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HOW DOES TWITTER INFLUENCE A SOCIAL MOVEMENT?

Research in Progress

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Abstract

Impact of social media on social movements is highly debated and not clearly understood. For better clarity, social media's influence should be examined by situating it in the context of use. To do so, a research study was undertaken to look at the role of Twitter in a social movement that emerged in India, post a violent gang-rape. Data was gathered to understand Twitter activity as well as offline activity that occurred post the incident. The research study consisted of multiple phases. The first phase of this research was exploratory in nature and aimed to examine how Twitter interacted with the structure of the social movement. For this, we analyzed important Twitter activity that occurred one week post the critical incident. This paper reports results of the initial, exploratory analysis. It found that Twitter was used as an important information diffusion mechanism. Analysis also revealed that Twitter impacted important structural components of the social movement. It influenced mobilization, identity framing and opportunity structures of the social movement. This helped in a better understanding of the process via which Twitter influenced the social movement.

Keywords: Social media, Social movements, Contentious action, Mobilization

1 Introduction

Role of social media in organizing public protests and mass movements has been the subject of debate. Events such as the Arab revolution (a.k.a Arab Spring) and the Egyptian protests have been cited as prime examples of the socio-political potential of social media (Ghannam 2011; Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Researchers believe that social media plays an important role in aiding protest movements (Ali 2011) and significantly influences the chances of individuals participating or attending protest meets (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). However, other researchers argue that social media “hardly” influences mass movements or revolution (Alterman 2011) and it is the contextual environment that leads to the actual outcomes (Lindsey 2013).

Researchers, policy makers and governments are also starting to take notice. The Internet is being used as a medium to counteract traditional media's (often controlled by handful elites) influence on how information is diffused to the public at large (Della Porta & Mosca 2005). Additionally, ICTs are also bringing about changes in the repertoire of tactics available to ordinary citizens. They are providing new tools like online petitions, hacktivism, online activism etc. (Van Laer & Van Aelst 2010) aiding easy participation and mobilization. As a result, agencies across the world (governments, policy makers and not-for-profit organizations) have been commissioning various studies and reports to understand role of social media in citizen protests.

For example, the United States Army, funded research examining the Zapatista movement in Mexico to enhance understanding of how conflict was evolving in the information age (Ronfeldt et al., 1999).

Similarly, in 2011, Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), published a report that detailed the role of social media in Arab uprisings (Ghannam 2011). Understanding the exact dynamics of how social media is influencing social movements is important for governments across the world. This can help them understand how to respond before movements turn violent. Considering that a social movement, is often a representation of citizen and government dialogue breakdown, social media could be an alternate channel that governments could use to restore communication. Policy makers, social groups and non-government organizations (NGOs) could harness social media in times of events or crises, if they have a better understanding of how social media influences social activity.

While social media might have played a significant role in multiple social movements, the details regarding the actual contribution, especially from the process perspective of social movement emergence, are largely unexplored in Information Systems (IS) research. This represents a knowledge gap. Social media also refers to different channels such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, all varying in terms of their richness. A much useful line of inquiry would be to examine a specific social media channel in the context of the society it is being used in. Besides, social media is just one among many entities playing a role in the complex construct called social movements. In fact, researchers believe that social media should be examined as one entity in the society which is used by humans to bring about a revolution (Fuchs 2012). Researchers examining use of social media from the societal impact perspective would benefit from studies that situate specific social media channels in the context of a social movement. This would give insight into the process of how a particular social media channel impacts social movements.

According to the social movement literature (McAdam et al. 1996; Tilly 1978; Morris & Mueller 1992), opportunity structures, mobilization structures and framing processes are the three factors that influence how a social movement emerges. At the right/opportune moment (determined by environmental characteristics and triggers), a collective identity is formed via framing processes which makes participants believe in the movement's cause. The group then uses the mobilization structures (tools/repertoire) to coordinate and take action. Social media channels have various characteristics that enable instant propagation of information to a large audience. These channels enable free-flow of uncensored information and can increase the awareness of restrictive societal conditions among common citizens. This means that social media channels have the potential to influence the different components of a social movement.

