Short-Form Video for Social Justice

The audience, the evidence, and pathway forward



ual: ako storytelling institute

COUNTERPOINTS.

Contents

3 How to read this report
4 Useful terms
5 Executive summary
6 A word on methodology

PART 1

The pressure of staying informed

11 Everyday life inside the feed
13 Affective intensity and emotional load
14 Familiar formats as emotional entry points
15 Low-visibility participation
17 A gateway, not a full journey
19 What this means for the rest of the report

PART 2

The rules of the game: How short-form video actually works

21 From social networks to algorithmic publics
22 Different platforms, different social worlds
24 The narrative language of short-form video
26 Platform moderation and the politics of trust

PART 3

Social media mapping: From community to action

28 Social justice advocacy videos on social media
30 The four archetypes of social justice videos
34 How should social justice creators use platforms differently
37 What drives social justice engagement
39 What the far-right/conservative comparison reveals

PART 4

From attention to action: A practical framework for social justice storytelling

42 What the evidence tells us
43 Story first: Structures that work
45 Designing the first three seconds
46 Community before mobilisation
47 Platform strategy: building the audience journey
48 Measuring what matters
49 Ethics, care and responsibility

PART 5

Conclusion: Small actions, big togetherness

51 The shift that the evidence asks for

Open questions and invitations to peers

53 What the report could not reach

54 Acknowledgements
55 Suggested readings

How to read this report

This research report is written for people who want to make a difference.

It is meant for the creative types who make short-form video in service of social justice causes: independent creators keen to address the problems they see in the world, leads in advocacy organisations designing communication campaigns, and the funders who support them. It is also written for researchers, students, and educators who want to understand contemporary digital media, social movements and youth audiences.

In this spirit, the report is designed to be easily approachable: something to be worked with, something useful. For this reason, while based on rigorous empirical research, the text is deliberately lacking excessive methodological detail, statistics, and jargon. The entire report is thus meant to be read in one sitting, or through perusing the individual sections that interest you, the reader. Each part has also an 'in this chapter you'll find' section.

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Useful terms

User-Generated Content (UGC)

Content created and publicly shared by ordinary platform users rather than professional media producers. It generally involves some creative effort and is produced outside established professional routines; examples include videos, posts, photographs, comments, reviews and remixes.

OECD. (2007). Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking. OECD Publishing. The OECD definition is also summarised by Brake. (OUP Academic)

Cognitive-dissonance storytelling

A working term for storytelling that introduces politically or socially challenging ideas through familiar, non-political formats—such as lifestyle, humour, beauty, relationships or everyday routines. The contrast between the comfortable format and difficult message creates productive tension that may prompt audiences to reconsider existing assumptions.

Festinger, L. (1957). A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. Stanford University Press.

Algorithmic folk theories

Informal, experience-based and often collectively-shared explanations of how a platform's algorithms work—for example, beliefs about what increases reach, triggers suppression or causes "shadow banning." These theories are developed through observation, trial and error and exchanges with other users, but may be incomplete or inaccurate.

Karizat, N., Delmonaco, D., Eslami, M., & Andalibi, N. (2021). "Algorithmic Folk Theories and Identity: How TikTok Users Co-Produce Knowledge of Identity and Engage in Algorithmic Resistance." Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 5(CSCW2), 1–44. (ACM Digital Library)

Vanity metrics

Easily visible measures—such as raw views, impressions, followers or likes—that can make performance appear impressive but provide limited evidence of meaningful engagement, learning, conversion or behavioural impact. They become "vanity" metrics when they are reported without a clear relationship to strategic objectives or actionable decisions.

Tableau. "Vanity Metrics: Definition and How to Identify Them." (tableau.com)

High-conversion blueprint

A practitioner-defined storytelling structure designed to retain attention and move viewers toward a desired action. It typically places a strong hook, tension, relevance or promised benefit in the opening seconds, followed by a concise narrative progression and a clear payoff or call to action.

KC, A. (2025, October 19). Short-Form Video Virality: Psychology, Dopamine & Attention. Gurkha Technology. [Link]

Algorithmic public

A public or audience that is partly assembled, sorted and made visible by platform algorithms rather than only through pre-existing social relationships. What members see, who encounters the content and how the audience is represented through clicks and dashboards are shaped by algorithmic selection and aggregation.

Christin, A. (2020). Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms. Princeton University Press, particularly "The Multiple Meanings of Clicks: Journalists and Their Algorithmic Publics." (OUP Academic)

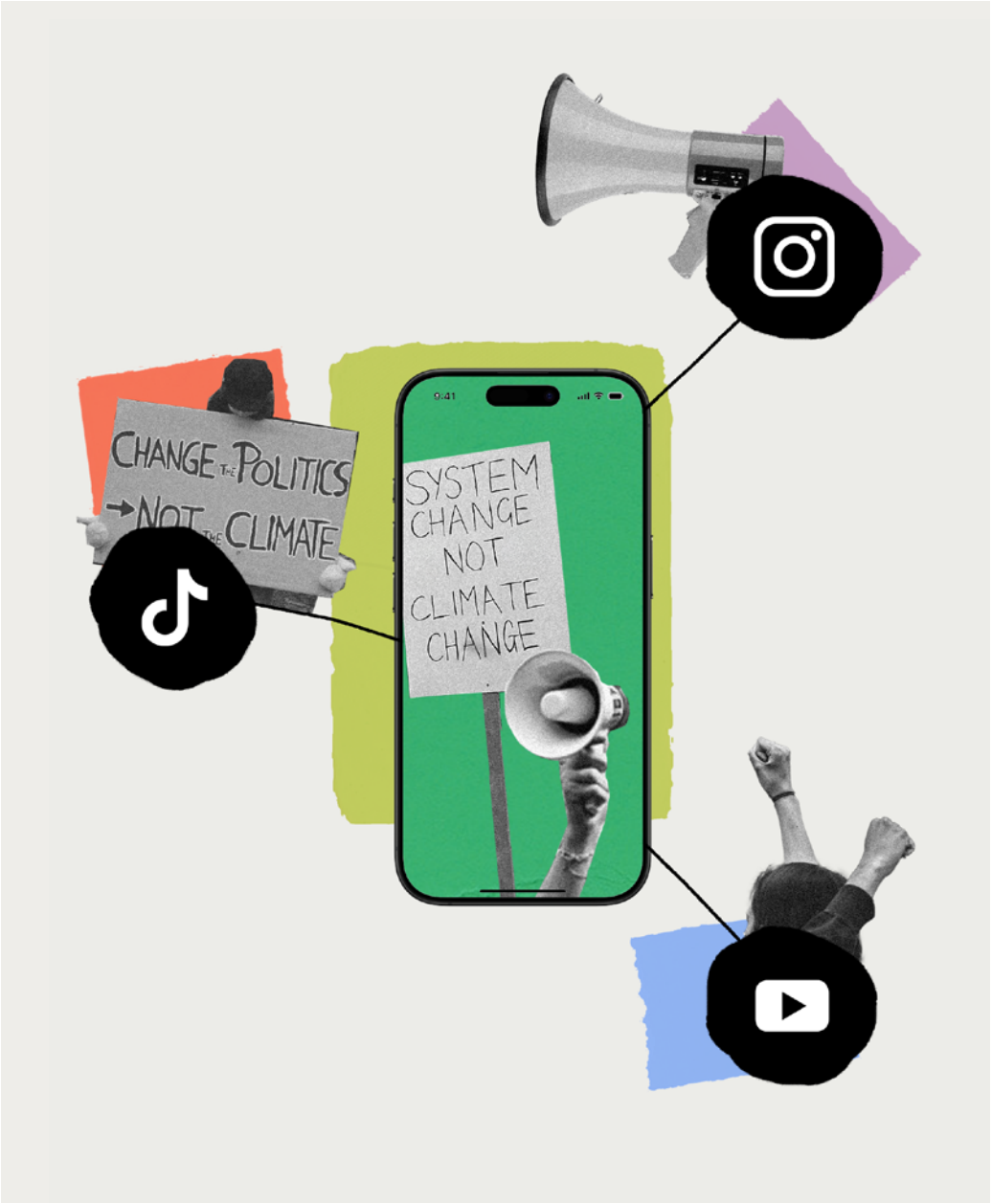
Transmedia strategy

A coordinated communication strategy in which different parts of a larger story or message are distributed across multiple media and platforms. Each channel makes a distinct contribution to the overall narrative rather than simply reproducing the same content in several places.

Jenkins, H. (2007). "Transmedia Storytelling 101." Confessions of an Aca-Fan. (Henry Jenkins)

Executive summary

Over the past five years, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have drastically shaped how audiences discover issues, experience political content and engage with social movements.



For many young people, short-form video is the first — and sometimes the only — place they encounter a cause.

It plays a key role in creating meaningful connections for creators and organisations passionate about social justice causes. At the same time, creators have become increasingly skilled at producing emotionally resonant, visually compelling and highly shareable content in these new digital ecosystems. Building on the findings of our research, this report asks what stories on social justice resonate with large audiences, and how to communicate these issues in a better and more impactful way.

Executive Summary

This executive summary outlines the key findings of the research:

Firstly, advocacy videos rarely mobilise audiences directly. Only about a quarter of the videos analysed contain a clear call to action. Instead, roughly three-quarters pair strong storytelling structures with weak or absent suggestions on what to do next. This, however, is not a failure. Audiences rarely jump from video to action. Instead, they can be led to care about an issue through different pathways to action in a dynamic and changing online ecosystem where short-form video platforms have one key role. Research shows that what explains whether a video moves people to action, or not, is whether the video is able to build a sense of shared community and use strong storytelling to support specific calls to action.

Secondly, assumptions about what participation is on social media are changing. Young people do passionately care about social justice issues. At the same time, our research shows that they also experience their feeds as emotionally overloaded and increasingly toxic, making it socially risky to show active support. Rather than engaging publicly, many support causes more quietly: they save videos, share content with friends (online and offline), research issues independently, and take conversations to private channels and to real-world interactions. These quieter and lower-visibility forms of participation also matter but they can often slip past measurements that only prioritise public engagement. Accounting for these more ambient forms of supportive action is becoming crucial for understanding, and designing, for impact and engagement in contemporary digital environments.

Thirdly, different social media platforms provide different types of pathways for social justice mobilisation. Our research shows that TikTok tends to be the most effective for emotional discovery and re-storying existing narratives. Instagram tends to support more community-building and mobilisation. YouTube provides space for deeper learning and sustained engagement. While these differences identified by our research should be approached more as tendencies rather than prescriptive guidelines, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of popular platforms play a strategic role in effective social justice storytelling. Viral discovery works best on TikTok. Fostering a community works best on Instagram. Providing depth works best on YouTube. For social justice creators and organisations, understanding such platform-specific strategies can offer an integrated ecosystem for discovery and learning, community building and collective action.

In practical terms, what this also means is that there is no single storytelling best practice that can help improve the reach and impact of social justice videos. What this report provides instead is a set of resources that creators and organisations can combine and use to account for the different audiences, political ideologies, creator profiles and platform strategies, underlying the diverse forms of social justice storytelling.

Building on the findings of our research, we identify **four stages of engagement** in successful social media storytelling:

1. CAPTURING ATTENTION

Produce attention-grabbing narratives that cut through emotionally saturated social media feeds (i.e., stop the scroll) with strong hooks, familiar formats and reframing.

2. BUILDING COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

Make people feel they are part of a community. This is the groundwork everything else rests on, and the work most advocacy videos are doing.

3. EARNING TRUST

Create trust through authentic and personal voices rather than institutional instructions.

4. TARGETED MOBILISATION

Finally, develop specific, time-bound calls to action once the audiences are ready to act. These actions can also take many forms depending on the needs and capacities of the audiences, from simply educating audiences more about a topic, to signing online petitions, fundraising, and showing up at a street protest.

Executive summary

So what should creators and organisations do to be more effective? We propose the following four guiding principles to work with when designing campaigns:

1

Work with the emotional burdens of users, do not add to it

The research findings suggest that social media users, and especially young users, are becoming emotionally exhausted on social media and especially with the growing toxicity of conversations. The most effective advocacy content should handle this emotional exhaustion with care, not more weight and pressure to it.

