

Activism on Twitter: Effectiveness & Effects on Real-Time Policies

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ABSTRACT

With citizen journalism thriving on the microblogging platform of Twitter, it is vital to hypothesize the area of study in order to gain a better understanding of the newer pillars of democracy, essentially and, in turn upgrade the efficiency of the system and people, thus far. The subject of social 'Activism on Twitter' is generally ignored and associated with a sort of rant or amateur outcry. Even so, there are a few papers that touch upon the topic and open doorways to elaborate and concrete research zones.

There is a need for studies that focus on the more significant substance of a government – the masses. The case studies elaborate and look theorizing the cycle and interworking of digital activism, online communities and social structures on the digital media. Some successful, some failures and some in-between; the paper will look in depth for the reasons that effect the same – leadership, time, offline governments, etc.

Keywords: Digital Activism; Twitter; hashtags; Armchair activism; #MeToo; #OscarsSoWhite; #BringOurGirlsBack; #EleNao.

1.0 Introduction

The evolving media has created waves of changes in how things work across various spheres. One of the most interesting has to be social media. The political diaspora almost feel suffocated and overwhelmed by the influx of opinions, devoted ideologists, backlash, etc. on them, for them, about them. In terms of democracies, the people are taking to social media as they did the streets. Hashtags are the new placards.

The reason to choose Twitter for the purpose of this research is three-fold. First and foremost, most social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube are heavily dictated by algorithms and hence, users are exposed to content that is personalized and in turn, likable and in tandem with their interests. Twitter is one such platform where that is not essentially the case. Secondly, Twitter seems to function or rank higher in political and public discussions than its counterparts; (as in, for example, Instagram is more entertainment-social and informal). Three, the ability to run campaigns – hashtags have become staple and an identity symbol. The simplicity of only #IStandWithCharlieHebdo is the essence of what makes these mass movements.

Public outrage is a term that has begun to associate with the social media; something that has forced political leaders to sit up and take notice of what's trending (a mere 1,200 tweets needed to get there). Now, the question is that is only them taking notice enough? Are there any systemic and/or constitutional changes that take place in response to the public putting their concerns on Twitter? The hypothesis is decidedly negative. Therefore, is this exercise hopeless?

The solution lies in a collective and sustained movement rather than anger and 'media trials.' The research will explore the aspect of efficiency in political discourses on Twitter. The research aims to look at major social media civic movements that may or may not have made an impact long term; and furthermore, look to address why/why not. Currently, the methodology will be based on qualitative and secondary data analysis.

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Academia has largely addressed and targeted specific electoral runs and analyzed them through the lens of social media. Through this paper, I hope to shed light on the undertheorized areas of the evolving political dialogues on Twitter as the testimony of the public. The paper also extends further study of scope on the themes of detailed case studies, interpersonal and mass political discussions amongst different socio-economic categories on the same platform and the success in changing, opening a subject or outlook to debate in the minds of the common man.

The micro-blogging site has an overarching reach on the political climates; as aforementioned, these community movements are a cornerstone in coming-of-age peoples' governments. Maybe it is simply a testament to our awareness as a consumer of democracy.

2.0 Objectives

1. Aims to look at major social media civic movements that may or may not have made an impact long term;
2. Address why/why not.
3. Give subjective solutions for the same, if needed.

3.0 Literature Review

The inspiration for this paper is drawn from a feature article by now Managing Editor, Sidin Vadukut of Mint, India titled Social (media) utility of outrage. He begins with an example from history, parallel to the social media protests we see today.

A Systematic Literature Review of Twitter Research from a Socio-Political Revolution Perspective by Ricardo Buettner and Katharina Buettner laid concrete groundwork especially, in terms of research objectives and methodologies. This paper can easily be classified as the main source in the secondary data collection. The study of different cases in terms of factors such as leadership, time frame, crowd, etc. has particularly aided me in working out the framework.

Identifying Stance by Analyzing Political Discourse on Twitter by Kristen Johnson and Dan Goldwasser is a good source for reading and knowledge as they have used statistics, mathematics and social theories to explain social media activism and phenomenon.

The Politics of Twitter: Emotions and the Power of Social Media by Constance Duncombe – emotion is a substantial pillar of digital activism. The paper reports on functionality of mass communication and following which, the escalation and/or de-escalation of conflict in scenarios of online protests.

The book, Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change by Mary C. Joyce was very insightful in its accuracies and dissection of social media activism. It aided in achieving my third objective, that of solutions.

