What price, tag? A study of community voice and the monetization of Twitter

Burton Speakman, Elizabeth Hendrickson, Aaron Atkins[*]

Twitter increasingly represents the first draft of history and as a source for journalists. Yet, this increasing importance of the site comes at a time when Twitter marched toward and then reached profitability. Potential virtual communities such as #BlackTwitter experienced issues with increased commercialization of Twitter including various types of disruption. This study suggests the increased notoriety of #BlackTwitter made it a target for both journalists and businesses which may reduce its potential journalistic utility.

Introduction

Twitter posts increasingly represent the first draft of history, overtaking the role of traditional media. Members of the press follow select Twitter users and prominently shared hashtags as part of their regular news coverage duties. For example, President Donald Trump uses the platform as an official information channel, taking his voice straight to the public and bypassing the media (Collins, 2018). Members of the media, in turn, use Twitter to find news sources and research online communities for stories (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Moon & Hadley, 2014).

One of the most-cited representations of an online community is #BlackTwitter, a hashtag that has been in use for many years. #BlackTwitter's most recent iterations come at a time when journalists are demanding increased diversity in voices, and many journalists may look beyond traditional sources and toward trending hashtags to gain access to that diversity. As such, it is imperative that all journalists – including community journalists – understand this discourse and its use of national, regional and community media of all platforms.

This research looks at two distinct time periods to examine the public discourse offered within #BlackTwitter forums. The first time period, over the 2016 Fourth of July weekend, was months before both a presidential election and Twitter's first profitable quarter. The second time period, May through June 2020, reflects the time when social media attention was focused on racial injustice as a result of a series of deaths of Black citizens. The first death was shown via a viral video posted to social media on May 8, 2020 that documented the shooting of an African American citizen by men claiming to make a citizen's arrest in Brunswick, Georgia, on February 23, 2020. The second event was centered around protests demanding justice in the police-involved killing of Breanna Taylor in Louisville on March 13, 2020 and the subsequent protests

[*] Dr. Burton Speakman is an assistant professor at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. Dr. Elizabeth Hendrickson is an associate professor at Ohio University. Dr. Aaron Atkins is an assistant professor at Weber State University in Utah.

that began on May 28, 2020 and continued for 30 days. The third and final event was the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, and the surrounding protests still ongoing connected to all three incidents.

The goal of this comparison is to provide insights about #BlackTwitter's functionality as it ages. This research considers the increasing significance of public discourse on the site during a time of change in the functionality of the platform. Twitter reported a profit for the first time during the first quarter of 2017, which corresponded, at least in part, to revenue growth based on increased corporate messaging in feeds (Flynn, 2018). It also considers the prominent individuals who use Twitter to bypass the media, thus increasing the site's importance as a means of transmitting communication messages and augment its relevance to researchers who seek to understand communication on the site.

This project studies the use of #BlackTwitter as a virtual community that attempts to serve as its own messenger by both bypassing traditional journalists and presenting its own views directly to its public. The more than 1 billion news articles that use or mention #BlackTwitter since the tag's inception demonstrate the importance of understanding the tag's functions as a driver of community.

The growing prominence of communication on Twitter, both in general and as a news source, combined with increased commercial messages, may alter the ability of groups, such as those who use #BlackTwitter, to communicate using the site. Since #BlackTwitter is a well-known hashtag, it may serve as a target for groups who seek to either degrade, distract from, or attach themselves to the hashtag (Kang, Kim, Chu, Cho, & Kim, 2016), which can occur regardless of the poster's intent. Irrelevant posts can negatively influence those who seek to participate on all forms of social media, and more generally online (Kang, Kim, Chu, Cho, & Kim, 2016; Sisson, 2017). Additionally, the open format of Twitter allows those outside of the virtual community to overwhelm the public using the platform (Hu, Tang, Zhang, & Liu, 2013). This project does not simply review community journalism in a traditional sense. It also considers how media can use a virtual community to engage the audience and supply information on its own. This research also posits how communication can be negatively influenced by outside sources that engage in trolling, astroturfing, or "hashjacking". When that occurs, it seems feasible that interruptions of communication could influence those who congregate around a tag and represent a community to stop using the hashtag and seek online community elsewhere. Previous research from Brock (2012) Florini (2013), and Clark (2014) found #BlackTwitter represents a virtual community. However, this project questions if a well-known, interest-based community that receives extensive, non-related communication continues to serve its intended purpose as a form of virtual community or if it simply becomes too large and well-known for that purpose becoming something else.

Twitter connections and community

Twitter can serve as a ready-made amplifier for public opinion and popular communication research. Its open format and hashtag organizational system carries the potential to alert mainstream journalists to issues otherwise not on their radar (Billings, 2014; Driscoll & Walker, 2014; Lipschultz, 2017). Hashtags allow people to cluster based on specific topics (Bode, Hanna, Yang, & Shah, 2015), creating the possibility for a community to grow. Furthermore, Twitter relevance overall is increasing because it now serves as a news source for 75 percent of those who use the site (Collins, 2018). In total, about 20 percent of Americans

receive the majority of their news through social media. These totals are higher among nonwhite populations (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017).

