

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

COLLEGE OF INFORMATION SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY

#PSURIOT: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE PATERNO RIOT

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SPRING 2013

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Mathematics and Security and Risk Analysis
with honors in Security and Risk Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of Twitter in activism, focusing on the riot that occurred in State College, Pennsylvania after Joe Paterno's termination in 2011. People who both attended the riot as well as people who observed Twitter activity during the time of the riot were interviewed. In addition, relevant tweets from the time of the riot were collected. By examining a more local, isolated instance of activism, this study will expand the current literature on the role of social media in activism. Based on the results of the study, it seems that Twitter played more of a facilitating role in expanding participation of the riot, rather than an inciting role.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Andrea Tapia. Without her guidance and feedback, this thesis would not have been possible. Her time and dedication are much appreciated. I would also like to thank my second reader, Prasenjit Mitra, for his input and his time.

Thank you to all my interviewees. Their knowledge and insight were invaluable, and I appreciate all of them taking the time out of their schedule to speak with me.

Lastly, I appreciate all the support from my family and friends. Whenever the project seemed daunting, their unwavering faith in me helped me to continue working.

Chapter 1

Introduction

On November 9, 2011, an announcement was made by the Board of Trustees at the Pennsylvania State University around 10 p.m. that the President, Graham Spanier, and the football coach, Joe Paterno, would be dismissed in wake of the sex abuse scandal involving former defensive coordinator, Jerry Sandusky. In the aftermath of the announcement, Penn State students took to the street to voice their discontent with Paterno's termination. Not only were there chants for Paterno's reinstatement, "We want Joe!", but the crowd also flung insults at Sandusky, the media, the police, and the Board of Trustees. Beyond the verbal presence, the riot also resulted in property destruction, including bottles being thrown, a lamppost being toppled, and most notably, a news van being flipped over. The intensity of the riot, which spilled into the early hours of November 10, 2011, brings questions to how it formed, both in terms of the logistics and the students' motivations behind their actions.

One of the most striking features of the riot was how quickly it developed. Jon Wertheim, who was on the scene for *SportsIllustrated.com*, noted that at 9 pm, one hour before the announcement and resulting riot, the campus was relatively quiet. According to Wertheim (2011), the sudden violent congregation of students can be contributed "to some level, [it was] the power of social media. To some level, [it was] the power of a college campus." The college campus afforded a group of people with a shared identity (the Penn State community) that identified a shared grievance (the termination of Joe

Paterno) to be in close proximity to one another. On the other hand, social media potentially provided that group with the opportunity to easily express that opinion, and to coordinate action.

What is Social Media?

Social media can be defined as a “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system,” (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

While there are a variety of social media sites, including Facebook, and a more professional-gearred LinkedIn, this study will focus on Twitter, a microblogging platform that allows users to share and read short 140-character messages, or “tweets.”

What is Activism?

Activism can be defined as “the actions of a group of like-minded individuals coming together to change the status quo, advocating for a cause, whether local or global, and whether progressive or not” (Harlow, 2011, p. 228). Not only does activism encompass social movements, which is an extended contestation between protestors and those in authority in an attempt to bring about social change, but also collective action, which is an action undertaken by a group for some common end. Collective action may be an element of social movements, but it could also be an isolated event (Harlow, 2011).

The Penn State riot was a large gathering of individuals who came together to express their discontent over the decision to terminate Paterno, and therefore, can be considered a form of activism.

The role of social media in the recent uprisings has garnered significant amount of attention. In 2009, the protest turned riots against the Communist government in Moldova was dubbed the “Twitter Revolution,” due to the role that the microblogging site played in the organization and sustainment of the movement. Beyond the Moldovan protests, Twitter, as well as other social media, has played a role in what is known as the “Arab Spring,” or uprisings in places such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Though these social movements have perhaps gathered the most attention, the internet and social media has also been found to play a role in the English riots of 2011, Guatemalan protests, and Whole Foods boycotts in the United States. By examining the role of social media in the Paterno riot, it will provide insight into how social media, in particular Twitter, affects local, one time instances of collective action.

Research Question #1: What is the role of social media in the Paterno riot?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Previous Research on Internet and Activism

There has been a wide range of literature regarding the impact of the internet, including but not exclusive to social media, on activism. Within that research, there has been much debate about how and to what extent internet communication alters activism. Earl, et al. (2010) outline three common schools of thought with regard to how the internet alters collective action, one element of activism. One finding is that the internet does not change traditional collective action. Others scholars, in contrast, find that the advent and widespread use of the internet requires a complete model change of collective action. In between these two competing findings is that the differences between online and offline activism are a difference in scale, and that no model change is necessary.

One study that found that internet mediated communication does not alter traditional collection action theory is Pudrovska and Ferree (2005)'s examination of the feminist website of the European Women's Lobby (EWL). Based on the content found on the EWL site, it did not focus on social movement organization, but instead advocated participation in promoting policy reform, and "thus the Web discourse that the EWL offers is consistent with the opportunities available to it within European political and legislative structures," (Pudrovska and Ferree, 2005, p.134). Despite its presence on the Internet, the EWL's strategy of bringing about change through lobbying was not altered.

