Environmental Activism in the Digital Age

Maëlle Jacqmarcq
Edited by Avery Franken and Chanel MacDiarmid

ABSTRACT - The development of new digital technologies was predicted to be a boon for environmental activism. Internet and social media platforms were expected to facilitate broad bottom-up change, enabling activists worldwide to communicate and organize more effectively. However, the emergence of digital technologies may not have revolutionized the methods and impacts of activist organizations, especially for the environmental movement, wherein meaningful change has not yet been realized regarding climate change and nature preservation. Given the many challenges activists face, it is essential to understand how collective action can be undertaken with digital media to produce positive consequences for nature and human relations. Moreover, the neoliberal economic context from which digital technologies emerged and grew further accelerates environmental destruction through overproduction and overconsumption. This paper examines the relationship between environmental activism and digital technologies. While the environmental movement may have benefitted from newer organizational and communication tools on the international stage, the neoliberal economic framework in which digital technologies operate fundamentally contradicts the goals of the environmental movement.
The emergence of the internet and the growth of social media platforms have been considered powerful new tools for social activism movements, facilitating broad bottom-up change. The environmental movement was initially thought to benefit from the arrival and growth of new digital technologies. It was hoped that tools such as online communication and social media platforms would allow environmental activists to organize more effectively. Spreading information to a wide audience of supporters and connecting with like-minded individuals would be easier as geographical and temporal barriers were reduced, and as the need to pass through established news companies was eliminated. However, the emergence of digital technologies did not revolutionize the methods and impacts of activist organizations. This is particularly true for the environmental movement, whose existence to this day demonstrates the continued urgency of the climate crisis. The environmental movement in this paper will refer to organizations whose general focus is the protection of the environment as well as individuals independently taking part in related activism. Environmental protection through the environmental movement may take the form of advocating for a decrease in global temperature rise, increased biodiversity, conservation efforts, and climate justice, among other goals. Mainstream media sources will refer to print media (newspapers) and electronic media (television, radio, cable news), while digital media will refer to media communication that emerged with the internet, such as emails, organization websites, and social media platforms. This paper will examine the impacts that the emergence of online communication and social media platforms have had on the methods and the efficacy of the environmental movement in generating meaningful change for environmental protection from individuals, public actors, and the private sector. Given the significant challenges we are facing in terms of climate change and environmental degradation, understanding how collective action can be undertaken within digital media is important to produce the most positive consequences for nature and human relations. The paper will argue that the benefits enabled by digital technologies for the environmental movement, namely more effective organization and communication, are outweighed by the tendency of online activism to be low-risk and lacking real engagement, due to echo chambers and ‘slacktivism’. These costs and benefits of digital technologies for the environmental movement are ultimately overshadowed by the structural problems that come from the neoliberal economic context. These problems contradict the initial goals of equal co-creation and horizontal communication of digital technologies and are fundamentally detrimental to the environmental movement. Firstly, the paper will discuss the benefits of digital technologies for the environmental movement: the loss of geographical and temporal barriers to spread information, reaching wider audiences, and the increased independence of environmental organizations to communicate on their platforms. Secondly, the paper will discuss the negative consequences of digital technologies on environmental activism: mainly, that wider audiences translate into the loss of meaningful engagement and impactful activism. Thirdly, the paper will assess the underlying structural issue, which is the dependence of the environmental movement on the neoliberal elite to succeed. This is evidenced in two ways: first, the problem of established corporate media power means that the environmental movement must create spectacular news to fit into the top-down model, requiring “expensive and difficult” media coverage, and second, the commodification of nature in the discourse and methods of activism is in contradiction with the preservation of nature itself. Lastly, the paper will conclude that to protect the natural environment, the environmental movement will need to transform the way they currently use digital technologies, to promote strong environmental collective action by decreasing what digital technologies were originally hoped to bring: a space of horizontal, bottom-up co-creation where communication is thoughtful and inclusive. Strength, Efficacy, and Independence of Online Environmental Activism

