

Digital Activism and Climate Change:

How #Climate Activists Are Using Social Media to Create an Effective Movement

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Digital activism has become more and more prominent in the world today. Social media and the internet have made it much easier for activism to take place. Digital activism is cheaper than the activism that took place before social media. All a person needs is access to the internet in order to become an activist. This could be anything from a cell phone, to using a computer at a local library. Mitu and Vega (2019), point out that “It is easier and cheaper to post a message to a public forum or to create a website than it is to operate a radio or television station or print a newspaper.” This makes it easier for ordinary people to become activists, especially teenagers who do not have much of their own money. People can become activists for anything from women’s rights, to gun violence.

One issue that more and more people are starting to advocate for is climate change. Whether everyone realizes it or not, the actions of humans have a large impact on the environment. Although our actions have always impacted the earth in some way, the effects that have come into the light during the last few decades have been extremely negative ones. Winters are becoming shorter, and average temperatures and sea levels are continuously rising (Lyons, 2019). In response to this prominent issue, many people have taken a stand to bring awareness and, hopefully, eventually stop it. Various movements have come about with the common goal of protecting the environment from the continued effects of climate change, with one of the most popular being #Climate. With the increased use of social media in today’s society, many have taken to sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in an effort to spread their message. Some individual activists have certainly left their mark on the movement and done everything that they can to help it move forward.

Although many of the damaging practices that have caused climate change began taking place decades ago, many of the people and activists that care about stopping it the most are the

teenagers and young adults who had no part in its beginning. Recent discoveries on the possible effects of climate change have caused these activists to worry. The changes to the Earth's climate and the atmosphere are happening faster than scientists had predicted at the beginning of the decade (Lyons, 2019). Although climate change is affecting the environment significantly, what many people don't realize is that it is affecting the world's economy as well. Damages to the land, environment, and water supply are leaving us with less food and resources, which will inevitably leave millions of more people living in poverty (Lyons, 2019). Some of the changes and effects brought about by climate change are becoming irreversible. For example, Lyons (2019), also states that the Amazon Rainforest "is approaching a 'tipping point' from which it might not recover, as areas the size of three football fields are being logged or burned every minute." This can be considered catastrophic, because the Amazon produces large amounts of the world's oxygen, while also absorbing carbon dioxide (Lyons, 2019). There are many more terrible events taking place because of climate change, but those mentioned are some of the most concerning to activists today.

One way in which the #climate movement has been effective is through these specific activists on social media. It takes just one person to start protests and advocate for things, and various activists on social media have done just that. Once an activist creates a following for themselves, others will begin to follow their lead (Wallace-Wells, 2019). Digital activists using social media have been very efficient in spreading the climate movement, helping it to be an effective social media movement.

One specific activist who has certainly done her part in spreading the movement is Greta Thunberg, a sixteen-year-old girl from Sweden. Greta has done everything from going vegan, to travelling to the United States via a yacht that had zero carbon emissions for the conference of

the United Nations in August (Wallace-Wells, 2019). Not only has Greta done her part, but she has inspired other teens to speak out in support of the movement as well. She may be from Sweden, but she has inspired teens even in the United States to do something about climate change as well. According to Maffly (2019), students as far as Utah followed her lead and skipped their classes on Friday September 20th, 2019 to protest. The teens were “inspired by teenage activist Greta Thunberg...” and took the day off of school to “push back against climate denial and Trump administration policies promoting fossil fuel extraction...” (Maffly, 2019). With this in mind, Greta has certainly done a great job of spreading her message and inspiring other people.

The #Climate movement in general has definitely used social media adequately. Social media has been and can be used in many different ways in order to spread a movement. This is because “when large numbers of citizens are able to more easily connect to one another, to send and receive original content, and to coordinate action, they are able to create effective political movements” (Mitu & Vega, 2014). The #Climate movement has done each of these things using social media, which is one of the reasons why it has been so effective. Digital activists for the movement have connected and related to one another, posted their own thoughts and ideas, and coordinated protests and other events to take action against climate change.

One reason why the #Climate movement has been effective is because it has connected people. As humans, it motivates us and makes us feel good when we meet someone who has the same ideas and intentions as us. Individual activists involved in this movement have made plenty of connections with others throughout the rise of the movement. This has proven to be true with Greta Thunberg and her followers. Greta was invited to speak at a rally outside of the Alberta legislature in British Columbia on Friday October 18th, 2019. She was invited by the leader of

the Green party in British Columbia, Andrew Weaver (Chidley, 2019). Greta both spoke in front of the legislature, and in front of thousands of fellow activists who travelled to the rally to see her. She inspires other people, and having the opportunity to listen to her speak and connect with her was likely motivating to those who came to see her. Greta was also able to connect with Weaver, who has many of the same beliefs as her (Chidley, 2019). Making these connections with people, as well as inspiring politicians is what will lead to changes being made that will force us to be more environmentally friendly with our actions.

