weizenbaum journal OF THE DIGITAL SOCIETY

SPECIAL ISSUE 02

WEIZENBAUM JOURNAL OF THE DIGITAL SOCIETY
Volume 2 \ Issue 2 \ w2.2.3 \ 12-31-2022
ISSN 2748-5625 \ DOI 10.34669/WI.WJDS/2.2.3

Information on this journal and its funding can be found on our website:
https://journal.weizenbaum-institut.de

KEYWORDS

social movements studies
digital activism
digital inequalities
feminist studies

FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

Who Can Still Afford to Do Digital Activism?

Exploring the material conditions of online mobilisation

Paola Pierri

London College of Communication \ Democratic Society
paola.pierri@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Digital activism is now considered a widespread form of activism. Studies on its impact and use have proliferated. Most research into this phenomenon has tended to analyze the impact of digital technologies on *action* and *activism*. In contrast, this study explores the role of *organizations* and *organizational structures,* focusing on internal processes and the functioning of digital campaigning. Based on ethnographic observation and interviews with staff of online campaigning organizations, this paper presents findings on how digital communication and its logic can affect the organization's internal processes. The paper challenges two established ideas: a) the idea of de-materialization of organizational structures from digital activism; b) that digital platforms tend to support the dissemination of opinions of previously marginalized actors. My fieldwork's findings demonstrate that the reality in both cases is far more nuanced, with significant identifiable inconsistencies. This research shows that organizations and organizational structures have not *de-materialized* and that the material conditions of digital activism are key to better understanding this phenomenon and new forms of inequality it might generate.

1 Introducing digital activism

Digital activism is now considered a widespread form of activism. Consequently, studies on its impact and use have proliferated. Most current research into this phenomenon tends to analyze the impact of digital technologies on *action* and *activism* (its nature and influence) (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Postill, 2012; Treré, 2018). In contrast, this study adopts a different perspective by exploring the role of *organizations* and *organizational structures*, focusing on internal processes and the functioning of digital campaigning. This paper is based on ethnographic observation and face-to-face interviews with members of an online campaigning organization. It aims to present new reflections on digital organizing and the role of women in what Schradie called *digital activist labor* (2019).

Digital-first campaigning is often depicted as *organizing without organizations* (Shirky, 2008) or organizing with "*different organizations*" (Karpf, 2012). This is based on the so-called "MoveOn model," built around the structure of the famous US online campaigning organization. In this view, digital activism appears more as an immaterial phenomenon that happens almost spontaneously due to self-organizing processes facilitated by the Internet and amplified through social media.

MoveOn is an American online campaigning organization founded in 1998 by Wes Boyd and Joan Blades. They circulated an online petition in opposition to the impeachment of US President Bill Clinton, asking for Congress to "move on" to more important issues. That petition rapidly collected an impressive 250,000 signatures in just a few weeks. This was an unprecedented result, and over the years, activists flew from all over Europe to visit and learn more about MoveOn and their model of online organizing. A shift had occurred in the field of online campaigning.

A few years later, in 2013, the OPEN group (Online Progressive Engagement Network) was formed. This is a network of progressive digital campaigning organizations with shared values and a unique approach to organizing. It aims to make engagement simple and accessible for every citizen. Today, the OPEN website counts 19 organizations across many countries with over 20 million members worldwide.

This study analyses this phenomenon of digital activism within the more progressive camp. It aims to challenge two established ideas that are prevalent in the public domain and reflected in many academic studies: the idea of the de-materialization of organizations and organizational structures from digital activism; and the idea that digital platforms tend to support the dissemination of opinions of actors who used to be marginalized.

1.1 Difference of affordances

The title of this paper – Who can still afford to do digital activism? – is the crucial and provocative question that my work aims to answer.

By considering the often-neglected material conditions of digital campaigning (its structure, hierarchy, work and labor conditions, and algorithmic logic), this paper questions the misleading idea that the digitalization of activism is a cost-saving and inclusive move that lowers the barriers to participation. The word afford in the title is deliberate, alluding to two specific ways digitalization processes impact forms of activism and create new forms of exclusion and discrimination. To *afford* implies both: the concept of *affordances*[1] and the idea of being able to bear the costs of something.

The first meaning introduces an affordances approach to digitalization. This focuses our attention on how technology is mutually constituted together with the social sphere. In the language of design, affordances are defined as an object's properties that show the possible actions that users can (or cannot) take with that object. Therefore, it may suggest how a user wants to interact with that object, or how an object clearly excludes specific purposes or people from its use.[2] Analyzing digital activism through a digital affordances lens allows us to appreciate that technologies and digital media have specific affordances designed within them. Therefore, their use might favor specific actions, groups, and logic more than others (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Furthermore, since affordability is not universal, we can appreciate how groups with specific capabilities might be afforded better access and outcomes from the engagement with digital activism and campaigning. In contrast, others can afford to do less digital activism or not afford to do it at all, as this paper will illustrate.

The second meaning refers to the concept of affording, in the sense of being able to bear the costs of something. Therefore, the questions in this instance are more classically economic: what are the costs of digital activism, and who can bear them? This paper examines the material conditions of digital activism to acknowledge the role that economic factors play in this field. This is noticeable in at least two elements: (a) in terms of *economic exclusion*, since a *digital activism gap* exists and is more visible among socio-economic lower classes (Schradie, 2018, 2019); (b) in terms of work conditions, by suggesting an understanding of the unpaid labor that fuels digital activist practices.

