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Digital Activism within the Coptic Community in North America: New Transnational Opportunities or Emerging Threats?*

النشاط الرقمي داخل المجتمع القبطي في أميركا الشمالية: فرص جديدة أم تهديدات ناشئة؟

Abstract: This study critically examines the dual impact of digital technologies on the political agency of the Coptic diaspora, emphasizing both the opportunities and limitations posed by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Digital platforms have enhanced diaspora visibility, resource mobilization, and transnational activism, but they also introduce major risks, including misinformation, censorship, and surveillance. These growing challenges have hindered the diaspora's ability to navigate power structures, reducing the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. The study argues that the drawbacks of digital activism now outweigh its initial benefits, creating new constraints on Coptic political influence. In light of these pressures, it calls for a reassessment of how diaspora groups can sustain activism in an increasingly hostile digital landscape.

Keywords: Coptic Diaspora; Transnational Activism; Misinformation; Censorship; Surveillance; Digital Activism.

ملخص: تُحلل الدراسة الأثر المزدوج للتقنيات الرقمية في الفاعلية السياسية للشركات القبطية، مع التركيز على الفرص التي تتيحها تقنيات المعلومات والاتصال والقيود التي تفرضها، حيث ساهمت المنصات الرقمية في تعزيز حضور الجاليات القبطية، وحشد الموارد، والانخراط في مناصرة عابرة للحدود، لكنّها في الوقت نفسه أدخلت مخاطر كبيرة، مثل المعلومات المضللة والرقابة والمراقبة. وقد أعاقت هذه التحديات المتزايدة قدرة الشركات على التعامل مع البنى القائمة، ما قلل من فعالية جهودهم السياسية. في هذا السياق، تجادل الدراسة أنّ سلبيات النشاط الرقمي باتت تفوق فوائده الأولى، ما فرض قيودًا جديدة على التأثير السياسي للشركات القبطية الرقمية. وبالنظر إلى هذه الضغوط، تدعو الدراسة إلى إعادة تقييم كيفية مواصلة جماعات الشركات جهودها في بيئة رقمية متغيرة وعدائية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الشركات القبطية؛ التعبئة العابرة للحدود؛ المعلومات المضللة؛ الرقابة؛ المراقبة؛ المناصرة الرقمية.

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Introduction

Global awareness of the Coptic plight surged on 15 February 2015, when ISIS released a disturbing video showing the execution of 20 Copts and one Ghanaian along the Libyan coast. The captives were martyred for refusing to abandon their Christian faith.¹ The release of this video prompted a strong reaction, particularly from the Coptic diaspora, which quickly mobilized online. The event is a notable example of how the Coptic diaspora has evolved into what can be termed a “digital diaspora”, utilizing online spaces to foster community and activism.

The Egyptian Coptic Orthodox community, a religious minority in Egypt, has established a significant presence in North America as part of a broader global dispersion. This migration began in the mid-20th century, with waves of Coptic immigrants arriving in the US and Canada in search of better economic opportunities and, in some cases, to escape religious persecution in Egypt.² Nadia Marzouki notes that Coptic migration to the US gained momentum in the 1950s, later than other Middle Eastern Christian groups.³ Over the years, this diaspora has grown significantly, with Coptic communities established in major North American metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Montreal, and Toronto. This expansion not only reflects broader patterns of migration but also makes the Coptic diaspora in North America a compelling case study in the modern era of globalization, digital connectivity, and the preservation of cultural identity, particularly due to its efforts to maintain religious and linguistic traditions, its transnational political engagement, and its active use of digital platforms for advocacy.

Digital technologies have reshaped the landscape of transnational activism, enabling diaspora communities to mobilize, advocate, and sustain connections across borders. A key dimension of this inquiry is the role of social media in facilitating digital mobilization and transnational advocacy. These platforms have provided Coptic individuals in the diaspora with tools to connect, voice their concerns, and advocate for the rights and safety of Coptic communities in Egypt. By leveraging digital tools, the Coptic diaspora has raised global awareness, articulated political grievances, and shaped a discourse centred on human rights. The rapid dissemination of news and updates across these networks has fostered solidarity and collective action, reinforcing a sense of community across geographic boundaries.

By engaging with Arjun Appadurai’s concept of deterritorialization, the study further situates the Coptic diaspora within broader discussions on globalization and digital activism.⁴ Appadurai argues that globalization has dislocated cultural identities from specific geographic territories, allowing migrant communities to maintain and even reshape their traditions in transnational contexts. The Coptic diaspora exemplifies this process, as its members navigate between preserving religious and linguistic traditions, engaging in transnational political activism, and leveraging digital platforms for advocacy with varying degrees of success.

This study examines the Coptic diaspora in North America as a compelling case of identity formation within the broader context of globalization, digital connectivity, and transnational activism. It explores the concept of the digital diaspora, emphasizing the importance of understanding this term within its specific political, geographical, and historical contexts.

¹ Athens Bureau, “Coptic Orthodox Martyrs Are Beheaded by ISIS in Libya,” *Greek City Times*, 16/2/2015, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/np3e56nf>; Bill Hutchinson, “ISIS Releases Video Purporting to Show Beheading of 21 Egyptians in Libya,” *New York Daily News*, 16/2/2015, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yhesad63>

² Youssef Zaki, “*A Theban Legion on the Banks of the Potomac: Coptic Political Activism in the Diaspora, the U.S., and the Egyptian Polity*,” George Washington University, *IMES Capstone Paper Series* (2010).

³ Nadia Marzouki, “The U.S. Coptic Diaspora and the Limit of Polarization,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2016), pp. 261-276.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

Research Questions and Argument

This study explores how the Coptic e-diaspora in North America has transcended physical borders and mobilized political agency through digital platforms. Specifically, it asks: To what extent do social media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) facilitate or hinder the ability of Coptic diaspora advocacy organizations to promote Coptic identity, mobilize resources, and capitalize on political opportunities? What contextual factors impact their capacity to use social media to support the Coptic community in Egypt? What are the primary challenges encountered by the Coptic e-diaspora?

While ICTs have significantly influenced the political landscape, particularly for diaspora communities, their impact remains complex and multidimensional. Fiona McCallum notes that diaspora groups often harness these technologies to advocate for their causes and maintain connections with both their homeland and fellow members around the world.⁵ However, this study argues that although digital platforms have enabled the Coptic diaspora to enhance visibility, mobilize resources, and engage in transnational activism, they have also introduced significant vulnerabilities, including misinformation, censorship, and state surveillance. The increasing complexities of digital engagement have further hindered the diaspora's ability to navigate existing power structures, limiting the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts. As these challenges continue to intensify, the disadvantages of digital activism now outweigh its initial benefits, imposing new constraints on the political influence of the Coptic e-diaspora. The increasing barriers to digital activism, including cyber surveillance, misinformation, internal fragmentation, and challenges in framing Coptic narratives, necessitate a critical reassessment of how diaspora advocacy groups can sustain their efforts in an evolving and often hostile digital landscape.

The paper first outlines the methodological approach and conceptual framework, situating digital diaspora activism within broader debates in diaspora studies and social movement theory. It then identifies key opportunities available to North American Copts, such as social media, international lobbying, and transnational networks, for digital mobilization. The analysis subsequently turns to major challenges, including digital literacy disparities, surveillance, self-censorship, internal disagreements, and difficulties framing Coptic narratives for wider audiences. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of these dynamics and proposes directions for future research.

