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## Social Action Meets Social Media: Environmental Justice in West Virginia

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**Abstract.** This article presents a case study of a community organizing effort known as Citizens Actively Protecting the Environment (CAPE). Led by rural West Virginians in response to the Elk River chemical spill of 2013, this environmental justice movement was novel in that it harnessed social media, specifically Facebook, to catalyze advocacy and change efforts in a rural area. The literature on environmental health disparities and environmental justice in rural communities is reviewed. Then authors describe how resident-led organizing in rural areas was effective in promoting environmental justice. Details of the CAPE project are presented, as well as ways social media can catalyze and augment environmental justice organizing efforts in rural communities. Implications for social work researchers and practitioners are presented.

**Keywords:** environmental justice, social media, community organizing

Like many rural areas in the United States, West Virginia has a long, complicated relationship with the coal industry. However, this industry is deeply entwined in the state's heritage and many residents' livelihoods, and is responsible for considerable environmental degradation that adversely affects the health and well-being of those very residents (Bell & York, 2010). Since the 1970s, activist groups in West Virginia have reported on the impact of synthetic chemicals, acid mine drainage, and coal mining on water and air supplies; but due to this industry's political and financial clout, these problems are often viewed as collateral damage necessary to support the economy and provide jobs. These problems recently gained nationwide attention in the wake of a massive chemical spill into the Elk River that affected more than 300,000 West Virginia residents (Gabriel, 2014).

### Environmental Justice: A Rural Perspective

Environmental health hazards are not experienced equally across populations, but disproportionately located in poor and minority communities (Brown, 1995; Bullard, 1990; Gochfeld & Burger, 2011). Indeed, the environmental justice movement aims to address this disparity by promoting safe and clean environments as a fundamental right of all people, and by addressing the inequities of environmental protection enforcement in low income and minority communities (Jones, 2011). Numerous studies regarding the impact of illegal dumping, hazardous waste site location, resource contamination, and other environmental hazards indicate that environmental inequality is a particularly salient issue in rural communities (Gochfeld & Burger, 2011; Jones, 2011; Pellow, 2004). Exposure and contamination are daily issues West Virginians living in coal counties face. Thus, native West Virginians hold differing perceptions of consciousness that either focus on awareness and advocacy, or reflect a state of suspended disbelief that enables residents to ignore the reality of health hazards related to environmental risk (Bell & York, 2010). These perceptions are common in rural areas due to both cultural

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norms that have evolved from decades of living in situations where environmental risk has been normalized. This ambivalence is attributed to what Dotson and Whyte (2013) refer to as “unknowability” which suggests that inadequate knowledge regarding the impact of environmental damage in the community, and a dominant culture that places these communities on the margin, concerted render residents unable to gain momentum in their efforts to affect change. Therefore, even though rural communities and vulnerable populations are disproportionately burdened with environmental hazards, this problem goes unrecognized because of residents’ lack of voice, and negative stereotyping that paints them as uneducated and politically uninformed (Jones, 2011).

Though it is a global problem, rural and especially farming and mining communities are at particular risk for environmental inequality. Rural areas experience their own unique set of environmental hazard exposures, including high levels of dust and lead levels. Additionally, rural areas also experience high pesticide levels and uncertain water quality (Gochfeld & Burger 2011). Rural communities are also uniquely vulnerable due to documented low voting rates and low records of homeownership. Moreover, rural residents have little access to wealth or disposable income. These conditions concerted leave residents unable to confront polluting facilities and their powerful and well-resourced political supporters (Pellow, 2004; Bell & York, 2010). West Virginia reflects this reality with its median household income \$13,000 below the national average, thus leaving 17.6% of its population living below poverty level and 10.2% of this group earning less than \$10,000 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Despite 73.7% of West Virginia residents owning their homes, over 50% of owner occupied homes are valued below \$99,000, with 22.2% of all owner occupied homes valued below \$50,000. Other salient demographic factors such as a larger than average population of residents over 65 (16.8% over the national average), as well as lower post-secondary graduation rates (17.9% under the national average) leave West Virginians particularly vulnerable to environmental inequalities due to their lack of economic and oftentimes accompanying political power (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

West Virginia is comprised of people with unique exposure pathways to environmental health hazards. Not only are state demographics of poverty and a sizable elder population indicators of vulnerability, West Virginia is the only state completely within the Appalachian Mountains. This total inclusion allows for its full classification as rural, both geographically and culturally. In an article detailing the characteristics of populations uniquely exposed to environmental health disparities, Gochfeld and Burger (2011) note that rural and isolated populations in Appalachia, especially those not immersed in the dominant culture, face unique exposure pathways for environmental hazards including consumption of self-caught fish and game, exposure to pesticides and animal waste from nearby farms, and proximity to mines and other industrial sites contaminated with arsenic and asbestos.

