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# Environmental Activism in the Digital Age

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**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 this top-down model and receive 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 recreating 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 (Büssing, 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 multiple social media platforms as well as their websites, allowing them to communicate with their supporters directly, instantaneously, and across large geographical spaces.

While online communication reduces geographical and temporal distances for the spread of information, digital technologies are also essential spaces for what Geert Lovink calls “tactical media action” (Lester and Hutchins 2009, 581). Lovink is a scholar whose work focuses on

the “emancipatory and democratizing potential of new media technologies,” and his idea of ‘tactical media’ is defined as a form of communication which is “participatory,” “dissenting,” and used by groups of people who feel “aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture” (580, 581). Tactical media is a powerful tool for activists to interrupt established news media with their messages. This tool is reinforced with digital technologies as activists have “expanded forms of distribution” namely the internet, where their messages can be shared across the world in seconds and can potentially gain a lot of traction (581). Using tactical media strategies through digital communication technologies is useful for the environmental movement to attract mainstream media attention. An example of this use of tactical media for environmental purposes can be seen in Neil Smith’s ten-day ‘tree-sit’ in 1998 to protest the construction of a road in a eucalyptus tree forest in Tasmania (586). After ten days in the tree with a computer and internet connection, Smith, who was dubbed “Hector the Forest Protector,” gained significant media coverage through the spread of information to politicians and news companies by email, recounting his situation and the context of the forest (586). Although Smith’s action was not successful in preventing the construction of the road, it is an example of a tactical media strategy, demonstrating the effective use of digital technologies at the beginning of the internet era to gain mainstream media attention and to spread information across a country despite spatial isolation. Digital technologies have thus enabled the environmental movement to engage in tactical media strategies in order to disseminate information and communicate 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

supporters as well as a broader audience through their webpages and social media platforms. This is a significant shift in the communication methods of environmental activism, as print and electronic media played an essential role in “environmental politics” before the emergence of the Internet, by “negotiating access, shaping meanings, and circulating symbols” about the environmental movement (Lester and Hutchins 2009, 579). In short, print and electronic media acted as gatekeepers for the environmental movement to gain access to widespread media attention. The emergence of digital technologies such as social media platforms created a clear shift for the environmental movement, as they were able to create and share their own content and information with much lower costs and “devoid of the mediating effect of news journalists and the established news media industries” (579). In addition to allowing the environmental organizations’ leadership to have full control over the information they share, the use of social media platforms also allowed this communication to be shaped by the members of these organizations themselves. While mainstream media has a clear direction, where information is delivered to a passive audience, digital media engages the audience through the shared content, effectively making them producers of content. As Akiko Hemmi and Jim Crowther (2013) describe, social media platforms create “two-directional” communication, where both the organization and its supporters can share and personalize the other’s content (1). With digital technologies, mainstream media no longer determines the information that is shared about the environmental movement and this information becomes constantly shaped and built upon by the individuals constituting the movement (Lester and Hutchins 2009, 580). This benefit of digital technologies is important for the environmental movement as it fosters solidarity through increased “interpersonal contact” between supporters, as well as opportunities for “individual textual production and innovative forms of civil engagement” (Craig 2019, 165, 167). This ultimately fosters meaningful involvement in the cause for environmental protection.

With 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 about them (Hemmi and Crowther 2013, 2). 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 (Sobéron 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). Similarly, Hemmi and Crowther (2013) argue that online activism can be thought of as ‘persuasive activism’ or ‘sub-activism’, where online environmental action is effective by being a “persuasive strategy of engagement rather than a confrontational one”, and “unfolds at the level of subjective experience” (4). One interviewed member of Friends of the Earth Scotland stated that online, small-scale activism is more effective than confrontational offline environmental activism as it is “more approachable and less lecturing”, meaning that “people will listen to us and we’ll be able to influence them a lot more” (4). Involvement in environmental groups through social media contributes to the creation of “ecological citizenship” among individuals, according to Andrew Dobson, which is a form of identity that focuses on the “public implications” of one’s actions, especially in terms of one’s ecological footprint (Craig 2019, 167). Therefore, the use of digital technologies by the environmental movement has the power to create positive environmental change by shaping public opinion about companies, politicians, and even one’s self 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?**

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 (see Büssing et al. 2019; Büscher 2016; Hemmi and Crowther 2013) is questioning the power of digital technologies in fostering meaningful 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). Büssing, Thielking, and Menzel (2019) sought to examine the relationship between online environmental behavior (‘liking’ content) and more demanding offline behaviors, such as donating money and volunteering, by conducting a quantitative research project about 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 larger 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 also may 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 Büssing, 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 by using digital technologies, it is difficult to conclude whether the increase in audience size has led to a commensurate increase in offline environmental activism, as a consequence of slacktivism.