2

Design campaigns for invisible support

The research findings suggest that social justice campaigners should design campaigns also for more ambient and harder-to-measure support. This can include content built for private sharing and clear directions for low-visibility supportive action. For many audiences this can be a route to participation and not only secondary support.

3

Wrap heavy content in familiar formats

The research findings suggest that familiar formats which function as emotional buffers let audiences engage with difficult subjects without being overwhelmed by it. These can include the use of lifestyle formats, trending audio, and cognitive-dissonance pairings to help engage with audiences.

4

Match the strategy to the platform

The research findings suggest that TikTok, Instagram and YouTube are not interchangeable as platforms but tend to play different roles in the audience journey. Rather than posting identical content everywhere, creators and organisations should strategically segment their content platforms: opening on TikTok, building community and action on Instagram, and deepening engagement on YouTube.

The report develops each of its findings, presents the evidence behind them, and suggests practical implications for the everyday work of effective social justice communication.

A word on methodology

The findings of this report draw on three different phases of research, each designed to address different perspectives to understanding contemporary short-form videos in social justice advocacy.

Literature review

The first part of the research, carried out in late 2025, mapped the state-of-the-art in what is known about the effective use of short-form video for sociopolitical communication. This phase drew on a wide range of academic research, industry reports, and creator-facing toolkits across communications, media studies, and social justice movement research. It also outlined the different narrative models that have been developed to catalyse effective social justice communication, such as the ABT, SUCCESS, the High-Conversion Blueprint, Remix and UGC theories in the literature. The rest of the research built on these findings.

A social media mapping study

The second part of the research, carried out in early 2026, empirically mapped out the use of short-form videos by social justice creators. Through a mixed method approach, it looked at the activity of 88 social justice actors and analysed 2,757 advocacy videos published by them across three platforms: TikTok (1,174 videos), Instagram (1,009), and YouTube (574). The actors were also grouped into different categories ranging from Human Rights and Refugees/Migration through Environment/Climate and Anti-Racism to a comparative Far-Right sample. Each of the videos, their visual content, their audio/speech transcriptions, were computationally analysed against more than thirty content dimensions, including hook effectiveness, narrative structure, call-to-action clarity, community building, re-storying, and collective-action presence. These were then compared against engagement metrics and comments in the selected videos.

A student diary exercise

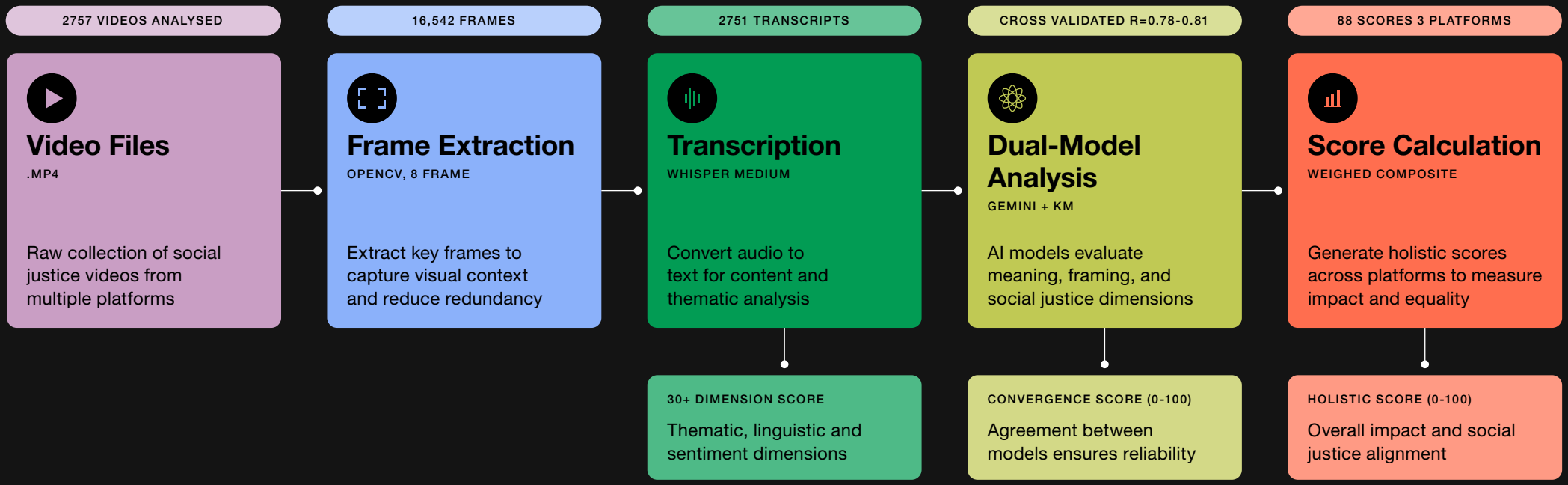
The third part, conducted in early 2026, asked six students in the United Kingdom to keep a structured viewing of diaries relating to the impression and engagement with short-form social justice videos. As part of these diaries, we organised group discussions where the participants reflected on the videos they encountered, the formats that affected them, the type of content they engaged with (publicly or privately), and how they felt about their daily feeds. These diaries were also interwoven into the social media mapping study by asking the users to look at different video segments in their feeds based on the findings of our research.

These diaries provided an experiential and affective layer to the research that our more large-scale social media mapping work could not achieve. The participants' words appear throughout this report, with their consent. It is also good not to note that this diary cohort was kept deliberately small and they should not be seen as a representative sample of users across a vast range of content, platforms and accounts. The deep engagement with the six participants during the research was used to illuminate the findings alongside the literature and the large-scale data, which all point in the same direction and integrated findings.

FIGURE 1 The five-stage analysis pipeline used for the social media mapping study

Social justice videos analysis pipeline

From raw videos to holistic insight: measuring impact, content, and meaning



PURPOSE TO UNDERSTAND HOW SOCIAL JUSTICE VIDEOS COMMUNICATE, RESONATE AND CREATE IMPACT TRANSPARENCY | ACCOUNTABILITY | JUSTICE

Part 1

The pressure of staying informed



In this chapter you will find:

- Why short-form video has become an everyday gateway into social justice issues.
- Why social justice content often reaches audiences inside emotionally dense feeds.
- Why familiar formats — humour, trends, captions, creator commentary — matter.
- Why visible engagement is only one part of participation.
- Why short-form video should be treated as a doorway into deeper learning and action.

Everyday life inside the feed

Short-form video has changed how people encounter public issues online.

Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts do not rely only on follower networks. They also use recommendation systems that organise visibility around interests, behaviour, watch time, and predicted engagement (Gerbaudo, 2024; Kang & Lou, 2022). This means that a social justice video can reach people who were not actively looking for it.

This matters for advocacy. Short-form video can make an issue visible quickly: through a creator's explanation, a stitched reaction, a protest clip, a trending sound, a meme, or a first-person testimony. Research on TikTok's communicative forms shows that the platform's language is built around brevity, informality, sound, captions, remixing, and everyday creator performance (Schellewald, 2021, 2023). These formats can make complex issues feel more immediate and accessible.

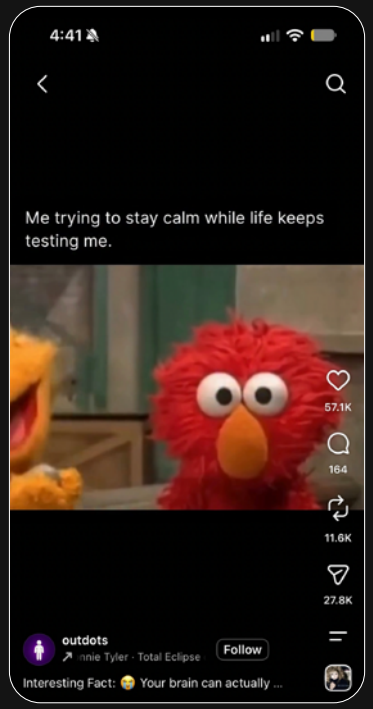
But this encounter rarely happens in a calm or linear information environment. Social justice content appears inside the same scroll as humour, lifestyle videos, gaming, celebrity clips, fashion, food, adverts, and personal updates. The feed moves quickly between emotional registers: fear and entertainment, outrage and intimacy, explanation and speculation, urgency and distraction.

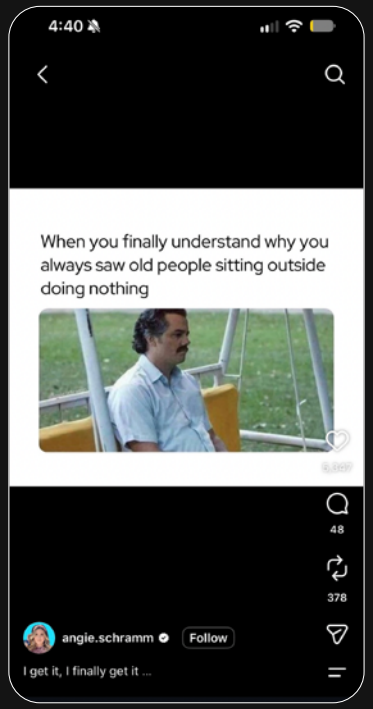
The student diary exercise, which we conducted for this study and are using for illustrative purposes in this chapter, does not establish how all young audiences behave. Instead, it shows what these wider patterns can feel like inside actual feeds. Participants often encountered social justice content while moving through ordinary streams of entertainment and everyday content. One participant described her feed as moving between "meme videos," "current news," "social justice," "influencer" content, and adverts. Another noticed that after several days of the diary, her feed had a larger "influx of news sources," though "not all trusted."

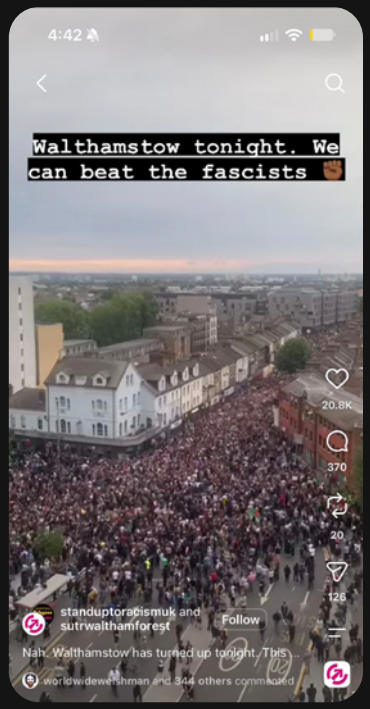
This is why the feed matters and should be treated as more than a distribution channel. It is the emotional setting in which advocacy content is received. A video about war, climate collapse, gender-based violence, or migration may be powerful on its own. But audiences often meet it in the middle of a mixed scroll, surrounded by lighter, faster, funnier, and maore disposable content. That context shapes how much attention, trust, and emotional capacity they can bring to it.

FIGURE 2 The mixed rhythm of the short-form video feed: social justice, humour, lifestyle, crisis, news, and distraction appearing in the same scroll.









Likes

Something human it breaks the heart.

Saves

Saves it. Maybe she'll show it in her class group chat.

Skips

She's emotionally exhausted. Can't take in more.

15 minutes

15 minutes of scrolling. Too much. The same pain in different forms.

Affective intensity and emotional load

Short-form video is not a neutral information format. It is fast, visual, personal, and affective. Studies of TikTok activism and political content show that emotion, humour, identity, and personal relevance are central to how videos attract attention and circulate (Brown et al., 2024; Hautea et al., 2021). Research on short-video consumption also points to the emotional effects of polarised or highly charged content (Ye et al., 2024).

This creates a challenge for social justice communication. The same features that help a video travel — urgency, emotional force, shock, anger, sadness, humour — can also increase the emotional burden on audiences. Literature on TikTok, mental health, and algorithmic mood environments similarly warns that highly personalised feeds can intensify emotional exposure, especially when sensitive or identity-linked content appears repeatedly (Avella, 2023; Basch et al., 2022; Karasavva et al., 2025).

