Image Content on Facebook as a Tool of Online Activism

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has led to an important development in traditional forms of protest movements and the emerging of online activism as a specific form of activism with its own particularities. This paper considers the self-generated image content created by political groups on Facebook as a tool for engaging larger support for their cause. The main purpose of the research is to outline what type of image content stipulates larger support amongst the followers of a certain Facebook group. Six major types of image content were outlined through Web Content Analysis. The popularity of every group was measured by the number of Likes, Shares and Comments received

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for the period of 24 days. Those three variables are measured as these are the options that Facebook offers to show the online popularity of every post. The empirical findings showed that the individualized image content (personal and real life examples) reaches larger audience and acquires greater support for the cause than the more generalized content and slogans.

Keywords: Online activism, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), Facebook

Introduction

Protests and social movements have shaken the political systems of Southeastern Europe in recent years. From Ljubljana to Istanbul the protest waves spread the will of citizens for social change. The protests focused on particular tangible issues like the corruption of politicians in Slovenia, prices of electricity in Bulgaria, ID number allocation for newborn babies in Bosnia Herzegovina or the future of Gezi Park in Istanbul. In many cases once the situation heats, it inflames in outrages in anti-parliament demonstrations that sometimes achieve their goals like the resignation of the governments in Slovenia and Bulgaria that came about under the

pressure of the protests.

An interesting case is the second protest wave in Bulgaria which started only a couple of weeks after the new government was formed. In fact by the time the protest started the government didn't have the chance to make any significant decisions on the governance of the country. This new protests which started in May 2013 were provoked by controversial appointments made by the new government and the comportment of the representatives of the extreme right nationalist "Ataka" party. What is different about these protests in comparison to previous ones in Bulgaria is that they have continued for more than 80 days in a moderately peaceful manner in the spirit of the "Occupy movement". As described by Castells the "Occupy movement" "was born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet, and maintained its presence on the Internet" and its "material form of existence was the occupation of public space" (Castells 2012: 168). The protesters in Bulgaria "occupy" the space in front of the Parliament. The public display of their disappointment included drinking coffee in front of the Parliament, sending humoristic text messages to deputies, creating a school program for the members of Parliament, etc.

At the same time with several days delay a smaller contra-protest group was formed (in support of the PM Oresharski). It stated that

Bulgaria is a functioning democracy, and its newly elected government deserves a chance to try to stabilise the country. Therefore, it was too early for new elections. The supporters of the government claimed to be against the appointment of Deliyan Peevsky for Chief of the National Security Agency. His nomination unleashed the public dissatisfaction as he is considered to be a part of oligarchic structures. The counter-protesters argued for a longer period of time in which the new government could show its competence.

In the turbulent times of protests, counter-protests and massive media coverage of the situation in Bulgaria this paper focuses on the way individuals connect and communicate with each other referring to the protests in the online environment. The present paper examines the online participation of people in political groups on Facebook as a form of online activism. As social media allows "committed groups to play by new rules" (Gladwell and Shirky 2011: 154) the tools for engaging support through social media have their own particularities. Social networks allow the users to "create their own content, distribute it online, and comment" (Hanson et al. 2011: 32). We consider that the creation and reaction to self-generated image contents is a way to express civil engagement and commitment to important political

messages. "What makes social media useful for digital activism may not be its interactivity but rather the fact that these technologies collapse the barrier to broadcast."(Brodock 2009) As protesters want to gain larger support for their cause and initiate a greater real-life participation in the protest movement the paper is going to explore the dynamics of competing ideas and slogans in the online environment. The popularity of every post on Facebook and the daily creation of self-generated content is important as the network algorithm prioritizes newer items on each individual's "news feed" in order to show up-to-date content (Manjoo 2011). Furthermore when one item is "shared" and "liked" by many people it becomes more noticeable and diffuses on a larger scale.