The 2016 presidential campaign suggested that Twitter may be able to circumvent the traditional gatekeeping roles of the news media (Conway-Silva, Filer, Kenski, & Tsetsi, 2017), at least it as it relates to popular individuals or well-known tags on the site. Trump's use of the site encouraged others to follow suit in bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Collins, 2018), creating a form of hybrid media where individuals and groups use Twitter to generate press interest and coverage while simultaneously avoiding speaking directly to the press (Wells, et al., 2016). While Twitter and mainstream news media may exhibit a symbiotic relationship, Twitter posts increasingly lead to press coverage and not vice versa (Conway-Silva, Filer, Kenski, & Tsetsi, 2017).

This relationship alteration occurred as Twitter became profitable. The company was able to amass profit without increasing users by relying upon more advertising sales volume (Wagner, 2018). Twitter credits its increased revenue to connecting advertisers to targeted audiences in real time (Tsukayama, 2018). However, the question remains about if or how much the company's increased focus on profitability (Wagner, 2018) will impact users of the site – including journalists.

Twitter as a news source

Journalists are using social media to find sources because of its open nature and curation mechanisms for information relating to specific topics (Broesma & Graham, 2014; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Twitter allows journalists to interact with various groups in order to find information that might be challenging to obtain via other methods (Skogerbø, Bruns, Quodling, & Ingebretsen, 2016). Social media has changed the practices of journalists and their sources (Paulussen & Harder, 2014; Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016; Skogerbø, Bruns, Quodling, & Ingebretsen, 2016). It has also altered the relationship between journalists and the public, creating a more open and participatory news process (Broesma & Graham, 2014; Zeller & Hermida, 2015). Yet at this point, elite users and influencers remain the primary groups that journalists quote from the platform (Moon & Hadley, 2014; Skogerbø, Bruns, Quodling, & Ingebretsen, 2016). While news dissemination may be the primary interest of academic research about Twitter (Moon & Hadley), studies have evolved enough to consider more deeply how the site functions as a primary source for news content. Researchers must consider what motivates people to participate in an open forum that, while mostly anonymous, does provide the opportunity (or conversely the risk) of much wider exposure.

Motivation matters in digital communities

Previous #BlackTwitter researchers classified the tag as a form of digital community because of the personal relationships that have developed between its users (Clark, 2014). Personal experiences and perceived benefits motivate people's participation or learning as it relates to media (Bandura, 1989; 2009). Personal agency can influence someone's continued willingness to use certain media (Bandura, 1989; 1991), including a hashtag. Certain motivating factors exist as part of self-efficacy that can influence someone's behavior as it relates to media use (Bandura, 1989; 1991). As it connects to social media, feedback or a lack thereof could represent one of those factors (Bandura, 1991). Online, people only use spaces that provide some level of personal gratification (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Social media allow for direct personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency to influence one's behavior and actions (Bandura,

2001). Therefore, people who use #BlackTwitter might seek to attain a form of social capital through their participation, providing motivation for continued use (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). The expectation is that those involved with the site would have both personal and community-based expectations for its appearance and use (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). People continue to use Twitter based on their perception, combined with any habit they developed while using the site (Barnes & Böhringer, 2011). It is possible these same factors would influence use of #BlackTwitter.

The possibility exists that #BlackTwitter could lose users if the tag develops in a manner that goes against either personal or community expectations (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). There are developments that can stop the habitual use of a site; for example, when changes reduce the gratification one might get from the use of a type of media, users may not engage with the hashtag anymore (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Overall, there is substance to arguments for social media to serve as a form of support for certain populations (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012). As it relates to social media, one of the expectations is interaction, that comments will receive a type of reaction as part of self-efficacy (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011). Political arenas such as #BlackTwitter often serve as a gathering site for motivated individuals to share like-minded ideas within a community (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). As opposed to location-based communities, virtual communities rely upon digital spaces to allow them to engage in community supporting activities. These communities provide support, conversation, engagement, and oft en act similarly for individuals to offline community (Rheingold, 2000). While prior research from Clark (2014), Brock (2012), and Florini (2013) determined #BlackTwitter did meet the definition of a virtual community, there is potential for challenges in #BlackTwitter remaining a digital community due to its tenuous bonds, which are based on a lack of a face-to-face relationships (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010). Research suggests that Twitter overall serves primarily an information source, rather than a method of satisfying social needs (Johnson & Yang, 2009). However, Twitter as a form of social media has shown the potential to serve as a community for specific hashtag users through identification and use intention (Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017).

