



#Activism – How Twitter Boosts Civic Activism in 140 Characters or Less

Wayne Buente, University of Hawaii at Manoa

Information and communication technologies are both ridiculed and praised for their contributions to democracy. Social media in particular is criticized as mere "desktop" activism, where citizens try to change the world with mouse clicks while engaging very little with "on the ground" social movements. In contrast, others laud social media as a necessary and effective tool for promoting change, even social revolution.

Here I move away from the general debate to focus specifically on Twitter – a social media platform that has proven effective in social activism. Perhaps the most visible use of Twitter was during the Occupy Wall Street protests a few years ago. Since that time, scholars have examined the use of the medium in social movements. Drawing on such work, this brief will discuss some of the important ways Twitter makes a difference with 140 characters or less. Features of Twitter turn out to do a very good job of drawing attention to widespread social movements.

The Attention Economy

Let's start by considering the larger current media context. In modern democracies, citizens are deluged with media content and messages from a variety of sources, in contrast to the situation just a few decades ago. Longstanding traditional media, such as newspaper, radio and television, continue to be influential sources of news and information. Furthermore, cable and satellite television allow viewers to choose among multiple channels with varying content. Social media has become yet another source of information, added to the overall mix, distinctive in that it works primarily via people's social networks or because of individual interest in particular subject matters. In this new hyper-networked age of multiple and competing media sources, the scarcest resource is attention. Media scholars dub this the attention economy, to underline the allocation that matters most when there are so many competing possibilities.

This attention economy matters for social movements because they need attention in order to sustain themselves and grow. Along with attention, even more valuable to any social movement are ways to represent the movement to the public. Social movements still need newspapers, television and radio to help draw attention to their message. In contrast to the recent past, though, social movements now have capacities to counter the dominant media narratives. Looking back to the Vietnam War, anti-war social movements received attention from the news media, yet had little control over how they were portrayed to the public. Media portrayals, especially on television, often disparaged antiwar efforts. Now, social media – and Twitter in particular – allow social movements not only to draw attention but also to engage with multiple audiences. Movement activists can by-pass traditional media outlets and broadcast their own voice in the larger attention economy.

The Distinctive Structure of Twitter

Within social media, it is important to remember that each application has certain features that may or may not exist for other social media applications. Scholars refer to these features as “affordances” because they allow very obvious actions in the same way a door knob affords the opportunity to open a door. For example, Facebook has a “friend” feature that requires reciprocal agreement for the friend request to be acknowledged. In contrast, Twitter has a “follow” feature which does not require reciprocity. One can follow any public account on Twitter without acknowledgement from the owner of the account.

For activism, another key feature is that Tweets are limited to 140 characters. This encourages quick sharing. And given speed and brevity, tweets can be easily retweeted or shared within the user’s Twitter network. Users potentially retweet the same message to their Twitter networks – and if this is done enough times, the message can effectively go “viral” and even be picked up by newspaper and television media outlets.

Visibility and Circulation in 140 Characters

Twitter allows for a greater visibility to social movements because anyone can follow the movement’s Twitter stream. The entry costs are low, making it easy for many people to get involved or simply learn about the cause. Useful for a social movement, its Twitter activity can be broadcast to an offline as well as an online audience. The offline audience represents the social movement activists and leaders who are most involved in the day to day operations. The online audience consists of anyone – including activists who cannot participate in the movement directly, sympathetic supporters, media, and people who just learned about the movement that day. As scholars have learned, activists understand that the tweets they send can serve multiple purposes. For example, tweets to organize offline protests can also be used to deliver messages asking for additional donation of supplies for the event. Tweets thus link the offline and online audiences, enabling those who cannot attend the event to feel they are still doing their part.

Research on Twitter has also shown that the 140-character limit requires activists to publish brief messages – which, in turn, are easily circulated and exchanged. Movement messages in this format are easily understood and forwarded, and tweets can be linked and retweeted allowing for an additional circulation far beyond the core social movement participants. This feature of Twitter forces activists to condense messages into short bursts of texts that have the potential to go “viral.” Activists have incentives to get to their point very quickly and draw attention-grabbing headlines that almost guarantee retweeting. Although such features could arguably hinder a social movement’s ability to craft effective messages, Twitter operates as just one part of a larger digital ecosystem. In this regard, Twitter makes hyperlinking easy, allowing social movement tweets to embed links that take users to other social media platforms, such as Facebook or a blog, where longer messages, stories, and videos can be presented.

In sum, Twitter is ideal for promoting social movements. Since social movements often lack dedicated command and communication structures, Twitter’s features work particularly well to share messages with thousands of people who comprise both an offline and online audience. And because every tweet from a movement could go viral, it is easy to understand why Twitter activism has become crucial in the attention economy.