Recognizing their own vulnerability to environmental hazards, citizen action groups in West Virginia, have long advocated for environmental regulation to protect vulnerable residents from environmental injustice. For example, a mainstay group advocating for environmental justice since 1974 is the West Virginia Citizen Action Group (WV-CAG). WV-CAG has historically focused on clean water and environmental protection, rallying against the contamination of West Virginia’s natural resources. Their focus is primarily due to the continued history of coal related chemical spillage in the West Virginia water supplies. As early as 1974, WV-CAG was disseminating public reports that detailed the impact synthetic chemicals had on

West Virginia's water and air supplies. These environmental issues of clean water, sustainability, and protection have been in the national spotlight for decades, but are particular focus areas in West Virginia, a coal-driven, chemical hub where 28 of the 55 counties in the state produce coal (West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety, and Training, 2012). This type of grassroots organizing and citizen action is a way for West Virginians to combine their individual concerns to create a collective voice that reflects full participation in the decision making process by all citizens to demand environmental change. However, WV-CAG is only one voice of many; and in light of the recent Freedom Industries spill (Gabriel, 2014), other citizen action groups have begun to form a collective voice for clean water and healthier living conditions throughout West Virginia.

### **Rural Community Organizing: A Brief History**

Though existing research has demonstrated the promise of community-led organizing and intervention efforts to address environmental justice issues, the literature continues to focus on urban populations (Brulle & Pellow, 2006; Harwood, 2003; Loh & Sugerman-Brozan, 2002; Minkler, Garcia, Williams, LoPresti, & Lilly, 2010; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2007). From the inception of social work, early social workers determined the importance of organizing groups and enabling individual community members to rally together for a common cause. From this perspective, grassroots organizing emerged as an organizing method specifically focused on change that enables community members to unify their voice for change in their towns and communities, and become an advocacy voice for the general public interest (Kahn, 1991). In rural communities, a unified voice is vital for members to take action, especially when advocating for environmental change. The foundation for citizen action as a democratic and participatory process can be traced back to Mary Parker Follett's theories regarding social processing and citizen unification in neighborhoods and communities (Elias, 2010; Morse, 2006). Follett's perspective on citizen action and shared power has stimulated social workers and community organizers to become change agents who, in turn, help educate and mobilize citizens to group together as a collective to become change agents themselves. This shared process could be defined as civic capacity, a concept that begins with a group of citizens living in a local area or sharing a common purpose coming together to problem solve with other constituents in response to economic, social, and environmental barriers (Elias, 2010).

Community organizing to build civic capacity and challenge the balance of power has been the catalyst for national movements in civil rights and other political agendas for many decades (Fisher & Schrage, 2000; Fisher, 1994; Rothman, 1974). In the late fifties and early sixties, grassroots organizing for environmental inequality and risk began with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (as cited in Hansen, 2012), which discussed the environmental decimation of pesticide use on land and wildlife, and culminated in the passing of several environmental laws from 1965-1980 including the Wilderness Act, the Clean Air Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), the Clean Water Act and the Superfund Act, as well as the creation of Earth Day in 1970 (Hansen, 2012). Following a social action model of organizing, environmentalists gathered momentum and built "people power" to draw attention to environmental injustices being perpetrated by poorly regulated, powerful corporations (Rothman, 1995).

Grassroots organizing and citizen efforts have been at the heart of the environmental movement, helping to bring issues of environmental injustice to the attention of broader society (Hansen, 2012). This is certainly the case in West Virginia where citizen action groups have been able to gain national attention through social media and public outcry. These grassroots strategies brought nationally recognized social activist Erin Brockovich to West Virginia to speak about clean water rights, as well as national and international news and media outlets to broadcast crisis updates through major networks and publications.

