Stop FEMA Now: Social media, activism and the sacrificed citizen

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ABSTRACT

In an era of late capitalism and climate crisis, an expanding, heterogeneous network of people find themselves precariously positioned at the edge of disaster. This paper explores how Stop FEMA Now, a coalition of U.S. flood disaster survivors and other coastal homeowners, used social media to challenge neoliberal policies that produced – and then privatized – environmental risk. I find that social media played a crucial and sometimes unexpected role in enabling activists to organize across difference and cohere around an identity that emphasized their multiple layers of vulnerability and responsibilization. Through images that reembedded natural disasters in their political and economic contexts, activists exposed their historic and ongoing abandonment by neoliberal policies and state failures. Ultimately, such abandonments forfeited coastal homeowners to a future marked by fiscal and climate crisis, constituting them as sacrificed citizens. And yet, I also propose that the struggles of sacrificed citizens offer new possibilities for coalitions and pluralisms.

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1. Introduction

In 2011, U.S. Presidential hopeful, Ron Paul issued a call to abolish the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. agency responsible for disaster prevention and response. While Paul’s presidential bid failed, his comments set off a national debate that raged throughout the election season. Conservative politicians and pundits railed against agency’s subsidizing of repeated disaster losses, and demanded that it be dismantled, privatized or localized. Those on the left side of the political spectrum repeated disaster losses, and demanded that it be dismantled, privatized or localized. Those on the left side of the political spectrum responded with unchecked horror. Shriil editorials in the New York Times and Washington Post called the abolishment of FEMA an “absurd” idea especially considering the uncertainties wrought by climate change. Then, a month before the national election (almost as if on cue), Hurricane Sandy slammed into the eastern seaboard. The largest Atlantic hurricane on record, Sandy’s devastation silenced public debates over FEMA, which now seemed too politically incorrect for all but the most hardline libertarians.1

However, three and a half years after the storm, it was hard to deny that the FEMA-abolishers might have had a point. A shocking number of Sandy survivors still struggled to repair their storm-damaged homes, and thousands had filed lawsuits against FEMA and the private insurance companies with which it contracts. In March, 2015, the TV news program, “60 min” exposed rampant fraud among FEMA contracted insurance companies. Specifically, the program found proof that some of these companies encouraged adjusters to falsify reports in order to drastically reduce or deny insurance payouts. In some cases, they used unlicensed engineers to assess flood damage. Even worse, top officials at FEMA were aware of the fraud for over a year but did not act on it.2 Shortly after the 60 min episode aired, FEMA re-opened all 144,000 Hurricane Sandy-related insurance claims. A year later, a 12-month investigation by National Public Radio and the documentary television series, Frontline, found that many of those re-opened claims were still unresolved even though the investigation also corroborated findings of fraud.3 In the end, rather than showcasing the need for FEMA, Hurricane Sandy’s aftermath revealed its myriad failures.

As if all of this were not enough, Sandy survivors had to contend with the Biggert-Waters Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2012. The Act ended federal subsidies for flood insurance, instead allowing rates to be set by the private market. In high risk flood zones, rates were set to rise by thousands of dollars per year unless homeowners paid to elevate their homes. But many homeowners could afford neither option, leaving them in an impossible situation. For Sandy survivors who were still struggling to rebuild some were

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still paying both mortgages and rent on temporary homes, Biggert-Waters represented a breaking point, and a rallying cry. This essay explores how such homeowners channeled their frustrations into a national, grassroots social movement, known as “Stop FEMA Now” (SFN). I am particularly interested in how activists integrated traditional organizing activities and direct actions with web 2.0-based activism. On a deeper level, I investigate how SFN morphed into a systemic challenge to the very neoliberal policies that produced – and then privatized – environmental risk. Ultimately, I find that social media enabled activists to articulate the ways that natural disasters are socially produced by the cumulative responsibilities and abandonment of coastal homeowners. This analysis thus brings together contemporary studies of social movements, web-based activism, and the political ecology of environmental risk, vulnerability and natural disasters.

