The not so Social Media: Critic of the use of Social Media for the Organization of Social Movements

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The effects of globalization on modern day society continue to increase inter-reliance among different populations due to the advancement of communication technology (Brym, Roberts, Lie & Rytina, 2012). Social media platforms for example, have produced easily accessible means for individuals to interact within the global community. Tools such as Twitter and Facebook function as communication technologies by facilitating the relay of information through the contextualization of localized issues to the global audience. This function creates a circuit in which external populations have the opportunity to advocate for issues which do not exist within their localities (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012). For example, global support for the Black Lives Matter initiative relies predominantly on exposure to external allies rather than the political voice of the people affected directly. From this aspect of social media platforms, a new wave of social activism has appeared.

Local issues within the physical world are now being brought online to the global community via social media platforms (Obar, 2012). A significantly larger amount of individuals have the opportunity to become aware of the situations their online neighbors are exposed to. While awareness is valuable, we must not confuse it with functionality when evaluating the role that social media plays in social movements. In this essay, I argue that although social media has increased the possibility to organize large scale social movements, it has also significantly decreased the effectiveness of these movements. To evaluate this claim, I address the function of
social media and how it is used to organize social gatherings. Then, I consider principles of human behavior and the psychology behind learning and motivation to address how people respond to social movements enacted online. Finally, I draw on real world examples of unproductivity in social movements that result from a heavy reliance on social media.

I begin by bringing the purpose of social media into question. According to Jennifer Evans Cario (1998), social media has three principal purposes: building and strengthening the brand, driving conversations and increasing/monitoring the presence of users. A misconception that many individuals have is that social media provides a means of diffusing power, conventionally held by large media corporations, to any user that has access to the platform (Obar, 2012). Organizers of social movements have taken advantage of this presumed diffusion of power to spark conversations about their causes (Guo & Sexton, 2010). Platforms like Twitter provide an opportunity for organizers to create short and sweet hashtags that are easily recognized and even easier to use to expand and strengthen their brands. This ability does not however make the information released more accurate or credible. In fact, the ability to create short phrases about a topic hinders users from gaining substantial information about the topic. This aspect of social media platforms in conjunction with rapidly changing information makes it hard for users to extract clear ideas. The confusion that results from this without a reliable means of determining the validity of the information pushes users to either reject it or, accept the most familiar information. In the case of social media, this is the information that has been most successful in being retweeted or reposted (Obar, 2012). Functionally speaking, this characteristic of social media is limiting due to its fast pace nature. Users accept a statement as true because of its familiarity; as
a result, the truth within the global setting changes constantly. Consequently, people are not awarded enough time to act on the information they are given outside the realm of online advocacy. Instead, many feed into cycles of validating constantly changing information by retweeting or reposting it for more users to view.

Certain campaigns, such as *Bring Back Our Girls*, do a reasonable job at avoiding this dilemma. What they lack is the ability to present solutions that social media users are able to achieve. Often enough, word limits and the lack of depth in explanation oversimplify issues social movements aim to change. By providing exceptional explanation, organizers risk a decrease in interaction because social media users are provided many other easily engaging stimuli. Too simple a post risks decreased understanding. Ultimately, both these avenues result in inaction through quantitative or qualitative means respectively.

Advancements within communication technologies are not enough to further the agenda of social movements due to influencing factors. Social media platforms have trouble transcending political boundaries established by governments (Brym, 2012). Despite the availability of information to a number of users, the ability to leverage the information for means of action is partially restricted by the users’ physical realities. Indirectly, the platform itself functions as a mass media outlet which is subject to government control, granting these political bodies the ability to silence dialogues like *Bring Back our Girls* (Keating, 2014).

So what do social media platforms offer organizers of social movement and their followings? The answer is not far from the ultimate purpose of mass media: advertising. Like any profitable industry, the structure of social media platforms does not allow for the gain of its users
to be greater than the platform itself. This presents two major issues. The first is that the agenda of social media outlets is not the same as those of social movements. The second is the nature of human behavior within the global community becomes consistent with the demands of the global community and not those of the user’s physical world.