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1 I refer here to the definition of affordance as popularized by Donald Norman (1988) within the field of design. Norman writes: "...the term affordance refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used. [...] Affordances provide strong clues to the operations of things. Plates are for pushing. Knobs are for turning. Slots are for inserting things into" (1988, p. 9).

2 This second condition is what Constanza-Chock has defined as disaffordances (2020). In her book on design justice, she also introduces the concept of *dysaffordances*, which require some persons to misidentify themselves in order to access a certain service or use a certain object.

Given the breadth of topics covered, this work does not purport to be exhaustive. However, it provides an initial contribution to a less researched area within the field of digital activism (namely, its material conditions), and starts a debate currently missing within the scholarship and practice of the broader digital campaigning field.

1.2 An ethnographic enquiry

This research is situated in the wider field of studies of social movements, including digital activism and its impact on the public space. Specifically, this research explores how digital technologies are shaping new ways of mobilizing dissent and, more broadly, public discourses. To clarify the object of this study, I draw on Earl's distinctions (Earl et al., 2010) between different types of "internet activism." I consider digital-first campaigning organizations to be involved to varying degrees of action in all four typologies of internet activism that Earl identifies:

> …brochureware, which uses technology to spread information online, but not to invite or to enable participation; e-mobilizations… which use online tools to facilitate offline protest; (a) online participation, which uses online tools to enable online participation (e.g., online petitions and denial of service actions); and (b) online organizing of e-movements, which uses online tools to wholly organize movement efforts online. (Earl, 2015, p. 39)

This paper draws on two years of ethnographic research within a European digital campaigning organization affiliated with the OPEN Movement. To protect the anonymity of the research participants, I have chosen not to disclose the organization's name but to give enough information to situate my work and the relevance of my findings.

Ethnographic observation and methods have been widely used in the field of digital activism and campaigning (Postill, 2012). These methods are especially relevant for observing digital activism in the ordinary and slow unfolding of time, away from more eventful moments. Giving attention only to the campaign that went viral or the hashtag re-tweeted many times risks glamorizing the digital element of these organizations and the fast pace of digital actions. David Karpf writes:

> By focusing on activist moments (italic in the original) instead of activist movements (italic in the original), scholars in the organizing-without organizations tradition devalue political infrastructure. And this is a problem, because the activist movements that win are activist movements that learn, adapt, and grow over time. (2017, p. 165)

An ethnographic inquiry allows a focus on the mundane everyday work of digital campaigners. Focusing on these routines and repetitive tasks reveals the material conditions of digital activism, including its infrastructure and bureaucracy. This paper purposefully shifts attention from the eventful to the everyday and its materiality in order to dispel the myth that digital social movements and activism can easily and rapidly succeed without much labor or cost.

My research methods included participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1989). Starting in 2017, I was personally involved with a digital campaigning organization for two years. I used the opportunity to observe – first as a member, second as a researcher – all the dynamics at play among staff members, the language used, and the reflections shared by those I was working with. I observed everyday moments as the team designed a new campaign, pitched a new idea for an action, and negotiated their relationship with their peer colleagues and more senior members of the team. In addition, I "hung out" with them on more social occasions, including going for lunch, a beer, or to a farewell party. During that time, I gradually made sense of their practices and language, learned their rituals, and reflected on what I observed through a research lens.

My analysis combines my initial observations with my field notes and interviews in a systemic study of the practice of digital campaigning (Rees, 2008). Although my primary field of observation was one specific digital campaigning organization, during the two years working with them, I had the opportunity to meet and work with staff and campaigners from other organizations. It is not unusual in this field to work collaboratively among organizations with similar political views, to share resources, learn from each other and build on each other's campaigns, amplifying their impact. This approach was referred to as "movement generosity" by participants, describing an attitude of collaboration to achieve shared goals.

My research data took the form of ethnographic field notes, recording all activities (including more mundane events, like staff meetings, training moments, informal conversations, external presentations, etc.). I drew on the ethnographic tradition to organize these data (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1989). First, I made field notes for a concrete and descriptive write-up of events as they happened, including the participants' accounts and a meticulous record (almost verbatim) of what they said. Second, I made analytic notes that included my thoughts as I developed an interpretation of my field notes. Finally, I developed analytic memos on ideas and research themes emerging from the data and my understanding of the context.

In addition to my field notes, I conducted ethnographic interviews with four members of staff (out of a total of 15 employees). They had different seniority, were from different teams, and performed different roles. These interviews were organized after the end of my collaboration, and once I had an opportuni-

ty to step back from the context in which I had been immersed to analyze my data and allow initial themes to emerge. These interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour, conducted digitally, audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed. The interviews had two aims: to validate my initial findings from my participant observation and to collect more data from my interviewees, inviting them to elaborate on the concepts I was exploring. This approach followed the ethnographic interview tradition (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989), providing an opportunity to check some initial concepts in the theory formation process. Moreover, they were an opportunity to reflect on events experienced by both ethnographer and the participants and compare different meanings and understandings of what happened.

