

THE HASHTAG AS A CHANNEL OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF THE #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS HASHTAG

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Abstract: *This conceptual paper x-rayed the changing nature of international communication, from the traditional concept of restrictive diplomatic interactions between nations to the concept of liberalized online public sphere, occasioned by social media use of hash tags as auxiliary channels of international communication. The paper reviewed the use of hash tags in various instances for Internet activism, and zeroed in on the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag. The strengths and weaknesses of the hash tag as an instrument of international mobilization were examined. It was posited that as the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag campaign aptly demonstrated, hash tags have become formidable instruments for international public mobilization. Online activities were found to form a synergy with offline activities in efforts at global public mobilization. The paper suggested that other uses of hash tags at the international level should be studied*

Keywords: Hash tag; Internet activism; Online public sphere; Global communication

INTRODUCTION

International communication – also referred to as global communication or transnational communication – is the communication practice that occurs across international borders. International communication is a branch of communication studies, with a scope that covers government-to-government, business-to-business, and people-to-people interactions at a global level (Fortner, 1993; Thussu, 2006). The channels of international communication are simply the means through which international communication is carried. These means and channels of international communication are no doubt changing drastically in the face of new media communication apparatus. Tankha (2000) observes:

The computer and other audio-visual technologies have created the possibility for individuals to become publishers and producers and the Internet has allowed them the possibility of worldwide distribution...The reach of global powers through international institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank show how individuals and states are molded by forces, benign as well as malevolent, that they lack effective control over...The relationship between the individual and the nation is being redefined just as the sovereignty of the

nation state is undermined by transnational forces which have removed their ability to control and regulate

One of such “technologies” and “transnational forces” is the hash tag, a product of social media networks (such as *Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn* and *Tumblr*) which are new media applications that enable real-time user-interface and interaction with many other users irrespective of the limitations of space and time. Page | 2

The hash tag, popularized by *Twitter*, is liberalizing global communication, wresting monopoly of such from established international media corporations and diplomats. It is further democratizing access to, and dissemination of information at the global front, enlarging the scope of public participation and obviating the need for a communicator to make a compulsory recourse to the conventional channels of international communication, or be a diplomat to participate, as is the case with international communication in its traditional sense.

Ekeanyanwu and Kalyango (2013) expatiate on the above arguing that the international communication scene has undergone dramatic changes in the later part of the twenty-first century because of unprecedented consequences of social media on the processes and procedures of communication. They argue that the future of international communication remains fluid because of further sophistication in the New Media technology envisaged. On the attraction of the social media they argue that “one only needs a smart phone and Internet access to actively engage in the production and distribution of news even at the international level. No taxes, no license fees etc to increase ones operational costs”.

The basic channels of international communication are radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, including films, books, and computers via the Internet, telephones, travels, and advertisements. Some of these channels serve as auxiliaries or enhancers of the major known channels and they play complementary roles in international as well as national communication. The hash tag has become one of such auxiliary channels of international communication. Being a brainchild of the social media, it complements the social media as a major channel of transnational communication.

The hash tag is often used for Internet activism and it has elevated activism to global limelight. This is the case with the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag activism. Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman (2012, p. 302) citing Marwell & Oliver (1993) observe that:

Social media network sites have several affordances for promoting participation, particularly protest behavior among youths. They facilitate access to large number of contacts, thereby enabling social movements to reach critical mass... allowing multiple channels of interpersonal feedback, peer acceptance, and reinforcement of group norms, these sites also promote the construction of personal and group identities that are key antecedents of protest behavior.

