

How Covid-19 led to a #Rentstrike and what it can teach us about online organizing

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Abstract

What are the impacts of the sudden online shift of social life forced by the global pandemic, on the organizing capacity of worse-off, socioeconomically marginal communities? This article analyses the 2020 Rent Strike movement in response to the Covid-19 crisis, to investigate how online and offline protest practices can be combined to support local struggles and transnational networks.

Keywords: Covid-19, Rent Strike, Social Media Activism, Online Social Movements, Class, US, Transnational Networks, Leftist Politics.

Class struggle and collective action in the midst of a pandemic

As Covid-19 spread across the world, society and communities have been forced to re-adapt individual and collective life, and to move a big part of it online. This includes organizing and protest practices, in a time in which worsened socioeconomic conditions urge solidarity and action to protect livelihoods. Bringing about more than a health crisis, the pandemic has been opening cracks in the existing inequalities, it has further exposed marginalized groups and inflated the number of people in precarious situation. Housing conditions are no exception, rather, they play quite a key role in a crisis characterized by the imperative to “stay at home”.

Breaking out in the first weeks of the American wave of contagion, the movement for rent strike pooled such widespread struggles and gained international visibility, with the diffusion of top hashtags such as #RentStrike, #CancelRent, #CancelMortgages and #NoIncomeNoRent. Reference websites were set up, like Rentstrike2020 and WeStrikeTogether, to share action trackings, resources and tools that would help activists worldwide build their own strategies, giving the campaign a transnational reach.

Just as for any other example of digital campaign, activists and researchers will have seen these calls to action and rightfully wondered what’s beyond the surface of social media advocacy. This is a particularly relevant interrogative when it comes to a movement that requires timely, specifically localized solutions, and a deep and tight coordination between strikers to actually have them protected from evictions and other legal consequences. A reflection on such challenges of online activism places itself within the wider debate around the reconceptualization of collective action in the Internet era (Bimber, Flanagin, Stohl, 2005; Schradie 2018 a, b). Against claims of the internet being a democratizing space that would have facilitated access and participation to all,

researchers have pointed out that lower costs of engagement often lead to a lack of real impact, while also not really being low for everyone. Speaking of practices such as rent strikes, which stem from socioeconomic inequalities, higher costs of engagement and lower resources are found to characterize the digital experience of marginalized or disadvantaged communities, just as they do offline (Schradié, 2018, a,b). In this perspective, the rent strike movement constitutes a great example to understand the ways in which class struggle plays out online when forced to.

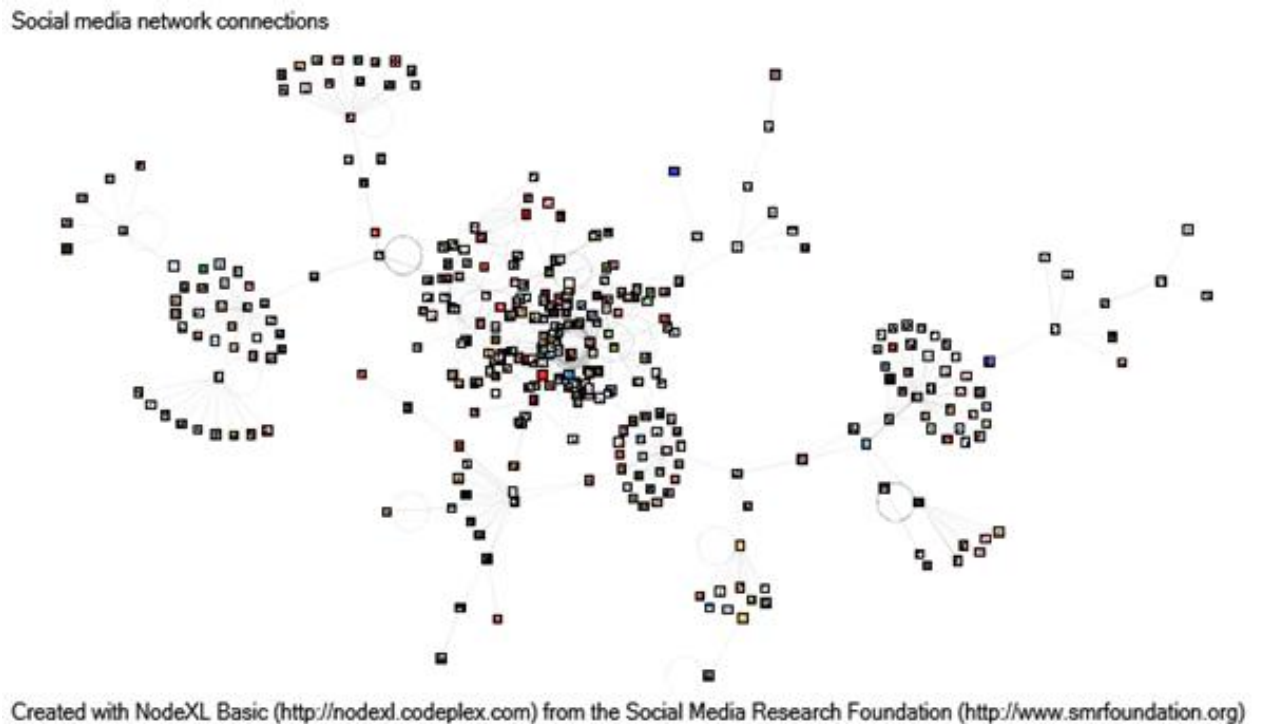
So how does the mobilizing capacity of worse-off groups change in an historical phase that allows little if none physical collective action to happen? Here is a summary of how I went about researching the issue through a sample of tweets.

