

An Editorial Piece

“Hashtavism”: a reflection of socio-political issue salience and activism

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“Hashtavism”: a reflection of socio-political issue salience & evolving forms of activism

Government accountability is foundational to the efficacy of a representative democracy (ACE Project). When it comes to holding the government responsible for its actions or policies in the United States, Pew Research reveals that 82% of Americans believe it is a civic duty to protest if government actions or policies are deemed wrongful or discriminatory (Pew, 2018). Adherence to these democratic values and civic duties positions constituents as the foundational neck and spine that upholds and controls the very head of the democratic system. Equivocally, the widespread emergence of the Internet and social networking sites has fundamentally altered the public sphere of social and political dialogue. Specifically, recent examples of Twitter #hashtag activism have led to a prognosis that the “two spheres” of socio- political discourse (corporation-controlled journalism and constituent-driven, network activism) are in fact converging (Moscato & Ofori-Parku, 2018; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Lim, 2013).

Consequently, many scholars concur that social media have provoked a new form of “participatory democracy in a corporate-controlled, mass-mediated world” (Barnard, 2018; Revers, 2014; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated through several events around the world that social media is progressively prevailing as a channel for socio-political advocacy, protest, and mobilization (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Moscato & Ofori-Parku, 2018).

Unprecedentedly, social media --specifically Twitter-- provides a platform for identifying and enunciating social issues that are salient to specific population subgroups (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Twitter has transpired in the sphere of journalism and discourse as a “site of resistance” (Williams, 2015) for marginalized groups who face underrepresentation (or other forms of subgroup-framing) in mass-mediated journalism media (Moscato & Ofori-Parku, 2018; Hopper, 2015). This “resistance” refers to the counteraction undertaken by individuals advocating for rights, beliefs, and/or a call-to-action regarding the present social and political state. When a sentence, phrase, or word containing a political or social claim is accompanied by a

#hashtag, and is posted (or re- tweeted) in considerable numbers, leading to increased exposure to the issue, #hashtag activism is inherently occurring. For example, individuals who have posted or retweeted #BlackLivesMatter share a set of values and grievances about institutional injustice and the government's lack of accountability, along with all of its political, moral, and social ramifications (Yang, 2018). More generally, however, exposure to a #hashtag and the (very) visible quantification of retweets allows individuals to advocate, not only collectively, but using their own words (derived from the in-group perspective) to tell their story in plea for change. Prominent examples like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #BringBackOurGirls, #ThisIsACoup, #MuslimsAreNotTerrorist, #WhyIStayed, and #CancelColbert directly express an ideological statement or explicit demand for action, rather than a simple theme, such as #change. These unambiguous calls to action translate to socio-political participation as acts of petitioning for particular legislation, demanding the end of institutional injustice, as well as organizing protest assemblies (Yang, 2018).

Scholars of activism and social movements recognize and very much consider the “power of narratives” when assessing the efficacy of social and political communication methods (Yang, 2018; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006). It has been revealed that individual citizens are able to better understand and interpret political events when it follows a narrative form or integrates a humanizing storyline (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006). Because the posts and retweets revolving around a #hashtag are also likely to contain personal experiences and stories, they acquire a narrative structure (Yang, 2018). The spread and “temporal order” of these posts, in “networked spaces” in particular, affords them both narrative structure and agency (Yang, 2018) -- critical elements of *real* activism. In turn, Twitter provides a channel for the formation of narratives that counter mediatized stereotypes and the reimagination of these subgroups' identities (Yang, 2018; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

For population subgroups that are marginalized, stereotyped, or whose perspective is simply underrepresented by mass, corporation-controlled media, the ability to collectively express

individual experiences and grievances in a networked and highly visible setting allows them to present (read: frame) the social or political issue from the in-group perspective (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Contemporary cognitive psychology theories concur that presenting information in a narrative or story format appears to change and improve understanding and can therefore influence and shape perceptions and opinions (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006). This influence extends to how individuals cognitively organize the information and stories they are exposed to in the media, what (precisely) is remembered, as well as the enunciation of attitudes and demands regarding the actions the government should take (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006). With this ability to frame socio-political issues as both a collective (yet, personal) narrative and an explicit demand for government action, hashtag activism on Twitter has become more than just a platform for personal disclosures and grievances; it has evolved into a means of “participatory transparency” (Revers, 2014; Karlsson, 2010), where those who experience misrepresentation are not bound by the constructs, agendas, and slant which exists in mass news media (Druckman & Parkin, 2005). Instead, hashtag campaigns are very much involved and engaged in the presentation (read: framing) of news and information on social media about social and political issues.

One example is #Ferguson, which emerged out of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, following the killing of Michael Brown in early August of 2014 (Barnard, 2018). In the first week of protests following Brown’s death, Twitter quickly emerged as a platform for updates and information, with more than 3.6 million posts containing #Ferguson (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). By the end of the month, #Ferguson had been posted over 8 million times on Twitter alone; along with this, emerged discourse, stories, and even video evidence of racial profiling and police brutality, including the emergence of related hashtags: #Michael Brown and #HandsUp (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Connections across hashtags and their corresponding narratives can enable marginalized groups to not only raise awareness of the tragedy in #Ferguson, but to also spread awareness discriminatory practices and racial profiling to shape a broader discussion across the nation.

The emergence and prevalence of hashtags such as #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter demonstrates hashtag campaigns as a means of challenging mass media narratives (read: framing) and institutionalized injustice, strongly suggesting that #hashtag activism functions as a valuable and substantive network for socio-political discourse and activism (Anderson, et al., 2018). Even decent majority of Americans (69%) believe social media play an important role in achieving social and political goals (Anderson, et al., 2018). Thus, it is imperative to continue to investigate and study the effects and implications of hashtag activism as social media ascends in its stake of how activism permeates the media environment and how this form of digital discourse and information could be controlled or monetized in the future.

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