Virtual activists

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As the strain of the pandemic curbed mass gatherings, community events and other meeting occasions of the public, protestors began finding new ways to continue their demonstrations in the digital world. We have already seen the likes of Greta Thunberg taking her #ClimateStrikeOnline, as well as other youth groups like March For Our Lives and The Sunrise Movement using social media and group-call events. But now, a new wave of virtual protests is upping the game when it comes to standing up for what you believe in during a pandemic.
This March in Hong Kong, groups of teenagers took to Animal crossing to continue former protests against their government. Inside the game, users gathered together on the island’s bonfire-covered beach surrounded by pictures of their head of government, Carrie Lam. As they stood around with their tiki torches in hand, characters began bashing photos of Lam with fishing nets while a large banner sat in the centre read “Free Hong Kong, Revolution now”. The game has since been removed from online Chinese stores due to the protest.

In Russia, consumers uncovered another innovative way to display their frustration at the government. Citizens took to Yandex Maps and Yandex Navigator (the Russian equivalent of Google Maps) to protest against the lack of government support and financial aid for those left unemployed due to the coronavirus outbreak. Protesters stuck thousands of virtual pins—normally used to warn drivers about heavy traffic—in front of government buildings across St Petersburg, Moscow and Yerkaterinburg and embedded them with protest messages like, “People don't have anything to eat. Where are the people's payouts?.”
At the end of April, the activist group #SaveNour hijacked a live DJ set by Brixton Market owner Taylor McWilliams to protest the eviction of a local Nour Cash & Carry amidst the coronavirus pandemic. During his live set, demonstrators who were disguised as event attendees stole the spotlight by holding up signs condemning McWilliams's actions.

On June 2nd, Instagram users staged a virtual demonstration across their feeds in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. According to Forbes, over 28 million Instagram users participated in #BlackoutTuesday, which saw people posting a photo of a black square, pausing their social content for the day to give the floor to black voices, and raising awareness of the BLM movement.

Continuing these efforts, a new clan of hacktivists has risen to the surface over the past few weeks in the US. K-pop stans have caused a social media storm, creating innovative ways to protect protestors and support a push for change. The stans hacked a Dallas Police intelligence app which was being used to identify individuals participating in protests, flooding the app with TikTok videos of themselves dancing and singing. They peacefully interfered with other policing tactics, too—as police scanned hashtags on social media to track down protestors, the stans spammed channels with endless fancams, using the same hashtag. They also managed to raise a $1 million donation for Black Lives Matter groups.

“K-pop fans learned how to organize through their fandom,” Korean blogger T.K. Park told The New York Times. “K-pop is a digital-native music,” he added, explaining that South Korea’s early adoption of
nationwide broadband service “made Korean pop music respond to the demands of the internet, and also made K-pop’s fandom the most sophisticated actors in the digital sphere.” The fandom’s near-constant campaigns to flood radio stations with song requests or sell out concert tickets in a matter of minutes has trained them in mass mobilization tactics: “All of these activities can be translated into politics very easily.”

This new wave of virtual protests highlights Gen Z’s passion to right the world's wrongs. Their creativity accompanied by their digitally savvy birth right makes them a sophisticated group of hackers—and shows just how resilient they can be.

*Main image courtesy of Animal Crossing New Horizons by Nintendo*

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