Full length article

Important tweets matter: Predicting retweets in the #BlackLivesMatter talk on twitter

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ABSTRACT

Social movements are increasingly using social media, and Twitter in particular, to reach existing and new publics and advance their mission. While historically movements had to rely on traditional media to connect with such publics, via social media any user can share content, helping to connect the key players within the movement to new publics. The quality of highly shared content, however, has been under scrutiny. The #BlackLivesMatter movement, one of the most prolific and popular hashtag movements on Twitter, is examined as a case study, in order to determine the role of content importance and emotion on the virality of the movement. Four aspects of importance were examined — Policy or Action, Group, Social Actor and Politics— as well as direction of sentiment. Findings suggest important tweets were more likely to be retweeted, where tweets associated with Policy or Action showing the strongest relationship with retweeting. Tweets with expressed emotion were more likely to be retweeted than neutral tweets. When tweets contained important content related to Policy or Action or a Group as well as sentiment, these tweets were most likely to be retweeted, revealing a method for social movements to increase effectiveness. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social media have shifted the paradigm of information flow from broadcast to interpersonal. Grassroots organizations no longer must depend on traditional mass media to reach existing and new audiences, especially important because the protest paradigm postulates that media reports of protest movements will actually marginalize and degrade the movement, rather than prop it up (Boyle, McLeod & Armstrong, 2012). These organizations can rely on individuals on social media to share their messages in an attempt to expand their audience, affect public opinion and generate support.

On Twitter, one key indicator of message dissemination is retweets. As the power to disseminate information shifts from professional journalists to individual users on social media, the reasoning behind content sharing remain uncertain and understudied. The research that does exist indicates that content of a tweet is a central indicator of engagement with the tweet, i.e. retweeting (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Naveed, Gottron, Kunegis, & Alhadi, 2011). News content is one of the major drivers of Twitter use (Rosenstiel, Sonderman, Loker, Ivancin, & Kjarval, 2015).

The availability of important news content has long been considered a citizen's pathway to democracy (Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007). What is considered "important", in this context, and therefore beneficial for democracy, is determined by news-related literature. The rich literature on the newsroom decision making suggests that social significance of news content is defined as related to issues that are political, economic, cultural and related to the public's well-being (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). Whether these standards apply to user dissemination of content on social media is key to evaluating the quality of information flow in these new and unstructured spaces. Whether users share socially important content on social media is an understudied area (Wang, Wang, & Zhu, 2013). Moreover, media audiences have long been criticized for preferring emotional (soft) over meaningful (hard) news (J. Lee & Thorson, 2009; Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012; Yang, 2016a, Yang, 2016b). Given the opportunity to decide what content to share, do users prefer disseminating

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socially important content? Emotionally-packed content over neutrally toned messages?

The #BlackLivesMatter movement grew out of the public reaction to the death of African American teenager Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder. The phrase #BlackLivesMatter was used by Alicia Garza on social media and led to the development of a physical movement by herself and two other women, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullor (Garza, 2017; Guynn, 2015). The movement is widely recognized by the U.S. populations, with 81% of Blacks and 76% of whites being aware of the movement (Parker, Horowitz, & Mahl, 2016). The use of #BlackLivesMatter was adopted by those wishing to discuss or read about the topic on social media, specifically Twitter. In fact, two of the most often used social movement hashtags on Twitter are #BlackLivesMatter and #Ferguson (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). How this movement grew to such prominence on social media presents an opportunity to study the mechanisms that led to its rise. The conversation, though large, does not necessarily mean that the movement, or society in general, benefits from the social media conversation. This study seeks to understand the elements of the social media movement that underlie its growth.

Two such items, often tied to social sharing, are importance and emotion. Topics that are important to society are covered by journalists, essentially to promote an educated citizenry (Marchionni, 2013). Expressed emotion has been observed in social media communications regarding news, especially around times of crisis (Shaw, Burgess, Crawford, & Bruns, 2013). The role of expressed emotion in sharing socially important news is explored in this study, using the #BlackLivesMatter movement on Twitter as a case study. This movement contains both an emotional and socially important topic, and grew form a grass-roots, one-woman start. Over a 20-day period, 118,000 tweets containing the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter were retrieved, coinciding with the aftermath of a pivotal moment in the movement, the grand jury decision not to indict in the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed black male, and the ensuing riots in Ferguson, MO. To capture the importance of the conversation as well as sentiment, a content analysis was used. The number of retweets for each tweet was calculated, and a stratified sample of 1872 tweets were coded. A regression model was used to evaluate the significance and power of the independent variables (four importance variables and a sentiment variable) in predicting number of retweets (normalized variable). Implications of findings are important for social movements and scholars interested in what mobilizes people and captures attention.

