THE FUTURE OF ACTIVISM

14

How Smartphones and Digital Apps Are Transforming Activist Movements

Sue Clayton

In the last five years smartphones and the expanded use of social media sites have become ever more essential tools of radical activism. Advances in camera quality, encryption and mapping applications, along with more flexible and responsive social media platforms, have allowed the smartphone to carry a number of essential functions for groups seeking to mobilise and communicate with each other in situations of precarity. These new applications come out of – and will no doubt lead to further – new forms of social organisation that aim to be fluid and

Figure 14.1 A refugee in makeshift accommodation at the Italian–French border seeks news online, 2018.
Image credit: Mirko Orlando.

non-hierarchical, seeking to balance needs for civic protection and privacy with the aim of rapidly spreading information and generally widening participation.

This photo-essay will look at the way marginalised and activist groups generate information flow through smartphones via maps, messaging and social media sites. It will take two examples, the activist volunteer response to the European 'refugee crisis' of 2015–2020 and recent actions by the climate change group Extinction Rebellion (XR), to explore what we can learn from their specific use of smartphones and social media.

Refugees and Their Needs

As increased arrivals into Europe in spring–summer 2015 from troubled zones such as Syria and Eritrea gave rise to what is called the 'European refugee crisis', it became clear that these people on the move relied heavily on mobiles and apps to find their routes and seek advice on the journey (Wendle 2016). Improved

Figure 14.2 Muslim woman on phone in Calais, 2016.
Image credit: Nour Adams.

mapping and shared data functions allowed refugees to find routes to safety across the Mediterranean, reunite family members who had become separated and navigate multiple borders to reach their destinations in Europe.

Figure 14.3 New arrivals use their phones to contact loved ones after arriving on a beach in Greece, 2015.
Image credit: Ghias Aljundi.

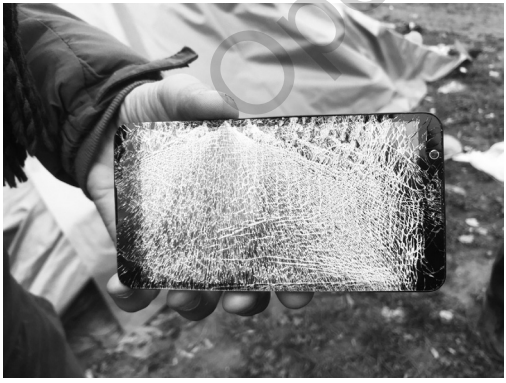

Figure 14.4 A Syrian refugee holds his phone, broken the previous night by Croatian authorities, at Velika Kladusa camp, Bosnia, 2018.
Image credit: Jack Sapoch.

Figure 14.5 A mobile phone is the only way refugees can connect with family back home after their treacherous journey to European shores.
Image credit: Ghias Aljundi.

A Sudanese boy, 'A', at the time just 17, tells how he was trafficked on a boat to escape Libya. He and all the occupants were alarmed to find that no one was on board to steer the boat or navigate – and the weather was very stormy. 'A' was one of the few who had a smartphone. He describes below the communication systems that he was able to use, undoubtedly saving the lives of everyone in the boat.

> 'We were packed many of us into the boat. We set off, and it was only then that we realised no one knew how to steer the boat. After many hours, there was a problem with the engine, and we were right out at sea, and the engine died. And there was a GPS system but nobody knew how to work it. Everyone started crying; I was very scared and I thought, this is going to be the last day of my life. Then someone said, who has a phone? and we used my phone. First we couldn't get any signal, then we did, but we couldn't buy credit as we couldn't read the languages that came up. We tried to find English and finally we did. One girl had a contact, a friend in Italy, a journalist. But he was out, and then the battery died. People started to cry again. We got a little more power to the phone and rang again and he answered. He phoned the Italian coastguard and after some hours they called us. And we gave our position from the phone signal, and so they were able to find us. We spent a whole night waiting but at dawn they came and got us, and brought us into Catania. We were safe.'
>
> (Clayton et al. 2016)

Figure 14.6 A Sudanese refugee, 'A', describes how he used his mobile to help navigate the Mediterranean crossing.

