

Twitter as a pivotal platform for engaging and participating in social change movements.

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Abstract

This paper explores digital technology and social networking sites' abilities to create communities online. Looking at the influence of micro-blogging site Twitter and its ability to provide users with a space to voice opinion, this paper discusses the rise of social movements online. 'Hashtag movements' have become common place within society creating spaces where real voices, experiences and opinions are at the forefront of change. Focusing on three recent hashtag movements; #BlackLivesMatter, #BringBackOurGirls and #MeToo, this paper argues that Twitter is pivotal in providing a platform to engage and participate in social change movements and in creating online communities.

Keywords: social networking sites, online community, micro-blogging, Twitter, social movements, hashtags

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The Internet, with the aid of digital technology, has created environments where individuals online have the ability to produce, share and interact with others in an unrestrained environment. Communities are developing in free-forming narratives online, where the instantaneous nature of communication is generated by users. Micro-blogging site Twitter has produced a platform where continuous conversation is dominantly fast-paced and promotes like-minded users to form communities where geographic barriers form no basis. Where physical locations often share similar socioeconomic situations, Twitter provides a platform that is location independent, allowing the spread of information more broadly. Protesting for and against social change has always been a big part of society and digital technologies have allowed people from all walks of life to voice opinions in accessible ways. Twitter has become a dominant avenue for individuals to engage, speak up and debate important political, social and cultural issues. It has also allowed anyone to say anything and is a platform that can contradict and challenge politics, views and perceptions. Through this platform, there has been a rise in the number of social movements within the last 10 years. #BlackLivesMatter, #BringBackOurGirls, and the #MeToo movements, were all developed online through user-generated responses to important and often disturbing social and cultural issues. The impact of these movements was felt substantially across the world. Through the development of these communities online, frank public opinion has led to real change and impact within society. Through a thorough discussion on online communities and the foundations of social movements focusing on #BringBackOurGirls, #BlackLivesMatter

and #MeToo, this paper argues that Twitter is pivotal in empowering public opinion and assisting individuals to engage with and participate in, social change movements.

Discussion

Through the integration of the Internet and social networking sites, the notion of community has become an even more, ever-present aspect to many within society. The mobility and instantaneous nature of smartphones and social networking platforms have accelerated the interaction of individuals with others online. This has encouraged the continuous exchanges between users, regardless of geographical location or time (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 1). Physical communities are fundamental to society however, online platforms have moved community into another environment. People world-wide with like-minded interests, views or differences can connect and come together in unrepresented and fragmented ways (Katz, Rice & Acord et al., 2004 & Wellman & Gulia, 1999). As communities become global, technology has blurred the previously segmented ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds into a merging of the two, as connections between people in physical and online spaces become intertwined (Katz, Rice & Acord et al., 2004, p. 316 & 362). Communities create an environment where group mentality, a sense of togetherness and accomplishment thrives. Unlike in physical communities where bias and judgement take place, barriers of race, religion, gender and ethnicity have less impact in the setting of online communities (Katz, Rice & Acord et al., 2004, p. 326). The capability to connect and share opinions with diverse people throughout the world, has fostered greater opportunities for people to engage, learn and interact online. Many users of social networking sites engage willingly in communication

with strangers, highlighting a fundamental shift in the way online interactions stand apart from the physical (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). This shift has seen an increase in society's willingness to share personal information that many would not be comfortable to share with strangers in person, all to become a part of a community. This change demonstrates the fascinating affect technology and mediated communication has had on promoting and expanding, whilst in many ways condensing communities in online and physical spaces.

Interactions between strangers online can be thought of as a 'weak-tie' where relationships exist only through shared interest or experience (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, p. 4). However, this personal and physical separation can generate substantial impact between users online (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Relationships are fundamental to human life, yet interactions on social networking sites with others personally removed, can foster strong feelings of social inclusion, supporting collectiveness and companionship for many (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, p. 18 & Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 6). This sense of belonging developed via the use of technology and mediated communication, shows online platforms are pivotal in encouraging social accomplishment and community. The embrace of mediated communication allows for greater reach between users within society, creating multi-dimensional environments where sustained interactions can develop into their own substantial social ties (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 8 & Katz, Rice & Acord et al., 2004 & Ridings & Gefen, 2004, p. 3). Seen through the rise of social movements mediated online, communities have developed in quick progression through the discussion of important social, racial and cultural issues.