2. Literature review

The rise of social media as complementing, often alternative, platforms for information exchange provides potential for organizations and movements to reach out to the public, bypassing traditional news media. In fact, social media is now being used often by people to encourage others to get involved in a cause or issue (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Users can now access information about news and events directly from these organizations, or, more commonly, from their peers on social media, who share content with them. Understanding the type of content that is more likely to be shared can reflect on the societal value of social media as a source for information and news. Two aspects of content are examined, importance and expressed emotion in the tweet, as predictors of information sharing, followed by a discussion of the case study, the Black Lives Matter movement. First, the role of social media in social movements is discussed.

2.1. Social media and social movements: a paradigm shift

The flow of information via social media represents a paradigm shift: from the one to many model of mass communication to a many to many model. Traditional mass media broadcasts a one-way message to its audiences. Social networking platforms allow any user to communicate directly with many (Sprenger, Sandner, Tumasjan, & Welpe, 2014) and when a topic gets attention, many to many (Lin, Keegan, Margolin, & Lazer, 2013). While traditional mass media may engage in simplistic communication on social media that serves to only re-enforce their existing strategies (Armstrong, 2010), this ability of individuals to use social media to take control of the topic being discussed is an option seized upon often by social activists and those living through crises.

For example, a study of the use of Twitter during the Egypt uprisings found that journalists, news networks and individuals could come together during major events to create a networked system of social awareness (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012). In this networked state, news values were co-determined by the public and news sources on Twitter via content sharing (Poell & Borra, 2012). Social media has become a powerful tool to both attract the attention of mainstream media (Wouters, 2015) and to circumvent it completely, creating an independent news stream where citizens are "para-journalists" (Hermida, 2010b; Poell & Borra, 2012). In a content analysis of the tweets of NPR correspondent Andy Carvin's work during the Arab Spring, researchers discovered that non-elite sources were more prominent in the reporters Twitter feed than those of official sources (Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014; Lewis, Zamith, & Hermida, 2013). This break in traditional reliance on official sources in news shows that social movements on Twitter can successfully gain the media's attention, and then be spread to the larger public via those media.

The Egypt uprising is just one example of a situation where a protest or advocacy group garnered the attention of mainstream media via social media (Hermida et al., 2014; Wouters, 2015). Other movements that have used Twitter to communicate and spread their message include the #OccupyWallStreet movement (Gleason, 2013) and the #IdleNoMore movement in Canada (Callison & Hermida, 2015). In the case of the #OccupyWallStreet movement, Twitter users were in fact able to move beyond homophily and the structure of personalized feeds by using the hashtag #Occupy-WallStreet, where the conversation around the movement was substantial, informative, and largely user-generated (Gleason, 2013). Gleason concluded, through a dual content analysis and case study of the movement, that the public was able and willing to read important news about their topic of interest and become educated about a variety of opinions by different sources on the topic (Gleason, 2013). Similar findings were discovered in the #IdleNoMore movement in Canada, which sought to stop the Canadian government from adopting the Jobs, Growth and Long-term Prosperity Act. In their study of this movement, Callison & Hermida found that alternative media were able to rival mainstream media in the amount of discussion on the Twitter feed. They specifically looked at the most retweeted accounts because these accounts were both the most prominent, because a retweet is a sign of the tweets importance, and because the most retweeted, through retweeting, have the ability to influence others (Callison & Hermida, 2015).

The ability to spread messages quickly and to large audiences, by getting them to retweet or re-share these important messages is key to social movements on Twitter because it represents a broadcasting of their message beyond the one-way push out of a message (Lewis et al., 2013). One tweet is invisible when there are more than 500 million tweets sent per day (Oreskovic, 2015), but when retweeted, a tweet can spread more quickly from user to user.