Two articles done on particular cases - #Occupy Wall Street: Exploring Informal Learning About a Social Movement on Twitter by Benjamin Gleason and, Iran's Protests: Why Twitter Is the Medium of the Movement by Lev Grossman. These have helped develop factors such as leadership, time frame, crowd, etc. in the framework; and further, depicted how tangible success can be brought out through these movements. The 'Effectiveness... on Politics' is judged here.

4.0 Research Methodology

The methodology will be based on qualitative and secondary data analysis. The former will be the main focus.

Qualitative methodology will narrow down a few cases studies that needs studying (which

will then be compared and contrasted). The sample would consist of a comprehensive number of cases from around the world, with countries under different forms of government and/or those with any special characteristic (religion, diversity, etc.). After which, relevant Twitter data will be collected through API sources and/or those already available in the form of secondary data. These will be analyzed and pitted against the cases themselves. The determination and conclusion of the same will achieve the second objective.

I will also look at political campaign studies to gain perspective on case studies and treatment and the larger picture, as well.

The third objective will be achieved through qualitative studies (expert opinions, research papers, etc.), again. These deductions will also be drawn after analyzing the data collected at the second phase.

Case Study 1: #OscarsSoWhite

History of Case:

When the Academy awards declared A tweet from campaign finance lawyers, April Reign gave birth to the hashtag and ensuing movement, Oscars So White (#OscarsSoWhite). Here is the original tweet,

#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair. (Reign, 2015)

The African-American woman, on the 15th of January 2015 put out her emotions on the social media platform, Twitter regarding the Oscar nominations and committee being predominantly comprised of the white race. The hashtag spread fast with celebrities and other known faces, especially minorities.

Subsequence:

Even after the flare up in 2015, the nominations of the Academy the following year contained no actors of colour (the second time running). 2017 showed some improvement with actors of different ethnicities and films with Asian and Blacks nominated.

A few quotes to analyze the aftermath:

"It's lovely to see the work that's nominated reflect the world at large," said Barry Jenkins, an African-American directed (film: Hidden Figures) (The Guardian, 2017).

"We are now in year six, and every single year #OscarsSoWhite is mentioned again," April Reign said (The Jakarta Post).

The change is slow, but there.

Case Study 2: #BringBackOurGirls

History of Case:

On the night of 14–15 April 2014, 276 mostly Christian female students were kidnapped from the Secondary School in the town of Chibok in Borno State, Nigeria. Responsibility for the kidnappings was claimed by Boko Haram, an Islamist extremist terrorist organization based in northeastern Nigeria. (Wikipedia)

A hashtag, #BringBackOurGirls trended on Twitter, which gained worldwide recognition for the issue.

Yesterdays & Today's:

Even after the incident, it made few headlines in mainstream media. However, on social media, the story was picked up and repeated by people around the world using the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. Two weeks of cyber-activism with the hashtag finally brought the issue to mainstream international attention; on May 6, 2014, The Washington Post reported

#BringBackOurGirls; #BringBackOurGirls had “now spread into a truly global social media phenomenon” (Taylor, 2014). The hashtag was mentioned more than four million times in 2014 (Stream, 2015).

Let us look at the impact: -

Some of the girls were rescued.

Former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan lost his reelection campaign to General Muhammadu Buhari on March 28, 2015. It was the first time a sitting president had been defeated in a Nigerian election (BBC, 2015). There was a viral video that made the rounds; the Nigerian co-founder of the #BringBackOurGirls movement, Hadiza Bala Usman saying, “Today is exactly ten months since our girls have been in captivity,”; “These girls were not protected. These girls were not cared for by the Federal Republic of Nigeria, under the watch of President Goodluck Jonathan.” (Saharareporters, February 18, 2015)

However, no significant talks of terrorism or measures were put in place to ensure that such an incident did not repeat. Offline protests, on a small scale also took place. International figures such as Michelle Obama and human rights agencies, Amnesty intervened and spread awareness; urging governmental bodies to take concrete steps to get the girls back to the safety of their homes.

Here is a tweet from this year, 2020, that highlights the current situation:

I pray for the 112 girls are still missing, out of the 276 Nigerian school girls who were kidnapped, and taken by Boko Haram, in April 2014. #bringbackourgirls (KIKI)

Case Study 3: #MeToo

History of Case:

In 2006, the “me too.” Movement was founded by survivor and activist Tarana Burke. (Burke)

Then, in October 2017, the #metoo hashtag went viral and woke up the world to the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence. American actress Alyssa Milano shared her story of sexual assault against Harvey Weinstein with the hashtag. What had begun as local grassroots work had now become a global movement — seemingly overnight. Within a six-month span, the message reached a global community of survivors. Suddenly there were millions of people from all walks of life saying “me too”.

