

From Apartheid to AI: Algorithmic Legibility and the Limits of Reconstructing Transnational Advocacy Networks

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Introduction

The emergence of artificial intelligence as a research partner has transformed the historian's toolkit. "AI historians", whether human scholars employing machine learning or algorithms autonomously mining the past, now parse archives once too vast or disordered for manual study. Digitized products, network-mapping software, and natural language processing allow researchers to visualize global connections, trace ideological diffusion, and detect sentiment shifts across decades (Colavizza 2021). Yet this apparent expansion of analytic reach conceals a profound narrowing of historical understanding. What AI makes visible, it simultaneously obscures. The archives it reads best are those already formatted for machines. They are structured, standardized, and online. While the informal, fragmented, or deliberately obscured traces of earlier movements risk fading further into interpretive silence (Bowker 2006; Scott 1998).

Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) illustrate this paradox acutely. Defined by Keck and Sikkink (1998) as "networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation." TANs have historically relied on relationships, moral authority, and information exchange rather than institutional hierarchy. They mobilize across borders to redefine norms, pressure states, and amplify the voices of marginalized communities (Risse 2002). Because their power derives from trust and persuasion rather than material capacity, much of this work unfolds in everyday speech, whispered conversations, and other forms of human communication that are difficult for algorithms to detect or classify. Fricker's (2007) account of epistemic injustice reminds us that these omissions are not neutral: structural power shapes whose voices are treated as credible in the first place.

This paper compares two emblematic advocacy networks separated by both time and technology. The Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a decentralized coalition of churches, student unions, exiles, and solidarity committees opposing racial segregation in South Africa. Its organizing was analog: mimeographed newsletters, coded correspondence, and personal networks that spread through word of mouth and moral conviction (Thorn 2009). By contrast, Fridays for Future (FFF) is a global climate movement initiated by Greta Thunberg's 2018 school strike. It was born into digital infrastructures. It operates through hashtags, livestreams, and algorithmically curated publics (de Moor 2021). FFF's activism is legible to machines because it is produced, circulated, and archived within the very systems that AI can most easily read.

The comparison raises a central question: How does AI reshape what becomes legible in historical research on advocacy? When machine learning models analyze digitized traces of activism, they privilege movements like FFF which are data-rich, multilingual but standardized, highly networked in visible ways and rendering older or covert networks like the AAM partially invisible. This differential visibility constitutes an epistemic asymmetry: AI amplifies the historical footprint of digitally born activism while diminishing the perceived scale and sophistication of human-centered, analog movements (Couldry and Mejias 2019). As a result, the record of collective actions risks becoming skewed toward what is most machine-readable rather than what was most socially transformative.

To examine this asymmetry, this paper proceeds in several interconnected stages. The next section situates TANs within existing historiography and explains how computational methods intersect with archival practice. The two sections that follow present the case studies, AAM and FFF, highlighting how their organizational forms and communicative media shape their algorithmic visibility. A subsequent section offers a comparative analysis of how AI reconstructs or misconstrues these movements, and the following section outlines a methodological proposal for integrating AI tools with oral histories, ethnography, and archival humanism. The paper concludes by arguing for a critical algorithmic historiography that uses AI's analytical power without surrendering the interpretive, moral, and contextual depth that defines historical inquiry.

AI, Historiography, and the Problem of Legibility

Transnational Advocacy Networks: Historical Context

The study of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) emerged from efforts to understand how moral and informational politics transcend the nation-state. Keck and Sikkink's *Activists Beyond Borders* (1998) defined TANs as "networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation." Their model highlighted how nonstate actors from human rights campaigns to environmental coalitions mobilize across borders through the strategic use of information, symbolism, and leverage. Rather than relying on material resources or coercion, TANs gain influence by shaping norms and public narratives (Risse and Sikkink, 1999).