Numerous Facebook groups have been formed in relation to the protest movement (e.g. "Occupy Bulgaria", "We protest", "The Idiots of Bulgaria", "National protest against the outrages in Bulgaria"). These groups create every day posts on Facebook with mainly image content and slogans in order to popularize their cause and to foster people to go on the street. Protesters stressed in many different ways they were well educated and civilized people who go on protest with their children and in full consciousness. This point had to be underlined in response to the accusations of politicians from the governing parties that they

were a drunken crowd terrorizing the city. Protesters call not only for fresh elections in the country but also for an overall change of the political system - maybe to a majoritarian parliament or a presidential republic. As in other protests the participants don't have a clear vision how to change the existing situation (Egmond 2013).

The particularities of online activism have drawn the attention of scholars from a wide range of disciplines. The conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan claimed that the "revolution will be twittered" in the context of the 2009 Iran protests. That statement is related to the growing importance of all kinds of social networks in the formation of activist movements. The application of ICT to social movement activities has contributed to the shift of balance of power amongst traditional actors (Castells 2007, 2009). ICT could represent an important alternative medium for progressive social movements, as shown by Indymedia (Fuchs 2010). Social media could be regarded as "long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere" (Shirky 2011: 32). The ICT also allow forms of activism possible only in the cyberspace like hacktivism-group of hackers attack and deface selected Web pages, create spoof sites and rerouting web traffic (Michael D., Mccaughey, M, 2003).

Research question: *What type of image content provokes larger online support for a particular political cause?*

The analysis explores the use of patriotic images, humorous pictures, caricatures, photos from the protests, the combination of image content with slogans or other textual messages in online protest groups on Facebook and furthermore - the popularity of different types of image content. The popularity is measured by the number of likes, shares and comments that every post containing image content acquires as these three options increase the online popularity of the posts. Understanding this phenomenon is crucial in a broader sense as it is related to the development of online political participation, online social movements and viral marketing in the aspect when they enter in competition for provoking online and real life activity.

Conceptual Framework

The paper considers the online participation of people in political groups on Facebook as a form of online activism that plays an important part in the strategy of online activist groups. As Castells conceptualizes "the more the movement is able to convey its message over the communication networks, the more citizen consciousness rises, and the more the public sphere of

communication becomes a contested terrain" (Castells 2012: 237). The overall online activities of the Facebook political groups have an important role in the creation, communication and participation in real life protests of the type of the "Occupy movement". "[I]t is through these digital communication networks that the movements live and act, certainly in interaction with face-to-face communication and with the occupation of urban space" (Castells 2012: 229).

As movements born from social network activities are considered leaderless (Castells 2012: 224) the responsibility for the content creation and the distribution of the information online is shared between the members of the online group. Everyone can start or contribute to an existing online group but the important question is how to persuade people to support and promote a particular cause. In order to achieve real life participation it is important to engage people in the online activities on a dailybasis which is enabled by the nature of social networks themselves as the process of networking keeps the energy flowing (Castells 2012: 144) and could successfully provoke real life participation.

Methodology

The source of primary data is the Facebook group "National protest against the outrages in Bulgaria". This particular group was chosen for the analysis as it expresses critiques towards all political parties. It was formed before the protests in February and is a group with stable followers. At the time of the analysis it has 88 753 likes which is much above the average for protest groups on Facebook in Bulgaria ("We protest"- 1405 likes, "Save Bulgaria, don't vote for GERB"- 4 922, "The Idiots of Bulgaria"- 49 588, etc.). As we like to compare the response to the impersonal and more general image content and slogans to the more personal and real life examples, six major types of image content on the Facebook page were differentiated through Web Content Analysis in the time span of 24 days.

- Group A - consists of a list with mobile Numbers - claimed to be the numbers of politicians and slogans to call these politicians and tell them your opinion on their work.

- Group B – consists of a photo, collage or a caricature of political figures plus text.

- Group C – consists of a photo from the protest plus slogan added by the one uploading the photo.