Literature that supports the idea that the introduction of the internet requires a model change of the collective action theory examines how the internet changes two central tenets of collective action theory, the free-riding problem and the need for formal organizations (Bimber et al, 2005). The free-riding problem is the issue that if a movement is successful, then people who did not participate also get to enjoy the benefits, and therefore, participation is de-incentivized, especially in early stages. With the introduction of Internet based-communication and cell phones, however, Bimber, et al. (2005) found that early contributions, especially information contributions, are low cost and can be provided by unmotivated people. The low cost of contributing via the Internet counters the free-riding problem associated with traditional collective action. Collective action requires a means to distribute information, communicate, and coordinate. Traditionally, formal organizations were required to accomplish these goals. Today, however, the Internet not only allows these three necessities to be accomplished, but to also reach a wider audience. With the introduction of internet communication and other mobile technologies, formal organizations are no longer as important to collective action. Interestingly, Bimber et al. (2005) found this to be true for one-shot instances of collective action, such as the protest of the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999, as well as the prolonged Zapatista movement in Mexico.

Despite the findings of Bimber, et al. (2005), other literature argues that formal organization still matter. To study the role of social movement organization (SMOs) in globalization protests, Fisher, et al. (2005), surveyed participants from five different protest events, as well as monitored both online and offline organizational strategies. By surveying participants from five globalization protests from 2000 to 2003, Fisher, et al.

(2005) finds that organizations were key in facilitating participation in the protest, both by informing individuals as well as providing monetary support to attend. The importance of SMOs is not what has changed with the introduction of the internet, but instead how they communicate. Fisher, et al. (2005) writes that “In recent years, SMOs have created Internet resources, and a significant percentage of these participants likely received their information from e-mail lists and websites run by, or affiliated with, SMOs,” (p. 117). Far from lessening the importance of SMOs, Fisher, et al. (2005) finds that the Internet helps to strengthen activists’ connections to particular SMOs. Such findings support that change in collective action theory due to the introduction of internet communication is simply a matter of degree.

In reality, it may be that none of these competing claims are necessarily wrong. Scholars are studying different types of internet activism, which cannot necessarily be used to draw conclusions about the nature of internet activism as a whole (Earl, et al., 2010). It is important to make distinctions between the types of internet activism when drawing conclusions about the impact.

Earl, et al. (2010) outline four different types of internet activism: brochure-ware, online facilitation of offline activity, online participation, and online organization. While online facilitation of offline activity and online participation are fairly self-explanatory, brochure-ware and online organization could be more fully defined. Brochure-ware is the online distribution of information (Earl et al., 2010), while online organization is defined as “when entire campaigns and/or movements are organized online,” (Earl et al., 2010, 429). Across all four types of activity, there has been some indication of scale related change to the model, but brochure-ware and online facility of offline activity tend to have

more support for scale change. Online participation and online organization are the least studied, but are more likely to support either the scale-related change or the model change school of thought (Earl et al, 2010). Making distinction between these types of activism allows for more nuanced conclusions about the true nature of the impact of the internet on activism.

While a lot of research has focused on how the internet has changed *how* activism is carried out, another study examines how the internet has changed *what* type of activism is occurring. Earl and Kimport (2009) have found that a large range of issues, including many new and nonpolitical claims, were discussed online. The most often nontraditional claim revolved around entertainment, or what is known as “fan activism.” Often, these nontraditional movements were hosted via automated sites, such as a site where an individual can automatically create an online position, where there are little to no entrance costs and no content restrictions. Though most nontraditional claims were found on automated sites, organizers of these nontraditional claims did not always take the “easy” route, and nontraditional claims existed online outside of this low-cost and low-effort option (Earl & Kimport, 2009).

Previous Research on Social Media and Activism

Given that social media sites are a subset of websites on the internet, the literature involving the impact of the internet as a whole on activism is relevant. There is a wealth of studies, however, that specifically examines the impact of social media on activism. While there remains much debate about the exact role of social media in activism, most

scholars find that it impacts activism in some way. Given that “more interactive and dynamic forms of online contention have often found scale-related ...or model-related impacts,” (Earl et al., 2010), and social media is by nature interactive and dynamic, this theme is unsurprising.

Particularly, a lot of scholars have reviewed the role of activism in the political protests in the Middle East, including the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as the election protests in Iran. It seemed that most studies found that social media’s role, in particular Twitter and Facebook, complemented traditional activist tactics. While the internet, and eventually social media, was used in Egyptian social movements since 2004, these online strategies were used in conjunction with passing out flyers and word of mouth (Lim, 2012). In a survey of participants of the Tahir square protests of January and February 2011, nearly half of the protestors first heard about it via word of mouth, a traditional activist tactic (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). The second leading initial source of information, however, was “interpersonally oriented media,” including Twitter, Facebook, and telephone (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 369). In the uprising in Egypt, social media was not used unilaterally, but in-step with other traditional activist methods.

Social media was not only intertwined with traditional activist methods during the Egyptian uprising, but also traditional media. During the protests in January in Egypt, the satellite television channel al-Jazeera not only began constantly broadcasting images of the protests, but also framed them as the beginning of a revolution (Alterman, 2011). The powerful images and wide reach of al-Jazeera, not social media, helped catapult the uprising from thousands of participants to millions (Alterman, 2011). Social media, however, is intimately linked to television coverage. In response to the widespread al-

Jazeera, Egyptians began creating their own coverage of the protests and sharing them via social media. The sharing of images, which is relatively low-cost, helped transform people into activists (Alterman, 2011). This idea is further supported by the 2012 study by Starbird and Palen. During a two week period of the Egyptian uprising, all tweets utilizing the hashtags “#egypt,” “#jan25,” and any mention of the word Egypt were collected. The study found that if the tweet was local to Egypt, it was more likely to be retweeted. From this result, the researchers concluded that Twitter enables locals to participate in “low risk activism” by expressing solidarity for the cause, as well as acting as a source of “information filtering and recommendation,” (Starbird & Palen, 2012). Al-Jazeera helped the news of a protest reach a wider audience, but social media allowed for the expansion of participation (Alterman, 2011).

