

COVID-19 and Online Activism: A Momentum for Radical Change?

Written by Julie Uldam and Tina Askanius

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COVID-19 and Online Activism: A Momentum for Radical Change?

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JULIE UL DAM AND TINA ASKANIUS, AUG 21 2020

Historically, crises have been seen as opportunities for change. The current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. For example, the pandemic has brought about calls for rethinking how we organize our everyday lives and society. For climate activists, this has involved calls for using the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to envision, articulate and act on solutions to the climate crisis. In doing so, the climate crisis is articulated both as a larger looming crisis, which will eclipse the COVID-19 crisis, and as connected to social inequalities also exposed by the COVID-19 crisis. Theoretically, this short article draws on critical approaches to crisis and the notion of social imaginaries to capture the ways in which the COVID-19 and climate crises are articulated and collectively imagined, with implications for possibilities for action. Empirically, it draws on observations of online events and activities organized by activist groups and NGOs, Extinction Rebellion, Greenpeace, PUSH and Fridays for Future in Denmark and Sweden. On the basis of preliminary findings of a digital ethnography of the everyday practices of online activism during the first months of the pandemic (March-June 2020), we show how the COVID-19 crisis was articulated as both a window of opportunity for imagining a more sustainable post-corona world and as a challenge for activism. Further, we point to similarities in articulating hope over despair and visions of solutions – including technologies of climate change mitigation, decision-making processes and how we organize society – to dealing with the climate crisis rather than returning to business as usual.

History tells us that crises work as a source of fear, of affirmation, but also of inspiration and opportunity. Koselleck (2006), for example, has argued that a crisis is a moment of rupture where instability advances by challenging the legitimacy of social institutions, the sense of normality and ideas and discourses that are taken for granted. The crisis itself signifies a moment of rupture, where new socio-political configurations can emerge. The concept of a crisis, he argues, is used to fit “the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment” (p. 399). The current health crisis is intricately tied into political, economic and environmental crises. In this sense, the pandemic is both accelerating and shining a new light on an already existing set of crises related to racial discrimination, economic injustices, environmental destruction, etc. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis is connected with the emergence of rival narratives, discourses and actions of social agents. The contingent space that a crisis foregrounds until the moment of its resolution allows for different possibilities and scenarios to emerge, for better or worse.

Along with political events (Uldam and Askanius, 2013), crises are thus critical junctures and potentially mark a state of exception and potentially enhance crucial change (Askanius and Mylonas, 2015). McChesney discusses critical junctures as “rare, brief periods in which dramatic changes are debated and enacted drawing from a broad palette of options, followed by a long process in which structural or institutional change is slow and difficult” (McChesney 2007, p. 56). Critical junctures, therefore, Kaun (2016) argues, should be considered as a period of opportunity for directing social change through different actors. In this state of exception created by the pandemic, opportunities were seized by climate activists.

The COVID-19 Crisis as Challenge: Re-imagining Climate Activism

When the gravity and magnitude of the (social, political and economic) crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus started to settle in, in the early spring of 2020, climate change activists across the world immediately started mobilizing

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online, reconfiguring actions and tactics and adapting protest events to the social restrictions imposed by governments everywhere. Many watched, slightly perplexed, as the pandemic became the center of attention of the 24-hour news cycle presenting the global health crisis as a threat to humanity in need of urgent and unprecedented collective action. One activist articulates this sentiment in a video post by Extinction Rebellion as follow:

When the virus first started my first thought was: What are we supposed to do now? How are we going to make climate change still an important topic of conversation when the only thing that has been dominating the news cycle is the corona virus pandemic? This pandemic is receiving so much more attention than climate change ever have (ER, FB, SE 21 May 2020).

The recurring school strikes every Friday around the world since August 2018 had been a landmark event for the movement providing it with continuity and sustained attention from media and the broader public. With the world on lock-down, these street manifestations were no longer possible. Online school strikes were organised by Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future but they generated relatively little engagement or media attention.

