Digital Activism in Online Communities and the Spread of Misinformation on Twitter

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Abstract

Digital activism is a prevalent form of political action which takes many forms of practice online. With an online presence on popular social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, digital activism has encouraged online communities and members of the younger demographics to be involved in expressing political opinion and rallying for social change. While the Internet provides endless amounts of information and credible sources to support boundless political topics, the spread of misinformation is also readily accessible, posing a threat to vulnerable demographics who might be unaware of the difference between verified and unverified information. This paper explores digital activism in the 21st century, social media communities, the role youth have in being involved with digital activism, and the threats that come with information overload. Significant digital activism movements such as #BeenRapedNeverReported, #SchoolStrike4Climate, #BlackLivesMatter and #LoveWins will be referenced to support the argument that social media has significantly facilitated social and environmental change. It is acknowledged that while social media platforms are taking steps in monitoring information, this paper reiterates the importance of encouraging the circulation of factual and verified information as opposed to spreading viral content in online communities.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Twitter, Communities, Youth, Misinformation.

Introduction

Activism as a display of social action has been referenced throughout history and has adapted to the prevailing social and technological discourses of the era. Modern technology has enabled social change to be communicated and executed significantly and is continually changing. Adapting the methods of communication in the modern era, digital activism has revolutionised the way society has protested for social change and political matters through social media platforms enabling communication to a wider audience than ever before. Yet,

with tools to communicate readily accessible information through a range of networked audiences, various implications arise as misinformation is also easily distributed. In recent years, social media platforms like Twitter have become catalysts for digital activism. However, while these technologies have increased awareness of social issues and have encouraged a wider demographic to be involved, misinformation is widely spread through social media, and as a major threat to society, must be monitored. This paper will examine the rise in digital activism among vulnerable demographics including youth and adolescence while highlighting the posed risks of misinformation distributed to the wider public due to the shareable nature of these platforms.

Origins of Digital Activism

Digital activism is a broad term that engages with traditional means of social advocacy while incorporating technology to distribute opinions. Digital activism is studied in a range of disciplines including sociology, anthropology political science and more due to its diverse subject matter and insightfulness to an array of fields. Kaun & Uldam (2018, p. 2100) define digital activism as, "Activism that engages both fixed and mobile devices with access to the Internet such as different forms of hashtag activism, and open source advocacy, or definitions that include all digital media used for political purposes." Unlike traditional forms of activism such as protests and political campaigning through demonstrations, digital activism utilises social media platforms in real-time to distribute individual voices over the Internet that would generally be unheard in a mass gathering.

These voices, or political stances, may be distributed and re-distributed over a varied period of time enhancing the ability for it to be viewed and recovered at any time; this aspect is only one of the many advantages of digital activism. Though it has modernised the way individuals voice political standpoints, digital activism continues to adopt traditional methods of engagement, and has transitioned through many waves of activism over the course of its beginning. If going by political sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo's theory, the current digital political climate aligns with the second major wave of digital activism in modern history. The second wave of digital activism emerged around the 2010's where technology and the Internet advanced significantly. The first wave saw the Internet as an autonomous

place for communication with only a small sector of political activists occupying the space away from the constructs of the state and the outside world (Kaun & Uldam, 2018).

Digital activism has seen a major shift since the first wave, as the Internet has now become a generic space which is populated by ordinary citizens (Gerbaudo, 2017). This change in activism is through the shift from cyber-autonomism to cyber-populism, differentiated by the amount of users utilising the Internet and for what purpose. This current techno-political orientation is characterised by an upsurge of social media usage by the vast majority of society and major search engine platforms geared toward mass outreach (Kaun & Uldam, 2018). Though the two waves of digital activism differ significantly, there are parallels. The emergence of cyber-populism was influenced by underground liberation, characterised by niche communities defying traditional media and large-scale institution while cyber-populism has created countless small and large scaled communities in a space of mass mobilisation (Gerbaudo, 2017).

Social Media and the Twitter Community

The accessibility and broad communication platforms on the Internet has seen digital activism evolve and grow in a variety of ways. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become major networks for the distribution and circulation of information. Twitter, a popular micro-blogging and networking service has become especially prominent in digital activism due to its function and design. Both Twitter and Facebook are largely text orientated and are designed to express thoughts and opinions through short text in a way that can be accessed and viewed by other users. However, Twitter's short character count for text, hashtag visibility function and the ability to link content makes for a superior platform for political advocacy. These features combined are used to deliver data on a mass scale, providing a democratic platform for the public to express their social and political viewpoints which has provided new ways to engage protesters through a sense of community and concurring interest (Sen, 2018).

Social media may provide an ideal setting for collective action as it enables users to weave their private and political life together, resulting in personal political expression and relatable content (Valenzuela, 2013). As platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and

other similar social media sites have enabled a space to voice political opinions and interests, to many users it has become a significant space for establishing identity through like-minded communities. The implementation of shareability features on these Web 2.0 platforms allows users to connect instantaneously and form a sense of community with ease, in ways traditional activism could not always achieve.

Twitter has the ability to engage with a mass audience with limited restrictions on the accessibility of content, unlike Facebook as its content is only generally circulated among personal friends on the platform making it more difficult to search for specific content. Twitter on the other hand is much more fluid with shareability through hashtags and its public content as Bertazolli (2019, p. 15) explains, "Twitter is more liberating in this instance as it permits the exploitation of pseudonyms and does not require the disclosure of personal information and real-life relationship ties with other users". While having an online persona is favourable when it comes to drawing attention to content, anyone can post visible and sharable content in order to generate traction. A sense of community may be established through unique hashtags belonging to specific political standpoints making similar content easy to find.