Community

Digital media focus on the idea of collaborative communication involving interaction and engagement (DeAndrea, Van Der Heide, & Easley, 2015), which are among the main elements necessary for building and sustaining a community. Representing #BlackTwitter as a community may diverge from traditional notions of the concept, but the hashtag seems to connect a group of people who are through their interests related to race and social equality (Clark, 2014; Goel, 2014). Racial identity represents part of how people communicate in the digital media sphere (Clark, 2014; Sharma, 2013; Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). The social qualities of Web 2.0 create a way of presentation whereby its users can interact in a manner that provides elements of racial modality (Sharma, 2013; Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014).

Some research considers groups using social media to communicate as a form of pseudo-*gemeinschaft*, which does not constitute a true community (Allen, 2013). While computer-mediated communities defy some norms within traditional definitions of community, they allow and support many other elements – including the participation and engagement in conversation considered necessary to support community (Baym, 1993).

Part of the importance of social media relates to its ability to foster new sources of quotable information, particularly for minority groups that believe themselves to be ignored by the mainstream press (Lipschultz, 2017). The importance of digital gathering places relates to the use of social media as a replacement for person-to-person communication (Ratkiewicz, et al., 2011). Yet, one of the challenges for Twitter as a space for community activity is the brevity of the site, which removes the possibility of complex conversation (Ott, 2017). Language use on Twitter can create a form of community by using a real or imagined "us-versus-them" dynamic connecting the writer and followers (Kreis, 2017, p. 615). This rhetoric helps to define members of a community either offline or online (Kreis, 2017).

#BlackTwitter

Those who use #BlackTwitter seek connectedness, to become part of a community (Clark, 2014). Clark refers to #BlackTwitter as a community on many levels, in that many of those involved have personal relationships, yet she is clear to differentiate that the group is not a monolith and represents multiple ideas within Blackness (Ramsey, 2015). One of the challenges within any online community is convincing members to share knowledge and participate (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). As it relates specifically to #BlackTwitter, some research suggests it contains characteristics necessary for a community, as its members exhibit unique forms of communication with norms, rituals, and distinctive information-sharing behavior (Price & Robinson, 2016; Rheingold, 2000).

#BlackTwitter offers a form of a counter-public for members of the black community who feel underrepresented to demonstrate their cultural identity (Graham & Smith, 2016; Florini, 2014; Schiappa, 2015). During the Ferguson, Missouri protests, for example, #BlackTwitter was one of the primary tags used, second only behind #BlackLivesMatter (Lipschultz, 2017). However, even at the time of the protests, three of the primary influencers on Twitter were supporters of the movement, but two were critics (Lipschultz, 2017). Additionally, #BlackTwitter provides a space for the expression of black culture's oral communication traditions with the digital sphere (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). "Dexterous use of language and skilled verbal performance are key elements of signifyin', and such performances have historically served important roles in the creation and preservation of Black communities" (Florini, 2014, p. 226).

Taking into consideration what we know about #BlackTwitter as a virtual community, the motivations for its use, its visibility during periods of social and political unrest, and its potential for misuse or otherwise off-label use, the following research question is posed:

> **RQ1:** *Based on previous research that considered #BlackTwitter a virtual community, can the argument be made that outside interests have altered the tenor of the site as it relates to the community?*

From the shadows to the mainstream

#BlackTwitter increased in prominence and media coverage since it first connected to mainstream awareness through an article by Choire Sicha on *The Awl* website, titled "What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night," (Majoo, 2010). In his article, Sicha noted how Twitter's trending topic algorithm provided him access to a vast corpus of otherwise-restricted conversations about Black culture (Guo, 2015). A simple search of Google shows

16,800 news articles that include the term "Black Twitter" and another 851 that contain #BlackTwitter.

#BlackTwitter, because of its longevity, differs from most hashtags in that the majority of posts to the tag appear infrequently and disappear quickly (Glasgow & Fink, 2013). However, its durability may make #BlackTwitter a target for activist groups who engage in behaviors that seek to overtake, infiltrate, or derail typical conversation (Adi, 2015). It is important to note these types of dissent campaigns were rare just a few years ago (Adi, 2015).

#BlackTwitter also represents a frequent source for journalists, with the hashtag being the third most commonly used by journalists (Freelon et. al, 2018). Yet the original function of the tag was to allow Black Twitter users to discuss issues they believed were overlooked by the mainstream media (Freelon et. al, 2018). Relatedly, media outlets are the focus of criticism as to how they deal with their minority employees and minority issues in their communities (Mock, 2020; Smith, 2020). Yet all forms of media are left to consider what to do as they struggle to cover issues important to minorities, while minorities use tags such as #BlackTwitter to provide their own messages and support news important to them (Freelon et. al, 2018). This topic is of utmost importance as media outlets face reckonings – both internally and externally – resulting from problematic coverage of minorities (Farhi & Ellison, 2020; Mock, 2020; Smith, 2020). Such issues demonstrate the fluid notions of what journalists need to be today and how that fits into classic ideals such as objectivity (Lowery, 2020; Sullivan, 2020).