While formal lockdown measures differed significantly in Denmark and Sweden (with stricter measures in Denmark than in Sweden), climate activist groups and NGOs in both countries took measures to reconfigure their tactics. The COVID-19 crisis was generally seen as a challenge to activism, creating obstacles to physical manifestations of dissent such as marches, sit-ins and creative happenings. Trying to counter these challenges, climate activist groups and NGOs responded by converting events into online events, with social media platforms playing a key role. For example, Extinction Rebellion Denmark converted their events for the International Workers' Day on 1 May into the event "Action: hang a banner from your window!" (Extinction Rebellion Denmark, Facebook event, 1 May 2020, our translation). In the call for action on the Facebook event, the activist network stated: "The corona crisis has made it harder to meet in person for actions, demonstrations, and other kinds of activism, but, of course, we have to remember and show that we are still fighting this fight together" (Extinction Rebellion Denmark, Facebook event, 1 May 2020). In this way, it simultaneously addresses the COVID-19 crisis as a challenge to activism and tries to counter this challenge by invoking feelings of solidarity. A similar strategy of motivating action is illustrated in the following description from a call for activists to put up posters across their city: "Are you longing to go a bit outside during this corona time and spread XR's green and positive message all over? Then join us in postering all around the city..." (Extinction Rebellion Denmark, Facebook event, 30 April 2020).

Here, invoking people's longing to go outside along with an articulation of hope to counter despair serves to motivate activists through positive appeals. At the same time, social media platforms figure as key to disseminating the engagement in tactics that comply with physical distancing such as, in this case, putting up posters. This is illustrated in the final appeal in the event text: "Please take pictures of the poster you have hung up afterwards and post them here. Then we can also spread the message on SoMe" (Extinction Rebellion Denmark, Facebook event, 30 April 2020). Later in the spring, activists tried moving beyond online activism and adapt physical gatherings to meet the requirements of social distancing, e.g. by posting links to various sites or webinars offering training on how to organise "Covid proof actions." This is illustrated in the following example from Extinction Rebellion Sweden:

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Karl Andreasson har gett ett uppdrag.

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The COVID-19 situation is unravelling in many different ways around the world and we know some activists are talking about reclaiming the streets as lock-downs ... **Se mere**

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Image 2 Extinction Rebellion Sweden

Addressing the challenge of activism during the COVID-19 pandemic more generally, Extinction Rebellion Sweden organized a series of workshops to equip activists for civil resistance against the climate crisis and its root causes:

Even though the corona crisis can feel overwhelming, we should not forget that the climate and ecological crises continue to unfold at accelerating rates...The need for collective action has never been greater...We'll then discuss how we best to bring attention to the crisis while practicing social distancing in these times of crisis. (Climate activism in times of corona: Online workshop, ER, Sweden, FB May 20, 2020).

In this way, where social media platforms were previously mainly used to support offline activism, they came to play a key role for both organizing, mobilizing, carrying out and mediating activism.

The COVID-19 Crisis as an Opportunity for Climate Activism: Imagining a Post-corona World

In their online events, most of the Nordic climate activist groups and NGOs articulate the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to reconfigure capitalist society and bring forth a transition to a society with social-ecological wellbeing in focus (Stoddart et al., forthcoming).

The ways in which we think and feel about the climate crisis has implications for our expectations and, ultimately, climate action and governance. The notion of social imaginaries has been used to describe people's understandings of and feelings and expectations about society, and their implications for how we organise and relate to each other (Taylor, 2002). In other words, social imaginaries shape our sense of what are acceptable, desirable and possible responses to the climate crisis (Wright et al., 2013). Against this backdrop of social imaginaries, Wright, De Cock and Nyberg (2013) argue for the importance of understanding the climate crisis in relation to social and political assumptions and that it is "our current capitalist imaginary" and its strive for economic growth which sustains fossil fuel extraction, the use of pesticides and technological solutions such as carbon trading (p. x). In this view, the ability to imagine alternatives to a capitalist organization of society is key to move beyond the often inadequate technological solution to the climate crisis (Wright et al., 2013).

Levy and Spicer (2013) identify four climate imaginaries: 'fossil fuels forever,' 'climate apocalypse,' 'technomarket' and 'sustainable lifestyle.' The 'fossil fuel forever' imaginary builds on economic growth, which enables it to resonate with the everyday lives of wider publics (Levy and Spicer, 2013, p. 675). However, while more recent imaginaries such as the 'techno-market' and 'sustainable lifestyle' pose a potential to challenge the dominant fossil fuel imaginary, these newer imaginaries resonate with smaller publics (Levy and Spicer, 2013). This highlights the importance of engaging the imagination of wider publics if they are to open new avenues of action against the climate crisis.

