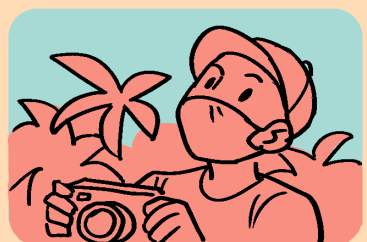# A Digital Carekit:

Developing activist communities of care online

A digital carekit: Developing activist communities of care online

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Contents

Introduction

Digital activism is a double-edged undertaking. Digital or cyber-activism may be described as campaigns that use the internet and infocomm technologies. Many movements now have some online presence. Online campaigning can produce knowledge, awareness and solidarities across space and at scales previously hard to achieve. Digital devices and platforms can also give activists greater control over their narratives, provide more sustainable ways to campaign, and help create striking new ways to protest.

At the same time, the digital life of campaigns can add to the tasks of pursuing social and environmental justice. Long-standing issues leading to volunteer burnout may be amplified. Virtual spaces can also be polarised and hostile. Online activism increasingly comes with the threat of social backlash and state-imposed sanctions. The many ethical issues with Big Tech companies are now becoming apparent, e.g. surveillance cultures, algorithmic discrimination, data commoditisation, labour exploitation, and resource extraction that causes environmental devastation.

Why a carekit for digital activism and campaigning?

Awareness of limitations and risks alongside the possibilities presented by digitisation is necessary to maintain critical momentum for causes. While digital tools are now widely and routinely used, there has been less thinking about collective care-based implications for social and environmental justice campaigners and activists. We can understand activism as a form of caring in a careless world, as hope in hopeless conditions. It is a way to recognise our interdependencies with each other within the social and natural worlds we inhabit (The Care Collective).

This carekit considers what needs to be done to nurture and sustain campaigns and campaigners in digitised conditions. It conceives of care in resolutely collective terms. By focusing on solidarity and collective practices, and by centreing intersectional and environmental considerations, this kit moves away from 'care-washing' approaches that individualise responses to structural pressures. While there are salient differences between online and offline activism, there are considerable overlaps, and the approaches in this kit may apply to both.

This kit draws on our research interests and activism, including: Audrey's research on the digital dimensions of grassroots environmental campaigns to reflect on what it means to be a citizen and human in the digital anthropocene, alongside her research-activism in higher education and in response to UK's housing safety crisis; Heather's work on school strikes against the climate crisis movement, and students' union and university staff unions, both of which have continued their climate-justice and education-related campaigns online during the pandemic; and Griselda's work as an illustrator and social media manager for Kontinentalist, a data storytelling editorial studio that supports Asian NGOs and academic institutions, to bridge the gap between research and the public, and raise awareness on various social justice causes across Asia.

We write this carekit for social and environmental justice campaigners who use or want to use digital spaces for all or part of their work. This kit complements the rich resources listed at the end. We write at a time when states across the world are systematically dismantling democratic freedoms, and Big Tech is complicit in eroding rights to protest and dissent. We are thus also reaching out to all who care: The stakes are high; we must critically reclaim the digital as our common space now, not least through online resistance practices based on mutual care.

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Forming online campaign communities
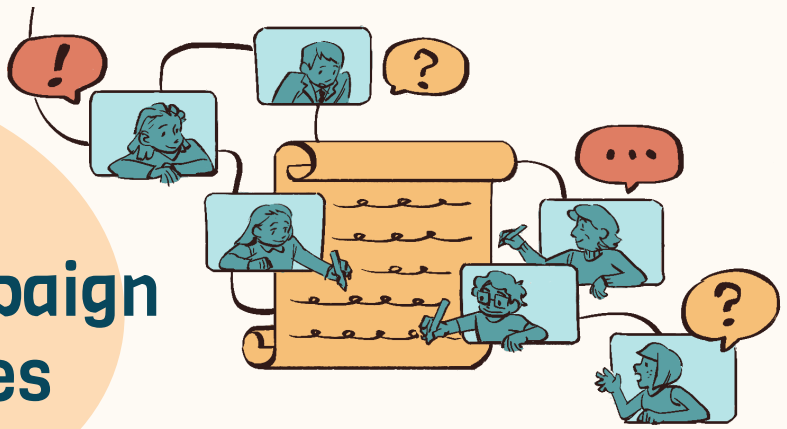
Campaigns may be described as communities, and communities first have to be built. Digital platforms enable connections to be made across space, but relationships built online can feel fleeting. Establishing trust and solidarity thus becomes important. A good place to start is by thinking about what holds the community together, what it stands for and its values.