Image credit: Alex Gabbay, Precarious Trajectories.

Figure 14.7 Syrian and Iraqi refugees arrive from Turkey to Lesvos, Greece in 2015, greeted by volunteers from the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms.
Image credit: 'Ggia'.

The link to GPS was a crucial one, as was the interactive function for rapid updates of information, and the fact that apps like WhatsApp and Viber allow free communication. As larger numbers of refugees arrived, more sites proliferated serving different national groups, carrying a flow of ever-changing updates on the chaotic situations on routes and sea-crossings and at borders, and advice that was learnt in painfully hard ways by those who blazed the trail. However, as Gillespie et al. discuss, European governments and NGOs did not immediately provide their own versions of such information, because they feared they may be seen to be facilitating attempts to seek asylum in Europe – a policy unpopular with some political factions.

> This forced refugees to rely on alternative, often unverified and unreliable sources of news and information circulated particularly by smugglers and handlers, endangering them and exacerbating an already dire situation.
>
> (Gillespie et al. 2016)

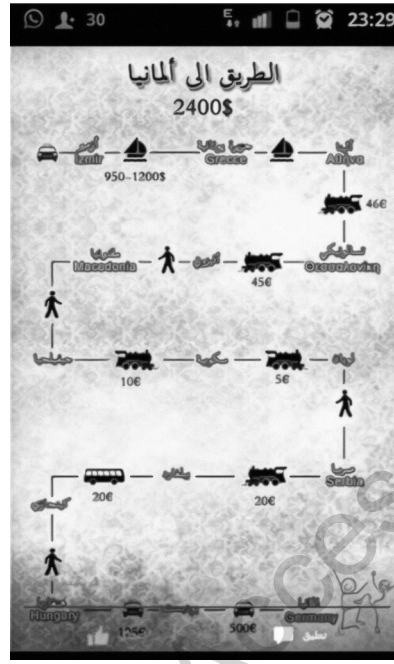

Figure 14.8 A map sent via WhatsApp by refugee interviewed in Paris.
Sourced from Gillespie et al. (2016).

Refugee Activist Communications

It was left to the smaller NGOs and grassroots volunteer groups to step in and fill this vital information gap. Independent volunteers who set up networks to support the new arrivals adopted similar tactics, building up map and route information, as well as coordinating the hundreds of grassroots support and supply initiatives on chat pages like People-to-People Solidarity and Refugee Solidarity Network. New low-cost design software allowed them to produce websites with greater levels of interactivity, while the increasing functionality of social media sites like Facebook as chat rooms for social change activism and campaigns allowed organisations to create highly populated parallel groups on Facebook, and so build site support very rapidly. One site popular with those arriving from Turkey to Greece was Infomobile – Welcome2Europe, run by local and international activists to support new arrivals to the Greek islands and Athens. The site helped refugees to avoid dangers on their journey and supplied key resources

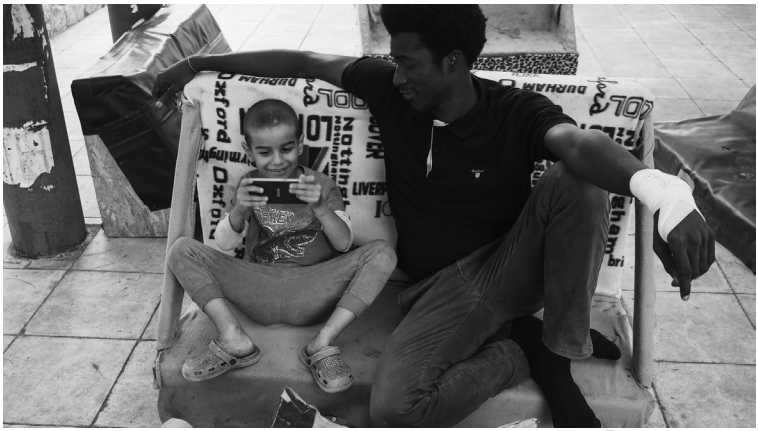

Figure 14.9 At Pipka camp in Lesvos a young resident enjoys mobile play.
Image credit: Pipka camp webpage.