Progress:

The ‘me too’ movement was a predominantly Twitter citation; we can say that for very few case studies. The public reactions and emotions on the social media platform of Twitter came through the raw, unfiltered subject of sexual abuse. There is a focus on empathy and support as basic characteristics of human nature; and further encouragement of safe haven to speak up. (Lydia Manikonda, 2018)

That tweet, written after articles in the New York Times and the New Yorker recounted accusations of abusive behavior by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, encouraged other victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault to share their stories as well. They did so in droves: The #MeToo hashtag was tweeted about 300,000 times on that first day alone.

A research team from Harvard Medical School and UC San Diego documented the extent of this self-education campaign by examining trends in Google searches between Jan. 1, 2004, and Oct. 14, 2017.

Here is a Table, highlighting the results of the research period of 8 months:

Table 1: Impact of #MeToo

S.NO.	SEARCHES ABOUT:	Impact due to #MeToo (rise compared to if the hashtag had not happened)
1.	General sexual harassment and assault	40 – 54 million searches (rise of 86%)
2.	Reporting sexual harassment/assault	30% increase
3.	Training to prevent harassment and assault	51% increase

“Our findings demonstrate the power of grass-roots movements to respond to large-scale public health crises,” the team concluded. (Los Angeles Times)

Speaking of long-term impact, we can see that four major outcomes can be seen till today.

Social ostracization of alleged abusers;

Encouraging survivors to come out; awareness

Harvey Weinstein’s conviction based on several allegations;

The people who kept their silence were severely noted.

As seen from the results, although such civic movements are of significance to the society’s social structure; the political and power structures went through only a minor tremor. (Though, there is overlapping of the three and others, for the sake of this argument, we try to separate them.) The third outcome served as the most concrete impact and can be associated with or seen as a change in long-term policies.

5.0 Comparison of Case Studies

The first study of OscarsSoWhite took place in a first world country and the people, authorities who were involved can be called the privileged lot compared to the Nigerian case study. Thus, the informed, educated ideology took over by a storm in the former’s case and made waves.

In #BringOurGirlsBack the people, at the grassroots level who were affected by the issue did not have access to smartphones or Twitter. They had a group of representatives who put the subject on the map of Twitter. This is significant as Nigeria is a third world country and it took international intervention to solve a virtual internal problem.

The #MeToo is similar or comparable to #OscarsSoWhite as it takes place in almost the same environment. There were no repercussions, on the surface to the people who spoke out.

Most of the times digital activism is time-bound; as it will be overshadowed and sometimes, erased by the ‘next big thing’. Thus, it helps if mainstream media picks up the issue and keeps it in conversations. It is vital to maintain the ‘high’ of the movement on social media, too; case in point, #OscarsSoWhite, in order to bring about big changes, we need to start with small steps. The movement kept calling out the committees when diversity was missing, and we see the Academy slowly coming out of its shell.

At times, movements go through a period of latency before picking up again. This can be attributed to the shallowness of social media and its users. A good example might be of the uproar following the alleged mafia involvement in the suicide of Indian actor, Sushant Singh Rajput. Twitter users jumped from one element to the next without sticking to one.

Here is a table giving an approximate idea:

Table 2: Comparison of Cases

S.NO.	CASE	COUNTRY/GOVERNMENT	INTERNATIONAL	Leadership for change	Ever- lasting Impact	TIME PERIOD
1	#OscarsSoWhite	USA/Democracy	No	No	Yes	On-going
2	#BringOurGirlsBack	Nigeria/Democracy	No	Yes	No	Few years
3	#MeToo	USA/Democracy	Yes	No	Can't say	Few years

Although, the intention is always to bring some kind of positive change (subjective), the pathway to its achievement is often blurred by the large numbers, spam, lack of organization, differing viewpoints, etc.

If we look at offline protests, say a Women's Rights March, we can safely assume that the participants are the ones that are in support of the issue; no opposing party would be present. But in case of Twitter or social media, we see opposing viewpoints and hence, there is an active lack of direction in the discourse. This was the case with the Oscars study and Me Too; with people chanting discriminations and 'false allegations.'