Operating online can make it challenging to deal with logistical issues, maintain momentum for the cause, and engage in collaborative practices. How might joy, humour, satire, story-telling, creativity and art be used to reclaim digital spaces for the activist purposes? How might campaign spaces be shaped inclusively and encourage active listening?

Reflect as a group on how the campaign should look, sound and feel. How does the campaign want to engage with and impact the social and natural worlds we live in? How might the movement create respectful and responsive communications?
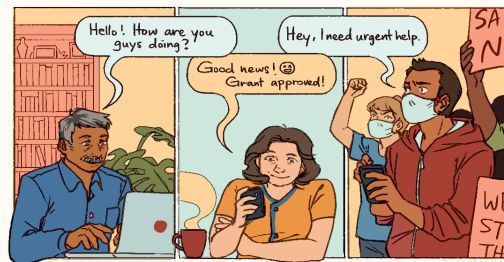
What might it take to build and organise a supportive community that people will want to join? How should online meetings be mediated to ensure all members are heard? (see Virtual Meeting Power Dynamics resource)

While it is important to be aware of online limitations and critical of technological risks, digital campaigning opens more possibilities than ever before. Through collective imagining and care practices, it can be possible to reclaim online spaces meaningfully, and sensitively enact the changes we want to see. It is crucial to model ways of working that resist discrimination and exploitation. Prioritise care, collaboration and supportive models of diverse engagement instead.

Building online campaigns

Within campaign communities, small or big, there will be a rich breadth and depth of knowledge to draw on, alongside varying levels of know-how. This section provides a basic guide on how to establish and share collective digital knowledge. The resources page at the end of this kit provides more specific guidance on different platforms and strategies.

Identify the varying levels of know-how, familiarity and comfort online. While many members may be tech-savvy, there may be members who are less comfortable in digital settings. Gauge technical know-how early on, to manage expectations and provide support. One option is to create a thread in the organising platform where people can post 'skills to share' and 'skills to learn'.

Building the campaign requires getting everyone on the same basic level. The use of 'on-boarding kits' (short, easy-to-use, jargon-free documents) can provide a campaign overview and outline how the group uses various digital platforms. Multiple guides may also be useful, for each platform. Consider how platform use is managed and governed. This is especially important with fundraising activities. Trust, transparency and robust auditing are vital.

Think about how knowledge may be shared within the group, for example, through the use of 'timebanks' and 'cafes', i.e. dedicated times set out to share capacity, troubleshoot issues and discuss creative solutions. Create spaces to practice, test and make mistakes in a supported environment, for example, ahead of online meetings or public live streams.

Reach out to experienced campaigners and allies for advice and mutual support.

De-centralise knowledge, rotate leadership and share responsibilities, e.g. by devolving tasks to sub-groups, sharing access and passwords, trusting different people to run activities.

Working with multiple or new digital platforms can create pressure. Consider streamlining by collaboratively choosing a few key platforms for organising and outreach.

Creating caring online activist spaces

Any campaign that aims to create a more just world is a process. The campaign and its aims are not fixed end-points; these will change and adapt as the campaign moves towards its goals. Learning will happen collaboratively, through engagement with each other on and through the digital platforms. It is useful to cultivate a sense of openness to new possibilities, of ways of being, doing and working together.