Figure 14.10 An online graphic representation of Alan Kurdi, 'The Birth of Death', 2017.
Image credit: Stathis Chaitas.

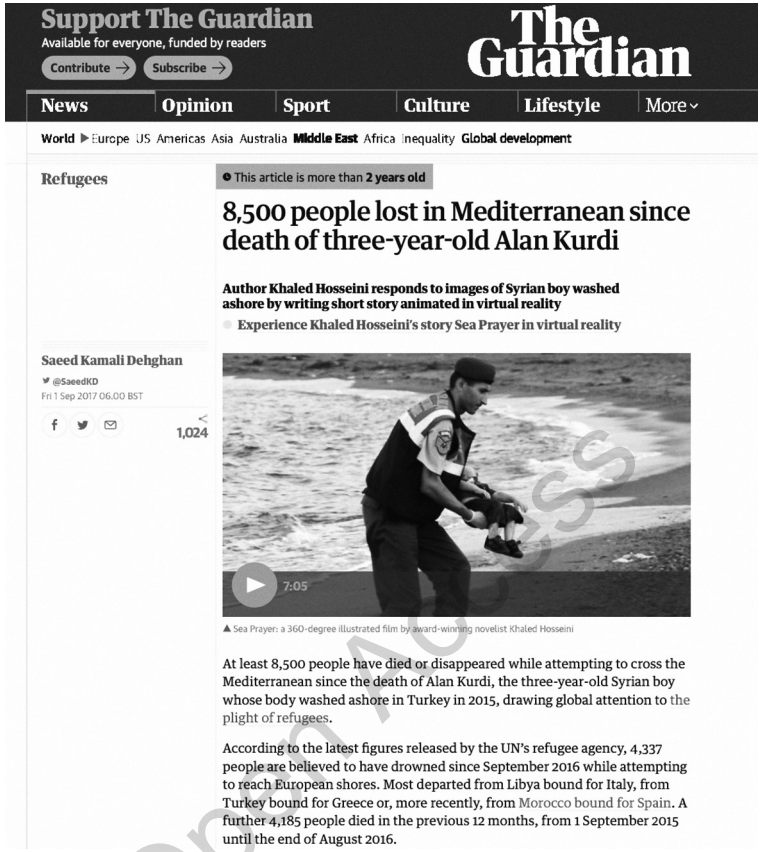

Figure 14.11 A *Guardian* headline from 2017 reviews the significance of Alan Kurdi's death two years on.

Image credit: Guardian Newspapers.

and information. The Village of Altogether, now under the umbrella of Lesvos Solidarity, was another website that supported refugees on arrival, and it also promoted and fundraised for the innovatory Pipka camp on Lesvos – an open, self-organised reception camp where refugee organisers and local volunteers worked together, saving many lives.

It was new sites like these which, in September 2015, circulated the shocking image of Alan Kurdi – the three-year-old Syrian child drowned off the Turkish coast in his family's attempt to reach Greece. It was the fact that this image rapidly went viral online that pushed the international press and broadcast media, after initial reservations, to publish it.

Public response fuelled a massive surge in the 'activist volunteer' movement that swept across Europe from late 2015 onward, as concerned European citizens began to appreciate that almost 2 million displaced people were arriving with little official provision. Who was going to support those who were now leaving Greece and Italy to find homes further north? I have written elsewhere about the extraordinary grassroots movement that blossomed as a response (Clayton 2020), but here I will simply sum up some of the innovative uses to which social media was put by these activists – uses which continue to expand in the agendas of national and international movements like #MeToo, Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter. I see several broad ways in which social media, phones and apps have changed the conversation, and are set to continue to do so into the future.

