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THE OFFLINE STRIKES BACK: COMPLICATING THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN COVID-19 MUTUAL AID ACTIVISM

Elisabetta Ferrari
Aarhus University

New experiences of grassroots solidarity activism emerged all over the world in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Under the label of "mutual aid", a global wave of activism (see Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020) aimed to support vulnerable community members by providing them access to basic necessities, such as food and medicines. Mutual aid can be defined as "collective coordination to meet each other's needs" and "build a shared understanding about why people do not have what they need" (Spade, 2020, pp. 7 & 9). It is a form of activism which works to improve people's material conditions, while building ties of political solidarity (Ferrari, 2022).

Mutual aid activists organized through complex layers of digital practices, relying on Google spreadsheets, Facebook groups, Whatsapp chats, Venmo accounts, and Instagram posts. These technologies facilitated the spread of mutual aid and supported activists in collecting donations and recruiting volunteers; they were especially crucial during a time in which physical proximity was a risk and where different rules governed physical interaction. However, the relationship between Covid-19 mutual aid activists and digital technologies was varied and often fraught.

Literature review

The role of digital technologies in supporting Covid-19 mutual aid is widely acknowledged, even by scholars who do not work on questions of media and technology (e.g. Firth, 2022; Ntontis et al., 2022). More tech-focused research, such as from an HCI perspective, has examined how the design features of corporate tools, such as Facebook Groups and Google Drive, lend themselves to mutual aid organizing (Knearem et al., 2021) and discussed the dilemmas that tech-enabled mutual aid activism poses for crisis informatics (Soden & Owen, 2021). However, the literature has yet to fully explore how the relationship between mutual aid activists and digital

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technologies unfolded and to contextualize these pandemic experiences within longstanding debates on the role of digital media in activism.

The scholarship on activism and digital technologies has investigated how the use of digital media, such as Facebook and Twitter/X, might be changing how movements come to exist and operate (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Tufekci, 2017), how digital technologies can both empower and oppress marginalized populations (Clark-Parsons, 2022; Jackson et al., 2020), and how collective identity, organization and leadership are being reconfigured (Gerbaudo, 2012; Kavada, 2015). One aspect discussed in this literature is particularly important to examine Covid-19 mutual aid activism: the relationship between the online and the offline. This has been addressed in terms of "hybrid activism" (Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2016; Treré, 2018; Showden et al., 2023), but also with respect to the longstanding importance of "offline" factors in shaping the efficacy and meaning of digital activism (Schradie, 2019). Given the peculiar conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift to predominantly digital modes due to the requirements of social distancing, pandemic mutual aid activism is an interesting case to consider to re-evaluate our understanding of the boundaries between online and offline activist practices.

The study

This paper is part of a larger project that investigates pandemic mutual aid activism in the United States, Italy and the United Kingdom to provide a comparison between these three contexts. I have selected these countries because, in addition to being similarly affected by the pandemic on similar timelines, they saw very strong and widespread mobilizations for mutual aid. Taking advantage of this comparative lens and drawing on 40 interviews with activists, this paper considers how the experiences of Covid-19 mutual aid activists complicate our understanding of the intersection of activism and digital technologies and of what digital activism looks like today.

Main findings

I show that Covid-19 mutual aid activism holds together several contradictions, which contribute to a nuanced understanding of the distinctions between online and offline, but also of what it means for activism to be digital. First, as mentioned, mutual aid activists started mobilizing at the height of the pandemic, when physical proximity was dangerous and often forbidden. They experimented with a range of technologies to organize their work and support their interactions with each other and with the public: they met via Zoom, collected requests via Google Forms, etc. However, even in the risky context of the pandemic, a big part of this mutual aid work had a strong embodied character: for instance, activists physically came together (albeit at a distance) to prepare and distribute food or to source PPE. Digital tools enabled the coordination of this material work. At the same time, the need for physical distancing and the increased attention to disabled and chronically ill individuals opened the door to a better appreciation of digital-only activism as an equally "valid" form of activism – an idea that even radical social justice movements have often struggled with.

Second, how mutual aid groups used digital technologies varied significantly from group to group, and country to country. Some mutual aid collectives developed very sophisticated tech-enabled systems for their activism. Many U.S.-based groups, for instance, integrated payment apps (e.g. Venmo, Cashapp) and crowdfunding websites (e.g. GoFundMe) in their day-to-day work. While these payment and crowdfunding tools initially felt very "easy" and efficient for these groups, over time activists experienced setbacks with these platforms and became very frustrated. For instance, they often had to invent creative solutions to get around the policies of Venmo, which are targeted towards individual consumers, rather than collectives. This led them to abandon these corporate digital tools and embraced more customizable and/or nonprofit digital solutions; in particular, many groups adopted the crowdfunding and cash flow management platform OpenCollective, which is targeted at community groups, and/or switched to the database management system AirTable. While these solutions allowed activists to move away from the constraints of corporate tools, this shift also resulted in highly complex digital processes, which took activists a lot of effort to implement. Other collectives, especially in the UK and Italy, developed quite complex collective procedures, too, but ones which were characterized by "less sophisticated" tech practices: they primarily used Whatsapp chats and lots of phone calls. This (relatively) low tech approach felt very comfortable to activists, since it repurposed digital media that were already in use, but was also particularly suited to reach populations with lower levels of access to digital technologies (e.g. migrants, older people, unhoused individuals). Concerns about access to mutual aid for these populations was expressed by activists in all contexts (see also Soden & Owen, 2021).

Discussion and conclusion

How do we make sense of these somewhat contradictory observations? Even in a moment of heightened centrality of digital communication such as the pandemic, it was clear that the offline was crucial: that extremely sophisticated activist digital practices coexisted with low-tech forms of digital communication and embodied/material practices. In the paper I argue that we should explore these contradictory aspects through activists' commitment to care (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; The Care Collective, 2020) as an overarching principle, which oriented them towards developing technologically-enabled hybrid practices that could enact this ideal of care as much as possible. I suggest we continue to complicate the idea of "hybrid activism" (see also Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2024) to consider how a multiplicity of modalities of activism can foster more open and inclusive solidarity movements. I conclude by discussing how these lessons can be useful beyond the context of the pandemic.

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