Historiographically, TAN research intersects with the rise of global civil society studies and social-movement theory. Early scholarship focused on formal NGOs and visible campaigns, but later work emphasized informal organizing, cross-ideological cooperation, and the role of emotion in sustaining advocacy (Bob 2005; Carpenter 2007). In this lineage, the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) functions as a canonical example of networked activism before the digital era, a moral coalition that combined churches, students, trade unions, and exiles into a diffuse yet remarkably coordinated international network (Thorn 2009). Such networks depended on analog communication, trust, and often secrecy; their traces survive in archives that are partial, handwritten, or dispersed across continents. As a result, reconstructing their organizational logic requires interpretive and ethnographic methods, tools that privilege context and human agency over computational pattern detection.

Artificial Intelligence and Historical Methodology

Artificial Intelligence now extends the historian's capacity to interrogate vast quantities of text and image. Through natural language processing (NLP), machine learning, and sentiment analysis, scholars can detect patterns across millions of documents, revealing structural relationships once hidden by scale (Colavizza 2021). Yet these technologies are only as inclusive as the data they ingest. Digitized archives overrepresent the bureaucratic, the official, and the already legible, while underrepresenting informal, noninstitutional, or marginalized voices (Sherratt 2022). Bowker (2006) and Scott (1998) remind us that every system of classification, whether archival or algorithmic, embeds power by privileging certain forms of knowledge. In the context of advocacy, this means AI will more readily reconstruct movements that leave structured metadata and standardized outputs (hashtags, posts, tagged documents) than those whose communications were intentionally opaque or interpersonal.

The concept of algorithmic legibility draws on this insight. AI recognizes activism to the extent that it conforms to data architectures designed for visibility and surveillance (Couldry and Mejias 2019). By translating activism into quantifiable digital footprints such as tweet counts, engagement metrics, co-occurrence networks, machine learning risks substituting traceability for understanding. The result is a methodological blind spot, an expanding computational map of activism that omits the moral framing, improvisation, and hidden labor underlying real transnational mobilization.

Epistemic Inequality and the Politics of Visibility

The asymmetry between what AI can analyze and what historians can interpret produces a new form of epistemic inequality. Movements that emerged in the digital era such as Fridays for Future (FFF) are hyper-legible to machines. Their organizing unfolds on platforms designed to capture and archive every post, comment, and interaction. In contrast, earlier human-centered movements like the AAM are archived unevenly, filtered through state surveillance, donor reports, or selective digitization. Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice, the systematic undervaluing of certain knowers or knowledge forms, helps explain this imbalance. AI reproduces these injustices when its training data omits or misclassifies historically marginalized actors.

Couldry and Mejias (2019) describe this as data colonialism: a new regime in which human experience becomes extractable data. For historians, this translates into algorithmic dependence on what is already digitized and monetized. When AI models dominate archival reconstruction, they risk reinscribing colonial hierarchies of visibility: Western, institutionalized, and recent movements appear central, while Global South or analog movements recede into the periphery. Thus, while AI may democratize access to archives, it also reorders historical significance according to machine-readability introducing a new epistemic hierarchy that historians must learn to decode and resist.

Case Study 1: The Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM)

The Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) represents one of the most influential and morally resonant transnational advocacy networks of the twentieth century. Originating in London in 1959 as the Boycott Movement, it expanded into a decentralized network linking church groups, student organizations, labor unions, exiled South African leaders, and international solidarity committees. Its mission was both normative and strategic: to frame apartheid as a violation of universal human rights, to pressure Western governments and corporations through boycotts and sanctions, and to sustain global public awareness of racial oppression in South Africa (Thorn 2009). Unlike later digital movements, the AAM relied on analog infrastructures of mobilization such as letters, newsletters, circulars, and personal visits that fostered trust and moral authority across borders.

This network's informal and adaptive structure was a direct response to political repression. Activists operated in dispersed nodes, often overlapping with anti-colonial and peace movements. Information circulated through semi-private channels, including church bulletins, student papers, and underground presses (Field 2012). Communication was deliberately coded

and redundant, ensuring that key messages survived censorship and surveillance. As a result, the AAM's coherence as a movement was produced not through a centralized hierarchy but through shared moral framing, the conviction that apartheid was a global, not merely South African, injustice (Seekings 2000). Its organizing style exemplified what Keck and Sikkink (1998) call information politics: the ability to "move politically usable information to where it will have the most impact."