Information and Coordination

By 2016, the unofficial Calais 'Jungle' refugee camp had grown to 10,000 inhabitants, 2,000 of them unaccompanied minors. Unrecognised and unsupported by both the French and British authorities, the Jungle attracted hundreds

Figure 14.12 A page from the Calaidipedia website, which recorded and archived all volunteer actions in the Calais Jungle from 2015 to 2016.
Image credit: Calaidipedia.

of grassroots aid initiatives from house-building to food supplies, medical and legal aid, schools and even its own fire brigade. As a fast reaction to a humanitarian crisis it was perhaps unparalleled, but there was initially no infrastructure at all. The site Calaidipedia began to function as a clearing house for all those wanting to help, linking all the groups, listing what supplies and skills were needed where, advising individuals where and how they should volunteer. (Since the Jungle camp was demolished by the French government in October 2016, the site has been less active, but it remains accessible as an archive, providing a unique and freely accessible record of this historic mobilisation – and demonstrating yet another functionality of new media.)

Fundraising

Web platforms like GoFundMe, Crowdcube and Indiegogo, along with associated pay sites like PayPal, have enabled a flow between standalone sites, their

Figure 14.13 The group Calais Action uses social media to promote a Help Refugees fundraising call.

Image credit: Calais Action.

social media 'avatar' sites on Facebook and other social media, and efficient crowdfunding functions. UK refugee charities recorded a rise in donations of over one third in response to the Alan Kurdi story, and the new start-up Help Refugees was able to raise over £200,000 in a matter of days at the beginning of the crisis. Though many in the activist sector have their criticisms of Facebook's stance on political and privacy issues (and have incidentally faced severe trolling and threats when they have made posts 'public'), they still tend to use it in preference to 'lifestyle' sites like Instagram. They have also found the 'charity' button function useful – linking personal posts to a pay site that allows them to make news posts and fundraise in one move.

Volunteer Support

The pressure on untrained volunteers to support and welcome almost 2 million people into a Europe that could be at times indifferent or openly hostile led to the need for support and counselling for many of them. However, in the high-pressure and chaotic world of border queues, camps, sea rescues and police

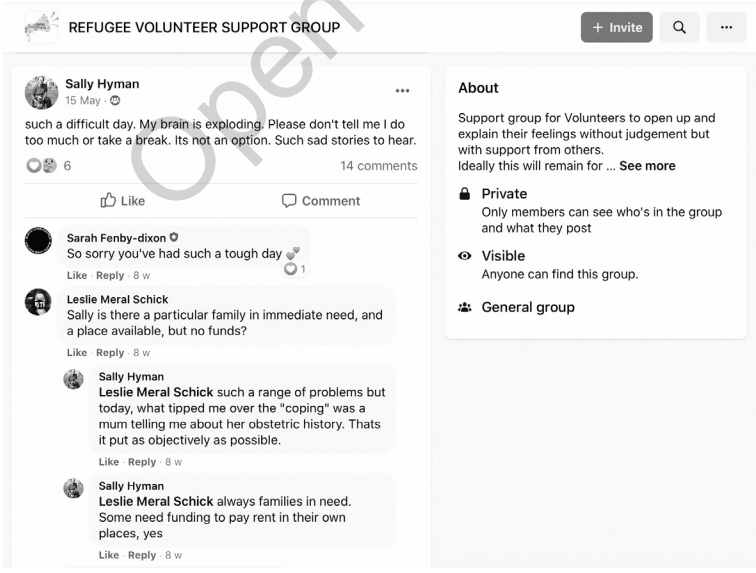

Figure 14.14 Extract from the Refugee Support Group Facebook page, 2020.
Image credit: Sally Hyman.

attacks, there was no hope of trained counselling being available. In its absence, volunteers continue to use social media closed chat rooms like the Refugee Volunteer Support Group. Given that most volunteers do not have access to laptops in the field, social media phone apps have been a lifeline for both health emergencies and discussing common longer-term issues such as burnout, vicarious trauma and PTSD.

