The Impact of Social Media on the Black Lives Matter Movement

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ABSTRACT

Counter-narratives can be powerful tools to oppose dominant beliefs, but they are not powerful enough; people tend to interact with like-minded others. This paper investigates the Black Lives Matter movement and its counter-protests on Twitter by adopting event detection, stance classification, and network analysis methods. Additionally, 11 case studies are provided to analyze the interaction of the three social movements with important and hot social or racial incidents. This paper analyzes online discourse: processed raw tweets containing either the movement's hashtags or keywords related to the movement and its counter-protests on Twitter between 2013 and 2020, and network data: the follower IDs and the friends IDs of a sample of Twitter users. Black Lives Matter (BLM) gains wide attention to protest against police brutality and racially-motivated incidents, advocating that Black lives and indigenous lives matter. Social media activism has been increasingly popular in recent years with the rise of social media popularity. For social movements (SMs), social media could act as a platform to gain attention and push events to national headlines, making the movements last longer and potentially achieve their goals. However, SMs have also faced challenges with their presence on social media. For example, they risk putting their goals, organizing strategies, and personal safety in danger. Moreover,

SMs have to deal with the divide in argument between them and the opposition by trying to shape social and political incidents differently. On the other hand, for counter protests, they introduce a new narrative that diverges the ideology and tactics of the recorded protests, diverting attention away from the event's original goals.

Keywords : Black Lives Matter, social media activism, counter-protests, racial incidents, network analysis, online discourse, police brutality, social movements.

2. Introduction

Social media is deeply embedded in the fabric of our society and helps bring awareness to social injustices while promoting community engagement on issues of social justice, like the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Since its inception in 2013, the social movement has grown ominously causing worldwide protests and discussions regarding the treatment of black individuals by police and other citizens. Social media use has long been of interest to researchers due to its growing influence on society. In the context of social movements, digital activism has been explored through its use to promote community engagement to address issues of social justice (Dacon & Tang, 2021). Social media's impact on social movement goals is complex as movements aim to create awareness and grow while other times they retaliate and condemn unfortunate events. To fully understand how social media impacts a social movement, all these facets must be explored. The present evolving role study focuses on social media in relation to protests and counter protests of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The three themes of analysis will revolve around advocacy efforts, social media conversations, and framing of the movement. The #BlackLivesMatter movement is examined as a focal point, with the understanding that the movement fragmented and expanded in response to events in different cities and locations. The movement under study is conceptualized as a 'digital' movement which is presented online through social media platforms, such as Twitter. This consists of participants who use the hashtag BLM to express themselves, as well as those who use the hashtag to perform counter-protests. (Bowman Williams et al., 2021)

3. Historical Context of the Black Lives Matter Movement

Historical Roots of the Black Lives Matter Movement In its 244-year history, the United States of America has not fully recovered from the unspeakable horrors of African American enslavement. As the self-proclaimed "Land of the Free," systemic race-based economic, social, political, and physical violence has prevailed. Historically, race relations have devastating effects on African American individuals and families prejudice from institutions, communities, and individuals. The historical context of race relations has not propelled the federal government to address poverty, employment, education, and political inequalities that are overwhelmingly race-based because people of color and their allies continue contestation through collective actions. For 246 years of this political experiment, African Americans have continuously challenged the federal government through uprisings, boycotts, and protests (Lutz, 2018). In 2008, the people of this nation elected the first African American president, suggesting the United States was in a new era of race relations. On closer inspection of racial horror, an armed patrol shot and killed Trayvon Martin. It is noted that, in 2014, the same year Michael Brown was shot by a police officer, there were 14 African American enslaved. From the continuing racial injustice of Martin's assassination, three black women began the resistance movement of #BlackLivesMatter; a community network that persists despite government efforts to undermine its effects. This study highlights analyses of black race relations, police violence, and responses to these horrors by the non-white community in the virtual landscape of socially-political activism. (Francis and Wright-Rigueur2021)

4. The Role of Social Media in Social Movements

Social media has significantly altered the traditional rules for the development of social movements, and this shift has impacted the ways in which members of marginalized communities engage with and challenge their own subjugation. Spurred by developments in the growing technological milieu, digital activism has become an

emerging issue in academic and media discourses. While research on the social and political impacts of this type of intervention is still in its early stages, critical components of this transformation are exposed through a plurivocal analysis of its social productivity. As a contemporary example, revealed is the transformative role of social media in the inception and execution of the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement.

In the context of heightened visibility and amplified discourses concerning police brutality and unjust violence suffered by Black people in the US, activists, community organizers, creators, and leaders of the three founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, constructed a powerful statement on social media networks, advocating for recognition, justice, and empathy, under the hashtag: #BlackLivesMatter (Richards, 2017). The powerful, unique message rapidly circulated across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram in the circadian world of cyberspace enhancing public consciousness, submitting information on steps of action, and promoting community activism. In correspondence to developments, Black Lives Matter rapidly evolved non-hierarchically and took form, reporting ongoing situations of police brutality, sharing information and producing know-how on resistance tactics. Through its development, rallies, protests, and campaigns took place, not only in similar fashion in cities all over the US, but also across the globe.