Yet it is precisely this human-centered, analog character that poses challenges for AI-driven historical reconstruction. Much of the AAM's record exists in scattered archives such as minutes from solidarity committee meetings, pamphlets stored in basements, letters preserved by former activists. These materials resist algorithmic processing because they are heterogeneous, multilingual, and often only partially digitized. Handwritten correspondence confounds optical character recognition (OCR); informal meeting notes lack metadata; and transnational communication often used idiosyncratic or encoded phrasing to evade state monitoring (Saunders 2009). In short, the very practices that allowed the AAM to survive repression like opacity, redundancy, and informality render it epistemically invisible to machines.

The archival asymmetry that results is not merely technical but interpretive. Natural language processing and network-mapping tools rely on structured data to infer connections, but AAM's relationality was built on affect, trust, and shared moral repertoires rather than formal documentation. When AI systems attempt to reconstruct these networks, they produce incomplete or distorted maps which identify only the visible nodes (major NGOs, government reports, newspaper references) while erasing the dense informal circuits that sustained global solidarity. The danger is that future historians using AI may mistake archival sparsity for historical marginality, thereby diminishing the scope and sophistication of analog-era activism.

In this sense, the AAM exemplifies the historical blind spot of algorithmic historiography. Its story survives through human memory, oral history, and interpretive archival work, the forms of knowledge that resists full translation into data. Recognizing these limits is essential not only for understanding anti-apartheid activism but also for ensuring that AI-assisted historiography does not reproduce the very exclusions such movements sought to overcome.

Case Study 2: Fridays for Future (FFF)

If the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) epitomized analog activism's moral reach, Fridays for Future (FFF) illustrates the new architecture of digital advocacy. Originating in August 2018 when Greta Thunberg began striking outside the Swedish Parliament, FFF rapidly evolved into a transnational climate-justice movement operating primarily through social media platforms. Within months, digital networks transformed an individual protest into a global phenomenon. Coordinated through hashtags such as #FridaysForFuture, #SchoolStrike4Climate, and #ClimateStrike, the movement mobilized millions of students across more than 150 countries (de Moor 2021). The resulting digital footprint comprised of tweets, images, livestreams, petitions, and comment threads constitutes a continuously updating archive of activism, readily accessible to algorithms. In this sense, FFF is the first major transnational advocacy network born inside the algorithmic archive.

FFF's communication style is natively digital and performatively visible. Coordination takes place across platforms: Twitter/X for framing and outreach, Instagram and TikTok for visual mobilization, and Discord or Telegram for Intra-movement logistics (De Moor et al. 2020). This network architecture reflects what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) term connective action: loosely structured, digitally mediated mobilization built on personalized content sharing rather than formal organization. The affective immediacy of digital media used in hashtags, emojis, and viral imagery substitutes for the embodied trust networks that characterized earlier activism. Moreover, AI tools are now embedded within the movement's own communication practices: automated translation, synthetic imagery, and even AI-generated personas are used to visualize climate futures and amplify outreach. These forms of synthetic activism not only expand reach but also ensure algorithmic visibility, as platform recommendation systems privilege high-engagement, multimodal content.

For the historian or for AI systems attempting to reconstruct the movement, this abundance of structured data creates an illusion of transparency. Natural language processing and sentiment-analysis models can quantify enthusiasm, track diffusion patterns, and identify influencers in real time (Theocharis, Kassing, and Trilling 2020). Yet these same analytical strengths risk flattening the movement's moral and social complexity. Digital traces tend to overrepresent the most algorithmically active nodes particularly English-language accounts, urban users, and Western activists while underrepresenting local or Global South participants who rely on offline or low-bandwidth forms of engagement (Pickard 2022). In this way, AI recreates the bias of the platforms on which FFF operates, turning visibility into a proxy for significance.