Potential disruption of the conversation

Although it is undeniable that #BlackTwitter is one of the longest-running and best-known minority-supported hashtags (Freelon et. al, 2018), one of the challenges with this type of research is the use of varied phrases to explain similar behavior that might have different motivations. For example, researchers use terms such as "trolling" (Bulut & Yoruk, 2017), "astro-turfing" (Lee, Tamilarasan, & Caverlee, 2015; Ratkiewicz J. , et al., 2011; Kang, Kim, Chu, Cho, & Kim, 2016), and still others use terms such as "hashjacking "(Bode, Hanna, Yang, & Shah, 2015), and "newsjacking." While they vary slightly in meaning, each of the behaviors behind these terms seek to interrupt the natural conversations in digital forums. The premise is that the action described in each of these terms are part of a coordinated behavior, either centralized or by an individual, designed to insert a product, cause, opinion, or beliefs into the social media conversation. In some cases, the disruption is caused by companies simply attempting to connect to popular online communication topics or groups for commercial gain (Macnamara, 2016).

This research will address the less intentional forms of disruption, hashjacking and newsjacking, then address an intentional form of disruption, astroturfing. Given the sizeable depth and breadth of #BlackTwitter and the number of mainstream news articles that mention it as either subject or source, it is important to investigate how much of the content is generated or shared by its members and how much content is advanced through disruptive actors. With that in mind, the following research question is posed:

> **RQ2:** *Does jacking, astroturfing, or trolling constitute a sizable portion of the conversation using #BlackTwitter?*

Hashjacking & Newsjacking

The open nature of Twitter permits grassroots interaction, yet it also provides the ability to manipulate the communication (Ratkiewicz et al., 2011). In the case of hashjacking and newsjacking, the intent does not appear to be disrupting the conversation, but instead to connect to it. However, the inauthentic communication associated with hashjacking and newsjacking can negatively impact the companies engaging in said behavior, leading to mistrust among those they attempted to reach (Sisson, 2017). Twitter users are developing skills that aid them in discerning which sources are authentic and credible (Castillo, Mendoza, & Poblete, 2015). Those who engage in hashjacking or newsjacking may simply view the tactic as a measure of reaching a desired, or large, audience in real time (Flowers & Sterbenk, 2016), which is similar to the logic

Twitter both promotes for advertisers and touts as a central reason for its profitability. There is uncertainty as to how inauthentic conversation impacts the behavior of users as it relates to specific hashtags, despite the large number of potentially disruptive tweets. Research speculates that some types of communication on social media seek to intimidate a community, yet could have the opposite effect (Suh, Vasi, & Chang, 2017). In these instances, members of the community were able to reframe aggressive tactics and use them to create support among the group (Suh, Vasi, & Chang, 2017).

Trolling & Astroturfing

The progressive nature of #BlackTwitter could make it a prime target for "trolls" because as many as one-third of posts that use a political hashtag could constitute some type of disruption (Bode, Hanna, Yang, & Shah, 2015). Conservative groups are more likely than liberal factions to engage in trolling or astroturfing behavior (Bode, Hanna, Yang, & Shah, 2015), meaning that #Twitter, as a mainly progressive community, is more likely to be subject to the practice. Groups like Black Lives Matter and its related hashtag experience similar behavior designed to discredit and deflect from its own community (Rickford, 2016).

Trolling occurs extensively throughout digital media and ranges from mild behavior to abuse (Binns, 2012). Trolling, unlike jacking behavior, has the specific goal of disrupting online conversation (Coles & West, 2016). Yet trolling is not easily identified, and one person's troll is simply another's impassioned social media user (Coles & West, 2016). In fact, trolls who are active posters in a digital community are more accepted than those who are not (Coles & West, 2016). However, one of the key elements of trolling is that the act typically is executed by an individual who might take pleasure in communicating in a manner that subverts social norms and amuses the troll (Binns, 2012; Hardaker, 2015). There remains concern about trolling's impact on digital conversation (Binns, 2012).

Another similar manner in which hashtags can be disrupted is through astroturfing, where those involved (either through crowdsourcing efforts or the use of bots) attempt to degrade the quality of discourse (Lee, Tamilarasan, & Caverlee, 2015). The key element of astroturfing includes centralized control designed to appear as grassroots efforts (Kang, Kim, Chu, Cho, & Kim, 2016; Ratkiewicz, et al., 2011). Astroturfing on social media appears to create interaction around the disruptive and increase the number of posts in opposition to the initial intent of the tag (Lee, Tamilarasan, & Caverlee, 2015).