Technology has played a significant position within the rise of social change movements. The power of public opinion and personal resonance has only become more

influential through the use of online platforms (Carty, 2015, p.5 & 8 & Obregon & Tufte, 2017, p. 639). The idea of a social movement is to bring awareness to issues, to spark outrage and create change. Through encouraging participation, social movements online have grown exponentially (Carty, 2015 & Obregon & Tufte, 2017). Yet to be successful, the foundations of a social movement as outlined by Tilly (2004, in Carty, 2015, p. 7) need to include “three main elements; 1. Campaign: long-term, organised, make a collective claim, 2. Repertories: tactics group have at their disposal, 3. WUNC: worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment”. Mediated communication has allowed social movements to become even more mobile where people across cities, states and most noticeably, countries, have the power to engage with one another. The use of technologies, smartphones and online platforms like Twitter, are now common throughout many countries, even in less developed nations. This bridging of social, cultural and political issues through technology, has forged greater senses of community and collective identity, recognising the effectiveness of strangers coming together as ‘weak-ties’ to develop a common goal (Carty, 2015, 28 & Obregon & Tufte, 2017, p. 635). As the importance of ‘weak ties’ becomes ever present online, Twitter has been used to promote and expand these links exponentially, providing influence in the spread of engagement, and participation in, social change movements.

As Marshall McLuhan famously said in the 1960s with the development of the television, “the medium is the message”, this view is still vitally relevant today (in Carty, 2015, p.9). Society’s ability to instantaneously share personal accounts, images and videos have enormous impact on the development of social movements. User-generated content creates the foundations of social change movements presently and the influential

role of communication cannot go unnoticed (Carty, 2015, p. 32 & Obregon & Tufte, 2017, p. 641). The use of social platforms like micro-blogging site Twitter has encouraged the expansion of user-generated initiatives, where the focus of a movement is the personal experiences of individuals. Giving power to the people and power to the voices, develops expansive communities online where user's experiences create extensive narrative and collective action (Obregon & Tufte, 2017). Since its development in 2006, Twitter has become a revolutionary platform for people to share opinions in short, succinct ways. As a micro-blogging site with limitations on how much people can write in one tweet (originally 140 characters, now 280), sharing of personal thoughts has become even more dynamic and engaging (Tamburrini, Cinnirella, Jansen, & Bryden, 2015). Its succinct nature has allowed Twitter to become a vital platform for the spread of information. Hashtags have also been adopted greatly making tweets searchable and identifiable, encouraging users to share opinions by including hashtags of words that are relatable to the contents of their tweet (Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014, p. 1090). Hashtags targeting key social and cultural issues have developed exponentially on Twitter, encouraging other users to share their own personal stories and to shed light on important cases (Yang, 2016, p. 14). Hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #BringBackOurGirls and #MeToo have established into enormous social movements, where user-generated content has been at the forefront in the search for social justice. These 'hashtag movements' started online through Twitter and expanded across other social networks, the mainstream media and then to the streets where activism, participation and community have grown (Yang, 2016, p. 15). Hashtags thus, have

become pivotal avenues for individuals to engage and participate in social change movements.

‘Hashtag movements’ have highlighted societal issues of urgency, increasing awareness and consciousness whilst also encouraging action to be taken (Carty, 2015, p. 25-6). Through the scope of social networking sites, hashtag movements have expanded globally. In America, gun violence is a systemic problem within society and there has been a disturbing rise in the number of unarmed African-American men being shot and killed by police officers and people with power. In 2013, when George Zimmerman, a Neighbourhood Watch Officer was acquitted of all charges for shooting unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida, society had had enough (Yang, 2016).

