



Selected Papers of #AoIR2017:
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MAPPING THE AFFORDANCES AND DYNAMICS OF ACTIVIST HASHTAGS

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Internet studies scholars critically pay attention to identifying and analyzing the affordances of particular information communication technologies (ICTs) and digital media platforms. In addition, they examine the affordances of particular mediated spaces that are created and accessed via ICTs. Understanding affordances allows us to consider – and to a certain extent manipulate – the benefits, consequences, and effects of ICTs and platforms. The ability to shape desired outcomes and uses of platforms is an essential aspect of activist movements that seek to use ICTs and networked publics to enact positive social change.

This paper builds upon previous research about the communicative and organizational affordances of platforms (boyd, 2010; Bruns and Burgess, 2015; Highfield and Leaver, 2015; Treem and Leonardi, 2012), in order to identify and analyze the particular affordances of the hashtag within the context of activism and networked publics. The use of hashtags has become a popular way for activist movements to create public dialog and shape social and political outcomes (Papacharissi, 2014). Hashtags are searchable and facilitate conversations between otherwise disconnected users on a particular platform. These basic affordances are integral to the organizational and public function of the hashtag. Yet, when we consider the activist potential of hashtags, we also must examine the communicative and participatory affordances of the hashtag itself, as well as the dynamics facilitated by such affordances.

I limit my analysis to the use of collective storytelling activist hashtags on Twitter because it is one of the most popular spaces for hashtag activism at the intersection of identity politics (Steiner and Eckert, 2017). Two, the use of activist-driven collective storytelling via Twitter hashtags is a strategy for drawing attention to otherwise overlooked demographics and marginalized experiences (Williams, 2015). Drawing from theories of (digital) communication, I explain how the hashtag functions as a unique digitally networked artifact with at least three distinct affordances: *curational*, *polysemic*, and *memetic*. These affordances encapsulate two dynamics with which activists must contend: *duality* within communities of practice and a *multiplicity of articulated*

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subjectivities. Mapping out the potentials of each of these affordances and dynamics is an essential step for activist movements seeking to harness the positive potential of hashtags for social change. Far too often well-intended activist hashtags get co-opted in ways that are antithetical to the intent of the movement; understanding the affordances and dynamics of the hashtag itself can help activists create and utilize them in advantageous ways.

Affordances

Curational

Twitter is a curational platform in which users often respond to or distribute news, images, and links they did not create, but rather they retweet or quote others' tweets. Hashtags afford curational modes of participation. The ability to retweet a story attached to an activist hashtag affords users the ability to engage in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), whereby novice users add value to the space via low levels of participation. In this case, people who curate hashtags amplify the cause without necessarily adding their own story to the stream.

Polysemic

Activist hashtags are polysemic in that they are open to multiple interpretations (Fiske, 1987). Users can interpret hashtags in ways that fit with their cultural worldviews and personal experiences. Polysemy is both a strength and a limitation: the openness affords opportunities for different people to appropriate the meaning as it fits within their own story, however, the openness also means the original goal or intent of the hashtag can evolve beyond recognition or even in ways that are contradictory the original goal of the hashtag.

Memetic

Combining the curational and polysemic affordances, hashtags function as memes that are open to interpretation, invite participatory remix, and easily spread throughout a platform (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). Coleman refers to online memes as viral catchphrases that are "under constant modification by users" (p. 109). Hashtags are memetic catchphrases that are easily and constantly appropriated, co-opted, and

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leveraged in contradictory and complimentary ways. In the context of activism, Reinsborough and Canning (2010) claim that memes are an essential aspect of story-based activism. Similarly, I argue that hashtags function as activist memes.

Dynamics

Duality

Duality describes the productive opposing forces that drive change and creativity within communities of practice. A duality is a “single conceptual unit that is formed by two inseparable and mutually constitutive elements whose inherent tensions and complementarity give the concept richness and dynamism” (Wenger, 1998, p. 66). The four dualities Wenger identifies are participation-reification (concerned with meaning), designed-emergent (focuses on tensions of time, but here can focus on tensions of intent), identification-negotiability (concerned with who has the power to negotiate and interpret goals and meaning), and local-global (boundaries that meet the needs of the community). Duality is a lens for analyzing the dynamics of activist hashtags that - when combined with the curational, polysemic, and memetic affordances - highlights the contradictions, ambivalences, and tensions underlying activism and participation within networked publics.

Multiplicity of Articulated Subjectivities

As a fragmented, asynchronous, and networked platform, Twitter – and participation in collective activist storytelling via hashtags – affords opportunities for individuals to articulate particular subjectivities that are brought into being via the practice of sharing a hashtag. Sharing personal stories alongside the use of a collective hashtag facilitates affective identification among strangers and promises a sense of belonging (Papacharissi 2014). Individuals who publically share personal stories via collective hashtags articulate a particular subjectivity that is at once private and public, one that is deeply personal but imbued with political potential. The use of activist hashtags within networked publics invites ephemeral, temporal, and fragmented participation as an identify signifier that is read and understood within a particular online community.

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Conclusion

The paper concludes with a brief analysis of the feminist hashtag #WhyIStayed – a collective storytelling activist hashtag intended to draw attention to the complexities of intimate partner violence - to elucidate the affordances and dynamics of the hashtag within a networked public.

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