By addressing these tensions, this study contributes to current debates on digital activism, diaspora politics, and the evolving role of technology in transnational advocacy. It positions the Coptic diaspora as a timely and important case through which to examine how marginalized communities navigate the promises and perils of digital mobilization under increasingly constrained conditions.

Theorizing E-Diaspora

The contemporary migration landscape reveals a dynamic interplay between human mobility and digital communication, which has garnered significant scholarly attention. Researchers are particularly focused on the role of digital platforms in diaspora politics.⁶ These platforms facilitate distant expressions and performances, proving crucial for non-state actors and reshaping diaspora identities by fostering homeland imagination and enabling political dissent.⁷ Building on this foundation, the advancement of cyber technology has introduced the concept of “digital diaspora”, emphasizing how diasporas create borderless

⁵ Fiona McCallum, “Religious Diaspora and Information Communications Technology: The Impact of Globalization on Communal Relations in Egypt,” in: Marc Lynch (ed.), *The New Arab Media: Technology, Image and Perception* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2011), pp. 81-101.

⁶ Koen Leurs & Kevin Smets, “Five Questions for Digital Migration Studies: Learning from Digital Connectivity and Forced Migration in (to) Europe,” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-16.

⁷ Priya Kumar, “Rerouting the Narrative: Mapping the Online Identity Politics of the Tamil and Palestinian Diaspora,” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-18.

organizations and leverage communication technologies to enhance their social capital: the networks, relationships, and resources that facilitate collective action and community support.⁸ This term encompasses various expressions, including “e-diasporas”, “net-diasporas”, and “web-diasporas”, each reflecting different perspectives on diasporic communities’ interactions within digital spaces.⁹ These concepts highlight the integration of online and offline experiences and emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of the study, bridging media studies, migration studies, and sociology. For this paper, “digital diaspora” and “e-diaspora” are selected for its versatility in addressing the political, geographical, and historical contexts of diasporic engagement.

To further understand these dynamics, some scholars have redefined the concept of diaspora by drawing on Anderson’s notion of imagined communities.¹⁰ Sökefeld notes that dispersed members are united by a shared imagination of a common origin and identity, transcending geographical distance and fostering a collective sense of identity.¹¹ Similarly, Adamson and Demetriou describe diaspora as a social collective that maintains a cohesive national, cultural, or religious identity over time through enduring ties to a real or imagined homeland.¹² Consequently, connecting members of diasporic communities via the Internet has become integral to modern global culture, linking individuals by birthplace, previous residence, or emotional ties to their homeland.

This interconnectedness is further underlined by the reliance of online communities on social capital, which encompasses individual belonging and a sense of community.¹³ Social capital fosters trust, facilitates information exchange, and creates shared expectations, typically categorized as bridging (connections across diverse groups) and bonding (close ties among family and friends).¹⁴ Scholars such as Agnieszka Kanas et al.,¹⁵ Larissa Larsen et al.,¹⁶ and Michelle Martin¹⁷ discuss the “bonding and bridging” processes that enable resource development and transfer from the homeland to the host country.

In addition, Harry Hiller and Tara Franz explore the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on diaspora activities.¹⁸ They argue that CMC, enhanced by online engagement, facilitates interactions beyond physical boundaries, fostering cultural ties and a sense of community centred around group identity. This enables e-diasporas to influence the socio-political landscape of their ancestral homelands while

⁸ Bahar Baser & Amira Halperin, “Diasporas from the Middle East: Displacement, Transnational Identities and Homeland Politics,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2019), pp. 215-221; Jennifer Brinkerhoff, “Digital Diasporas and Governance in Semi-Authoritarian States: The Case of the Egyptian Copts,” *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2005), pp. 193-204; Donald A. Westbrook & Michael Saad, “Religious Identity and Borderless Territoriality in the Coptic E-Diaspora,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2017), pp. 341-351.

⁹ Victoria Bernal, *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Dana Diminescu & Benjamin Loveluck, “Traces of Dispersion: Online Media and Diasporic Identities,” *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014), pp. 23-39.

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1997).

¹¹ Martin Sökefeld, “Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora,” *Global Networks*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2006), pp. 265-284.

¹² Fiona Adamson & Michael Demetriou, “Remapping the Boundaries of ‘State’ and ‘National Identity’: Incorporating Diasporas into IR Theorizing,” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2007), pp. 489-526.

¹³ Vicente Navarro, “A Critique of Social Capital,” *International Journal of Social Determinants of Health and Health Services*, vol. 32, no. 3 (2002), pp. 423-432.

¹⁴ Sajjun Zhang, Steven G. Anderson & Min Zhan, “The Differentiated Impact of Bridging and Bonding Social Capital on Economic Well-Being: An Individual Level Perspective,” *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2011), pp. 119 - 142.

¹⁵ Agnieszka Kanas, Frank van Tubergen & Tanja van der Lippe, “Immigrant Self-Employment: Testing Hypotheses about the Role of Origin- and Host-Country Human Capital and Bonding and Bridging Social Capital,” *Work and Occupations*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2009), pp. 181-208.

¹⁶ Larissa Larsen et al., “Bonding and Bridging: Understanding the Relationship between Social Capital and Civic Action,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2004), pp. 64-77.

¹⁷ Michelle E. Martin, “The Political Power of Diaspora as External Actors in Armed Civil Conflict: Ethnonationalist Conflict-Generated Diaspora Use of Social Media in Transnational Political Engagement in Homeland Conflict: The Case of Rwanda,” PhD. Dissertation, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, 2013.

¹⁸ Harry H. Hiller & Tara M. Franz, “New Ties, Old Ties and Lost Ties: The Use of the Internet in Diaspora,” *New Media & Society*, vol. 6, no. 6 (2004), pp. 731-752.

asserting their ethnic identities in host countries. Supporting this viewpoint, Bennett highlights how digital platforms, especially social media, have cultivated more personalized political experiences. When shared in online spaces, these individual experiences often contribute to larger collective political movements.¹⁹

Despite these insights, the debate over whether online communities foster social isolation or enhance social capital remains active. Initial critiques suggested that internet use could lead to isolation by displacing social activities; however, more recent research indicates that the impact largely depends on the type of online interaction.²⁰ Online communities, often based on shared interests rather than geographical proximity, can promote heterogeneous community building and social bonds. Nonetheless, challenges such as closed structures that create in-group and out-group divisions persist, underscoring the importance of trust and shared norms for both online and offline communities.²¹

Building on these theoretical perspectives, this study applies social movement theories to conceptualize the Coptic diaspora as a digital diaspora actively engaging in transnational advocacy and collective action. While research on social media and digital activism is growing, few studies have incorporated social movement theory or examined the collective action strategies of digital diasporas. This study addresses that gap by investigating how Coptic activists employ digital tools to amplify their advocacy efforts and sustain transnational ties. By integrating social movement theories with the study of ICTs, this research contributes to a broader understanding of digital transnational collective action while also shedding light on this understudied group. In doing so, it bridges an important gap in the existing literature on diaspora activism and digital mobilization. Moreover, while the structural dimension of social movement theory explains the institutional mechanisms that shape Coptic mobilization in Canada and the US, its constructivist dimension highlights the ideational foundations of Coptic activism, illustrating how narratives, identity, and collective memory influence digital engagement.

