



The (Ding)Politic(k)s of Discourses through #Hashtags on Twitter

Name student: *Naina Parasher*

Student Number: *11681977*

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Name of Teacher: *Tim Highfield*

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In 2004, Bruno Latour presented his ideology of how he believed that the world of Realpolitik, that is the political discourses within that time, was based more within the abstract ideas of what politics should be rather than based within the real-life ideas of what was actually involved within humankind and their lives. He offered an alternative situation of that kind of politics within his paper, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik (or How to Make Things Public)', wherein he presented an ideal situation of dingpolitik based within the reality and other idealistic situations of representation, assembly and successions and simultaneity of time and space. This essay aims to examine the existence of this situation through the presence of an 'assembly of assemblies', that is, the existence of Twitter¹ within the contemporary world as a public sphere presenting an ideal ground for dingpolitik to exist. Through this analysis of Twitter through the lens of Latour's ideology I examine if dingpolitik can truly exist in an ideal situation or if we are even heading towards it by going through the different ideas he presents as a part of the ideal.

Latour describes an 'assembly of assemblies' to encompass the political sphere as well as all objects and ideas pertaining to humankind, be it virtual, real or a simulation. Twitter presents an opportunity where one can have a platform with a tool, such as that of 'Hashtags'², which encompasses the different platforms of sharing information online through a micro-blogging platform while allowing an open space for an open and political public discourse. In this paper, I use the term reality based within the definition presented by Baudrillard, wherein any reference made to reality actually addresses the existence of an hyper-real, as in, "a real without an origin or reality" (Baudrillard and Poster 1988), thus basing this paper within post-modernism.³

Latour discusses how "Philosophers define time as a 'series of successions' and space as a 'series of simultaneities'." He adds how "we have changed time so completely that we have shifted from the time of Time to a time of Simultaneity." This shift can be recognized through the use of hashtags within the confines of the social networking platforms, as hashtags present themselves as both time and space dependent, yet everything presents itself simultaneously.

Discourses within the platform are often led by certain time-sensitive agendas. Particularly discussions based on current occurrences or political agendas, do not last beyond the limit of time when the agenda is

¹ Twitter: Twitter is a social networking and microblogging online service that allows users to send and receive text-based messages or posts of up to 140 characters called "tweets." (techopedia.com)

² a word or phrase preceded by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text (such as a tweet) ("Definition Of HASHTAG" 2019)

³ Post-modernism: in [Western philosophy](#), a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad [skepticism](#), subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of [reason](#); and an [acute](#) sensitivity to the role of [ideology](#) in asserting and maintaining political and economic power. ("Postmodernism | Definition, Doctrines, & Facts" 2019)

fulfilled. Even if so, either digressions from the core of the topic continue to exist, which may have already existed at the point when the main discourse was being continued, thus pointing back to the ‘Simultaneity of Time.’ For instance, studies were conducted to determine the use of the platform of Twitter for promoting candidacy during 2012 United States Election campaigns, with a focus on Barack Obama’s use of it. While the core discussion remained to be their candidacy, digressions and simultaneous discourses continued to exist. (Conway et.al. 2013)

“An examination of Twitter use by members of Congress found that they rarely promote interaction through “re-tweets” or user mentions. Instead, they prefer to use the site to disseminate the same information shared in other media” (Golbeck et al., 2010, as cited in Conway et.al. 2013). Which leads to the dependency of hashtag within the time of space. As seen within the example presented above, while the candidates were sharing on Twitter to disseminate the same information shared on other media, it is well known that “the communicative functions, practices, or interoperability of hashtags themselves are not consistent across social media platforms: what shows up as a hashtag on one platform will not necessarily be recognized as one on another.” (Highfield 2018) Thus, implying that even if hashtags were used to share the same information on different platforms, it cannot be determined if the information discourse would continue the same way on all platforms.

The accessibility of information through the use of these online tools, particularly the hashtag in this case, has allowed the blurring of the line between the past and the present. One can claim that the ‘trending’ hashtags may be the central topics for short periods of time, yet one cannot deny that they continue to exist on the platform all through without the limitations of the succession of time and can be revived and brought back to ‘trending’⁴, depending on the user-usage of the platform.

This leads to how “Everything has become contemporary.” (Latour 2004) Through the unexpected existence of a “Time of Simultaneity.” The existence of simultaneous discourses on the platform through the use of tools like hashtags, historic discourses are often brought back into the limelight as well. After the recent release of the first Blackhole image, it was revealed that one of the main faces behind the scientific achievement was a woman in science, Katie Bouman. This allowed the platform to bring to the forefront other women in science whose achievements have often been underplayed along with the discourse regarding the *representation* of women in science. (“The Women Behind the First Blackhole

⁴ A trend on Twitter refers to a hashtag-driven topic that is immediately popular at a particular time. (“What do Twitter Trends Mean?” 2019)

Image” 2019) Representation being the accurate portrayal of matters at hand, with “the same degree of attention being given to the two aspects of what it is to represent an issue.” (Latour 2004)

In this case a positive addition to the discourse, however, representation can often be based within personal occurrences or histories which may not have been recorded due to issues of privilege. The idea of representation is often re-iterated to ensure the inclusion of the history of all sections of society, and not just the privileged groups, yet systemic indiscretions often do not allow that to happen when people continue believing within the politics of ‘matters-of-fact’, as discussed by Latour, wherein facts that have existed as they are due to the agreement of a certain section of people of their truth. Here, the ‘matters-of-concern’ come into play, where we can stress the presence of a ‘new eloquence’ where people are allowed to bring in all possible perspectives. However, one cannot ignore the aspect that no matter the extent to which one wishes to allow such discourses, the lack of the ability to determine the truth within the representations can lead these discussions from being based in reality to an abstract or fiction based, thus moving away from the existence of dingpolitik rather than towards it.