There are, however, other studies that support the idea that social media did help the news of social movements reach a wider audience. While word of mouth was the number one initial source of information for protestors in Tahir square, early participants in the protest tended to rely on Facebook, Twitter, or blogs for information. Given that early participants tend to have a higher participation cost, social media may have had an important role in spreading information among this initial population (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Social media provided a tool for widespread information diffusion that the government could not easily control, and may have helped reach younger, unemployed Egyptians, a segment of the population more likely to participate in risky activism (Lim, 2012).

Beyond the protest in Egypt, there are other instances of social media allowing for easier and more widespread information diffusion. Following the protests of the Iranian

election, Zhou, et al. (2010) started with the 100 most active users who tweeted about the Iranian election. On Twitter, one can “follow” another user, meaning that that user’s tweets will appear in the original user’s homepage. If one user follows another, however, it does not guarantee that the second user follows the original follower. This is known as the Friends-Followers (F-F) structure on Twitter. Using the F-F network of these 100 most active tweeters, researchers then found more valid users. Continuing this process, researchers found over a million users who tweeted during the Iranian protests. By examining how often a specific tweet was retweeted, and how many times that tweet was retweeted by non-followers, the authors found that tweets were most often retweeted by followers than non-followers, and thus implies that the underlying social network of Twitter plays a role in how the information is spread across the internet (Zhou, et al., 2010).

The widespread information via social media is not limited to the protests in Egypt and Iran. In 2011, following the fatal shooting of unarmed Mark Duggan by police in England, a protest began outside the police station in Tottenham, which eventually devolved into a destructive riot, including a police car being set on fire (BBC News, 2011). Eventually, the riots spread from London to over 30 other English towns. With respect to the riot, social media provided an alternate virtual arena in addition to the traditional physical arena of the riot location (Baker, 2012). The intersection of participation in the riot offline, as well as participation online by sharing content, allowed for a larger and faster mobilization of the crowd (Baker, 2012). Social media and internet communication, however, do not always play the same role. Both Facebook and Blackberry Messaging (BBM) were used as organizing tools in the 2011 English riots,

while Twitter helped provide a real time updates when the riots were actually occurring. Whether it was an organization tool or a reporting tool, with respect to the English riots, social media was a facilitator and not a creator (Baker, 2012).

Interestingly, while attention was paid to how social media and internet communication can be used to mobilize individuals to participate in activism, Baker (2012) noted how the opposite may have been true with respect to 2011 English riots. As the riots spread, so did the destructive behavior, including looting, arson, and violence (Joyce & Wallis, 2012). While not empirically proven, Baker (2012) notes that social media likely played a role in encouraging people *not* to attend. The theory that Twitter was used for good during the English riots, reinforced by the actions of Dan Thompson, an English artist who started the hashtag “#riotcleanup,” encouraging English citizens to help their affected neighbors recover (Joyce & Wallis, 2012).

While social media was considered a facilitator in the English riots and the Egyptian protests, in other instances, it was deemed necessary to the success of a movement. In Guatemala in 2009, after the death of lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg, a posthumous video where Rosenberg accuses President Alvaro Colom was discovered and disseminated. In response, several Facebook pages were started, and attracting thousands of followers, demanded justice for Rosenberg. Eventually, there were protests and marches offline numbering over 50,000, not only calling for justice for Rosenberg, but for an end to violence in Guatemala as a whole. Through interviews with the Facebook organizers, as well as content analysis of posts, it was found that without the use of Facebook, these protests would have never mobilized (Harlow, 2011). While the creators, who were younger and educated members of society, initially started the Facebook pages

to spread information about Rosenberg's murder, the most active Facebook users tended to call more for offline action. Not only can online activism translate to offline activism, but online activism can be *necessary* for offline activism (Harlow, 2011).

Facebook also played a driving role in the 2009 Whole Food boycotts. In response to Whole Foods CEO John Mackey's editorial critique of Obama's healthcare reform plan, an online Facebook page, which reached over 30,000 members, to organize a Whole Foods boycott was started. While there were discussions about offline picketing, and Whole Foods experienced such behavior, Facebook was not as much of a driving force in terms of offline activity as in the Guatemala case. The main impact of the group is that it made what would have been an individual, and fairly invisible, withdraw from Whole Foods a public group effort (Kang, 2012). The actual monetary effects of the boycott are murky because, while Whole Foods did have a slower economic year, it came on the heels of an economic depression. The monetary effect notwithstanding, the discourse via the Facebook group brought about considerable attention to the cause. Not only was the Facebook boycott group noted by such publications as *The New York Times*, but it also appeared at the top of Google's search page when the term "Whole Foods boycott" was entered (Kang, 2012). Facebook connected people across a geographical distance to form a substantive, though largely online, instance of collective action.

Whether social media simply complemented activism, or was a driving force behind it, there is evidence that it is difficult to sustain activism driven by social media. Both the Guatemalan protest over Rosenberg's murder, as well as the Whole Foods boycott, saw a significant decline both in the Facebook group and offline over time (Harlow, 2011; Kang, 2012). Kang (2012) points to the lack of leadership and

organizational structure to the waning use of the Whole Foods boycott Facebook page. In terms of the Egyptian protests, Alterman (2011) also notes that the lack of leadership among the protestors makes it difficult to gain concessions, or to even negotiate. The generalized message of the protestors wanting change can easily spread through social media, but a more nuanced plan of what that change should be is much more difficult to transmit (Alterman, 2011). It seems that while social media can spur activism, it is not as effective in securing long-term solutions.