The diary exercise echoed this tension. Participants often described caring about the issues they saw, but also feeling guilt, sadness, anger, helplessness, or exhaustion. One student's reflection on a video about children killed in Iran captures the moral weight that short-form video can place on a viewer in just a few seconds:

> **"I felt guilty, I am currently 20 years old and having an education, while Iranian elementary school children died who could have had a future ahead of them."**
>
> STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

The point is not that all viewers respond this way. The point is that social justice content often reaches audiences who are already trying to process multiple crises, across multiple places, in rapid succession. For some viewers, staying informed becomes emotionally tied to guilt, responsibility, and comparison: What do I have? What do others not have? What should I be doing?

This suggests an important shift for creators. The question is not only, "How do we make people care?" In many cases, audiences already care. The harder question is, "How do we engage people who care, but feel emotionally overloaded?" Social justice content therefore needs to provide orientation, not only urgency: a clearer explanation, a manageable next step, a reason to feel part of something, or a way to continue learning without being left alone with distress.

→ **In many cases, audiences already care. The harder question is, "How do we engage people who care, but feel emotionally overloaded?"**

Familiar formats as emotional entry points

Platform-native formats are not just aesthetic choices. Humour, memes, trending audio, captions, Duets, Stitches, remixing, and informal creator commentary are part of the communicative grammar of short-form video (Schellewald, 2021, 2023). They help audiences recognise what kind of content they are watching and decide quickly whether to stay with it.

For social justice communication, familiar formats can do important work. Research on climate and political TikToks shows that memetic and affective design can make difficult issues more shareable and emotionally graspable (Brown et al., 2024; Hautea et al., 2021). The literature review also identifies remixing, User-Generated Content (UGC), trends, and platform-native storytelling as important tools for community virality and audience participation.

The diaries bring this to life in practical terms. Participants often stopped because a video used a familiar sound, bold subtitles, a recognisable person, a meme format, or a trend. These were not minor design details. They shaped whether a difficult issue felt accessible enough to watch.

> **"The visual style also made me stop scrolling because there were big bold subtitles... which is always more helpful since English is not my first language."**
>
> STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

Captions, in this sense, do more than support accessibility. They also help make fast-moving content legible, especially when people are scrolling without sound, watching in public, or trying to follow complex information quickly.

Trending audio worked in a similar way. Familiar music or sounds can make a difficult video feel culturally recognisable, while also intensifying its emotional effect.

> **"The trending audio 'when I grow up' from the Matilda musical definitely amplified the emotional impact... it's no longer 'when' but 'if I grow up' for the children."**
>
> STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

This is the key point: familiar formats can open the door, but they cannot carry the whole advocacy journey. Humour, trends, subtitles, creator-led commentary, and lifestyle wrappers can make difficult topics easier to enter. But without explanation, trust, or a meaningful next step, they can leave audiences moved but unsure what to do.

FIGURE 3 What familiar formats can and cannot do in social justice short-form video.

Can help

- ✓ Stop the scroll
- ✓ Make difficult issues approachable
- ✓ Create recognition and emotional entry
- ✓ Support sharing and remixing

Cannot replace

- ⊘ Clear explanation
- ⊘ Credible evidence
- ⊘ Trust-building
- ⊘ A meaningful next step

Low-visibility participation

Most platforms make public engagement easy to count: views, likes, comments, shares, reposts, and follower growth. But these metrics do not capture the full range of sociopolitical action online. Wilf and Wray-Lake's Youth Sociopolitical Action Scale for Social Media identifies broader forms of participation, including re-storying, community-building, and collective action (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2023). The literature review therefore argues that impact measurement should include higher-value behaviours such as saves, shares, click-throughs, meaningful comments, community-building, and off-platform action.

This matters because public engagement can feel risky. Research on TikTok users' algorithmic awareness and platform "folk theories" shows that users actively think about visibility, control, suppression, and the consequences of interacting with content (Issar, 2023; Jones, 2023; Klug et al., 2021; Savolainen, 2022). In social justice contexts, visible engagement can also invite conflict, misunderstanding, or unwanted attention.

The diary exercise illustrated this clearly. Participants often watched, liked, saved, checked comments, shared privately, or looked up more information, while avoiding public comment. Lal (a student diary participant) explained this not as indifference, but as caution:

"I did not choose to actively engage with it because of how sensitive societal topics can be... I feel like people over exploit what you are trying to say and the intended meaning of that comment, the meaning gets lost along the way."

STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

These behaviours should not be dismissed as apathy. They are better understood as low-visibility participation. For some audiences, especially around sensitive or polarised topics, quieter forms of engagement may be the safest or most sustainable way to participate.

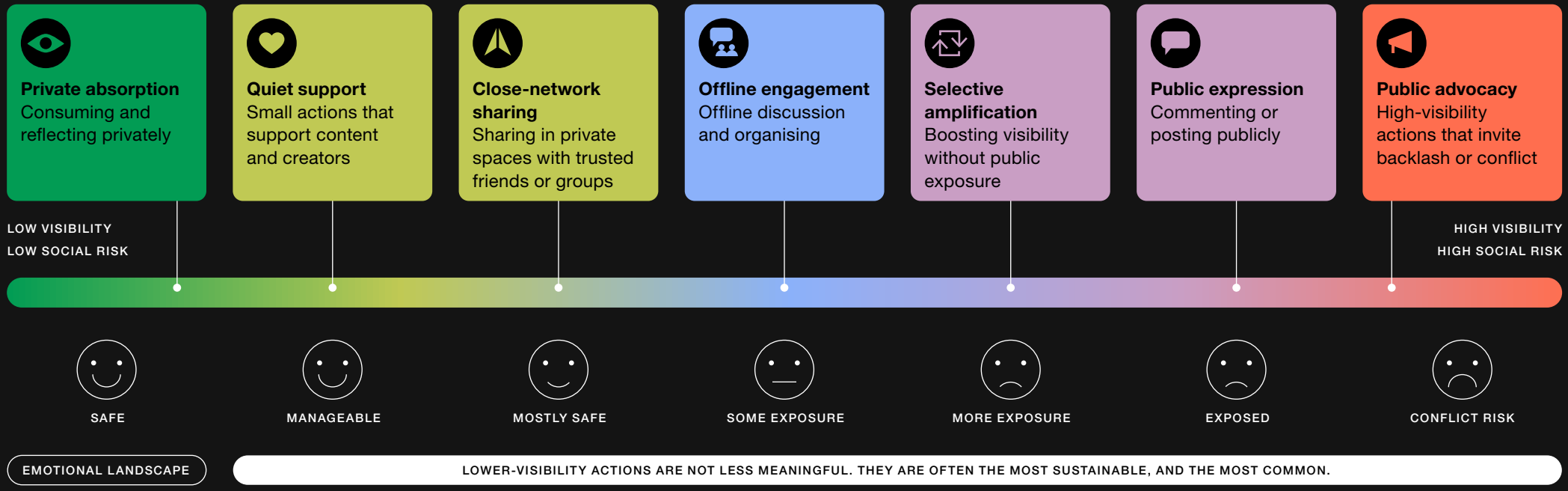
For creators and organisations, this means designing beyond the visible metric. A private share, a save, a link click, a quiet follow, a conversation with a friend, or a later search for more information may all be meaningful. The practical question is not only, "How many people publicly engaged?" It is also, "What kinds of participation did this content make possible? And how can we account for all types of participation"

→ **Research on TikTok users' algorithmic awareness and platform "folk theories" shows that users actively think about visibility, control, suppression, and the consequences of interacting with content.**

FIGURE 4 A social risk gradient for online participation. Lower-visibility actions are not weaker actions; they may be the forms of participation audiences feel safest taking.

The social risk gradient

Young users are not absent. They are navigating social exposure, emotional safety, and the potential costs of being seen.



A gateway, not a full journey

Short-form video is strongest as an entry point. It can introduce an issue, create emotional recognition, and make audiences curious enough to keep learning. But the literature review is clear that short-form video is not well suited to carrying the full burden of social movement communication on its own. It works best as an attention funnel into a broader transmedia strategy that supports deeper learning, community, and off-platform engagement (Gerbaudo, 2024; Kang & Lou, 2022; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2023).

The diaries reflect this. Participants often became aware of an issue, learned something new, saved a video, checked comments, shared privately, or searched for more information. But further action was not automatic. One participant watched a video with a clear call to contact an MP, but wrote: “I didn’t contact them though.”

This does not mean the video failed. It means the video opened a door. The next question is whether there was somewhere for the audience to go — and whether that next step felt realistic, safe, and worth taking.

For social justice creators, the implication is simple: design the pathway, not only the post.

A strong short-form video should ask:

What does this help the audience understand?

What emotion does it leave them with?

What is the next possible step?

Is that step public, private, or both?

Where can the audience go for deeper learning, community, or action?

Short-form video can create attention.
The work of advocacy is to help attention become:

Understanding

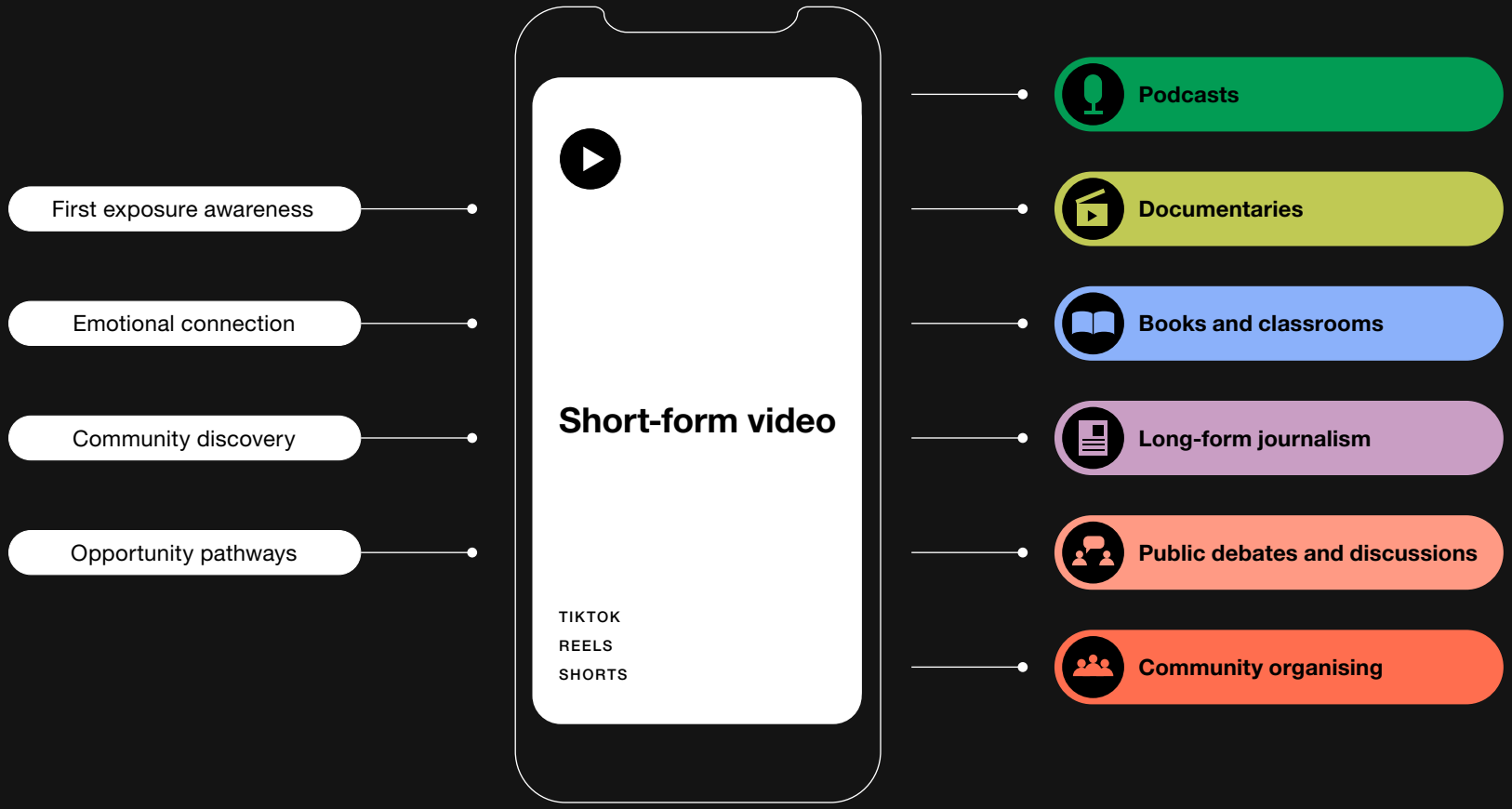
Connection

Action

FIGURE 5 Short-form video as an entry point into a wider social justice journey: attention → recognition → learning → connection → action.