2 Ten years later: is digital activism still the same?

David Karpf (2012) was one of the first authors to systematically study and analyze the new phenomenon of digital campaigning that emerged in the US at the beginning of the 2000s. Therefore, his work is a key reference point for any study of digital campaigning and activism, including this one. His work is especially relevant for this paper because Karpf's book focused on the unique organizational features he identified as constituting digital campaigning. He notably identified three unique elements of the MoveOn model of digital campaigning: (a) the organization structure, (b) the membership, and (c) the engagement practices[3]. However, during my research, I realized how much my observations from first-hand experience as a member of a digital campaigning organization in Europe differed from what Karpf presented.

Karpf's main argument was that the emergence of online campaigning presents us with a very different type of organization. From its inception, MoveOn did not have a traditional organizational structure of other advocacy groups, with departments and teams. Instead, it operated according to horizontal and flexible internal processes. For example, a significant innovation at MoveOn was their use of *phantom staff*, additional staff members that move around the organization and are quickly recruited and activated when needed to support the *core staff*. Significantly, many of MoveOn's organizational principles resembled key characteristics of lean start-up models. In fact, the theory of lean start-ups circulated in the field, as I discovered when I was given by organization members, to my surprise, a book on lean start-ups as an introduction to the digital campaigning model.

However, a very different picture emerged from my observation and interviews in the field. Since the early days of MoveOn and the development of

[3] Karpf also identified a fourth element that makes these organizations unique. Their fundraising model is built on members-crowdsourced fundraising. In this paper I will not analyze this fourth aspect as it is less relevant to its analysis and focus.

OPEN, digital campaigning organizations have become increasingly professionalized. They have become more necessary as intermediaries between activists and institutional political actors. These organizations currently operate in a competitive environment where those with more resources (e.g., more staff and better infrastructure) are more successful. Smaller groups with a more informal structure tend to suffer the most and often have to merge with larger organizations to survive.

A member of staff from an online campaigning organization once told me:

> The time when a group of friends could share a petition on social media and attract huge attention have since long [sic] gone. We need to accept the fact that we might never have a campaign that gets viral. We need to work much harder and for less visibility.

This quote exemplifies the awareness of those who operate within these organizations that times have changed. The online space is more crowded, and more work and better structures are needed to develop new tactics and campaign strategies that can mobilize people and have a greater impact.

In the rest of this section, I will briefly illustrate the main novel elements I found through ethnographic research in a digital campaigning organization. I will look at how the field has changed over ten years after the emergence of MoveOn. I will draw on Karpf's analysis to expand on his work and propose a new understanding of these organizations' key components and how the organizations operate. In presenting my findings, I will follow Karpf's distinction between (a) the organization structure, (b) the membership, and (c) engagement practice.

In Section 3, I will draw on the main findings presented in Section 2 to outline the significant contribution of my research and analysis to the field, and namely: that (a) organizations and organizational structures have not de-materialized as a result of the digitalization of activism, and that to better understand this phenomenon, more attention must be given to the material conditions of digital activism; (b) that digital platforms and online tools may actually introduce new forms of inequality and discrimination of their own – rather than simply supporting the dissemination of opinions of previously discriminated actors, as has been argued (Norris, 2001). My analysis aims to portray a more nuanced reality of online campaigning organizations, usually depicted as fast-moving, member-led, and high-impact. Although these statements still hold, much has happened in online organizing since the first MoveOn petition, and new complexities and variations can be identified (Poell & van Dijck, 2018; Postill, 2018).

Before I present the findings, I will make one caveat: this paper summarizes in a short space a relatively long period of fieldwork (between 2017 and 2019) and a large amount of qualitative ethnographic data collected during that time.

Therefore, I have prioritized an overall illustration of my work's main findings, and I have briefly presented the main analysis derived from those findings. Consequently, this paper touches on many diverse points, each deserving of a more in-depth presentation. However, I hope it provides a helpful overview of the field and a valuable and needed critical reading of digital activism. Future publications will draw on the same fieldwork and each element in more detail. In the meantime, this paper should be considered an introduction to an updated analysis of a fast-moving field, more than ten years after the emergence of the field of digital activism and digital organizations.

2.1 The organizations' structure: recognizing the digital activism labor

The assumption of digital and online organizing as a cheaper and bottom-up endeavor that needs minor or no organizational effort has become problematic and outdated. Since their work entails that these entities are often geographically dispersed, the effort needed to coordinate the team is probably even greater than in traditional advocacy and campaigning organizations. In an interview, a leader from an online campaigning organization reflected on how often this extra amount of work tends to be overlooked:

> …this assumption that structure, strategy and departments are not there is completely wrong. Like, I don't know, any digital-first organization, that, for example, isn't broken into departments, there's generally always at least a Campaign and Tech department and sometimes a "Member engagement" department. And then you add comms support and other logistics and functions. In terms of structure, they mostly follow a similar hierarchy to old models, as there's a director, then maybe there's a deputy director, a campaign or tech director, and so on. And I don't know anyone that has let go of these old hierarchies or that does not have a strategy. Because if you don't have a strategy… like, it'd be kind of nuts. And I think that's just an assumption that is wrong, that there's digital-first organizations out there just trying to mobilize big numbers of people, and that's it. This is maybe the invisible bit.