-        Group D – consists of a photo of the slogans from the real life protests.

-        Group E – consists of images and slogans of respected Bulgarians - ordinary people publicly known for their noble acts like risking their own lives for saving others, etc.

-        Group F – consists of images and slogans of patriots from the nineteenth century (e.g. Levski, Botev etc).

The impersonal and more general image content and slogans are the List of mobile numbers, General political images and Images of Patriots. The more personal and real life examples are the Photos from the protests and Images of respected Bulgarians. The analysis will be led ceteris paribus. It will not take into account the quality of the images, the different content of every image in every group, the time correlation between a political act or speech and the release of the image, the originality of the image or text content.

The online support for every type of self-generated image content is analyzed through descriptive statistics by measuring three important variables: the number of Likes, the number of Shares and the number of Comments every image acquires. We measure those three variables as they help a post to become noticeable and diffused on a larger scale. Furthermore the number of likes every post gathers indicates the support of the audience towards

its content, the number of shares shows how this post is spreading in the social network and the number of comments indicates the debate that it initiates. Each one of these three indicators is measured and analyzed separately as they measure different aspects of the online popularity of a post.

Empirical findings

Number of likes - the data is very clear - the more personal content (Groups C,D,E) generates much more likes than a more general one (Groups A, B, F). This first variable suggests that the individualized image content generatesstrongersupport towards the common cause. Within the groups with more general content only the Group F generates higher response from the audience.

Average number of Likes
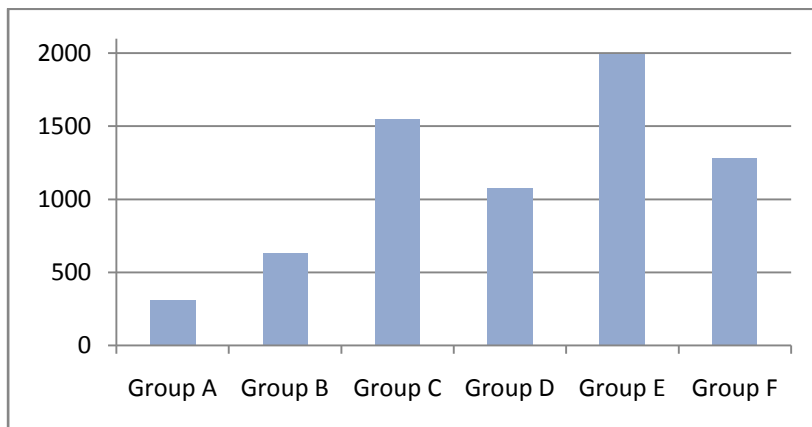
Analyzing the number of shares for each group the data again indicate that the more personal content (Groups C, D,F) generates a larger number of shares than the more general content (Groups A, B, F). Once again only Group F has higher number of shares. This second variable shows whether the post will spread on other Facebook pages and represents an important variable when analyzing viral content. The results support the hypothesis that individualized image content tends to be shared more often then the more general content.

Average number of Shares
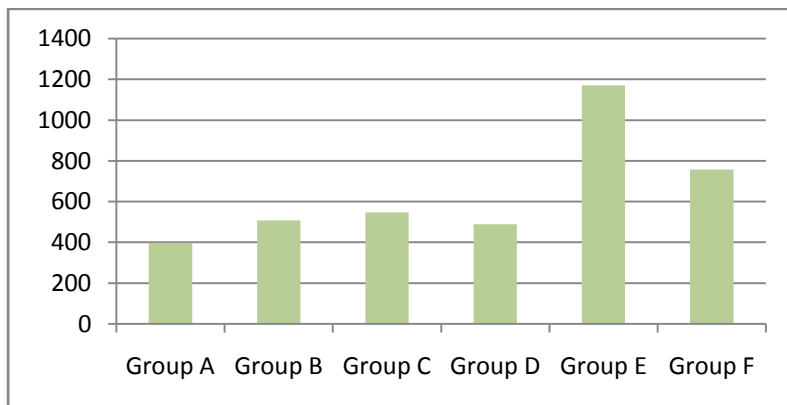
Regarding the number of comments there aren't so important differences between the more personal and the more general content. Most of the comments are generated by Groups B, E, F.