Some research connects astroturfing to trolling behavior associated with social media (Bulut & Yoruk, 2017). However, astroturfing extends beyond the typical trolling behavior of an individual into coordinated attacks that might include trolling (Bulut & Yoruk, 2017). The goal of astroturfing is to have a negative impact on the targeted community (Kang, Kim, Chu, Cho, & Kim, 2016). One potential detriment of astroturfing is its ability to influence the attitudes of

those not strongly connected to the community (DeAndrea, Van Der Heide, & Easley, 2015). Some groups on Twitter changed hashtags as a method of circumventing various disruption efforts (Bode, Hanna, Yang, & Shah, 2015).

The final research question, which dives deeper into the nature and influence of the potential for disruption and its consequence, is the following:

RQ3: *Do potentially disruptive posts appear to influence the conversation on #BlackTwitter by potentially eliminating the motivation for conversation?*

Method

This study examines #BlackTwitter over the Fourth of July holiday in the middle of the 2016 United States presidential race and between May 1 and June 30, 2020. to understand how communication might occur during an active, but not overly active communication time for #BlackTwitter. Discourse analysis is a form of methodology to study what people do (Van Leeuwen, 2008). This study uses it to primarily track the most vocal sample of the community. The researchers acknowledge that this study does not include those who view the tags frequently but do not post (Billings, 2014). While this study does not include statements from lurkers or those who simply monitor the conversation, it might provide insight into them (Bell & Newby, 1971).

The researchers reviewed all posts using #BlackTwitter between July 1 and July 5, 2016. The screen grabs occurred each day at 6 a.m., 1 p.m., and 7 p.m., and the sample constitutes all the conversation that occurred using the tag within those five days. The second sample consists of tweets posted on #Black Twitter between May 1 and June 30, 2020. In both cases, reviewers looked at a random sample of the total posts. In the 2016 example, 20 pages for each of the three time periods for each of the five days yielded a total of 15 samples. For the 2020 sample, researchers again examined 20 pages, but these were from six groupings: May 1 to May 10, May 11 to May 20, May 21 to May 31, June 1 to June 10, June 11 to June 20, and June 21 to June 30. In each case, reviewers evaluated the samples in chronological order in an effort to understand the natural dynamics of the community's conversation and responses.

Qualitative research is important to the study of social media because it allows for the understanding and review of the conversational nature of the sites (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011). It also allows for comprehension of context and intention (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011). Qualitative research of Twitter posts offers context not possible in quantitative studies that often look into the use of words, but not necessarily the varying potential meanings of those words (Pal, 2017). Qualitative research allows for measuring the tone of the language used as well as intent (Pal, 2017). For example, not every post on Twitter seeks response or engagement. When studying Twitter discourse it is important to review both texts and images posted. Visualization can be dispersive, so both words and images provide meaning (Van Leeuwen, 2008). These specific hashtags represent the unit of analysis, which is important because of Twitter's horizontal structure and its ability to foster community surrounding specific hashtags. As part of this discourse analysis, those days of collection represent a purposive sample that reviews the discourse as part of a sequence, which also more closely mimics Twitter's conversational and reactionary style.

To avoid some of the pitfalls that can occur, such as missing posts that can be associated with Twitter data collection (Driscoll & Walker, 2014), this project avoided third-party organizers and collected data directly from Twitter. Yet, it is understood that even using this

method a small percentage of Tweets are not accessible based on either error or individuals with privacy settings on their account (Driscoll & Walker, 2014). However, the public nature of #BlackTwitter makes those limitations less likely to occur, at least in the portion of the study that deals with that population. There is still the chance of a missing as much as 2% of the population (Driscoll & Walker, 2014).

Findings & Discussion

A review of both the initial and later samples suggests that the popularity of #BlackTwitter made the tag a target for those wishing to connect with an African American community. For example, in the initial sample, a number of posters focused on support for Bernie Sanders as the best candidate for African Americans' interests, as did a number of posters sharing a news article focusing on the appropriation of Black culture by liquor producer Jack Daniels. In each of the days examined initially, it appeared the predominant post using #BlackTwitter were a small group of journalists, trolls, and organizations who used the tag. The users IsItJustUs and BlackPressRadio, both alternative news sites geared toward African Americans, extensively promoted their work using the tag. For example, BlackPressRadio posted a number of articles related to the Hilary Clinton email investigation, while IsItJustUs was more prone to popular culture news such as Charles Barkley advising Kevin Durant on Twitter. The main individual journalist who appeared was Kathleen Wells, a Los Angeles-based reporter and hosts a radio show.

