

Representing Climate Activism through Digital Media before and during COVID-19 lockdowns.

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Climate activism in the digital space is recognised as a mechanism active since the late 1980s yet it is only in recent times that the academy is coming to terms with its presence through digital media with any serious measure of analysis and enquiry. This paper acknowledges the contributions made on the topic over its forty year digital history but will instead focus on the recent considerations through the contributions of activism in the online space. Of interest in this regard is to understand the presence and role of climate activism in social and digital media at a more meaningful level through the two periods of before and during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Keywords: Climate activism, social media, digital media, school climate strike, COVID-19

When Greta Thunberg's speech to the United Nations Climate Action Summit in September 2019 declared that 'we are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!' (Thunberg, 2019), Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison responded by saying that 'so I think we've got to caution against raising the anxieties of children in our country'' (Crowe, 2019) building on his previous comments delivered in the Australian parliament regarding *School Strike for Climate* that 'what we want is more learning in schools and less activism in schools.' (Murphy, 2018) The reaction to these statements from social media users who identified as being sympathetic to climate activism erupted with reactive dialogue including 'Australian Youth Climate Coalition spokesperson Laura Sykes [who] said [that] 'when young people try to have a voice in politics, Scott Morrison is shutting them down, yet he's happy to listen to the coal lobby and big corporations who continue to profit from making climate change worse.' (Crowe)

While considering how ‘social media has revolutionized the way we fight for social justice’ (Sites.psu.edu.2019) this paper seeks to understand the trajectory of climate activism in the 2019 as pre-COVID-19 and 2020 as COVID-19 lockdown periods where it proposes to consider such examples in terms of how activists engage with digital media as a way to enable audiences on a vast, instantaneous scale inasmuch as this connectivity provides innovation towards how such engagement can utilise significant influence with regards to finding new ways to think about activism and climate change.

Dhiraj Murthy argues that ‘the literature on social movements and social media has not fully grasped just how much social [and digital] media have fundamentally changed the landscape of organizational communication’ (Murthy, 2018) inasmuch as the ‘lack of understanding [of] how social media have shaped social movement organizations (SMOs) and the organization of social movements’ (Murthy) altogether. As ‘the primary benefit to using social media in activism campaigns is social media’s ability to spread information faster than ever before’ (Sites.psu.edu.2019), it is surprising to note that as Chapman argues, ‘there is very little academic research that directly addresses the impact and implication of social media’s prevalence in modern activism.’ (Chapman, p.2) Moreover, it is only in recent years that ethnographic research has positioned activism at the forefront of digital media dialogue when the medium at first was subject to finding out the nature of it’s structural elements as ‘a thing’ in the early days of Facebook and Twitter long before activism became intertwined within social media as a mainstream adenum.

In this sense, social media has, for all intents and purposes, become a fact of life that has blurred the line between the digital and material world (Shirky, 2011, p. 28) where ‘social media activism has the ability to unite a group of people with disparate backgrounds around a common cause in a short space of time’. (Basserabie, 2019) To a certain extent, online interactions are human phenomena that share numerous traits with their previous non-digital counterparts (Cernison, p.18) yet the major point of difference for it’s digital iteration is that social media activism obviously has a faster way to mobilise activity through both public and digital spaces than previous methods of word of mouth and hard media communication.

However, moving beyond social media's presence within activism comes to what this paper asks in terms of how activism has impacted on digital transactions and, in turn, how can these transactions then make an impact on activism?

To consider the role that social media plays in the presence of climate activism, this paper considers that a wider assessment of digital media informs how such movement can progress through meaningful agency in defining innovative ways to approach the proliferation of social media as a medium beyond the normative assumptions of its boundaries and limitations from generic mainstream usage. For example, up until the COVID-19 lockdowns, many governments around the world limited that way in which climate activism could be legally expressed in a public context where some recent developments of using significant innovation tactics have revealed themselves as a method by activists to circumvent existing laws and enforcement orders that in a COVID-19 world, are 'the new normal'. One of which is the use of holograms as public protest. Malchik writes that 'in answer to a [Spanish government] blanket ban on protests of any kind, as well as marches or assemblies in front of Congress, activists resorted [in 2015] to protest by hologram' (Malchick, 2019) where 'eighteen thousand people sent in [via the project's website] holograms of themselves protesting, which were projected in front of Congress on a loop for several hours while activist leaders gave speeches, also via hologram.' (Malchik) While these protests were used as a form of agitation against the Spanish government's anti protest policies, it highlights the fact that innovation through the internet has brought new ways of thinking about activism which, in turn, is able to respond to the limitations of public restriction to then find significance to such an extent that digital avatars as public activism brings forth a completely new understanding of how activism can be staged in ways that have not been seen, and moreover, have not been made possible until recent times.