Methodology: Interviews and Content Analysis

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating semi-structured interviews and content analysis to examine the role of ICTs in Coptic digital activism. The primary data consists of 23 in-depth interviews conducted with members of the Coptic diaspora in Los Angeles, Toronto, and Montreal, three major hubs of Coptic residence in North America. Of these, 15 interviews were conducted in Canada and eight in the US, spanning from February to September 2022, with additional interviews held between July and September 2023.

1. Sampling and Data Collection

Participants included leaders and members of Coptic human rights advocacy organizations, volunteers from philanthropic groups, independent Coptic politicians, media activists, Coptic scholars, and clergy members. The study also incorporated perspectives from second-generation Copts, offering insights into generational differences in digital activism. Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, starting with key figures in Coptic communities in Canada and the US, as well as individuals identified through public online sources, activist websites, social media, and media reports. Communication with participants was primarily conducted via email.

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, with an average length of 90 minutes. While Zoom was the primary medium, many initial conversations occurred in-person in churches, homes, and conferences in

¹⁹ W. Lance Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 644, no. 1 (2012), pp. 20-39.

²⁰ Norman H. Nie & Lutz Erbring, "Internet and Society: A Preliminary Report," *IT & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2002), pp. 275-283.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Hiller & Franz; Navarro.

Toronto, Montreal, Kingston, and Los Angeles. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in digital advocacy strategies, concerns about surveillance, and the broader impact of ICTs on community mobilization. To ensure participant confidentiality, pseudonyms (for example, “A6”) were assigned, except in cases where interviewees explicitly requested to be named.

The interview guide included both open-ended and closed questions, covering key themes such as engagement strategies, the impact of digital media on community identity, and concerns regarding surveillance, control, and privacy. These insights provided a qualitative foundation for understanding the complexities of online activism within the Coptic diaspora.²²

Ethical approval for this study was obtained following Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Before each interview, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation and their right to decline answering any question or terminate the interview at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and interviews were recorded only with explicit permission. As a Coptic migrant in Canada fluent in both Arabic and English, the researcher was able to conduct interviews in the language preferred by participants, ensuring their comfort and facilitating more candid discussions. This shared identity helped build trust and ease potential hesitations, particularly around politically sensitive topics such as surveillance and repression. The researcher’s insider-outsider positionality – being both part of the diaspora community and trained in academic research – proved crucial in gaining access to key informants and navigating discussions that required a balance of empathy, cultural familiarity, and analytical distance.

2. Content Analysis of Digital Advocacy

In addition to interviews, this study conducts content analysis of digital materials related to Coptic advocacy. This includes publications from major Coptic organizations, social media discourse, electronic media articles, websites affiliated with the Coptic Church, and online forums. Advocacy-related posts from Coptic lobby organizations were monitored, along with correspondence with diaspora associations and conference materials. Social media activity was systematically reviewed on a weekly basis to track shifts in advocacy narratives, mobilization efforts, and response patterns to political events affecting Coptic communities.

The content was categorized based on advocacy focus areas, distinguishing between human rights advocacy, philanthropic and charitable organizations, and cultural preservation initiatives. Within each category, organizations with a strong digital presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram were prioritized. The human rights advocacy sector includes organizations that leverage digital platforms to raise awareness, mobilize international support, and document human rights violations against Copts. Among the most active on social media are Coptic Solidarity, the American Coptic Association (ACA), the US Copts Association, the Coptic Assembly of America (CAA), and the International Coptic Federation. These groups frequently publish reports, share news updates, organize online petitions, and livestream conferences and protests. Coptic Solidarity, in particular, has a robust presence on X (Twitter) and Facebook, where it engages with policymakers and international human rights organizations.

The philanthropic and charitable sector features organizations that utilize social media to fundraise, share testimonials, and promote humanitarian initiatives. Notable organizations with strong digital engagement include Coptic Orphans, Santa Verena Charity, Care 4 Needy Copts (C4NC), Light for Orphans USA, and Rising Out Of The Ashes (ROOTA). These groups frequently post success stories, crowdfunding campaigns, and behind-the-scenes footage of their aid efforts on Instagram and Facebook. Coptic Orphans, for example,

²² See: Appendix.

has a well-established digital outreach strategy that includes YouTube videos, X advocacy, and interactive Instagram posts to showcase its impact and mobilize diaspora contributions.

The cultural preservation sector consists of organizations that digitally archive historical materials, promote Coptic heritage, and engage with diaspora communities through educational initiatives. The most digitally active include St. Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society, The Coptic Museum of Canada, The Society of Coptic Church Studies, and The Coptic Canadian History Project (CCHP). These institutions frequently host virtual lectures, publish digital archives, and engage with audiences through podcasts, online exhibits, and webinars. The Coptic Museum of Canada maintains a strong presence on Facebook and Instagram, regularly posting historical artifacts and cultural insights, while CCHP actively shares research publications and oral history projects on X and YouTube.

By prioritizing organizations with significant social media activity, this study ensures a more dynamic analysis of digital advocacy, philanthropy, and cultural preservation within the Coptic diaspora. Future monitoring efforts will focus on tracking these organizations' content trends, engagement strategies, and evolving digital mobilization tactics across various platforms.

Unlocking Opportunities: Information Technology in Coptic Advocacy

In the process of remembrance, the portrayal of Coptic victimhood plays a crucial role in identity reconstruction and political resistance. This victimhood is rooted in historical and contemporary experiences of marginalization, shaping a collective memory that reinforces a shared sense of struggle and resilience. By mobilizing these narratives, Copts in the diaspora not only affirm their distinct identity but also strengthen transnational ties, using digital platforms and advocacy networks to connect dispersed communities. This process transforms collective memory into a tool for political mobilization, allowing Copts to frame their struggles within global human rights discourse and seek international recognition and support.

Digital technologies, particularly social media, have further reinforced this process, offering Coptic advocacy organizations in North America new avenues to amplify their voices, organize campaigns, and sustain transnational engagement. These online platforms function as extensions of diasporic networks, enabling more immediate and far-reaching forms of activism that bridge local concerns with global advocacy efforts. This digital connectivity aligns with the broader concept of the “e-diaspora”, where virtual spaces become vital arenas for identity formation, collective action, and the preservation of Coptic heritage. Through these platforms, Copts can challenge marginalization, shape public discourse, and cultivate a sense of solidarity that transcends geographic boundaries. The following sections explore how digital platforms amplify the collective voice of Copts across borders, creating opportunities for the Coptic diaspora. Key areas of focus include how ICTs have improved communication and visibility, fostered political and financial autonomy, and helped preserve religious and cultural identity among first- and second-generation Copts.

1. Improved Communication and Visibility

ICTs have revolutionized the communication methods of Coptic advocacy organizations. These digital tools facilitate smoother interactions both within Coptic networks and with external entities, such as government bodies, thereby enhancing collaboration and streamlining advocacy efforts. Additionally, ICTs grant advocates direct access to crucial data, legislative updates, and news, empowering them to stay informed and actively engage with policymakers.