In rural areas, community organizing can be difficult due to the cultural norms of “unknowability,” but also because of geographic boundaries. Sandusky (2007) posits that crossing boundaries means constituencies must join together, but actions typically require state or federal level resources. Rural communities cannot organize alone, but must join forces to achieve “scale necessary to win” (Sandusky, 2007, p. 93). Consequently, if a rural community chooses to advocate for change without joining forces with other rural towns, citizens can encounter power differentials between citizens and corporate or community power players that can cripple rural environmental change efforts due to fewer citizen activists. Grouping smaller communities together can balance the power and create enough social capital to challenge decision makers and influence change. Staples (2012) discusses that, despite communities grouping together, the power shift is not without conflict due to the effort needed to “redress disparities in distributive justice by altering relations of power between dominant elites and marginalized groups” (p. 290). In order to achieve social justice, Staples states that it “...takes power; and community organizations are vehicles of collective empowerment” (p. 295). Social media is a new tool that rural communities can leverage to transcend geographic boundaries and build a critical number of residents necessary to challenge power imbalances between powerful industries like the coal industry and rural residents. It can also assist the rural communities to reach people in non-rural areas to gain more collective power as was the case in West Virginia.

### **Rural Community Organizing in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century World**

Social networking through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter accounts for a significant amount of mass communication and, in conjunction with connectivity to blogs, news articles, video and other Internet based information resources, can provide instant action items that allow organizers to align and advocate in quick and efficient ways. According to Nielsen (2012), between 2011 and 2012, there was a 21% increase in time spent on the Internet, and a total of 520 billion minutes were spent on mobiles and PCs across the U.S. Moreover, 521 billion people use social media, which results in 22% of the United States time spent online using social networking (Nielsen, 2012). Given this massive online activity, the traditional concepts of community organizing such as protests, town meetings, and sit-ins could take a 21<sup>st</sup> century turn to create a new perspective of collective action, civic capacity, and social capital. The traditional concepts of organizing, while still effective, can be enhanced by the acceptance of social media as an addition to activism versus a comparison. Traditional methods of community activism may be augmented by online social activism, which could be used as a vehicle to enhance free speech, information sharing, and online organizing efforts (Ladhani, 2011).

Few events depict the impact and power of social media as a method of public participation as clearly as the 2008 U.S. presidential election. The Obama campaign’s ability to

harness the power of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube provided a vehicle to share campaign information, allow for public participation in debates, and engage the millennial electorate (Harfoush, 2009). The campaign electrified youth unlike traditional campaigns, culminating in over one million people watching the 2008 inauguration on Facebook (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). Not only did this method increase public political support, it provided a template for political and social activism that has since been employed by large-scale organizing and advocacy efforts including the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Marzouki, Skandrani-Marzouki, Béjaoui, Hammoudi, & Bellaj, 2012).

Though geographical boundaries are a barrier to rural community organizing, social networking provides a pathway through which those barriers may be crossed. Virtual organizing can be used to transcend spatial boundaries and connect once disenfranchised groups through technology (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Singer & Sage, forthcoming). Using technology and social media in rural communities may catalyze more traditional forms of activism; and social media can be the first step in engaging constituents across geographic boundaries, while embedding these techniques within traditional forms of activism can organize and enhance participation (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). Technology can also bridge the rural/non-rural divide. By sharing information through cyberspace, people can communicate with and educate potential allies elsewhere. Building a strong collective is vital to any organizing effort, but this is particularly salient in the case of environmental justice issues as many people are invested in this social cause regardless of geographic residence.

### **Citizens Actively Protecting the Environment: A Case Study of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Organizing**

The following case study illustrates an example of citizens in rural West Virginia using social media to catalyze more traditional environmental justice advocacy. Using CAPE's organizing strategy as an example, the case study details how the group bolstered traditional social action organizing with 21<sup>st</sup> century tools.

On January 9th, 2014, West Virginians in 9 counties were alerted of the 4-MCHM chemical spill that prevented all users of West Virginia American Water Company (WVAWC) utility from using water for anything other than firefighting or flushing toilets for approximately six days. Despite the spill being identified around 10 a.m., WVAWC executives did not advise users to stop drinking, cooking, or bathing for several hours; thus, a significant number of residents in all nine counties were unknowingly exposed to 4-MCHM. The impact of a spill of this magnitude, which affected over 300,000 users, was immediate. People who had ingested the water panicked, businesses were at risk, and healthcare agencies were significantly overwhelmed by their inability to operate in a functional and safe way. Governor Earl Ray Tomblin issued a state of emergency, and officials began trying to calm the public and ensure that major health facilities such as hospitals and nursing homes could resume operations.