One way of understanding the role of various social media channels would be to explore how it interacts with the underlying structure of a social movement. In order to explore this influence, this research examined a social movement that emerged in response to a brutal gang rape in India in December of 2012. The movement was among the first in India to be called a social media led revolution. During this movement, traditional media and various social media were extensively used to voice protests, share opinions and raise awareness. The goal in the initial phase of this research study was to understand the role of Twitter, as a social media channel, in influencing the various components of social movement that emerged. In the following sections, literature on social movements, role of social media in social movements as well as the methodology are briefly reviewed. This is followed by presentation of preliminary findings and analysis to give an understanding of how Twitter influenced the social movement under discussion.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Anatomy of Social Movements

According to the structural paradigm from the social movement literature (McAdam et al. 1996; McCarthy & Zald 1977), social movements occur when the three components of social movements; opportunity structures, mobilizing structures, and framing processes align.

Opportunity structures, also referred to as political opportunity structures, are related to external environmental conditions (often related to political power) that may impact the social movement. These factors cannot be controlled and often influence the success or failure of social movements. It includes, access to the political system, presence or absence of political elites as allies, alignment (or lack thereof) among the powerful elites in the system, inclination of the state to repress challenging movements as well as their ability to discourage contention (McAdam et al. 1996; Morris 2000; Tarrow 1998).

Mobilizing structures are mechanisms which individuals use to come together and organize themselves for a common cause (McCarthy 1996). These include formal social structures such as social movement organizations and informal networks of family, friends or like-minded individuals. They are the building blocks of any social movement and could also include tactical forms of collective actions such as protests, demonstrations and petitions (McCarthy 1996). The combination of political or opportunity structures as well as mobilizing structures are incomplete in terms of explaining the occurrence of collective action (McAdam et al. 1996).

Framing processes form the third missing component. Framing processes are used by individuals to come together as a group. Framing processes involve use of shared meanings, beliefs or attitudes that help gather support as well as membership for the movement (Benford & Snow 2000). The group forms using the framing processes and uses the mobilization structures in the context of the opportunity structures to emerge as a social movement.

Advancements in information and communication technologies (commonly known as ICTs) have made technology an all pervasive aspect of our everyday lives. Social media, based on Web 2.0 technologies is one of the latest trends in the ICT area. It allows people across the world to create/share information and collaborate online. Individuals are connecting with each other on various personal as well as professional fronts, thus forming social networks. Research has shown that social networks play an important role in translating participation in online activism into participation in offline activism (Harlow & Harp 2012). This implies that social media and social networks have the potential to influence any social movement that needs to be understood. In the next section, we shall look at the role played by social media in how social movements emerge.

2.2 Social Media, Social Networks and Social Movements

Social media represents the potential of Internet and technology in transforming social movements. Social media can bring about fundamental changes in the ways that social movements emerge and develop over time (Melucci 1996; Pickerill 2004). Social media and the networks they create, have huge implications for social and political scenarios. For example, use of social media for activism may negate impacts of government controlled or politically allied media (Ghannam 2011) resulting in free flow of information. Social media can help users become activists and play an important part in how social movements emerge (Alterman 2011). Social media has also shifted the roles of users from mere observers to active participants. Users not only read content, but also generate and share content. In addition to the information aspect, users often share emotions associated with the content. (Choudhary et al. 2012). Social networks become fertile grounds for mobilization due to their ability to transmit information in the form of images, videos and other rich media that evoke similar kind of appeal such as face-to-face strong ties (Howard 2011). Social media enables online activism, changing the perception that social movements are primarily associated with face-to-face connections (Meek 2012).

But, research has also shown that authorities in power use censorship to curtail or stall social mobilization, irrespective of the kind of content they carry (King et al. 2013). Powerful influencers and intermediaries present on social media influence how important trends and decisions are consumed by the general public (Auer 2011). This means that social media can influence social movements in different ways. In order to understand how a specific social media channel can impact the components of a social movement, this study examined a case study where Twitter was used

extensively as the movement emerged. The next section describes in brief the methodology followed to understand the role of Twitter in the specific social movement that emerged.

3 Method and Analysis

To analyze the social movement that emerged post a violent rape incident in India, this study examined well known, key events related to this movement. A timeline was created to observe how social movement activity both offline and on Twitter progressed over the first week. The time period of one week was chosen because initial phase of the research was primarily interested in examining the build-up and emergence of the movement.

3.1 Case Context: Delhi Gang Rape

On December 16th 2012, a 23-year old, paramedical college student was brutally gang-raped by six men (one minor) on a public bus in the Indian capital city of New Delhi. This incident resulted in widespread anger among the public which was expressed on various forums, including traditional media and social media. Soon, public protests against the incident began taking place at Delhi and rest of the country. Clashes among the police and protesters left many injured and a police officer, dead. A judicial committee was set up to suggest possible changes to criminal law that would deal strictly with sexual assault on women. This committee eventually submitted its report outlining measures for quicker trials and severe punishments. Their suggestions were implemented partly and it became a law effective February 3rd 2013.

