



Prosocial media in action

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ABSTRACT

Online social media has been criticized by social psychologists as ineffective in providing significant social change to such a degree that the term ‘Slacktivism’ has been coined as a counter term to online ‘Activism.’ Yet, research to support this theory is inadequate. To understand more about the activism/slacktivism debate, two events were studied that occurred in close proximity in the winter of 2013 and 2014 – Giving Tuesday and “SnowedOutAtlanta.” Giving Tuesday began in 2012 in the United States as a way to give back to charitable organizations during the holiday season following the chaotic consumerism displayed during Black Friday and Cyber Monday. In 2013, other countries followed suit to make it a world-wide online giving phenomenon. The Facebook, group “SnowedOutAtlanta” was created by Atlanta resident, Michelle Sollicito after two inches of snow created a traffic gridlock in Atlanta that quickly turned chaotic. She sensed a strong need and created an open, online Facebook group where people could easily join and connect to one another. A content analysis was conducted on the tweets from Giving Tuesday 2013 and from the Facebook group page “SnowedOutAtlanta” 2014. Does social media provide a meaningful forum for prosocial helping behaviour and if so, how and why people are giving of their time, money, and resources? These two events provide insight into the current ‘Slacktivism’ debate.

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1. Introduction

The aim of the current study was to further examine the “Slacktivism” debate that argues that social media encourages a lazy form of activism and is not a place for meaningful social change (Morozov, 2010). Slacktivism, coined by Morozov (2010) is a term that describes the lazy, ineffectiveness of online activism. It is also described as low-cost, low-risk online activism (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). “Clicktivism” is a term used interchangeably with slacktivism, which signifies the ease of which individuals can click on an online petition or a social media activist page and feel like they are actually helping. Other researchers agree that online social and political activity often fails to achieve real world change and that the only success it brings is a mere Twitter ‘retweet’ or a Facebook ‘like’ or ‘share’ (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012). Slacktivists are wary of online activism and think that individuals need to guard against it, making sure it does not stop real action (Kavner, 2012). There is a strong criticism that these prosocial online tactics do not have a

significant lasting effect because activism associated with social media is dependent upon weak tie relationships such as Twitter followers and Facebook ‘friends’ that are merely acquaintances whereas meaningful activism requires a strong, robust, organizational structure (Morozov, 2010). Morozov (2010) posits that the internet is nothing but a net delusion that is defined by cyber utopianism and internet centricism that blinds us to an evolving internet landscape that may actually limit democratic possibilities.

Yet, many researchers disagree with this pessimistic view. For example, Lee and Hsieh (2013) found that exposure to online activism influenced individual decision on subsequent civic actions. For instance, participants that signed an online petition were significantly more likely to donate to charity which demonstrated a consistency effect (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). Other researchers point out that the unique platform that social media supplies, enables participants to engage cheaply and easily (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Another advantage of online activism is the ability to reach a large number of people with minimal effort and at low cost, hence potentially increasing public awareness of a social or political issue/movement. By creating awareness of issues, mobilization of citizens is also made possible (Christensen, 2011). In addition, the act of public awareness is often the first step towards fixing a problem, doing good deeds, or creating change (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Golsborough, 2011).

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Social media has become a popular venue that fosters various forms of online activism. With its ease of use and immense popularity, social media, also coined as social network sites (SNS) have experienced a massive boom since their creation a few years ago, and it has now become the most popular activity on the internet (Qualman, 2009). Boyd and Ellison (2009) define SNS as web based services that allow individuals to '(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connections and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (pg. 211). Facebook is the largest and most popular social media site with over 1.2 billion monthly users worldwide and over 1.6 billion page views per day (Sedghi, 2014). Facebook is also the top photo-sharing site on the web with more than 14 million photos posted everyday (Stone, Zickler, & Darrell, 2010). Facebook provides the opportunity for users to create their own profiles where they can post information about themselves, their educational background, work history, hobbies and interests, relationship information, and post pictures. Users can also send private and public messages to friends as well as share videos and pictures. Currently with over 800 million users and translated in over 70 different languages, Facebook is a unique tool in understanding social interaction and online behaviour.

Slacktivism will be examined through two events where social media played a vital role in helping behaviour. These events were Giving Tuesday 2013 and SnowedOutAtlanta 2014. These two events were chosen because of the accessibility of data along with their relevance during the time of data collection. In addition, both events were created in an on-line environment in response to a social need.