Identify the diverse strengths and interests in the group. Some members will be good at writing or illustration. Others will be adept at using social media, yet others may be subject experts. Play to these strengths in distributing responsibilities.
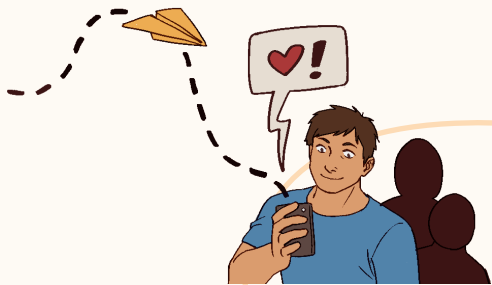
Consider your communications approaches, e.g. drawing up a digital comms strategy. What are the overlaps and differences between internal and external comms? Which platforms are secure for organising? How might these spaces be kept safe and respectful? What is needed to speak with different publics with empathy, compassion and inclusivity, in part to bring the public onside?

Cultivate an intersectional awareness of the division of labour within the group. Ensure that responsibilities do not fall on those who already face the greatest discrimination and burdens. Consider the varied circumstances of group members and do not expect the same amount of labour from each collaborator.

There will be ups and downs in a campaign. Shift the focus during 'down' periods, e.g. to amplifying voices of allies. 'Slow' times may be used for collective reflection, e.g. creating shared playlists or reading lists. Develop habits of sharing and citing resources generously.

Maintaining and nurturing online campaign communities

Campaign communities need to be maintained and nurtured. Digital activism is much more than the use of devices. The social, political and environmental context in which these technologies are embedded is important (MinorMatters). For example, not everyone on the campaign will experience the same digital space in the same way. These different vulnerabilities and intersectional positions must be considered in the group's digital plan. (see Online Harassment Field Manual and Discussion on Undoing Racism in Activism in resources).

The 'always on' pressure of activism can be amplified in digital conditions. Mitigating digital burnout should happen through care practices both at group and individual levels. What does balance look like? Are there expectations to adjust, e.g. are immediate replies expected, or can priority indicators be used for urgent messages? (see Digital Rights Foundation's Digital Detox Kit in resources). Flexibility, empathy and adaptability are necessary, not least since much digital activism depends on volunteer labour and happens within fast-changing media cycles.

Write collaborative guidelines on dealing with stress and burnout. These 'living documents' may be reflected, extended and expanded upon.

Members should be encouraged to identify personal boundaries when engaging with each other and with wider publics. These boundaries must be supported clearly and in the campaign's culture.

Encourage members to step out or step back when they need to. Enabling members to take breaks without guilt and not feel like they have to be present all the time should be part of the culture of the community.

Tune in to fellow activists' confidence levels. Practice small acts of kindness and check in with how people are feeling. Be aware of voicing negative thoughts and constructively identify these for each other (see Magnetic Ideals' Automatic Negative Thoughts Worksheet in resources).

It is also essential to recognise and reject demotivating narratives that fail to recognise the value of digital activism. Narratives around 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism', for example, offer a reductive view as it does not acknowledge the extensive labour and logic of digital activism.

Keeping online campaign communities safe

In the pursuit of social justice and critical change, it is worth considering how digital activism intersects with and impacts offline events and lives. Care-full and safe online spaces built on good practice and trust are thus particularly critical (Legacy Russell, Glitch Feminism). These spaces must first be established within the group, e.g. in dealing with in-group conflict.

Have mediation and dialogue processes in place for conflict management (see The Seeds for Change Working with Conflict in resources). Deal with conflict as it arises to avoid escalation. Create spaces to share concerns constructively, without fear of judgment.

