


An Innovative Methodological Approach to Analysing Social Media Movements: The Case of #Jesuischarlie

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ABSTRACT

Social media movements take place in an increasingly volatile technological landscape. Researchers who want to analyse their spread must navigate methodological challenges relating to data accessibility, combining qualitative and quantitative data, and remaining attentive to the shifting technological affordances of social media platforms. In response to key challenges, the paper outlines an innovative, three-fold methodological approach to the analysis of social media movements integrating three strands: the Linguistic, Material, and Processual (LMP). Using the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie as a case study, the paper demonstrates how an LMP approach can provide richer insights into social media movements which would be missed by most current methods. Its low-cost design, flexible approach, and technical accessibility equips the researcher in anticipation of further change in the technical landscape. The framework outlined in the paper can be applied to other social media platforms.

KEYWORDS

Charlie Hebdo, Digital, Social, Mixed-Method, Qualitative, Quantitative, Social Media, X

INTRODUCTION

Social media movements or phenomena, such as #JeSuisCharlie, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter, typically engage millions of individuals who collectively express solidarity, share opinions, or engage in activist activity in both online and offline spaces. Analysing social movements, that is, understanding the characteristics of their success, their evolution and movement patterns, and significant contributing actors can be complex because to do so requires a range of both qualitative and quantitative data which must be investigated simultaneously combining a number of different methodological approaches.

Moreover, social media movements take place in an increasingly volatile technological landscape. This presents opportunities for the researcher to gain rich insights into social media phenomena but also comes with many challenges, particularly in terms of the continued accessibility of data, and understanding the material affordances of the platforms on which these phenomena spread. The changeable media ecology highlights the need for a flexible methodological approach to the analysis

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of social media movements which enables the researcher to capitalise on the wealth of data that social media engagement can offer but also equips them in the face of inevitable technological change.

In response to these challenges, the paper sets out an innovative, three-fold methodological approach to the analysis of social media movements on Twitter (now X). The framework approaches the collection and analysis of data through the lens of a) the Linguistic, b) the Material, and c) the Processual and is thus termed an *LMP approach*. These lenses are explicitly outlined later in the paper. An LMP approach highlights the interplay between who is saying what, the material affordances of the platform, and the processes involved in the spread of social media phenomena.

Drawing on established methodological approaches to the collection and analysis of social media data, such as content analysis, discourse analysis, and time-series analysis, as well as theoretical approaches rooted in social movement theory, such as Lefebvre, 2004 (rhythmanalysis), Latour, 2005 (Actor-Network Theory), and Durkheim (collective effervescence, see, for example, Garcia & Rimé, 2019), the paper outlines a novel integrated mixed-methods design which ‘bridge[s] the gap’ (in the words of Karamshuk et al., 2017, p. 33) between qualitative and quantitative approaches to data.

An LMP approach can be utilized to explore any type of research question. However, it is particularly useful in answering *exploratory* questions, such as ‘how’ and ‘why’ a social media movement was successful, as well as *explanatory* questions, such as ‘what’ and ‘who’ was influential in its success (see, for example, Lipizzi et al., 2016). The Twittersphere’s response to the Charlie Hebdo attack and the success of the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie is used to demonstrate how an LMP approach can provide richer insights into the success of social phenomena, particularly phenomena with a ‘contagious complexity’—those whose success ‘cannot be captured by quantitative measurement of tweet volume and frequency...’ alone (Payne, 2018, p. 279).

PAPER OUTLINE

The paper first outlines the importance of being able to analyse the spread of global social movements. The benefits and challenges of using Twitter/X as a research tool are discussed alongside the limitations of existing methodological approaches to doing so. Using the spread of the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie as a case study, the paper proceeds to demonstrate how the operationalizing of an LMP approach can offer a fresh perspective on the success and spread of social media phenomena that might be missed by other methodological approaches. The final section looks to the future of studies in this field, detailing how the unique flexibility of the LMP framework equips the researcher with an adaptable approach in anticipation of continued change in the technological landscape. Twitter/X is the platform of choice in this paper (established global social movements have centred around the hashtag on this platform) but following an approach from Bruns and Burgess (2012), the central tenet of the approach (i.e. the interplay of these strands) can (and should) be applied to analyses of other social media platforms.

SOCIAL MEDIA MOVEMENTS AND TWITTER/X

Diani (1992, p. 1) defines social movements as ‘networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities’. Although social movements continue to foster large offline gatherings, such as solidarity marches, sharing symbolic gestures, and protesting, social movements in today’s technological landscape are also ‘more or less digital’ events¹—they either emerge online or have a significant online dimension. This online dimension has attracted interest from many academics (Ray et al., 2017; Tarafdar & Kajal Ray, 2017; Li et al., 2021; Merrill et al., 2020; Mirbabaie et al., 2021). Over the last decade, Twitter/X has become a key platform for facilitating the informal interactions which make up social movements (Floreani, 2022) around a range of topics, such as free speech after terror attacks (#JeSuisCharlie), racism (#BlackLivesMatter), abortion (#ShoutYourAbortion), and sexual harassment (#MeToo). Although no longer unique to Twitter/X, the hashtag is central to the

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