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**Small acts and personal politics: on helping to save the orangutan via social media**

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In recent years, the capacity of social media to influence voters’ behaviour, fuel protest, and enact structural change has come under renewed scrutiny. As happened during the ‘Arab Spring’ and ‘Occupy’ movements in the early-2010s, analysts today ask searching questions about how social media shapes contemporary developments, from the Trump presidency to the rise of populist movements in Europe. Is social media a kingmaker, they ask, a purveyor of ‘fake news’, a tool of dissent and political mobilization—or, perhaps, its opposite?

These discussions pivot on the question of social media’s effectiveness—that is, the extent to which acting online engenders ‘real’ results in the world. In this respect, they extend a long-running conversation within and beyond academia about the utility of online participation—a prime example being recurring debates about what has been scathingly termed ‘slacktivism’.[[1]](#endnote-1) In this article, however, I shall broach the subject from a different angle. Rather than assessing the (in)efficacy of online engagements with movements or causes, I shall ask what anthropologists can gain from a more open-ended ethnographic analysis of the tropes and relations that fuel such engagements.

My focus is the social media-scape of orangutan conservation: a lively field populated by various orangutan organizations and their supporters—mainly Euro-Americans in the Global North. In recent years, social media has become increasingly central to these organizations’ efforts to engage Western publics and garner support for their work (Figure 1). However, more than highlighting the threats facing orangutans, these platforms are also animated participatory spaces through which supporters are encouraged to play their part in saving this critically endangered ape—whether by signing and sharing petitions, donating online, or simply ‘liking’ photographs and videos.

Viewed through the habitually critical lens of much contemporary anthropology, such activities may appear naïve, frivolous, or even self-indulgent virtue-signalling behaviour. In this article, however, I shall maintain a methodological agnosticism about what these occlude or effect, and try instead to engage with supporters’ claims, actions, and exchanges on their own terms. Doing so lays bare a discourse of ordinariness, small acts, and personal networking that frames interactions on this social media-scape, enrolling disparate individuals in a digitally-mediated project of helping to save the orangutan. By taking this discourse seriously, I also aim to shed light on the multiple scales and shades of participation that exist on social media—some of which, I suggest, can nudge anthropological understandings of digital activism in different directions.

**Orangutan causes on social media**

The field of orangutan conservation encompasses a large, diverse cast of participants, including scientific projects, conservation NGOs, charities, and rescue and rehabilitation centres in Borneo and Sumatra. Online, at least, the most visible and popular of these are rescue and rehabilitation centres, which pick up and treat displaced, injured, or confiscated orangutans that have been affected by human-wildlife conflict, hunting, poaching, and deforestation, before (ideally) ‘returning them to the wild’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Their residents include many orphaned baby orangutans, who are helped to recover and accrue basic survival skills for a future life in the forest.

To help fund their work, such centres and their partner charities in the Global North maintain a constant social media presence, posting updates about individual animals, promoting orangutan adoption schemes[[3]](#endnote-3) (Figure 2) or voluntourism programmes, and highlighting larger conservation issues—notably the destruction of orangutans’ rainforest habitats by commercial logging and oil palm expansion (Figure 3). Punctuating these streams are also one-off appeals that underscore the ‘now-ness’ of the situation, such as petitions against land development schemes, fundraising campaigns to purchase protected land or repair facilities, and pleas for donations to care for newly-rescued orangutans.

As I explain elsewhere (Author, forthcoming), such posts deftly transform orangutans into characters in a larger narrative about environmental destruction, human greed, and imminent extinction. Replete with names, biographies, and personalities, the individual residents of rehabilitation centres perform the affective work of bridging large-scale problems with small-scale specificities, becoming the almost-human faces of an unfolding ecological crisis. However, what these posts also do is render the large-scale, environmental threats to orangutans immediate, personal, and, crucially, addressable by individual users.

**The cumulative logic of small acts**

In a 2016 Easter-themed Instagram post shared by over 3,500 people, International Animal Rescue (IAR)—one of the largest and most popular presences on the social media-scape of orangutan conservation—wrote:

This Easter, huge amounts of unsustainable palm oil will be used during the mass production of chocolate eggs. Unsustainable palm oil plays a major role in the systematic destruction of the rainforest, and consequently the death and capture of vulnerable orangutans.

This year, please consider giving an animal-friendly Easter treat such as one of our virtual animal adoptions!

