

A CRITICAL APPROACH TO MEDIA STUDIES: EXAMPLES OF #HASHTAG CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract: Media research and theories have been criticized for being Euro and US-centric. Important concepts like freedom and democracy have been defined mainly from western perspectives with grand narratives about the social impact of the media. Hence, media have been assimilated to powerful agents which manipulate audiences and media centrism has been the dominant frame through which media effects has been understood. In a context where media has become ubiquitous, even in the Global South, there is the need to revisit our understanding of the impact of media on society. Based on the contemporary realities of mediated societies and focusing on #hashtag movements, the paper argues that there is the need to re-align key concepts of media studies in order to understand contemporary communicative practice. Through an exploration of #hashtag movements like #MeToo which has had a global impact raising awareness about sexual harassment and violence, #rhodesmustfall in South Africa which denounced institutional racism and called for the decolonization of university curricula in Africa and the #fightfortruthmu movement to support investigative journalism and truth in Mauritius, this paper proposes an outline on what could be a critical reflection of the fields of media based on human experience and reciprocity.

Keywords: media studies, protest, human experience, justice

Introduction

The world has witnessed the recent phenomenon of digital activism. In 2017, the #MeToo campaign gathered momentum on social media as the New York Times and the New Yorker broke the Weinstein stories eponymous of the Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein accused of sexual misconduct and abuse. Celebrity movie stars including Rose McGowan, Ashley Judd and Asia Argento to name only a few of them exposed stories of sexual abuse by the Hollywood producer and emboldened the #MeToo movement as more women came forward to tell their stories and opening the floodgates of horror stories of sexual harassments and assaults. The Time magazine honored the women who spoke up as the “silence breakers” and as its 2017 Person of the Year in salutation to the fortitude of the women who spoke out against sexual abuse and misconduct despite the intimidations and threats which they received.

Using the hashtag #MeToo women who have been victims of sexual violence recalled through their personal stories, their traumatic and painful experiences and shamed their harassers who abused of their power and authority. The movement expanded to other parts of the world as it gained magnitude and became a rallying call for women, irrespective of class and color, to use social media to shame their offenders as in France the movement came to be known as #balancetonporcand #YoTambien being the Spanish version of the movement and it took several shapes and shades across the world. Other offshoots of the #MeToo movement like Time’s Up developed and aligned itself with the issues raised by #MeToo.

Another campaign which has gained traction and international visibility through digital activism is the #rhodesmustfall campaign in South Africa. In 2015 the #rhodesmustfall movement started at the University of Cape Town (UCT) demanding that the statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes be removed from the campus as a way to denounce his racism and the imperial legacy. The student uprisings were prompted through the use of the hashtag #rhodesmustfall and spread across campuses in South Africa. In the UK, the movement sparked a debate about racism, the memory of the empire with calls for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel

College, University of Oxford. Following widespread student activism in South Africa, Rhodes fell at UCT as his statue was removed on 9th April 2015 and the movement has since turned into a wider movement calling for decolonization and the transformation of the institutional culture and curricula of universities so that they are culturally close to the needs of society.

In Mauritius the rise of fake news, manipulation and political lies has seen the #fightfortruthmu campaign launched by journalists of l'express newspaper calling for public support of their journalism in a climate of political hostility. Following a 2017 investigative story of l'express based on the claims of a whistle blower about money laundering, the Mauritian Attorney General has had to step down as the police started to enquire into the case. However after a while the whistleblower changed his version and alleged that he had lied about the Attorney General's involvement in the money laundering activities and that he wished to be forgiven by him. The U-turn of the whistleblower smacked impropriety and it was believed that he had been pressured to change version. With these dramatic events the police made early morning landings and searches at the journalists' houses and called them for interrogation. A viral campaign #fightfortruthmu was conducted on social media and on the internet in support of the investigative journalists of l'express and called for the denunciation of political lies that have clouded the whole affair and for truth to prevail in a context where Mauritian politics and democracy have floundered in a state of crisis.

At the outset these stories may appear to raise and address different sets of problems. However one common tenet to these movements is that they have been carried out by activists and have mobilized the youth using hashtags as they address issues of gender, race and class inequalities. They represent acts of dissent from traditional hierarchies of social, political and cultural establishments. Whether it is on Twitter or Facebook or any other social media platforms like Instagram or YouTube or instant messaging applications like Whatsapp, these campaigns have trended online and have expanded offline on the streets and have influenced people and opened new ways for social and political activism within and across national borders. They are vocal campaigns grounded in protests, anger and civil indignation against the current prevailing social and political order. Protest and outrage are the signature mark of movements where people share their experiences of institutional harassment, racism and political lies and abuse.