LET'S NOT GO BACK TO NORMAL – BECAUSE NORMAL WASN'T WORKING Normalt är 2 miljarder människor som inte har...

Posted by Greenpeace Sverige on Wednesday, May 20, 2020

In using the COVID-19 crisis to conjure up new imaginaries of social-ecological wellbeing, Nordic climate activist groups and NGOs construe the crisis as an opportunity in relation to our organization of society more generally and in relation to specific policies. In relation to the former, for example, the accompanying text for Extinction Rebellion Denmark's workshops mentioned above states that "[t]he corona pandemic has put large parts of the world to a halt, and we now face an historic opportunity for creating massive change in our society" (Extinction Rebellion Denmark, Facebook event, 3 April 2020). In Sweden, Greenpeace invoked climate activist Greta Thunberg's speech at 2019 World Economic Forum where she used the metaphor "our house is on fire" to describe the climate crisis: "LET'S NOT GO BACK TO NORMAL – BECAUSE NORMAL WASN'T WORKING what we call 'normal' is a planet on fire" (Greenpeace Sweden, Facebook, 20 May 2020). The Greenpeace post was accompanied by an image of a cut down tree sprouting a new green branch and the text "may we grow back not to what was but instead towards what

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we can become.” Together, the image and text invoke both a criticism of the dominant imaginary of economic growth and a hope for a sustainable alternative.

In relation to specific policies, for example, the text accompanying Extinction Rebellion Denmark’s banner drop event “Save the planet, not the polluters” (Extinction Rebellion Denmark, Facebook event, 6 May 2020, our translation) calls for the Danish government to show that their “courage and willingness to prioritize life over money continues when [they have] to invest in relief packages and restart Denmark after Corona” (Extinction Rebellion Denmark, Facebook event, 6 May 2020).

For activists in both Sweden and Denmark, this call for “courage and willingness” centered on government relief packages for Scandinavian Airlines (SAS). This is further illustrated in Extinction Rebellion Sweden’s live streaming of activists stopping an SAS flight (XR SE FB 30 June 2020).

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30. juni · 🌐

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SAS flyg stoppat av rebeller igen – Inga stödpengar till flyget! LIVE: Två klimataktivister befinner sig på ett...

Extinction Rebellion, Sweden

These calls invoke criticism of government bailout of banks in the financial crisis (Kaun, 2016). Fridays for Future also organized events (adapted from a physical to virtual strike) focused on criticizing government policies, in this case oil extraction in the North Sea: "Participate in the virtual strike by sending a video filmed horizontally... where you say 'the climate crisis is also an emergency – drop the oil, Dan [Jørgensen, Climate Minister, Denmark]'" (Fridays for Future Denmark, Facebook event, 13 March 2020). In a similar vein, Greenpeace Sweden posted a campaign video titled "Let's not go back to normal – normal was the problem," which called for the Swedish government to consider the climate crisis in their Corona relief packages (Greenpeace Sweden, Facebook video, 25 May 2020). This invokes imaginaries of fossil fuels and economic growth as dominant, i.e. "normal," construing these as the problem that has led to the climate crisis.

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These articulations of the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity propose imaginaries that break with the “fossil fuels forever” imaginary. They do so at the risk of instead proposing a “climate apocalypse” imaginary, which can create a sense of apathy that fails to motivate publics to engage with the climate crisis as a larger looming crisis that by far exceeds the COVID-19 crisis. However, the responses of Nordic climate activist groups and NGOs also try to appeal to hope rather than despair as they present involvement in their tactics as a means to counter negative feelings caused by physical distancing and propose alternative imaginaries of social-environmental wellbeing.

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Julie Uldam is Associate Professor at Copenhagen Business School. Her PhD and postdoc research was conducted as part of a collaboration between London School of Economics and Copenhagen Business School. Julie's current research critically explores the interrelations between activism and digital media, including climate justice activism, human rights activism and corporate activism. Her work has been published in peer-reviewed journals, including *New Media & Society*, *Organization* and *International Journal of Communication*. Her book *Civic Engagement & Social Media* was published in 2015. Julie was chair of ECREA's Communication & Democracy section and chair of the network on Social Innovation and Civic Engagement.

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