The emergence of digital technologies altered the way environmental activism operates. Traditional campaigning practices were done by lobbying groups, scholars, or scientific organizations in a slow, more effortful manner by organizing protests or unconventional actions and influencing the broader society through books and news media (Elliott 2020). Conversely, digital technologies enabled faster communication between like-minded but geographically far individuals through emails, organizational webpages, and social media platforms. Effective communication is at the heart of any type of activism in order to share information, to raise awareness, as well as to coordinate mobilization and organize actions; in fact, the success of activist activities is dependent on effective communication (Blüssing, Thielking, and Menzel 2019, 12). Social media platforms and other forms of online communication are therefore powerful tools for activist movements, allowing organizations to extend and accelerate the circulation of information, to mobilize resources, raise awareness, facilitate discussion, organize events and gain public attention” (Sobéron 2019, 2). Digital media has allowed the environmental movement to transcend the significant geographical and temporal barriers of traditional activism by disseminating information quickly. This is especially evident in “cross-platform usage”, where information is spread through “horizontal networks interconnected through different platforms” (3). Most large environmental non-governmental organizations, such as Greenpeace or the World Wildlife Fund, now tend to have an online presence across wide geographical areas very efficiently.

As previously discussed, the environmental movement has been able to gain public attention by using “tactical media” strategies or creating original and rapid content that is then given coverage by mainstream media sources. The environmental movement has also been able to gain widespread public attention by using digital technologies autonomously, no longer relying on print and electronic media. Instead, environmental organizations can communicate directly with their

FLUX: International Relations Review

FLUX: International Relations Review
The ability to create one’s self-representation and the ability to share this information quickly, the environmental movement has used digital technologies to reach and mobilize a widespread and large audience of old and new supporters. Social media platforms such as Facebook create “horizontal networks” between users who can share campaigns, ideas, and other information internationally, thus widening the reach of anything published above (Abelvik-Lawson 2020). Similarly, the “user-friendly and flexible forms of communication” that are permitted on social media platforms, such as videos and events, may appeal to wider audiences more effectively than written content which may be less accessible in mainstream media (2). The global environmental organization, Greenpeace, argued that petitions and hashtags are several of the tools offered on social media platforms that allow people campaigning on similar issues to connect and are part of wider campaigns which can create “huge societal change” (Abelvik-Lawson 2020). The “worldwide attention” given in the past year to the ‘Fridays for Future’ movement—a worldwide movement of youth striking weekly to protest the inaction on climate change, led by Greta Thunberg—and the widespread use of the hashtag #FridaysForFuture on social media is another demonstration of using digital technologies to reach a large audience and gain widespread news attention (Sobrón 2019, 1).

Media attention which reaches a large audience is effective for an environmental movement because it helps to gain new supporters and mobilize old ones. This ultimately fosters change by putting pressure on powerful actors, such as companies or politicians, to change their actions or decisions, by raising awareness, and appealing to a large scope of individuals to make small changes in their daily lives. For example, a video made by Greenpeace in 2014 called “Everything is not Awesome” criticized Lego’s partnership with the oil company Shell and was viewed six million times online (Abelvik-Lawson 2020). The video format is a powerful medium to share information and provoke emotion from an audience, and its presence on social media and Greenpeace’s website made the message spread quickly across the world. This ultimately resulted in Lego ending its “multimillion-pound, 50-year relationship with the oil company” due to the pressure of maintaining a positive corporate image (Abelvik-Lawson 2020).

While the emergence of the internet and growth of digital technologies initially brought hope to activist movements due to their potential to accelerate change, a growing body of literature has raised concerns about the effectiveness of online activism. The global environmental movement has the power to create positive environmental change by sharing public opinion about companies, politicians, and even oneself in terms of the environmental impact of their behaviors. The reduction of geographical and temporal barriers, the ability to gain widespread attention without depending on traditional news outlets, and the two-directional nature of communication on digital media technologies have allowed the environmental movement to become more autonomous, participatory, and far-reaching.

**Slacktivism and Echo Chambers: Is Online Activism Even Activism?**

Online activism has been described as ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ due to the absence of meaningful engagement and mobilization by online activists, referring to the inability of creating change by simply liking content with a ‘click’ (Büscher 2016, 730). Büsing, Thielking, and Menzel (2019) sought to examine the relationship between online environmental behavior (‘liking’ content) and more demanding offline behaviors, such as donating money, volunteering, or ‘protesting the protection of the Andean bear in Ecuador’ (4). They found that online campaigns can be a “low-level entry point for environmental action” but only if the individuals in question have the time or money (9). Their conclusions are thus in line with the assumptions of slacktivism: since offline activities such as volunteering or donating money require large personal resources, they are more closely correlated to each other than to online ‘liking’ (9). Therefore, their results show that digital technologies are only effective in leading to meaningful actions in support of the environmental movement if individuals are already predisposed to do so.