The epistemic consequence is a mirror image of the Anti-Apartheid Movement's invisibility. Where AAM is archived too sparsely for machines, FFF is archived too well. AI-based reconstructions risk mistaking data abundance for historical importance. The constant production of digital content ensures that FFF will be highly legible to future historians using algorithmic tools, but that legibility may obscure the movement's internal contradictions, its uneven representation, decentralized governance, and intersectional tensions. The analytic focus on measurable engagement displaces interpretive attention from values and moral narratives, which, as Keck and Sikkink (1998) remind us, constitute the very essence of advocacy.

The case of FFF thus reveals the paradoxical endpoint of algorithmic historiography: a movement whose every action is archived and analyzable, yet whose meaning risks being reduced to metrics. AI may excel at counting tweets and mapping hashtags, but it cannot yet grasp how a generation transformed climate anxiety into global solidarity. Understanding that transformation requires the interpretive, ethnographic, and narrative methods that digital data alone cannot supply.

Comparative Analysis: From Human Networks to Machine-Legible Movements

Placed side by side, the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and Fridays for Future (FFF) reveal the historical shift from human networks of trust to machine-legible networks of data. Both embody transnational moral action mobilizing empathy, framing injustice, and demanding global accountability, but they do so through radically different infrastructures of visibility. The AAM's analog activism thrived in an environment of limited media exposure, relying on interpersonal

relationships, symbolic boycotts, and appeals to conscience. In contrast, FFF emerged within an algorithmically mediated public sphere, where visibility is currency and communication is continuous. These divergent infrastructures produce what can be called an epistemic asymmetry: the historical record systematically overrepresents digital movements and underrepresents analog ones, not because of their respective impacts, but because of how each aligns with the data architectures through which AI “sees.”

Structural and Archival Asymmetries

The AAM’s archival invisibility stems from its resistance to surveillance. Its participants encoded correspondence, circulated paper newsletters, and built decentralized solidarity networks across states and continents (Thorn 2009; Saunders 2009). These strategies minimized traceability but also left behind scattered, often incomplete documentation. AI-based tools that depend on digitized, standardized text struggle to recover these dispersed traces. In contrast, FFF’s operations are inherently data-generating. Every tweet, image, or post functions as both activism and artifact, automatically time-stamped and tagged for retrieval. The difference is not simply technological but epistemological: the AAM’s logic was analog resistance; FFF’s is digital amplification. Where one avoided documentation to survive, the other depends on documentation to exist.

Algorithmic Legibility and Historical Bias

The term algorithmic legibility (Scott 1998; Bowker 2006) captures how systems of classification shape what counts as knowledge. AI’s analytic strength in pattern recognition across massive datasets relies on legible data formats. FFF therefore appears hyper-coherent in machine learning reconstructions: social network analyses easily map clusters of interaction, and sentiment algorithms chart moral momentum in real time (Theocharis, Kassing, and Trilling 2020). In contrast, the AAM emerges as fragmented or even peripheral; its moral energy is invisible to computational analysis. This difference produces a false symmetry: an algorithmic comparison might suggest FFF’s scale or coordination far exceeds that of AAM, even though the AAM sustained a multi-decade global campaign that helped transform international norms. In other words, data density is a mistake for historical significance.

Such distortions mirror what Couldry and Mejias (2009) term data colonialism, the extraction and valuation of human activity through digital infrastructures. Just as colonial archives privileged imperial voices, algorithmic archives privilege the digital, English-language, and platform-visible. When historians outsource detection of patterns to AI, they risk reproducing these hierarchies of visibility. The epistemic effect is cumulative: digital-era movements become progressively overrepresented in computational historiography, while analog or non-Western movements fade from the analytic field. AI thus functions not merely as a neutral method but as a selective amplifier of modernity.