This also indicates that social media is, now, not solely used as a digital newspaper hosting articles, events, chats and media but rather, a more progressive, and from this, disruptive platform from a collective herd consciousness capability which gives rise to a facilitation that enables a mission control style of activism, capable of instantaneously perverting global

mobilisation inasmuch as it could, in a pre COVID society, facilitate an outwitting of law enforcement quicker than politicians could enact laws to prevent it from acting. Notwithstanding, this urgency to climate reform based on the assumption that the tipping point of climate inaction is measured in years not decades, and amplified by the notion which Marcano argues that ‘social mediums perpetuate an oppressive form of the internet by petrifying us.’ (Marcano, p.32)

While it is undeniably a fact that social media can transform climate activism into an organised political mechanism, the transformative nature of the media is also representative of widespread tribalism by it’s users. As Gladstone and Wing argue ‘in its current form, however, social media’s potential to be an effective mediator is limited’ (Gladstone & Wing, p.5), the debate that social media demonstrates is a polarisation of two opposing viewpoints of a ‘belief’ by social media users that climate science is either real or an elaborate hoax. ‘Rather than forums for debate, social media feeds quickly become echo chambers – a significant polarizing vehicle’. (Gladstone & Wing) As ‘efforts to combat climate change have been regarded by some as posing a fundamental challenge to the American way of life’ (Antonio, 2009), the opposition of such by right wing denialism in the United States, propelled by the Trump administration's insistence at a policy level that ‘the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive’ (Trump, 2012) has propelled the international climate movement to reactive measures to counter the right’s denialism as an expediated mechanism with social media at its primary base. Inasmuch debate as this has caused, the factional groups of climate activism have nonetheless propelled the idea that highlighting climate debates within a digital landscape fosters reliance of strength in numbers to such an extent that one central tweet or post has the ability now to reach billions of people and provide instantaneousness as a currency. An example of such is the emergence of the *Fridays for Future* strike later dubbed the *School Strike for Climate*.

If one was to consider this movement in two parts thus being the public demonstrations of 2019 based through social media and the virtual demonstrations of 2020 during the

COVID-19 lockdowns based through live streaming, the movement has demonstrated innovative methods of social technologies which up until now have yet to be seen at a mass herd level. The accelerated use of social communications gained momentum as each four strikes outflanked the former to be situated around key strategic events. The first global strike of 15 March 2019 centred on the manifestation of the figurehead, Greta Thunberg, as a personified call to arms for recruitment and action of young people. The second strike on 24 May 2019 amplified the political leverage of the group staged on the second day of the four-day 2019 European Parliament election in order to affect it (Haynes), the third strike was held as a week long event corresponding to mass rallies on the respective Fridays of 20 September and 27 September, 2019, and the fourth strike staged on 29 November 2019 ‘three days before the start of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) in Madrid’ (Dw.com).

During the 2019 strikes, the movement used a hierarchical merger of sub-groups organised under the banner of School Strikes which invited more localised groups pertaining to community-based issues of climate change to join together through social networks to then organise their own public rallies and civic order disturbances, interconnected from the social staples of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and for the first time, additional fifth generation social platforms of Tik Tok, Tapebook, Vero, and Steemit. While the simple use of these platforms by School Strike activists bears in itself no leaning towards an indication of innovation per se, where the movement does engage with such is the way that users engage with these platforms that have enabled a rapid mass mobilisation of millions of activists, all communicating through various interconnected social platforms which enabled the demonstrations to occur at a scale not seen since the Vietnam War protests of the late 1960s and the very early 1970s. This surmounted a deep understanding of multi-platform social media interwebs used by the architects of the movement but could not have been made possible if it was not for the already tech savvy youth whose primary native social interaction is orchestrated through the use of apps and file sharing networks. If anything can be learnt from these four events, this paper recognises that such interconnectivity spawned a world-wide re-evaluation of climate protection at a cultural and policy level inasmuch as it