3.2 Data Gathering

This study used a virtual ethnographic approach, known as “internet-related ethnography” which has been used by researchers to understand social media practices as a blend of online and offline phenomenon (Postill & Pink 2012). The study was interested in understanding the role of Twitter in the emergence of the social movement that followed. Therefore, a search was performed using specific key words such as “Delhi”, “India gang rape”, “India rape”, “Delhi gang rape” on Twitter. Top tweets were downloaded for every single day, up until one week post the incident. According to Twitter, top tweets refer to tweets that generate significant attention as well as activity around them. Twitter displays only the top tweets while displaying search results when a keyword search using its search tool is conducted. The data collection methods were observational and non-participative like in the study used to understand consumer activism in the area of consumer research (Kozinets & Handelman 2004). Similar methodology has been used in the IS area to understand contradictory findings in the area of telework practices (Boell et al. 2016).

3.3 Analysis

A total of 1585 top tweets were collected. This helped in our understanding of how Twitter influenced the protests that shaped up, post the critical incident. In addition, we also used internet sources such as Google as well as Wikipedia extensively for possible sources of links to articles, blogs, media related to the rape incident that got substantial media attention in India. A timeline was constructed using the key events in social media to help understand how the protests emerged. Even though offline and online events continued over many weeks, the exploratory phase of the study specifically examined prominent Twitter activity during the week following the incident to understand how Twitter influenced social movement emergence in the initial period.

A qualitative content analysis of all the tweets collected was done. For every tweet collected, the first pass looked at understanding the various themes that were emerging from the tweets. The aim was to understand broadly “what” was being talked about. Two coders were given instructions to read every individual tweet and to answer the question “What is the tweet trying to communicate?” Post this, the

results of the answers were used as a pool of codes. This pool of codes was then examined by the researcher and the coding team to decide the final codes. This phase is also known as open coding in qualitative content analysis (Corbin & Strauss 2007; Krippendorff 2013). As this was a relatively new area of research, disagreements were resolved by discussion among the members of the coding team.

Most tweets were coded in multiple codes because they carried information about multiple issues. For example, some tweets only carried a link to a news article/blog online. These were coded as information tweets. Others expressed emotions such as anger, frustration, sadness and others in their tweets. Some tweets called for action in wake of the horrible incident that had just occurred while other tweets posed rhetorical questions. Some tweets expressed their opinion on certain elements such as government, politics, society, media, and gender along with communicating emotions (for example anger). In the next round of coding, sub-categories related to the broad categories of emotions and opinions that emerged were combined to generate four broader themes. The broad themes found were: communicating news/information, expressing opinion, expressing emotions and calling for action.

Table 1 indicates examples of few of the initial codes that were found after the first level of content analysis.

| Code | Tweet |
|------------------|--|
| Information/News | "Economics Journal: The Delhi Rape Case, Examined - India Real Time - WSJ http://on.wsj.com/V4BThD " |
| Politics | "More than 24 hours since the Delhi rape, and neither @AamAadmiParty nor @ArvindKejriwal7 have reacted to it. So much for their new thinking!" AamAadmiParty is a political party in India, Arvind Kejriwal is the leader of this political party |
| Society | "Tremendous how India is reacting to the Delhi gang rape. Clear that civil society has woken up & taking its role seriously" |
| Government | "Central Govt has announced setting up of a judicial commission to "probe" the Delhi gang-rape! In short, a strategy to delay govt action!" |
| Media | "Why is Mirror comparing the rape rate in Delhi and Mumbai? Is it a competition?" |
| Anger | "Blood boils hearing about the Delhi rape case.. thrash those bas(t)ards in public and hang them to set an example" |
| Sadness | "Sad that states with women CMs--Delhi and West Bengal--have among the highest numbers of rape cases" |
| Shame | "Delhi gang rape - I am ashamed that I belong to this city I love ." |
| Fear | "Reading about Delhi gang-rape on TOI Hyderabad front page. Feeling the chill of what must have happened to the girl... http://4sq.com/V4bmRN " |
| Call for Action | "Join us for a solidarity march with Delhi rape victim on 23Dec2012 at 5:00pm. Venue: Sankey Tank Park. 18th Cross,Malleswaram. #Bangalore" |

Table 1. Example of tweets related to few initial codes from first pass of content analysis

Next, we examined all tweets and the content they carried to understand which aspect of the social movement was it influencing. At this point we grouped the tweets into three categories, each category respectively including tweets - influencing opportunity structures, mobilizing structures and/or framing processes. Tweets that shared only links to news articles were not included in this coding process.