Another risk for environmental activism discussed widely in the literature, is the risk of creating an ‘echo chamber’. Echo on the idea that online organizations will only reach individuals who are already interested and committed to actions and will thus prevent them from ‘converting’ others and widening the public support for the environmental movement (Greijsdanus et al. 2020, 50). This idea is directly linked with the algorithmic structure of social media platforms such as Facebook: the platforms show individuals 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 militant, 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’ may be misleading as it 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 slacktivism 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).

## The Underlying Neoliberal Context of the Digital Environmental Movement

The environmental movement has reduced geographical and temporal barriers in communicating information and has been able to share content to a large audience more autonomously as a result of digital technologies. However, the increase of meaningful activism, which effectively raises awareness and leads to change both online and offline, is not proportional to the increase in audience levels due to slacktivism and echo chambers. Furthermore, the structural model of digital technologies and consequently the structural model of online environmental activism depend upon the neoliberal economic context in which both emerged. This is an economic model that prioritizes individual gains over group sharing, wealth accumulation over harmony with nature, and commodification of natural resources over their preservation. The current elite-centered economic model is environmentally unsustainable and contradicts the initial intentions to make digital technologies a horizontal space of equal co-creation. Therefore, while there is strong evidence for both the benefits and costs of the digital sphere for the environmental movement, perhaps the most pressing issue to be addressed is whether the contradictory underlying structure may preclude the success of the movement, even putting the above costs and benefits aside.

The traditional model of media coverage that is characteristic of neoliberalism, based on top-down established corporate media deciding what information will receive news attention, has not been fundamentally altered by the growth of digital technologies. The rise of the internet promised more equal access to public attention, allowing individuals to share their content, independent from established electronic and print news corporations. Activists hoped that this would be a powerful tool to generate change independently, building on each other’s messages, in harmony with the idea of natural diversity evolving through cycles. However, Lester and Hutchins (2009) argue that digital technologies have instead become a tool used by environmental activist organizations primarily to get the attention

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 models of media power embedded within the specific networking capacity of the internet and web. (Lester and 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 being a symbolic image of a single man preventing the destruction of the forest. Another example of this unchanged model of media power is the Fridays for Future movement. Per popular belief the movement started gaining popular attention as a result of its use of the hashtag #FridaysforFuture on social media; in reality, the movement began to gain considerable traction only after Greta Thunberg’s UN speech in December 2018 (Road 2019). This shows that environmental activists still rely on news coverage from mainstream media sources to receive widespread public attention; even the attention gained on social media platforms is determined by the platforms’ algorithms, which are shaped by the

type of news people are most likely to engage with, pointing to an inherent bias towards corporate, mainstream news sources. Similarly, online digital media platforms such as Facebook are interested in maximizing online user engagement, which means that the platform’s algorithms will also favour these established corporate news sources. This model of corporate power is problematic because it denies environmental activist organizations the autonomy of sharing information in a bottom-up, independent way, and means their attainment of public attention is dependent on them passing through the established corporate media model.

The neoliberal economic model which exists at the structural base of digital technologies may also be harmful to the environmental 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 to promote Western consumerism of the search engine and to generate profit (732). Secondly, individual interactions or searches on Ecosia are represented as being positive for conservation efforts. However, in reality, user data ends up fueling the capitalist economy by allowing the search

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 soon 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 line with the ideals 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) highlight 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 is 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 should not ignore the power of these gradual benefits. Thoughtful and civil online discussions that allow users to change their minds will allow such conversations to slowly raise awareness in favor of the environmental movement. This will ultimately lead to broad cultural shifts in our society’s beliefs about environmental protection, beliefs that will become deep and non-commodified due to the nature of communication, which are necessary to tackle this large-scale crisis. With these attributes, the internet has the potential to become “an organized open forum for deliberative democracy” (Hemmi and Crowther 2013, 1). However, to achieve effective collective action and revive horizontal digital communication, we must promote deliberative expression, patience, and open-mindedness in our online conversations, especially when these are about our self-representation and the representation of nature.

## Conclusion

The emergence of digital technologies has impacted the environmental movement by increasing the speed and scope of its messages worldwide. Despite having a theoretically broader reach, the nature of digital technologies’ platforms has meant that audiences reached online are often limited to those already seeking out the environmental movement’s messages, and offline engagement does not necessarily lead to more 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.

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