Beyond enhancing communication, ICTs present Coptic organizations with opportunities to amplify their visibility and promote their political agendas. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube allow these organizations to bypass traditional media, which often misrepresents

or underrepresents their stories, thereby enabling direct connections with a broader audience. Based on the author's content analysis of social media outputs and organizational websites, Facebook, X (@Coptic_Solidarity), and Instagram (@copticolidarity) are actively used by Coptic Solidarity to engage followers worldwide. YouTube channels such as Coptic Advocacy, Coptic Solidarity, and Coptic Orphans regularly share personal narratives and visual content that raise awareness of human rights concerns and enhance the diaspora's visibility.

In an environment marked by state control and news censorship, social media has become a crucial communication tool for Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt. This significance is emphasized by the violence they face from both government and sectarian groups. Research reveals a stark contrast in the coverage of incidents such as the Maspero Massacre between state-owned and independent media, with social media emerging as an essential alternative. For instance, X has played a key role in fostering solidarity for Copts through personal testimonies and collaborative Muslim-Christian prayers.²³ It not only facilitates the sharing of images and videos but also provides a platform for independent voices to express firsthand experiences, helping to fill gaps left by state-dominated media narratives.

Another important type of online social community for the Coptic diaspora involves the use of more conventional media, such as livestreams and television broadcasts. These observations are based on the author's review of digital archives and media histories documented by Michael Saad, along with analysis of diaspora broadcasting content available through satellite and YouTube platforms.²⁴ Coptic television and press in North America have played a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and providing platforms for communities to express their views on social and political issues. For instance, in 1997, an effort was made to establish Egyptian Coptic Television in New Jersey under the leadership of Sami Boulos, a prominent figure within the Coptic community. Boulos, with his extensive background in education and religious writing, led a program that aired for two hours every Friday evening over a span of 12 weeks.²⁵ This initiative aimed to deliver religious and social programming tailored to the needs of the Coptic diaspora. However, despite its initial success, the program's short run can be attributed to a lack of sufficient financial resources.

Building on the foundation laid by such initiatives, another notable attempt to create a Coptic television presence was the establishment of Orthodox Christian TV (OCTV) in Los Angeles, led by Coptic immigrant Wahid Doctor. From 2003 to 2007, OCTV broadcasted for 30 minutes every Saturday morning via a cable network. Although it received support from other Orthodox Churches, financial constraints ultimately hindered its long-term sustainability.²⁶ In contrast, the landscape shifted in 2007 with the launch of two Coptic Church channels from Egypt that aimed to reach a broader audience through 24 / 7 satellite broadcasting. Aghapy TV, run by Bishop Botros and accessible via Dish Network, was able to sustain itself through donations and subscriptions, while the other channel, Coptic TV, was financed by Sarwat Bassily, who maintained residences in both Cairo and Chicago. Both channels quickly garnered substantial viewership within the US, further solidifying the role of television in connecting the Coptic diaspora and enhancing their sense of community.²⁷

Continuing this momentum, in 2010, the Coptic Diocese of Los Angeles initiated the Logos TV satellite channel, which had four primary goals: evangelism, education, healing, and defending the oppressed and

²³ Amal Bakry & Mohammed F. Alkazemi, "Social Media Coverage of 'Maspero': Solidarity between Muslims and Christians Post the Egyptian Uprising," *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2014), pp. 61-74.

²⁴ Michael Saad, "The Contemporary Life of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United States," *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2010), pp. 207-225.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

persecuted. Co-sponsored by other Coptic dioceses in America, Logos TV broadcasted in English and Arabic. This initiative represented a significant development in the Coptic diaspora's media landscape, providing a powerful platform to showcase and preserve Coptic heritage, advance its rich civilization, and foster the expansion of a dynamic and interconnected global community. Since 2013, Michael Saad has been hosting the Logos TV program "Coptic Civilization" in both Arabic and English.

2. Fostering Political and Financial Autonomy

Digital technology also provides Coptic advocacy organizations with the potential for greater political autonomy. A key challenge these organizations face in traditional settings is the overwhelming influence of the church in political matters, as the church often seeks to maintain exclusive control over representing the Coptic community. The church's stance toward any form of oppositional political activity within the Coptic community remained consistently negative and restrictive for years. Mariz Tadros describes the state's treatment of Copts as a patron-client relationship, where limited services, such as church permits, are provided to secure the political loyalty of the Coptic community.²⁸ Similarly, Rowe refers to this church policy as a mutually reinforcing neo-millet partnership, wherein the church supports the state, and the state grants legitimacy to the church.²⁹ However, despite these arrangements, none of these services address the unjust legal and institutional policies targeting Copts in the country. Guindy points out that having the church as the "main interlocutor" between the state and the Copts appears to be a strategy to exert pressure indirectly on the Copts by pressuring them into silence in order to avoid disturbing the already-unstable relationship between the church and the Egyptian government, thus worsening the Copts' situation in Egypt.³⁰

Many interviewees noted that the church's reluctance to support independent organizations significantly limits the scope of Coptic political advocacy. This hesitation arises from the church's desire to avoid endorsing initiatives that might jeopardize its relationship with the Egyptian government. This desire to monopolize representation complicates the efforts of independent advocacy groups, who may struggle to gain legitimacy without the church's endorsement. By utilizing digital tools, Coptic advocacy groups can assert their independence, promote their causes more freely, and operate outside the constraints of traditional ecclesiastical power structures.

Moreover, digital platforms allow organizations to promote their projects and cultural initiatives, creating new opportunities for funding and reducing dependence on governmental or church financial support. This financial independence gives them the flexibility to advocate freely without fear of reprisal. As 8I explained, organizations like Association Copt de Montreal (ACOM), established to engage with politicians at various levels, struggled with workload and management, ultimately leading to their discontinuation.³¹ Volunteers often face burnout due to the overwhelming demands of advocacy work, a challenge amplified by the volunteer-based nature of many Coptic advocacy organizations. 5D, a lawyer and politician, reflected: "It is not just a Coptic issue. Advocacy itself is exhausting. People start with passion but burn out fast". He added, "How many of us can afford to work full-time for free?".³² Similarly, 7G, a Coptic lawyer and activist, emphasized the scarcity of well-funded Coptic organizations with proper governance structures,

²⁸ Mariz Tadros, "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952–2007)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2009), pp. 269-287.

²⁹ Paul S. Rowe, "Neo-Millet Systems and Transnational Religious Movements: The Humayun Decrees and Church Construction in Egypt," *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2007), pp. 329-350; Paul S. Rowe, "Building Coptic Civil Society: Christian Groups and the State in Mubarak's Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2009), pp. 111-126.

³⁰ Adel Guindy, *Sword over the Nile: A Brief History of the Copts under Islamic Rule* (London: Austin Macauley, 2020), p. 325.

³¹ 8I, politician, Conservative Party of Canada candidate in 2019 and board member of Les Partenaires de l'Association de la Haute-Égypte, Zoom interview, Montreal, April 2022.

³² 5D, lawyer, politician, former member of the Conservative Party and current member of the Liberal Party, Zoom interview, Kingston, Canada, May 2022.

noting that few have succession plans or the capacity to sustain long-term advocacy.³³ 8I, a politician and board member of Les Partenaires de L'Association de la Haute-Égypte, also pointed out that Copts in North America face significant funding challenges, as “most donations go directly to charity work in Egypt, not to advocacy organizations here”. She stressed that “many Copts are not used to the idea of donating to political causes – they have not been taught why it matters”.³⁴

3. Preserving Religious and Cultural Identity

In the effort to preserve Coptic cultural identity, ICT plays a key role. It provides individuals with access to a wealth of resources related to Coptic history, language, and traditions through online platforms. These resources range from virtual libraries of Coptic texts to instructional materials for learning the Coptic language. As a result, younger generations of Coptic Americans and Canadians now have unprecedented opportunities to engage with their cultural heritage in ways that may not have been possible without the internet.