Short-form video as the entry point

The power of short-form video is in opening the gateway into a wider ecosystem of learning, discussion and participation.



What this means for the rest of the report

The goal of Part 1 is to offer an audience lens for understanding the role short-form video plays in the social justice communication ecosystem. Together, the literature review and the diary exercise complicate the stereotypical notion that young audiences are apathetic or unwilling to act. The picture is more complex: audiences encounter social justice content inside algorithmic, affective, fast-moving feeds; they often manage emotional load while trying to stay informed; and they may participate in ways that are meaningful but not always public or easy to measure (Gerbaudo, 2024; Hautea et al., 2021; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2023).

This is why the rest of the report does not treat short-form video simply as a tool for reach. It asks what happens after reach: whether content helps audiences understand, whether it respects emotional capacity, whether it creates room for low-visibility participation, and whether it gives people somewhere to go next.

Part 2 turns to the short-form video ecosystem at large: how the major platforms work, how algorithmic distribution shapes visibility, and how creators and organisations can understand the rules of the game without mistaking platform performance for social impact.

Part 3 then presents the social media mapping study, examining how social justice videos are currently being made, circulated, and engaged with across platforms. Parts 4 and 5 translate the findings into practical recommendations and creative tools for artists, filmmakers, campaigners, content creators, communication teams, and organisations seeking to make short-form video more emotionally resonant, strategically effective, and genuinely mobilising.

Part 2

The rules of the game: How short-form video actually works



In this chapter you will find:

A brief history of the rise of short-form video and the shift from network-based to algorithm-based distribution.

A comparison of TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube as platforms — what each platform is best suited for, what each platform rewards, and how they shape audience behaviour differently.

A discussion of platform moderation, algorithmic visibility, and why trust in platforms increasingly matters for social justice communication, and showing up at a street protest.

From social networks to algorithmic publics

Part 1 looked at short-form video from the audience side: how social justice content feels when it arrives inside fast, affective, mixed feeds. Part 2 looks underneath that experience. It explains the platform rules — algorithmic distribution, platform cultures, narrative formats, and moderation systems — that shape what audiences see, how quickly they see it, and what kinds of engagement feel possible.

The rules of social media communication have changed dramatically over the past decade. The rise of short-form video between roughly 2018 and 2021 did not simply introduce a new content format; it transformed how visibility itself works online.

TikTok's merger with Musical.ly in 2018 accelerated this shift globally, establishing short-form video as the dominant communication style across social media platforms (Pellin, 2025). Older platforms quickly adapted: Instagram launched Reels in 2020, and YouTube launched Shorts in 2021. What followed was not simply competition between platforms, but a broader transformation of digital culture and the wider communication ecosystem.

Older social media platforms were largely organised around social networks: visibility depended primarily on who followed whom and the strength of those existing connections. Short-form video platforms shifted this logic toward algorithmic recommendation systems organised around individual behavior — interests, watch time, engagement, and retention (Gerbaudo, 2024). The potential audience for a video was no longer limited to a creator's immediate network. Instead, algorithms could rapidly distribute content to millions of users with no prior connection to the creator, based largely on predicted engagement patterns and viewing behavior.

> **"My feed changed quickly, after just liking that one video... the next 5–10 videos were related videos."**
>
> STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

This shift made visibility more accessible, but also far less predictable. A video could suddenly reach millions of viewers or disappear almost entirely depending on whether it triggered the right engagement signals within the first moments of viewing.

For social justice communication, this transformation created both opportunities and tensions. Smaller creators and less-resourced organisations could now compete with larger institutions for attention and reach. At the same time, platforms increasingly began rewarding content that generated immediate emotional reactions, fast engagement, and high retention rates over slower forms of trust-building, political education, or nuanced explanation (Theodorakopoulos et al., 2025). The result is a media environment increasingly shaped by what researchers describe as "algorithmic publics" — audiences temporarily assembled by recommendation systems rather than by stable communities or long-term relationships (Gerbaudo, 2024). This helps explain why social justice content today often feels emotionally intense, fast-moving, and highly reactive: the platform environment itself increasingly rewards emotional immediacy over depth.

Different platforms, different social worlds

Although TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts are often grouped together under the label of short-form video, in practice the platforms function very differently. Published research, platform analysis, and social media mapping findings point to the importance of treating TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts as distinct social environments (Gerbaudo, 2024; Steckly, 2025). The diaries help illustrate how these differences can feel to users.

TikTok is the reach platform. Its recommendation system is the most aggressive in distributing content to users who have no prior relationship to the creator. Visibility is driven primarily through the For You Page rather than through follower networks (Kang & Lou, 2022).

The diaries also show how quickly a platform can cluster attention around a topic once a user signals interest. After engaging with one video, one of the participants described the next videos as variations on the same issue:

> **"I kept scrolling and got a lot of videos about the same topic. Although the videos were formatted differently, it was all about McDonald's and human meat."**
>
> STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

This kind of repetition can make an issue feel suddenly much larger in the feed, even when the user did not actively search for it.

The algorithm makes TikTok especially effective for rapidly building awareness, creating emotional immediacy, and introducing audiences to issues they may not have previously encountered. At the same time, the pace of the platform can intensify emotional overload and shorten the lifespan of individual issues as users consciously disengage or seek emotional refuge in more entertaining, lighter content (Ling et al., 2021).

Instagram functions differently. While Reels adopted many features from TikTok, Instagram still favors follower relationships, identity presentation, and visible social interaction (Steckly, 2025). In the mapping study (See Part 3 for details), Instagram consistently produced the highest engagement and collective-action rates. Unlike TikTok, which operates primarily as a discovery engine, Instagram supports community-building and early mobilisation. This difference is not only technical. It also shapes perceived social exposure.

> **"Unlike Instagram, where likes are public, on TikTok it is not, so I want to be seen supporting these causes and viewpoints."**
>
> STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

YouTube occupies yet another role. Here, shorts exist within a much larger ecosystem built around medium- and long-form content. The platform is, therefore, better suited for sustained explanation, detailed evidence, and slower audience-building over time. Several diary participants described YouTube as a place where they went to learn more about issues that they first encountered on TikTok or Instagram.

In essence, the three platforms support different stages of engagement:

- TikTok is for reach and emotional immediacy,
- Instagram is for community-building and mobilisation,
- YouTube is for deep engagement and sustained learning.

The most effective social justice communication increasingly works across all three platforms, drawing on the unique strengths each one provides.

FIGURE 6 Comparative overview of TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube

Different algorithms. Different cultures. Different strength. Same journey.

TikTok

BEST SUITED FOR

Awareness and emotional engagement

WHAT THE PLATFORM REWARDS

01	Virality
02	Emotional Immediacy
03	Discovery

Instagram

BEST SUITED FOR

Community-building and mobilisation

WHAT THE PLATFORM REWARDS

01	Relationships
02	Identity
03	Visibility

YouTube

BEST SUITED FOR

Deep learning and sustained engagement

WHAT THE PLATFORM REWARDS

01	Depth
02	Search
03	Long-term attention

The narrative language of short-form video

Short-form video does not only change how content is distributed; it also changes how stories are told. The format is built around speed, compression, and interruption. Videos are vertical, fast-paced, visually dense, and heavily optimised for the first few seconds of attention. Recommendation systems prioritise watch time, completion rates, and replay behaviour, which means the content must interrupt scrolling or risk disappearing into the feed (KC, 2025). Hooks, captions, trending audio, edits, and on-screen text are not decorative. They are the operating grammar of short-form video: they help a video stop the scroll, signal relevance, sustain watch time, and make the content legible without requiring prior context. (O'Rourke, 2025).

The student diaries suggest that these technical features also carry emotional and social meaning. Captions, for example, not only improved accessibility, but also signalled authenticity. The participants associated caption-heavy videos with creator-led communication, while highly polished videos without captions were perceived as institutional or emotionally distant.

Trending audio functioned similarly. Familiar sounds, recurring formats, and recognisable editing styles helped difficult topics feel socially familiar and emotionally approachable.

Research on TikTok similarly shows that remix culture, duets, stitches, memes, and other participatory trends do more than stimulate virality. They allow users to insert themselves into conversations, personalise political narratives, and participate in collective meaning-making (Quick & Maddox, 2024).

This is partially the reason why social justice content increasingly appears through lifestyle wrappers, humour, tutorials, reaction videos, or "doing something while speaking" formats. These approaches are not distractions from advocacy; they are part of the narrative language through which advocacy becomes emotionally accessible.

The same structural features that make short-form video emotionally immediate and highly engaging can also flatten complexity. This is why short-form video is best understood as a gateway into a wider social justice ecosystem, not as a format that can sustain nuance or deeper political understanding on its own.

→ **Short-form video does not only change how content is distributed; it also changes how stories are told.**

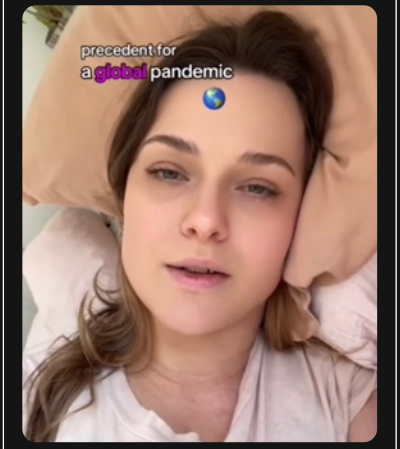
FIGURE 7 The signals of trust in a short-form video

What feels trustworthy?

KEY SIGNALS

- Direct address (conversational tone)
- Captions for accessibility and clarity
- Real setting, imperfect, relatable
- Trending audio and formats
- Evidence and screenshots

Creator-led



Authentic

Relatable

Trustworthy

Institutional



Credible but distant
and inaccessible

KEY SIGNALS

- Polished visuals and branding
- No captions or on-screen text
- Formal tone, distant presentation
- Highly produced, studio setting
- Branding and logos prominent

HOW AUDIENCES INTERPRET THE SIGNALS

Perceived authenticity
Feels real, personal and honest

Emotional distance
Feels close vs feels distant

Accessibility and inclusion
Easy to understand, inclusive vs exclusive

Trust and safety
Feels safe to engage vs unclear or risky

Willingness to engage
More likely to watch, save, share or act vs less likely

Platform moderation and the politics of trust

The diaries revealed another important dimension of platform culture: distrust. Several participants described experiences that felt to them like suppression, censorship, or algorithmic manipulation. These included content warnings appearing on political videos, sudden drops in video quality, muted audio, or feeds rapidly shifting away from certain topics.

“The video started glitching in the beginning, so I was quite intrigued that TikTok was muting the person as he was speaking out on this matter.”

STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

“It made me feel slightly afraid at first but overall it made me angry how the government and TikTok are working together to censor information in this way.”

STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

Whether these experiences reflected actual moderation systems, automated safety filters, algorithmic instability, or user interpretation is difficult to verify empirically. However, social media research shows that users actively develop “algorithmic folk theories” — shared beliefs about how platforms reward, suppress, or manipulate visibility online (Klug et al., 2021; Savolainen, 2022). While these perceptions might not be objective or accurate, they shape user behaviour and need to be considered.

For social justice creators, it is important to understand that a platform is not a neutral delivery mechanism — it is part of the emotional and political environment audiences are navigating every day, and the audience trust in the platform environment increasingly influences what audiences feel safe engaging with, how publicly they participate, and how willing they are to share political content openly.

These platform rules matter because they shape not only what becomes visible, but what kinds of advocacy are rewarded. Part 3 turns from the rules of the platforms to the evidence from the mapping study: how social justice creators are currently using these rules, where the strongest storytelling is happening, and where mobilisation is being lost.