Kathleen Wells @WellsKathleen · Jul 3, 2016
Replying to @NAAPC and @Bakari_Sellers
I'm not into mere labels I'm into analysis. 60 years of voting Democrat and look at our neighborhoods. #Blacktwitter

A typical Wells tweet includes information that attempts to remain relevant to the spirit of a potential #BlackTwitter community and could be her own work or that of other journalists. However, one must question if journalists promoting their work represents hashjacking behavior? While this does not appear malicious, it does fall under the category of hashjacking based on the definition, which simple commercial interests who attempt to connect to the desired audience in real time (Flowers & Sterbenk, 2016). In addition, Gina Humber, an author who writes about diversity, also posted frequently using the hashtag. Her posts also fell within the Flowers and Sterbenk (2016) definition of hashjacking. Humber typically promoted either a book, a podcast, articles quoting her, or clothing she sells on her website, such as T-shirts that contain the tag #diversityisaverb. Yet, there was a lack of response to these commercial and journalistic posts although they could be seen as inauthentic to the conversation (Suh, Vasi, & Chang, 2017).

Figure 1: https://twitter.com/WellsKathleen/status/749640707644624896

Nearly four years later, it is clear the role of #BlackTwitter has changed. Despite the second sample occurring at a time of tremendous protest and activism within the Black community nationwide, #BlackTwitter still primarily featured commercial messages and notable trolling, suggesting hashjacking behavior occurs on #BlackTwitter.

For many business interests that used #BlackTwitter, the tag was often one of many that seemed to be more of a targeted marketing or advertising strategy in the initial sample. In such cases, the #BlackTwitter community may represent a demographic niche for marketing goods and services. For example, one post attempted to sell men's underwear using Black models. In terms of direct commercial pitches, the Twitter user BlackTradeCircleApp was the dominant purveyor appearing consistently throughout the sample. The owner of the Twitter handle states that its goal is to promote Black-owned business. Therefore, one might safely state that promotional

Figure 2:
https://twitter.com/Seed_of_Israel/status/750207774018138
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messages do represent a sizable portion of tweets on #BlackTwitter. Four years later, that trend, if anything, has expanded. Yet, at the same time, the hashtag use was more specific and singular. Much of the comments on #BlackTwitter are shouts with a marketing megaphone without any sort of specific audience, other than Black users. The tag appears as a type of generic marketplace for promotion of and by Black entrepreneurs. The lack of posts from members of the public in both samples suggests that Rheingold's (2000) version of virtual community is not occurring on #BlackTwitter.

As it relates to astroturfing or trolling, this research looked among groups that attempted to use the tag to promote a specific message. Israel United in Christ was the main purveyor of these types of tweets. Other prominent activists included a pro-life activist who tweeted about abortion as a form of Black genocide; an organization called The Real Black Fist, a Black militant account that has since been changed to private; and Justica, which primarily tweeted in favor of Bernie Sanders and against Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. Overall, these promotional tweets by organizations and activists each represented a large enough number to stick out far and above other posters using #BlackTwitter. The only group that appeared to engage in a larger-scale effort that might approach astroturfing was Israel United in Christ. This group published tweets promoting the wearing of beards as a religious symbol and that African Americans should not celebrate the Fourth of July due to the U.S. history of slavery and that July 4 did not represent Independence Day for African Americans.

This group used multiple accounts to publish its messages and used those same accounts to interact with itself in an attempt to make the posts appear more popular. There were at least five different Twitter handles used by the group. However, this still seems a far cry from the organized campaigns of astroturfing cited by other researchers (Kang, Kim, Chu, Cho, & Kim, 2016; Ratkiewicz, et al., 2011). Trolling, in this case, was readily apparent with numerous examples that constitute a considerable part of the overall posts. The posts seem designed to annoy those who regularly use the hashtag (Hardaker, 2015). However, these individuals and groups posted so frequently that it is possible that those who use the tag just consider them to be part of the group (Coles & West, 2016). Other less frequent posters might comment negatively about Black Lives Matter, make fun of those on #BlackTwitter who complain about cultural appropriation, accuse #BlackTwitter users of bullying tactics, or state that #BlackTwitter should not exist until there is a #WhiteTwitter, #AsianTwitter and #SpanishTwitter. The newer sample includes considerable far-right trolling using the tag with individuals attempting to dispute with a conversation designed to anger with those who would be expected to be #BlackTwitter's core

users. Therefore, it is difficult to claim that astroturfing takes place on #BlackTwitter, but trolling certainly has a prominent role in the conversation. One element that should be mentioned about the newer sample is an attempt to use those following #BlackTwitter as a form of activist retribution network to go after those labeled racist by someone using the hashtag. A deeper dive suggests that the more recent trolling efforts of #BlackTwitter may be related, as many of the most caustic comments came from those with user profile photos that featured "Make America Great Again" attire and bios referencing the "QANON" conspiracy.

