowledge about digital surveillance and the profiling of activists through social media activity and chatbots. In addition to developing “digital toolkits” for those less familiar with these issues.
- Uncover the links between Tech firms involved in “security” and mass surveillance and the European Union through service provision contracts. Some of the major companies, questioned for their role in current armed conflicts, have been collaborating on border control and police systems in various states for many years²⁶.
- Strengthen the historical perspective, delving deeper into the lessons learned from previous movements’ experiences and adapting and applying them to the current context. This includes exploring the usefulness of direct action strategies in resisting the impact of algorithms on activism.
- Establishing connections with initiatives that also influence the infrastructure layer.

Prepare for a scenario of a radical closure of the digital civic space

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT LESSONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF 'THE ACTIVIST ALGORITHM'?

The combination of research carried out as part of The Activist Algorithm and the exchanges between researchers and activists, and amongst activists themselves, has shed some light on the impact that algorithmic systems are having on activism. This information and the reflections sparked by these exchanges may prove valuable in addressing a situation that is progressively deteriorating in terms of the exercise of rights and freedoms.

The participating activists have highlighted the need to broaden and deepen our understanding of the role played by algorithmic systems in their interactions, particularly with social media. There is a lack of clarity regarding at what points in the process algorithmic systems intervene, and even less so regarding their technical functioning. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult, first and foremost, to recognise that we are subject to the dictates of such systems and, consequently, to establish mechanisms of resistance and response.

One of the most pressing needs is the establishment of an algorithm observatory

Precisely for this reason, one of the most pressing needs is the establishment of an algorithm observatory to keep knowledge up to date regarding these constantly changing systems. The very nature of these systems necessitates constant monitoring and review, as well as an update on their effects and the ways to address them.

Similarly, activists note the deterioration of the digital civic space, whether due to restrictions on freedoms imposed by institutional bodies or the intensification of a climate of hatred fuelled by the strategies and discourses of the far right. Despite the lack of concrete knowledge about how these algorithmic systems work, the participating activists know that the 'demands' of social media platforms shape and influence the ways in which they carry out their activism. For example, they observe constraints on the topics, language, tone, approach and even formats they use. These constraints are trade-offs they must constantly negotiate, caught between yielding to the platforms' logic and remaining steadfast in their convictions and objectives. There is a constant dilemma between making certain concessions in exchange for greater reach and a wider audience for their messages. This constant uncertainty creates unease, because it is difficult to determine when concessions are excessive or when one is losing one's bearings.

Activists constantly pay a high price for their presence on social media

This is one source of unease, but not the only one. Activists constantly pay a high price for their presence on social media and their militant use of it. Violence, harassment and hostility are a constant, affecting not only their commitment but also their personal integrity. Where other axes of oppression intersect – such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, language, etc. –, the situation becomes even more hostile. Women activists face the sexualisation of their image, whatever their message; racialised activists experience constant racism; activists who define themselves from dissident affective or gender positions face waves of homophobia, transphobia, biphobia...; those with non-normative bodies are the focus of contempt, mockery, insults and discrimination.

There is an urgent need to strengthen the links between forms of online and offline activism

Faced with this situation, activists are certain that they need mechanisms for response and organisation. However, reflection is needed to determine the most appropriate strategies. There is no consensus, for example, on whether it is more coherent and effective to abandon common social platforms, whose rules already create an imbalance for activists working for global justice; or whether it is necessary to continue resisting, in some cases, with the consequent risk to activists' safety, to avoid ceding significant ground to discourses that deny rights and undermine democracy and democratic systems of governance.

What is seen as a certainty, albeit with an undefined scope, is the need to strengthen coordination between organisations, collectives and activists from different fields. There is an urgent need to strengthen the links between forms of online and offline activism, as well as between different areas of interest and across different territories. The complexity of the situation leads activists to recognise the importance of complementarity and collaborative contributions, in which each collective can develop a specialisation (whether in issues, tactics or strategies, or in approaches or contexts) that it places at the service of the community. The response requires efforts across diverse areas, ranging from countering discourses to advocacy, including protection, regulation, awareness-raising and even litigation; coordination between diverse actors is therefore essential.

The debates, discussions and reflections of the participants in The Activist Algorithm have emphasised the need to create digital spaces that are not fertile ground for hate, discrimination and anti-rights discourse. In any case, although no clear conclusion has been reached on the path to achieving this, the need to change the logic and the paradigm is constantly apparent: that these spaces should not be governed by market principles (prioritising profit over legality and rights), and that they should not be the territory of anti-democratic positions under the guise of free enterprise. The digital spaces of the future (and of the present) must guarantee scrupulous respect for all people, whether or not they are users, whether through regulation or through the creation of other platforms based on different principles.



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THE ACTIVIST ALGORITHM PROJECT. FINAL REPORT

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