bolstered climate denialism through mainstream right-based media outlets lamented by James Murdoch as ‘dangerous and damaging to our communities’(Knott). ‘The United States and Brazil, led by nationalist leaders disdainful of climate science have slowed momentum as a UN report... warning that the required ambition is lacking among most countries’. (Milman) Coupled with ‘the paradox of high resource use that results in little or no human benefits’ (Steinberger) from countries such as, for example, those said as exonerating climate science into a type of economic enemy of the state, ‘has its roots in the very structure of our political economy, and the industries that are some of its most important mainstays’ (Steinberger) where climate change proliferation is seen at least in government communities as a hindrance to industry profit and citizen activism more as an act of criminality which affects the price of stocks than a moral decision to protect the balance of nature and the natural world.

‘Crystal Abidin, a digital anthropologist at Curtin University’ (Bogle & Edraki), describes Tik Tok’s contextualisation in School Strikes as a ‘silo social’(Bogle & Edraki) moving towards a ‘mish-mash’(Bogle & Edraki) of platforms which uncharacteristically are linked together through a specific logic based on trends and interconnectivity where multi-platform integration exemplifies the same kinds of information designated to a broad based audience who, like their metamodernism counterpoints, embraces multiplicity and oscillation as the primary mode of communication. What emerges in this instance is that social media up until this point has been seen, at least by the academy, as a silo grouping of individualised singular functions yet ‘what critical social media theories are missing is a greater liberty to play with ideas for what an alternative social media sphere would look like’ (Marcano p. 55) or in this instance, that the indiscriminate ‘mish-mash’ (Bogle & Edraki) approach *is* an alternative social media sphere. Although this practice is not exclusively reserved for climate activist groups, the magnitude of the practice for an organised socio-political force spread across multiple platforms is not only unique but unparalleled at the social scalability enacted since 2019. What we can learn from this instance is that digital media is not merely a branding for computational communication but an entire technological ecosystem, transforming world populations from disparate regions to a unified singularity thus connected through a digital

coporality built from networks plugged into other networks and so forth, and legitimised through populous membership-based platforms as a form of digital tribality.

If we are to try to understand how these digital medias have a symbiance when on the surface, the commonality of all social apps do more or less the same kind of functions with the only real point of difference being branding and tribal patterns, this fusing together of a Frankensteinian approach has effectively demonstrated a profound example of how groups of societies can be interlinked in real time en-mass to what this paper proposes to define as a U2U, that is to say, universal to universal social integration which, like wicked problems, exists at a cosmic level yet in a relativist perspective can only exist in the wider context of gigantic social networks much bigger than say one particular social network such as, for example, Facebook or Twitter. As the combination of app users needed in the digital space of U2U integration, several billion user accounts serve as a hive or, in more broader terms, a digital cartel of sorts, able to unifiably act as a universal megaforce unrivaled by even the global membership base of religions. It is important in this regard to recognise that there has been no point in human history up until now where such profound megaforges have linked together in ways that provide insight into mass collective consciousness no more prominent than in 2019 through the four global climate strikes.

It is important to understand, though, that ‘the digital strikes are not the only online climate activism’ (Murray, 2020) originating in the umbrella scope of climate initiatives. ‘In the US, [where] groups [were] preparing a three-day livestream to mark Earth Day,’ (Murray) which use the same kinds of technologies available to other groups in the streaming events highlighting the rapid morphing that the strikes have spawned in such a short amount of time. Even in places where climate protesting of any kind is illegal or at the very least, heavily censored such as the recent online censorship by the Indian government where ‘the websites of three environmental, youth and student movements have been blocked since June 29 [2020]’ (Nandi, 2020) the need for action has located the same instances of platform cross-integration to lead front-end events from back-end source tools to instigate the wider scope of U2U exchanges while at the same time opening up a space to confront micro

problems at a cosmic level. ‘When environmentalists are brave enough to speak out in places like Barrancabermeja, Colombia, they’re often protesting against very local problems’ (Elena, 2020) and this of course highlights the magnitude of the participatory nature of the climate strike movement’s ability to adapt to a DIY approach at a grassroots level that one might argue mimics the premise of the technologies which propel its core agency in that social medias offer a free platform to coerce users together at the community stage as the same ways these localised issues, such as the Colombian situation, also address the scalable experiences of such users in the same kind of domicile space simply because, at its strategic interface, ‘social media platforms have wide appeal because they facilitate human connection.’ (Marcano, p.27)

