"#ViralEnvironmentalism—Digital Landscapes of Environmental Activism, Fridays for Future and Beyond."

Mariana Arjona Soberón

Digital media has been reshaping the politics of cultural representation and environmental activism in significant ways. It has been changing the communication pathways, meaning-making practices, and politics of communities across the world. Beginning last year, a particularly notorious movement "Fridays for Future" began to garner worldwide attention. Currently, there is a need to study the role digital media is playing in creating these youth activist communities and understanding how global digital culture making is changing the landscape of environmental understandings and local activism. This research project aims to explore the ways digital media has influenced the recent environmental activism that has been developing globally amongst youth, specifically in the context of the Fridays for Future movement. After a first exploration stage, the focus will be narrowed to study this phenomenon in communities in Germany and Mexico. The first objective of this project is to give insight and map the dynamics and digital and offline practices currently being used in the #fridaysforfuture interactions, gatherings, etc. A second objective is to understand the eco-systems and community entities that play a role in enabling students and teachers in participating in the protests, creating material and expanding their understandings of the environment and the current environmental situation. The third objective is to understand how this movement interacts with larger governmental and societal structures in both Germany and Mexico. These objectives will be achieved through digital ethnography, and ethnographic interviews. Outputs of this project will be a written doctoral thesis as well as a multimedia project resulting from methods of visual ethnography.

This doctoral thesis studies digital culture and environmental activism, specifically the politics of environmental activism and understandings of representation through digital media. This project aims to explore the ways youth communities around the world have been engaging with the Fridays for Future and school strikes movement with a focus on the connections between the German and Mexican contexts. This will establish the role digital media plays in mediating, reimagining, and redefining environmental understandings and realities, activist and educational communities, and socio-political relations and narratives. An outcome will be that we will know more about the cultural significance of these interfaces and the potentials and pitfalls they present, creating new understandings of the environment and influencing policy and government, as well as achieving an understanding of how the created narratives influence and complicate intergenerational relations.

In line with Coleman's work on ethnographic approaches to digital media, this thesis will examine "how cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries, such as those hinged to youth, diaspora, nation, and indigeneity, are remade, subverted, communicated, and circulated through individual and collective engagement with digital technologies" (Coleman, 2010). Specifically, what it means to be an "environmentalist" and environmental activism is being redefined and rearticulated in smaller local interactions that have substantial interplay with a global dialogue and arena, focused on youth, education, and the imagined future or lack thereof. I argue that digital media have provided youth activists with interfaces (Kaur, 2015) that enable them to create dissident narratives and mobilize around demands that go beyond what many other players have currently been willing to explore.

This doctoral project will be based on methods of ethnographic research in the discipline of anthropology. The first stage of research will be to conduct an exhaustive literature review.

This will be followed by participant observation firstly in the form of digital ethnography. Digital ethnography is a practice that has become more commonplace in the past two decades. As a starting point, the writing of Karen O'Reilly, 2005 helps to understand the nature of the ethnographic process "iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods… that acknowledges the role of theory, as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject". In digital ethnography, the online world and its interactions are seen as a "field in which we practice as much as we analyze" (Pink et al., 2016). During this time, I will observe and participate in online interactions and exchanges, collect images, videos, texts from websites, Instagram posts, tweets and other formats of digital production, observing ethical principles of human subject's research . An "at risk" population which I would be working with for this research would be minors, and explicit consent from guardians or parents would therefore be required. It is expected that through this digital ethnography, contact will extend to offline interactions such as participation in Fridays for Future protests, meetings, and school gatherings with members of organized collectives or notable figures in the online communities.

In addition to participant observation, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with active members or active consumers of the identified digital communities and media will be undertaken. These interviews will be semi-structured and informal. They will be conducted in the place of a participants choosing and participants will be allowed to set the pace and length of the interview, being able to opt out at any time, or continue the process at a different time. In case of explicit consent, an audio recorder or video recorder will be used during the interviews, in addition to hand-written field notes during interviews. In addition to notes made during interviews, a daily log will be filled to create a record of ethnographic work and observations. Participants for interviews will be gathered firstly through contacts established during the participant observation phase and them through informal snowball sampling. This project will also engage in visual anthropology methods, in which the visual and multimedial will be used as a recording tool of data for analysis and archival purpose (El Guindi, 442) during the participant observation and interview phases.

Bibliography

Coleman, E. G. "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (2010): 487–505.

El Guindi, F. "Visual Anthropology." In *The Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (second edition), edited by H. Russell Bernard and Clarence C. Gravlee, 439–463. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

Horst, H. A. and D. Miller. *Digital anthropology*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Kaur, K. "Social media creating digital environmental publics: Case of Lynas Malaysia." *Public Relations Review* 41, no. 2 (2015) 311–314.

Liu, J. (2018). "Digital Media, Cycle of Contention, and Sustainability of Environmental Activism: The Case of Anti-PX Protests in China." *Mass Communication and Society* 19 (2016): 604–625.

Pink, S., H. A. Horst, J. Postill, L. Hjorth, T. Lewis, and J. Tacchi. *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016.