



## *Digital Toolkits for Inclusive Climate Justice Movements*

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As a youth, Jett Zhang had difficulty finding a community that shared his interests. Born in Atlanta, Georgia to immigrant parents from China, he had a hard time finding people who shared his interest in entrepreneurship. At times, growing up in the American South was quite difficult for him. Some days his mental health suffered, and most days he felt very alone.

One day, after meeting an entrepreneurial high schooler, he realized there must be others who felt the same sort of isolation that he did. So he decided to use his experience, as well as his entrepreneurial and technical skills, to create communities intent on bringing all kinds of people together. “In high school I tried social entrepreneurship,” he says. “I designed several apps, which won me a few pitch competitions, but they didn’t end up going anywhere. I loved the concept of connecting changemakers to each other, but I wasn’t even sure yet what issues I cared about myself.”

While researching an essay he was writing on the Paris climate agreement, Jett reached out to 350 Pensacola, a local climate action network, for some expertise, and they invited him to come to a meeting. This network was an amazing source of information for Jett, and it set him on a path working toward climate justice. But he noticed that very few youth environmentalists belonged to the network. “So naturally, I began looking for a network of young people who were also getting involved.”

Jett used Instagram to send direct messages to climate activists about getting involved with youth movements. Eventually, Iris Zhan, a Chinese-American activist from Maryland, replied to him with a show of support. “This showed me that there were people like me out there willing to help, and it really inspired me to get involved in this movement in a bigger way.”

At 17, Jett took up the mantle as director of the 350 Pensacola Youth Climate Coalition. Shortly thereafter, on September 20, 2019, using his social media savvy he organized a climate strike, and he got more than 150 people to attend. His digital organizing experience brought him to Fridays For Future Digital (FFFDD), and he began collaborating with them on a much larger scale.

At FFFDD, Jett found a niche, creating and developing digital protests. Through various social media platforms, youth activists were urged to send photos and messages, and to create digital collages showing the extensive support network of youth around the world. “Activism is similar to entrepreneurship, only the end goal is impact, not money,” Jett says. And considering the near-global lockdowns from COVID-19, his impact has been all the more extraordinary. When the quarantine started in March 2020, people couldn’t physically protest. “But you can still keep these important environmental issues on the top of your mind and that sense of community strong, with digital activism.”

Jett’s efforts have helped FFFDD empower thousands of activists, many of whom are new to the movement. He hopes that getting more youth involved in these campaigns can further help those in isolation feel some sense of community. “I ended up creating some of the strongest relationships of my life during a time of isolation; which goes to show us the beauty that the technology can have if it’s used in a positive way,” he says.

Jett often leverages the FFFDD platform to assist environmental groups that have less reach and visibility, and that normally wouldn’t have access to the resources or networks to help them get meaningful exposure and community

support. One story that was particularly important to Jett came to light via the work of a partner group called Defend Defenders. Defend Defenders stands up for the human rights of environmental defenders and indigenous people in the East and Horn of Africa subregions. Through this group, Jett learned about Friends of Zoka, and he decided to get FFFD virtually involved with them.

Friends of Zoka is a group of northern Ugandans who are trying to stop illegal logging in the rainforests, which has destroyed roughly 60 percent of the standing rainforest of the country in the last 20 years. “I reached out to the Whatsapp on their website and was able to speak with William Amanzuru, who was cataloguing evidence of the devastation,” Jett says. At the time, William was hiding from the local commissioner in the Moyo District. The Whatsapp technology not only allowed Jett to communicate with him, but helped them work together to coordinate a digital campaign to put pressure on the Ugandan government through tweets and emails sent from around the world. “It just goes to show you that even a social messaging app can impact change,” Jett says. “This wasn’t something that was possible for wildlife defenders like William 20 years ago, when the illegal foresting began.”

Jett has also played an integral role in connecting FFFD with the Re-Earth Initiative, and combining their expertise as leading digital activist networks to influence legislation for vulnerable groups worldwide. The focus of their most recent joint effort is to raise awareness and support from Caribbean and Latin American governments for the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation, and Justice in Environmental Matters. This is a groundbreaking piece of legislation for persecuted indigenous peoples, which is better known as the #EscazúAgreement because it was first adopted in Escazú, Costa Rica.

The #EscazúAgreement is the first binding treaty in Latin America and the Caribbean to deal with environmental democracy and environmental human rights. In many places in these regions, the indigenous populations are horribly abused by powerful corporations and the rogue government officials that allow the corporations free reign, simply for standing up for and protecting their land. Currently, there is little legal recourse for a defender of the environment who is being persecuted, strong-armed, bribed, physically harmed and intimidated, or even murdered by outside interests. Ratifying this agreement would provide the indigenous populations who are being exploited proper access to data about ongoing projects, and the chance to participate in the planning and conversations around what projects will be allowed. Perhaps most importantly, it provides legal protections for those who are persecuted while defending the natural habitats they call home. “I’m honored to spend my time defending the most vulnerable people in the most vulnerable places,” Jett says. “This sort of community building is something I will always be involved in.”

Jett wants young people to understand that whatever the scope of the cause they are interested in, or whatever your personality is, you *can* get involved in a way that suits you as an individual. Many types of people coming together is what makes the climate movement so impactful. “For example, I like to design systems behind the scenes,” Jett says. “I like to engage in digital community building. I play many roles for FFFD that aren’t obvious or glamorous, but they make just as significant an impact on the cause as the outward-facing figures of the movement. I like to say to other activists who are reserved, like me, you can’t make a movie without the camera man, can you?”

With up and coming leaders like Jett, who are so effective at digitally organizing youth communities, the climate justice movement has significantly expanded its reach to a network of tech-savvy, motivated activists across the virtual world. This virtual approach by FFFD and youth leaders like Jett shows that no matter what logistical problems may arise from something like a pandemic, innovative activists will always have opportunities to use their intelligence and their creativity to keep the momentum of their work rolling forward.

While incorporating the guidance of environmental activists before him, Jett has set an example of digital resilience in the face of myriad obstacles, through his efforts at organizing online protests and shining a light on stories that will no longer go untold. The climate justice movement will surely need more of this type of innovation and resilience in the future, as the challenges will be more varied and complicated. Jett hopes we will all learn from this digital triumph, small as it may seem, and take an intergenerational approach to solving the next hurdle, which is sure to come.

*The Earth is a fine place and worth fighting for.*

*Ernest Hemingway*

**Call To Action:** Don't let the lockdowns stop you from supporting a cause that's important to you - get out in virtual space and support digital climate protests with Jett at Fridays for Future Digital - <https://fffdigital.carrd.co>

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