Central to this idea, if we are to understand that scalability and modularity are the main contributing factors of significance then the meaningfulness of such must be able to look at how activism has enacted its participants to also combine a sense of digital communities inasmuch as it is to how these communities enable an identity for its members based on the presence of optimistic and pessimistic perspectives. Sivianides and Shah (2011) discuss the positions of Yochai Benkler (2006) who culminated that ‘the networked nature of the digital world allows for people to communicate and take action outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, traditional hierarchical power structures’(Sivitanides, Shah, p.4) inasmuch as negative perspectives based around Morozov’s (2010) stance about the complications of digital surveillance that brings ‘new methods of control, surveillance, and persecution for repressive governments.’ (ibid) If we consider activism in these two alignments more so than the other less persuasive effacements of social media, such as the currencies of likes and dislikes and hits and counts, digital activism utilises both the pessimism of climate destruction based on the urge to halt human interference with nature while at the same time, propels the notion of positiveness in terms of what mechanisations can be allocated to the amount of political change that might occur in favour of climate science proliferation. In doing so, the tribalism nested in these two points also define how each cluster of users anoint their behaviours built around individual silos based on age demographic and political perspectives none more prominent in the COVID-19 lockdown era activism.

Amidst rapid social disintegration of world economies through the 2020 pandemic, a dramatic shift by world media organisations have focused on COVID-19 and, within an instant, the world headlines of climate strikes which adorned every mainstream and alternative news outlet in 2019 have in the eye of the public spectacle, evaporated. Dieter Rucht from the Institute for Social Movement in Berlin cites that [digital protests] ‘won’t come close to the level of attention of the street protests last year’ (Deutch, 2020) and ‘with that now happening as a result of national economies grinding to a near halt, Rucht says that "argument is vanishing into thin air." (Deutch) The reduction vacuum of climate activism on our streets, impacted by the enforced global compliance of martial law, movement orders, and an unseen level of state-based erosion of civil liberties has limited the capacity to host the magnitude of scale by which the 2019 climate protests were attended and received. Yet the attention of global unrest has now induced more covert mass demonstrations - quite different to the moderate protests of 2019 which were aimed at creating awareness through, at the passive end, the *Fridays for Future* general assemblies in public places to the high end of public non-violent disruptions of *Extinction Rebellion* in defiance of public order - to a more aggressive and hard pitched ideology carried for some years now through the *Black Lives Matter* (BLW) movement, embodied through the targeting of police and state-based authority with the aim to hold such forces accountable for, especially in the United States, state-sanction inequality and brutality against people of colour. We have seen this expodentially through the 2020 BLM and associated anti-racist protests which have, en mass, replaced on-the-street climate rallies through sheer numbers and volume. However, this fact is also coupled for consideration when current dialogue has interlinked both climate activism and BLW together where Cullors and Nguvu claim ‘that those most affected – and killed – by climate change are Black and poor people’ (Haynes, 2020). In similar polarisations, the civil unrest surrounding the conflicts associated with rhetoric from the Trump administration and the pending 2020 US presidential campaign, following the murder of George Floyd in May, 2020 as one such of many social atrocities now evocated by hard right governments leave climate activism in a stranded public position where ‘reaching world leaders and the general public would be more difficult now as the pandemic shuts down large parts of public life.’ (Lawal, 2020) but moreso, the economic stability, now lost, that was present in a 2019

contextualisation of climate reform discussions. Where ‘policy makers in many nations sacrifice attention to global warming in order to introduce quick fixes to economies in crisis’ (Bennett, Segerberg, p.3) it's now more than ever that measures to stimulate world economies and, at the same time, segregate them through public lockdowns, distances themselves from the strategic gains made from climate awareness in 2019 and puts into question *if* climate activism has had any real effect at all despite the growing consensus of the need for climate action versus the need to ignore it completely in order to safeguard immediate health and economic stabilities where one might argue that, from a logic perspective, such reasoning is ironical if not completely absurd.

