



# Digital platforms as tools: Rise of Anti-Fracking protest movements across the world

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## Background

The world stands at a crossroads regarding the future of energy production with countries struggling to take a decision on whether to go with short term gains or sustainable long-term ways. Never before have corporate interests and people's movements clashed so strongly on energy policy making, with the challenge from people taking newer forms and gaining ever widening support.

Unlike the past, internet offers previously unimaginable possibilities of projecting one's own version of what is happening with an audience that is spread across the world. The ever-increasing number of users on various social media platforms Twitter, Facebook, Youtube etc, forecast tremendous potential for easy proliferation of information, something that was only possible by traditional media earlier. Any debate now has thousands of participants worldwide with local groups using online platforms to gain and extend global solidarity. These developments and increasing digital accessibility make online platforms a crucial factor in all sociopolitical movements. This article aims to look at the global anti-fracking movement and how internet as a platform has affected the cause.

## Causes, Concerns and Fallouts

Fracking which was highly concentrated in US for decades, later started moving into Latin America with the political leaders around the world calling shale gas the "Game Changer", "New Gas Age".

With fracking, it's the siting location that forms the foundation of movements against it. The modern society's need to provide energy for transportation and infrastructure collides with the local communities where the fracking is supposed to begin. The process also known as hydraulic fracturing is a horizontal drilling technique for removing oil and gas largely from traditionally untapped shale. The controversial part is that environmental groups and NGOs have been producing evidence of the disastrous effects of fracking in the surrounding areas. The process involves mixing highly toxic chemicals with water before drilling and it has been found out that 80 percent of these chemicals remain underground after fracking is done. The technology behind USA's natural gas revolution began gaining supporters after oil and gas prices spiked around 2008 and

companies started taking interest in “unconventional gas”, soon making the country the world’s largest gas producer. The anti-fracking movement in USA began taking proper shape after release of Josh Fox’s documentary *Gasland* released in 2010 along with resistance across the nation even leading to people under the banner of “Occupy the Pipeline” attending a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission hearing with gas masks and hazmat suits. The adoption of this technology had a very low profile in Latin America with the Interamerican Association for Environment Defense (AIDA) stating that there was “no previous consultation with communities, nor holistic studies carried out about the impact and risks of these techniques in any (country of Latin America). There is also no access to information about the oil companies’ contract and operations.”

Right after Latin America was thrown into the debate, community resistance and opposition have consistently grown. The most famous protest being the one that happened in early 2018, when a biologist named Esteban Servat mobilised thousands of people in Mendoza, Argentina using Facebook. He published a secret Argentine government study of the environmental effects of fracking, after which protests erupted in Argentina forcing seven draft laws to be in Argentine congress to ban it. As a result, criminal charges were filed against Servat and a judicial investigation was launched against him and others associated with a group they created - *Ecoleaks*. He later had to escape to Europe fearing arrest and further continued using online platforms to spread awareness, even garnering the support of Pope Francis. Likewise, the subcontinent has witnessed multiple protests with the movement showing no signs of slowing down. Esteban Servat’s case was mentioned here as he has turned into one of the most vocal figures of the anti-fracking movement. His shot to international fame was only possible with heavy campaigning through social media.

Similarly, the anti-fracking struggles around the world have successfully extended and gathered solidarity forming what we can call a truly trans local movement. Online forums such as the Global Frackdown, Camp Frack have been generating common space for small groups and organisations to come together on an international scale in the cyberspace for organising events and sharing information. As a result, protests have been going on with many winning bans and moratoriums against fracking. In the online platform, such wins are not just local wins but become of global significance, filling the pages of websites around the world, fueling the movement.

The online forums record the strategies, successes to generate global solidarity, for example The Global Frackdown webpage boasts of their first effort in 2012 accounting for 200 actions in 20 countries. Though transnational, in the first Global Frackdown day of action, the majority of organizations were North American among which two thirds were from USA, Europe coming close next. The website’s mission statement says, “We stand united as a global movement in calling on governmental officials at all levels to

pursue a renewable energy future and not allow fracking or any of the associated infrastructure in our communities or any communities” with the activists claiming that the reason for organizing an international day of action against fracking is that the companies and multinational corporations are international players. Hence, it becomes necessary to share experience and strategy with other local initiatives. The day has been organised with help of civil society organization, Food and Water Watch with special focus on building the movement at local levels.