Though not strictly related to activism, flash mobs may provide insight into how certain one-time instances of activism, such as riots, may form. Flash mobs are “public gathering of complete strangers, organized using the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse,” (Kiltz, 2011). Though flash mobs are considered “pointless,” the organizational efforts used for flash mobs could easily be transferred to support an activist cause. Recently, there has been an evolution of flash mobs from performing harmless acts such as singing and dancing to instance of crime (Kiltz, 2011). Specifically, on Twitter during Hurricane Sandy, there was nascent organization plans to go on a flash looting spree if and when the hurricane made landfall (Watson, 2012). Kiltz (2011) notes this evolution, and conjectures that the same social media tactics could be used to organize political protests. Given that flash mobs are leaderless and spontaneous, it makes them enormously difficult to control (Kiltz, 2011).

Formation of Hypothesis

After reviewing the literature about both the impact of internet as a whole, as well as social media specifically, on activism, it seems that the internet fosters non-traditional claims, such as backlash against Paterno's resignation. It also indicates that social media, including Twitter, tends to play a facilitating, rather than an inciting, role in activism.

Based on this research it is feasible that:

Hypothesis #1: Twitter did not cause the Paterno riot, but it accounted for a larger participation.

Chapter 3

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were individuals who utilized or observed social media during the Paterno riot. To get a well-rounded understanding of the riot, participants were both people who attended the riot, and those who simply observed it online. Based on the subject of the riot, most participants were students at Penn State, and between the ages of 18 and 22. A total of seven individuals were interviewed.

In order to find such individuals, I employed several methods. First, I contacted journalists at two of Penn State's student-run news organizations, *Onward State* and *The Daily Collegian*. Both *Onward State* and *The Daily Collegian* thoroughly covered the Sandusky scandal, including the Paterno riot, and through their reporting, actively used social media. Interviews from these journalists would, therefore, provide insight into the riot. Another way to find potential interviewees was to search through relevant tweets, and contact people based on their profile names. Beyond these two tactics, I utilized snowballing sampling. People who attended the riot likely know other people who went as well. After I interviewed one individual, I asked for name and contact information in order to find more participants.

Procedure

The study consisted of two parts. The first stage of the study was interviewing the participants in the role of social media, particularly Twitter, played in the Paterno riot. During the interview, participants were asked about both the motivational and organizational impact Twitter had on the riot. Questions were very open-ended in an attempt to gain a deep understanding of each person's particular experience.

Beyond the interviews, I collected relevant tweets from around the time of the riot. Using the website Topsy Pro Analytics, I will search the terms "penn state," "#pennstate," "paterno," "joepa," "sandusky," "spanier," "board of trustees," "college ave," "beaver ave," "riot," and #PSUCharges for the time period November 9, 2011 and November 10, 2011. November 9, 2011 was the night Paterno was fired, and the time of the resulting riot, which spilled into the early morning hours of November 10, 2011. Using those keywords, and that time frame, I was able to gather *most*, but not *all* of the relevant tweets.

Selecting the proper keywords is crucial to the success of the study. "#PSUCharges" was selected because it was the hashtag used to describe tweets pertaining to the Penn State scandal that eventually resulted in the termination of Joe Paterno. The only other additional hashtag, which describes the overall theme of the tweet, was "#pennstate." Being the broadest descriptor possible, "#pennstate" likely gathered the most relevant tweets. Since the riot was in support of Joe Paterno consisting of many Penn State students, the keywords "paterno," "joepa," "riot," and "penn state" seemed to be obvious additions in the parameters of the search. "Spanier" was included

because President Graham Spanier was terminated the same night as Paterno, while “board of trustees” was selected since they made the decision to fire both Paterno and Spanier. Since the riot largely took place both on Beaver Avenue and College Avenue in State College, Pennsylvania, “college ave” and “beaver ave” are included as well.

In December 2012, Twitter began rolling out a new feature allowing for the download of an archive of a user’s tweets. By contacting the social media managers of *Onward State* and *The Daily Collegian*, who control the Twitter accounts for those two organizations, I attempted to gain access, and find the relevant tweets from the November 9, 2011 and November 10, 2011 time period. Unfortunately, during the time of the study, these archives were not yet available. Eventually, Twitter will make this feature available for all users, and in the future, it will be a useful tool for further studies.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Overview of Twitter Activity During the Riot

Proceeding, during, and after the Paterno riot in November 2011, there was a large volume of Twitter activity related to the Sandusky scandal and the firing of Joe Paterno and Graham Spanier.

Table 4-1: Number of Relevant Tweets

Term	Number of Tweets
paterno	484,750
joepa	87,829
penn state	463,550
sandusky	126,571
#pennstate	83,422
riot	73,302
spanier	31,994
#PSUCharges	28,362
board of trustees	25,278
beaver ave	1,707
college ave	1,183
Total	1,407,948

Though the riot only took place during a few hours of November 9, 2011 and November 10, 2011, all the tweets from the two-day time period are included. The numbers of tweets, therefore, may be somewhat inflated because they include tweets both *before* the announcement of Joe Paterno's termination and *after* the riot occurred. Given that the number of plausibly relevant tweets, however, numbered well above one million,

it is clear that Twitter was utilized heavily both during the lead-up of the riot as well as when it was actually occurring.