Mapping social media mobilization

My research combined institutional data, social network analysis and content analysis of users' profiles, with the goal of understanding the structure and main actors of the rent strike movement on Twitter.

Social network analysis (through NodeXL) allowed me to map the use of the hashtag #Rentstrike in 436 tweets, posted between April 25, 8.12 PM and April 26, 2.39 PM Paris Time. The resulting graph outlines the main groups and subgroups in the network, shows the relationships within and between them, and highlights the users that play key roles as vectors of information, organizing or both (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Social Network Analysis graph, hashtag #RentStrike



I identify as central figures the ones placed at the core of subnetworks, arguably their referents. Gatekeepers instead are the isolated figures that are responsible for bridging those segregated subnetworks, and without which the overall structure would be fragmented. Highly visible tweeters are those that present more than 800.000 followers and thus are able to raise visibility around the issue. Once these actors have been identified, an analysis of their Twitter accounts provides information relevant to understand the movement - particularly whether they are organizations or individuals, if they state an ideological affiliation (through symbols, colors, groups names or political values) and their eventual connection to specific territorial contexts and communities organizing the rent strike.

Finally, evidence from both my sample of tweets and the dedicated websites can give us an idea of the reach of the movement beyond the American context.

In the next sections, the main findings of this combined research will be outlined and analyzed to elaborate the takeouts of the rent strike 2020 experience.

Individualized core, structured peripheries: a layered network of political actors

The graph resulting from the social network analysis layout highlighted a sharp opposition between what happens at the core and what happens at the margins of the network (Figure 1).

On one hand, a tight web of interactions between mainly individual users, forms a chaotic mass at the center of the map. Leader-less and structure-less, this cluster in a way accounts for a the fast rhythm at which the hashtag has been retweeted and reshared. These, in fact, are likely to be the main social media activities in which highly visible tweeters and other users in this position are engaged: while they are active supporters and participants in the wider online political conversation, they seem to have a less direct contact with the actual planning of the rent strike.

On the other hand, several subgroups occupy segregated, peripheral positions and are connected to the core with only few links. Despite being marginal, these smaller clusters present clearly identifiable central figures, dominant elements of strong hierarchical structures. These are not only important to their own audience but, for the indicators they present, they qualify among the key elements of the entire network. Moreover, an observation of their profiles shows most of them are 'institutional' accounts of either associations, organizations, mutual aid or activism groups. The majority of them presents a strong ideological background recalling typical leftist narratives - the black and red colors, the fist symbol, statements on values of equality, class struggle, anti-capitalism and anti-fascism. Finally, most of these accounts show affiliations to offline local groups whose purposes they serve through online activities of coordination and resource sharing. Such coordination seems to happen most often at the state and city-level, and to involve working class, black and overall vulnerable communities. Not surprisingly, this matches with data from the American context showing that the harshest health and socioeconomic consequences are falling on young people, precarious and low-paid workers, and on those coming from the service sector - features that characterize a large proportion of the American renter population (Adamczyk, 2020).