The case of second-generation Copts illustrates the advantages of being raised in the diaspora. These individuals, as products of their environment, possess the knowledge and skills to effectively engage with governments and amplify Coptic voices. They are particularly adept at utilizing various media platforms and are more active and open in their advocacy efforts. As part of the e-diaspora, they have the potential to advocate for Copts' rights in Egypt, provided they receive the necessary education, training, and experience.

Additionally, Donald Westbrook and Saad highlight another motivation for first- and second-generation Copts through three case studies on electronic identity mediation and preservation in the Coptic diaspora. These cases demonstrate how diaspora initiatives partly fulfil Copts' longing for territorial ownership and control.³⁵ The examples include: 1) the online ecclesiastical and educational presence of Bishop Suriel of Melbourne; 2) the spiritual, social, and cultural mission of the Los Angeles-based Coptic television channel Logos TV; and 3) the global collaborative academic project of the digital Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia. Together, these initiatives represent an emerging electronic Coptic diaspora (e-diaspora) – a form of borderless territoriality that compensates for the loss of socio-religious, cultural, and political control in Egypt, providing first- and second-generation Copts with virtual territorial gains and a borderless space for community engagement and consciousness-raising.³⁶

Navigating Digital Challenges in Coptic Advocacy

This section focuses on the challenges posed by information technology in Coptic advocacy in North America. It draws on insights from Coptic advocacy organizers and second-generation members to highlight key issues and strategies for navigating the complex digital landscape. The discussion addresses a range of obstacles, including cyber surveillance, self-censorship, and corporate control, alongside training gaps and power imbalances. It also examines the complexities of framing Coptic narratives and the internal divisions among Coptic diaspora activists.

1. Training Gaps and Power Dynamics

While digital transnational activism offers significant advantages, inadequate training and digital skills pose a major barrier to digital equity and effective engagement among the Coptic community. Many participants

³³ 7G, lawyer and activist, second-generation Copt, Zoom interview, Montreal, April 2022.

³⁴ 8I.

³⁵ Westbrook & Saad.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

reported that this lack of training limits their ability to fully leverage digital tools, despite their potential to reach both Coptic and non-Coptic audiences. As one participant put it, “We have the platforms, but most people do not know how to use them strategically. There is no training, no guidance”.³⁷ Over three-quarters of interviewees noted that these limitations have adversely affected their efforts to promote a shared Coptic identity. Reflecting on earlier periods of activism, 9L, an academic and advocate, remarked, “It was easier before. People were more focused. Now the noise online makes it hard to come together”.³⁸ Additionally, unequal access to digital tools further exacerbates this challenge, particularly in grassroots communities where many first-generation Copts continue to rely on traditional communication methods, such as church bulletins or in-person meetings, rather than digital outreach.

Transitioning from these challenges, even when organizations possess some necessary skills, they often struggle to compete with more powerful actors, such as government agencies and corporate entities, that have far greater resources to develop sophisticated public relations campaigns that can overshadow grassroots efforts. Therefore, without genuine recognition and support for Coptic concerns, technology alone cannot address deeper systemic inequalities or political marginalization.

Moving forward, it is essential to recognize that the broader social and political context significantly influences the success of digital communication. While social media enables Coptic organizations to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with the public, it does not inherently change public perception or power dynamics. Moreover, although digital tools can help disseminate information and mobilize supporters, they cannot, on their own, overcome deeply entrenched political and social inequalities. The experiences of various Coptic advocacy leaders demonstrate that using IT for political purposes is constrained by the broader context of state control, public opinion, and available resources.

2. Cyber Surveillance and Privacy Concerns

Emerging digital securitization strategies increasingly rely on surveillance mechanisms targeting marginalized groups such as migrants, refugees, and diasporas that are viewed as potential threats. These strategies often involve monitoring through databases like Frontex, Eurosur, and Eurodac, as well as biometric technologies, intertwining national security concerns with global migration.³⁹ As a result, rather than alleviating power imbalances, the digital revolution deepens them, disproportionately burdening already vulnerable groups.

For Coptic advocacy, the threat of cyber surveillance and the spread of misinformation present serious obstacles. Advocacy leaders fear that state and powerful actors may use digital tools to monitor their activities. The risk of being perceived as a national security threat or facing political persecution can deter organizations from fully utilizing digital platforms. These concerns are heightened by the increased capacity of both homeland and host country governments to engage in surveillance, as seen in cases where Coptic activists have experienced monitoring and harassment.

Retaliation is a particularly significant challenge for Coptic diaspora activists, especially in their dealings with the Egyptian government, which has long viewed diaspora activism with suspicion as a hazard to Egypt’s sovereignty. Egyptian regimes often frame such activism as unnecessary political pressure, external interference, or even conspiracies orchestrated by perceived enemies like Israel or Zionist

³⁷ 6F, activist and university professor, Zoom interview, Kingston, Canada, August 2022.

³⁸ 9L, activist, university professor, and executive member of the Canadian Psychological Association, Zoom interview, Kingston, Canada, February 2022.

³⁹ Mark Latonero & Paula Kift, “On Digital Passages and Borders: Refugees and the New Infrastructure for Movement and Control,” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-11; Shoshana A. Magnet, *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Christianity.⁴⁰ Consequently, posting on social media frequently exposes activists to increased threats. To suppress opposition, the Egyptian government employs transnational repression tactics, including revoking citizenship, restricting travel to Egypt, harassing family members, confiscating property, and persecuting relatives still residing in Egypt.⁴¹

Interviews with activists reveal the disturbing effect of these tactics on diaspora mobilization. For instance, 7G, a lawyer and activist, highlighted the government's resistance to external groups influencing how internal issues are addressed, especially when these groups reside abroad.⁴² Similarly, 13R, an executive member of Coptic Solidarity, noted that Coptic mobilization has been significantly stifled by government pressure aimed at silencing diaspora activists. The fear of retaliation extends beyond activists themselves. 5D, a lawyer and politician, expressed concerns about the safety of activists and their relatives, citing the 2012 release of a list of Coptic activists by ISIS, which included many names from Canada.⁴³ Likewise, 6F, a university professor and activist, stressed the need for cautious representation of the Coptic cause, fearing that activism could negatively affect their families and fellow Copts in Egypt.⁴⁴

The experiences of activists like 11M further illustrate the complex dynamics of diaspora activism. For example, 11M, a politician and activist, wrote poems about sectarian discrimination and the Maspero events but hesitated to share them widely, fearing it would jeopardize his chances of returning to Egypt.⁴⁵ The pervasive threat of transnational repression demonstrates how the Egyptian government seeks to close down opportunities for advocacy, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship.

These tactics, employed not only against Coptic activists but also against a wide range of human rights defenders and civil society activists, regardless of religious affiliation, severely limit activists' ability to openly discuss political issues, both online and in person, with fellow expatriates. By fostering fear and mistrust, the government effectively undermines the diaspora's digital mobilization efforts, weakening the impact of Coptic advocacy organizations abroad and curtailing their capacity to influence homeland politics.