However zillions of hashtags are shared online on a daily basis as every event seems to afford a hashtag. Many of them do not even turn into trends and do not get a following as their life spans are brief. This begs the question as to how should the political significance of such movements as #MeToo or #rhodesmustfall or #fightfortruthmu must be understood. What are the participatory cultures of online activism and the implications for media and democracy. Traditional approaches view the media as being centrifugal institutions that allow the maintenance of order and stability in society. Often social media is viewed as dispersed and peripheral and as opposed to traditional media which sets the agenda for the powerful and marginalizes that which is part of the counterculture. Couldry notes that "a great deal of the achievements of media and communication research in the 1970s and 1980s consisted in showing, in great detail, why media [...] mattered as a social reference point; as a reproducer of ideology; as an economic force, and, of course, as a source of pleasure, information, and mystification in people's daily lives" (Couldry, 2006, p. 11). However, media centrism is decried as Couldry points to an approach of media studies which is "decentered", specifically "media research whose assumptions and priorities are media-oriented, but not media-centered" as it "raises new and interesting questions, questions that bring media research closer to the problematics of other social sciences, without sacrificing any of media research's historic achievements" (Couldry, 2006, p. 13, original emphasis).

Ethnographic observations

This paper offers an exploration of how should online protests and digital activism be understood in terms of their political and democratic significance. Through ethnographic observations of the development of the online movements, the paper explores the #MeToo, #rhodesmustfall and #fightfortruthmu campaigns and their participatory cultures and the extent to which they make the politics of voice intelligible and contribute to social and political change.

Protest communication

Often it is considered that the internet is a space of diffusion of alternative political communication as people make use of the internet and social media to engage in activities which are outside of traditional mainstream media and politics. Social media are often referred to as counterpoints of traditional media (Mercea, 2012). Online media is represented as giving visibility to voices that have been sidelined by mainstream media. As social media favors a participatory culture, the Indignados, Occupy Movements and the Arab revolutions have been analyzed as being part of the “participatory ecology” (Mercea, Iannelli and Loader, 2015) of social media and the internet and as circumventing traditional media systems (Mercea, 2012).

Protest is also often conceived as taking its cue in non-institutional political participation and gaining traction through digital media. Benett and Segerberg (2012) consider social media as the “organizing agents of protest” as they view social media as a key site for the staging of protests and for rendering visible the relations of power which operate in society. The contention is that traditional print and broadcasting media focus more on the dramaturgy of power relations than revealing their underlying organisation. Nonetheless, if some view social media as utopian others highlight its dystopian aspects as they hold that they are part of the structures of power of major conglomerates including Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon (GAFA). Even though social media is often touted as agents that contrive the deficits of mainstream media and politics and allow the articulation of alternative politics, others are critical and warn that social media represent power imbalances and that individuals have to be very savvy to “overcome such constrictions on participation as surveillance and algorithmic filtering” (Mercea, Iannelli and Loader, 2015, p. 4). The 2018 revelations surrounding Cambridge Analytica tend to raise further questions about digital media which appears to be a modern day propaganda machine for collecting data and for psychological warfare (Cadwalladr, 2018) alarming further the pessimism of its critics.

Approaches to social media and the internet have developed into technologically deterministic ways. Instead, there is a need to adopt an approach which takes into consideration the “multi-faceted, complex and contradictory developments” of the internet (Wasserman, 2017, p. 8). An important feature of protest including digital protest as a form of communication is related to ‘the political’. Neoliberalism has promoted an “anti-politics” ideology of the markets in the sense that the efficacy of the markets has taken precedence over popular sovereignty. The consequences of such an ideology have resulted in the neglect of social relations and the rise of identity politics. In order to restore democracy in a substantive manner, there is the need to consider the uses of social media and of the internet as “like all media, new ICT [...] can be used for good and evil, to exclude or include, to reinforce social hierarchies, to flout them or create new ones [...]” (de Bruijn, Brikman and Nyamnjoh, 2013, p. 15).

Such an approach opens the way to a nuanced conception of social media and a radical approach to democracy (Mouffe, 2005). Radical politics entails taking into account the antagonistic character of politics especially accounting for divergences and conflicts that are part of democratic deliberation. Radical democracy does not discard conflicts and dissensus for the sake of promoting a by default democratic horizon. On the contrary, radical democracy aims to take head-on the elements of conflicts and antagonism and to foster them into the democratic process so that they are taken on board and discussed and allow for new sites of citizenship.