Even as 2020 climate indicators of a disintegrating environmental catastrophe through exacerbated rising sea temperatures and further reductions of polar caps became known and released through scientific channels, the precedent of extension from COVID-19 has indeed switched citizen climate activism to a more immediate sensed reactionary schema for the general public which has effectively replaced the fear of a looming future climate catastrophe with the even more immediate fear of dying or losing employment from COVID-19 thus leaving climate activism in a public collective as a secondary and in many cases, irrelevant argument, superseded by a pandemic trifecta of fearing infection, the redundancy of civil liberties, and the risk of an economic depression.

As ‘social distancing has made on-the-ground demonstrations... impossible in most places’ (Anderson, 2020), the dependency for online activism has grown exponentially with movements hosting regular protests and actions online, further indicating that the way to keep climate activism alive was to find innovative methods of collective spectacles yet as Fisher comments, ‘what you’re going to end up doing is amplifying within an echo chamber, which is really different from what the movement wants.’ (Lawal) Despite such issues for climate activists from a logistics point of view, the irony of this is that carbon emission reduction has been claimed by Le Quéré in reference to the global pandemic shutdown that ‘daily global CO₂ emissions decreased by –17% (–11 to –25% for $\pm 1\sigma$) by early April 2020’ (Le Quéré, 2020) and further ‘emissions in individual countries decreased by –26% on average.’ (Le

Quéré) However, irrespective of this, NASA climate data claim that sea levels and global temperatures have continued to rise in 2020. (NASA)

That said, with the absence of the more radicalised public performances en-mass from *Extinction Rebellion* both in terms of disruption and theatrical attentiveness, the online space has spawned more inventive and creative ways to voice dissent. Returning to Earth Day 2020, the San Francisco-based *Youth versus Apocalypse* climate activist group, forged as culmination ‘between the climate crisis, and the coronavirus pandemic, and all other life crises that we face in our society," (Anderson) promoted ‘people to make art in their homes, paintings, dances, music, Tik-Tok videos or even just selfies and posters to share on social media’ (Anderson) over a three day online event bringing in a new facite of using arts and crafts to generate content in unison with a mish mash of social and streaming platforms.

While there were instances of streaming and video conferencing proliferated in the 2019 strikes, the catapulted increased in use of both means indicate a distinctive difference in a way that breaks new ground so to speak in the way that users have moved past the experimental cobbling of grafting one platform to another, to the evolution of such from an established set of integrated technologies through the rapid response additions by, for example, Zoom, Teams, and Discord to facilitate a more integrated approach between website - app - social media - streaming consortments.

Yet looking back at this period of 2019 and 2020 to date, the approach to digital media has exacerbated our dependency on the field, transitioning from recreational luxury to necessity, driven by the sudden need to work remotely in an unprecedented global shift for billions of people to move into a digital media integrated workspace for stay at home or essential services activities not seen in terms of rapid mobilisation since the Second World War. Where this leaves climate activism in the digital space is both advantageous from a perspective of an abundance of digitally integrated tools available en mass at a membership and activities level while at the same time as a disadvantage through both lockdown restrictions and policy level shifts to prioritise economic recovery over climate emergency

recovery. As this paper has explored some of the ways that innovative uses of digital media through social integration have advanced the long standing trajectory of climate activism, it also indicates that while the movement faces unprecedented challenges in achieving their goals of pressing climate responsibilities, it does suggest that its influence is amplified by digital media in ways that have simply not been possible to achieve in previous decades of its ongoing history. What it does reveal, however, is that the challenges for the movement are facing an even more urgent deadline of responding to a looming tipping point at a time when policy-led reactive measures are placing an even greater emphasis on carbon emission technology activities through a 2021 forecast as a means to act as triage for world economies in crisis yet systematically failing to act on an even bigger wolf at our door who's irreversible natural and social destruction has already begin.

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