Toward a Reflexive Methodology for AI-Assisted Historiography

Recognizing this asymmetry invites a reflexive methodological stance. Rather than discarding AI, historians must use it diagnostically to reveal the contours of what machines cannot yet see. Mixed methods’ approaches that combine computational analysis with oral history, ethnography, and archival curation can counteract algorithmic bias (Colavizza 2021; Sherratt 2022). For

instance, AI can assist in locating dispersed AAM documents or mapping the temporal rhythms of FFF mobilization, but interpretation must remain human-centered. Only through triangulating quantitative and qualitative evidence can scholars reconstruct both the visible and the hidden infrastructures of transnational advocacy.

Ultimately, the comparison between AAM and FFF underscores that the historian's challenge in the age of AI is not access but interpretation. The risk is not that the past will vanish, but that it will reappear misrepresented through the lens of algorithmic legibility. The task ahead is to develop a critical algorithmic historiography, one that acknowledges data's power while refusing its epistemic monopoly.

Bridging AI and Humanistic Inquiry

If the comparison between the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and Fridays for Future (FFF) exposes AI's epistemic asymmetry, the task before historians is to design methods that bridge machine precision with human interpretation. The challenge is not to reject AI but to discipline it, to situate computational analysis within interpretive traditions that preserve moral, contextual, and historical nuance. A critical algorithmic historiography requires what Colavizza (2021) calls hybrid intelligence: the integration of algorithmic tools into historically grounded reasoning rather than their substitution for it.

Mixed-Methods Reconstruction

The first methodological principle is triangulation. Quantitative text-mining, image-recognition, and network-analysis tools can assist in locating dispersed materials or identifying overlooked linkages, but their results must be continually tested against qualitative evidence. Oral histories, ethnographic interviews, and archival annotation projects remain indispensable for reconstructing the affective and moral dimensions of advocacy networks (Field 2012; Thorn 2009). For instance, computational clustering might reveal unexpected transnational connections within AAM correspondence, but only interviews with surviving activists can explain how trust, secrecy, and improvisation made those connections meaningful. Likewise, AI sentiment analysis of FFF tweets should be contextualized with ethnographic observation of strike events to distinguish performative enthusiasm from enduring commitment.

Archival Justice and Inclusive Digitization

Second, historians must confront the archival inequalities embedded in data infrastructures. The digitization of archives tends to follow geopolitical and linguistic hierarchies. English-language and Global North collections are richly encoded, while movements from the Global South remain under-digitized (Sherratt 2022). Caswell and Cifor's (2016) call for *archival care* and *radical empathy* offers a crucial counterpoint: archival systems must attend to the communities whose voices are at risk of being erased. Extending their argument to AI-driven archives highlights how digitization and automation can widen these gaps unless community-centered practices remain central. Collaborative digitization with local institutions, activist communities, and formerly marginalized groups can create training materials that better represent global advocacy histories. Such work transforms AI from a passive consumer of archives into an active partner in their diversification.

Reflexive AI Design and Transparency

Third, scholars must advocate for reflexive algorithmic design. Transparency in data provenance, model training, and interpretive limitations should accompany every computational historical study. As Bowker (2006) reminds us, classification systems are political; the categories embedded in machine learning models implicitly define what counts as legitimate evidence. Developing open-source, historically diverse training datasets, for example, incorporating handwritten documents, multilingual materials, and oral transcription texts would mitigate the exclusionary effects of current models. Historians and computer scientists should co-design interpretive layers that allow models to flag uncertainty rather than overstate confidence when encountering analog or culturally specific data.

Integrative Analytical Framework

This approach treats AI and humanistic methods as mutually reinforcing rather than competing modes of analysis. AI excels at scale, pattern detection, and discovery, while historians excel at interpretation, contextualization, and moral reasoning. The two must operate in dialogue. As Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue, resisting data colonialism requires reclaiming the interpretive authority of human judgment and situating computational findings within broader political and ethical contexts.

Rather than a linear pipeline in which AI outputs are simply verified or corrected, reconstructing transnational advocacy networks requires a cyclical, mixed-methods process in which each phase reshapes the next. **Figure 1** illustrates this iterative workflow, showing how AI analysis and humanistic inquiry interact in a continuous loop of pattern detection, interpretation, analog/archival verification, and model refinement.