Traditional politics has showed its limits as conflicts are often sidelined to the benefit of consensus which often turns into political apathy or cynicism. Such an approach is detrimental to the democratic process as real issues are swept under the carpet and are not discussed. For this reason, there is the need to uphold radical politics in the sense that in unequal situations, the marginal can make their voices heard and overturn the oppressive conditions in which they are in. Hashtag movements can be analyzed as digital activists make their differend known through new forms of expression and connection. These movements position themselves as counter-hegemonic as they garner their energy in the experiences of people and develop into new affiliations (Papacharissi, 2015). They are radical because they are authentic as they narrate experiences of sexual harassment, racism and falsehood and oppression.

The personal is political

At the outset, the performances as displayed in the hashtag campaigns may seem personal even intimate. Narration of personal encounters and experiences of sexual harassment, racism and falsehood is rendered possible through the conduits of social media and its shareable contents. Couldry highlights the importance of narration in the sense that “narrative is a fundamental capacity of human beings, and its exercise crucial to living, whatever the conditions” (Couldry, 2010, p. 124). Papacharissi also highlights the importance of narration in the forms of personal stories as “the storytelling infrastructure of platforms like Facebook and Twitter invites observers to tune into events they are physically removed from by imagining what these might feel like for people directly experiencing them” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 4). As part of the shareable contents of social media and the internet, besides testimonies of victims of sexual abuse, the audio recording of Harvey Weinstein’s confessions to actress Gutierrez have leaked online as Weinstein is heard angrily disdaining her as she shows resistance to his sexual advances (Boucher, 2018).

The testimonies are private, intimate one and yet the language is replete with anger. Social media has redrawn the lines as people share these stories of sexual abuse and the experiences resonate with the life stories of millions of women across the world and allow them to ‘affiliate’ to the stories. In the case of #MeToo the use of social media has amplified the intensity of the voices and turned these personal stories into collective voices of anger and outrage against the perpetrators. The “Me” in the “MeToo” has transmuted into a “We”, a community of women and men who have gathered courage to speak up against sexual violence despite the threats that they receive. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, the sentencing of Lawrence Nassar, the former American gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor represented a #MeToo pivotal moment as the latter was administered justice and condemned to life imprisonment for sexually abusing women (Correa, 2018)

Similarly in the #Rhodesmustfall (RMF) campaign, student activists protested against institutional racism and imperial legacies. The movement came in the heels of the #Blacklivesmatter (BLM) which use the hashtag to denounce systemic injustice against black people especially the institutional racism of the policing system. If BLM originated in the US and held protests against police brutality against black people, RMF started in South Africa and denounced the feelings of exclusion and marginalization that black students experienced on South African campuses and the need for institutional transformation. Students recounted how the education system marginalizes and alienates them. As part of the movement, Chumani Maxwele, a UCT student and South African activist, threw human excrements on the statue of Cecil Rhodes and this turned into a political performance as students joined the movement which finally toppled the statue of Cecil Rhodes. The movement has taken new shapes as it later turned into protests against university fees and kick started a debate about decolonization of university curricula and the need for social and political relevance.

In Mauritius, the #fightfortruthmu was launched in the context of an investigative story which had many twists and turns as the whistleblower who initially accused the Mauritian Attorney General changed his version and finally accused the investigative journalists to have set a trap for the Attorney General. This dramatic U-turn of the whistleblower triggered a police investigation and the zeal of the police to interrogate the journalists made them appear at the doorsteps of the journalists’ houses at 4 o’clock in the morning. The hashtag campaign allowed the public to support the investigative journalists, to follow the police events and to decry the zeal of the police and of local politicians and demand that truth prevails.

Besides the defiance of the journalists and the public, the #fightfortruthmu campaign on social media and on the internet indicated disaffection with the political class and traditional democracy. In the post-truth era, truth has become a major casualty and in Mauritius many important investigative stories have revealed corruptions and bad governance. Yet these stories have not allowed for further probes as the political class shields itself by demonstrating hostility towards journalists and uses political lies or half-truths especially in a context where there is no freedom of information. Politicians often consider journalists as being an adversary to them and accuse them of carrying political plots instead of considering investigative journalism as an essential pillar of democracy and good governance. In such a context, the #fightfortruthmu campaign has allowed a channel of

expression of the disaffection and public cynicism of the Mauritian publics towards the political class and the tenets of representative democracy.

Voice

Social media has allowed connections of networked publics which refer to spaces that are “constructed through networked technologies and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice” (boyd, 2010, p. 39). Importantly the publics are multiple and dispersed as they interact with each other. Hashtag movements may appear to be people talking past each other. In reality, they have allowed the emergence of political discussions and through distributed voice has allowed individual voices to take part in the participatory culture of social media and become part of the disgruntled collective.