This lengthy quote is remarkable in that it breaks with the widely accepted belief that digital activism is the result of spontaneous bottom-up movements that quickly mobilize online. The bureaucracy of digital activism does exist, but as long as this structure remains invisible, it risks perpetuating the "cost-saving myth." As we have seen, this myth obfuscates the material conditions of digital campaigning, namely, (a) the role of strategies that set the agenda, aims, and guidance for an organization; (b) the persistence of old-fashioned hierarchies behind the myth of horizontality; (c) the amount of resources (e.g., financial, professional and digital infrastructure) that are

required to develop this type of organization and keep it functioning in the long-term; and finally (d) the working conditions and amount of unpaid work and pressure that staff (as well as members) experience in order to make a campaign successful.

Since no direct research was done with members of the online campaigning organization, this paper can only provide a few reflections on the role of members. However, the interviewee indicated several times the amount of effort expected from members in order to get the campaigning model to work. For example, one member of staff told me:

> …you give people a chance to do activism on their own time and on their own terms, which opens up the opportunity for participation massively…. That's what gets me excited about, it's not about 'armchair democracy', it's about knowing that the reality of people is that between raising kids having three jobs trying to survive, it's just not possible to be out there on the street every second of your life. And therefore, what I love about this is the extent to which digital campaigning can act as a huge boost to overall campaigning. I mean, because you can share a petition or re-tweet an action in your own terms and in your own time.

This quote may be read in two different ways. On the one hand, it demonstrates the potential of online campaigning to provide low-level access to mobilization for members who can make a difference without becoming full-time activists. On the other hand, it does not critically question the costs and the amount of digital activist labor (Schradie, 2019) that is employed in these organizations. I will dedicate my discussion in Section 3 to expand on this point and the reasons why the material conditions of digital activism need to be explored and I will focus the next section to illustrate the role of membership overall.

2.2 The membership and the risks of the "Flamingo Effect"

The existence and the role of members have been core characteristics of these new digital campaigning organizations. Karpf even argues that these organizations are as big and as influential as big is their list of members. My fieldwork revealed that the relationship of online campaigning organizations with their members has become a difficult topic for many of these groups. Campaigning organizations are increasingly aware that what had been their strength in the initial phases (their capacity to demonstrate high numbers of members that could be mobilized) may now become a critical weakness.

In a member-led view of digital campaigning, "list growth" is a key objective and sometimes a factor in deciding whether or not to run a specific online campaign (i.e., depending on whether or not that campaign is likely to bring growth

to the membership list). Campaigns that show high list growth opportunities are often prioritized over others that might score higher on other factors, like political impact or the issue's importance. The result is that many campaigns and campaign tactics are designed to chase headlines in the hope of going viral and achieving significant growth. This is usually referred to as "list vanity" within these organizations, an expression I observed during my research.

In contrast to Karpf's analysis of MoveOn, my research revealed the perverse and unanticipated consequences of list vanity. After the initial rush to grow their membership, many organizations discovered they had collected a diverse group of people with wide-ranging political orientations. As a result, new members proved almost impossible to coordinate in a joint political endeavor without sufficient common ground, a shared sense of identity, or collective will. Therefore, many organizations are becoming more proactive in defining which elements of diversity are desirable to encourage and which diversity is more problematic and prevents the long-term formation of a collective identity.

During my fieldwork, I observed another membership issue, described by some staff members as the "flamingo effect." This metaphor assumes that flamingos are pink because they eat pink shrimps. Similarly, these online campaigning organizations described themselves as having the "color" (or political identity) of the membership they (metaphorically) ate. According to this view, the digital organization is imagined to be like an empty container of neutral value. The organization's political identity and types of campaigns are ultimately decided by members based on what is most popular to them. Alice Jay, former campaign director at Avaaz (one of the largest international digital campaigning organizations), explained this concept in another way:

> We're like a sailing boat, not a motor boat. Whether it's our strategy or our campaigns, it's only as strong as the public wind of ideas that are behind them. So whether we might believe ourselves that A, B or C are great campaigns, we test and poll them, and if the membership isn't into them, we don't run them…" (Ball, 2013)

Some members of staff used the flamingo effect metaphor as a neutral one to describe the influence that members' interests and political outlook had on the campaigning work. For example, one staff member said: "…we are clearly a green organization since environment is what our members care about. It is just the flamingo effect." However, several others in the field identified the flamingo effect as a complication that could endanger the organization's work and impact it in the long-term, coupled with the organic growth of a membership with diverse political positions. For example, what would happen if a large group of right-wing conservative members joined the organization tactically to influence and re-focus campaigning activities? This was a concerning scenario I observed being raised and discussed many times by staff of the organization to illustrate a possible risk coming from this membership model. When I finished my research

and left the organization, a solution to the "issue" of membership had not been found. However, the group was still exploring the best ways to shape the relationship with its members. For example, could members be framed as followers, supporting a clear organizational line for campaigning? Would a stewardship relationship be better? Or did these organizations need to find new ways to better listen and follow their members, in order to be genuinely member-led?

Therefore, the findings emerging from my research were novel and different, compared to Karpf's analysis. This research showed that membership, although still a crucial component of these organizations and a measure of their strength, was now more complex and regarded as an area of greater risk, requiring a new approach.

