

Afterword: Ethics, Backlash, and Access in Twitter Research

Over the course of the research for this book, which spanned five years, internet policy, thinking regarding best practices in online research, the tone of national politics, and the viability of Twitter access for researchers changed—a lot. Here we note some of the issues that concern us because of our vested interest in both research and justice.

Net Neutrality

Our work illustrates the power of Twitter hashtags as a user-generated phenomenon. The 2018 dissolution of the Obama White House Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulation that protected people's ability to access the internet poses a devastating threat to hashtag activism. Federally, net neutrality ended when the FCC voted 3–2 to repeal protections that prevented internet service providers from slowing the speed of broadband usage, from blocking access to certain sites, and from creating fast lanes accessible for a price. Hashtag activism depends on users being able to tweet quickly from mobile devices and access new information rapidly. Advocates fear that if slowing, blocking, and outpricing of people's access to the internet

takes place, it will be nearly impossible for the dynamic and fast-paced democratic culture of hashtag activism to be maintained.

The internet has become such an important medium for activism that it cannot be deregulated into oblivion. Our work shows the power of user-generated hashtags to aid activism and the need for consumers to push back against cable and phone companies that whittle away at access to the internet. Consumers are making inroads, with twenty-two states joining together to challenge the 2018 repeal of net neutrality rules.¹ Local advocacy organizations such as the Equitable Internet Initiative, which has a program that trains young people to install routers, modems, and cables in homes that would otherwise not have access to the internet, circumventing problematic ISPs by effectively creating their own network of providers for their communities.²

Efforts to make access to the internet a human right have had mixed success. While there is interest from users in such a campaign, nation-states have undertaken no coordinated actions to make the freedom to connect a reality. When basic human needs like food, access to clean water, and shelter are still contested, a fight for the right to broadband may seem superfluous. But as we have shown, the internet allows users to make claims and create actions that affect these material realities.

Bots, Trolls, and the Weaponization of Networks

In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, much has been written about the weaponization of social media by foreign governments and domestic extremists. Evidence emerging as we finish writing this book suggests that Russian actors deliberately leveraged social media accounts to spread misinformation.³

More germane to our work, recent work by Ahmer Arif, Leo Stewart, and Kate Starbird suggests that Russian operatives specifically infiltrated #BlackLivesMatter networks on Twitter to amplify polarized political conversations and (presumably) fuel discontent between right-leaning and left-leaning voters interested in race, policing, and gun violence.⁴ Though none of the prominent accounts identified in their published work appears in our networks (which largely predate the run-up to the 2016 presidential election), and though our mixed-methods approach helped us identify and remove suspicious bot and troll accounts from our analysis, it is nevertheless notable that some used hashtags and networks on Twitter as a weapon to fracture an already polarized nation. This finding puts online activism work in a precarious bind. On the one hand, our research points to the real and important advances made by racial and gender justice activists and allies online; on the other, growing concern over Russian interference has put public and political pressure on social media companies to better manage controversial conversations. The risk, of course, is that legitimate activism will be partially or fully silenced—as in the case of Genie Lauren’s suspension, noted in the foreword—in an effort to diminish foreign interference, throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

Such challenges are further complicated by evidence that far-right extremist groups, partly in response to advances made in racial and gender justice, are actively and deliberately using the same networks to manipulate mainstream media.⁵ Members of the alt-right Gamergaters (video-gamers who engage in ongoing harassment of women developers and players), men’s rights activists, and others work together to craft and test messages on

4chan and Reddit that are pushed through Twitter and laundered by partisan media such as Breitbart. Not surprisingly, these efforts often target activists and other members of networked counterpublics, with whom far-right extremists vocally and sometimes violently disagree. Messages curated in extreme right corners of the internet have successfully infiltrated mainstream media and are sometimes held up as equally valid alternate interpretations to messages arising from networked counterpublics. In a misguided effort to give equal airtime to “both sides” of important social justice issues, mainstream media outlets may (however unwittingly) be playing into deliberate attempts to propagate and (re)normalize regressive, sexist, white supremacist narratives.

While some of these concerns are outside the scope of this book, we encourage future researchers not only to tackle the difficult question of the backlash against counterpublic politics online but to continue to elevate and center the good work that is simultaneously occurring. One way to do this is to work with activists and those committed to expanding the public sphere to develop critical interventions and guidelines for responding to the weaponization of networks. If the studies in this book have illustrated anything, it is that those on the margins will find a way to be heard and that we must hear them even as we take realistic stock of the media and political ecosystems in which they face steep uphill battles.

Research Ethics

There were few guidelines about how to handle Twitter data when we began research for this book. Although we worked with

our institutional review board to establish an ethical framework for handling Twitter data, we found ourselves leaning more heavily on our own internally negotiated (and higher) standards for ethical data use as we drafted each chapter. Some chapters demanded more privacy protections than others, as some topics and individual tweets revealed sensitive information. Although we always operated on the assumption that ordinary (non-public figure) users do not fully appreciate that their data can be used by researchers, after recent confirmation in scholarly research we added an additional ethical practice to our workflow.⁶ In addition to the guidelines outlined in the introduction, which included considering context, lifting up marginalized voices, and respecting signals of privacy added after a tweet was issued, we also made our best effort to reach out and inform non-public figures whose tweets we quote.

API Restrictions

As Deen Freelon argued in a 2018 address to the Computational Methods Interest Group at the annual International Communication Association meeting, those interested in using online data are increasingly faced with an impossible choice: violate the terms of service of the platforms that own the data or find a new line of work. The data collection and analyses that motivate the insights in this book would not have been possible without privileged access to Twitter data—access we no longer have, and which would be prohibitively expensive if we were to try to replicate our work today. Although some social media companies are experimenting with ways to share data with social science researchers while respecting the privacy of their users, such

efforts are still quite limited in scope and topic.⁷ The threats to privacy and security that are introduced through unwanted use of social media data are real, but so too are the threats to social scientific insight if we are unable to create pathways for researchers to access data within and across social media platforms. The trend toward restricting data to a small few who are fortunate enough to win grants, or, worse, to those who can afford to pay exorbitant fees for access, risks cutting off the entire enterprise of online social justice research in its infancy. It is imperative that content creators, social media companies, and scholars work together to find solutions that ethically and equitably enable access to the data that underwrite research on social justice and other vital social and behavioral questions.