The #MeToo campaigns kick started a moral dialogue about sexual coercion with several high profile figures having to vacate their office following accusations of sexual misconduct. The moral conversations started with denunciations, public anger and at times sprung into excess and backlash. Yet Etzioni, the sociologist, notes that “such dialogues do introduce major improvements but always leave room for more reforms. They often also overshoot in some parts—for instance, lumping behavior that is ambiguous (e.g. ogling) with sexual abuse. And they often engender some backlash. However, they do usher in significant changes in norms, behavior and law—but never so swiftly as the current wave against sexual harassment.” (Etzioni, 2018). The moral dialogue of the campaign has raised new understandings of sexual traumas as participants tuned into the stories of victims, reacted in anger and at other moments expressed solidarity with them.

Similarly in the case of #rhodesmustfall, the movement has created a new ethos of relationship and triggered a dialogue about the persistence of colonialism and the racist heritage in South Africa. It has allowed the production of counter memories of heritage to the official ones. The movement of #rhodesmustfall has provided a platform to articulate and interrogate Rhodes’s legacy and beyond the figure of Rhodes it has allowed for discussions about the need to decolonize African universities. Bosch asserts that “the #RMF Twitter conversations also facilitated the creation of space where people were not only given voice, but where they also listened to each other, across their real or perceived differences. As such, the Twitter conversations around the #RMF campaign can be seen as a collective project of resistance to normative memory production” (Bosch, 2016, p. 10).

In Mauritius, the political dialogue about political lies and truth is latent and ongoing especially on social media and the internet. However in a context where people fear to speak their minds, the #fightfortruthmu platform and social media have allowed people to find spaces where they can express themselves, even though at times the expressions can be impolite even crude and rude. Yet their comments may seem juxtaposed and may not develop into coherent and neat arguments and narratives but they reveal the deep-seated malaise that exists in Mauritian society especially with regards to representative democracy and the political class as citizens are outraged with the greed and arrogance politicians. The basis of political exchanges using #fightfortruthmu and the internet is grounded in anger as people reacted to the police interrogations of the investigative journalists as assaults on truth and hostility towards journalists. However the discussions on social media also represent an urgent call for the emergence of a new generation of Mauritian politicians who are responsive to good governance, accountability and the promotion of truth.

Discussions

The paper articulates five reflections related to the fields of media studies based on digital activism. First, when referring to digital activism, there is a dichotomy between traditional media and social media which is foregrounded in traditional understanding of the media. The dichotomy is not a useful one as the new communication ecology enables activism both on social and mainstream media. Just like in the #MeToo movement, the stories have appeared in New York Times and New Yorker and have moved online and vice versa. As in the case of the #fightfortruthmu, even traditional journalists who have a platform of their own in the form of a newspaper has had to have recourse to social media in order to ask the public to support them in their

investigative stories. Hence, the mainstream and social media dichotomy is a false one as both feeds into each other as they advance the cause of activism and social justice.

Secondly, there is also the need to take into consideration the affordances of social media by the people knowing that the digital infrastructure may deepen inequalities in terms of access, impact and appropriation even if a nuanced account is required (Wasserman, 2017)

Thirdly, the end of history as envisioned by liberal scholars has seen the paradoxical emergence of counter-narratives characterized by the resurgence of particularisms which have not been fostered into the democratic process. There is the need to foster a substantive perspective to democracy. This is most relevant considering the fact that voice entails disrupting the social and political order and the direct expression creates the possibilities of listening. Even if there are excesses, it entails that the conversations must continue so that there are self-adjusting mechanisms allowing for reciprocity towards each other.

Fourthly, there is the need to account for the private experiences of people, especially when these private stories reveal stories of harassment, racism or lies and generate a sense of community and solidarity. The private is political and its exclusion from the public domain may represent forms of continued oppression and marginalization. Finally, online media has allowed new forms of audience participation and the mediated experience of digital media cannot be undermined on the basis that only face-to-face communication matters.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on digital activism through the hashtag movements using #MeToo, #rhodesmustfall and #fightfortruthmu. It has argued that activism has taken new contours as digital activists are able to protest, make their voices heard and call for social justice and change. Importantly these platforms, often in alliance with traditional media, allow citizens to narrate their experiences of oppression and to ask for redress and justice as citizens share their experiences and interact with each other. While this year of 2018 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King, there is no doubt that social media has opened new possibilities for protest and civil action.

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