The third variable shows the intensity of the debate between Facebook members initiated by the posting of every image. Here the most important finding is that the groups of images of respected Bulgarians and Patriots generate most of the responses and those comments have mainly positive connotation.

Average number of Comments
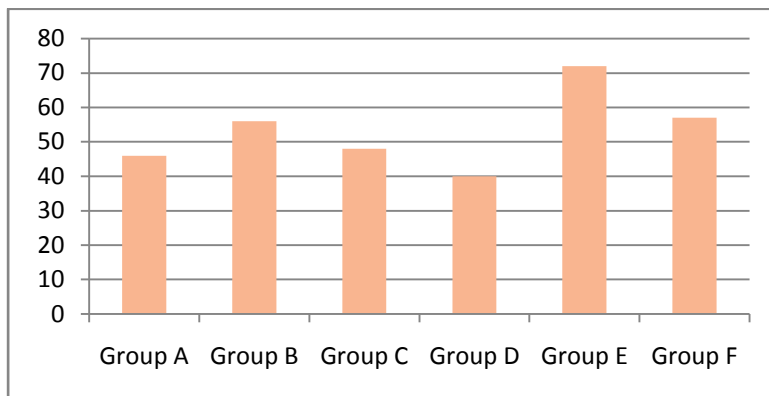
Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the popularity of different types of image content used by online protest groups on Facebook. The empirical findings suggest that the individualized content stimulates a broader response from the audience. In order to analyze the importance of the time lapse between the publication of the image and the reading of its popularity we

conducted an experiment where a test group of 12 images (from all the 6 groups) were selected and we measured the changes in responses for 5 consecutive days. The results showed a moderate augmentation of the responses that didn't considerably change the primary gap between the groups.

As the comparison of the originality of the image content within a group and between groups was not the main purpose of the research we noted only the major particularities:

-        The group of list with mobile Numbers – the first post gained the higher response and the next posts were with considerably lower response.

-        The group with a photo, collage or a caricature of political figures plus text – there was a higher response to posts containing images of politicians whose behavior was considered being the initial cause for the protest (e.g. Delyan Peevsky and Volen Siderov).

-        A photo from the protest plus slogan added by the person uploading the photo – a stable number of responses for all the posts.

-        A photo of the slogans from the protesters - the higher number of responses was for images of children on the protests. The photos from supporting protests in foreign countries (UK,

Austria, Canada etc.) gained responses around the average rate.

-        Images of respected Bulgarians - ordinary people publicly known for their noble acts like risking their own lives for saving others, etc. - all had very high number of responses.

-        Images and slogans of the Patriots from the nineteenth century (like Levski, Botev, etc.) - all had a stable number of responses without considerable variation depending on the personality of the patriot.

Conclusion

The current paper gives a glimpse of the process how different Facebook posts gain online popularity. Further investigation of the way self-generated online content acquires popularity and initiates real-life participation is needed in order to understand more thoroughly the power of this new type of communication and its various implications in both online and offline activism. The results could be useful for the development of online activism tactics and campaigns. The survey of the phenomena of response to different types of self-generated online image content is needed for both better understanding of political online activism and overall understanding of viral image sharing. The opportunity given by

social media to easily create online content and distribute information on an international scale could lead to increased empowerment of ordinary people as they have the opportunity to promote their thoughts and believes. At the same time online activism also challenges the moral values of the creators as to which cause to promote and how to create a working online strategy that leads to real life results. This issue is particularly important as the "life" of a Facebook group is strongly related to the creation and innovation of its content. As a result from the fast development of online activism emerge new forms of collective solidarity mediated by ICT that also need further detailed investigation as they are related to successful fostering of real life activities.

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