Tracking at Sea

As I have described elsewhere (Clayton 2020), the EU's sea rescue mission in the Mediterranean changed in nature when its 'Frontex' force became more

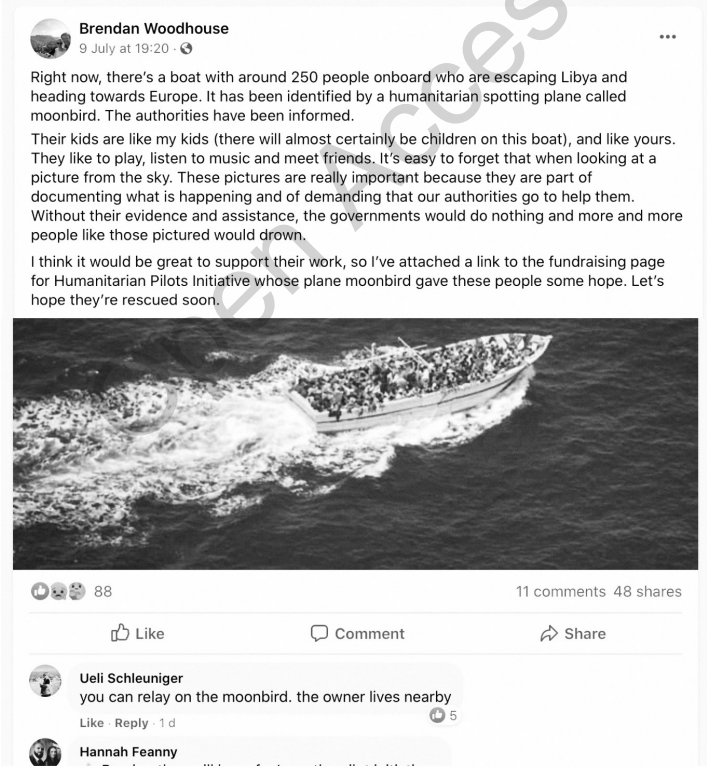

Figure 14.15 A volunteer with Sea-Watch, an independent rescue mission in the Mediterranean, puts out an urgent call to action on Facebook, 2020.
Image credit: Brendan Woodhouse.

concerned with deterring those making the sea crossing than with rescuing them. Independent groups like Sea-Watch.Org and Open Arms took over the rescue role, crowdfunding the purchase and equipping of new rescue ships. Sea-Watch also commissioned its own reconnaissance plane, the *Moonbird*, to spot migrant boats in distress at sea, and used GPS and smartphone links to contact its ships to make immediate rescue. As many countries now refuse to accept these rescue missions into port, April 2019 saw a Sea-Watch crew member make increasingly urgent social media posts as the crew and the 40 people they had rescued from the sea were running out of water and food, and had to rely on the activist community through Facebook to help them broker a landing before lives were lost.

Monitoring Violence

In many parts of Europe, state forces (army and police) have been persistently violent in their treatment of new refugee arrivals and of volunteers as well. Higher-quality phone cameras with greater capacity for shooting in low light, and with accurate referencing as to time and place, have enabled volunteer groups in Calais, Menton (on the French–Italian border) and in Serbia and Croatia to record and monitor police and state violence, in order to bring actions against these states.

Figure 14.16 Refugees create slogans at Belgrade 'Barracks' camp, Serbia, winter 2017. Image credit: Abdul Saboor.

Figure 14.17 The broken arm of an unaccompanied minor from Iraq, recently pushed back from Croatia to Velika Kladusa, Bosnia, 2018.
Image credit: Jack Sapoch.

Direct Campaigning

Activists have expanded the use of Twitter, using hashtags and memes such as #ChooseLove, which was the slogan of new independent group Help Refugees, and #DubsNow, a demand for the UK government to honour Section 67c of the 2016 Immigration Act, the so-called 'Dubs Amendment', which required the UK to accept a specified number of unaccompanied children from the European refugee crisis. This use of memes and hashtags in conjunction with live demonstrations – each effectively promoting the other – has increasingly become a feature of other radical mobilisations such as Extinction Rebellion, #MeToo, Time's Up and Black Lives Matter.