Proponents of social media activism argue that increased presence of issues on social media platforms furthers the agenda of a social movement by creating awareness. In campaigns such as *Free Palestine*, both parties have large followings on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Many of the people who “support” either side of these campaigns have access to large amounts of skewed information. Participants who do not identify with the groups affected are marketing the platform they are using more than raising awareness about the issue they are discussing. By presenting complex issues on simplified platforms, patrons are not provided enough resources to form unbiased opinions or in fact, their own opinions on topics. For instance, the *Free Palestine* campaign presents information to the media to expose injustices that take place due to Israeli apartheid and military occupation. The opposition also presents information to justify their position on the matter. Should a user of social media platforms choose not to identify with one of the two arguments, said user is in support of the majority. This practice is no different than conscious conservatism (Bulhan, 2004). This point is often illustrated by the term neutrality that lies on the side of the oppressor (Fanon, 2007).

What is interesting is that the support of either side promotes the use of Facebook or any other social media platform more than anything else. A post or a tweet serves as an indicator to one’s social network that they are a supporter of a movement; that same post or tweet does not in
any way help those affected by the issue outside the virtual realm. As such, recruiting supporters onto these platforms is not the same as recruiting supporters within the physical world. As the presence of social media advocacy increases, the general definition of support gradually becomes construed. A tweet or post of solidarity becomes enough to support a movement. This in itself is advantageous to the majority because it ensures awareness remains awareness and social movements become stagnated in discussion (Franz, 2007). By adhering to this newly formed definition of support, those with the means to physically support social movements are bound to the side of the majority because organizing via social media is detrimental to their cause in the long run.

Since social media advocacy inevitably leads to inaction, conducting online campaigns using marketing tools like unique pictures or fashion as a mode of advocacy advertises brands instead of messages. Social media users tend to seek methods of artistic expression to increase cohesion within their organization’s message (Jasper, 2008). Tactics such as t-shirts with phrases and posing in abstract positions are often visuals used to show solidarity within movements (Adler, 1995). These tactics become problematic because they tend to create phases where social movements and equity work are viewed as fashionable fads instead of tools of change.

In December of 2014, the “I Can’t Breathe” t-shirts campaign in support of Eric Garner, saturated Facebook and Twitter feeds (Graaf & Boyle, 2014; Mathias, 2014). Supporters would purchase this merchandise and post pictures on social media platforms in support of the Black Lives Matter initiative (Mathias, 2014). However, when assessing the effectiveness of these tactics, buying a shirt has not changed anyone’s premise on the issues of Black lives within the
United States nor empowered Black communities. The publicity surrounding celebrities and other privileged individuals wearing these shirts was neither political nor helpful because that is all they did (Mahoney, 2014). In this case, buying a shirt in support of a complex issue yet again oversimplified the issue, did no more than create financial gains for a particular party, marketed the platform used to promote the shirts and continued conversations to keep the fad in style. Unless the money raised was used to strengthen the political voice of affected groups or the social movement requires fundraising to proceed, this method of “support” is no more than a method of brand advertisement (Carlo, 1998).

Walkouts and die-ins posted on social media platforms are similar in their function of fashionable advocacy online. These tactics have become “cool” because social change has become cool. A reductionist can argue that attendance to said events has become an Instagram upload. That is not to argue that the physical event does not further the agenda of the social movement itself; however, the organization and publication of these events on social media platforms does not. In doing so, the reason for attendance by individuals may stray from the reason the event is being held.

