

#resist: Twitter as an instigator and arena of counter-hegemonic discourse

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Political meaning is made and controlled within Twitter via counter-hegemonic discourse, using Twitter's instigating and inherent capabilities as a technology of engagement that incorporates the platform's limits and the Twitter community's expectation of involvement. Specifically, the levelling of traditionally elitist media echelons to Twitter's horizontal networks, the ability to broadcast to and – more importantly – interact with a wide range of individuals and elites and the use of hashtags to focus and promote attention to political discussions combine to encourage, incite or coordinate counter-hegemonic discourse, action and representation. This encapsulates how meaning is made and controlled within Twitter.

Twitter is different from other social media platforms in allowing and expecting its users to interact and communicate freely across horizontal networks, bypassing traditional methods of – and barriers to – egalitarian communication. Twitter allows its users to form connections based on personal, professional, political and general interests and relationships via a platform capable of information exchange, discussion, broadcasting and interaction (Bergie & Hodson 2015, p. 256). Users have a limit of 140 (editor: now 280) characters to share their thoughts, arguments, experiences, links, and information, with the ability to reply or mention other users in their posts, called 'tweets' (Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 4; Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt & Puschmann eds 2016, p. 428). The traditional power-base tenets are of socio-economic elites participating in and manipulating political discourse (Carah & Louw 2015, p. 18; Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 9), with meaning and traditional media communication being top-down in flow (Carah & Louw 2015, p. 46). However, Twitter has a low threshold for entry where demographic indicators such as social status, education, geographic location, political affiliations or cultural identification do not preclude a user joining the platform and participating (Carah & Louw 2015, p. 14; Maireder & Ausserhofer 2016, p. 306; Park 2013, p. 1641). In 2009, technology journalist Lev Grossman noted this strength, stating, 'Totalitarian governments rule by brute force, and because they control the consensus worldview of those they rule. Tyranny, in other words, is a monologue. But as long as Twitter is up and running, there's no such thing' (Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 16). Twitter allows and encourages its users to communicate via tweets across traditional communication barriers, through its horizontal networks and low-entry threshold, providing opportunity for egalitarian discourse to develop and occur.

The variability of Twitter users has created an open, transparent arena for discourse and interaction, where users can not only observe political conversations of the political elite but also participate in the dialogue (Caspi & Elias 2011, p. 73; Maireder & Ausserhofer 2016, p. 316). The restriction of 140 characters has resulted in tweets generally having a more oral style of composition rather than elevated language of other media/communications platforms (Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt & Puschmann eds 2016, p. 428), with personal experience and expertise meriting inclusion in political discourse. Traditional mass media, by contrast, would

usually exclude or limit such interaction (Bergie & Hodson 2015 p. 256; Caspi & Elias 2011, p. 64; Maireder & Ausserhofer 2016, p. 306). Twitter users have their own motivations for each tweet created, with political tweets originating from users who are commenting on their personal views and lives, to tweets by public officials, organisations disseminating political information, political activists and politicians themselves (Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 30) seeking to create discursive results. Tweets are used to broadcast information and opinion, to interact with other users, or a combination of both (Park 2013, p. 1642; Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 2), with politicians tending to broadcast more than interact (Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 9). Twitter is accepted as being 'increasingly entrenched' in the media landscape (Sauter & Bruns 2015, p. 56; Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt & Puschmann eds 2016, p. 429), with political meaning increasingly developed through interaction with and by Twitter users and challenged accordingly. Twitter provides an arena where political ideas and discourse can easily and openly occur between individuals and the traditionally political elite.

