



IN THE NEWS

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Twitter Activism

Introduction

It is almost impossible to avoid news about Twitter these days. Whether it is celebrity tweets, tweeting journalists, or global movements using Twitter to organize, Twitter is often the instigator, source, and object of news. To some, Twitter is yet another crowded, fast-cycling feed of everything under the sun, from what someone ate for breakfast to how bored they are at work. On the other hand, it is also a platform to organize social movements in a much faster and more diverse manner than past door-to-door education or rally-style demonstrations.

Political activists heralded the power of Twitter during the Arab Spring, or Arab Awakening. More recent “Twitter activism” includes reaction to Boko Haram’s kidnapping hundreds of Nigerian girls. Another recent example is of the U.S.-based National Rifle Association members posting pictures of themselves holding weapons outside Chipotle stores in protest of the fact that Chipotle decided not to allow weapons in their restaurants in spite of Texas’s open carry laws. Both of these recent issues coalesced around their own Twitter hashtag, #BringBackOurGirls and #BoycottChipotle, and both received criticism.

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We might begin by asking: Is what happens on Twitter deserving of the term “activism”? And is the instantaneous, viral quality of Twitter a positive or negative when it comes to activism? Terms like “clictivism” and “hashtag activism” as well as “Twitter activism” have been coined to deal with such questions. The debate usually centers around those who think raising awareness is a kind of activism and those who believe activism has to be an embodied activity, usually one performed with others.

What Is Twitter and How Does It Work?

Twitter claims that it “helps you create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers.”¹ Additionally, it seeks to connect people via their digital devices by letting users follow other’s accounts and letting users be followed. One can more directly connect with others by inserting an account holder’s handle (@Kates_Take, for example). All this connection happens in messages that are less than 140 characters long and that use hashtags (#) to highlight words. In broader terms, Twitter is a digital social networking platform that anyone can join or access as long as they have an internet connection and their government doesn’t block the service.

The combination of hashtags, handles, and followers creates

a network or web that instantaneously publishes a message, forwards it, and continues to broaden the web. Hence the viral quality of Twitter. For example, I tweeted: “Can digital technologies reshape our spiritual norms of ‘attention’? shar.es/VALeZ @FemTheologian @joyceannmercer @nathanairplane.” Then my followers @FemTheologian, @joyceannmercer, and @nathanairplane were sent the link I posted and could choose to forward the message, sharing it with their followers. You can see from the picture that two of them favorited it and forwarded it. The tweet is seen by my followers in their feeds, and had I added a hashtag like #technology or #spirituality, it would have been searchable by anyone on Twitter watching for those keywords.



Here is an example of the way one tweet can quickly spread to reach additional users when followers share the original message with their own followers.

Jesus Was a Social Networker

Digital social networking is relatively new, but social networking is not. Jesus and the movement that formed around him was built by social networking, as were the early Christian

communities. Jesus would say in one town that he was going to the next, and travelers would spread the word (virally, albeit rather slowly). Crowds would show up randomly, as if a flash-mob invitation had been tweeted out by birds, the news making its way from one village market to the next. Jesus’ ability to gather a crowd on such short notice and the fact that someone he had never met might “know” of his miracles in advance scared the religious and political leadership of the time. The institutional authorities were unable to control the story and the way the community of Christians kept growing. This generated fear in the established authority, as it has throughout history.

Early Christian communities were founded on a similar method of networking. Disciples and converts formed small communities to practice their religion together, but more importantly, doing so helped them spread the stories and beliefs of this newly forming religion. Paul might as well have had a degree in social movements. He used letters to communicate to new communities, theologizing on the fly to integrate diverse voices and welcome new believers with very different histories. For example, he got rid of requirements to be circumcised or to eat only certain foods. The letters collected from Paul in the Bible are not necessarily even all written by him. He developed a group of followers who could spread his message under his name, giving the “organizing” a sense of authority. Of course, there were squabbles over theology and Christian practices then just as there are today. The epistles (letters) provide record of the kind of back-and-forth conversation that was taking place as communities struggled with how to live out their beliefs.

In their long form, the epistles might be more analogous to today’s blogs. However, we know that sayings from Jesus, Paul, and other major figures in the developing tradition of Christianity became popular ways to teach and spread the religion. It was a tradition of the time to sum

up the meaning of one's movement or the character of a person in aphorisms. This practice mimics tweeting. Small snippets become a totalizing thought that stand for a larger set of beliefs or practices. For example, if I were to say, "The Love Commandment," most Christians would automatically recall Jesus' statement to religious authorities about which law was most important.

If I were to tweet, "#Healthcare is a #HumanRight. Let's speak up. #LoveCommandment in action," Christians reading my tweet would be able to assume a particular theological interpretation that grounds my orientation to health-care access. Granted, none of what Jesus or Paul did was instantaneous, and only some of it was anonymous or pseudonymous, but it shares all the same qualities of social networking that Twitter activists hope to achieve.

Have Hashtags Changed Activism?

Twitter, at its best, allows individuals to connect and strengthens networks that raise awareness by providing links to opportunities for change. There are, of course, times when the sheer number of supporters (whose awareness came from the Twitter-verse) generates enough pressure that tangible change does occur. For example, in 2012 the Susan G. Komen Foundation was going to stop its funding donations to Planned Parenthood. Supporters of #PlannedParenthood went viral with the news, not only putting pressure on the Susan G. Komen Foundation to reverse its decision but also raising significant amounts of money for Planned Parenthood. Some would say Twitter, at its worst, allows individuals to be in relative comfort, anonymously sometimes, jumping on cause-based bandwagons that lack sophistication. Twitter allows people to act without considering wider consequences. Such criticism has been leveled at individuals such as Michele Obama, who posted

a picture with #BringBackOurGirls in response to the kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls.