#BlackLivesMatter became a trending topic online, especially on Twitter, where African-American men and women voiced personal accounts of racial unjust and violence, calling for reform of police officers across the country (Ray, Brown & Laybourn, 2017, p. 1795). The use of social networking sites to voice opinion and to enact and seek change, renewed the power of digital technologies in the #BlackLivesMatter case (Yang, 2016, p. 13). Although it started online, #BlackLivesMatter turned to the streets, where protests and marching took place. #BlackLivesMatter has developed further into an official organisation, highlighting further the powerful force that collective expression, personal voice, identity and community have in social change movements (Katz, Rice & Acord et al., 2004, p. 326 & Carty, 2015, p. 3). Sharing of personal experiences people have faced, has helped to shed light on the unjust actions of people with power in communities across America. Whilst there is a long way to go and these horrific events still take place, the

power of public voice and the engagement and participation within Twitter in enacting change, can be seen noticeably through #BlackLivesMatter.

In 2014, 276 Nigerian school girls were kidnapped as radical terror group Boko Haram stormed a local school. Boko Haram greatly oppose western influence, especially on women and girls and have kidnapped over 2,000 since the incident in 2014 (Olson, 2016, p. 772). The kidnapping of school girls sparked outrage across the world and the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls grew traction on social networking sites. Human rights organisations and activists, celebrities and politicians got behind this social movement, urging for the local government to intervene and retrieve the girls (Olson, 2016, p. 773). The power of this online activism grew, showing the influence conversation can have outside of mainstream media. In 2014, the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag was mentioned over four million times on Twitter, with even Michelle Obama, then First Lady of the United States, voicing her concern of global women's issues and unjust in disadvantaged communities (Olson, 2016, p. 773 & 784). Online conversations have the ability to spread quickly as seen in #BringBackOurGirls. Its capability to become internationally recognised and to disrupt the oppressive policies and government in Nigeria, shows the influence public participation can have in online communities (Olson, 2016, p. 775 & 784). There is a willingness within society now to participate and voice concern for issues outside of their immediate location. However, it is important to acknowledge that to do so, access to Twitter and other online platforms is needed and is a vital, dependant and key factor in online activism. #BringBackOurGirls showcased the power of like-minded people from vast socioeconomic and geographical locations to use Twitter, to

raise awareness globally, on an important situation and engage and participate to enact change.

In October of last year, the *New York Times* ran a lengthy article on the horrendous sexual abuse perpetrated by movie producer Harvey Weinstein against multiple women. Within hours and throughout the days, weeks and months after, more and more women came forward with further experiences of sexual assault. Actress Alyssa Milano, one of those named in the original article, used Twitter to encourage other women to come forward. Milano and activist Tarana Burke, encouraged users to use the #MeToo hashtag to raise awareness on the systemic issues of violence, sexual abuse and harassment faced by women (Zarkov & Davies, 2018, p. 3). The use of the #MeToo hashtag, empowered women and men to voice their personal stories and showed that people from all walks of life can and do face similar issues. Just like #BlackLivesMatter and #BringBackOurGirls, #MeToo built traction internationally, highlighting the demand for recognition of injustice and the need for immediate change and societal accountability (Zarkov & Davies, 2018, p. 9). Again, Twitter and the implementation of hashtags has been used powerfully to spark debate, to spread conversation and to action change on important societal issues. (Carty, 2015, Obregon & Tufte, 2017, Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014, p. 1090 & Zarkov & Davies, 2018, p. 4-6). #MeToo has become front and centre of mainstream media across the world and has impacted greatly on public opinion and perception. Sharing of personal experiences through Twitter has developed a web of 'weak ties', creating strong online communities where its members now have the power to enact collective societal change.

Conclusion

The development of online communities has grown exponentially through the increase use and adoption of technology and social networking sites. Through micro-blogging site Twitter, the power of public opinion has been vital to the traction of key social change movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #BringBackOurGirls and #MeToo. These movements have been pivotal in creating genuine change within society and altering public opinion on issues that are quite often, kept private. Bringing community issues to the forefront of discussion and encouraging participation has helped to challenge systemic attitudes and issues thus, enacting tangible change within society. Twitter has become a pivotal platform for providing people with a space to engage and participate in social change movements, whilst also developing 'weak ties' into strong online communities.

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