Twitter's platform evokes an expectation of community involvement in generating politically counter-hegemonic discourse, which is best reflected through the mechanism of the hashtag. (Sauter & Bruns 2015, p. 47). Users can choose to add a hashtag to a tweet, which not only indicates the targeting of a potential and particular audience, but adds to a discourse that invites responses and discussion of assumptions (Bergie & Hodson 2015, p. 259; Bohman 2004, p. 131). While Žižek called hashtag activism – where users can believe they are active in a cause just by adding a hashtag to their tweets in 'support' but not engaging any further – 'pseudointeractivity' (Carah & Louw 2015, p. 252), Twitter's creator has said there is 'huge potential to tweet change' (Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 13). This potential has recently begun to be realised with the #blacklivesmatter counter-hegemonic discourse, which began gaining momentum in 2016, and the political mobilisation after the 2016 US Presidential election. Politicians are in the business of mobilising trust (Goggin 2014, p. 263) on social media and offline (Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 12; Sauter & Bruns 2015, p. 56), and the counter-hegemonic meaning making and representation on Twitter is making hashtags far more than a generic communication or punctuation mark (Sauter & Bruns 2015, p. 48). They are instead becoming a discursive tool for generating discourse, communities, activism, awareness of alternate publics, and relationships (Bergie & Hodson 2015, p. 256; Demirhan & Çakır-Demirhan 2015, p. 308; Sauter & Bruns 2015, p. 48). Hashtags are politically important both within the ruling hegemony and the politically activated (Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 13), and the use of hashtags has evolved as a cross-platform communication, now found on other social media sites, mainstream media broadcasts, and everyday conversations (Carah & Louw 2015, p. 272; Demirhan & Çakır-Demirhan 2015, p. 309; Goggin 2014, p. 263). Hashtags are now meaning-making mechanisms and powerful tools in counter-hegemonic discourse.

Twitter itself has become an arena of political meaning making and counter-hegemonic discourse. In bypassing traditional media and governmental controls (Bergie & Hodson 2015, p. 262), political discussion and mobilisation on Twitter is the social negotiation of political focus, meaning and engagement (Bergie & Hodson 2015, p. 259; Maireder & Ausserhofer 2016, p. 310; Park 2013, p. 1642). Representation is politicised on Twitter, as users collect information from elsewhere and share it using hashtags (Bergie & Hodson 2015, p. 260; Carah

& Louw 2015, p. 313). This sharing often operates to highlight the failures, sexism or actions of the politicians being critiqued (Carah & Louw 2015, p. 247; Caspi & Elias 2011, p. 62; Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt & Puschmann eds 2016, p. 431), such as #shepersisted, which is now employed as a rallying cry for female political involvement, represented from its original intent (163 *Congressional Record*, S855; Teen Vogue 2017, np). While Twitter historically tended to repeat and amplify arguments rather than critique politicians or the ruling hegemony (Bergie & Hodson 2015, p. 261; Parmelee & Bichard 2012, p. 16), the proliferation of multiple 'rogue' US Departments on Twitter is in direct response – and resistance – to the latest administration's perceived dismissal of scientific research, its associated budgetary cuts and constant flow of #altfacts (Pappenfuss 2017, np). The on-Twitter creation of all 'rogue' agencies, their coordinated, counter-hegemonic use of #resist or #resistance in their Twitter handles (profile summaries) (Twitter 2017, np) both contributed to political discourse and is an instance of political meaning on Twitter becoming discussed on and distributed within mainstream media (Goggin 2014, p. 248; Pappenfuss 2017, np). The recent mobilisation of Twitter users has significantly shifted the power and political weight to users in order to generate, participate and engage in counter-hegemonic discourse on Twitter and, through the use of Twitter to coordinate plans and approaches, offline in the real world.

Twitter has changed the way political meaning is made and controlled on social media, by generating horizontal networks for users who then can broadcast to and – more importantly – interact with a wide range of individuals and traditional elites, using hashtags to focus and promote attention to political discussions. It is the combination of these factors that works to encourage, incite or coordinate counter-hegemonic discourse, action and representation, none of which can be suppressed on Twitter. As long as Twitter exists, it will provide an arena for political meaning to be made, controlled, discussed, argued and countered, in 140 characters or less. #end

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