Part 3

Social media mapping: From community to action



In this chapter you will find:

- How short-form video is currently used by social justice creators and organisations: most advocacy content currently builds community and identity rather than issuing calls to action.
- The four archetypes of social justice video content: Full-Spectrum Mobilisers, Narrative Reframers, Low-Intensity Content and Ambient Content.
- Why the most-viewed advocacy content is often the least mobilising, and what that perhaps means for how we measure impact.
- What popular far-right content can tell us about community-first communication — and where progressive movements should borrow its techniques and where not.
- How creators use TikTok, Instagram and YouTube as different platforms and how they should adapt their strategies to the different platforms.

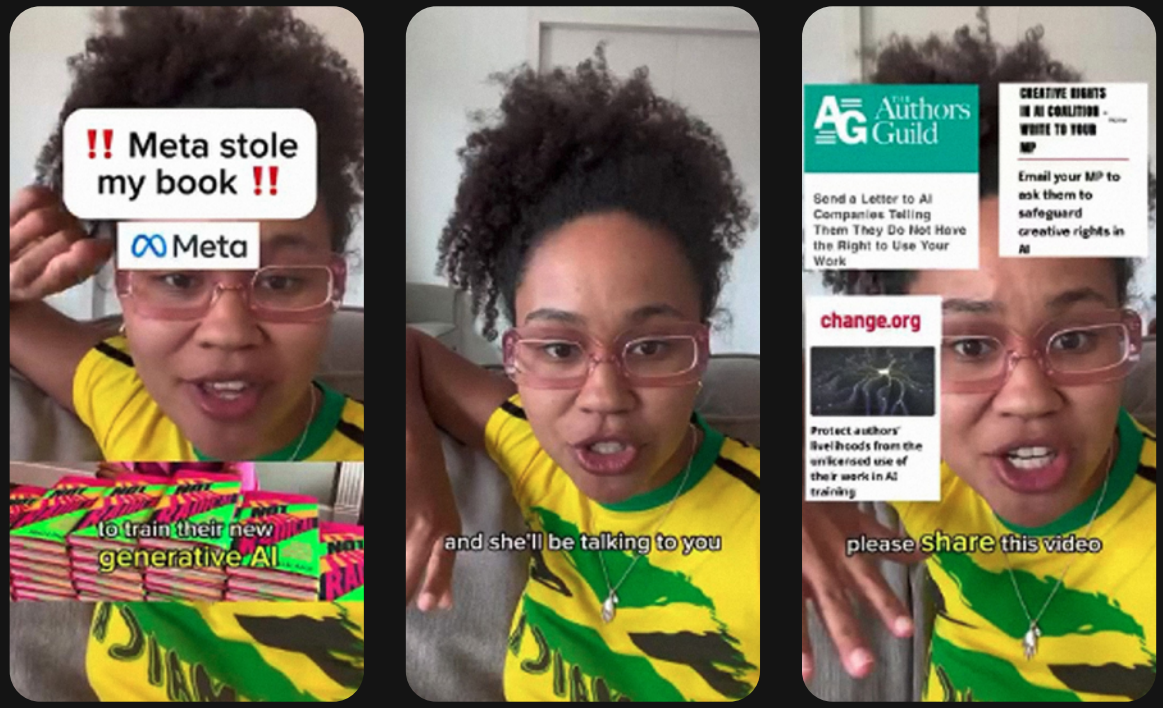
Platform moderation and the politics of trust

Section 2 showed how major platforms work: how algorithmic distribution increasingly shapes visibility in different ways and how creators and organisations are adapting to the rules of the game. Building on the large-scale analysis of 2,757 videos across 88 accounts on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, Section 3 now shows how actual short-form content currently works on social media and what these findings can tell us about effective storytelling structures.

Many of the social justice videos identified by our research are, on the whole, beautifully made. Their narrative structures and storytelling are strong. Creators who care deeply about issues related to social justice are skilled at compressing complex political topics into 30-60 seconds of vertical video. In terms of narrative craft, the ecosystem is thriving and creative. Take as examples two videos from the dataset.

In the first, Mikaela Loach holds up a paperback to the camera. “So I just found out that my book was stolen by Meta,” she says, the text overlay reading “!! Meta stole my book !!” Over the next minute she walks the viewer through what Meta did, provides an engaging account why it matters for creatives, and what to do about it. The caption lists three specific things you can do about this problem: such as email your MP using a prepared template, file a formal notice with the Authors Guild, sign a Change.org petition.

FIGURE 8 Mikaela Loach, “Meta stole my book” (Instagram). Beginning, middle and end of the same video, which uses a ‘passing-the-phone’ format: Mikaela hooks the viewer, hands off to her collaborator Adele Walton for the systemic argument (middle), then returns at the end with the action cards.”



BEGINNING MIDDLE END

In the second video, we can see a lone hiker climb a snow-covered ridge against a twilight cityscape in the faded background. Snow falls. The climber pauses to look up at the sky. The bold text appears: “REST IS RESISTANCE. It’s time to switch off.” The video, posted by Friends of the Earth, is quietly radical in its reframing of rest as political.

Both videos are well-made. They both reach big audiences. But they create community and impact through quite different strategies. The video by Mikaele Loach has a clear call to action and instructions on what to do next. The video by Friends of the Earth asks the audience to take a moment to breathe, to switch off from the stress of everyday life and explore and experience the beauty of nature beyond the flickering screens of social media screens. A nature that is, however, worth protecting when the time comes.

Our research similarly suggests that there are many ways to engage audiences and to achieve such impact found in our sample videos. Across the videos looked at, only about a quarter contained a clear call to action in the classical social activist video sense. Yet the remaining videos do not fail to mobilise. Instead, they do different kinds of important work in the contemporary social media ecosystem: they capture and channel fragmented user attention, they forge connections and change narratives and — crucially — they foster the type of community that meaningful impact and collective action depend on.

Indeed, one core finding of our social media mapping could be that successful participation takes place in many stages. Audiences seldom move directly from first screen contact to powerful action. Instead, engaging with social justice debates happens over time through finding and learning about a topic, becoming a part of a community, through creating trust in the message and, eventually, asking for collective action when this becomes the key goal. Understood this way, the findings of our large-scale mapping of social justice short-form videos and accounts on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube is less a catalogue of what makes a video successful but more an ecosystem of different kinds of techniques that can be used to get there taking into account the different stages and ways social justice videos work as part of a broader ecosystem of social justice practice.

FIGURE 9 **Friends of the Earth, “REST IS RESISTANCE” (Instagram). A textbook re-storying: rest reframed as political. The video ends on the text. There is no next step.**



BEGINNING MIDDLE END

The four archetypes of social justice videos

One way to understand this is to look at the four archetypes of social justice videos identified by social media mapping of thousands of videos. From these videos, our research identified four different types of social justice storytelling archetypes. Each of these archetypes used short-form videos in different ways for storytelling and mobilisation, some more effectively than others. It is important to note that these archetypes should also not be read as ranking from best to worst but as different ways how engagement is built online each containing different opportunities and challenges.

The four archetypes identified by the social media mapping incorporate the following characteristics:

Full-Spectrum Mobiliser

There are videos (23% of the dataset) that contain both strong narrative structures and clear specific calls to action. On average, these reached smaller audiences, but they scored top on other measured metrics.

Narrative Reframers

Narrative Reframers (38% of the dataset) told strong stories but they did not follow these with a clear pathway to action. On average these videos were highly popular and reached the largest audiences.

Low-Intensity Content

Low-Intensity Content (27% of the dataset) of the videos show partial narrative work and limited calls to action. In this case, both the strong story structure and the pathways to action were missing.

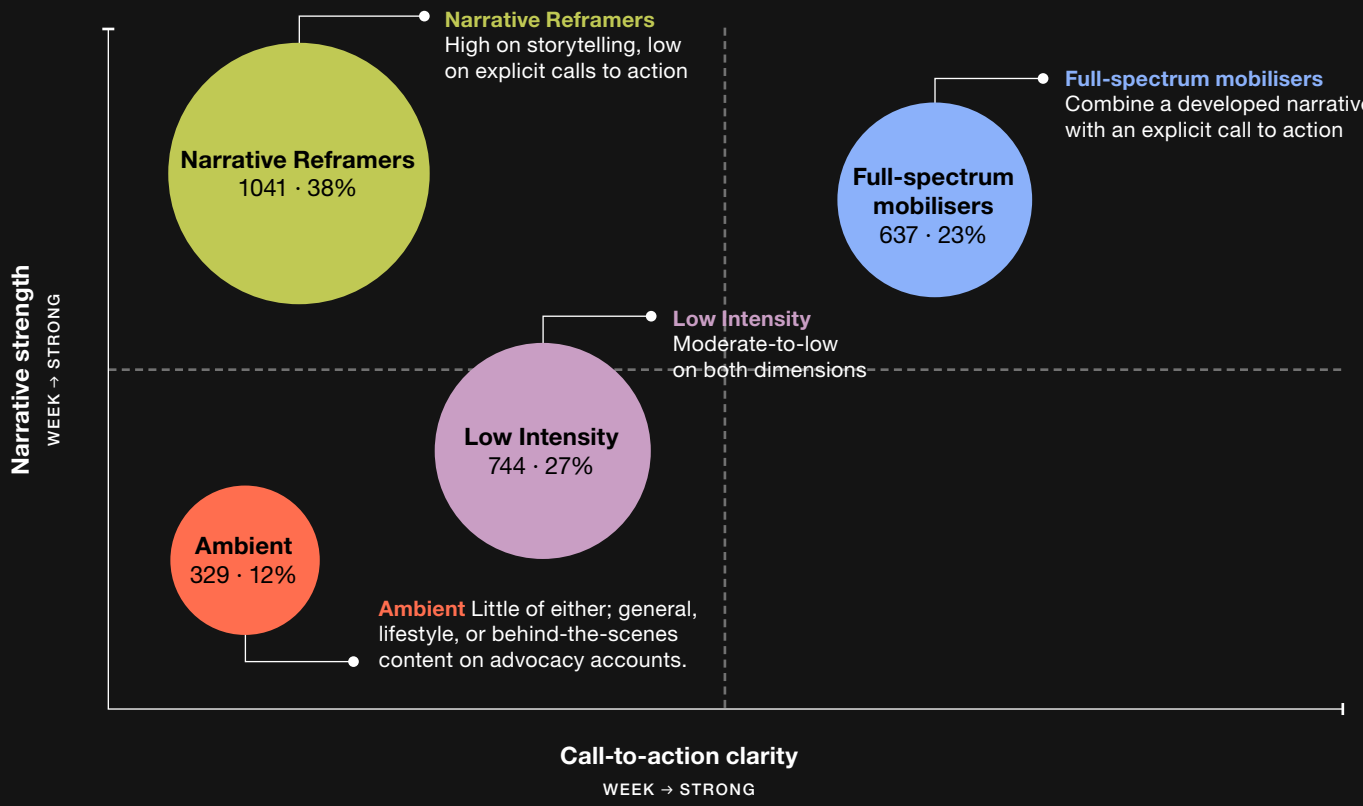
Ambient Content

Ambient Content (12% of the dataset) consisted of social justice videos where all dimensions identified by the research remained weak and the advocacy content was not clearly identified.

FIGURE 10 The four archetypes of social justice video content, positioned by how much narrative structure and call to action each contains; bubble size shows each cluster's share of the dataset.

The four archetypes of social justice video

Where each cluster sits on the two qualities that define it — and how much of the sector it is.