KEY TERMS

- Hash tag: a hyperlink used on social media to classify information expected to become an issue of international relevance, which when clicked on, links a user to similar information that bear the “#” sign.
- International communication: communication meant for the public or government, which occurs beyond national boundaries, i.e. hash tags that have become popular by trending on Twitter.
- International mobilization: the use of hash tags to create awareness and garner support for a cause on the Internet, also synonymously used with the term, international communication.
- Internet activism: use of the Internet to garner global support for a cause.
- Trend: this means to become popular on the social media. A hash tag that trends is one that has achieved international popularity and relevance by appearing in the “Trend” section of *Twitter*; it is also described as “Trending”.
- Auxiliary channel: an international medium supported by, or which supports another; that is the hash tag as an international communication channel and a product of another – the social media..
- Tweet: a message published on Twitter for circulation among users of the social network.
- Re-tweet: a rebroadcast of a Tweet by another user of Twitter to show support and solidarity with the message. This is equivalent to “Share” and likeable to “Like” on *Facebook*.

DEFINITION AND ORIGIN OF THE HASHTAG

A hash tag is a word or an un-spaced phrase prefixed with the hash character (or the number sign), # to form a label. It is used in various online communities to promote an idea which someone wants to be popular. Such an idea is encapsulated in as few words as possible so as to be catchy and punchy, as seen in #BringBackOurGirls. When a user searches a hash tag in a particular social media, the user is hyperlinked to other posts containing the same hash tag. Social media that support the use of hash tags include *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Tumblr* and *Instagram*.

In the 1970’s the number sign or the hash # was often used in Information Technology to highlight a special meaning. The developers of the C Programming language used

the # for special keywords that had to be processed first by the C processor notes (Kernighan and Ritchie 1978).

The first hash tag used on *Twitter* and on any social network was posted on August 24, 2007 by Chris Messina. He borrowed a leaf from the technological usage, proposing a similar system to be used on *Twitter* to tag topics of interest on the micro blogging network. The objective is that people interested in similar topics can find it easily when they search the hash tagged keywords on *Twitter*. Page | 4

The first use of the term “hash tag” is found in a blog post by Steve Boyd: “Hash Tags =Twitter Groupings”. It was posted on 26 August 2007 two days after Chris Messina had used the hash tag sign for the first time on *Twitter*. The use of hash tags on social media emanated from *Twitter* and is used the most as an international communication channel on the same social network more than on any other.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are bodies of theories in every discipline that provide the explanation for an observable phenomenon in that field. Consequently use of the hash tag as an auxiliary channel of international communication – an observed phenomenon in the field of International Relations – is for this study, couched on two theories examined as follows:

Technological Determinism Theory

This theory presumes that a society’s technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. The term is believed to have been coined by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) while the first major elaboration of the theory was done by Karl Marx. According to Marx, changes in technology, specifically productive ones, primarily influence human social relations, organizational structure and cultural practices. Marx’s position has become embedded in contemporary society where the idea that fast-changing technologies alter human lives is all-pervasive. Marshall McLuhan in 1962 explained the theory in media terms: media technology shapes how individuals in a society think, feel and act and how a society operates as we move from one technological age to another. For instance, mobile phones have changed the way we communicate; hardly do we write informal letters anymore. The theory is criticized for its reductionist and simplistic stance, reducing all facets of societal development to man-made technology (Griffin 2000).

In line with the postulations of the theory, the hash tag as a product of media technology is revolutionizing global communication. It has further democratized access to, and dissemination of information including the flow of global news. Individuals who otherwise have no locus standi to participate in the highly diplomatic communications between states can now be initiators of this same global communication by simply

creating a hash tag that would grasp global attention just like the #BringBackOurGirls campaign did.

Expectancy Value Theory

The underlying idea behind this theory is that media offer rewards which are expected/predicted by potential members of an audience on the basis of relevant past experiences. According to McQuail (2000) this theory is an adaption of the Uses and Gratifications Approach to audiences' use of the media which was first described in an article by Katz (1959). The theory is criticized for neglecting such media influence on the audience as those emanating from addictive media usage, which is based on compulsive use and no more voluntary usage inspired by expected uses and gratifications.