These organizations – along with digital activism and digital-first campaigning more generally – had reached a mature state, where membership growth had slowed. The online space was crowded with more campaigns and events competing to capture limited online attention. As a result, these organizations started looking at their list more sophisticatedly, focusing on more active members rather than an overall larger membership. Organizations define who counts as an active member differently. In the organization I was observing, active members were intended to be those who perform more than one action online in a given time period and respond to different campaigns and campaign tactics. Interestingly, I observed that most members, counted as such for fulfilling the list vanity effect, were inactive and simply passive receivers of emails, notifications, and calls to action. Many did not even open the emails they were regularly receiving, and some might have simply forgotten that they had ever joined a specific organization. Joining an online organization was an effortless act, and arguably too easy. For example, before the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), signing a petition and providing basic personal details was considered enough to become a member.

The next section explores in more detail the engagement tactics and the role of members, focusing on the use of digital tools for engagement.

2.3 The engagement tactics: when the algorithm decides

The final and most important component I will discuss is the engagement tactics used by online campaigning organizations to connect and mobilize their members. In his work, Karpf argued that "not all digital tactics are created equal" (2012, p. 14). In a later study, *Analytic Activism: Digital Listening and the New Political Strategy*, Karpf explores in more detail the impact and approach of the emergent tactics that online campaigning organizations use (Karpf, 2017). I am going to draw on this study for this final part.

Karpf argued that "analytic activism is a new approach in citizen-driven politics that makes use of the affordances of digital technologies to fashion new

strategic interventions in the political arena" (Karpf, 2017, p. 2). Digital-first tactics are presented in Karpf's study as more than a means of giving people a voice. They are also a particularly effective tool to allow organizations to perform the act of listening to what people prefer and what works online. Therefore, these digital tactics are linked to the membership as they *afford* both to connect the organization to its members – to listen to them – and for members to connect among themselves and mobilize more easily.

In the digital tactics and tools used by online campaigning organizations, the question of affordances is crucial and should be better analyzed. How much the logic and design choice of specific digital tools afford particular actions – and *dis-afford* others – was a question only starting to emerge at the end of my fieldwork in 2019–2020. Dis-affordance describes the process of excluding or disincentivizing particular uses or users through specific design choices. This was rarely discussed in the field, as my research notes demonstrated. There were often discussions in campaign meetings with the Tech Team regarding what could be achieved, unlocked, or enabled through a specific tactic or design feature. However, I observed no discussion of a design feature for a digital tool that would *disable* an action or *dissuade* a user from taking part in a campaign.

The debates I observed and explored in interviews focused on the risks of what Karpf refers to as analytic activism, making campaign choices that prioritize quantifiable indicators, satisfying members, and growing the membership. I noted many comments and even jokes about the unusual topics that gained more attention in the digital campaigning world (e.g., campaigns to save penguins) compared to those campaigns that raised important issues (e.g., tax justice, patents on seeds, or even protection of LGBTQ rights in certain countries). The first kind of campaign was always popular and helped membership growth. In contrast, other campaigns required more background work (e.g., researching the topic, building alliances, and further online work to mobilize people to share a post, like, or leave a comment). Most of the time, this additional digital work made these campaigns ultimately highly inefficient.

Within the organization I observed, affordances of digital tools and engagement tactics were a terrain of frequent clashes between the Campaign Team and the Tech Team. Campaigners often complained that the Tech Team was, in fact, either limiting or skewing the campaign focus. Usually, it was perceived that the Tech Team did not have enough bespoke solutions and time to develop new and effective tools that would have been needed by the Campaign Team. Other times the data gathered by the Tech Team were used to make important and strategic campaign decisions, going against the Campaign Team's wishes.

Quantification and data-driven strategizing were two interesting factors that emerged as problematic in my research. On one hand, data were in high demand and used by the leadership team to make strategic decisions to ensure continuous membership growth. On the other hand, when data was the only criteria that

counted to choose a new digital campaign this was often criticized as being too data-driven. As Karpf clarifies (2017), digital organizations need many members and mailing lists to employ analytics, compare different tactics and gather data that can inform strategic decisions. Large databases are also required to run members' surveys – carried out regularly by the organisation I observed – to listen to the priorities of the people that support them and anticipate their attitudes towards issues that could become campaign topics. In summary, we might argue that analytic activism and list vanity *afford* each other in a continuously growing circle: you need more members to count digitally, and you need better and more analytic tools to measure what your large membership really wants.

When analytic activism is used inappropriately, a culture of testing and measuring becomes listening "without conversation" (Karpf, 2017, p. 156), which may lead to prioritizing campaigns because they are likely to achieve more clicks rather than because of their strategic priority. Many digital campaigning organizations are aware of the risk that analytic and data-driven activism may be subjected to "algorithmic curation," to use Gillespie's term (2014). In the attempt to pursue those campaigns that are analytically more successful, protests are chosen automatically and only when they perform numerically. Feeding the algorithm through the logic of analytic activism becomes the priority to justify the decision to carry on a specific campaign with specific tactics. Parisier (as cited in Karpf, 2017) presents the problem of algorithmic curation as follows:

> So if algorithms are going to curate the world for us, if they are going to decide what we get to see and what we don't get to see, then we need to make sure that they're not just keyed to relevance. We need to make sure that they also show us things that are uncomfortable or important" (p. 104).