The civic capacity described by Elias (2010) arose almost immediately, and West Virginians were galvanized into citizen action for environmental justice; however, the method of organizing took a 21<sup>st</sup> century turn. Citizen action groups such as WV-CAG, CAPE, Keepers of the Mountain, WV Clean Water Hub, Citizen Action for Real Enforcement (CARE), and People

Concerned about Chemical Safety all used social networking to facilitate community action and legislative change.

Community members scrambling to find clean water and businesses were forced to close for the duration of the crisis until approved for cleanliness by the local health departments. Hospitals, nursing homes, and schools were prioritized, whereas small businesses and private daycares were the last to receive approval to reopen. One small business, a catering company called Ms. Groovy's Cafe, was impacted significantly and became the catalyst for a grassroots organization effort that spurred legislative change, and provided renewed hope that, when joined together, citizen voices would be heard.

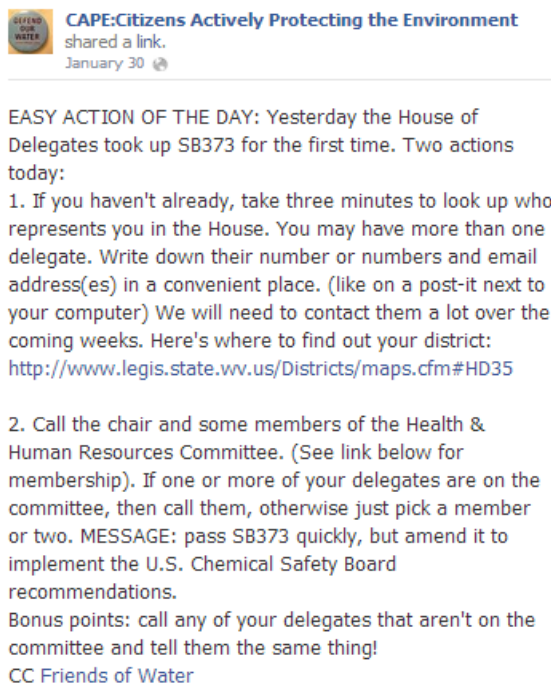
The effects of the 4-MCHM chemical spill on Ms. Groovy's Café were substantial, and resulted in owner, Jeni Burns, losing three weeks of business and experiencing continued scrutiny by clients regarding the use of city versus bottled water. Ms. Burns reported that the only thing that keeps Ms. Groovy's Cafe in business is that she continues to use bottled water months after being cleared by the Kanawha/Charleston Health Department. As a business owner and as a community resident, Jeni Burns was angry – angry at Freedom Industries, angry at West Virginia American Water, and angry that citizens were not adequately informed. When asked to describe how CAPE began, Ms. Burns (J. Burns, personal communication, March 19, 2014) explained:

I reached out to a few friends on Facebook, and word of mouth spread the message. People were scared and needed to vent. There was such poor handling in so many areas and a lack of leadership. [People] needed a communal sense instead of being isolated in their own world. They had to do something with their energy. Leadership was doing nothing, so people needed to stand. Our first town hall meetings at the Roosevelt Center had over 150 attendees. Social media was the key element.

Out of this initial face-to-face meeting described by Ms. Burns, the community group, CAPE, was born. They created a Facebook page that garnered an immediate, active following. This joining of traditional organizing and online activism helped residents of the 9 affected counties to mobilize together. At the time of this article, the CAPE group's Facebook page had more than 1600 "likes." Along with a few other invested community members, CAPE members began collectively organizing to appeal to state officials to approve Senate Bill 373, *Incorporating State Water Resources Management Plan into Water Resources Protection and Management Act*, which includes source water protection plans, public water supply protection, aboveground storage tank registration, and long-term medical study planning to determine any affects from the chemical spill (West Virginia Rivers Coalition, 2014.) Again, Ms. Burns (personal communication, March 19, 2014) stated, "I was compelled to do something. I never thought I would be a citizen lobbyist, but citizen input is what made the difference in Bill 373."

CAPE members used the Facebook page as a platform to communicate with concerned community members and organize collective action around Senate Bill 373. They encouraged residents to contact their elected officials and provided simple instructions and contact information in a convenient location so that West Virginia residents across geographic

boundaries could engage in advocacy for the bill. The Facebook post in Figure 1 illustrates one of their first efforts (CAPE, 2014).