In line with this theory we can understand the use of the hash tag by various users of social media to be because of an expected value or gratification emanating from the usage. Hash tags are not only used officially for international mobilization but at times for contextual self expression in a casual manner. The latter usage can be classified as informal usage. For instance various social media users simply use the hash tag to denote quotidian activities in which they are involved; a *Facebook* user may post: I am in #DaClass receiving #LecturesAndPinging #AtTheSameTime. This diverse usage connotes the uses and gratifications approach to audiences' media use.

A REVIEW OF PRIOR USE OF THE HASHTAG FOR INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

A few examples of the use of hash tags in international communication are examined as follows:

Arab Spring

Various hash tags were used for communication and public mobilization across the Arab world during the revolution that started in the last quarter of 2010 in Tunisia. In addition to the use of hash tags such as #Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, "Date-stamp" hash tags – that is hash tags specifying dates for revolutionary protests – were subsequently used in other parts of the Arab World to communicate dates for planned protests. They include Egypt's #Jan25, Bahrain's #Feb14, Libya's #Feb17, Iraq's #Feb 25, and proposed Saudi Arabia's #March6, #March11 and #March20. The use of the hash tag in the Arab spring was a huge success and marked the emergence of the use of hash tag for political activism.

#Kony2012

#Kony2012 was a trending hash tag in 2012. It was a sequel to a film released by American filmmaker, Invisible Children in March 2012. The film and the hash tag aimed at generating awareness and mobilizing support to have African militia leader Joseph Kony arrested and tried by the International Court of Justice at The Hague for war crimes. The #Kony2012 hash tag was tweeted 5,469,696 times while 3.6 million signed an online petition to lobby policy makers on the issue. This spurred governments' involvement. The US government signed the Reward for Justice Bill, authorizing a reward up to \$5m for any information leading to the arrest of Kony and other internationally wanted human rights abusers. African Union contributed troops while United Nation's Security Council also called for investigation into Kony's LRA group's activities.

#FreeAJStaff

An Egyptian court on June 23, 2014 convicted three Al Jazeera English journalists (Peter Greste, Mohamed Fahmy, and Baher Mohammed) of aiding a terrorist organization and damaging national security by producing false news. Their sentences range from 7 to 10 years and sparked international condemnation from journalists, activists, politicians, and non-governmental organizations. This hash tag emerged after the initial imprisonment of the journalists and prior to their conviction, appearing not just on *Twitter* but in mainstream media and other social media platforms as well. Concerned *Twitter* users urged their followers to tweet and re-tweet the hash tag as it initially lagged in popularity. The conviction on the following day popularized the #Freak hash tag, causing it to be re-tweeted over 50,000 times, according to #BBCTrending). Despite the international awareness raised by the hash tag, only one of the journalists was released on February 12, 2015. This further questions the ability of hash tag activism to cause tangible results.

Others

According to *globalvoicesonline.org*, for most of January 2014, #DigitalMaidan topped *Twitter's* worldwide trending topics. An activist *Twitter* initiative dubbed Twitter Storm called upon *Twitter* users to show support for the then 10-week long Euromaidan anti-government protests (which was an attempt to raise awareness of the importance of financial sanctions against Ukraine) by posting tweets bearing the hash tag "#DigitalMaidan" within a stipulated time. There was an average of 5 to 6 tweets per minute that included the hash tag and over 60,000 #DigitalMaidan tweets published within the hour. #Justice4All is another hash tag used to promote December 2014 march to Washington DC to protest police brutality which resulted in the killing of two unarmed Americans, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown. #ICantBreathe is also a popular hash tag closely associated with the campaign.

From the review, it is clear that the synergistic or complementary use of hash tag activism with offline protest is not news. The #BringBackOurGirls campaign is just a recent example with unprecedented popularity.