3 Discussion: the materiality of digital organizing

Digital-first campaigning organizations have changed significantly since they first emerged at the end of the 1990s. As my research demonstrated, this results from changes in the digital media landscape and the advancement of digitalization in various spheres of society. "Organising without – or with different – organizations" was the popular slogan, supported by Karpf's interpretation of what he argued was a new world of digital advocacy organizations. However, based on my observation and research in one of these digital campaign groups between 2017 and 2019, I have argued that this way of describing the nature of digital-first campaigning is no longer appropriate. Moreover, it risks overlooking the important material conditions in which digital activism develops and its impact on specific marginalized groups.

In the following pages, I will elaborate on the findings from my ethnographic research and move toward an analysis that introduces a critical reading of digital activism. First, I will articulate how digital activism's material conditions emerged and why they are an important, but often neglected, means of understanding the impact and social implications of online organizing. Next, I will reflect on instances of inequalities that I witnessed and collected in my interviews. Of course, these findings are not new. Feminist readings of social movements have already demonstrated how inequalities can be created and perpetrated within social movements (Bhattacharjya et al., 2013), even when women are participants and women's rights campaigns are prioritized. However, I argue that these inequalities may be exacerbated over time in digital activism by introducing new forms of discrimination.

3.1 The hidden costs of online activism

For a long time, cost-saving arguments regarding digital activism and movements have been prevalent in the field (Earl, 2015; Shirky, 2008). It may be true that digital-first organizations are usually operating with much lower costs than traditional campaigning organizations, without the need for buildings and offices all over the world for mobilization. Moreover, they tend to rely on fewer people. However, this analysis overlooks the impact these "savings" have on staff.

Workers' conditions and rights in digital campaigning organizations are not always upheld to the highest possible standards. During my time in the field, I have witnessed many cases of burnout, the undiscussed and invisible side effect of having to work around the clock – one cannot make a campaign go viral by re-tweeting between 9am and 5pm. Some found this situation ideal, with flexible, fast-moving, and exciting work. However, others found the work environment too stressful. The leadership addressed this in the organization I was observing by establishing a work council and electing workers onto the board.

Despite the increased attention given to the side effects of low-cost infrastructure and the lack of internal policies and support, many staff members still felt the impact of working remotely from their homes. This condition has become apparent to more people since the Covid-19 pandemic (Cotofan et al., 2021).[4] However, it was not exceptional in the field of online organizing. On the contrary, it has been a core characteristic of working for online campaigning organizations from the beginning.

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[4] This report is one of the first that drew together evidence and academic reflections on the impact of Covid-19 on workers conditions across the world. It presents interesting findings on loss of employment, conditions of work from home, the impact of home schooling and childcare and the disproportionate impact that remote-working has had on young people and women more generally.

During my fieldwork, I observed mention of the impact of online working and distributed teams on team dynamics and power dynamics. Many complained that it was even more difficult (if not impossible) than in a traditional organization for information to circulate spontaneously among all staff at different seniority grades. For example, online meetings were often described as more "exclusive" than those offline. Since one cannot see a digital meeting happening if one is not invited to it, it is usually impossible to see who is meeting with whom. Rumors circulated about online private areas or password-protected digital folders only accessible to senior staff. However, these could never be proved or disproved because, again, one cannot see a private digital area or a hidden digital folder.

As a result, the digital nature of the work made the work relationship and power dynamics opaque or even invisible, as this extract from one of my interviews shows:

> …it doesn't mean that there isn't toxic masculinity happening within the ranks of the team. And it's like, you know, I mean, you can't really maybe see it so much in like, a day-to-day interaction, only over a Zoom call or on Teams. You only see these dynamics on the "in-person" team away days.

Even more serious issues became apparent with digital-only work and distributed organizations when the group had to address toxic behavior or episodes of verbal aggression. In these instances, the structure of the digital campaign organization proved to be wholly inadequate to support the workers:

I had this very unpleasant experience with a guy in a high position of power, where he really like exercised this power over. And that makes you feel uncomfortable, even if it was just over a call. But then this was so difficult to address, because this is like, how do you really do that in an organization that is distributed? And who could you tell this to? You were alone with this guy online… and you close call and you are still alone.

There are many reasons to investigate what Schradie (2018, 2019) calls "digital activist labor" and bureaucracy. This brings attention back to these material conditions of work and precarity, hierarchy, and exclusion that many working in this field face.