Table 2 represents examples of various codes found during the analysis.

| Social Movement Process | Meaning | No of Tweets Coded | Examples |
|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Opportunity | They are environmental | 265 | City of rape...! Where politician rapes country and |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--|-----|---|
| Structures | triggers that cannot be controlled. They also include access to political allies, powerful elites that support the movement, state capacity and propensity for repression | | men rapes women...! http://toi.in/c7eVZY What is stopping government from enforcing really strict laws against these sick bastards!#delhi #rape #needstrictlaws Water cannons to disperse those protesting #delhirape outside the CM's house? Because that's what the police need to crack down on? #fail |
| Mobilization Structures | They are mechanisms which individuals use to come together and organize themselves for a common cause. They include use of formal and informal networks to mobilize people as well as various tactics such as protests, demonstrations and petitions | 88 | Lets all meet today (18th Dec) at INDIA GATE 5 PM SHARP to oppose another rape in Delhi. Carry a Candle I want a civilised, not barbaric, India for myself, my children and countrymen. If you think so too sign up here: http://www.change.org/en-IN/petitions/president-cji-delhi-cm-stop-rape-now AMU students to hold candle march against the brutal Delhi rape case on Dec 20, 2012. March will start from MA Library at 5:30 pm. #Aligarh |
| Framing Processes | They refer to use of shared meanings, beliefs or attitudes to help gather support as well as membership for the movement | 233 | #awareness is mattress we Indians have learnt to sleep on. Awareness of terror of corruption of slow justice of rape. Time 2wake. #delhiRape Lethargy, National attitude, Justice delayed is Justice denied. Fast courts can bring about the much needed change. #delhirape Nation burns, quite evidently. What role are you playing - Fuel, Water, or a passive on-looker soaking the warmth!? #delhirape |

Table 2. Example of codes found in tweets

4 Preliminary Findings and Discussion

The constructed timeline of activities around the incident was as follows:

1. 16th December 2012: Gang rape occurred
2. 17th December 2012: At around 7.03 am, first tweet about the incident appeared on Twitter. Subsequently, more tweets appeared. Online news articles were shared heavily on Twitter. Students of a prominent university protested outside a police station in Delhi, pictures uploaded by activists on twitter, more pictures and tweets on Twitter followed
3. 18th December: More protests in Delhi; Protest outside Chief Minister of Delhi's office planned using Facebook post by prominent social activist Anna Hazare was publicized heavily on Twitter
4. 19th December 2012: Protest against violence on women at India Gate, first pictures on Twitter appeared around 6.27 a.m. and followed throughout the day. First online petition called "Stop Rape Now" was created and gathered attention on Twitter. The Black Dot campaign on social media started gaining awareness and was shared extensively on Twitter.
5. 20th December 2012: Protests at India gate continued. Wear Black campaign began. Another online petition called "End rape impunity" hosted on avaaz.org was shared extensively on Twitter
6. 21st December 2012: Physical protests at Delhi (India Gate) and Raisina Hill (official residence of the President of India), Protests turned violent with police use of force, tear gas etc.
7. 22nd December 2012: Videos and pictures showing police versus protesters altercation at protest site shared heavily on Twitter; Judicial committee set up in response to the protests, invited suggestions via phone/email from public towards law amendment for greater women security. This information was shared extensively on Twitter.

Content analysis of the tweets also revealed that there were multiple entities and social structures that were interacting with each other. They included common individuals, celebrities, social networks, government, political leaders, religious leaders, non-government organizations and the news media. Further analysis showed that all the three components of opportunity structures, mobilization structures as well as framing processes defining the social movement were impacted by social media in multiple ways. The next section elaborates how social media interacted with these components.

4.1 Twitter and Opportunity Structures

Twitter provided a relatively inexpensive medium that delivered information instantaneously (speed of information access and availability). Many individual users posted messages and comments relevant to the social cause at hand. Messages on Twitter were used to convey emotions as well as information about ongoing protests around the incident. Close to 62% of the tweets that were collected were related to sharing information and news articles. Among the 1541 tweets selected, almost 7% of the tweets were opinions voiced against the government, police officials as well as politicians in power.