Conversely, Greenpeace argues that online environmental support leads to meaningful activism both offline and digitally. The organization cites a Georgetown University study which stated that online activists are “twice as likely to volunteer their time, more than four times as likely to contact political representatives, and five times as likely to recruit others to sign petitions” (Abelvik-Lawson 2020). The stronger emphasis made by Greenpeace on the correlation between online engagement and offline actions may be caused in part by Greenpeace’s role as an environmental organization which uses hashtags, videos, and petitions to generate mobilization, and thus wishes to portray online activism as a strong gateway to meaningful offline action. As a large environmental organization, Greenpeace can also find further use in offline activism by being able to monetize online actions, such as likes or views by their supporters, something which the smaller Ecuadorian organization studied by Büsing, Thielking, and Menzel probably could not. Nevertheless, it can be expected that...
the individuals who ‘like’ environmental content online will be more likely to engage in offline environmental activism than those who do not partake in online liking, but liking online content remains a much easier task (in terms of time, money, and engagement) than offline activities. Therefore, while the environmental movement may have reached a wider audience using digital technologies, it is to conclude whether the audience size has led to a increase in offline activism, as a of slactivism. of digital technologies activism discussed literature, is the risk ‘echo chamber’. Echo on the idea that online organizations individuals who are and committed to actions and will thus ‘converting’ others public support for movement 2020, 50). This linked with the of social media platforms such the platforms show the content they are most likely to engage with (liking, commenting, or sharing it for example), which is based on the data generated by what that individual has previously engaged with. Hemmi and Crowther (2013) recognize this limitation of communicating and mobilizing online. They argue that “sub-activism” on social media platforms does not reach as much of the public compared to print or electronic media due to individuals “primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network” (4, 5). Due to echo chambers, there is a trade-off when using digital technologies: while these online platforms bring autonomy to the environmental movement, they have a limited and partial audience reach since they may only attain the people who are already seeking out their message. This audience reach is both advantageous and disadvantageous: while it has the disadvantage of spreading the movement’s messages to a smaller number of people, it also has the potential advantage of this smaller group being more passionate and interested, and more likely to engage in subsequent offline activism. Therefore, to effectively foster awareness and attain the vast goal of reversing climate change through broad societal change, the environmental movement must use digital technologies in conjunction with mainstream media, to simultaneously advocate towards a mass audience and direct potential supporters to their unfiltered message online. The difficulty of digital technologies in generating meaningful engagement has led scholars to question whether online activism can truly be called ‘activism’. Activism is defined as “a doctrine or practice that emphasized direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue” (Merriam-Webster 2020). This stereotypical vision of activism which focuses on effortful action is agreed upon by interviewed members of Friends of the Earth Scotland who described “true” activism as involving high stakes, confrontation, and militancy (Hemmi and Crowther 2013, 4). Only one of these interviewees described their environmental activity on the organization’s Facebook page as “environmental activism”; instead, all the others referred to their activities as simply campaigning or communicating (3). This conception of activism is a narrow one because campaigns and communication are important aspects of activism and essential to generate change since they are the basis of any form of organization and advocacy to render a population more sensitive to a given message. Nevertheless, Hemmi and Crowther (2013) argue that online activity allows members to be “environmentally concerned but not militantly, politically engaged but not ideologically driven, participating and active, but without bodily risk” (5). It is important to understand the nuance between these different forms of environmental activity in order to distinguish the line between what is true activism and what is not. Also, it is necessary to remember that online activism may be a way for people to participate and support a cause safely, people who otherwise would be at disproportionate risk of state violence if they took part in more confrontational activist methods. For example, Extinction Rebellion has recognized that their reliance on direct, high stakes militancy, essentially being arrested as a method to protest the lack of environmental policy in the UK, is flawed, as it puts people of color at higher risk of police violence despite partaking in similar activities (Extinction Rebellion 2020). In addition to the lack of confrontational militancy, online environmental activity may be more focused on creating one’s digital identity and presenting oneself as environmentally engaged rather than helping to foster meaningful change. Gladwell argues that “the growth of ‘social media activism’ movement may merely express how individuals are constructing their own identities rather than expressing strong commitments to social movement goals” (Hemmi and Crowther 2013, 6). Therefore, due to the risks of slactivism and echo chambers and the potential for individuals to use environmental movement to form their digital identity, the environmental movement’s use of online activism has the risk of limiting its potential audience reach, which makes it more difficult to generate widespread offline activism. It also has the risk of overlooking the “substance of traditional activist engagement”, which may be the only meaningful way to promote societal change (6).