THE #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS HASHTAG ACTIVISM

On the night of 14 April 2014, 276 female students were reportedly kidnapped from Government Girls Secondary School Chibok in Borno state, Nigeria. The Islamic Jihadist group, Boko Haram based in the northeastern part of Nigeria claimed responsibility for the kidnap in a video released on May 5, showing about 130 kidnapped girls. The group is domiciled in a place known as Sambisa Forest in Borno State where it is believed the girls were kept. The group threatened to sell the girls off as slaves by giving them out in marriage. Reports on the incident vary; initial BBC reports said 85 students had been kidnapped. The police claimed it could not ascertain the exact number of girls kidnapped. There were reports of some of the girls escaping.

However, all the girls are not yet back as of February 11, 2015 amidst continuing assurances of the girls' rescue by the then Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, during media chat on NTA. Skeptics have been of the view that no girls were actually kidnapped, claiming that the whole campaign was a charade by the opposition to discredit the government. The former Nigerian president had spoken for the first time concerning the incident on May 4 2014; over two weeks after the incident took place. The delay had generated tremendous public criticism which also gave the ensuing #BringBackOurGirls campaign momentum.

How the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag achieved Trending status

Blogger Pamela Kirkland quoting *Topy*, a website that monitors Internet traffic, states that as at July, three months after the hash tag campaign began, more than 4 million tweets had been sent using the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag while 57,000 re-tweets had been recorded from users tweeting from around the world. This feat was possible due to the interest the hash tag generated not just from concerned Nigerians but from netizens around the world.

Dr. Oby Ezekweisli, a former minister of education; a former World Bank regional vice president, and a human rights activist, is prominently associated with popularizing the #BringBackOurGirls campaign while Ibrahim Abdullahi, a lawyer, is said to be the initiator of the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag on April 23, 2014. The idea of the hash tag had come from an event in Port Harcourt Nigeria, while Dr. Ezekwesili spoke as a keynote speaker and which Abdullahi watched on television in Abuja. The former later re-tweeted the "#BringBackOurGirls" tweet of the latter and that is how the "fire" was ignited.

Some concerned users created several dedicated twitter accounts bearing the hash tag to help spread the word. Some of the accounts which are still functioning as of February 25, 2014, include #BringBackOurGirls @BBOG Nigeria, #ChibokGirlsClock @chibokclock, J/#BringBackOurGirls @omojuwa. These and many more that have now gone moribund helped to propagate the message. Particularly, @chibokclock maintains a daily countdown of the number of days the abducted girls have remained missing on its *Twitter* profile page. Similarly, the Nigerian Guardian newspaper dedicates a small portion of its front page to a daily count down. Page | 8

Ramaa Mosely, an American film maker is credited with being instrumental to the popularity of the hash tag in the United States. It was claimed she began posting about the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag on April 25 as soon as she saw it on Television. On April 26, 2014 she created a *Facebook* page which as of May 6 had over 46, 500 “Likes”, and a dedicated *Twitter* account called ENDS (Every Nigerian Do Something). Somebody by the name M.K in Chicago U.S. created a “We the People Petition” asking the international community to help with the search for the girls. The online petition as of May 6 had over 17, 400 signatures (Neubauer, 2014).

Malala Yousafzai, the girl attacked by the Taliban for promoting girl education and who later in 2014 won a Nobel Prize lent her voice to the campaign and also visited Nigeria, meeting the then president of the country on the issue. Celebrities such as Chris Brown and Piers Morgan lent their tweets bearing the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag which went viral on social media. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron and the first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama by their identification with the hash tag popularized it. The first lady of the United States held a sign with the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag, posted to her official *Twitter* account. Although she was not the first to do that, this later became the norm in various social media as many other users did likewise. US Secretary of State John Kerry lent the support of his country in this tweet: “On behalf the #POTUS Spoke w/#Nigeria’s PresGJ earlier. US will send security team to help #BringBackOurGirls safely”. In the same vein other countries of the world including United Kingdom, France China, Canada, Iran and Israel provided or pledged support in various ways to help rescue the abducted girls. The European Union passed a resolution on July 17, 2014, and demanded immediate and unconditional release of the abducted school girls.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS HASHTAG AS A CHANNEL OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Strengths/Successes of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign

1. It proved the workability of International mobilization for a local incident

Through the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag people from all over the world were able to get involved in an issue that is otherwise a local one. This lends credence to

McLuhan's theory of the world becoming a global village or as some scholars say, a global family. What happened in the northeastern part of Nigeria, which is likely the remotest geographical location in Nigeria became an international issue, eliciting concern from global citizens and from many of the over 2 billion Netizens. Khan-Ibarra (2014) posits that 500 million people log on to *Facebook* social media everyday and 175 million tweets are sent around the world daily. It is thus a great achievement for a hash tag to trend out of a myriad of issues jostling for the world's attention on the social media. A hash tag garnering up to 4 million tweets and 55, 000 re-tweets within two months is not a regular occurrence. From the hash tag's level of mobilization, one can only imagine the possible impact supposing the campaign had been a revolution against the national government.

2. Provision of quick and uncensored global information

It is no more news that the social media in general democratize access to information and dissemination of information, wresting such powers from the traditional media. This they do nearly at the speed of light. This played out in the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag campaign. Ibrahim Abdullahi who sent the first tweet containing the hash tag is a lawyer, not a journalist. More so he was able to express himself without any institutional inhibitions. Who knows if the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag would have been edited off the tweet if it had been subjected to editorial processes of the "Old Media? If that is the case, one also wonders what would have become of the global awareness it raised about the kidnap. Without prejudice to editorial functions, the birth of this hash tag underscores the essence of disseminating raw information in the spirit of free flow of information across the globe.

3. It prompted commitment from governments of around the world.

The social media through the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag advocacy performed the watchdog function of the mass media. While the hash tag may not have literally addressed the national government, since they did not claim responsibility for the kidnap and therefore did not have custody of the girls, it was a constant reminder of the basic function of government: to protect citizens' lives and property. The hash tag was therefore a clarion call to duty, seeking to hold the government accountable. In fact Megan (2014) reports that such was the pressure that the Nigerian government contracted a Washington DC Public Relations firm, *LEVICK*, for \$1.2million "to work on the international and local media narrative" surrounding the kidnap. The hash tag campaign successfully got the government that seemed initially lethargic about the kidnap to commit more resources to bring back the girls besides international governments' support. As earlier hinted, countries of the world rallied round Nigeria to assist in the girls' rescue; the United States had to send Intelligence personnel to assist the national government.

4. It engendered participation by all and sundry

During the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag campaign, anyone with Internet access could participate in this international communication activity – the handicapped, the hospitalized, and the introverted – anyone. The basis of participation was no more the ability to gain access to Cable News Network (CNN) and other world class international communication channels or being a diplomat; in fact the basis of participation was not even physical, at the barest minimum anyone with a phone, Internet connection and basic knowledge of logging onto a website could participate. One just needs to have an account with *Twitter* – which can be opened free of charge – so as to talk to diverse stakeholders via the tweet or re-tweet of #BringBackOurGirls. Just about anyone can attract phenomenal world attention to a cause just like Ibrahim Abdullahi did by first tweeting the hash tag. Page | 10

5. It demonstrated how online communication can complement offline activities.

In a manner typical of the Arab Spring where the social networks were instrumental to the success of the revolution, the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag campaign complemented the offline protest that took place at Unity Fountain in Abuja. The protest was sustained for over a period of one month and drew the attention or wrath of the police as the case may be. Never has a hash tag campaign been used better to muster and sustain support for an offline action as was done with this campaign and this is the unique thing about this hash tag campaign. Even the popular #Kony2012 did not mobilize support for protest march as did the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag campaign. The popularity of the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag seemed to rub off on the protest giving it the sustaining fillip. The fact that the hash tag idea itself originated from an offline event proves further the synergic roles offline and online efforts can interchangeably and simultaneously play in international public mobilization.

