Computers in Human Behavior 31 (2014) 65–72

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Computers in Human Behavior

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

Time, place, technology: Twitter as an information source in the Wisconsin labor protests

Aaron S. Veenstra [a,*], Narayanan Iyer [a], Mohammad Delwar Hossain [b], Jiwoo Park [b]

[a] School of Journalism, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, United States
[b] College of Mass Communication & Media Arts, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 30 October 2013

Keywords:
Twitter
Protest mobilization
Citizen journalism
Labor
Wisconsin protests

ABSTRACT

Recently, Twitter has become a prominent part of social protest movement communication. This study examines Twitter as a new kind of citizen journalism platform emerging at the aggregate in the context of such "crisis" situations by undertaking a case study of the use of Twitter in the 2011 Wisconsin labor protests. A corpus of more than 775,000 tweets tagged with #wiunion during the first 3 weeks of the protests provides the source of the analyses. Findings suggest that significant differences exist between users who tweet via mobile devices, and thus may be present at protests, and those who tweet from computers. Mobile users post fewer URLs overall; however, when they do, they are more likely to link to traditional news sources and to provide additional hashtags for context. Over time, all link-posting declines, as users become better able to convey first-hand information. Notably, results for most analyses significantly change when restricted to original tweets only, rather than including retweets.

1. Introduction

Since the rise of the commercial Internet in the mid-1990s, researchers have speculated on the impact of this decentralized, many-to-many communication pathway on political and social organization. Some of this speculation predates even the simple self-publishing tools found in early blog platforms (e.g., Bimber, 1998), suggesting a certain inevitability to the infusion of social media into the structure of political information flow. In the last decade, blogs, social network sites, and online-only news organizations have become key parts of the mass political discussion.

Recent protest events around the world have led some to speculate that the "microblogging" platform Twitter now plays a key role in organizing mass protest. Twitter allows users to quickly distribute messages of up to 140 characters, which may include links to content on the web, via computers, mobile phones, and other Internet-connected devices. This ability to quickly spread information within a loose conglomeration of social networks, outside the gatekeeping control of traditional media, would appear to make the platform very useful in the quickly moving and potentially confusing physical and temporal context of a large-scale protest, such as that seen in Iran's so-called "Twitter Revolution" ("Iran's Twitter revolution," 2009). Twitter has also been cited as an important factor in anti-government uprisings in Moldova, Tunisia, and Egypt (Barry, 2009; Boudreau, 2011; Olivarez-Giles, 2011), as well as the 2011 U.S. labor protests centered in Wisconsin (Levine, 2011). It is also seen as a key new outlet for citizen journalism (Epstein & Kraft, 2010). Across analyses of these events, scholars and commentators remain unsettled on the extent to which Twitter activity is coming from those who are actually at or near the protests, as opposed to geographical distant supporters.

This case study focuses on the use of Twitter in the early days of the Wisconsin protests, specifically examining its uses as an alternative news source and distribution channel to the traditional media both in and outside of Madison, WI. This is potentially a highly important role for Twitter as a medium, because it allows people around the world to relay news they've encountered elsewhere, while allowing those physically present to provide reports from ongoing events. The mobile nature of the platform raises key questions about the production of news information in the new media era by presenting a venue in which citizen journalists can route around not only the traditional institutions and production processes of news, but also the established forms of organized citizen journalism. To study the use of Twitter in the Wisconsin context, we first present a brief history of the protests themselves, and then examine existing theory regarding protest communication, citizen journalism, and the use of mobile computing in information diffusion.

1.1. The 2011 Wisconsin labor protests

On February 11, 2011, Governor Scott Walker announced his intention to strip about 175,000 public employees of their

* Corresponding author. Address: 1100 Lincoln Dr., Mail Code 6601, Carbondale, IL 62901, United States. Tel.: +1 618 536 3361.
E-mail address: asveenstra@siu.edu (A.S. Veenstra).

0747-5632/$ - see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.10.011

collective bargaining rights (Spicuzza & Barbour, 2011). Though Walker expected the so-called "budget repair bill" to be passed within a week of the announcement (Bauer, 2011), public employee unions quickly mobilized in opposition to it. On February 14, public employee unions, University of Wisconsin–Madison students and others staged the first of many rallies at the Wisconsin Capitol building in downtown Madison (Kalk Derby, 2011), leading into a period of semi-permanent protest both within and around the building. On February 17, Democratic members of the state Senate left the state to deny the Senate a quorum and keep it from being able to vote on the bill.