That being said, interviewees noted that political sensitivities in Egypt, as well as in host countries like the US and Canada, significantly influence their digital advocacy strategies. These political dynamics require careful adaptation of strategies to avoid conflict and maximize impact. They emphasized that in the US, the political climate surrounding religious freedom and cultural sensitivity plays a crucial role in shaping how messages are framed and received. During politically charged periods, they adjust their messaging to focus more on general human rights rather than specific Coptic issues to avoid potential backlash. In Canada, where there is a strong emphasis on multiculturalism, advocacy content is tailored to align with the country's values on diversity and inclusion.

3. Censorship and Corporate Control

The challenges posed by government surveillance extend to corporate censorship, where digital platforms play a significant role in controlling content visibility. As digital activism increasingly depends on social media, Coptic advocacy groups have encountered numerous incidents of their content being monitored,

⁴⁰ Sameh Elnaggar, "Egyptian Diaspora Explains the Meaning of Its Political Engagement in Washington, DC," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019; Hani Labib, *Azmat al-Ḥimāya al-Dīniyya: al-Dīn wa-l-Dawla fī Miṣr* (Cairo: Dar al-Shouruq, 2000); Bosmat Yefet, "The Coptic Diaspora and the Status of the Coptic Minority in Egypt," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 43, no. 7 (2017), pp. 1205-1221.

⁴¹ Mena Botros, "The Coptic Identity: Recognizing the Coptic 'Indigenous Peoples' Status for Protection from State-Sponsored Discrimination," *Coptic Solidarity Report*, 2/5/2023, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4c2b66ek>; Egyptian Human Rights Forum, *Years of Persecution, Reprisals, and Deprivation of Basic Citizenship Rights: Targeting of Egyptian Human Rights Defenders in the Diaspora* (2024), accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3xumrybw>

⁴² 7G.

⁴³ 5D.

⁴⁴ 6F.

⁴⁵ 11M, Conservative Party of Canada candidate for Mississauga–Streetsville 2019 and activist, Zoom interview, Toronto, March 2022.

flagged, or removed, prompting a need for careful messaging strategies. Activists worry that their posts, aimed at highlighting human rights violations and Coptic persecution, could be suppressed by platform algorithms, hindering engagement and amplifying fears of corporate surveillance.

Facebook's algorithm adjustments, for instance, have been especially impactful. These algorithmic changes have at times restricted the reach of posts related to Coptic issues, such as the ongoing discrimination against Copts in Egypt. This shadow-banning effect, where posts are limited without explicit removal, frustrates advocacy efforts, as it reduces the visibility of critical campaigns like the #SaveCopts movement.⁴⁶ In one instance, several posts related to the campaign were flagged or removed across Facebook and Instagram, limiting their impact and raising concerns about biases in content moderation policies. As a result, activists are forced to adjust their approach, navigating around these corporate gatekeepers while seeking to protect the privacy and integrity of their members.⁴⁷

The rise of misinformation and the proliferation of fake accounts further complicates digital advocacy. A key example occurred when false information circulated about a major campaign, leading to significant efforts to counteract the damage done to the advocacy message. This wave of disinformation not only diluted the original message but also added complexity to online mobilization efforts, as it required advocacy organizations to defend against false narratives while advancing their cause.

In response to corporate censorship, Coptic advocacy organizations have also embraced alternative communication channels. Many groups now place increased emphasis on email newsletters and independent websites to ensure that their key messages, especially those around human rights violations, are shared without the risk of suppression.

4. Challenges in Framing Copts' Traumatic Memory, Cultural Identity, and Persecution Narratives Across Generations

Digital media has profoundly influenced the Coptic community's sense of identity, strengthening collective ties by providing a platform for shared experiences and values. However, there are concerns that it could also dilute traditional practices if not managed carefully. The impact of digital media is multifaceted; while it reinforces community bonds, it simultaneously challenges the preservation of cultural identity. This duality presents significant hurdles for Coptic digital advocacy, particularly in light of the declining interest among second-generation Copts in maintaining a strong cultural identity, complicating efforts to mobilize around shared goals. Many participants expressed concern that the influx of foreign ideas, often introduced through the internet, entices younger Copts to adopt different lifestyles, distancing them from their cultural roots. This dilution of identity, magnified by online exposure to global influences, weakens the ability of advocacy organizations to unite the community and act effectively.

For second-generation Copts in North America, digital media practices play a key role in shaping identity. These practices are embedded in their daily social, cultural, and political activities, influencing their sense of belonging within the diaspora and their engagement with Coptic causes. However, their connection to traumatic memory varies considerably from that of the first generation. While older Copts carry the trauma of the 1970s through the 1990s – when many left Egypt – the younger generation, born or raised in North America, tends to view the Coptic plight more liberally. With limited firsthand experience of sectarian violence, they often rely on the transgenerational transmission of memories and digital representations from their parents or the church to form their understanding.

⁴⁶ Coptic Solidarity, *The Impact of Social Media Restrictions on Coptic Advocacy*, 2023, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mu5rk3ht>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The second-generation's relationship with Coptic identity is marked by a tension between "moving on" from past traumas and "sticking" to these narratives, as they remain central to their sense of self. This trauma is rooted in both historical and contemporary experiences of marginalization and violence. Empirical evidence and human rights reports have documented various incidents highlighting the challenges faced by the Coptic community. For instance, between 2016 and 2019, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights documented at least 36 cases of violence against Coptic Christian communities, particularly in Upper Egypt's el-Minya governorate. These incidents often stemmed from disputes over the construction or renovation of churches.⁴⁸ Additionally, the 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom by the U.S. Department of State noted reports of abductions and forced conversions of Coptic women and girls. Civil society groups and Coptic organizations reported at least eight such cases during the year.⁴⁹ However, it is essential to recognize that the broader Egyptian populace, irrespective of religious affiliation, has also faced significant political and religious persecution. The 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Egypt highlighted credible reports of arbitrary or unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, and torture affecting various segments of society.⁵⁰

Online spaces, particularly social media, provide platforms for second-generation North American Copts to engage with these narratives selectively. Many focus on instances of violence and discrimination primarily when these events reinforce their identity, often sharing such stories digitally to raise awareness. The church also plays a crucial role in maintaining their religious identity as Orthodox Christians, though their political engagement with the plight of Copts in Egypt may be less pronounced online.

Language and historical distance further complicate identity formation, particularly in the digital realm. Many second-generation Copts are less familiar with Arabic and have a more mediated relationship to Egypt's history of sectarian violence, which they did not experience directly and did not grow up navigating in everyday life, unlike their parents. As the first generation, with vivid memories of these traumas, diminishes in number, the younger generation struggles to fully grasp the suffering endured by earlier generations. This creates a gap in digital advocacy efforts, where historical events are less frequently discussed or shared.