Literature on this topic shows us how online platforms accommodate dense networks for information exchange between non-state actors with shared values and common discourses called Transnational Networks (TAN), with the important assumption here being that the international actors serves as an useful agent for the local groups. This assumption seems to be holding up well as far as anti-fracking movement is considered with protestors in first world not only demanding fracking to be stopped in their countries but urging their governments to stop fracking in developing countries. The coming together of so many local narratives with the help of online platforms have made everyone realize that the dominant narrative of ‘man saving nature’ homogenizes extreme local differences. Unlike dominant narrative, the anti-fracking promotes the idea that new environmentalists have been trying to promote for a long time. The idea that protection of nature by humans is misleading and struggle is to protect places and sets to relationships necessary for everyday life. This understanding along with political anger have been instrumental in this movement. Further, climate change activists and environmentalists have joined this movement as fracking is a danger that is visible while global warming seems to be problem in the future attracting less people into action. People whose daily lives have been affected by fracking need no other external convincing on the dangers of the practice, hence anti-fracking movement has occupied the forefront of the struggle against climate change, bringing the topic into both the physical and political landscape.

## **Major Trends**

Online platforms have facilitated these protests and movement in various ways. As mentioned earlier by helping to show various versions of what is happening and also helping with what Arturo Escobar says as ‘articulation of alternative imaginaries. It means that internet helps in countering a common perception regarding social movements that they end once people stop hitting the streets or once media loses interest. Through internet people now have the power to promote or counter a discourse, each struggle, each news report adds an ever-lasting impression in the digital space which may or may not have repercussions. Such discourses further have the potential to sustain the movement and gather more supporters and even influencing the policy making like we have seen in so many places.

Any social movement do not happen in a flash, it consists of various stages and in this context all the stages have been immensely facilitated by digital platforms. The discontent that surrounded fracking was spread out in pockets at the beginning with the looming danger of local initiatives dying out early. The preliminary stage had no or little organization with places witnessing individual actions than collective action. Online platforms helped the discontent become more widespread and suddenly gave space for people to find like-minded others along with dissemination of information. The struggle was no more just local or individual, the path to collective action was set along with strategic plans. These translocal networks facilitated and helped various local initiatives from dying out due to lack of support. For example, in 2013 solidarity protests were held in UK for the new anti-fracking struggles in Romania and Bulgaria. A year later Romanian protesters proclaimed solidarity to people of Barton Moss in the UK. The major themes across such protests is the concept of solidarity not only within but also across borders.

The organisers of these networks have been keeping definitions loose so that local groups can accommodate their needs according to the emerging circumstances. The focus at local and transnational scale is on relationship building, beginning from networks that were preexisting and interpersonal. Activists reported using various communication tools and online platforms. The toolkit available in Global Frackdown website suggests conducting events that target elected officials of the respective areas and also promoting bans as well as pressuring policy makers to encourage research on effects of fracking. It is also clear that at the local level organizing have been heavily facilitated through social media. While earlier it was difficult to reach elected officials and policy makers as general public rarely have access to traditional media now it is much easier with online platforms. People tagging elected officials in posts regarding fracking and also tagging famous people in order to receive support have been an integral part of this movement. Anti-fracking tweets by Hollywood actor Mark Ruffalo were shared by protesters worldwide with many making pictures of his most famous character Hulk smashing fracking. Such efforts are aimed at getting more people into the movement and also at mainstreaming it. For example, the Friends of the Earth website says that Mark Ruffalo is the 'most recognisable person who opposes fracking'. Along with this they have also posted story about a UK government survey which states that the public support for shale gas is very low, fluctuating around 16% and roughly a third of people oppose it. In UK, anti-fracking groups have been springing up with the number now being nearly 300. This spike can be related with the increase in fracking after the prime minister David Cameron said the country would go 'all out for shale'. The website also gives a visitor links to these anti fracking groups while proclaiming, "Friends of the Earth has a huge community of local groups across the UK. Together we support people fending off fracking."

One more observation about how online platforms help this movement is that internet easily facilitates 'blockadia'. According to Naomi Klein, this is a 'roving transnational

conflict zone', the front lines of climate movement where activists across nations work in sync. The farmers in Poland after learning that their country has the largest reserve of shale gas in Europe became overnight anti-fracking activists and caught international attention. One may wonder how this was possible, a peak into it reveals that they were joined by French Green activist Jose Bove, an already famous figure in global anti-fracking circuit after his efforts lead to victory against fracking in France. In 2011 Jose Bove along with Polish-American filmmaker Lech Kowalski, farmers, activists conducted a militant campaign against Chevron and when the company returned two years later a 400-day blockade called #OccupyChevron was done by nearly 300 farmers forcing Chevron to end its operation in Poland completely. Likewise, the company has faced strong opposition in many countries. A nationwide anti-fracking revolt in Romania forced it to pull out.

The Pungesti anti fracking protests received support from many international organizations including the European Green Party, European Peasant Movement, Helsinki Committee. Such international solidarity and resistance towards one perpetrator are a result of transnational network being of great use and those transforming into a successful version of blockadia. The very visible effects of fracking have put the anti-fracking movement on the forefront of climate change activism. While multinational corporate interests have found it easy to choke discourse on global warming putting forward the argument of lack of evidence and other similar reasons, the fracking debate seems to be a totally different case.