Twitter uses are able to engage and share with similar people, affirming personal and political opinions while forming new connections through a support network. The generation of support and community is apparent through instances where Twitter users have utilised the platform to express controversial, personal experiences as evident in #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag which started circulating the platform in 2014. Victims of sexual assault shared their experiences and their fears of the potential emotional consequences that may have followed if the assault was reported (Li et al., 2020). The response from the wider Twitter community was positive, generating a notion of solidarity and support. Due to Twitter's hashtag feature, countless retellings of these experiences could be viewed and validated, in turn creating a united community of victims and allies.

The Role of Youth in Digital Activism

Activism in the age of social media has not only generated a new way of expression through modern technology and instant accessibility to networking platforms, it has encouraged the

engagement of younger demographics to be involved in politics more than ever before. This is strongly demonstrated through the recent environmental advocacy youth all over the world were involved in by bringing awareness to climate change. Social media platforms are dominated by younger demographics and their presence has transcended on to the online political scene. A recent example of this was through a young Swedish environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, who promoted the idea that humanity was facing an existential crisis arising from climate change. Her presence both online and offline sent waves through the political world, most significantly the demographic of young people who followed in her footsteps. The hashtag #SchoolStrike4Climate, a movement founded by Thunberg, remains a viral hashtag that has consistently trended since Thunberg's gained popularity in 2018. Teenagers and youth around the world tweet this hashtag accompanying their own form of environmental activism through photos, videos and short text rallying against climate change.

This is not the only significant display of youth banding together online to rally for cultural change, young people have been seen to participate in iconic movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #LoveWins, which gathered huge online attention as recent as 2013 and 2015 (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Viral movements like these and the public displays of banding together both online and offline to bring awareness to climate change thrived on Twitter and other social platforms alike due to the involvement of the demographic that is most familiar with these content sharing platforms; the youth. The fact that these platforms have become a place where political expression can be voiced and distributed as social media is so intertwined with youth culture means that young people can counternarrate the world from their perspective and encourage social change.

The Spread of Misinformation on Social Media
The involvement of youth in the interest of politics will have enormous benefits in the progression of the future economy and future social and political matters. However, the constant influx of information readily available to such vulnerable remains a threat as young people are influenced by the prevailing cultural and social discourses present in society. A major facilitator to these cultural discourses is the content that circulates the Internet and social media. A threat tantamount to the influential power of the Internet is the spread of

misinformation which can be created and distributed by any member of the public. While the current digital age allows for all demographics to participate in voicing their views and defining their political identities on a range of online platforms, this growth has changed the power dynamics of participation (Bakardjieva, Svensson & Skoric, 2012).

Bakardjieva, Svensson & Skoric (2012, p. 1) explain, "With a massive growth in online social networking, digital infrastructures offer citizens new channels for speaking and acting together and thus lower the threshold for involvement in collective action and, eventually, politics…digital storytelling, for example, is a novel tool for engaging ordinary people in the discussion of issues of wide public significance". Unlike traditional forms of media and news, anyone can pose as a credible source of information, blurring the line of validity in information and news distribution. Validity and verification can be easily overlooked when new information can be accessed at a rapid speed with minimal effort to access it. Though credible, scientific information and data are readily identifiable and accessible, the type of information and views that populate social media platforms tend to be information that is radicalised, hateful or with shock value (Del Vicario et al., 2016).

This variety of content can be more appealing and scandalous which has the power to turn into viral, misinformation which anyone can spread. The tendency of young people who are hungry for information, entertainment and seeking likenesses in identity online are exposed to the risk of developing harmful and radicalized responses to misinformation (Alfida, Maryam & Rianti, 2019). While the implications of misinformation vary due to the severity of the content, the absorption of uncredible information could encourage traditional education to be replaced with unverified resources online which can be dangerously misleading. Instances of misinformation is ongoing, however, well-known examples of information being spread from uncredible sources can be found in relation to the recent global health crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-vaccination propaganda which has circulated social media for a number of years.

As Twitter enables small network communities, users are likely to follow other people with opinions similar to their own. This network structure results in a tendency of users to engage with only a small subset of content aligned with their ideological preferences and

magnified by algorithmic features on social network sites (Shore, Baek & Dellarocas, 2018). The threat of misinformation within this social structure is that of controversial or incorrect information being circulated among like-minded people, where there is a tendency to adopt an even more extreme position on the topic (Shore, Baek & Dellarocas, 2018). In this case, the disparity of the information available to the public on the Internet and social media platforms lies with how these groups choose to utilise this technology; by expressing political views and finding a sense of community through like-minded content or by creating and distributing misinformation maliciously or unknowingly. While social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are working to monitor content and misinformation, the exposure to the distribution of misinformation, fabrication and propaganda must not be overlooked when using these sites. It is imperative to continue making these spaces factual and educational for youth and other vulnerable demographics to be involved in politics and social matters.

Conclusion

The transformation of activism due to modern technology and contemporary forms of communication has resulted in a revolutionary way to convey personal and political expression. Digital activism has progressed into a an inclusive form of communication which strengthens community, raises awareness on global issues and encourages social change. As digital activism is prominently demonstrated on popular social media platforms, it is accurate to assume that a fraction of the digital activism is contributed by younger demographics who heavily use said social media sites. While society should encourage young people to be involved in politics, it is imperative that misinformation is not distributed and over-consumed as opposed to verified information. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have great protentional in encouraging society to be more involved in politics but must be monitored in ensuring young demographics are safe from misinformation that could harm society.

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