Despite this historical gap, the second generation has shown a strong reaction to recent acts of sectarian violence, particularly following ISIS attacks on Copts in Libya in 2016. Many Coptic youth took visible online actions, such as changing their Facebook profile pictures to the Arabic letter "nūn" (ن), a symbol used by ISIS to mark Christian homes. Others wore "Nation of the Cross" clothing in solidarity, amplifying their collective voice digitally. As one second-generation scholar, 22I, noted, "We have endured over 2,000 years of martyrdom and persecution. If anything, these events help reinforce and strengthen my identity and faith". This stresses the power of digital platforms in mobilizing support during critical moments.⁵¹

However, second-generation Copts generally exhibit a lower level of wariness toward other religions compared to the first generation. According to 5D, a second-generation activist, the more conservative nature of many Coptic organizations in North America does not appeal as strongly to younger, more liberal Copts. As a result, many tend to engage more with digital content addressing issues such as homelessness, shelters, and drug abuse, causes that resonate with their local communities rather than distant political struggles.⁵²

This generational divide presents a challenge for digital advocacy, as maintaining a collective identity across generations becomes increasingly difficult in the face of differing perspectives, priorities, and levels

⁴⁸ "Egypt: Release Nine Coptic Christians Detained for Attempting to Rebuild Church," Amnesty International (March 2022), accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mmr42yt>

⁴⁹ 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt, U.S. Department of State, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/27t3jvxa>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ 22I, Coptic scholar at Queen's University, Zoom interview, Toronto, September 2023.

⁵² 5D.

of engagement with the Coptic plight. Online platforms, while crucial for raising awareness, must bridge these gaps to sustain a unified Coptic advocacy movement across generations.

5. Digital Activism and Disagreements Among Coptic Advocates

A significant factor influencing the pattern of digital activism within the Coptic diaspora is the internal disagreements regarding how to reframe and present their claims. Activists strategically assign frames to relevant events to induce a shared consciousness for collective action.⁵³ While the majority of Copts agree on the importance of advocating for religious freedom in Egypt, they hold differing views on several critical issues: 1) how Coptic activists should frame their claims, particularly the dilemma of advocating for equal citizenship versus emphasizing minority rights; 2) the extent to which foreign governments should intervene in Egyptian politics; and 3) the overall strategy and vision for engaging with the Egyptian government. These differing perspectives represent a substantial source of disagreement among Coptic activists and intellectuals in the diaspora, often playing out in online discussions and campaigns.

Occasionally, diaspora involvement can reignite conflicts, with well-meaning international engagement sometimes leading to misdirected approaches that exacerbate tensions. For example, several organizations that promoted aggressive and anti-Islamic stances failed to gain significant support from the Coptic diaspora or the broader Coptic community in Egypt.⁵⁴ Ironically, their activities attracted considerable online media attention, which ultimately discredited other Coptic organizations. Notably, the National American Coptic Assembly, established in 2009, was criticized for its unrealistic perspectives and vague mission. This organization inadvertently provided a platform for extremist elements within the diaspora to propagate Islamophobic rhetoric. As a result, the National American Coptic Assembly and similar groups were generally unwelcome among the broader Coptic population, as they fragmented the support base rather than fostering unity in defence of a common cause.

While digital activism has provided the Coptic diaspora with opportunities for mobilization and advocacy, it has also contributed to tensions within and beyond diaspora communities. Digital spaces are not only sites of solidarity but also arenas of ideological conflict, where different factions within diasporic groups promote diverging narratives. In some cases, individual actors have used digital platforms to engage in more contentious forms of activism that exacerbate interreligious and interethnic tensions. One notable example is Nakoula Basseley, an Egyptian-American Copt who produced *Innocence of Muslims*, a controversial and inflammatory film that sparked protests across the Muslim world. His subsequent association with far-right Christian figures further fuelled these divisions, illustrating how digital activism can be co-opted by extremist actors to serve exclusionary and confrontational agendas.⁵⁵ Ahmed Al-Rawi documents similar digital tensions, demonstrating how online platforms often become battlegrounds for competing political and religious ideologies.⁵⁶ These instances show the need for a more critical examination of how digital advocacy, while often framed as a tool for empowerment, can also generate backlash, deepen societal cleavages, and complicate diaspora activism by reinforcing polarized discourses.

⁵³ Doowan Lee, "Resistance Dynamics and Social Movement Theory: Conditions, Mechanisms, and Effects," *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2017), pp. 42-63; Amanda Pullum, "Social Movement Theory and the Modern Day Tea Party," *Sociology Compass*, vol. 8, no. 12 (2014), pp. 1377-1387; Marie-Claude Tremblay, "Can We Build on Social Movement Theories to Develop and Improve Community-Based Participatory Research? A Framework Synthesis Review," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 59, nos. 3-4 (2017), pp. 333-362.

⁵⁴ Yvonne Haddad, "Good Copt, Bad Copt: Competing Narratives on Coptic Identity in Egypt and the United States," *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2013), pp. 208-232.

⁵⁵ "Details Emerge on 'Innocence of Muslims' Filmmaker," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14/9/2012, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mryfshna>

⁵⁶ Ahmed Al-Rawi, *Islam on YouTube: Online Debates, Protests, and Extremism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

In contrast, some Coptic organizations that emerged in the 2000s, such as the Coptic Assembly of America, Coptic Solidarity, the International Coptic Union, and the Canadian Coptic Foundation, have been effective in advocating for the Coptic community. Coptic Solidarity stands out as one of the most prominent human rights organizations for Copts in North America. To advocate for the rights of Copts, Coptic Solidarity has organized over 20 demonstrations in front of the White House, serving as a staunch defender of their cause. Additionally, Coptic Solidarity has spearheaded numerous international online petition campaigns focusing on critical issues such as proportional representation for the Coptic community, amending Article Two of the Egyptian constitution, combating Islamist extremists and terrorist organizations, and ending the abduction of Coptic girls.

Over the past decade, Coptic Solidarity has focused extensively on advocating for Coptic women and underage girls trafficked or kidnapped, disseminating critical information through social media outlets. Their digital presence has amplified their activism, enabling them to reach a broader audience. For instance, on 22 July 2011, Hany Guirguis, now the president of Coptic Solidarity, testified during a Congressional hearing titled “Minority at Risk: Coptic Christians in Egypt”. This hearing, broadcast on C-SPAN, highlighted that these crimes meet the United Nations’ definitions of trafficking and align with both Egyptian and US protocols, underscoring the importance of digital advocacy in shaping international awareness and policy.⁵⁷

Conclusion

This study has examined how the Coptic e-diaspora in North America utilizes digital platforms to mobilize political agency, advocate for human rights, and maintain cultural and religious identity. Through social media, Coptic advocacy organizations have created transnational networks that amplify their voices, enhance visibility, and engage with global political structures. However, the findings illustrate that while digital technologies provide opportunities for mobilization, they also introduce significant challenges, including misinformation, censorship, cyber surveillance, and the risk of transnational repression.

As demonstrated in the experiences shared by respondents, these challenges have tangible consequences for Coptic activists. For instance, 7G, a lawyer and activist, emphasized that “the Egyptian government is resistant to any external influence on how Copts’ issues are addressed, especially when those advocating for them live abroad”.⁵⁸ Similarly, 13R, an executive member of Coptic Solidarity, noted that government pressure has significantly stifled diaspora mobilization efforts, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship.⁵⁹ The pervasive risk of retaliation is further evidenced by the experience of 11M, a politician and activist, who hesitated to share his poetry about sectarian violence, fearing repercussions that could jeopardize his ability to return to Egypt.⁶⁰ These accounts underscore how digital activism, while offering new tools for advocacy, also exposes activists to significant threats.