Climate Change Activism and Extinction

There is considerable intersectionality between grassroots movements in the UK and elsewhere, so that many of those active on refugee issues have also been taking forward climate change protest and other campaigns. Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a global environmental movement which supports non-violent direct

Figure 14.18 A social media post promoting the 'Dubs Now' campaign to implement the Dubs Amendment to the UK Immigration Act 2016, allowing more child refugees into the UK.
Image credit: Sophie Holgate, member of the Hummingbird Refugee Project in Brighton.

Figure 14.19 A social media post supporting the #DubsNow hashtag.
Image credit: 'Mesadorm'.

Figure 14.20 A Refugees Welcome demonstration, London, 2016.
Image credit: Pru Waldorf.

Figure 14.21 Lord Dubs, speaking at a Westminster rally, is filmed by mobile for a podcast.
Image credit: Tess Berry-Hart.

Figure 14.22 The Refugee Solidarity Summit, London, 2020, which was also available as online webinars, as many volunteers were working overseas.
Image credit: Pru Waldorf.

Figure 14.23 A Climate Justice demonstration, 2020.
Image credit: Jacek Patora.

action (known as NVDA) as a means of pressuring governments to steer away from what it calls 'tipping points' in the climate system, which it says carry a risk of ecological collapse. XR's founding has interesting antecedents. It began in the UK in 2018, when 100 academics prompted by the group Rising Up! signed a call to action, echoing the Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament's (CND) 'Committee of 100' march in 1961, when 100 academics, led by Bertrand Russell, were – like Rising Up! nearly 60 years later – prepared to be arrested and imprisoned for non-violent protest to make their case.

XR has further developed the role of social media, apps and smartphones to service its actions and discussion. While I have described how the refugee volunteer movement faced the challenge of purposing social media and apps to connect a loose association of hundreds of disparate groups engaged in very urgent practical tasks, XR arguably has different concerns: how to support a new movement that is based on both ethical and political considerations, that eschews the restrictions of being a political party, but that nonetheless requires organisation and discipline to conduct its orchestrated public demonstrations.

This need for seemingly opposing forms of communication – for efficiency of aim and action yet allowing a quite fluid infrastructure – is likely to be the way that future social movements will organise. W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg have described these as 'connective action frameworks' and argued

Figure 14.24 A demonstration referencing climate change and migrant issues, London, 2019.
Image credit: Jacek Patora.

that such movements were driven by cultural and moral, rather than conventional party-political, rhetoric. Earlier examples would include groups such as Occupy, Stop the City and Plane Stupid, and we can see current embodiments in the EU/Brexit campaigns and the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. In such movements the social media branding becomes particularly significant, and

> entails technology platforms and applications taking the role of established political organizations. In this network mode, political demands and

Figure 14.25 Extinction Rebellion (XR) demonstration, London, 2020.
Image credit: Andrea Domeniconi.

> grievances are often shared in very personalized accounts that travel over social networking platforms, email lists, and online coordinating platforms … For example, the easily personalized action frame 'we are the 99 per cent' that emerged from the US Occupy protests in 2011 quickly travelled the world via personal stories and images shared on social networks such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook.
>
> (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 742)

A further challenge for new organisations is the UK's current so-called 'hostile environment', where the right to protest is coming under increasing attack.

Figure 14.26 Youth Strike 4 Climate demonstration, Birmingham, 2020, highlighting global warming and other environmental issues.
Image Credit: Rizwan Ali Dar.

Figure 14.27 Led by Donkeys placard, Kentish Town, London, 2020.
Image credit: Kerry Hopkins.