Tweets showed that celebrities in India used their Twitter networks as a powerful force to spread awareness and as a medium of expression. They shared emotions such as anguish, shame, anger at both at the societal conditions as well as the law and order situation. This was available instantly to millions of other users, who followed them on Twitter. It was further shared by these users with their networks. This was an example of how Twitter (specific social media channel) influenced opportunity structures within the social movement by spreading information with speed and in great depth. Twitter with its large number of users and instant access to information became a formidable force. People on Twitter expressed themselves against the current social conditions as well as the lack of government action. Their actions counteracted power centres within the context of governance (protest against police apathy and government inability to make safety measures a priority).

Sharing of this kind of information also highlighted existing, unsafe conditions for ordinary women citizens and this increased awareness impacted how individuals perceived the environmental conditions. This was evident from multiple tweets which questioned the capabilities of current law and order authorities. Information access and raising awareness were important ways in which Twitter altered the opportunity structures for the social movement in the case.

4.2 Twitter and Mobilization Structures

Twitter interacted with the mobilization capabilities of the social movement through its ability to diffuse information. In this case, the information about online and offline protests were spread through Twitter. In addition, online petitions were extensively shared on Twitter. Endorsements by celebrities also greatly influenced the success of the online petition “Stop Rape Now”. Around 2-3% of the tweets were call for action or rhetorical questions. This helped the mobilization aspect of the social movement that emerged. Twitter was used to coordinate offline protests. Tweets shared location and timings of various planned protest meets, creating awareness as well as acting as a recruiting mechanism. Thus, the repertoire for various mobilization structures increased due to presence of Twitter.

4.3 Twitter and Framing Processes

Twitter resulted in new forms of communication, symbols, meanings that interacted with the framing processes to impact the collective identity of any social movement. In this case, online videos showing the clashes between protesters and police officials was shared via links on Twitter. Sharing of videos via Twitter bridged the physical and social medium, helping many individuals who were not physically present at the protest site to connect with the onsite protesters at an emotional level. Multiple tweets conveyed emotions such as anguish, fear and shame. Among the 1541 tweets that were analyzed, close to 10% expressed emotions and feelings such as sadness, fear, anger, disgust etc.

Around 26% of tweets expressed strong opinions regarding various related entities including law and order, politicians, country, city, crime etc. These tweets acted as framing processes for others who shared similar emotions. Hash tags were another way in which common identity and shared language developed among Twitter participants during this movement. Several hash tags such as #delhirape, #delhishame, #nirbhaya were used as anchors on Twitter for conversation around related topics. These hash tags were part of the framing processes of this social movement. As conversations on Twitter evolved, potential participants developed shared concern and meaning. This allowed a collective identity to form in the social movement, directly impacting the framing processes.

The preliminary analysis revealed that Twitter interacted with various structural aspects of the social movement process. The study demonstrated how Twitter interacted with different entities in the society while the social movement emerged. Twitter via its networks and connections, influenced society and its information consumption process. Thus, Twitter created greater opportunities for social protests and change. Twitter also impacted mobilization efforts and helped uncover liberating and constraining structures of society. Via common language, Twitter also helped develop a collective identity online. Thus, Twitter influenced all three components of the social movement that emerged.

5 Contributions and Implications

The exploratory phase of the research study helped understand of how Twitter influenced social movements in multiple ways. It showed that Twitter was an important information diffusion medium, which spread information with great speed and to great depth. This spread of information highlighted the repressive societal conditions that needed to change, creating environmental conditions conducive to rise of a movement. The influencers in society (celebrities from various walks of life) present on Twitter had a large network of followers. Their opinions were shared heavily and also played a role in influencing potential participants. Online petitions shared on Twitter, also received strong participation and signatures. Twitter was also an important medium for coordinating protest logistics. Multiple tweets carried protest location and timing details. In addition, Twitter enabled anchors for conversation via various hashtags. This enabled people online to show their support and identify themselves with the movement.

6 Limitations

Some of the limitations of the study included the limited timeline (one week post incident) as well as the choice of a single source of social media activity (Twitter). The timeline was chosen primarily due to the interest in understanding the emergence or the initial phase of the social movement and to keep the analysis within scope. Twitter was chosen to represent social media activity because the nature of activity on Twitter (recent and trending) was more suited to understand how online and offline world were interacting. Also, only top tweets for Twitter were used, instead of the entire set of Tweets because it represented those tweets that had received wide coverage.

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