Our virtual adoptions make a wonderful gift and allow you to support our work rescuing animals from suffering in a more engaged way! […][[4]](#endnote-4)

This post is a typically consummate example of how ‘the plight of the orangutan’ is explicated and domesticated through social media; transformed into a personal problem in which ordinary individuals are implicated. Yet in the same inculpatory breath, it offers redemption: instead of buying a chocolate egg, why not adopt an orangutan (Figure 4), support IAR’s life-saving work, *and* save the rainforest?

Adoption, however, is only one of many mechanisms through which social media users can act. Several charities sell orangutan-themed or ethical merchandise (Figure 5) such as t-shirts and soft toys, and many participate in online ‘giving’ projects, such as ‘Give as you Live’[[5]](#endnote-5), which channels a percentage of buyers’ purchases towards their chosen charities. Moreover, organizations always encourage supporters to spread the word—and the pleasure of watching and saving orangutans—through likes, shares, tags, retweets, and other interventions, portraying all of these as meaningful actions in themselves.

Central to these activities is an ethos of small acts: the insistence that many individual contributions, however tiny, can cumulatively make a big difference. In early February 2017, for example, the UK-based Orangutan Protection Foundation (OPF) issued an emergency Facebook and Twitter appeal for funds to rescue twenty orangutans stranded in a fragment of degraded forest. Its first tweet, featuring a photograph of an orangutan hefted on a rescuer’s back, read:

Donate & RT [retweet]. EMERGENCY: 20 Orangutans need rescue! Text ORANG £10 to 70555 (UK ONLY) to help get them out of danger.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A string of updates followed over the next few hours and days, showing the running tally of donations raised ‘via social media shares alone’[[7]](#endnote-7): £200 within a few hours, £3,500 by the third day.[[8]](#endnote-8) The collective import of these separate contributions was encapsulated by one of OPF’s Facebook updates:

Your donations have been gratefully received over the last 24 hours. You are all amazing... […]

Thank you. You are the difference they need in the world.

The cumulative logic fuelling this appeal is reproduced in varying guises across the social media-scape of orangutan conservation—not only by organizations but also, importantly, by their supporters. For example, when IAR posted a video on Facebook about the translocation of rescued orangutans to a piece of land that supporters had helped purchase,[[9]](#endnote-9) it elicited many gratified responses, including:

KD: This is so beautiful!! So happy to see this and am so happy we could come together to save this piece of land for them ❤

BD: So thrilled to be a “part” of this project! Thank you for sharing. ❤

RN: Heart melting footage. SO happy to see my tiny donation playing a role in such magnificent purchase. ❤

KF: O.K. I will donate again like the last years.

Such comments are, in part, testament to the IAR media team’s aptitude for cultivating long-term relationships with their supporters—for example, by posting regular updates and evidence of what donations are helping to achieve. However, the comments also reproduce a widespread understanding that is articulated in various ways on social media: that small acts are important not only because of their cumulative impact, but also because of what we might gloss as their inherent ‘mere-ness’.

**Valorising ‘the mere’**

In her ethnography of Finnish Red Cross workers and volunteers, Liisa Malkki reflects on how international development discourse often implicitly delineates what she glosses as ‘the mere’ and ‘the real’. Soft toys, blankets and other items crafted for humanitarian aid campaigns, she notes, are often treated as ‘the mere to the “real” of humanitarian aid’, just as humanitarian aid itself ‘is often dismissed as the mere to “real” politics or “real” social transformation’ (2015:106). Yet, as Malkki shows through her research with creators of ‘Aid Bunnies’, even apparently ‘mere’ things can have powerful social and affective purchase for those who work with them.

A different but equally compelling ‘mere’/‘real’ distinction frames many exchanges and actions on the social media-scape of orangutan conservation. Although some supporters have visited Borneo and Sumatra as tourists or volunteers, the vast majority of social media users who engage with orangutan causes are physically removed from the objects of their affection. Indeed, tweets and comments threads are frequently laced with expressions of hope (‘It is my dream to one day fly out and volunteer at…’) and regret (‘I’d love to be there, but don’t have the money/time/ability…’) from people who can only ‘save’ orangutans from a distance.

This vexatious sense of being removed from orangutans, I suggest, fuels a prevalent, virtually axiomatic assumption on social media: that the ‘real’ work of saving orangutans is essentially carried out by professionals in the field, notably vets, rescuers, carers, and others who have regular (and, importantly, sanctioned) physical contact with these apes.[[10]](#endnote-10) While supported by the organizations that employ them and fund their work, and, to a lesser extent, by rolling batches of voluntourists,[[11]](#endnote-11) such professionals are portrayed as *the* frontline of orangutan protection—as the ones who do what everyone else can’t (Figure 6).