Though all of these tweets contain at least one of these search terms, the message of the tweets are not necessarily the same. One interview subject, a journalist for *Onward State* who followed Twitter during the riot, estimates that:

Seventy-five percent of it was it reaction to Joe being fired. You know, “It’s right, It’s wrong.” Probably twenty-five percent of it was “Let’s riot,” or “Why is everyone rioting? This is awful. Look at all of us on TV. We’re on CNN, ABC. We’re giving us a national, awful portrait of ourselves, and stop,” and all that kind of stuff. It was really mixed.

While there was a significant amount of reaction to the announcement of Paterno’s resignation, there was also substantial online activity regarding the riot as well.

In terms of the reactionary tweets, there were both people within and outside the Penn State community commenting on Paterno’s firing. Some supported the decision without being overly inflammatory, such as the tweet from a television personality and political commentator that read “Penn State just took the step necessary to restore its reputation, by firing Paterno and the University president. PSU is to be commended.” Other tweets used aggressive language to show support for Paterno’s termination. One tweet by a member of the National Football League read “I don’t feel sorry 4 [sic] joe paterno old ass, f*ck [sic] him! You allow that sh*t [sic] to happen to kids better be glad it wasn’t my son! PERIOD! #MANONFIRE.” While most of Twitter was dominated by those in support of the Paterno’s termination, other tweets expressed their support. These mostly came from members of the Penn State community, including one from a Penn State graduate that said “Do y’all [sic] understand they just FIRED JOE PATERNO.

FIRED JOE PATERNO. GREATEST COACH IN COLLEGE FOOTBALL HISTORY. ”

While there was a both support and derision for the decision of Paterno’s termination, the commentary regarding the riot was almost wholly negative. One individual tweeted “Seeing the pro-JoePa student ‘protests,’ I demand a napalming of Happy Valley. Burn them all.” Another individual expressed his disapproval, but without using antagonistic language, tweeting “Penn State riot? #Embarassing.” There were certainly degrees of outrage with regards to the riot, but despite the observation from the *Onward State* journalist that individuals were tweeting in support of the riot, there seem to be very few public tweets to substantiate that.

Beyond individuals tweeting their reactions, there was a wide range of news organization simply disseminating the news of both Paterno’s termination as well as the coverage of the riot itself. News organizations that covered the news of Paterno’s dismissal and the ensuing riot were local and national as well as sports-focused and non-specific media outlets. One from *SportsCenter*, a national sports news outlet read “Joe Paterno is out at Penn State. The board of trustees got rid of the legendary coach and the school’s president.” There was a similar message from came from the *CNN*, which tweeted “Coach Paterno and President ousted.” Beyond national news organizations, *StateCollege.com*, a local news website, tweeted “We have confirmation: Paterno is done. Now.” Quickly after the riot began, news organizations began tweeting about that as well. *The New York Times* tweeted “Penn State Students Riot After Paterno is Ousted.” There was also extensive coverage from student-run Penn State organization, including

The Daily Collegian and *Onward State*. When coming from news organizations accounts, no matter what genre, the tweets were, on the whole, impartial.

While the tweets from the news organization accounts tended to be impartial, individual professional journalists often expressed personal opinions on Paterno's dismissal, as well as the rioters' behavior, via their personal accounts. One journalist for *Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN)* tweeted: "The latin root Pater means "father." Paterno was fired because he failed to be one," while another *ESPN* journalist tweeted "Glad to see Paterno wasn't let off the hook at PSU." Beyond *ESPN* journalists, a columnist for *The Washington Post* tweeted the message "Joe Paterno is not a fall guy. He is the CEO of his corp. [sic] who knew and didn't tell the police. A leader of men does not fail to protect children." Other tweets from professional journalists also decried the reaction of the Penn State students who were rioting. A sports journalist from *CBSSports.com* tweeted "I wouldn't call what I'm seeing a riot. I'd call it a conclave of de-facto child-rape apologists, but not a riot." Another columnist from *The New York Times* similarly expressed his disappointment with the riot, tweeting "Everyone needs to watch this Penn State riot coverage. I can't believe it. One of those boys was apparently 10 y.o. [sic] What about him?" Twitter accounts representing news corporations as a whole used more unbiased language, but professional journalists used their personal accounts to express their opinion.

Overall, there was a large volume of tweets both about Paterno's termination and the resulting riot. The tweets tended to be a combination of a source of information regarding the firing and the riot as well as reactions to the event. Often, Twitter accounts

associated with news organizations tended to be impartial, but the online atmosphere was dominated by more opinionated tweets from both individuals and professional journalists.

Speed of Twitter

For real-time reporting, Twitter is an ideal tool to spread information. With respect to Paterno's termination, one individual who followed the story online, but did not attend the riot, said that:

[Social media] was huge because it was such a big story that everyone wanted real time updates, and more Twitter than Facebook, is the real time updates. If you go into Twitter, and even if people who are tweeting about it you don't follow those people, you can still go to Twitter search and search "Joe Paterno" or "Jerry Sandusky" or search the hashtags and stuff, and you knew right away through a Twitter search where you couldn't get that through a Google search because it was so outdated.

Not only does Twitter allow people to quickly send bursts of information to wide audiences via tweets, but it also allows people to quickly gather information.