Many groups, such as the 'Stansted 15' and the anti-fracking movement, have been targeted by authorities and listed as a threat to the state. XR itself was controversially listed as a 'terrorist' organisation by one regional division of the Counter-Terrorism Policing task force in 2019 and this status was only rescinded after public and press pressure. So a further concern is how future movements

Figure 14.28 Extinction Rebellion (XR) demonstration, London, 2019.
Image credit: Toby Pickard.

will benefit from the open-access nature of social media, while offering individual privacy and protection from state surveillance.

Below are some characteristics that they have developed.

Staging Demonstrations

At a functional level, XR continues to engage in acts of non-violent direct action, such as the occupation of London bridges and central road junctions in 2018

Figure 14.29 Extinction Rebellion (XR) demonstration, Brisbane, Australia, 2019.
Image credit: Dan Smith.

and 2019. Its group tactics necessarily result in frequent altering of plans, as police and other state actors cause it to move on and re-group. It has found ways to appropriate commercial apps for such occasions; for instance, in a rally in October 2019 those taking part were asked to register (with no payment required) for the rally, which was listed on the commercial events app Eventbrite. Through its auto-update function, XR was able to send real-time updates or changes in plan, venue and tactics from both the organisers and other activists on the ground.

High- and Low-Tech Messaging

XR employs a mix of high-tech and low-tech messaging, using mass-media opportunities created by its very public acts to display hand-drawn links and memes. This contributes to the notion expressed above of 'connective action frameworks', where real-life events, media capture of these and virtual events and messaging together form a dense network of social connection.

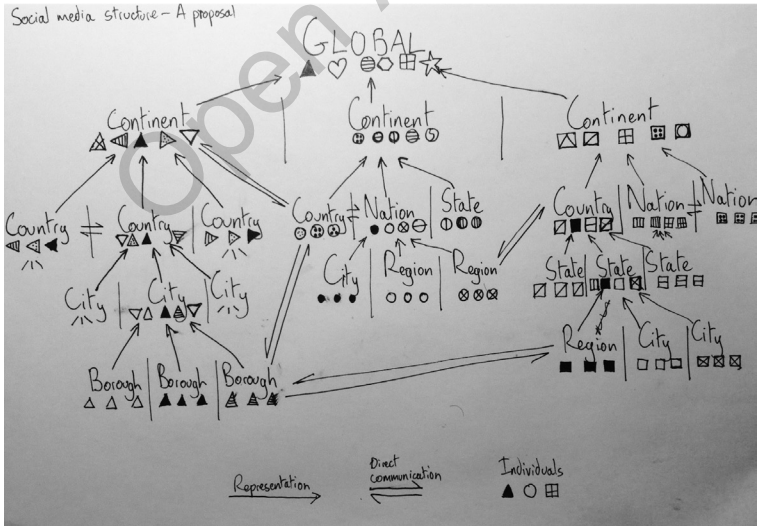

Figure 14.30 A proposed Extinction Rebellion (XR) online communication plan, 2019. Image credit: 'Iggy Fox'.

Privacy and Encryption

The XR media team has adopted various new forms of user-accessible encryption for advance planning. It also segments the national network of groups so that police and others can never access more than part of the network. The organisation also plans for increasing decentralisation by creating a web design structure (see below) that gives autonomy to local group platforms but allows them to feed directly into central planning.

In conclusion, what Hannah Amm (2020) calls the 'connective action repertoire' seems set to continue and expand in the social activist sector. It seems from the evidence of 2019–2020 protests over Hong Kong and demonstrations in the USA and Europe supporting Black Lives Matter that movements will go on drawing their affective power from live events, whether these are shaped as traditional marches and demonstrations or as more elaborated performative happenings.