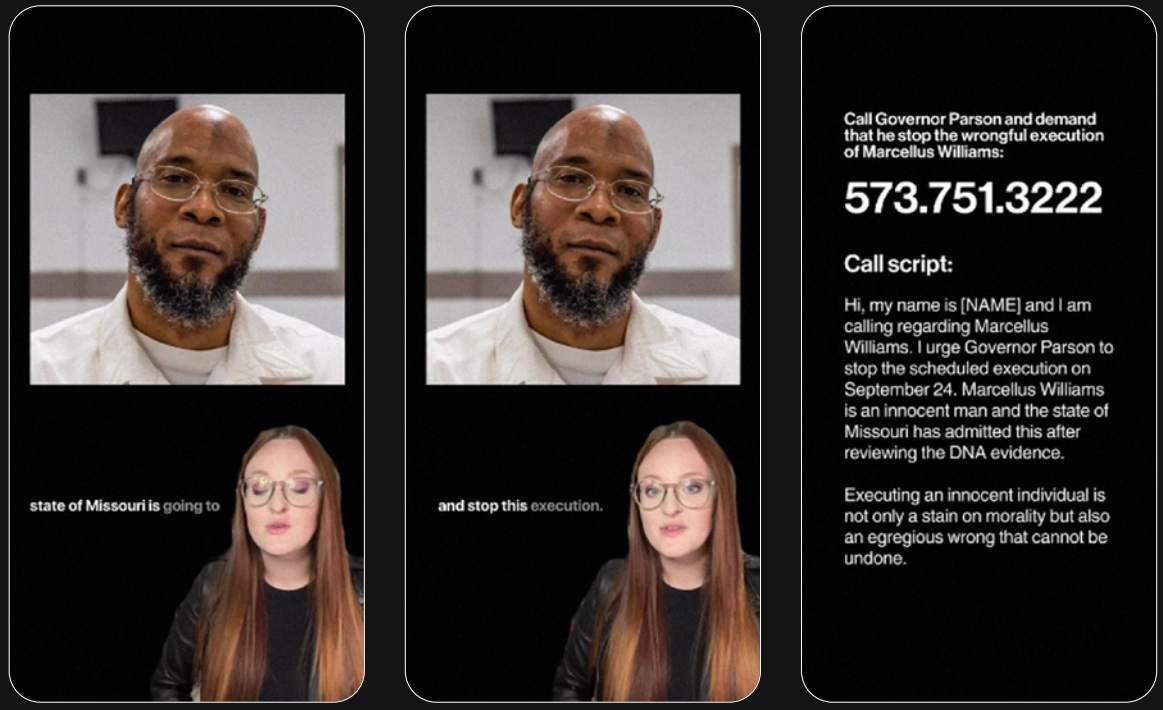
Bubble size = share of 2757 advocacy videos

- From 88 organisations and creators (TikTok, Instagram, TouTube).
- Position from ai-scored narrative strength and call-to-cation clarity.
- Community-building rises toward the top-right.

What do each of these archetypes look like in practice?

An illustrative example of a Full-Spectrum Mobiliser is the so.informed video. The video starts with a clear hook: “Missouri is about to execute an innocent man on Tuesday,” the creator says. Then the video gives a clear message on what to do about it. The phone number for Governor Parson’s office appears on screen and a word-for-word script for what to say when you call your political representative. Story, urgency, target, action, all in 60 seconds.

FIGURE 11 **so.informed, Marcellus Williams (TikTok). The final card of the video: target named, phone number on screen, call script in full. This is what a Full-Spectrum Mobiliser looks like in sixty seconds.**



BEGINNING MIDDLE END

Conversely, take Venetia La Manna's "Met Gala" video as an example of Narrative Reframers. The video opens as a celebrity fashion roundup, then pivots to the Rafah border crossing. The powerful re-story mixes celebrities voluntarily losing the ability to breathe in tight corsets with Palestinians involuntarily losing theirs under occupation. The reframe is brilliant. The video reaches large audiences without having a clear and articulated "what do about this?" message. It works in different ways.

The smaller two categories have less distinct storytelling structures and calls to action.

A Low-Intensity video is the kind a lot of us can make on our social media feeds: a clip that gestures at the problem, has a decent hook, ends on "this is unacceptable," but never quite turns the video into a powerful story or a call to do something about it. An Ambient video, often, is not really an advocacy video at all. It is a lifestyle clip on an advocacy account, a behind-the-scenes from the office, a creator's morning routine, content that keeps the page warm without doing the political work. It does not contain clear narrative structures or calls to action.

These archetypes matter. They should not be seen as a ranking from good to bad but as a map that helps understand the different kinds of work short-form video can do for social justice. Their value lies in recognising which cluster a given video belongs to and being deliberate about what the video is created to achieve. A Narrative Reframer video that builds attention and community does something quite different from a Full-Spectrum Mobiliser video whose purpose is to channel visibility into action. The two other categories that score lower of both — Low-Intensity and Ambient videos — in turn can be perhaps most improved by adapting techniques from the Narrative Reframers or Mobilisers.

Thinking in these terms, we recommend that creators start from where they currently are and strategically plan a mix of content and a narrative strategy that works best across their feed and needs, rather than expecting every single video to do everything at once.

FIGURE 12 Venetia La Manna, "Met Gala" (Instagram). The bait: a celebrity fashion roundup. Within seconds the video pivots to the Rafah border crossing. Brilliant re-storying, no concrete next step.



BEGINNING MIDDLE END

How should social justice creators use platforms differently

This diversity of content and types of engagement strategies found in the videos also cuts across the three platforms looked at. As part of the research, we explored in detail how different actors/organisations used different short-form video platforms for their social justice storytelling. To do this, we created what is called the Platform Adaptation Index (PAI) for the research, which measures how creators adapt to different platforms and what the consequences of this adaptation are.

The first thing our research showed is that only about one in seven creators in our dataset post the same content on every platform. The other six adapt. The question is not whether to adapt, but how. Most successful actors in the dataset know how to customise their content to the specific affordances of each platform. An illustrative example of such adaptation is again Mikaela Loach. On Instagram, her advocacy work runs at full strength: long captions, templated emails, named petitions, explicit calls to action. On TikTok, the same topics show up wrapped in surprising claims and stop-scrolling hooks, with the action moved to the caption or bio. On YouTube, the longer-form content sits behind everything else as the evidence layer. Her platform-adaptation is one of the largest in the dataset, and her work is one of the most consistently mobilising in the sector.

FIGURE 13 Mikaela Loach on TikTok. A POV-format, reach-oriented video: a stop-scrolling caption and a conversational register suited to the platform. The action moves to the caption and bio.



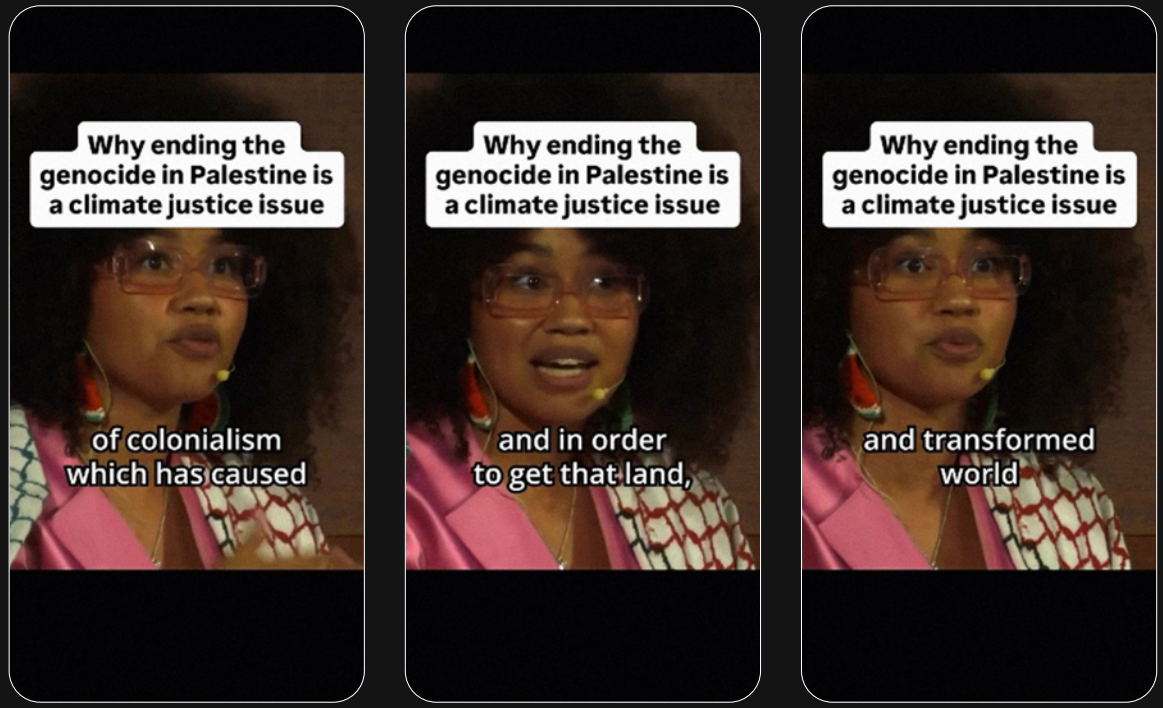
BEGINNING MIDDLE END

This has clear implications for social justice creators and organisations.

Develop content that is customised to how audiences use different platforms by building on the strengths of each.

As we have argued in Part 2, the content produced for TikTok tends to be more reach-oriented, whereas content for Instagram tends to be direct mobilisation-oriented. YouTube works better for more factual and in-depth longer material that the short-form videos link back to. The data also shows these tendencies in how different platforms are already used by social justice creators.

FIGURE 14 Mikaela Loach on YouTube. The longer-form evidence layer: a talk on climate justice and Palestine, sitting behind the shorter content as the place to go for depth.



BEGINNING MIDDLE END

FIGURE 15 Strategic aims by platform.

Practical guidance for social justice video content across community-building, reframing, and calls to action

	Build community and identity	Inform and reframe	Call to action
TikTok	Duets, trending audio, identity markers	Counter narratives, surprising claims, GRWM formats	Low priority. Accept lower CTAs. Lurker friendly.
Instagram	Close friends, community calls, shared identity	Evidence posts, carousel explainers, caption depth	Explicit asks, link in bio.
YouTube	Longer format, subscriber community, Q&A	Evidence-based, detailed explanation, fact-checking	Detailed action mechanisms, resource links

KEY TAKEAWAY

INSTAGRAM STRONGEST FOR DIRECT MOBILISATION, WHILE TIKTOK AND YOUTUBE PLAY COMPLEMENTARY ROLES IN IDENTITY-BUILDING AND EXPLANATION.

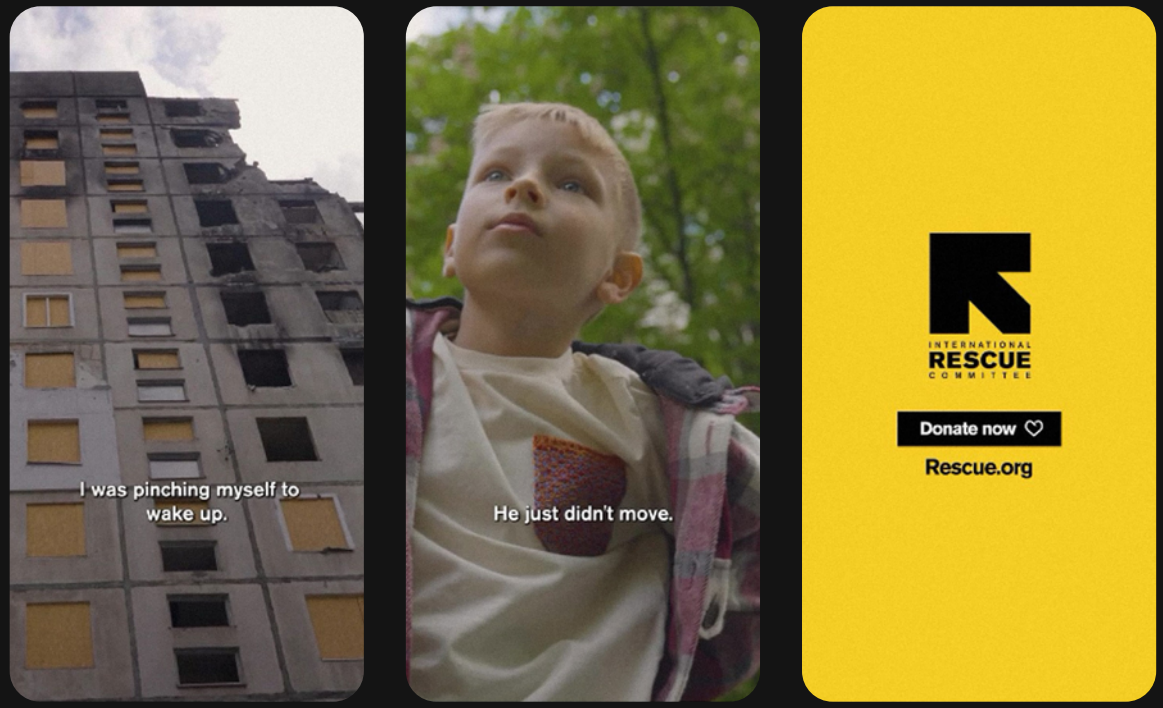
What drives social justice engagement?