People from minority backgrounds often struggle to have their voices heard offline and online. Digital spaces can replicate and amplify discrimination and erasures. Already marginalised group members thus face more online abuse, intensified by platforms that allow anonymity or have poor reporting mechanisms. Identify meaningful support strategies and signpost formal redress avenues. Be prepared to actively support fellow activists who are facing online harassment. (see Salvage report on Gendered Violence in Activist Communities in resources).

When engaging with the public, respond in ways that are calm and measured. Humour may also help, but avoid reacting to every emotion. Do not hesitate to stop engaging or block to protect members and prevent escalation. Reflect seriously on the group's boundaries with online 'trolls'. Take a zero-tolerance approach to abuse.

The online world can make us simultaneously invisible and hypervisible. Digital surveillance has however proven to be a real risk, resulting in the persecution and threats to the safety of activists.

Critically consider privacy issues when selecting and setting up organising platforms. Reflect on securing online profiles, e.g. remove personal info, keep separate email accounts for different broad purposes. Be aware of online identity exposure and consider ways to protect the community and its members. Discuss if members want to disclose their identities online or use pseudonyms.

Provide shared guidance and reminders on securing digital devices. Useful safety features include screen lock, remote device wipe, emergency SOS buttons, two-factor authentication, message encryption and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Avoid public charging ports or use USB data blockers. Reduce surveillance software risk by not clicking on suspicious files or links. If in doubt, check with fellow activists to verify message authenticity. This is a fast-changing and critical area, and it is worth keeping up with the latest cybersecurity news. (see Cryptoharlem and Amnesty Guidance in resources).

When linking online activism to offline efforts, consider that these activities may affect members, other movements, allies and policy stakeholders. It is worth figuring out beforehand: Who could the group work with (or not)? What compromises may be made? What is non-negotiable? Keep lines of communication open, and where meaningful, develop working links. Reflect on how information about protests or rallies is conveyed online. For example, this should come from a recognised group account; but do not post sensitive information publicly. Take care when publishing content online. Make sure posts are clear, up-to-date, inclusive, and made in good faith.


Critically assess digital platforms before use. Try to avoid platforms that are known to use discriminatory algorithms, have poor data policies, are known to have worked with anti-democratic groups, or have poor environmental records (see Ethical Consumer in resources). Create safe spaces online, avoid sharing links and passwords in unsecured public online spaces. If suspicious participants share offensive content, close the meeting for everyone and start a new one (see ILGA Europe Guide to Online Activist Safety for platform-specific guidance in resources).

The internet rarely forgets, and it is hard to control content access. Digital engagement may be used against campaigners not just on a personal level, but by institutions and governments. State surveillance has led to the arrest and imprisonment of activists. Know your rights well and ensure the group does too. Carefully research local pro bono assistance schemes for activists. Ensure key support contact details are shared, e.g. ahead of rallies.

Activism is rarely without conflict, failure and risk. It is useful to recognise the darkness of the moment we live in, and how this is amplified by the technologies we use. Create support structures to work through issues safely, together. Honest reflection to think through threats and to anticipate intersections between wider social issues and campaigns might help minimise risks.

Celebrating Communities
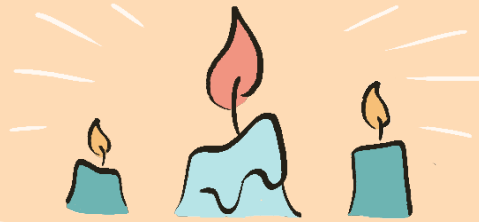
Centering hope and joy in the campaign planning process might help maintain focus on the many little (and big) things to celebrate. One approach is to generate optimism that is grounded in the critical knowledge of the current moment. This is an optimism that realistically acknowledges the chances of failure without losing hope in the possibility of successful change.

Part of maintaining a joyful approach is managing expectations. What are small, achievable targets and campaign phases? It may be helpful to discuss what happens if goals are not reached. It may also be worth thinking of wider contexts. Are there broader social and environmental justice goals that the campaign is contributing to?