of established mainstream news sources (592). The model of media power has remained the same despite the growth of digital technologies: Environmental groups are using the internet in a way that reaffirms the historical and cultural dominance of print and electronic news media, adapting to the agenda and priorities of journalists, as opposed to forging new forms of media power embedded within the specific networking capacity of the internet (Hutchins 2009, 580). The authors argue that there is a “popular assumption” that the established news media hold “a privileged and naturalized role in representing and anchoring ‘reality’” (Lester and Hutchins 2009, 591). This is an issue because environmental campaigns that do not gain news media coverage are believed to be unable to attract broad public support as access to a mass, impartial audience may only be attained through mainstream news coverage. Therefore, environmental organizations use tactical media to “intervene in and influence” the mainstream news outlets (582). Since these major news sources are based on novelty and significant events, the environmental movement must systematically re-strategize to “find alternative access points” into the mainstream news media (583). Some of the tactical tools they use are the coordination of strategic actions combined with “symbolic resonance” (583). The earlier example of ‘Hector the Forest Protector’ demonstrates this combination: the strategic action of Smith sitting in a tree temporarily prevented the logging of the forest and it gained national news coverage by also creating advertising space, they give the majority of their revenue to “rainforest sustainability programs” (731). Firstly, the representation of the movement as it makes it dependent on the commodification of nature in its discourse and methods of activism, contradicting the natural world itself. Environmental activism inevitably must create some human representation of nature to impart common understandings of the natural world to others. However, Büscher (2016) argues that the representations of nature present online are almost entirely commodified to fit within the economic model of consumerism and profit-making and this commodification of nature happens in what Büscher calls ‘nature 2.0’ (727). Nature 2.0 is “a nature that is humanly produced” through co-creation, active modification, and production by individuals on social media and other online communication spheres (727, 728). An example of nature commodification is the ecological search engine called Ecosia. By selling user data and creating advertising space, they give the majority of their revenue to “rainforest sustainability programs” (731). Firstly, the representation of the Amazon rainforest as the “lungs of our planet” hides a more complex reality of local gold-diggers and farmers who rely on the forest for their income. This representation of nature is distorted and commodified to fit within the economic model of consumerism and profit-making. In today’s economic context, nature conservation efforts are increasingly being “subjected to capitalist market dynamics” such as ecotourism or payments for ecosystem services (Büscher 2016, 728). Similarly, environmental organizations compete among one another for the attention of media outlets and potential online conservation supporters, instead of the collective efforts needed to reach environmental goals (733). Büscher argues that part of the problem lies in the “highly marketized environment where ‘social connections’ and ‘doing good’ in the like-economy consist solely of individual actions” (733). The neoliberal market model poses significant challenges for the environmental movement, as engine to place more advertisements, indirectly encouraging more consumption and destruction of the environment. The commodification of nature in online discourses and activist methods fits within the neoliberal vision which represents competition and profit as ways of “saving nature”. However, the representation of nature through these capitalist forces is “impersonal” and “sliced into small bits that can be trademarked and sold” which goes against the true representation of nature as wild, peaceful, and diverse (736). Therefore, while the emergence of digital technologies spurred hope for the environmental movement to provide a space for bottom-up mobilization for nature preservation, the neoliberal economic context shifted the structural mechanisms of digital technologies. Instead, environmental organizations remained dependent on their messages being expressed through the same elitist model of media power and resorted to nature commodification to succeed at raising public awareness, at the cost of positive and sustainable representations of the environment.