It could be argued that the use of social media platforms to organize events such as walkouts and die-ins has increased the opportunity for individual involvement within these events. This is a premise to which I cannot disagree, as I would imagine that the accessibility of information is greater than before the age of social media. Despite this, a relationship between accessibility to online information and attendance to physical events surrounding social movements has not been established (Obar, 2012). It is a well-known fact that many social
movements existed prior to the creation of social media and mass media outlets. What also holds
to be true is that social involvement in organized groups is declining in Canada and the United
States (Kraut et al., 1998). Here we see that inclusion in the global community is not synonymous
to inclusion within one's physical community. The Ice bucket Challenge highlights this argument
perfectly. The rapid spread of self-promoting videos has not increased support of ALS research or
awareness in the long run. Only 20% of videos mentioned donations to the organization and a
fraction of this percent mentioned understanding of the purpose of the challenge (Oremus, 2014).
The Ice Bucket Challenge was successful in raising funds from blind donations and was able to
achieve the simple goal of fundraising (Schwartz, 2014). Sadly, the price of this victory dwarfed
the benefits of the challenge. For example, more money was spent in Canada and the United States
on water for the Ice Bucket Challenge than was donated to ALS research which became a major
backlash (Oremus, 2014; Samenow, 2014). Also, the amount of people that will benefit from the
research is miniscule to the amount of people that would have benefited from the water used
(Schwartz, 2014). Now, much publicity about the campaign is not about ALS research. In fact,
awareness has been refocused on the effects of wasting millions of gallons of water and the number
of videos despite efforts to educate users about ALS (Schwartz, 2014). Facebook usage also
increased as a product of the campaign (Keating, 2014; Schwartz, 2014).

Reducing the requirements that constitute people as members of an ingroup will also reduce
the affinity those people have to the group. The more energy individuals have to exert to a cause,
the more likely they will be to invest in that cause within the future, due to the value built around
it (Brewer, 1991). In revisiting the simplicity of social media platforms and the Ice Bucket
Challenge all that was required of users to be a supporter of the ALS fundraiser was to create an ice bucket video and donate to the foundation. Many users of Facebook were able to complete the first task but, failed to make the connection between the physical task of creating a video and donating to support research (Oremus, 2014; Schwartz, 2014; Samenow, 2014).

The disconnection between the purpose of the video and the video itself pertains to what support is defined as and what the user is meant to support. The video’s creation is in no way related to any level of support given to ALS research. Exposing the fundraising means is not an adequate criterion to describe a supporter. However, being exposed to the challenge pressures Facebook because they see people they identify with performing a particular action. This creates two types of people: people who perform the ice bucket challenge to be part of the new Facebook craze, and those who do not. None of these groups are required to be supporters of ALS research. One of these groups supports the use of Facebook and the building of branding as the purpose of social media. This latter group has the option of becoming an ALS research support but, as seen by rates of donation and long lasting rates of interest, members of the ice bucket challenge group seldomly do (Oremus, 2014).

When principles such as these are applied to hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #FreePalestine, the criterion to be a supporter is far too simple to be of any assistance to the social movement itself (Keating, 2014). Contributing to conversation online ensures that Twitter remains relevant and, to a lesser degree, promotes one’s personal page. None of these acts apply pressure on political bodies that have the means for change because the bulk of conversation results from users partaking in the social phenomena of following. Following is the increased likelihood that
people will mimic behaviours when they have seen more people perform the particular behaviour (Brewer, 1991). Bodies of power know that as time passes, these hashtags will no longer be trending and another will take its place. Users that once used these hashtags discontinue conversations because it is no longer being reproduced by their network, and are able to opt out of being an active supporter as easily as they became one.

These hashtags, of course, are brought back onto news feeds as mass media outlets release new information pertaining to the specific social movement, creating a cycle. Instead of capitalizing off of opportunities of heightened exposure, social movements organized on social media perpetuate the use of counterproductive tactics such as creative photos of solidarity which ultimately objectify oppression. As resistance becomes a marketable commodity, a dangerous mistake is made, which furthers the distortion of the definition of support. Just like the case with the Ice Bucket Challenge, "supporters" partake in organizing work that is more sociable than supportive. We can call into question how many tweeters are partaking in constructive work that cannot necessarily be put onto social media, and how many people partaking in constructive work are tweeting about it. Social media advocacy creates a structure similar to those used by not-for-profit organizations like World Vision. Instead of formulating transformative solutions, these campaigns offer aid that targets symptoms rather than origins. In doing so, the advocacy groups intervention will always be relevant because the problem will always be present (Collier, 1995; Olisson, 2014). Inadvertently, the advocacy group becomes an obstacle towards their own goals. In order to avoid this issue, social media advocacy groups need to pool resources provided by their followings in a meaningful manner and, dissociate social media platform users from the purpose
of social media. Under this structure, the currency used in this work shifts from monetary donations to verbal ones.