Specifically, like other social movement theorists, I am interested in the significance of social media to contemporary activism. I find that while technology did not determine the inception of this movement nor the entirety of its organizing activities, it did play a crucial – and unexpected – role in the movement’s success. In addition to enabling SFN’s rapid diffusion across geographic space, web technologies provided a platform for expressing the strong emotions and traumatic experiences that drove the SFN movement. These emotions not only inspired solidarity, but they also fueled the movement and the process of integrating traditional organizing activities and direct actions with web 2.0-based activism. On a deeper level, I investigate how SFN morphed into a systemic challenge to the very neoliberal policies that produced – and then privatized – environmental risk. Ultimately, I find that social media encouraged paradoxically allowed activists to reframe vulnerability as socially produced, to re-embed natural disasters in their political and economic contexts, and to constitute themselves as sacrificed citizens.

2. From revolution to clicktivism

Well before the “Arab Spring” of 2010, social movement scholars agreed that web 2.0 technology had forever changed the landscape of contentious politics, as well as the political opportunities available to local activists (Alimi and Meyer, 2011; Meyer, 2004; Tilly and Tarrow, 2006; Tufekci, 2011; see also McArdam et al., 2001). As Manuel Castells observed in 2007, the web has become contemporary activists’ “most potent political weapon” (Castells, 2007: 243). In the aftermath of the 2010 uprisings, questions about the nature of that weapon and the salience of web technologies in providing new opportunities for political revolt became the subject of great public and academic debate. Below, I paint these arguments with admittedly broad strokes in order to present the opposing poles of this discussion.

On one hand, a flurry of popular and scholarly articles credited Twitter and Facebook with providing communicative platforms that created new counter-publics that were not previously possible (Penney and Dadas, 2013). In one of the most comprehensive, quantitative studies on the topic, researchers analyzed over 3 million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content and thousands of blog posts before and during the Arab Spring. Their report concluded, “Social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring… Conversations about revolution often preceded major events on the ground, and social media carried inspiring stories of protest across international borders” (Howard et al., 2011:2-3). Extensive interviews with movement leaders in Tunisia and Egypt corroborate these findings, pointing to the variety of ways in which social media enabled their organizing. From online games that allowed leaders to play with scenarios for regime change, to disseminating political analyses, leaked documents, editorials, photos showing police violence and corruption, calls for protest, and other information, interviewees reported that web 2.0 technologies were instrumental to their work at all levels (Pollack, 2011; Rosen, 2011).

On the other hand, a number of academics were less sanguine about the opportunities provided by web 2.0. Some argued that web technologies played only a minimal role in creating new political actors, and that role was contingent on a number of other factors (Kenski and Stroud, 2006; see also Wang, 2007). Al-Kandari and Hasenan (2012), for instance, find that individuals who used social media to express political ideas or to engage in various causes were already more likely to engage in politics. Others point out that the Internet’s rhetoric of “sharing” and democracy mask the degree to which it is “increasingly steered by techno-commercial structures that are even more inscrutable and hierarchically structured than old media apparatuses” (van Dijck, 2011: 164; see also Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010; Dahlberg, 2007; Hindman, 2008; Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009). These enigmatic structures then facilitate surveillance and co-option. Morozov (2012), for instance, argues that in the 2009 Iranian uprising, Twitter was never the “liberating” platform it was purported to be. Instead, its log files were used to monitor active members of the Iranian resistance and to communicate the news outside Iran (see also Dean, 2012).

Taking a slightly different tack, some scholars observe that the ease and convenience of web 2.0 platforms promotes “clicktivism” or “slactivism.” Nature 2.0 scholars, for instance, find that conservation NGOs use sophisticated email marketing software to convince users that by clicking on, or “liking,” images of cute animals and pristine natural areas to create a hyper-real version of nature, or nature 2.0 (see Büscher and Igoe, 2013: 284; Typhina, 2015). Clicks, likes and retweets then come to stand for environmental concerns and activism, and they identify an individual as an environmentally-concerned global citizen (Büscher and Igoe, 2013: 284; Typhina, 2015). The web-based images that mediate viewers’ experiences of the environment and environmental...
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