Giving Tuesday began in 2012 in the United States as a way to give back to charitable organizations during the holiday season in response to the chaotic consumerism displayed during Black Friday and Cyber Monday. In 2013, other countries followed suit to make it a world-wide online giving phenomenon. This event trended on twitter with the hashtags #GivingTuesday and #Unselfie as thousands tweeted about their donations or volunteer efforts. The term 'unselfie' was created for this event and individuals were urged to take a picture of themselves giving back or donating to a good cause and upload it to their Instagram or twitter accounts.

The Facebook group "SnowedOutAtlanta" was created by Atlanta resident, Michelle Sollicito after two inches of snow created a traffic gridlock in Atlanta that quickly turned chaotic. Children were stranded in schools, people were stuck in their cars, with no place to sleep (Garner, 2014). Sollicito checked her Facebook that night and saw friends offering help or asking for help on her Facebook feed but they were not connected. She sensed a strong need and created an open, online Facebook group where people could easily join and connect to one another. In less than 24 h the group gained over 50,000 members (Kendall, 2014). Group members banded together and offered their assistance and resources to those in need. Two weeks later the group was reactivated as a second winter storm hit Atlanta. Sollicito was praised for her efforts and labelled the 'Snow Angel of Atlanta' to which she replied 'To those who say that I single-handedly united all the people of Atlanta, I tell them that I did it with the help of 50,000 friends, and an awesome tool called Facebook' (Sollicito, 2014).

Yet, these two events are just two examples of online activism and Prosocial Behaviour. I hypothesize that the 'Slacktivism' argument is not only overly cynical, but also that online activism can have a profound effect on society. Both Giving Tuesday 2013 and SnowedOutAtlanta resulted in a unique communication medium where help could be offered and received that could not have occurred prior to social media's creation.

To understand more about Prosocial Behaviour in a social media setting and how and why people are giving of their time, money,

and resources; a content analyses were conducted on the tweets from Giving Tuesday 2013 and from the Facebook group page "SnowedOutAtlanta" 2014.

2. Research questions and hypotheses

2.1. Research question 1

Is social media only a place for online Slactivism? Or does true online activism exist?

2.2. Research question 2

Why, how, and when do people help on social media sites?

Hypothesis 1. 'Slacktivism' is too cynical a view and true online activism does exist.

Hypothesis 2. People help on social media sites in similar ways as they do offline. People see a need and they fill that need. Yet, the scope of how people can help is much larger as social media bridges spaces and connects individuals that otherwise would not be connected.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

16,493 tweets were downloaded from Tuesday, December 3, 2013 from 5:10 am until 5:10 pm using the hashtags #GivingTuesday and #Unselfie. The 12-h time slot aimed to capture an entire workday on Twitter in hopes of maximizing on online user engagement. In addition, 371 Facebook posts were downloaded from the group page SnowedOutAtlanta on January 29, 2014, and 235 posts were downloaded from February 13, 2014.

3.2. Procedure

Tweets were downloaded using an open access Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet (TAGS version 5.1, created by Martin Hawksey) using the hash tags #GivingTuesday and #Unselfie. 16,493 tweets were collected from Tuesday, December 3, 2013 from 5:10 am until 5:10 pm. A content analysis was performed on the tweets. A content analysis is beneficial in capturing patterns and themes in large amounts of data. The tweets, since high in volume, were analysed by searching for certain key terms in Microsoft excel. These search terms led to commonalities and patterns among the tweets. For example, it was quickly evident that a charity entitled the Salvation Army had many tweets. Once identified it was easy to use excel to count the tweets with Salvation Army within the tweet. Then, systematic ways of identifying the donor organizations were used to identify charities with multiple supporters. In many cases the @ sign was used to identify the retweeter, or the organization that the original tweet was designed to support. The text function was used to identify the first and second @ tweeted, and the result was sorted alphabetically. Next, since, many of the tweets referenced an http site; this text was extracted and matched for the same http. Finally, an attempt was made to match the tweeter against the charity to see whether the tweeter was a potential donor, or a charity requesting support or thanking a tweeter. Fig. 1 below uses a flow chart to describe the content analysis procedure used to analyse the Giving Tuesday tweets.

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