Because of the speed of Twitter, news organizations are placed in an interesting position because they are live-tweeting events such as the riot. One journalist from *Onward State* said that:

I know from our social media accounts, we were a little bit conflicted about whether—since we had a big audience—to be pointing people. You know, you don't want to fuel the riot... I presume *The Daily Collegian* had a similar debate. I guess conflicted isn't the right word. It's just something you think about. I don't think there was any doubt we were going to be tweeting about it. It was just like in the back of your head, are we really helping this riot kind of continue?"

Part of the news is distributing the movements of the riot, which both *Onward State* and *The Daily Collegian* did. On the night of the riot, *Onward State* tweeted "We have a

stampede: reports of tear gas. From what I've seen, there was no reason to deploy it. Students rush towards west campus," as well as "...WTAJ news van has been flipped and gasoline leaking in front of Urban Outfitters." *The Daily Collegian* also tweeted movements of the riot, including "Hundreds continue to rush towards campus away from police #PSUCharges," and "Thousands of people are heading down McAllister. Police are using mace on the crowd. #PSUCharges." By live-tweeting the movements of the riot, *Onward State* and *The Daily Collegian* were providing information that could facilitate more people joining the riot, even though that was not necessarily their intention.

Penn State Twitter Presence

Twitter allows information to spread quickly as it is, but Penn State during the time of the riot was even more primed for quick information diffusion. On one hand, Penn State has a large Twitter presence. One journalist from *Onward State* commented that:

It's kind of impressive because [Penn State has] these two massive social media accounts created by student news organizations, [*Onward State* and *The Daily Collegian*]. Plus we also have the Penn State main account. We have a lot of students who have—like I said—900 to 1200 followers. And I think that that's pretty rare to have that many students with those kinds of followings. So as soon as you get all that going together, I think that kind of that kind of creates this melting pot where things can really snowball fast here.

It was estimated that around the time of the riot *Onward State* had fifteen to twenty thousand followers at the time, while *The Daily Collegian* had around ten to twelve

thousand followers. Those news organization, combined with students who have many followers as well, have an enormous amount of reach within the Penn State community.

Not only does Penn State have news organizations and students with a lot of followers, but people at Penn State tend to follow each other. One bystander who attended the riot commented “obviously, I follow a lot of people that go to Penn State...and Penn State people that follow sports.” Belonging to the Penn State community offline influences who people chose to follow online.

Beyond Penn State having a large social media presence, after news of the Sandusky scandal broke, the mainstream media came to State College to cover the news. As a result, not only was the Penn State community tweeting about the riot, but the mainstream media was as well. The coverage of the scandal, which began four days prior to the riot, allowed for additional exposure of both Paterno’s termination, as well as the ensuing riot.

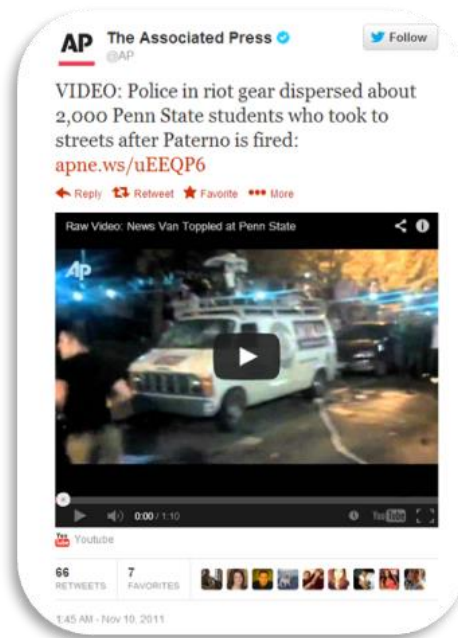
Motivational Impact of Twitter

Even before the announcement of Paterno’s firing, there was chatter about a potential riot if that decision were occur. One journalist for a local news outlet said “I know that people had talked about [a riot] beforehand. Only like hypothetically, like if you fire Joe tonight, there’s going to be a riot on Beaver.” About two hours from the announcement, *Onward State* retweeted a similar sentiment from a Penn State student. The tweet read “Retweets do not constitute an endorsement. RT...if joepa isn’t allowed to coach saturday, this campus will burn. #pennstate.” Another journalist from Comcast

Sportsnet Philadelphia also reported talk about a riot pending the Board of Trustees' decision, tweeting "One PSU student: 'If the board says Paterno can't coach Saturday, there's going to be a riot. Get your cameras ready. College Ave might burn.'" There was definitely a build-up regarding the riot, both offline and online.

Once the riot actually began, many of the tweets included pictures and videos of the riot. One journalist describes his behavior during the riot saying: "I took lots of pictures during the riot itself, and I would tweet them out in bunches so people could see what it's like...it kind of sensationalizing it a bit because it was a riot technically, but it's not like when Vancouver loses the Stanley Cup and burns half the city down." *Associated Press* tweeted out a video of the news van being flipped shown below:

Figure 4-1: *Associated Press* Tweet



Local news and student news organizations also contributed content, such as the picture below *The Daily Collegian* tweeted:

Figure 4-2: *The Daily Collegian* Tweet



Beyond news organization, individuals also tweeted images of the riot.

Figure 4-3: Bystander Tweet



A lot of times, the most exciting images and videos of the riot were disseminated quickly via Twitter.