What emerges is thus a hierarchical layering of capacities that conflates professionalism and (geographical and interspecies) proximity with the ‘real’ work of saving orangutans. Situated at various removes from its apex, supporters on social media do not expect their small acts to enact direct change on the ground. Rather, many of them portray their contribution in terms of boosting *organizations’* and *professionals’* ability to effect that change. Organizations themselves tend to naturalize this assumption. Consider, for example, the caption by Orangutan Outreach that accompanied its Instagram photograph of an endearing baby orangutan: ‘Everything we do, we do for THEM. Please help us help them. Thank you’ (10 August 2017).[[12]](#endnote-12) Similarly, in a request for donations on ‘Giving Tuesday’ (29 November 2016), IAR posted a video montage of various orangutans in chains before their rescue, and the following:

With your support we can cut the chains of more suffering orangutans who are urgently in need of rescue. Thank you so much for your continued kindness, you make our life-saving work possible.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Responses to this video reinforced that professional/non-professional division of labour, with many commenters readily slotting themselves into an ancillary role. SB thus said, ‘I am so privileged to support your rescues, thank you so much for your kind work for those beautiful Great Apes who are helpless to help themselves. https://www.facebook.com/images/emoji.php/v7/f6c/1/16/2764.png’, while KVN mused, ‘Thank goodness for organisations such as yourselves for helping these beautiful creatures find freedom, safety and caring’. Other comments such as ‘Thank you for being their angels’ and ‘You guys are heroes’ further underscored the perceived extraordinariness of IAR’s work.

Such remarks reinscribe a distinction between the ‘real’ work carried out by professionals in the field and the ‘mere’ help and support that everyone else can offer (at different removes). This distinction is conceptual and relational rather than absolute: an orangutan supporter may be a rich, influential professional who supports numerous causes, but *in this particular context*, and *in relation to* those who rescue and care for orangutans, s/he occupies a structural position of mere-ness, of only being able to help others help orangutans. Individuals who adopt his subject position thus have no pretences about being directly involved in orangutan rescue, rehabilitation, or conservation. Rather, what they play on and valorise is precisely their *in*capacity for direct action, taking their mere-ness as the ethical grounds from which they can help (others) save orangutans. In this view, small acts gain moral freight: they are what individuals, straitened by distance, circumstance, and lack of expertise, can manage within their limits*.*

This ‘do what you can’ ethos is articulated in different ways on social media. A supporter thus posted in response to IAR’s New Year 2016 appeal:[[14]](#endnote-14) ‘Always share & regularly donate, small monthly amount, but it all helps’ (SB), while another declared: ‘i love Budi [one of IAR’s adoptable orangutans] so much […] I am currently unemployed but I have to help, can't wait to join the other adopters.’ (JT). Still, another (LC) expounded: ‘The other thing that I do is buy t shirt’s [sic] from you guys too because that way I feel I'm not only giving a small donation but also spreading awareness to others about whom I support and hopefully get others too!’ (Figure 7)

It is worth stressing here that these sentiments are neither new nor unique to orangutan causes on social media. The logics of small acts and ‘mere-ness’, the grammars of innocence (Ticktin 2015), victimhood, and witnessing (Torchin 2006) that fuel them, and the model of saving-through-sponsorship to which they give rise all have long pedigrees, having also been deployed by charities, rights activists, humanitarian campaigns, and other cause-related projects for decades (see, e.g., Bornstein 2002; Igoe 2010; McLagan 2003; Rabbitts 2012; Wilson and Brown 2009). In this regard, orangutan conservation must be seen as hewn from the same conceptual and structural terrain as other projects of ‘doing good’ in the Global North.

Although I lack the space to delve into this wider field, I do want to highlight the extra layer of dynamism and complexity that social media’s interactive and participatory affordances have added to such projects. Whereas earlier activist, fundraising, and other campaigns were heavily mediated by organizations (e.g. through newsletters, telephone calls, mailshots), their incarnations on social media are more immediately accessible and appropriable by their target audiences, who can ‘like’, share, (re)interpret, and personalize posts without their originators’ intervention.[[15]](#endnote-15) And as I shall now explain, the online visibility and traceability of such activities facilitate certain relational dynamics through which some supporters try to do more than what they (alone) can.