To summarize the main findings, a prevalence of institutional accounts over individual ones, and a clear cultural and political background emerge from the analysis of our sample, as the distinctive features of its leading speakers. Online collective action thus seems to be based on the work of leftist organizations rather than individuals. Despite often being marginal, these organizations prove strong offline ties and ideology, as well as experienced background in social activism.

Local fights, global narratives: tenants unions going transnational

What was particularly fascinating about mapping and combining Twitter data on the #RentStrike hashtag is that it allowed me to unfold the multiple, interwoven venues through which the movement developed and grew. By looking at one actor, a whole new set of information would uncover in front of me, often providing links to other actors that eventually happened to figure in the network themselves.

This was the case with @igd_news, the Twitter account of a well-established platform for mutual aid and anarchist organizing across the US. The website, called 'It's Going Down' (Igd, 2020), gave me access to a map of the rent strike actions that were being taken worldwide. Such map had been designed by 5DemandsGlobal, another reference platform for anti-system politics in response to the Covid crisis. In addition to this, among the striking groups reported in the map, I found the New Zealand activist community of RentStrike Aotearoa, whose Twitter account figured among the central users of my dataset.

Examples like this suggest that a deep interconnection exists across groups and regions involved in the initiative. Despite the challenges posed by the global situation and beyond the actual success of the strikes, this tells us that activists were able to create networks of solidarity and support across worse-off communities, and to build online tools that made them visible to the other struggling populations.

Another map, published by the San Francisco Tenants Union and Anti-eviction Mapping Project, provides records of the level of Covid-19 Housing Protection Legislation and presence of Housing Justice Action all over the world. It reports a high density of offline engagement on the two sides of the US (especially New York and California), in the UK and in Italy. Although the question of where this is all happening is really different from the one about the online reach of the hashtag, users themselves and the content they rely on for coordination overall suggest agreement on the part of the movement on a major dissemination starting from the US and echoing in the anglophone world and across Southern Europe. In addition to this, the transnational character of the movement can also be assessed by looking at its discursive framing in online advocacy: in fact, the rent strike was often integrated within a global, holistic and anti-system political narrative, that places it among other intertwined goals (formulated, for example, on the 5DemandsGlobal website) for the achievement of social justice against the damages brought up by Covid.

Digital class struggle: teachings from a pandemic

To conclude, how can these findings inform our understanding and practice of online organizing?

As mentioned, literature suggests that low-SES and marginalized groups face similar challenges online as offline, making their claims harder to articulate in

the digital space, which is understood as largely individualized and often not paired with on-site engagement. Researchers also argue that class entails more risks with participation, especially if in political debates and activities in general (Shaw and Hargittai, 2018; Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015; Seong-Jae 2010; Shradie, 2018a).

These arguments allow to assume that the prevalence of institutional over individual tweeters in our network might find a reason in the lower classes' higher costs of engagement. They highlight the importance for such groups to pool claims into organizations and strategies able to protect individuals from risks. They point out that individualization might not always be the case, as class opportunities and constraints require shaping networks of social media activism differently (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012).

Following what Bimber (1998) has called accelerated pluralism, the structureless core of our network can be considered responsible for the visibility and spillover effect of the hashtag. However, this type of digital activism proves to be not enough and not the most relevant one in the context of a rent strike, as little would have been put in place or achieved without the effort of the marginal political groups actually connected to specific local contexts. This reminds activists to not overestimate the ability of digital tools to mobilize individuals, but rather focus their efforts on building offline strong ties within and between communities first, without which an impactful use of ICTs wouldn't be possible.

In light of these elements, the rent strike 2020 experience tells us that, contrary to what is thought of social media activism - that weaker ties and a less defined political color allow for a larger spreading of the cause -, a clearer framing is necessary when anti-system politics, timely solutions and socio-economic justice are advocated for. In this sense, the intertwined challenges, sharper class conflict and higher urgency created by the pandemic is likely to continue to offer us insights on how a combination of online and offline tight linkages, and an acknowledgement of the political dimension of such struggles, is increasingly fundamental for social movements to navigate their costs of action and achieve their goals.

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