Based on previous studies that speak to the community nature of #BlackTwitter, this study examined the interaction in an attempt to gauge if the site has evolved. It seems as #BlackTwitter has become better known, it has attracted more people using it as a promotional tool. As a result, fewer users are talking about issues important to the community. This is not to say this type of communication does not occur, just that it occurs in a select few posts. For example, the comments of Juan Williams at the 2016 BET Awards ceremony along with the Trump-Clinton presidential race were topics of several tweets. Other users sought to discuss racist social media posts, police brutality, issues of racial injustice, or even making fun of Fox News pundit Tomi Lahren for comments about #BlackTwitter.

However, it is impossible not to notice that anytime someone would tweet about one of the issues that may be important to those who use #BlackTwitter as a way to feel connected, that user would then have to wade through multiple promotional messages to find another user who connected to the issue-related message. In this vein, it seems highly probable that the raw number of promotional posts altered the conversation on #BlackTwitter and made conversations more stunted and less likely to result in sustained, or even brief, periods of interaction and conversation between those who use the tag as something necessary for fostering an online community (Rheingold, 2000). The latter sample offered an additional evolution of #BlackTwitter, whereby conversations related to serious issues have migrated from the more general #BlackTwitter hashtag to tags related to individual issues. Most notable in this case is the presence of super-users who post to #BlackTwitter and serve as a form of Sherpa, guiding those using the tag to other more specific tags for related conversations and community. Users such as @KiDatHearto_O, provide a service to those less savvy with Twitter's tagging functions. Poster Dr. Goddess stated that black people organized online on #BlackTwitter as a way of corrected the mainstream media.

As such, both samples indicate the amount of disruption in the tag makes it possible that longtime #BlackTwitter users have moved on to other tags that are less polluted with promotional messages. The power of #BlackTwitter now seems to be one of awareness for those new to Twitter. The tag contains rhetoric that is less serious and more playful in tone generally, despite the commercial and trolling attempts. This might be an issue with the open format of Twitter, in that anyone can insert themselves into a tag, and if a tag begins trending or otherwise becomes well-known, it might dilute the tag's relevance to the original community (Hu, Tang, Zhang, & Liu, 2013). It seems unlikely that with the amount of hashjacking and trolling on Twitter, a tag could expect to exist beyond the onslaught it receives the more prominent it becomes (Bode, Hanna, Yang, & Shah, 2015). Therefore, it is possible those who seek to engage in community activities on Twitter may be forced to consistently look for new tags that are representative of that community.

For the reasons mentioned above, the researchers believe it is clear that Twitter's format poses challenges toward the continued existence of a hashtag as a banner for virtual community. For example, these communities provide support, conversation, engagement, and often act

similarly for individuals to an offline community (Rheingold, 2000). Because of the challenge of privacy, Twitter may be a platform best used for non-community functions and may not be a site for long-term planning and communication among those with similar interests necessary (Rheingold, 2000). The possibility, and likely probability, of others or outgroup members inserting themselves into an in-group social media conversation is a growing challenge. For example, Russian astroturfing efforts created an event – and protest of said event – in Houston, Texas on May 21, 2016 using social media (O'Sullivan, 2018). In fact, fake groups created more than 129 events in the U.S. between 2015 and 2017 (Volz & Ingram, 2018). The public is aware of this increasingly inauthentic activity on social media sites. Therefore, it is highly like that outside interests have altered the tenor of conversation on #BlackTwitter, as with nearly all social media sites, compared to previous studies.

The final research question is the most challenging to answer. Does the amount of communication that engages in jacking, trolling, or astroturfing behavior influence how people communicate on #BlackTwitter? Before reaching that point, it seems important to talk about how people communicate on the site. The results of this study suggest that when no prominent issue rises within the #BlackTwitter agenda, #BlackTwitter seems to be dominated by self-aggrandizement. Additionally, the tag seems to serve as a place where a dominant group seeks to connect with minority culture, not necessarily when a minority culture interacts and engages among themselves. As the hashtag gained notoriety, the level of authentic discourse decreased based on prior research (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). Yet, the researchers note that there are still those who are attempting to use the tag as originally intended. Overall, there are actually more posts that go against or at least have little in common with the original intent. The fact is that the types of activists who started the tag seem less likely to post following the appropriation by commercial actors. Poster @blackismy suggested that everyone on #BlackTwitter should simply set their accounts to private during the next big event.

It appears the change corresponds both to #BlackTwitter's increased notoriety and Twitter's ascent into profitability. Twitter became a publicly traded company in 2013, sparking a more consistent effort toward profit maximization (Fiegerman, 2017). Twitter's goal since going public on Nov. 7, 2013, was to build the number of users, i.e. the number of accounts, in order to increase advertising revenue (Fiegerman, 2014). An individual's personal feed is increasingly less likely to

Figure 3: https://twitter.com/VISunChildIX/status/749795361233985537

resemble a closely curated information structure, and more likely to resemble its business interests (Fiegerman, 2014), which appears through viewing the content on #BlackTwitter. This may have implications for digital community networks and lead to the lack of community found in this study.