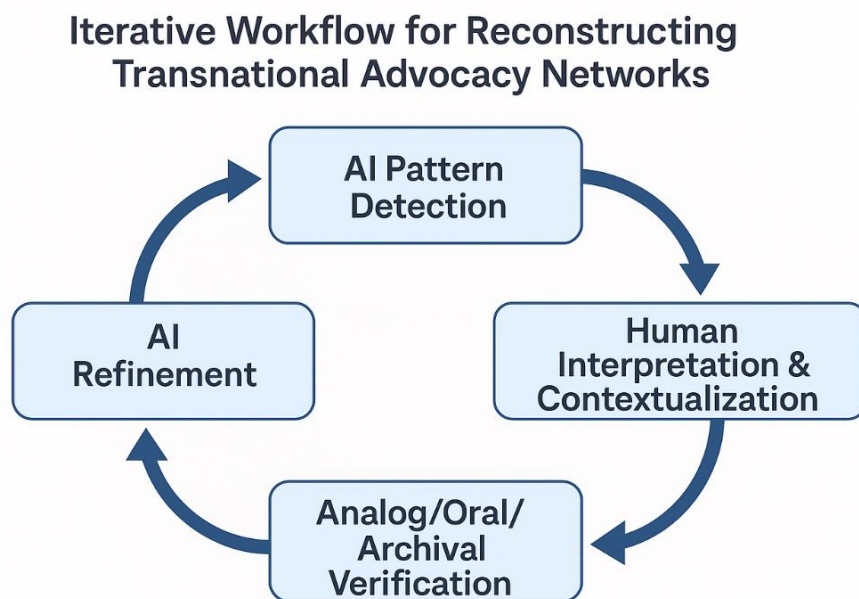


Figure 1. A cyclical, mixed-methods workflow in which AI pattern detection, human interpretation, analog/archival verification, and AI refinement operate as an iterative loop for reconstructing transnational advocacy networks.

By conceptualizing the analytic process as a loop rather than a line, the model highlights how AI and humanistic methods generate more robust insights together than either could alone. The aim

is not automation but augmentation, a co-production of historical knowledge that respects both data and discourse.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence now stands at the threshold of historical practice. It promises breadth, speed, and precision, yet as this paper has argued, these strengths conceal an epistemic narrowing. The comparison between the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and Fridays for Future (FFF) demonstrates that what AI illuminates most vividly are those movements already designed for its gaze. In privileging structured, digitized, and linguistically standardized data, AI amplifies the visibility of digital-era activism while dimming the human, analog struggles that predate it. The result is a skewed historiography; one in which data abundance masquerades as historical importance, and archival silence is mistaken for absence.

This asymmetry is not only technical but moral. The AAM's analog networks, forged through risk, exile, and moral conviction, left sparse digital residue yet reshaped the moral landscape of the late twentieth century. FFF's algorithmic activism, in contrast, unfolds in real time across searchable databases and platforms, leaving a meticulously indexed trace of youth engagement. When machine learning systems map these movements side by side, they reproduce the logic of algorithmic legibility, an epistemic filter that rewards documentation and penalizes discretion. Left unexamined, AI risks enshrining a future in which history is written not by the victors but by the datasets.

A critical algorithmic historiography offers a way forward. It recognizes AI's analytical power while re-centering interpretive authority in human hands. The historian's task is no longer only to recover what has been lost but to question what machines have chosen to find. By pairing computational analysis with oral history, ethnography, and archival empathy, scholars can counteract algorithmic bias and restore the complexity of transnational activism to the historical record. This fusion of machine vision and human judgement transforms AI from a mechanism of reduction into an instrument of revelation.

In the end, the question is not whether AI will participate in writing history—it already does, but whether historians will guide how it learns to see. If the Anti-Apartheid Movement taught the world that moral networks can topple injustice, and Fridays for Future reminds us that digital networks can mobilize the planet, the historian's charge is to ensure that both remain equally visible in the age of algorithms.

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