Furthermore, this study highlights the generational divide in digital advocacy, with second-generation Copts often engaging selectively with narratives of trauma and persecution. While first-generation Copts have firsthand experiences of marginalization in Egypt, younger Copts rely primarily on transgenerational transmission of memory and digital representations. This difference influences their approach to activism, as reflected in the testimony of 22I, a second-generation scholar, who stated, “We have endured over 2,000 years of martyrdom and persecution. If anything, these events help reinforce and strengthen my identity and faith”.⁶¹ However, this perspective contrasts with those of younger activists like 5D, who noted that

⁵⁷ “*Jihad of the Womb: Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt*,” *Coptic Solidarity*, 10/9/2020, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/5ctmbw2z>

⁵⁸ 7G.

⁵⁹ 13R.

⁶⁰ 11M.

⁶¹ 22I.

“many second-generation Copts do not connect as strongly with traditional advocacy organizations, as this generation’s priorities often focus on broader social issues rather than specific Coptic grievances”.⁶² This generational shift complicates efforts to maintain a unified advocacy movement across different age groups.

Despite these obstacles, the study finds that Coptic advocacy organizations continue to adapt to the evolving digital landscape. Groups such as Coptic Solidarity have demonstrated resilience by leveraging international platforms to bring Coptic issues to global attention. Their advocacy, including congressional testimonies and international petition campaigns, has been instrumental in pressuring policymakers to address the systemic discrimination faced by Copts in Egypt. However, their effectiveness is increasingly challenged by digital censorship, misinformation, and shifting priorities within the diaspora.

To navigate these challenges, Coptic advocacy groups have adopted strategic measures such as diversifying their online presence, utilizing secure communication tools, and tailoring their messaging for different political and cultural contexts. These adaptations allow them to bypass corporate censorship, mitigate state surveillance risks, and ensure their narratives reach wider audiences. Additionally, the rise of independent digital fundraising has enabled Coptic organizations to operate with greater financial autonomy, reducing dependence on traditional institutions that may seek to control their messaging.

More broadly, the experiences of the Coptic e-diaspora illustrate how marginalized communities leverage digital technologies for both resistance and survival. As digital activism continues to evolve, the Coptic case offers insights into the resilience of diasporic advocacy movements in the face of state repression and algorithmic restrictions. Ultimately, while digital platforms provide new avenues for engagement, their potential is constrained by broader political realities, requiring constant adaptation and innovation. Moving forward, the sustainability of Coptic digital advocacy will depend on its ability to balance visibility with security, maintain generational engagement, and develop strategies that counteract both state repression and corporate control.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study primarily focuses on the challenges of online activism within the Coptic community, specifically examining issues such as surveillance, self-censorship, and other obstacles to digital engagement. Consequently, it does not provide a comprehensive review of the history of Copts in Egypt or their inter-communal relations with Muslims. While aspects like origins, culture, religion, language, heritage, and historical challenges faced by the Coptic community are essential, they are not the central focus of this research. Moreover, the study does not extensively cover the migration history of Copts or the formation of the Coptic diaspora as a transnational group. Instead, it offers insights into the social, cultural, and political motivations behind Coptic immigration to North America, highlighting early activism and mobilization efforts that have shaped contemporary digital advocacy.

In addition to these limitations, the concept of “digital diaspora” faces several challenges and paradoxes. First, the term lacks a clear definition, despite various interpretations and emerging terms like “e-diaspora” and “net-diaspora”. This ambiguity can oversimplify or merge diverse practices and groups, thereby diminishing its effectiveness in addressing injustices and amplifying marginalized voices. Furthermore, there is no established methodology for identifying and analysing digital diasporas, and current research often overlooks the different motivations and experiences of diaspora communities across the Global South and North, as well as their internal diversity. To address these issues, this research suggests that digital diasporas should be viewed as dynamic constellations rather than fixed entities, acknowledging

⁶² 5D.

their evolving nature and the complex interplay of identity, communication, and belonging. This approach integrates the emotional and affective dimensions of digital interactions, recognizing that the digital and physical worlds are interconnected and that emotions play a crucial role in shaping diasporic experiences. By considering these factors, researchers can better understand how digital technologies transform migration experiences, community formation, and identity.

On the other hand, the study of the Coptic e-diaspora and its role in mobilization has significant implications for future research that can extend to the broader field of diaspora studies and transnationalism. First, the dynamics of transnational activism observed within the Coptic e-diaspora can be applied to other diaspora communities. Researchers can investigate how various diaspora groups use social media to advocate for political, social, or cultural causes in their home countries and explore the effectiveness of these efforts. Additionally, comparing digital identities across different diaspora groups can reveal both commonalities and differences, prompting exploration of how digital identities influence the integration and preservation of cultural heritage within various diaspora communities.

Second, the study's identification of challenges and drawbacks of excessive digital engagement can inform research on how various diaspora communities mitigate or address issues like online harassment, misinformation, and echo chambers. This knowledge can lead to better strategies for promoting positive online interactions. Third, long-term research tracking the evolution of diaspora engagement through social media can provide insights into changing transnational dynamics over time, helping researchers identify trends and adapt their methodologies accordingly. Fourth, the study's policy implications regarding social media use can be extended to transnational contexts in general. Policymakers and organizations can consider how to leverage or regulate digital platforms for transnational cooperation, advocacy, and humanitarian efforts. Lastly, ethical considerations surrounding social media use in diaspora studies can be expanded to the broader field of transnationalism. Researchers and practitioners must grapple with issues related to privacy, data security, information dissemination, and responsible digital engagement in transnational initiatives.

Looking ahead, the integration of emerging technologies such as AI and virtual reality into digital engagement strategies offers both opportunities and challenges. These technologies could enhance advocacy efforts through innovative means of connection and storytelling but will also introduce new privacy and security concerns. Staying informed and adaptable will be crucial for Coptic advocacy organizations as they continue to navigate the evolving digital landscape.

Appendix: Selected Interview Questions

- How does your organization utilize social media and digital platforms to engage with the Coptic community and broader audiences? What are your primary goals (for example, advocacy, awareness, fundraising, community building)?
- What are the most significant challenges your organization faces when using digital platforms for advocacy and mobilization? Have these challenges evolved over time?
- How do concerns about government or corporate surveillance affect your organization's digital strategy? Have you experienced instances of monitoring, censorship, or other forms of control over your content?
- How do you tailor your messaging to engage different audiences (Coptic and non-Coptic)? Can you provide examples of successful campaigns or initiatives that were enabled by digital tools?
- How do political and social contexts, both in Egypt and the diaspora host countries, influence your organization's digital advocacy strategies? Have these contexts led to changes in your online activities?

- In what ways do you believe the use of digital media has influenced the Coptic community's sense of identity, both at an individual and collective level? Do you see this impact as strengthening or diluting community ties?
- How frequently do you engage with Coptic advocacy organizations online? Which platforms do you find most effective, and why?
- What barriers prevent you from engaging more actively with Coptic advocacy groups online? How could these barriers be addressed by the organizations themselves?
- Can you provide specific examples where privacy or surveillance concerns impacted your or your organization's digital activities?
- How do you see the future of digital engagement for the Coptic community evolving in response to these challenges?

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