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Discourse, Context and Media

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

Exploring ‘success’ in digitally augmented activism: A triangulated approach to analyzing UK activist Twitter use



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 May 2014

Received in revised form

18 July 2014

Accepted 22 August 2014

Available online 16 September 2014

Keywords:

Activism

Twitter

Triangulation

Corpus-based analysis

Discourse analysis

Success

ABSTRACT

The transformational potential of using social networking sites (SNS) for activism is a highly researched topic in various academic disciplines, but the topic of ‘success’ has been largely avoided by scholars, much to the detriment of activists themselves, for whom effective use of SNS has become action critical. In this paper, we *triangulate* findings (incorporating data from surveys, focus groups, and tweets from activists, and combining qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, chiefly through corpus-based critical discourse analysis) to gain a better understanding of how activists perceive and construct activism on SNS, to describe some features of successful and unsuccessful activist tweets, and to provide some recommendations for heightened impact of activist activities on SNS. To this aim, we describe to what extent certain actions leverage the affordances of digital media and distinguish between categories of action along two dimensions: *individualistic vs. collectivistic* and *persuasive vs. confrontational*. We find that activists describe goals that involve individualized, persuasive (and therefore low-risk) activities to be most effectively achieved using Twitter, likely due to fear of police intervention. Activist tweets are found to be retweeted at a dramatically lower rate than a reference corpus of general tweets, and are characterized by lack of original content. We conclude by discussing the various ways in which activists could improve these circumstances and optimize their engagement with SNS by radically increasing their leveraging of the affordances of digital media.

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1. Introduction

The topic of activism and social media has long been of interest to scholars, (see [Garrett, 2006](#)), but has received increased attention since global events such as the Arab Springs, the UK Riots and Occupy Wall Street (see e.g. [Jurgenson, 2012](#); [Lindgren, 2013](#); [Procter et al., 2013](#); [Tufekci and Wilson, 2012](#)). [Castells \(2012\)](#) argues that these and similar events signal a paradigm shift in how societies communicate. While [Castells \(2012\)](#) identifies the potential for social movements to be mediated by social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook or Twitter, with some caveats, other scholars are more consistently sceptical. Many point to some of the ‘failed’ revolutions that had initially been hailed in mainstream media as ‘social media revolutions’ ([Morozov, 2011](#); see also [Lindgren, 2013](#) for a summary of the debate between more optimistic and more pessimistic views of the transformative potential of SNS).

Activism in social media is therefore a timely topic for researchers, but it is also of critical import to campaigners, who

themselves are trying to use SNS to achieve their activism-related goals. According to a recent Pew Research Center study, “25% of SNS users say they have become more active in a political issue after discussing it or reading posts about it on the sites” and “16% of SNS users say they have changed their views about a political issue after discussing it or reading posts about it on the sites” ([Rainie and Smith, 2012](#), p. 1). Achieving this impact is vital for activists; sophisticated incorporation of social media as part of campaigns can mean increased numbers of participants and even a deep impact on the opinions of other users.

While there has been some ‘grand theorising’ about the role of social media in recent protests ([Castells, 2012](#); [Couldry, 2012](#)) there has also been more detailed, empirical work; a number of studies (e.g. [Theocharis, 2012](#)) have sought to leverage the huge volumes of data that can be gained from SNS like Twitter to make quantitative claims about the connections between and actions of activists or protestors. Other scholars have undertaken detailed ethnographic studies (see e.g. [Postill, 2012](#)) to closely examine the practices of activists. However, the highly individual nature of SNS interaction leads to difficulty in measuring (and predicting) *impact* of usage. There are further complications from the perspective of users: in speaking with activists participating in our study, both the concepts of SNS itself and of what constitutes activism on SNS were constantly being negotiated. This is echoed in divergent

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definitions within scholarship: "some scholars understand [digital] activism as actually occurring online, while others see activism as limited to offline collective actions that may at most be facilitated through online organizing tools or only advertised online" (Earl and Kimport, 2011, p. 14). As such, systematic analyses of 'success' in typical (e.g. non-transformative) campaigns have been largely avoided in academic texts. This may in part be due to the difficulty of defining 'success' in the first place, particularly in digitally augmented campaigns. Karpf (2010, p. 151), for instance, distinguishes between 'tactical' and 'strategic' metrics in digital campaigns – the former relate to counting numbers of e.g. 'likes' or 'visits', while the latter can only be evaluated in relation to whether or not specific goals have been achieved by a tactical measure. With the aim of providing some insight that will be of practical use to activists and of intellectual interest to researchers, we propose a triangulated methodology to gain a better understanding of varying types of success in digitally augmented activism.