Politics, through time, has become closely interspersed with technology. One can see that even within the political scope of the real world, as contrasted to the virtual world, “politicians and journalists use hashtags in correlation with their professional norms and traditional roles. Social media logic is largely moderated by both the professional norms of the specific user groups and by the media logic of mainstream media.” (Enli and Simonsen 2017). A complex stance to take within the contexts of the socio-technical determinism discourse, one cannot deny the politics of how society currently functions has become quite highly interlinked with the working of technology. Twitter has often been accused of opening up a platform for discussions, yet has been consistently accused of promoting weak ties instead of strong ties amongst the people. Borrowed from ideologies put forth by Granovetter regarding strong ties and weak ties, it is argued that Twitter promotes intellectual discourses yet the network connections made on these platforms are not strong enough to foster revolutions in the real world, thus undermining its value as a public space. Lehrer argues that these ideas do not take into consideration the complete implications of the weak ties and the power within them. He states, “It turns out that such distant relationships aren't just useful for getting jobs or spreading trends or sharing information. [...] The Revolution [...] just might be helped along by Twitter.” (2010)

Lastly, one should also note that historically, hashtags have been a user developed innovation, which was then supported by the platform itself through additional features like the usage of emoji’s to make them more interesting. These hashtags were later used by the platform to drive and deliver than own politically or commercially motivated messages. “The commercial links underpinning most hashflags [hashtags], however explicit, highlight how these images are directed by interests beyond the user community.

Because these are special features only accessible through Twitter, though, they are used to encourage engagement with brands, events, and promotional campaigns through scarcity and novelty: tweeting to see a cute image, regardless of the context.” (Highfield 2018) This presents a new facet of the politics of the platform, wherein Twitter no longer remains a neutral ground as a public space, but due to the hierarchical existence of humans through networks, even this platform now serves as a confined space for discourse, yet with an important inherent difference, the power to steer the value of discussion also lays in the hands of the technology itself, i.e. not just the moderators of the hashtags but the artificial intelligence created through algorithms themselves. Thus, providing a good stepping stone towards dingpolitik.

Moving back to the politics of representation, current use of technology by those in power within the real world is now also highly reflected within the virtual world. “Hashtags are inclusive, and democratic in the sense that all users have equal access to the tool, making the users in principle on equal footing. However, as previous research has shown, Twitter is a hierarchical platform where elites such as celebrities, politicians, and journalists have more followers and more impact than ordinary people” (as cited in Enli and Simonsen 2017) This hierarchy often allows the misuse of this power, yet again bringing forth an uneven playing field, becoming another reflection of the realpolitik situation that has existed. In simple words, not all sections of society have equal voice or access to the public discourses being carried out on the internet or power within these social spheres. The politics of representation plays an integral role here and the influencing voice is yet again provided to the section of the privileged. The political disparities which exist in the real world are reflected within the virtual world, thus moving away from the neutral standpoint of dingpolitik, and being based within the abstract instead of the real.

An ideal dingpolitik situation according to Latour consists of a politics incorporating everything attached to humans and not just themselves, considers objects as things, and complicated entanglements become matters of concern, assembling is provided a new space, inherent limits of disabilities are replaced by prostheses, and politics is freed from its obsession with succession. As seen within the contexts of twitter, the assembly there existed free from its obsession with succession, yet the matters of concern were not resolved, there was representation, yet prostheses were never fully accepted, all objects concerning humans are discussed yet instead of moving into a dingpolitik situation, we moved into a new kind of realpolitik, with the some complications as before yet not closer to dingpolitik.

Ideally, dingpolitiks can exist using a platform like twitter. However, one must remember that the same public who creates and exists in the real world, is the one represented in the virtual world as well. The flaws which have existed within such human interactions are bound to reflect in the virtual world as well since it is created and driven by humans themselves. One can always imagine idealistic situations, but the existence of an imperfect world throughout history is a sign of human kind itself, the social structures and

systemic issues which exist today are inherent and it is a slow process of change within the societies and ideologies to get rid of the 'imperfections' which are often disagreed upon.

We can fight and hope for an ideal of dingpolitik with policies wholly based within reality and exempt of the limitations of time and space, we should note that the existence of realpolitik has been based within time and space throughout. The ideal of stepping away to a dingpolitik, though plausible, opposes the logical 'unexpected' next step which did happen – the blurring of the lines into a 'time of simultaneity'.

Platforms allowed for an opportunity of 'dingpolitik' as described by Latour, yet we drifted away from it to a new kind of 'realpolitik'. One may believe that dingpolitik could allow for better growth, it will have to be in a definitive, assertive environment where we can ensure that the systemic flaws of representation do not recur, an issue yet to be resolved within the general realm of philosophies itself.

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