Before we can ask if hashtags have changed activism, we need to ask what definition of activism is being used. Sean Gardner (@2morrowknight) is an influential social media activist. In an article about the art of Twitter activism, he writes, "What is a great activist, you ask? I'll tell you: one who informs you of the issues, inspires you to take action, and empowers you to make a difference."²

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While such *great activism* does at times happen, it is often missing from Twitter activist movements. Instead, the primary criticism is that most activism on Twitter stops at "informs you of the issues" and often does so with no consequence to the person forwarding the information. Another criticism is that because of the speed at which campaigns form, there is looser fact checking and a lack of in-depth explanation. As Caitlin Dewey writes in a recent article for the *Washington Post*:

First, critics argue, "hashtag activism" is lazy—it's a frictionless convenience, conducted from the safety of a computer screen, that often serves more as a flattering public symbol of concern than concern itself. More insidiously, some claim, these hashtags are often started not by the people they're supposed to help, but by privileged, pitying outsiders on the other side of the world, gender gap or class divide. That's what made #Kony2012 so vaguely icky. And that's what made #NotYourAsianSidekick and #JusticeforTrayvon so great—those hashtags transcended whatever paternalistic or imperialistic traditions may exist in traditional media and discourse, and gave a platform to an oft-disenfranchised group.³

In fact, Twitter is used by many groups primarily for activist agendas. These groups not only use it to spread information, though

that is their primary impetus, but they also include a specific call to action, such as when #JusticeforTrayvon sought to bring people together for rallies and vigils. Twitter activists also successfully pressured one of the jurors who acquitted George Zimmerman to drop her book contract. Feminista Jones, in a col-



This image from Twitter shows one community in which activism that began on Twitter led to more traditional activism in the form of a peaceful protest march seeking #justicefortrayvon

umn wondering if “Twitter is the Underground Railroad of Activism,” writes, “Particularly for people of color, Twitter has become one of the most important tools of modern sociopolitical activism, a powerful force in the Zimmerman trial aftermath and beyond.”⁴

Some critics point out that in the United States there are proportionally more people of color than whites using Twitter.⁵ Access to Twitter and the ability to generate large viral networks impact how a story is told or what action is taken. Many refer to this as a democratization of media or technology. It is a legitimate criticism that Twitter allows the privileged to take on someone else’s cause in an underinformed, do-gooder manner, and activist scholars like Andrea Smith point out that the privileged—majority stakeholders in the status quo—dismiss Twitter activism as a way to silence minority voices that are raising awareness and organizing via Twitter.⁶ Activists such

as Smith ask us to question whether the content, the mode, or the group is what aggravates critics of Twitter activism. It is probably a combination of the three. It may also be that raising awareness is itself enough of an activist contribution to lead folks, over time, to work for concrete change related to a particular issue.

#FinalRemarks

Twitter is not simply a tool for organizing or a space to share random thoughts. Like any significant technology, it alters our behavior and even affects our thought patterns. Global organization has definitely been changed by Twitter. While key phrases and aphoristic, value-laden slogans have been around for centuries, the spread of such networks and the formation of communities reaches new levels with digital social media. Given the speed and possible anonymity, great harm can be done. There are plenty of reported examples of harm, such as the homophobic tweets that Michael Sam received after kissing his boyfriend on ESPN when he was selected in the NFL draft or the onslaught of negative tweets that women of color receive when they speak up against sexual violence. Some would say that the instantaneous quality of Twitter leads to people posting and forwarding without thinking first. Others would say it just allows people to see one another’s true colors.

Twitter, like any other network of people, is not free from the same oppressive forces that shape our everyday lives. It can be used to reinforce them or counter them.

Endnotes

1. “About Twitter,” <https://about.Twitter.com/>.
2. Sean Gardner (@2morrowknight), “Marc Parent and the Art of Twitter Activism,” *Huffington Post*, Nov. 19, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2morrowknight/marc-parent-and-the-art-o_b_785240.html.

3. Caitlin Dewey, “#Bringbackourgirls, #Kony2012, and the Complete, Divisive History of ‘Hashtag Activism,’” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/05/08/bringbackourgirls-kony2012-and-the-complete-divisive-history-of-hashtag-activism/>.
4. Feminista Jones, “Is Twitter the Underground Railroad of Activism?” *Salon*, July 17, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/07/17/how_Twitter_fuels_black_activism/.
5. Pew Research Center, “The Demographics of Media Users—2012,” Feb. 14, 2013, http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2013/PIP_SocialMediaUsers.pdf.
6. @Prisonculture and Andrea Smith, “Interlopers on Social Media: Feminism, Women of Color and Oppression,” Jan. 30, 2014, <http://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/2014/01/30/interlopers-on-social-media-feminism-women-of-color-and-oppression>.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is raising awareness a form of activism?
2. How does the form of communication shape or limit the type of response and concrete reaction of the recipient? For example, how was Jesus' message changed when others spoke or wrote about him after he was gone?
3. Who stands to benefit from the democratization of technology through access to social media? What recent examples can you think of to illustrate your response?
4. How does increased global awareness change your approach to current events or social causes, both close to home and far away?