In addition to these episodes of worker burnout and lack of rights, protection, and support, another hidden cost that results from saving on staff costs is that organizations are "a lot more reliant on the community and their members to do some of the heavy lifting needed for the work," as an interviewee told me. This issue was never critically addressed in the field. However, one can argue that the work of sharing and amplifying content requested and expected by these organizations can be defined – to a certain extent – as unpaid labor (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). I refer deliberately to the term digital labor, ap-

plying Fuchs and Sevignani's argument (2013), based on Marxist analysis and calling for an understanding and theorizing of the distinction between digital work and digital labor. Digital work is the conscious and productive activity of generating added value to satisfy human needs. Digital labor alludes to various forms of alienation derived from exploiting users' unpaid labor in the digital sphere. Forms of exploitation would include, for example, the creation of new digital content, sharing others' content, or sharing personal experiences and thoughts. These are all forms of labor on which digital activism and online campaigning depend heavily. Although initially developed for non-commercial use, these materials and content are disseminated through private platforms. All online campaigning organizations rely on well-known social media platforms to do their work. Therefore, these forms of digital activism arguably turn into acts of digital labor, as online production of members generates profit for those companies that host this digital material. When I left the field, these issues were beginning to be discussed. Many felt that using commercial platforms to do activist work was not an ethical choice. However, few questioned whether relying on activists to do "the heavy lifting" was problematic in itself. Which activists could afford to do this unpaid work? What existing skills and resources did these activists need to draw on? These questions were not discussed.

Analyzing the material conditions of digital labor also brings to the fore the conditions of women within the structures of digital campaigning organizations. This is a neglected area for social movement research more broadly (Batliwala & Friedman, 2014) and the next section builds on recent literature and on the findings of my own ethnographic research to start exploring this topic.

3.2 Women in digital campaigning: a complex relationship

Some scholars (Tarrow 2011) initially identified feminist principles and values as being at the core of new digital social movements. However, more critical perspectives are now emerging on the current evolution of feminism in the digital space (Baer, 2016; Boler et al., 2014; Fotopoulou, 2016; Jouët, 2018). Even those authors like Baer (2016), who recognize the great potential digital platforms have for disseminating feminist ideas transnationally, also raise important questions regarding how digital activism has impacted feminist protest culture and the advancement of feminist values in more profound ways.

Despite this growing body of critical evidence, I observed many women in my interviews who still shared a strong belief in digital tools' positive role for building and reinforcing a transnational feminist movement. This would confirm the critical analysis of Fotopoulou on the prevalence of the "social imaginary of networked feminism" (2016). In the words of one of the digital campaigners I interviewed:

> …one of the biggest needs for solidarity is solidarity across feminist groups in Europe, because I cannot see the European feminist movements, like I can't see it. I know that it's there all over the places, in separate cities and a national level but the pan-European feminist movement, where is it? I don't know. And I think that's where there is a space, particularly for digital because as in all kinds of activism, the question will be like: where is the street? And in Europe, there is no one street!

In the view of those operating in the digital space, digital activism still provides one "digital street" where different feminist movements can coalesce and become visible. But during my research different narratives are also started to emerge, as gender differences and new and old forms of discriminations were becoming more apparent inside these organizations themselves. The most striking gender imbalance that was often discussed regarded the Tech Teams. Although in digital campaigning organization women tend to be the visible majority of staff (many digital campaigning organizations' CEOs are also women), they are rarely seen on Tech Teams. This was a recurring topic in my notes. All women I spoke to reflected on the male predominance in Tech Teams and the difficulty of addressing the gender imbalance in this field (within organizations that were otherwise predominantly female). Applications for tech roles rarely came from female tech experts. As one of my interviewees said, this perhaps was because "…lots of women are discouraged from getting into STEM education…. "[5]:

It's not just ORG n.1[6], it's like the whole connection, their whole network, is all men! ORG n.2 was like men, only their CTO[7] at some point was a woman. But all the other staff were men. The whole group of online mobilizing is like, basically, men "techies," and it's, yeah, it's a hard world.

It is possible joining a whole team of male staff also played a role in discouraging those women with the right skills to apply Shifts in the biographies, demographics, and social background of activists and campaigners in online organizing also emerged from my interviews, as few participants reflected on the fact that the tech and digital world attracted specific types of people:

> …I think the whole digital sphere can be in its essence very cool, it's nice and young and I'm being very open, you know, these young, up-and-coming like ambitious people, especially men, tend to be very vocal. And that's something I don't like. I definitely have the "impostor syndrome"; I second guess myself all the time. And so, being confronted with those types of characters, whether it's in the Tech Team, or just like in general,

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5 STEM is a term used in education curricula – especially in English speaking countries – that focuses on education that covers these four main disciplines of: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

6 In this quote I have chosen to anonymize the organizations that were mentioned in the original.

7 CTO: Chief Technology Officer.

> someone who goes like 'I know this, I know that'… You kind of stand back because you feel more comfortable behind the scenes.

Scholars of digital movements have revealed several discriminatory dynamics happening within these movements (Batliwala & Friedman, 2014). Even when women have a role in the tech space, they are usually relegated to "connective labor" (Boler et al., 2014), gender specific forms of invisible labor in social media and storytelling. I had a chance to interview one of the few women attached to a Tech Team in a role that was supposed to bridge the gap between campaigning and tech tactics and solutions. She described her experience:

> I think that I can share my experience as a woman, also with a disclaimer that I never really had a tech background, you know. I just kind of liked it and I'm just quite quick and fast to understand tech stuff, but I have no education in tech. But, umh, being the only woman in the team pushed me even more into this role of like the communicative woman, the communicator within the team, you know, more like the sensitive person in the team, kind of like playing a "puppy" role. And then it's like "Okay, guys, if this is what you see then I'm going to be this!"