**‘Could you please donate? For me xxx’**

The notion that mere-ness is no barrier to involvement is commonly espoused by individual supporters, some of whom deploy the interactive affordances of social media to recruit more allies to their cause. A regular OPF supporter (AD), for instance, explained that she only sent Christmas greetings online, putting the money that she saved from cards into a donation to orangutans. ‘That is why I put in [sic] on here [Facebook] too,’ she concluded, ‘in the hope some people will follow’. Similarly, LB wrote in a comment to IAR: ‘I have adopted and hope my friends on FB [Facebook] will follow my lead so that you can continue your wonderful work’. Another supporter shared an appeal to her personal timeline with the added gloss: ‘Donation from the family and me winging its way to this amazing charity. If you can spare even just £1, please consider doing so. Even just sharing will help’.

Addressed less to organizations than to supporters’ own contacts, such comments are not just informative but elicitative: online nudges that seek to implicate their intended recipients in the project of saving the orangutan. However, many supporters do more than just nudge. Returning to IAR’s New Year appeal, we find HJ tagging a friend with the suggestion, ‘She’ll [sic] we donate half between us xxx’, and KR challenging JF with: ‘JF [tag] babe you can donate from the UK and it's only £3 😊❤ I made a donation online xoxo’. Meanwhile, a regular donor who had already tagged several of her contacts posted a public plea to her partner (‘MW [tag] could you please donate? For me xxx’), while another tagged hers with: ‘L [tag] ❤ I'm gonna text, you should too!’ (ALJ).

My aim here is not to speculate on disparate individual commenters’ motivations or intentions: it is impossible to surmise from social media exchanges whether these are heartfelt pleas, self-promoting, virtue-signalling acts (as some critics of ‘slacktivism’ would argue), or a combination of both. My point, rather, is that such appeals draw on and feed into a set of prevalent, highly public tropes and logics of helping through small acts, which in turn facilitate certain kinds of interactions. As the examples above suggest, such appeals are not exactly coercive—but they are compelling, blending existing personal ties with specific ethical and praxiological imperatives. Here, small acts are portrayed not only as gestures of support for orangutans, but also, crucially, as extensions of and plays on interpersonal relations, with all their attendant affects and obligations (Figure 8).

It is thus here, on the apparent peripheries of the social media-scape of orangutan conservation, that a great deal of emotional and relational work takes place, as individual supporters reach outwards to act on their social networks: the pals who’ll split a donation with them, loved ones who might adopt an orangutan, like-minded colleagues who could spare £1. Such efforts, I suggest, add up to a ‘politics of the personal’ (Marichal 2016:116), whereby orangutan supporters use social media to act on their contacts’ preferences, trust, moral compasses, and senses of obligation. Stripping away potential barriers of cost, risk, expertise, and physical difficulty, their appeals distil the project of saving the orangutan into a personal choice: one that may stem from a sense of interspecies responsibility, a sense of duty to a friend or relative, or, quite possibly, both.

**Conclusion**

In his call for ‘an anthropology of the good’, Joel Robbins exhorts anthropologists to attend carefully and less cynically to the ‘different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good’ (2013:457). To do this, he argues, we need to trace how ‘the good’ is ‘imaginatively conceived, not simply perceived’ (ibid.:457)—a move that, importantly, means not ‘dismissing [people’s] ideals as unimportant or, worse, bad-faith alibis for the worlds they actually create’ (2013:457).

It is in this open-ended, agnostic spirit that I have explored one such project of ‘doing good’: the digitally-mediated ways through which disparate individuals seek to save the orangutan. My aim, I should stress, is not to uncover the multiplicitous realities of individual supporters’ lives, nor to evaluate the (in)efficacy of their activities. What I have outlined, rather, is a public digital infrastructure of meaning, feeling, and acting that is built around social media’s interactive affordances, and that shapes individuals’ online engagements with orangutan causes. Combining small acts with personal politics, this infrastructure sustains a specific notion of ‘doing good’ that elevates ordinary orangutan supporters’ relative mere-ness into a virtue, an ethical position.

Such projects are not, of course, flawless. Like others of their ilk, they are built around various structures and assumptions—about animals, indigenous people, extinction, and change—that warrant critical investigation.[[16]](#endnote-16) My point, however, is that critique is not necessarily the only or most profitable means of apprehending the conceptual, moral, and relational dimensions of cause-related projects. Rather, as I have tried to show, it is by holding that critical sensibility in check that we can gain a better understanding of the tropes and logics that frame supporters’ engagements with such causes.