Australia even witnessed a company investing a lot of money to counter the organic anti fracking discourse. The anti-fracking movement is definitely small compared to the corporate interests, but such a grassroots movement have certainly deflated fracking to some extent around the world and for each success, external solidarity has been an important factor. Unlike many types of activism which works on trouble in own backyard, activists here took it beyond that, illustrated well by famous French anti fracking slogan, "Ni ici, ni ailleurs" which means neither here nor elsewhere. This global solidarity has also helped first world activists understand various differences that were homogenized earlier by dominant narratives. For example, the anti-fracking protests in Algeria was not only about dealing with resulting water contamination but also a fight back against neocolonialism. One must note that while energy giant Total was not allowed to continue fracking in its native soil France after protests, it started seeking alternate sources in other countries. Algeria being a former French colony and Total planning to do fracking there led to strong outrage even from French leftists and environmentalists. As soon as the news about Total fracking in Algeria spread, Algerian civil society groups began discussing resistance strategies with others in Morocco, France, UK etc at the World Social Forum in 2013.

These are the cases that show the such movements are not just about environment justice but social justice too. Consider ourselves as a part of nature rather than the one who tames it bring newer perspectives into the game. The struggle now also becomes of power and greater democratic participation. The spread out and heterogeneous movement against fracking now not only hold promise for a world without fracking but one that is more democratized. At the core of this movement is the everyday struggle for resources of the people participating in local initiatives. For them this is also about having a greater say in policy making of the country and a struggle against social equality. Many cases across the globe illustrate a shift in how anti-fracking protests take place, rather than just being reactionary protests aimed at a cause, they are also articulating a wide range of other concerns. The reason behind is to pull in larger crowds and more diverse actors. In the process other societal problems like corruption, violation of human rights is also highlighted. In fact, anti-fracking protesters were also present in the now famous Occupy Wall Street movement. Citizens now join even though their main concern is not environmental, like how corruption scandals related to fracking industry in UK made more people to join the movement.

### **Forecast in 2020**

The coming of novel corona virus has crippled protest movements around the world. The virus has definitely given time for authoritarian leaders to relax and initiate moves that they couldn't while active protests were going on in the streets. The unstoppable Hong Kong protest was easily dispersed citing the ban of gatherings with more than four people. Post the beginning of the health crisis a highly shared Ted Talk video speaks of how pandemics like corona virus are our future and how further uninhibited exploitation would lead to contact with viruses that human body has no knowledge of, leading to another crisis. Such line of thinking would certainly help future environmental protests even though the economic recession would lead to multinational corporations advocating for further drilling, the aggressive practice of which may have disastrous long-term effects.

With both authoritarian and more democratic states expected to go by this considering the financial situation, post pandemic people's protest movement may certainly induce what the video predicts into their discourse. Environmentalists have been showing the decrease in pollution as a positive side of the lockdown but the hype maybe short lived with coal production expected to reach back normal as soon as lockdown ends and demand goes up. Politically, economic stimuli will certainly warm up conventional industries and would obviously put rain forests in danger like in Brazil. While it will definitely take time for on the streets protests to begin again, the online platforms definitely help the emotions to linger longer but there is every chance that states and corporate interests hijack the fracking discourse easily post the pandemic. Developing



countries have less options than exploit conventional sources, further there would be much pressure from developed countries.

The question here is that how many unemployed people are willing to spend time on saving future. The recession will displace many off their social status, would the people behind daily necessities have time to rally behind people on ground zero suffering due to fracking. Pessimistic outlook into the future predict reduction of public investment in green technology as propping up other business to reduce unemployment seems important now. Even if somehow the economics become greener with optimists claiming that the uncertainty post corona virus would make people take climate change seriously there are also chances of right-wing nationalism and xenophobia gripping various countries. It must also be analysed how the anti-globalization discourse getting stronger post the pandemic would affect the anti-fracking movement as it includes people from both sides of the political spectrum.

As the bigger question of climate change looms behind, there are even environmentalists going for shale gas stating that it is better in comparison with conventional oil and coal gas and some sacrifices are necessary. Energy policy especially with the upcoming recession will only become more controversial, one can only wait and see how regulations would change and form anew. It is be looked upon whether the framing of debate regarding fracking would be limited to environmental and economic or would also include social issues and aboriginal politics in the future. Further, the intensification on one side would definitely have reaction. The left politics seems to be gaining much from the movement like we saw in Romania where the foremost demand was greater public control over use of natural resources and a halt in privatization. Likewise, tension would certainly provide opportunity for radical stream to gain control of protests. Unless people regroup post the pandemic and continue the movement, there are chances that it would lose steam in front of what Naomi Klein calls the disaster capital complex. In the name of bringing back the economy up multinational interests would induce economic plans with short term gains and the shale gas industry would be back on its feet in no time. If people wait for everything to return back to normalcy, it may just turn out to be late.

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