What, if anything, then helps a social justice short-form video gain engagement? When we dug deeper into the popularity of the 2,757 videos in the research, the findings revealed an interesting paradox that helps highlight why there are many different strategies for effective social justice storytelling. The most viewed videos were often not the same videos that contained clear pathways to action. Videos that have good storytelling structures but low pathways to action generally had more views and engagement than the videos that tried to explicitly mobilise.

To unpack what this means, it is worth pausing for a second on what is meant by “engagement.” This word often does two different jobs, which are not necessarily compatible. Views (how many people see the video) are one. Engagement rate (how many of the people who watch the video then like, comment, or save it) is another. The first measures reach. The second measures something closer to whether the audience cares enough to do something about it, even if only like or share.

The two ways engagement works in the data — views and likes/shares/comments — move the findings in different directions. Reframer videos beat Mobilisers on views by about four to one. But Mobilisers have a slightly higher engagement rate (10.0% versus 9.4%). The same pattern shows up at the platform level: Instagram has the smallest audiences of the three platforms, but the highest engagement rate and the highest conversion scores. A small, committed audience is not a consolation prize. It is the metric that tracks mobilisation.

FIGURE 16 International Rescue Committee, Ukraine family (Instagram). Smaller audience than the Met Gala video above, but the closing card does the advocacy work the algorithm doesn’t reward: named recipient, clear action, off-platform mechanism.



BEGINNING MIDDLE END

This finding suggests that virality and advocacy effectiveness are not the same thing and that platforms are perhaps not currently rewarding what the advocacy sector cares about. In other words, reaching virality through platforms such as TikTok can gain visibility, reach and brand recognition — but this might not create impact.

This has consequences for measuring how social justice advocacy videos perform and how this impact should be measured by social justice organisations. If the core interest of advocacy is to guide a person to take action, tracking views or follower counts might not be the most effective way in the new algorithmically curated platform economy where platforms such as TikTok can spike views even if the user's attention remains less committed. On the contrary, fewer views and engagement can also drive mobilisation if the calls to action are guided by strong long-term commitment to the community and clear suggestions of how collective mobilisation and action can help this community.

So, the conclusion the research advocates is not "add a call to action to everything." Instead, it is to treat such concrete mobilisation as a step of a sequence: build community and identity, educating the users, earning their trust, and then making the call to action specific to a platform and across multiple types of uses — both public and private — at the point where the audience is ready for it. Then customise the call to action to the specific needs and capacities of the audience and the aims of a campaign. This can include educational purposes, signing a petition, fundraising, or informing about offline actions such as a street protest — and many more other things.

→ **Reaching virality through platforms such as TikTok can gain visibility, reach and brand recognition — but this might not create impact.**

What the far-right/ conservative comparison reveals

Far-right/conservative actors are highly popular on short-form video platforms such as TikTok. For this reason, we also compared progressive social justice actors to a set of far-right/conservative accounts to see how their content performed differently and what they did with their videos. The research shows that these far-right videos, like the broader trends in the dataset, also do not explicitly mobilise their users, at least insofar that their content seldom contains clear pathways to actions. Instead, these far-right/conservative groups' storytelling is successful in building identity, reinforcing in-group cohesion, and maintaining a consistent narrative and emotional register.

The data suggests that what makes far-right content work on these platforms is thus not that it's louder, or angrier, or more inflammatory — though it is often all three. It is that it is unusually consistent. They have the same message, same register, same identity, on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. See, for instance, the video by Katie Hopkins.

This consistency works for far-right content because in-group identity is their political project. Belonging is the goal. The video does not need to ask you to do anything — being a part of the community is the act. For movements whose goal is changing the world inclusively rather than fortifying a tribe, this approach is not enough. The techniques, subverting a familiar format, building a recognisable visual identity, threading a consistent emotional register, are perhaps worth borrowing. The goal or politics is not.

FIGURE 17 Katie Hopkins, "Tunbridge Wells" (Instagram). A spoof charity-aid format applied to a wealthy English town. The technique — subverting a familiar format — is one progressive creators use too. The politics underneath are not.



BEGINNING MIDDLE END

While progressive movements should not copy the far-right/conservative actors, their popularity nonetheless suggests that advocacy ecosystems may work in many ways and include diverse ways to engage the users that cannot be reduced to a single strategy alone. Producing identity- and community-driven content can help drive meaningful social justice impact. These two tactics can go in parallel: making sure that the videos cultivate community and strong narratives that provide emotional resonance to the users while building clear pathways to channel this to action is what matters.

Taken together, Part 3 reframes what counts as “effective” in social justice video. Not every clip needs to end in a call to action; the sector works best when attention, community, trust and mobilisation are designed to reinforce one another across a creator’s output over time. Part 4 turns these findings into a practical framework for doing exactly that.

→ **Making sure that the videos cultivate community and strong narratives that provide emotional resonance to the users while building clear pathways to channel this to action is what matters.**

Part 4

From attention to action: A practical framework for social justice storytelling



In this chapter you will find:

- A synthesis of the key audience, platform, and storytelling insights emerging from Parts 1–3.
- Practical storytelling frameworks drawn from the literature review and tested against the audience and mapping findings.
- Guidance on designing stories for emotionally overloaded and socially cautious audiences.
- Platform-specific strategies for TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.
- Practical recommendations for calls to action, community-building, and impact measurement.
- Ethical considerations for creators and organisations working in emotionally charged digital environments.

What the evidence tells us

The first three parts of this report explored short-form video from three connected perspectives: how audiences experience social media, how platforms shape communication, and how social justice creators currently use the format. Together, these findings point toward a significant shift in how advocacy communication now needs to operate online.

The audience evidence suggests that many viewers already care deeply about social justice issues before they encounter advocacy content. What shapes their engagement is less awareness itself than emotional overload, social risk, and the increasingly private ways participation now happens across digital spaces. Participants repeatedly described carefully managing their emotional exposure, avoiding visible conflict, and engaging through quieter forms of support such as saving videos, private sharing, researching issues independently, or discussing content offline.

At the same time, the platform environment increasingly rewards emotional immediacy, retention, and fast engagement (Gerbaudo, 2024; Kang & Lou, 2022). Different platforms encourage different forms of participation and community-building, while creator-led and emotionally accessible communication increasingly shapes audience trust. This creates a communication environment where visibility is easier to achieve than before, but where audience attention is fragmented, emotionally saturated, and difficult to sustain.

Finally, the mapping study revealed a creative ecosystem with exceptionally strong storytelling craft but persistent mobilisation gaps. Many videos successfully captured attention and emotional resonance yet often failed to provide meaningful pathways into participation or action. The findings repeatedly showed that virality and social impact are not the same thing.

Taken together, these findings suggest that “business as usual” advocacy communication increasingly underperforms in short-form video environments. The challenge is no longer simply how to attract attention, but how to transform attention into sustainable engagement, participation, and action. The remainder of this chapter explores practical storytelling approaches that respond directly to these realities.

→ **Many videos successfully captured attention and emotional resonance yet often failed to provide meaningful pathways into participation or action.**

Story first: Structures that work

One of the clearest findings from the mapping study is that audiences respond strongly to good storytelling. Videos with strong hooks, emotional clarity, narrative tension, and recognisable narrative structures consistently performed better across platforms. The literature reviewed for this project similarly showed that successful short-form videos rarely emerge accidentally. Most rely — consciously or unconsciously — on storytelling structures optimised for emotional engagement, clarity, and retention.

Among the most effective are the ABT ("And, But, Therefore") model and the SUCCESS framework (Heath & Heath, 2007).

FIGURE 18 ABT and SUCCESS Models

The ABT story structure

A simple 3-step story arc that turns attention into understanding and action.

1. And

ESTABLISH SHARED GROUND

Start with what your audience already knows and agrees on.

2. But

INTRODUCE THE PROBLEM OR CONFLICT

Reveal the disruption, injustice or contradiction that needs attention.

3. Therefore

OFFER MEANING, DIRECTION OR ACTION

Show what this means and what we can do about it.

ABT gives your story a beginning, a conflict, and a way forward — so your audience can feel, understand, and act.

The success framework

7 key ingredients for short-form stories that connect, resonate and drive impact.

- **S** — **Simple** — Focus on one clear idea.
- **U** — **Unexpected** — Use surprise, contrast, or curiosity to stop the scroll.
- **C** — **Concrete** — Ground your message in real people, places, or examples.
- **C** — **Credible** — Back it up with evidence, sources, or lived experience.
- **E** — **Emotional** — Help your audience feel something — hope, anger, care.
- **S** — **Story** — Give your message a beginning, middle and meaning.
- **S** — **Specific** — End with one clear action the viewer can take.

When your story has all 7 ingredients, it doesn't just get watched — it gets remembered, shared, and acted on.

The strength of the ABT structure lies in its simplicity. It allows creators to compress complex political issues into emotionally understandable narratives without losing clarity. The “And” establishes shared ground, the “But” introduces conflict or injustice, and the “Therefore” provides meaning, direction, or action.

The diary findings suggest that the “Therefore” section is often the most important — and the one most frequently missing in social justice content. Many videos in the dataset generated emotional response but stopped before offering audiences a realistic next step. The most effective calls to action were rarely the loudest or most emotionally dramatic. They offered audiences a foothold against helplessness: one concrete action, one achievable direction, one meaningful next step.

The SUCCESS framework responds to a different but equally important challenge: how to make complex social justice issues emotionally engaging without sacrificing clarity or credibility. The framework emphasises simplicity, emotional resonance, visual concreteness, credibility, and narrative structure — qualities that appeared repeatedly across both the mapping study and the diary exercise. Participants consistently responded most strongly to content that was easy to follow, emotionally resonant, visually grounded, and clearly structured.

In fast-moving short-form video environments, successful storytelling increasingly depends not simply on emotional intensity, but on making difficult issues understandable, memorable, and actionable within seconds. Together, the ABT and SUCCESS models help address one of the central problems identified in Part 3: strong emotional storytelling without meaningful narrative direction.

→ **In fast-moving short-form video environments, successful storytelling increasingly depends not simply on emotional intensity, but on making difficult issues understandable, memorable, and actionable within seconds.**

Designing the first three seconds

In short-form video, the opening moments of a video determine whether the audience continues watching or scrolls away. The strongest-performing videos in the mapping study consistently relied on some form of early interruption — a surprising visual, an emotionally charged statement, a recognisable trend, or a sudden narrative contrast that created immediate curiosity.

This aligns closely with what the literature review describes as the "High-Conversion Blueprint": a retention-focused storytelling structure optimised around the first seconds of audience attention (KC, 2025).

One of the clearest patterns emerging from both the mapping study and the diary exercise was the effectiveness of what might be called cognitive-dissonance storytelling: difficult political content delivered through familiar lifestyle formats. A creator discussing Gaza while doing makeup. A food video introducing a migration story. A trending sound layered over footage from a conflict zone. These formats combine familiarity with disruption — enough comfort to invite audiences in, and enough tension to hold attention.

Importantly, these "lifestyle wrappers" should not be understood as distractions from advocacy. In emotionally crowded feeds, they often function as the emotional entry point that allows difficult topics to become approachable in the first place. The diary participants repeatedly described stopping to watch content because it felt socially familiar, visually recognisable, or unexpectedly emotional.

The literature review similarly highlights the strategic value of platform-native storytelling techniques such as remix culture, trends, Duets, Stitches, and emotionally recognisable formats (Quick & Maddox, 2024). In practice, the strongest hooks are often the ones that feel least like formal advocacy and most like something already moving naturally inside the audience's digital world.