What, then, can this agnostic approach contribute to current anthropological takes on social media? In recent years, anthropologists have paid extensive attention to how social media fuels and sustains new modes of political or social activism (e.g. Postill 2014; Gerbaudo 2012; Gerbaudo and Treré 2015; Juris 2012). Like discussions of the symbolic (Tufekci 2012), subjective (Kendzior 2012), and performative (Marichal 2016) dimensions of ‘slacktivism’, these works serve as a collective, and rather more nuanced, riposte to most media and political analysts’ focus on the (in)efficacy of online activism.

However, activism is not the only means through which people seek to intervene in the world. As my exploration of the ostensibly more trivial field of orangutan causes reveals, there exist multiple shades, levels, and methods of acting online. Not all of them resemble the sorts of activities conventionally associated with political action: signing petitions, yes; adopting orangutans…no. Yet, as I have tried to show, by apprehending such activities on their own terms rather than evaluating them against existing templates (e.g. ‘politics’, ‘activism’) we can also cast them in a different light: as variants of small acts through which ‘ordinary’ individuals seek to help organizations and encourage others to save orangutans.

Such activities flag the need for anthropologists to explore more expansive and creative ways of conceptualizing digital participation. One starting point, I suggest, is to move beyond the current ethnographic and conceptual focus on ‘activism’ and to explore more quotidian fields of action and intervention—the sort that anthropologists might once have dismissed as the ‘mere’ to the ‘real’ of political mobilization.[[17]](#endnote-17) What kind of analytical work, for example, might tropes of ‘helping’ or doing ‘good’ perform in ethnographies of online participation? How can the concept of ‘activism’ be recast through such ethnographies? And—as this article has fleetingly suggested—how might focusing on the personal(ized) peripheries of cause-oriented social media-scapes illuminate the ‘digital socialities’ (Postill and Pink 2012:127) of these public-yet-private spheres? Such questions may not settle the issue of whether such forms of online participation ‘actually’ work. However, they can make for richer and more nuanced understandings of the small, quotidian ways by which people seek not to change the world, but to do their bit of good within it.

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1. **Notes**

   ‘Slacktivism’ (‘slacking’ + ‘activism’) has been defined as ‘feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact’ (Morozov 2009; see also Gladwell 2010), and that dilutes ‘real’ political activism such as sit-ins and demonstrations. Defenders of online activism retort that such activities can, among other things, generate better offline behaviour (Lane and Dal Cin 2017) and powerful political effects (Moyer 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In practice, these centres’ work and effectiveness have been the subject of heated debate among conservationists (e.g., Russon 2009 and Wilson et al. 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In return for a one-off or regular contribution, ‘adopters’ generally receive a certificate, a photograph, and biography of ‘their’ orangutan, and regular updates on its progress. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BDQvXe8yMPx/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.giveasyoulive.com> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://twitter.com/opfuk/status/828935129129156609> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://scontent-lht6-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/16473087_1236411739778426_3615695840495749442_n.jpg?oh=36e90e88a4ce8f573a6a9bc417ffd915&oe=59094C89> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.facebook.com/opfuk/photos/pcb.1238727619546838/1238727446213522/?type=3>; <https://twitter.com/opfuk/status/829777940967780352>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.facebook.com/internationalanimalrescue/videos/10155888910259910/> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Author, forthcoming, for a discussion of the professional and moral boundary that gets drawn between contact and non-contact in popular engagements with orangutan causes. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Such individuals play an interesting mediatory role on social media. Although they have ‘been there’ in the flesh, they mostly do not claim to have carried out ‘real’ (professional) work. Rather, they often act as witnesses on social media, attesting to the dedication and tenacity of the professionals that they worked with during their volunteer stints. For ethnographies of orangutan-related voluntourism, see Parreñas 2012 and Russell 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. <https://scontent-lht6-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/20770160_1378232068879637_2554788414870017391_n.jpg?oh=17c260f5babd2803da0de76446c76508&oe=5AC9B65B> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.facebook.com/internationalanimalrescue/videos/vb.8539814909/10154752607334910/?type=2&theater>. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.facebook.com/internationalanimalrescue/videos/10153851229954910/> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Author, forthcoming, for a fuller discussion of the (ostensibly) egalitarian, participatory dynamics of the social media-scape of orangutan conservation. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. A discussion of critiques of the neo-colonial, neoliberal, ‘spectacularized’ (Igoe 2010) aspects of conservation, as well as the ‘myth of “us”’ on digital networks (Couldry 2015), lies beyond the scope of this article. However, see Parreñas 2012 and 2016 for an important critique of transnational volunteerism and ethical capitalism in the context of one orangutan rehabilitation centre. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Recent examples include Hirschkind, de Abreu, and Caduff, eds. 2017, and Slama and Jones, eds. 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)