Dissociation from the purpose of social media platforms is a difficult mental task. Likes and retweets on a political post cannot equate to a substantive level of support for a cause. None the less we experience a sort of reward from receiving them (Keating, 2014). This in itself is not detrimental. These self-satisfying rewards benefit social movements by providing exposure. Supporters on the other hand, would need to leverage information for the use outside of social media platforms to contextualize it for actual action.

Because virtual and physical environments can be very different, individuals develop varying identities. Here we see the utility in the application of W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of the double consciousness (Du Bois, 1994). If the demands of the physical world and virtual world do not align, people may form two or more identities to address the needs of the each environment (Reed, 1903).

More often than not, this is the case. Even weak values held by the physical self may be strengthened within online personas due to the phenomenon of following (Franz, 2007). Rewards such as retweets, likes and a sense of community encourage online personas to promote a social movement without effecting the physical self. The creation of two identities comes with consequences. When physical and virtual conditions do not align, each identity will operate in isolation based on the needs of their unique environments. Physical identities will be no more responsible for the actions of online ones than the actions of another individual and vice versa. As a result, commitments made on the behalf of the physical self by the virtual self, do not hold the
same weight as other same self-commitments. Imagine declaring your attendance to a rally via Twitter. Now imagine the same but, in this second scenario, you declared your attendance in a physical room to another person. In most cases, people will feel more obligated to attend the rally in the second condition. Under the first scenario, people can choose not to take responsibility for their actions online because those responsibilities were made under different conditions and by another identity.

Responsibility for one's actions online is not clearly defined either. Even virtual identities cannot take responsibility for a post if they decided to like or retweet it. These actions are influenced by other factors not necessarily related to one's true feelings about the statement. These functions simply serve as rewards for the person who posted the initial statement and a means of exposure for both the user and the platform. Conducting operations online in this way creates a disconnection between the leveraging of information discussed online by the physical self. The break in responsibility for action manifests in inaction in the physical world. Once again, the platform users' perception benefits the platform more than any other party.

Finally, social media does not leave the spread of news in the hands of the public. The majority of the information discussed on social media platforms is directly related to information provided by mass media outlets. The exclusion of campaigns such as *Bring Back Our Girls* from social media platforms is directly related to its exclusion in mainstream media (Keating, 2014). Stories that have had large presence on social media have also shared this privilege through conventional methods of media. Mass media therefore still controls the movement of information on social media platforms (Brym, 2012; Keating, 2014). In the event that supporters do not
capitalize off of the opportunity of exposure, mass media outlets maintain the power to flush out stories or not present them at all.

Therefore, the platform serves its role as a marketing tool, playing the same role a logo does on clothes. The amount of power held by the individual user is similar in this aspect as well. Our virtual selves only have the option to wear the brand or not, to tweet or not and to, advertise or not. What we do not have the power to do is to dissociate mass media from social media and organize social movements on them, just as we cannot change the logo of a company once we have chosen to wear their clothing. In order to further social movements, we must push for the use of more laborious tactics that strengthen commitment of the physical self and define action outside the context of advertisement. Campaigns should become the centralized platforms and transitional methods of moving virtual voices to physical bodies of power. In doing this, the same pressures that lead virtual identities to join groups in solidarity will pressure physical ones to act. Campaigns such as the Ice Bucket Challenge and Black Lives Matter have shown us that social media advocacy can accumulate significant financial gains. To further the utility of these campaigns, organizers must understand concepts of political timing; they must stray away from brand strengthening and move toward community building. Organizers cannot be as complacent as users in their perception of support. Social media advocacy should be used as tool for campaigning and not as a campaign's foundation. By moving away from the online community, hopefully people may be able to encourage the same from their peers.
Reference List