5. Case Studies: Social Media's Influence on Specific Events within the Black Lives Matter Movement

Introduction

This paper examines the post hoc narrative attributions of the Black Lives Matter movement's influence to social media. To analyze these attributions, a series of specific instances of social media influencing events within the movement are illuminated as case studies. The case studies presented here showcase the various methodological concerns, examples of the phenomena considered, the role of spread of information and community response as well as responses from proponents of Black Lives Matter and their opponents. This examination of the cases will illustrate

the myriad of ways in which social media can impact real-world events, both positively in terms of mobilizing action and raising awareness and negatively in terms of misrepresentation and exploitation.

• Case Study 1: The Michael Brown Protests Following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014 and the initiation of protests streaming the event, Twitter centered around the trending hashtag BlackLivesMatter. The conversation consisted predominantly of protest-related news, but also contained more racially charged topics. Much of the conversation consisted of posts supporting the protests or condemning the police response, with a smaller faction opposing the protestors as members of the protest were arrested and the state imposed a curfew. (Dacon & Tang, 2021) conducted a similar study which analyzed topic modeling over the social network in addition to sentiment. The sentiment was assigned from crowd-coding based methods, although individual tweets were not crowd-coded but rather assigned sentiment scores by a computer algorithm. There is a substantial bias in favor of one perspective on racial feelings in Ferguson with no discussion of the racial composition of the crowds. Researchers knew that the majority of the community of Ferguson was black and the police were notably mainly white, yet there was no indication in the dataset brought for the study that this industry adequately reflected the real-life race-oriented roles.

6. Challenges and Criticisms of Social Media Activism

There is a large amount of activism occurring on social media. This type of activism is often critiqued, discussed, and called out. It is important to reflect on the critique of digital activism to be a better social media activist. This chapter calls into question the effectiveness of social media protests and the disparities of tools available between privilege and underrepresented groups. While there is debate on the effectiveness of digital activism, recent research suggests that ideas spread through social media to incite change in offline environments (Dacon & Tang, 2021). Other scholars argue that with an overabundance of content, social media activism becomes an echo chamber unable to spread awareness beyond people already familiar with the situation

(Lutz, 2018). The rise in misinformation also means there is an increasing amount of question when viewing social media activism.

Another issue brought up by digital activism is the harassment that can be incited online. The relative anonymity of the web, as well as those attempting to cause harm, has resulted in mobs actively trying to suppress important activisms. There is also the question of potential over-reliance on social media protests, an argument commonly used in dismissal of online engagement, which frames digital protests in a negative light. Diminished the value and effectiveness of protesting through sharing posts or using hashtags compared to in-person marches and activism efforts, in turn, discourages individuals with limited disabilities, or health concerns from participating. While digital activism can be seen as an introduction, stepping stone, or companion to further action, social media advocacy does not always translate into real world activism-action.

7. Future Directions and Recommendations for Social Media Use in Activism

There is widespread agreement that social media has had an important and transformational effect on the proliferation and success of social movements. However, the manner in which social media should be used to effectively build and sustain social movements and whether their impact has been uniformly positive are subject to considerable debate. The 2013 acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer, George Zimmerman, and the subsequent founding of the #BlackLivesMatter online movement has posed various questions regarding social media's role in both social change and the mobilization of a successful social movement (Richards, 2017). There are three key lessons that can be taken from the surge in social activism that took place after the Zimmerman verdict and in response to police brutality and mass incarceration: 1) successful social media use in activism requires continued innovation and adaptability; 2) social movements should strive to use social media to maximize engagement with community members and broader publics to raise issues and build awareness; and 3) an approach that integrates collaboration between experts

in social movements and activists versed in social change may produce the most informed and effective strategies for both digital and offline activism. In order to best accomplish these communication and activism goals, a number of social media recommendations for future social activists have emerged and a proactive and media-savvy approach to social media use is highly encouraged for Black lives Matter activists and others who are operating in the space of social justice activism. Such an approach suggests that social movement organizations should be actively analyzing the most effective hashtag activism trends, innovative strategies, and tactics that have shaped previous advocacy successes and challenges in order to best inform future practices. (Nekmahmud et al.2022)

8. Conclusion

In 2013, three women started as one of the largest social movements in history with just three words: Black Lives Matter (Lutz, 2018). While the purpose of these women was not to begin a massive organization, their call to action inspired protests across the United States. The primary objective was to combat issues of systematic violence and discrimination against black people and the movement itself was decentralized. Other social and progressive movements historically relied heavily on hierarchical organization, mass funding, and formal institutions. Yet, in the digital age, all a social movement needs is an internet connection and an idea. While social media allows for greater ability to spread awareness and support, there are limits to this access. A collective public reaction to this movement? Thousands of voices (M Sánchez, 2018). Some people aren't sure what is happening or why it's developing. As a result of the internet and social media, social-political movements can develop "quickly and unexpectedly". This rise as a network of practices allows individuals who are geographically separated to communicate about a common factor or goal. This paper aims to address how Black Lives Matter has utilized social media as a network of practices to increase social action; this goal is achieved through analysis of , looking at the #BlackLivesMatter twitter hashtag, the several groups involved with the movement, and a timeline on the Ferguson protests in 2014.

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