How to Save Digital Environmental Activism and the Planet

In order to promote strong and effective collective action for the environment, digital technologies must find a way to operate within the neoliberal economic structure in a way that fosters horizontal, bottom-up communication and activism, in contrast with the top-down models upon which they were originally created. In today’s economic context, nature conservation efforts are increasingly being “subjected to capitalist market dynamics” such as ecotourism or payments for ecosystem services (Büscher 2016, 728). Similarly, environmental organizations compete among one another for the attention of media outlets and potential online conservation supporters, instead of the collective efforts needed to reach environmental goals (733). Büscher argues that part of the problem lies in the “highly marketized environment where ‘social connections’ and ‘doing good’ in the like-economy consist solely of individual actions” (733). The neoliberal market model poses significant challenges for the environmental movement, as previously discussed, and commodifying nature will not solve the environmental crisis. Therefore, it will be essential moving forward to reimagine the way digital technologies are structured economically, to reduce negative business incentives and promote positive nature conservation efforts.

Various scholars have discussed potential alternatives to structure digital technologies in accordance with environmental efforts. Lester and Hutchins (2009) argue for the importance of “sustainable self-representation” reinforced by direct and on-going communication between users, where online users participate in the creation of citizen journalism through “community-driven wikis, blogs, vlogs and video-hosting sites” (591). Investing in such types of participatory communication models would lead to news that is “more likely to be incremental than spectacular,” but this digital collective self-representation fits better with the goals of the environmental movement, “both philosophically and practically” (591, 592). It is essential to create an open digital space where all individuals can contribute to the dissemination of news and mobilization. Büscher (2016) makes similar claims about the importance of horizontal self-representation on social media platforms. He suggests that ‘eco-blogging’ could be a “form of pedagogy to critique established, consumeristic online communication” among equal individuals (734). Currently, there are significant efforts made in this direction as news websites such as The Correspondent and Drilled News are reader-funded and collaborative, and are thus able to be ad-free, participatory spaces of journalism. Similarly, independent podcasts funded by listener contributions through Patreon, such as the Critical Frequency podcasts and the Yikes podcast, enable bottom-up discussion on pressing climate issues, free of corporate funding. Environmental problems are increasingly salient; therefore, fostering forms of self-representation that are desirable to avoid elite news “diluted by the interests of the state, capital and/or corporate media” and to promote sustainable communication and collective action (Lester and Hutchins 2009, 592).

An important aspect of sustainable and ongoing self-representation by the environmental
movement online is about shifting the structural way we relate to each other on these digital technologies, promoting thought-out, expressive communication. The neoliberal economic context with its ever-growing desire for profit has a fundamental impact on how we use digital technologies today. Communication and relationality on these platforms are structured to be commodified and result in the types of engagement such as surface-level ‘likes’ and feeding into echo chambers. It dissuades users from engaging in thought-out, expressive communication, and ultimately goes against the goals of the environmental movement. Wael Ghonim (2015) argues that real change on social media can be achieved by promoting civility and thoughtfulness in online discussions, and making it socially acceptable to change one’s mind on a subject, rather than the short and sharp opinions given in response to complex issues; he argues that it is important to talk with each other instead of at each other. Similarly, the scholar Zeynep Tufekci (2010) argues that effective social change can be achieved through slow and sustained work and protest, and embracing technology change can be achieved through slow and sustained effortful offline activism. Nevertheless, in many ways, it is difficult to characterize the size and nature of the impact of the growth of digital technologies on the methods of the environment movement. Due to the neoliberal economic context within which social media platforms and other online communication technologies grew, corporate news continues to dominate mainstream media coverage as well as the digital sphere, where digital platform algorithms favor these established news companies to maximize online engagement. The perpetuation of this elitist model of media power within the digital sphere shapes the actions and content of environmental organizations and prevents them from being completely autonomous in the content they generate. Additionally, the representation of nature in neoliberal terms is detrimental to environmental goals as it aims to generate profit from the preservation of nature, when the act of seeking profit can be seen as promoting over-production and over-consumption, beyond nature’s limits. The goals of the environmental movement will be best promoted by fostering the initial hopes of digital technologies: providing an open space for deliberation, creation, and self-representation among individuals. Achieving this space of healthy communication will help to cultivate effective activism and an environmentally sustainable future.

References