To do this, we combined aspects of quantitative (corpus-based) and qualitative (critical discourse) analysis (see Baker et al., 2008) to explore the attitudes and behaviours of activists. In focus groups and surveys, we asked UK-based activists how they use SNS for activism, providing them with a venue to discuss their attitudes towards the various uses and potential outcomes of this vehicle, with particular attention devoted to how they discursively construct successful (usually strategic) SNS use in activism. This data was compared to one observed, quantifiable and tactical measure of 'success' – frequency of retweets in status updates.

In this study, we consider the following questions: how effective do professional and volunteer activists consider SNS to achieve a variety of activism-related goals? Can campaign presence and perceived (strategic) efficacy be linked to categories of activism? Compared to 'general' tweets, how objectively (or tactically) 'successful' are activists' tweets? In discussing our findings, we provide some guidelines for more cognizant, successful use of SNS for activism as a form of prospective critique (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009).

1.1. Types and potential purposes of activist tweets

1.1.1. Leveraging the affordances of digital media

Through its design, technology enables particular types of actions or characteristics of actions called 'affordances'; Earl and Kimport find that two primary affordances of the Web (though we would broaden this to include non-Web digital media such as text messaging) are of particular salience to online protest: "sharply reduced costs for creating, organizing, and participating in protest; and the ability to aggregate people's individual actions into broader collective actions without requiring participants to be copresent in time and space". The first affordance allows for very low initial costs of communication, coordination, and information sharing; costs of scaling up each of these efforts will remain low if this affordance is fully leveraged. The second affordance allows for small (even individual) efforts spread as far as the entire globe to leverage asynchronous communication to engage in aggregated, collectivized action.

Earl and Kimport consider the extent to which affordances of the Web are leveraged to represent a continuum of Web protest (see Table 1 below).

"The more these two affordances are leveraged, the more transformative the changes are to organizing and participation processes... the less these affordances are leveraged, the more likely it is that researchers will find what we refer to as a 'supersize' model where the Web leads to faster, wider, cheaper

activism, but without fundamental changes to the dynamics of contention." (Earl and Kimport, 2011, p. 13).

Common consideration of this continuum as a conflated unit may be one main reason behind discrepancies in the definition of online activism – just how much should digital media affordances be leveraged in order for a movement to 'qualify'? Further – and of particular relevance in the aims of this study – analysis of one type of online activism (e-mobilizations, e-tactics, or e-movements) cannot inform researchers about the possible successes or failures of another type. Much previous research has been focussed on e-movements (e.g. the Arab Springs), though our findings indicate that these are not representative of typical online activism. A final consideration is the definition of who (or what) an 'activist' is in our study. We take a broad view of this, using on the one hand self-identification by focus group and survey participants, and on the other hand considering any individual or organization that engages in activism-related tasks (see Section 3.1, below) to be activists. Activists who make use of Twitter also often do not operate uni-directionally; as we will show below, many of the tweets that come from activist Twitter accounts are themselves retweeted, often from other activists. Thus the traditional media boundaries between text producers and consumers has blurred in this research context (see also Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010, on 'prosumption', which refers to the process whereby users both produce and consume content in digital media).

1.1.2. Categories of action

For the purposes of this article, it is also useful to distinguish between various categories of activism along two dimensions: *individualistic* vs. *collectivistic* and *persuasive* vs. *confrontational* (see Postmes and Brunsting, 2002).

In the first dimension, we differentiate between *individualistic* action that might be undertaken by a single individual (e.g. letter writing, sabotage) and *collectivistic* action, where efficacy depends upon mass participation of a somewhat unified group (e.g. petition campaigns, riots) (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002). Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 760) found that "collective action based on exclusive collective identifications and strongly tied networks continues to play a role in this political landscape, but this has become joined by, interspersed with, and in some cases supplanted by personalized collective action formations in which digital media become integral organizational parts". In this study, we analyze tweets from accounts of Individuals, Movements (sometimes temporary or transient networks of individuals), and Organizations ('brick-and-mortar', institutional sources of discourse) to investigate whether individualistic or collectivistic goals (and discourses) can be found to be more tactically and strategically successful.

The second dimension – *persuasive* vs. *confrontational* action – distinguishes between actions which are more or less normative and unpunishable, "whose primary purpose is to persuade others that certain viewpoints are worth considering – strategies generally associated with solving intragroup disputes" (e.g. letter writing, lobbying), and those which are non-normative, punishable, and "may also engage and confront another party more directly, as in a demonstration, blockage or sabotage – strategies more closely associated with intergroup disputes" (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002, p. 291). Participation in confrontational action comes at a greater personal risk – legally and socially – and likely for this reason, much media attention (and academic consideration) has been paid to confrontational action via digital media, though predominantly speaking, both digitally augmented and 'traditional' (or non-digital) activism are, by nature, nonviolent and persuasive (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002). Depending on overall activism goals, strategic success may thus be determined

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