What is different, however, is the web of connection made by the push into identity politics with such generic memes and slogans as 'Me Too' and 'Tell the Truth' that brand these mobilisations in flexible and complex ways – to protest,

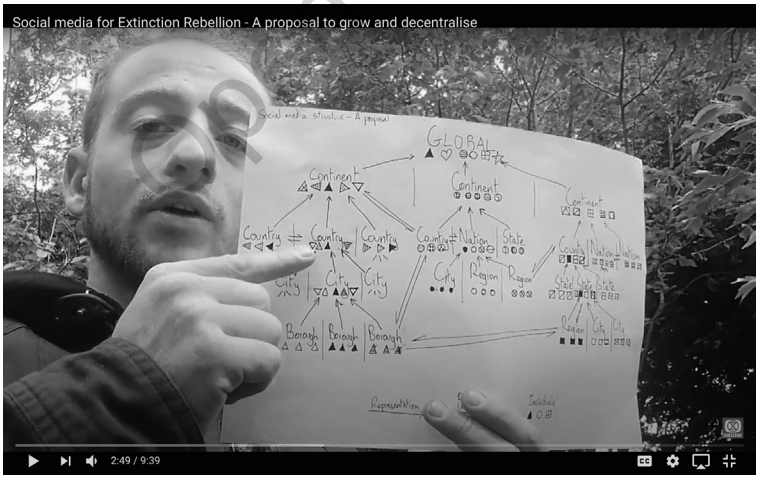

Figure 14.31 Activist 'Iggy Fox' (Raphaël Coleman) describes the Extinction Rebellion (XR) online communication plan, 2019.
Image credit: 'Iggy Fox'.

Figure 14.32 Ecocide woman protester, London, 2019.
Image credit: Andrea Domeniconi.

Figure 14.33 Extinction Rebellion (XR) demonstration, London, 2019.
Image credit: Rosie, @the_vibey_vegan.

but also to survive: to tell stories, make connections, act out injustice, share mapping and information and to self-educate the cohort. This is a social as much as a technological revolution, and one that plays into, and can respond to, each individual's ever-more-complex matrix of loyalties and identities.

Additional Material

Watch Sue Clayton's activist film, *The Stansted 15: On Trial*, on The Future of Media website: www.golddust.org.uk/futureofmedia

Image Research

Natalie Galvau.

References

Amm, H. 2020. 'The Extraordinarily Ordinary: How the Rebels of Extinction Rebellion Berlin Shape their Movement by Using Connective Action Repertoires'. *Student Papers*, University of Lund. Available at: http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/9017790.

Bennett, W. L. and A. Segerberg. 2012. 'The Logic of Connective Action'. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15: 5.

Clayton S., S. Parker and E. Weizman. 2016. 'Precarious Trajectories: Understanding the Human Cost of the Migrant Crisis in the Central Mediterranean'. Available at: https://precarioustrajectories.wordpress.com/2016/11/.

Clayton, S. 2020. *The New Internationalists: Activist Volunteers in the European Refugee Crisis*. London: Goldsmiths Press.

Gillespie, M., L. Ampofo, M. Cheesman, B. Faith, E. Iliadou, A. Issa, S. Osseiran and D. Skleparis. 2016. *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*. Open University/France Médias Monde. Available at: www.open.ac.uk/ccig/research/projects/mapping-refugee-media-journeys.

Wendle, J. 2016. 'For Asylum Seekers, a Cellphone is a Bridge to the Future and the Past'. Al Jazeera, 18 January 2016. Available at: http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2016/1/18/for-asylum-seekers-a-cell-phone-is-a-bridge-to-the-future-and-the-past.html.

Websites

Calaidipedia. www.calaidipedia.co.uk/.

Extinction Rebellion UK. https://rebellion.earth/.

Help Refugees. https://helprefugees.org/.

Infomobile – Welcome2Europe. http://infomobile.w2eu.net/.

Lesvos Solidarity – Pipka camp. www.lesvossolidarity.org/en/what-we-do/pikpa-camp.

People-Solidarity. https://people-solidarity.com/.

Plane Stupid. www.planestupid.com/.

Refugee Solidarity Network. https://refugeesolidaritynetwork.org/.

Refugee Volunteer Support. www.facebook.com/groups/1424742354318380/.

Rising Up! https://risingup.org.uk/.

The Village of Alltogether, housed on Lesvos Solidarity. https://lesvossolidarity.org/.