The sensationalizing of the riot may have played a role in getting more people to attend the riot. One journalist for *Onward State* said that:

It's always tough to estimate how many people are really rioting or how many people are really just there to watch. I mean, I know that a lot of my friends got down there as soon as they could because they wanted to know what the hell is going on. Who knows how many people were actually causing damages and actually rioting? But again, it's one of those things with social media where you find out about it and you there to watch. Everybody wants to become a spectator. Everyone is taking smart phone photos. Everybody wants to be there to get a shot of it so they can share with their friends and their personal social media accounts

That sentiment was further reinforced by one bystander, who talked about her motivations for joining in:

Well, personally, when we were in the dorms, I was in my bed, flipping through Twitter, and...everybody was tweeting about the riot, and so I was like "Oh my God, what's going on?" And then we heard people yelling outside the windows, so we just joined in because "Why not? I'm not going to miss out."

The more enticing the riot looked online, it seemed people were more inclined to attend.

Beyond making the riot look more exciting, Twitter may have played a role in contributing to a groupthink mentality. One of the journalists from *Onward State* discussed this impact, saying:

A lot of people, I think, watched the press conference, opened up their computer, and saw five people saying "let's riot," and then again, I think once ten people do it, you're going to have a hundred, and once hundred people do it, you're going to have one thousand, once you have one thousand, you're going to have two thousand...the collective actions [at Penn State] are not only evidenced by THON and by the football games, but they're also evidenced by the riot. So, when you have people who have the same inkling of a thought, they're going to be more compelled to act.

Twitter opens up another avenue of pressure. People are not only encouraged to attend the riot from people in a close geographical proximity, but by people online as well.

Beyond the images and online talk of the riot itself contributing to a groupthink mentality, tweets in support of Joe Paterno may have also contributed. During the time of the riot, Twitter was populated with tweets in support of Joe Paterno, mostly from people inside the Penn State community. One student tweeted “Can I give my ticket to JoePa to make sure he is at the game on Saturday,” while another student’s tweet expressed anger at the Board of Trustees along with his support for Paterno, writing “#PSUBOT was unable to find a way to fire JoePa in person. Cowards. All of you. F—ing cowards.” If people were angry about the decision to fire Paterno, such tweets will only serve to reinforce the sentiment. Since the riot was in reaction to Paterno’s termination, the online derision of the Board of Trustees’ decision may have had a powerful contribution to the riot.

Once people were at the riot, however, the influence of Twitter tended to end there. Commenting on whether Twitter influenced the actions of people *at* the riot, a journalist for a local news organization said:

I don’t know if it made people feel the desire to flip over a garbage can, probably that was more from seeing it in person. Like everyone, that was more of a group effect. Certainly someone could say something like “this is crazy, and let’s go contribute to this,” but they’re probably more influenced by what they see in person than what they hear in social media, at least in that circumstance.

The general consensus among interviewees is that while Twitter encouraged people to attend the riot, once there, actual behavior was encouraged by the mob mentality more than Twitter.

Use of Twitter to Discourage

While Twitter can encourage people to riot, the opposite is true as well. Many people within the Penn State community used Twitter to discourage people from attending the riot. When discussing with one student who watched the riot, but did not attend, he said:

I did not approve the riot because I thought that it was pretty much a useless gesture. And because it wasn't going to change anything, I tweeted something pretty much to that effect. Other people tweeted at me they either appreciated or didn't appreciate my comments, and then I responded to those.

That sentiment was reflected by actual tweets as well. One student wrote "PLEASE do not be stupid and further tarnish the reputation of our university everyone," while another one tweeted "I know it will fall upon deaf ears but please don't riot...Realize the lasting effect it will have." Beyond current students, alumni also tweeted encouraging people not to attend the riot, including "Dear Penn State students: Whatever happens, please don't riot tonight. Please just don't. Sincerely, every alumni worldwide cc: @OnwardState." Obviously, Twitter was used during the night of the riot in an attempt to discourage people from attending. The actual mitigating effect of these tweets, however, is unclear.

Influences Outside of Twitter

Other mediums were utilized to spread the news of the riot besides Twitter. At Penn State, there is an understanding that a place on Beaver Avenue, known as "Beaver Canyon," is where massive gatherings take place. A journalist for *Onward State* said that:

Maybe because it's the apartments are kind of bookending the street, or maybe it's because tons of students live over there, or what it is, but Beaver Canyon is always the place people go whenever there's a riot, or there's something about to shake down. So that was the people's first instinct. "Okay, get to Beaver Canyon."

Many of the people interviewed mentioned this general knowledge, as well as the fact that about six months prior to the Paterno riot, there was a large rally at Beaver Canyon after the death of Osama bin Laden. Because of this understanding, as well as the recent Osama bin Laden rally, once the news broke, people generally knew that if there was going to be a riot, it would at least start at Beaver Canyon.

Beyond this understanding among Penn State students, coverage of the riot was also televised. As noted, mainstream media provided extensive coverage as the Sandusky scandal unfolded. One of the journalists from *Onward State* commented that:

People were watching on TV. I mean, I think that was another component. You have an *ESPN* anchor standing in front of there talking to people as they're getting pushed around and news vans flipped. You're watching TV and all of the sudden, something like that happens live on TV, and you might be sitting there "I'm just going to do my homework," but then all of the sudden you're like "I got to go see this."

Other mediums, besides Twitter, had a motivational effect on individuals.

