A Short Essay on Evolving Modes of Contemporary Communication

"Hashtavism": A Reflection of Socio-Political Issue Salience

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Government accountability is foundational to the efficacy of a representative democracy ("Holding"). 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 ("What's", 2018). Adherence to these democratic values and civic duties positions constituents as the foundational neck and spine that upholds and, in a way, 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 has 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 that social media is progressively prevailing as a channel for socio-political advocacy, mobilization and protest (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 subgroups 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 his or her beliefs and grievances regarding the present socio-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 occuring. 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 associations and 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 can 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 re-imagination of these subgroups' identities (Yang, 2018; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

For population subgroups which are marginalized, stereotyped, or whose perspective is simply underrepresented by corporation-controlled, mass media, this 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 constructedness and slant of mass news media

(Druckman & Parkin, 2005). Rather, 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 exemplar 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, Twitter quickly emerged as a platform for information and details about the shooting, 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 and along with this, emerged discourse of racial profiling and police brutality, including related hashtags: #Michael Brown and #HandsUp (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Connections across hashtags and their corresponding narratives essentially enable marginalized subgroups to not only raise awareness of the tragedy in #Ferguson, but to also shape the broader discussion of discriminatory police practices and marginalized subgroups of citizens.

Some critics of hashtag activism discredit it as a "poor substitute" for *real* activism; suggesting that the virtualness and virality of social media can only be effective so far as producing ephemeral "nanostories" (Wasik, 2009), resulting in very little impact on legislative action. Thus, it is imperative to investigate how and why forms of digital activism, quantified by the amount of #hashtags, have become pertinent and salient to specific citizens, if any form of institutional or policy change is to occur in reality. It surely cannot coincidental that these certain groups-- "most likely to experience police brutality, to have their protests disparaged as acts of 'rioting' or 'looting', and to be misrepresented in the media--" are precisely those who are leading the evolution of digital activism (Bonilla

& Rosa, 2015). #Ferguson demonstrates the emergence of hashtag campaigns as a means of challenging mass media narratives (read: framing) and institutional injustice, suggesting that #hashtag activism functions as a valuable and substantive network for discourse and activism.

While there is considerable evidence that the rise of hashtag activism, like #BlackLivesMatter, has provoked a broader discussion about the viability and efficacy of social media as a mobilizer for social activism and corresponding political participation and change (Anderson, et al., 2018), it is imperative to consider mass media's response regarding this convergence of #hashtag and real-life activism. For example, local publications in Nigeria portrayed the influx of #BringOurGirlsBack as a strong indicator of the prominence and salience of the issue; whereas news and media outlets in the U.S., like The Washington Post and The New York Times-- primarily covering the development of the story sin field reporters-- noted the prevalence of the (sheer number of tweets containing) the hashtag as though it was an entirely separate response to the issue, disparate from the street-level activism and protests occurring (Moscato & Ofori-Parku, 2018). The Nigerian press's presentation (read: framing) of the #BringOurGirlsBack campaign as both an online (virtual) and offline (real-life) advocacy protest, supports the prognosis that these "two spheres" of journalism and discourse are in fact converging (Moscato & Ofori-Parku, 2018; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Lim, 2013). Contrary to mass news publications in the U.S., the ideology among citizens appears to be evolving along with this plausible convergence of online networks and social activism; a decent majority of Americans (69%) believe that social media plays 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 continues to ascend in its stake of how information and activism permeates the media environment. The emergence of ideological arguments that political speech, rhetoric, and discourse in the public sphere is "dying, and possibly even dead" (Herbst, 2007), demonstrates concern for this evolution of network activism; however, looking forward, unable to know what new forms of activism will arise, we must look at this as one of the many adaptations with which individual citizens have undertaken as a result of the mediatization of socio-political issues and the government's response.

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