While advertising crept into Twitter feeds, active participation in online community networks that promote mutual respect and trust, as well as relationships of reciprocity and cooperation slipped out (Harrison, Zappen & Prell, 2002). Our sample suggests the connection forged via #BlackTwitter has become subdued, at best.
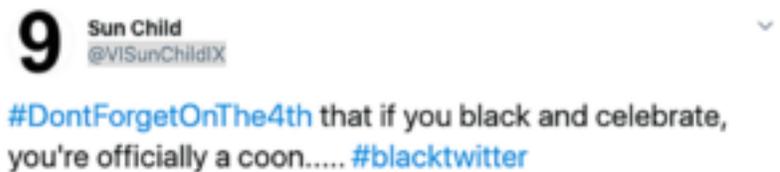
Berry Black
@Ambidextrous_QB

How is #blacktwitter helping out the black community as a whole? Are yall solving the crime problem in the inner cities?

8:13 PM · Jul 3, 2016 from Rhode Island, USA · Twitter for iPhone

Figure 4:
https://twitter.com/Ambidextrous_QB/status/749758055651352581

A virtual community often represents a key element for marginalized or minority groups as a way to stay connected and strengthen group ties (Jankowski & Prehn, 2002). As this study illustrates, the introduction of significant commercial profit expectations, including selling jewelry, hats, clothing, or other items that are either African in nature or designed to appeal to an African American audience, increases the likelihood of the community and its message getting lost. However, the increased promotion of Black-owned businesses does seem to be a priority, with some posters even asking for such companies in their area. Still these commercial efforts may also change the community expectations (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006), impacting the motivation of others to use the site or the tag, because the reduction in feedback decreases their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1989; 1991; 2001; 2009). While the web helps connect people in a manner beyond real-world, face-to-face interactions (Delanty, 2003), it also allows other entities to interrupt the conversation in a way that would seem galling at best in a face-to-face interaction. The challenge for individuals such as those in the Clark (2014) study, then, is to continue to act as a community using the tag as their messages blend into other, less relevant posts. In this study, it seems impossible to suggest that outside tweets changed the activity on #BlackTwitter, but the sheer preponderance of inauthentic content makes it likely.

Conclusion

The overarching amount of content outside of the prior expectations of #BlackTwitter seems to mute the cultural signifiers that one would expect to find in an online community (Florini, 2014). Is the increased inauthentic communication on #BlackTwitter the result of Twitter's economic goals providing less incentive to tamp down commercially based promotional interests since going public, or has #BlackTwitter simply reached the end of its lifespan? It seems possible, maybe even probable, that as more people became aware of #BlackTwitter, those who started using the site moved on to less well-known hashtags and, therefore, places where less conversational interference – hashtag jacking and trolling – occurs. Based on the typical lifespan of other hashtags, #BlackTwitter has already outperformed most (Kywe, Hoang, Lim, & Zhu, 2012).

This article furthers the notion of community as it relates to social media and suggests challenges toward its meaningful existence (Rheingold, 2000). The open format of Twitter, often at odds with the motivation and self-efficacy of social cognitive theory, suggests that other more closed formats of social media might possess better long-term odds for continued participation. The two samples of #BlackTwitter offer insights for journalists seeking to discover more diverse news sources. The first is the notion that #BlackTwitter is a fluid space and not a forum to simply dive into and attempt to contact someone quickly without context. A journalist might be just as likely to find a promotional or trolling source as a useful activist if they are not prudent. Secondly, journalists must understand that Black Twitter users have moved beyond the hashtag #BlackTwitter and now reside in specific venues much more representative of the current media landscape. The benefits and pitfalls of the transition from closed, vertical media to more open,

horizontal media are illustrated within this study, as outside forces are increasingly able to take over and potentially remake a digital conversation. While horizontal media provides open access and participation to the public (Shaw, Hamm, & Terry, 2006), it also allows for the message to be hijacked and taken over by those who might not share the community's agenda.

Furthermore, this study supports the correlation between trolling, astroturfing, and other jacking behaviors with the type of influence it on social media users, thus challenging the possibility of a long-lasting digital community. Indeed, if those seeking to connect to the group push away the most active participants from the gathering place, this could support the increase in popularity of closed groups on other social sites (Roose, 2017), where members can control membership and maintain a stronger sense of community. As it relates to news coverage, this study provides a caution for journalists seeking social media sourcing. Just as Lecheler and Kruikemeier (2016) focused on the challenges of individual identification, the findings of this paper suggest the challenge of using hashtags to link individuals to digital communities or groups. Therefore, it recommends journalists take caution when suggesting an individual or group of individuals using a certain tag represent an entire community. In this way the role of the journalist, their judgement, and industry norms remain paramount in selecting digital sources and using hashtags as a sorting process.

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