Lastly, word of mouth had a contributing effect on the riot itself. At Penn State, students are in close proximity to one another, whether in the dorms or in apartments off campus, allowing news to travel fast via word of mouth. One bystander who attended the riot said that while she was monitoring Twitter, she was also motivated to go because she "heard people yelling outside the windows." While the role of Twitter should not be discounted, other forms of communication should be recognized as well.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

With respect to the Paterno riot, Twitter played a facilitating role by encouraging people to attend. Because of the real time updates of Twitter, it spread the news of both Paterno's termination and subsequent riot quicker than either Facebook or searching the internet. Due to Penn State's large Twitter presence in the form of *Onward State* and *The Daily Collegian* accounts, as well as students with large number of followers, information was easily spread through the Penn State community. Public tweets on Twitter are also searchable, so while the news could be quickly spread via the underlying social structure of Twitter, people could also use the public newsfeed of Twitter to seek out information themselves. Given that the number of relevant tweets from November 9, 2011 and November 10, 2011 numbered nearly one and a half million, there was an enormous amount of information shared on Twitter. The role of Twitter, however, extended beyond information diffusion.

Twitter also played a role in reinforcing opinions people may have already had. Almost immediately after the riot, there was a lot of opinion expressed on Twitter regarding Paterno's firing, both in support of the decision as well as against it. Largely, the people who tweeted that they disagree with the Board of Trustee's decision to fire Paterno had some sort of ties to the Penn State. Often, people within the Penn State community follow others people within that same community on Twitter. If someone

disagreed with the Paterno's termination, it is likely that that opinion was further strengthened by the activity on Twitter. Since the riot was in reaction to the firing, the online reinforcement that the premise of the riot was right could have compelled people to act.

Beyond contributing to a groupthink mentality, the Twitter activity sensationalized the riot. Students as well as news organizations were tweeting both videos and photos of the riot. Those types of media are easily accessible via Twitter, and make the riot seem more exciting. Based on those videos and images, people would be more motivated to go not only because they want to see what is going on but also because they do not want miss any of the perceived action.

Once at the riot, people are not motivated to partake in further action by Twitter. When discussing people's motivations *at* the riot, interviewees mentioned that a "mob mentality" drove people's actions once there. Twitter's most important role in the riot is, therefore, enticing more people to attend the riot rather than motivating people once there.

Twitter did play a facilitating role in the riot, but it would mischaracterize the role of Twitter to say that it caused the riot. Without Twitter, and even without social media in general, it is likely the riot would have occurred anyway because there were many other factors that could have motivated people to participate. At the time, television was also broadcasting news and images of both Paterno's firing and the riot. On a college campus, the most powerful motivator was probably word of mouth. Both in dorms and in off-campus apartments, there are many people within a close proximity of one another. By

simply watching or hearing people go to the riot, people are likely more inspired to attend as well.

While Twitter motivated people to attend, there was a lot of Twitter activity encouraging people *not* to riot. Both alumni and students used their Twitter accounts to advocate for restraint, but the actual effect of those efforts is unclear because success is measured in those who *did not* attend the riot. Twitter can reinforce people's pre-conceived notions, but it is unclear whether it actually changes people's opinions. This would be an interesting topic for further research, and perhaps be best studied via a survey.

Another further topic of study is the role of Facebook in instances of local activism, such as this riot. While Facebook and Twitter are both social media sites, they are different, and their distinct impacts should be studied and documented. With respect to Twitter itself, it may be interesting to study what role the short messages play. Twitter limits tweets to 140-characters, and therefore may expose people to more information more quickly. On the other hand, Twitter may not be able to fully express an entire message in this truncated form. It would be interesting to study whether or not the short messages associated with Twitter help or hurt activism.

With all studies, there are limitations associated with this one. While the interviews provided in-depth information about the role of Twitter in the Paterno riot, information from only seven individuals was gathered. A survey that gathers less information, but from more people could be conducted to complement the findings of this study. There were also no interviews with people who destructively participated in the

riot. While these interviews are more difficult to secure because people may be embarrassed due to the backlash of the riot, it would have been an interesting perspective.

Beyond the interviews, there are also potential deficiencies within the Twitter data. When gathering tweets, I only have access to public tweets from the time of the riot. Individuals on Twitter can choose to “lock” their tweets so only people they chose are allowed to see them. Perhaps, because individuals with private accounts can choose who can see their tweets, these “private” tweets are more inflammatory. Several interviewees’ mentioned that people were tweeting in support of the riot, but very few public tweets supported that notion. It is possible that many of those were private tweets, and could not be gathered. The issue of private versus public tweets is a difficult one to overcome in research. In order to gather private tweets, it would likely be necessary to contact participants, and have them provide access to their Twitter archive.

Another issue is that tweets were gathered using keywords. While utilizing this method, *most* relevant tweets were gathered, it is impossible to gather *all* relevant tweets. As a result, there may be some under-sampling of these tweets. The opposite effect may be true as well. Some of the keywords were so broad that they may have captured tweets irrelevant to the Penn State riot. For example, I used the term “riot.” Also on November 9, 2011, there was a gathering at the University of California, Berkley termed “Occupy Cal,” in response to cuts of higher education (Asimov & Tucker, 2011). Tweets about Occupy Cal were captured by the search term “riot” in addition to tweets about the Paterno riot. It is better, however, to capture the relevant tweets using the search term “riot” than to exclude them due to over-sampling.

Beyond the over-sampling due to the search terms, the time frame may have contributed to the over-sampling. The time frame was both November 9, 2011 and November 10, 2011, so tweets were captured *before* the announcement of Paterno's termination and *after* the riot had ended. It is hard to overcome this timeframe issue as well. Now that Twitter is rolling out a feature where you can download Twitter archives, it may be easier to narrow the time parameters.

No study is perfect, and therefore, it is important to accept the inherent flaws with study design. Future research, such as a survey, will help offset certain deficiencies of this particular study.

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