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Reflexive Thoughts on Campaigning for Changes in ICT Use

In recent months, a well-publicised British campaign, lead by UK chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, to promote sustainable fishing practices has lead to a counterintuitive spike in seafood and fish consumption in Britain. In encouraging consumers to "vote" with their wallets, Fearnley-Whittingstall's television programmes, media appearances and newspaper coverage of his campaign have driven an increase in demand for all manner of fish, rather than one for sustainable catches of species not at risk. Unwittingly, Fearnley-Whittingstall's campaign has only exacerbated the problems it was designed to combat.

A similar problem faces activitists hoping to change attitudes toward use of information and communications technologies. To reach those users whose online activities drive industry demands for greater storage and access capacity, campaigns must be conducted with the very digital media that are generating the problem. Campaigns like Greenpeace's "Get Facebook to Unfriend Coal" actually generate more Facebook (and Twitter) usage as interested users share videos, news and blog posts, "like" status updates and leave comments. Activist organisations are caught in a Catch-22. Social media are the most effective way to reach large numbers of people in the global north, but these technologies are driving a new wave of intense energy consumption, largely derived from fossil fuels.

This paper has two aims: exploring how activist organisations can develop campaigns that are more reflexive and responsible; and considering what rhetorics might be most effective in such campaigns. Activism focusing on ecological costs arising from use of information and communication technologies - which produce the majority of emissions generated by an electronic device over its lifecycle - are still very new. Activist organisations need new rhetorics, and even new ways of thinking about using social media, to construct campaigns that are both effective and responsible. This paper aims to stimulate a discussion about what forms such rhetorics and campaigns might take.