For the next several weeks, rallies continued to form largely through decentralized means, with the support of unions and activist organizations from Wisconsin and around the United States (Simmons, 2011). On March 9, a revised version of the bill, containing only the provisions stripping collective bargaining rights and thus not subject to the budget's quorum rules, was passed by both houses of the Wisconsin legislature, and was signed by the governor the next day. On March 12, the Democratic senators returned to Wisconsin, with Capitol protests still ongoing. During the pre-passage period, recall efforts were put in motion against all recall-eligible senators, both Republican and Democratic, with two Republican senators being removed from office later in the year. Subsequent recalls removed one more Republican senator in 2012, though Governor Walker retained his office.

2. Literature review

2.1. Communication in protest movements

On their face, the Wisconsin protests have much in common with previous protests that have been staged around the Capitol building in Madison and at sites around the world. Traditionally, such events have been organized through resource mobilization within an organization, based on relatively slow communication channels, such as face-to-face discussion, and have been largely dependent on social proximity and interpersonal affect (Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980).

At its most basic, digital communication dramatically speeds the process of communicating within any organization, including social movements (Myers, 1994). But perhaps more importantly, it facilitates much easier *informal* communication between a movement and unaffiliated but sympathetic individuals, as well as decentralized communication between and among those individuals (Diani, 2000; Myers, 1994). Thus, the Internet and its associated technologies provide not only a bridge from a movement to the public, they provide a method for engagement and participation by individuals who may never have significant contact with any social movement organization, empowering a expanded network of weak ties.

This ability of new communication technologies to boost civic engagement and social mobilization has been examined from a variety of perspectives, ranging from traditional protests to new forms of activism based on digital communication to pop culture fandom (see Scardaville, 2005). Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2005) note that Iraqis used text messages to anonymously report criminal activity to local authorities; the International Campaign to Ban Landmines used e-mail in order to reduce overhead and increase accessibility while operating in third world countries; and in the "Battle in Seattle" protests against the World Trade Organization, disparate groups used the Internet to form a temporary coalition of activists with many different concerns but one big target in common. In the Philippines, the second "People Power" revolution was organized largely through text messaging (Rafael, 2003). Each of these occurrences can be seen as precursors of later protest or social movement activity organized through similar, subsequent technology, such as contemporary social network sites.

The technologies of the Internet have also been found to reduce barriers to political participation. In their research on transnational mobilization at the EU Summit, Bédoyan, Van Aelst, and Walgrave (2001) discuss the ways that the Internet was used to accommodate the international participants and how information about the logistics of demonstrations was made available electronically. When studying participation in five globalization protests in multiple countries, Fisher and her colleagues come to similar conclusions: More than 80% of the protesters reported using the Internet to learn about the issue, organize accommodations or transportation, or coordinate with other people coming to the protest (Fisher & Boekkooi, 2010; Fisher, Stanley, Berman, & Neff, 2005).

In addition, the Internet provides an outlet not just to connect with other like-minded activists, but also to obtain information that the traditional media does not provide. For people otherwise dependent on media sources publishing a limited range of viewpoints, online news information can be "deployed in a democratic and emancipatory manner by a growing planetary citizenry," which seemed to occur in the early 2003 protests against the then-looming Iraq War (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). The Internet's most important function in the phenomenon may have been to counteract the suppressive effect of traditional media, especially television, on the likelihood of protesting (Hwang, Schmierbach, Paek, Gil de Zúñiga, & Shah, 2006).

In recent years, the emergence of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube, has provided activists powerful tools to mobilize the masses to protest. Neumayer and Raffl (2008), analyzing the anti-FARC rallies in Colombia organized via Facebook, argue that social media has the potential to foster grassroots activism, political inclusion, and community-building that decrease oppressive or elitist forms of political decision-making. However, some scholars argue the opposite. Burns and Eltham (2009), after investigating Twitter's role during Iran's 2009 election crisis, warn that those who believe Twitter and other social media will enable ordinary people to seize power from repressive regimes should consider the fate of Iran's protestors, some of whom paid for their enthusiastic adoption of Twitter with their lives.

The confluence of these events suggests multiple possible models for activist communication in the new media environment. While it is clear that the use of social network sites and other new media to mobilize might be seen as a modernized form of protest communication, the inextricable link to news media and information also allows this phenomenon to be seen as a kind of citizen journalism, in which participation is a key factor in one's ability to gather and distribute information.

2.2. Citizen journalism

Sometimes called "participatory journalism," "grassroots journalism," or "public journalism," the concept of citizen journalism – that is, content produced by ordinary citizens with an emphasis on individual participation and engagement with the entire process of gathering, reporting, and producing news information – has built momentum in recent years, spurred by new developments in Internet technology (Niekamp, 2009). The emergence of various forms of citizen journalism has enabled the public to perform "an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 2).

Citizen journalism is often organized around "mobilizing information" (Mythen, 2010), which Lemert, Mitzman, Seither, Cook, and O'Neil (1977) defined as any information that allows people to act on attitudes they already possess. A study by Carpenter