6.0 Other Note-Worthy Cases & Analysis

There are cases of digital activism where other forms of protests took place alongside it. Offline demonstrations, hunger strikes, occupations, etc. followed and are often associated with civil movements. Take the Umbrella Revolution for example. Twitter is what helped mobilize and organize the cause and after which, protests erupted in the streets. The social media platform also became a world's stage as the information about it and anger spread to different countries, with world leaders taking a stand on the issue, giving it prominence and building pressure on international authorities and the home country's government to respond to the retaliation in favour of the protesters. The Hong Kong protests can be cited as the most recent example of citizen activism which has Twitter in the centerfold.

Another example is that of the #EleNao movement. Although, it began as a Facebook group and grew into the streets, Twitter was an enabler in getting the work out to the world. The issue was centered around Brazilian presidential candidate, Jair Bolsonaro. After multiple accounts of sexual abuse accusations, the country's system still allowed him to contest the General Elections in the October of 2018. Women poured into the streets chanting Ele Nao, meaning 'Not Him' in Portuguese.

Both these cases have created ripples in water; desired outcomes had/has not come out yet. But these movements are bridging online and offline communities to form a united movement. (Olson, #BringBackOurGirls: digital communities supporting real-world change and influencing mainstream media agendas, 2016). On the while, social media have worked to disrupt oppressive governments and repressive policies worldwide as people have used social media to bypass traditional media to organize in-person protests and rallies (Studies).

7.0 Conclusion

Before going into decline and disappearing, a social movement.... will either succeed, fail, be

co-opted, repressed, or become mainstream.

sociologist, Charles Tilly. (2018)

Digital media has the power to create, sustain and destroy. The success or failure of a social movement is a testimony to the willpower of the people involved. When speaking in terms of hashtags, it doesn't take much to get a subject trending. But keeping it there is the task. Social consciousness is as fickle as a mass's attention span. This is the main challenge in bringing solid turnovers. Because only if there is prolonged effort, will there be concrete future.

Another aspect that is vital is a ring leader. Due to the lack of leadership, masses tend to lose their sense of purpose. A captain supplies the much-needed words of encouragement. But that is not the only responsibility of his/her. The leader is much like the representative of the entire group's interest. This is especially useful when pitching to those in-charge (such as government bodies) to make changes in laws or policies; essentially, act as lobbyists for the period. Albeit Twitter did not play the central role, #SaveTheInternet is a widely quoted example for the same. The hashtag, that arose in India highlighted the need for net neutrality. Interest groups included individuals, businesses, etc. This movement was hailed as a massive victory for a public movement. A comedy group, 'All India Backchod' (AIB)'s viral video is what sparked the debate. (2018) Following which, Nikhil Pahwa came into the picture. This tech journalist is accredited by many for steer-heading the cause. This clearly establishes the necessity of a leader to condense the demands of the social group.

As we progress, the amalgamation of technology, government and people have become a complex and sometimes, rewarding process. If we were to study the depth and breadth of such unions, gather and theorize; then, we would make better use of institutions around us and be able to use them for our wellbeing.

Although, it is difficult to conclude on on-going social events and their long term impact, a few final markers:

Digital activism has strived due to the lack of traditional gatekeeping methods in other forms of media.

The element of citizen journalism also is highlighted on Twitter.

The voice of the marginalized (often ignored by funded traditional media) is amplified.

8.0 Future Scope

As mentioned before, the breadth and depth of studies in the arena are not much. There are a few studies that explore individual cases and those are the ones that has crossed all boundaries. The lesser remarkable hashtags have not found a place in academia. There are numerous reasons why some movements have not made a permanent mark; it is necessary to study that area to make sure an individual's words (containing a hashtag that can change the world) are not lost in the ocean of Twitter's characters.

Cyber-communities have for setting the agenda for mainstream media sources (Olson, #BringBackOurGirls: digital communities supporting real-world change and influencing mainstream media agendas).

Numerous cases can be studied to analyze how Twitter, digital activism works to drive mainstream media conversations, which is vital for the state media and governments to sit up and take notice of the subject from the lens of a national issue that needs redressal.

Furthermore, e-activism also covers the gap in news reportage in conventional media. Feminist issues and other class and discrimination issues gain centerstage on Twitter. News channels and/or newspapers do not give enough spaces for these subjects to be discussed in depth. Thus, studies can be conducted on specific themes to explore the difference between the two classes.

Another aspect in how the minority communities is given a pedestal on Twitter. The impact

of the same can be studied to make the process and transitions easier for the people, themselves, legislative, executive and judiciary.

There are also articles that such as ‘Outrage Culture Is Ruining Foreign Policy’ by Steven A. Cook which illustrated the not-so-obvious issues with digital civic activism. Further theses on under-the-carpet issues would be interesting.

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