Greta Thunberg has also been able to connect with some fellow teenage #Climate activists. After taking her carbon-free journey to New York, Greta was able to speak personally with two of these fellow activists. Alexandria Villaseñor, a fourteen-year-old girl from California, and Xiye Bastida-Patrick, a seventeen-year-old girl from Mexico, were the first to introduce Greta when she spoke at the North Cove Marina (Wallace-Wells, 2019). In the midst of the chaos of speaking in front of so many people in New York, being able to speak with two fellow teenage activists in a one-on-one way was most likely a breath of fresh air for Greta. Both teens look up to Greta as well, so being able to speak personally with the person who inspired them was surely very rewarding.

Along with making connections to each other, activists in the #Climate movement have also been sure to post their original thoughts and ideas on social media. Mitu and Vega (2019) state that “an open and free cyberspace has promoted political and social inclusion worldwide; it has broken down barriers between countries, communities, and citizens, allowing interaction and sharing of information and ideas across the globe.” When a person shares their ideas on social media, someone from all the way across the world could possibly see it, spreading the message even further. There is even a possibility that a politician or an influential individual could see a

post, which could lead to action being taken on their end. Another reason why social media is a great way to spread one's ideas, is that it is free. On May 14th, 2019, Greta tweeted, "It's 2019. Can we all now please stop saying 'climate change' and instead call it what it is: climate breakdown, climate crisis, climate emergency, ecological breakdown, ecological crisis, and ecological emergency?" (@GretaThunberg, 2019). This tweet, and similar ones by Greta have called attention to climate change and shown just how bad its effects really are. This particular tweet received over seventy-one-thousand likes, twenty-four-thousand retweets, and two thousand replies. With this much attention given to the tweet, even more people than what these numbers show viewed it, because Greta has almost three million followers on twitter. Essentially, the more people that see one's ideas, the more people who will agree, and the more collective action that takes place to get something done about the issue. Therefore, the use of social media to express people's individual ideas and thoughts throughout the climate movement has helped contribute to the effectiveness of the movement.

Lastly, the #Climate movement has used social media as a platform for coordinating action. The #Climate movement has proven very effective with their strikes and protests, as there have been many different coordinated events. Greta Thunberg has inspired one of the largest events for the movement. In fact, it is not just one event in particular, but many throughout the past few months all over the world. Since Greta started her "School Strike for Climate" in August of 2018, there have been strikes nearly every Friday of classes. Each Friday, students have skipped their classes in order to participate in strikes (Wallace-Wells, 2019). Although these local strikes have been happening in different areas throughout the world, Greta inspired and organized the Global Climate Strike that occurred on September 20th, 2019. This is the same climate strike that the students in Salt Lake City, as mentioned earlier, were taking part in. With

these things in mind, the climate movement has definitely excelled in the coordination aspect of social media and digital activism.

The #Climate movement has widely used social media as a means of spreading awareness through connections, the spread of individuals' ideas, and coordination of people and events. Because of all of the efforts put in through these ways, it has been a relatively effective social media movement thus far. Climate activists have made their message heard in countries all over the world. With Greta Thunberg's protests, marches, and school strikes, politicians all over the world have heard about her and other teens' concerns. She spoke at the United Nations' climate change conference only four months after starting her strike (Wallace-Wells, 2019). This goes to show that Greta, and the #Climate movement in general have been effective in bringing awareness to the issue of climate change. Greta was so effective with her activism that she was able to speak with multiple leaders of the world just four months after becoming an activist. Her prominence on social media certainly helped her bring this on for herself.

Political leaders from many different countries are listening to Greta's message, and even acting on it. The president of the European Commission pledged to spend a full quarter of the European Union's budget over the next seven years, on climate mitigation after hearing Greta speak to the Commission in February of 2019 (Wallace-Wells, 2019). In addition to this, the British Parliament had a majority vote to declare a climate emergency after Greta paid them a visit. The Parliament "promised it would zero out on its carbon emissions by 2050" (Wallace-Wells, 2019). Regardless of whether every country Greta visits has done something about climate change, she has made people aware of climate change and the movement. By starting her strikes for climate, she started a domino effect, causing more and more people around the world to advocate. For example, after Greta's climate strikes, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was elected to

Congress, and shortly afterward started making plans and advocating for a Green New Deal (Wallace-Wells, 2019). Some believe that these strikes are what swayed people to give Ocasio-Cortez the majority vote.

With climate change taking place at a more rapid rate than ever, more and more people are expressing their concerns and advocating for climate change and ways to stop it. The increased use of electronic devices and the internet in today's society has led many people to take to social media in order to spread their ideas and activism. Social media is an easy and cheap tool to use, and it makes for a potential audience of millions of people (Mitu & Vega, 2019). Ordinary people, even teenagers in high school, can post their ideas and make their messages seen and heard. Movements specific to certain social or political issues have come about as a way to spread ideas and awareness. Those advocating for climate change are tending to use #climate when speaking about climate change on social media about the movement. Some individual activists have reached hundreds of thousands, and even millions of people with their ideas on social media, doing everything they can for the movement. These activists have used social media in a powerful way, helping the #climate movement to be effective.

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