The High-Conversion Blueprint therefore works less as a rigid formula and more as a pacing principle: capture attention immediately, establish emotional or political tension quickly, deliver one clear idea, and provide one meaningful direction before the audience disappears back into the feed.

→ **This aligns closely with what the literature review describes as the "High-Conversion Blueprint": a retention-focused storytelling structure optimised around the first seconds of audience attention (KC, 2025).**

Community before mobilisation

The findings across the mapping study strongly suggest that community-building is one of the most important — and most underestimated — dimensions of effective social justice communication. Audiences who felt socially connected to creators, communities, or shared identities were substantially more likely to engage meaningfully with calls to action later.

This helps explain why some highly viral videos fail to mobilise effectively. Attention alone does not necessarily produce participation. In many cases, participation emerges from trust, familiarity, and shared identity first.

The literature review similarly identifies community-building as one of the three core dimensions of meaningful sociopolitical action alongside re-storying and collective action (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2023). For creators, this means thinking less about isolated viral moments and more about long-term relational ecosystems. In many of the strongest-performing accounts in the dataset, the comments section functioned less as audience feedback and more as community infrastructure. Creators replied consistently, recognised recurring participants, pinned audience contributions, and treated the conversation itself as part of the storytelling process. Recurring storytelling formats, recognisable visual styles, and stable creator identities similarly helped audiences return over time and develop stronger emotional attachment to the content.

The findings also suggest that community-building increasingly depends on recognising quieter forms of participation. Many users engage privately rather than publicly: saving content, sharing videos with close friends, following links silently, or revisiting creators repeatedly without commenting. Designing for these forms of "invisible support" is increasingly important for social justice communication because they often represent the primary form of participation available to emotionally overloaded or socially cautious audiences.

The strategic implication is significant. Effective social justice storytelling increasingly depends not simply on persuading audiences, but on giving audiences somewhere emotionally safe and socially meaningful to belong.

→ **Effective social justice storytelling increasingly depends not simply on persuading audiences, but on giving audiences somewhere emotionally safe and socially meaningful to belong.**

Platform strategy: building the audience journey

For creators and organisations, the practical question is not simply where to post. It is how to build a pathway that helps audiences move from first attention to deeper participation.

The literature review repeatedly emphasises that short-form video works most effectively as an attention funnel into a broader transmedia strategy — an approach that uses multiple media channels to deliver complementary parts of the same story, with each channel making a unique contribution to audience engagement and understanding — rather than as a complete advocacy strategy on its own (Jenkins, 2007; Pellin, 2025). The diary findings point in the same direction. Participants often encountered an issue first through a short video, then saved it, shared it privately, searched for more information, followed a link, or discussed it with friends afterward.

This means each platform should carry a different part of the audience journey. TikTok is best used to open the door: to create the first emotional hook, make an issue feel immediate, and introduce a frame that audiences may not have encountered before. Instagram is where that first attention can become early participation — a follow, a save, a private share, a visible signal of belonging, or a direct call to action. YouTube is where the same audience can be taken further into evidence, explanation, testimony, and sustained learning once emotional interest has already been established.

The strategic mistake is to treat these platforms as three places to repost the same video. A stronger approach is to design the pathway deliberately. A TikTok video creates recognition. An Instagram post or Reel gives the audience a community and a next step. A YouTube video, podcast, website, documentary, classroom resource, or community gathering gives them somewhere deeper to go.

This is especially important for audiences who are emotionally overloaded or cautious about public participation. A person may not comment publicly on TikTok, but they may save the video. They may not repost on Instagram, but they may share it privately with close friends. They may not attend an event immediately, but they may watch a longer explainer, read a resource page, or sign a petition privately later. Effective platform strategy therefore means designing for movement across levels of commitment rather than assuming that one viral moment will carry the full burden of awareness, trust, learning, and action.

For social justice communication, the goal is not platform presence for its own sake. The goal is to build a coherent route from emotional recognition to meaningful participation: from the first short-form hook to community connection, to deeper learning, and eventually to action beyond the feed.

Measuring what matters

One of the clearest findings from both the literature review and the social media mapping study is that virality and impact are not the same thing.

A video can reach millions of viewers and still produce very little meaningful engagement or action. At the same time, smaller videos with lower visibility can generate deeper forms of participation, community-building, and long-term influence.

This matters because many creators — especially independent creators and smaller organisations — rarely measure the impact of their content systematically at all. Yet storytelling is never neutral. Social justice content is created for a reason: to change awareness, challenge narratives, build community, encourage participation, or move audiences toward action. Measuring impact is therefore not simply a technical exercise; it is how creators understand whether their storytelling is actually doing the work they hope it is doing.

The challenge is that the easiest metrics to access are often the least meaningful. Views, impressions, and likes remain important because they indicate reach and visibility, but on their own they reveal very little about what audiences actually took away from the content or whether anything changed afterward. The literature reviewed for this project repeatedly emphasises the importance of looking beyond these "vanity metrics" toward deeper forms of engagement and sociopolitical action (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2023).

For creators, this means paying closer attention to how audiences interact with content over time: whether they save a video to revisit later, replay it multiple times, share it privately with others, follow a link, return to the creator's content repeatedly, or move toward some form of off-platform participation such as research, donations, petitions, community events, or collective action.

The diary findings suggest that this shift is especially important for social justice communication because many forms of participation now happen quietly and outside public visibility. A person may never comment publicly, yet still save the video, research the issue independently, follow a resource link, attend an event, or change how they think about an issue afterward.

> **"I ended up researching about the issue online to educate myself more on what happened."**
>
> CHARMIN, A STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT

The literature review also identifies three broader dimensions of meaningful impact particularly relevant for social justice storytelling: re-storying dominant narratives, building community and solidarity, and moving audiences toward collective action. This reframes success away from visibility alone and toward movement: Did audiences stay with the story? Did they engage more deeply? Did they learn something? Did they feel connected to others? Did they do something afterward?

The strategic challenge is therefore no longer simply measuring attention, but measuring what attention becomes.

Ethics, care, and responsibility

Short-form video gives creators an extraordinary ability to capture attention, shape emotional responses, and introduce audiences to stories that may fundamentally change how they understand the world and their place within it.

In the context of social justice communication, this is both a creative opportunity and an ethical responsibility. The same emotional immediacy that allows advocacy content to cut through crowded feeds also gives creators enormous influence over how audiences experience suffering, injustice, identity, and political conflict.

This influence cannot be separated from the realities audiences already navigate every day: emotional exhaustion, outrage-driven feeds, harassment, misinformation, polarisation, and the constant visibility of human suffering. Social justice storytelling should not intensify these conditions carelessly or exploit them for engagement. Nor should creators use emotionally charged storytelling to flatten complexity, misrepresent vulnerable communities, or commodify suffering in pursuit of visibility. The literature reviewed for this project repeatedly warns that the emotional speed of short-form video can easily reward sensationalism over care, especially when creators feel pressured by platform algorithms to continuously escalate emotional intensity.

The findings from this report instead point toward a different approach: one grounded in consent, credibility, authentic representation, emotional sustainability, and care for both audiences and subjects. Ethical storytelling means representing vulnerable people with dignity rather than spectacle. It means prioritising accuracy over outrage, emotional connection over manipulation, and long-term trust over short-term virality. It also means recognising when not to push audiences further emotionally, especially in already overwhelming moments.

This is not only an ethical question, but a strategic one. The diary findings consistently suggest that audiences are more likely to trust, revisit, share, and meaningfully engage with creators who feel emotionally honest, credible, and socially responsible. Over time, this kind of communication can help build healthier digital environments: spaces where audiences feel less manipulated, more respected, and more willing to participate. In the long term, the creators most likely to sustain meaningful engagement may not be those who shout the loudest, but those who build trust carefully enough for audiences to stay.

Part 5

Conclusion: Small actions, big togetherness



In this chapter you will find:

A short closing reframing of the report's central argument

The shift that the evidence asks for

The argument of this report can be reduced to a single sentence: the most powerful shift available to social justice creators working in short-form video is to stop demanding that audiences arrive somewhere and start walking with them instead.

That formulation is deliberately soft. The hardest re-orientation in the work is not learning a new platform, mastering a new narrative model, or producing more polished content. It is letting go of the idea that the work of advocacy is to convince people. The job, more often than not, is to make it easier — emotionally, socially, technically — for people to act on what they already believe.

The picture that emerges from the three research phases is, in its quiet way, hopeful. The audience is not lost. The storytelling craft is, in many corners of the sector, already excellent. The platforms, for all their failures, still occasionally deliver an advocacy video into the life of someone who needed exactly that video on exactly that day. What is missing from the bulk of the work is mostly small: a clearer ask, a community to land in, a softer entry, a recognition that the lurker watching from the edge of the frame is also — in their own private, considered way — already on the side of the work.

> **"I followed what the creator said to do, so the video could get more awareness."**
>
> STUDENT DIARY PARTICIPANT.

Open questions and invitations to peers

In this chapter you will find:

- Four areas beyond the project's scope for researchers and creators to explore.
- An invitation to extend the findings and continue the conversation.

What the report could not reach

A report that did its job honestly should also be able to say what it did not do. The research that anchors this work was a snapshot — one set of eyes, three platforms, a small qualitative sample of Gen Z viewers in one country, a corpus of advocacy content collected over a defined period. The findings are real, but they are not the whole picture, and a number of important questions the project began with remain genuinely open. This short closing section names the most consequential of those questions and offers them as invitations to the wider field.

Other languages, other geographies.
The literature review and the multimodal analysis are weighted heavily toward English-language content. The diary participants were based in the UK. The advocacy work happening on these platforms in Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Tagalog, Mandarin, Bengali, Swahili, Urdu, and many other languages is enormous and largely outside this report's frame. What works for an English-language audience on Instagram in 2026 will not be what works for a Portuguese-language audience on TikTok or a Tigrinya-language audience on YouTube. The invitation here is to peer organisations working in linguistic and cultural contexts this report could not reach: the findings should be tested, contested, and rewritten in your settings, not imported wholesale.

Audiences this report did not centre.
One place where this research heard from audiences directly about how the content actually felt was the diary exercise, which was limited in sample to six University students in the UK. This comes with its limitations. Older audiences, working-class audiences, audiences with limited internet access, audiences in diasporic and migrant communities, audiences who do not identify as socially conscious, and audiences whose primary platforms are WhatsApp, Telegram, or Facebook rather than the those studied here will have their own pathways, their own emotional textures, and their own forms of invisible support. The mapping study and the literature review, however, analysed much broader trends, and the generalisability of these lessons learned extend beyond any single group. The pathways of togetherness in Part 4 are built from the literature and the large-scale mapping alongside that testimony from the diary exercise.

The inside of platform moderation.
The diary participants described content suppression they read as deliberate. The research could not see inside the platforms' moderation regimes, and the literature on this is patchy and contested. What does meaningful transparency from platforms about content moderation look like? What can advocacy organisations actually do, individually and collectively, when their content is suppressed? These are questions for media-policy researchers, platform-accountability organisations, and the communities most affected by suppression. They are also questions where the empirical ground keeps shifting under everyone's feet.

Audiences not already on the side of the work.
This report focuses on advocacy content reaching audiences who, in the diary participants' words, are already "kind of socially conscious." The question of how short-form video might do persuasive work with audiences who are not already aligned — without becoming manipulative, without sliding into the same playbook as the far-right comparison group — is a question this research did not seriously answer. The far-right/conservative comparison did put a differently-aligned set of accounts and audiences in frame, but it examined how those creators build and hold their own base, not how progressive advocacy might reach audiences outside its own support groups or against groups that oppose them.

The four questions above are not a research agenda this team will pursue alone. The framing of this report has tried, throughout, to position the work as a contribution to a longer conversation among practitioners, organisations, and researchers — not as a final word. Counterpoints Arts, the instigator, co-commissioners and funder of this research, frames its own work explicitly around "sharing of learning, evaluation and impact" between peer organisations. The hope of the authors is that this report functions in that spirit: as one offering to that shared conversation, with much left for others to add.

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Suggested readings

For readers who wish to engage with the underlying evidence in full:

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