Criticisms/weaknesses of the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag Campaign

1. Clicktivism and Slacktivism

Clicktivism is the tendency of activism to be reduced to mere click of the mouse, yielding numbers (in form of likes, tweets, re-tweets etc) with little or no real engagement or commitment to a cause. Slacktivism is similarly defined as online political discussions that lead to fragmentation and polarization rather than consensus. People in other words slack into polarized camps instead of mobilizing online. In essence, both concepts accuse hash tags and *Facebook* “likes”, *Twitter* “re-tweet” etc of having the potential to make people feel as if they “did something” about a cause without actually doing anything to meaningfully enact change (Morozov 2011; Hirzalla et al 2011). Critics argue that the Internet occupies free time that can no longer be spent getting involved in activist groups. White (2010) captures the effect of clicktivism this way:

Political engagement becomes (because of clicktivism) a matter of clicking a few links and neglects the vital, immeasurable inner-events and personal epiphanies that great social ruptures are actually made of.

Critics of the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag maintain that it replaced more substantial, effortful forms of inter-personal activism. The fact that the online campaign generated more popularity and involvement more than the offline protest appears to lend credence to this argument. Page | 11

2. The campaign has not succeeded in bringing the abducted girls back

As if to emphasize the clicktivism and slacktivism argument, the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag activism has not succeeded in its ultimate demand which is to ensure the rescue of the abducted girls. The campaign, even though it elicited worldwide attention, has not resulted in freedom for the girls. This seems to prove the skeptics' claim that even though "likes", "tweets" and "re-tweets" can generate global attention, they transform into no tangible results.

3. The national government perceived the hash tag as a tool in the hand of the opposition

The person seen as the chief proponent of the hash tag campaign, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili is seen as a member of the opposition party APC, which is always at loggerheads with the party in power PDP, and perceived by government spokespersons as power hungry. Many of the proponents of the #BringBackOurGirls protests especially those who publicly identified with it such as Mallam Nasir El Rufai, the former FCT minister, are critical members of the opposition. This perception fuelled the claim that the campaign was aimed at discrediting the government. Some persons like Militant leader Dokubo Asari, had taken the claim to the extreme by claiming that no girls went missing in the first place. According to Godwin Ohimai, Special Assistant to the Minister of State for Defence:

The easiest way to become a hero, activist or advocate of the masses today is to create or identify with a hash tag that denigrates, bullies, oppresses or ridicules the efforts of the government...I shook my head in pity as I saw the kidnap of our young girls in Chibok reduced to a hash tag that breastfeeds the political ambition and street creed of some power mongers.

That probably underscores the perception of the campaign among those in the corridors of power, and may have contributed in the ultimate failure of the campaign to bring back the girls.

CONCLUSION

Despite its flaws the hash tag has come to stay as a tool for international communication and public mobilization. This is because the social media, because of the multi-faceted benefits contained in their numerous applications and services, have become indispensable in all human endeavors. The use of the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag as a channel of international communication is in the area of Internet activism, which was the focus of this study. The strengths and weaknesses of the hash tag discussed in this study were treated as peculiar to, but not limited to the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag, as some of the points can be identified in other use of hash tags for international mobilization. From the review of prior use of hash tags it was became clear that the complementary use of hash tags with offline activities was not peculiar to the hash tag under discourse.

Worthy of emphasis is the synergy created when governments of the world rallied round a nation, eager to volunteer various levels of expertise towards tackling a kidnap – a product of a universal monster: terrorism. This demonstrates the practicability of Marshal McLuhan's global village theory which posits that modern technological communication devices are bridging the sectarian boundaries of nations of the world in such a way that these international entities are becoming likened to a communal village, wherein "natives" watch one another's back. It further lends credence to the operation of the Technological Determinism Theory which was reviewed in this work. Other uses of the hash tag at the international level which require comprehensive further study include its use for information dissemination; say in land or air traffic management by governments, government agencies and its use for public relations by global citizens and business entities, including the traditional mass media.

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