The roles that women are given and the soft skills they are supposed to bring are both gendered and imposed on these women, as the quote above demonstrates. Sometimes, women accept them and play their roles according to these expectations. Therefore, even when women are not visibly excluded from predominantly male Tech Teams, there are other layers and mechanisms of exclusion, as my research revealed.

In my research, I identified a new instance of gendered exclusion and discrimination that I defined as *epistemic exclusion*. This describes the process and outcomes of deliberately excluding women from the knowledge domain that pertains to technical and digital discourses. A senior woman in a digital campaigning organization recounted an episode that exemplifies this form of exclusion:

> We were talking about a new type of action, and there was all these exchange [sic] and discussion and then I asked "how would you like technically to do that?" And [Tech Male Person] said "Don't worry about it!" And I was like "Excuse me? Don't tell me not to worry about it. I'm interested." And they both realized, "Oh, sorry, we didn't mean to imply that you cannot get it." I'm asking you to explain it to me. And I think they were both like, they realized what they had done. There's this tendency of saying "Don't worry, it's with the Tech Team". And actually, a lot of our campaigners, for example – women included – are like "I don't care about this stuff." But I am, for me, it's one of those things that like, I feel like I should make an effort.

This episode describes the process of making the technology of digital campaigning unexplained or inaccessible. The outcome of this epistemic exclusion is that people – and proportionally women more than men – feel intimidated by the technology. This generates questions of disempowerment, as many women – sometimes even by their own choice – delegate their active role on matters of digital choices to others, who are perceived or position themselves as more tech-savvy and able to understand and deal with the digital world.

Significantly, the young women Josiane Jouët (2018) interviewed for her research on digital activism were all fully aware of the need to develop excellent communication and digital skills to avoid depending on male tech experts. Unfortunately, many women have felt that stronger skills and better tech knowledge were needed to survive the "bro culture" – as defined by one of my interviewees – of Tech companies and teams, more than a drive to improve or thrive in the tech environment. Klinger and Svensson (2021) argue that pervasive stereotypes persist in the Tech environment due to a lack of role models. However, new role models will struggle to emerge until more women can play a central role in this field. This is a vicious circle that digital campaigning organizations (among many others) need to acknowledge before they can begin to address the problem.

4 Conclusions: who can still afford digital activism?

Research is growing on digital campaigning in general and organizations specifically. However, there is still a gap in the literature that must address the material conditions of digital activism and, more specifically, analyze the gender perspective within these contexts. This paper presents some initial reflections on the main findings from my ethnographic study of a digital campaigning organization. This research offers a new inside view of online organizing, revealing a field that is changing quickly and significantly.

As discussed at the start of this paper, the choice of the word "afford" in the title is intentional. On the one hand, it implies not everyone can afford to bear the hidden costs of digital organizing. On the other hand, it states that dynamics in digital campaigning do not happen by chance but result from specific affordances integrated into the tools and logic of digital activism. This issue requires further analysis and change within digital activism.

Drawing on two years of ethnographic research in this field and participant observation in a digital campaigning organization, this paper first presented how the world of digital organizing has changed since David Karpf described it in his seminal work. This paper considered the main elements of these digital campaigning organizations that Karpf identified as ground-breaking and

unique. This paper then raised a few questions about how the field has evolved in terms of organizational structures, the role of members, and the online tactics to engage the membership. Some of my observations demonstrate a changing situation from the one Karpf's analyzed in the early phase of digital organizing, and the main argument this paper has tried to build is that some of these changes and features have been obfuscated by the myth of immateriality that is still prevalent within most discourses on online activism.

This paper presents two fields of analysis concerning material conditions: (a) the hidden and exorbitant costs of labor in online organizing and (b) the old and new forms of exclusion and discrimination that these forms of activism materialize in this field. The most significant finding concerns the working conditions and hidden costs of those apparent savings central to digital forms of organizing.

More research is required from a social class standpoint to further develop work by Jen Schradie (2019), corroborated by my research. Schradie argued that "organizing costs have not disappeared but are often buried and embedded in the resources that middle/upper-calls groups already have – digital tools, skills, and confidence" (2019, p. 96–97). Future research should properly expand on this point, which is only briefly addressed in this paper.

In addition, my fieldwork explored "digital activist labor," a concept first used by Schradie (2019). This could potentially be productively applied to the members of digital orgnisations as well. This is a new and under-researched dimension that requires further exploration.

Shifting the focus onto the material conditions of digital activism also brought to the fore the conditions of women within this field. In this paper, I have mainly presented reflections illustrating gender discrimination within Tech Teams, showing that digital organizing suffers from old gender inequalities while also creating new ones. Further research is required on the impact of digitalization on feminist movement tactics and the effect on women of an aggressive online environment.

As I illustrated in the opening of this article, this paper cannot do justice to a complex and rapidly evolving field. However, I have drawn on important studies exploring the costs and the human labor necessary to make things happen online (Schradie, 2019; Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013) to reinforce an important message and to ensure that digital labor and its material conditions do not become a blind spot in digital activism studies.

5 Acknowledgments

This paper has received no funding or other support from external entities. I want to thank all the participants and the organizations that have opened their doors and agreed to be part of this research. Their thoughts and reflections have informed my understanding of the sector and the analysis presented in this paper.

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Date received: September 2021
Date accepted: May 2022