Use online platforms not only for practicalities, but to keep the community motivated. The process is a learning experience even when things do not turn out as planned.
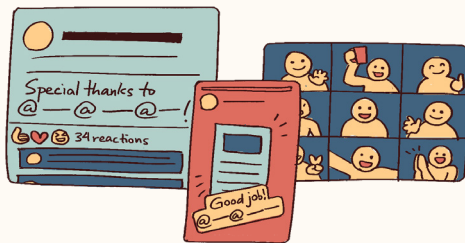
Recognising and acknowledging each other's labour is vital. Develop practices of praise and recognition, to lift each other up and welcome new and potential members.

Acknowledge work done, but go beyond the verbal act of thanking. Check in, look after and look out for each other. Offer to assist if possible. Consider how the campaign is helping individuals to grow alongside the cause. How might the campaign help members to develop their strengths and interests?

Reject gamified thinking on digital platforms that emphasise 'likes' for the self or individual causes. Focus equally instead on lifting voices of fellow activists, parallel communities and related campaigns that may not have much clout.

Big wins should be celebrated, but other things matter too. Find hope in lessons learned and small victories. Value new friendships, experiences and interactions. Celebrate your online community.

The need for environmental and social justice activists to engage within changing and fraught digitised conditions is here to stay. There are clear imperatives to challenge, reclaim and restructure the digital in ways that reject discrimination and exploitation. It is incumbent on us to imagine, enact and share collective care practices, to creatively refigure the digital into spaces where we can meaningfully look after each other and the worlds we inhabit.

Resources

Amnesty (2020) **Using Digital Tools for Activism**. https://www.amnesty.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/208-using-digital-tools-for-activism.pdf

Aspirational Meeting Tech. **Virtual Meeting Power Dynamics** https://aspirationtech.org/blog/virtualmeetingpowerdynamics

CryptoHarlem. **Cybersecurity for the People**. https://www.cryptoharlem.com/

Digital Rights Foundation (2020) **Digital Detox & Self Care**. https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Annex-6-Digital-Detox-Self-Care-1.pdf

Downes, Julia., Karis Hanson & Rebecca Hudson (2016) **Salvage: Gendered Violence in Activist Communities**. Leeds, UK: Footprint Workers Co-op. https://salvagecollective.bigcartel.com/product/salvage-zine-report

Ethical Consumer: https://www.ethicalconsumer.org

Free online courses in Racism, Equality and Diversity https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/online-courses-racial-justice/

Greenberg, Andy & Lily Hay Newman (2020) **How to Protest Safely in the Age of Surveillance**. https://www.wired.com/story/how-to-protest-safely-surveillance-digital-privacy/

Hollaback! Bystander Intervention Training https://www.ihollaback.org/bystander-resources/

I**LGA Europe Guide to Online Activist Safety** https://ilga-europe.medium.com/covid-19-and-digital-security-how-lgbti-activists-can-safely-work-online-472eff2e9fb6

Magnetic Ideals. **Dealing with Automatic Negative Thoughts**. http://www.magneticideals.org/home/resources/catchingants/

Minor Matters (2020) **Advancing Digital Activism**. https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/5f1/adb/f4a/5f1adbf4ac6e6501892884.pdf

Online Harassment Field Manual: Best Practices for Allies and Witnesses https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/best-practices-for-allies-and-witnesses/

The Race Thing (2021) **Discussion on Undoing Racism in Activism**. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmYRsgGFVD8

Seeds for Change. **Facilitation Resources** https://seedsforchange.org.uk/resources

Seeds for Change. **Working with Conflict** https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/conflictbooklet.pdf

Further reading:

Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation by Tom Moylan (2020)

The Care Manifesto by The Care Collective (2020)

The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution by Micah White (2016)

Envisioning Real Utopias by Erik Olin Wright (2010)

Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces by Davina Cooper (2013)

Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto by Legacy Russell (2020)

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