*Figure 1.* CAPE encourages citizen action in this Facebook post.

This post shows how the community organizing effort, CAPE, married traditional social action organizing techniques with 21<sup>st</sup> century tools. In keeping with the social action organizing typology, the group used a Facebook page to increase residents' problem solving abilities through education about the political process, and worked to address issues of power by giving residents a larger collective voice in the context of a social media campaign (Rothman, 1995). The group used action items like the one presented above in conjunction with invites to physical meetings, which has been associated with more successful, sustainable change in community organizing efforts (Herbert, 2006).

Social media also allowed members of CAPE to strategize before actively coming together to lobby before the West Virginia legislature. According to Ms. Burns (personal communication, March 19, 2014), "It lessened the need to meet and provided immediate information." This key informant went further to describe how using Twitter and Facebook allowed CAPE members to communicate effectively and quickly to share information and mobilize:

It puts you at the same playing level as your opposition. Using social media to strategize puts you at an advantage [just as] not using can put you at a disadvantage. Citizens don't have the monetary power to go against WVAWC or Big Coal. Social media worked great during [legislative] session because it provided tools for community members and caused delegates to take notice – they all want to be re-elected. (J. Burns, personal communication, March 19, 2014)



Additionally, Ms. Burns highlighted how engaging large numbers of people through social media gave the organization a presence that it otherwise might not have had. Again, mirroring the goals of traditional social action organizing, the social media campaign agitated and motivated residents to gain access to decision makers. Rural residents, often disenfranchised in the political process, must rely on “people power” to “pressure and disrupt” the more powerful political influences (Rothman, 1995). The group engaged in coalition building to gain further momentum against the powerful polluters and government interests by connecting and sharing advocacy opportunities spearheaded by other organizations and legislative allies.

Finally, CAPE members used their Facebook page to celebrate victories and keep residents engaged and informed about future community action efforts. After the success of their campaign in support of Senate Bill 373, the organization could have lost momentum as issue-oriented action efforts often do (Cloward & Piven, 1999). As illustrated in Figure 2, CAPE members used compelling visuals and encouragement to promote small victories while reminding residents that there was more work to be done (CAPE, 2014).



Figure 2. CAPE used Facebook posts to celebrate advocacy victories.

CAPE augmented traditional organizing efforts with social media tools and successfully lobbied for stronger regulations to promote environmental justice in West Virginia and to prevent another environmental crisis like the Elk River Spill.

## Discussion

This article discussed environmental justice in a rural context through a case study of a rural environmental justice campaign that combined traditional community organizing methods and Internet based tools. This strategy was employed successfully to lobby for stricter environmental regulations in West Virginia and mobilize rural residents to share information and advocate for change.

Rural communities have historically been excluded from discussions of social and environmental justice, despite their discrimination and marginalization, thereby leaving them disproportionately exposed to environmental health hazards (Bassett, 2003; Jones, 2011). Stereotypes further marginalize these communities by suggesting that rural residents are simple, poorly educated, and unable to engage in political advocacy (Bassett, 2003; Jones, 2011).

However, this case study illustrates that rural citizens can overcome some of these challenges through using social media to articulate their concerns, virtually meet like-minded people across broad geographic areas, and organize large numbers of people to address environmental justice issues common to their communities.

Social media was a particularly useful tool to address some of the challenges unique to rural community organizing and service provision. Rural organizing efforts in rural areas are often hampered by challenges such as geographic remoteness and physical barriers, lack of political power, and less access to voluntary organizations and activist groups (Elias, 2010; Sandusky, 2007). The use of social media in this campaign helped ameliorate these issues by garnering large numbers of supporters across geographic regions and creating a tool through which multiple organizations could build strong coalitions. It also helped garner support with non-rural areas allies. CAPE began by building an online community and ended with a strong and capable offline community that had the organization and power to lobby against seemingly much more powerful corporate interests.

For rural practitioners and researchers who wish to address environmental justice, this case study illustrates that social media can be a useful tool to augment traditional community organizing tactics. The benefits of social media include its ability to transcend geographic barriers and build momentum and support across multiple communities affected by environmental health hazards in rural areas. These techniques also help create networks with others outside of the affected areas. It is vital as organizers to look for allies in all places, especially those that are seldom considered. Rural practitioners may benefit from exploring the use of social media to augment advocacy efforts in rural communities because of its utility in addressing unique challenges of rural practice.

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