## *Slacktivism* as a mobilization resource in social networks: The *#BringBackOurGirls* case[1]

*El* slacktivismo *como recurso de movilización en redes sociales: el caso de #BringBackOurGirls*

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This paper studies the *#BringBackOurGirls* campaign development on Twitter, during 2014, through the use of six social networks measurement APIs. Its main objective is to approach the advantages that *Slacktivism* represents as a social mobilization phenomenon on the Internet, from the assumptions of the Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) and its effectiveness in impacting the global political agenda.

KEYWORDS: *Slacktivism*, Resource Mobilization Theory, *#BringBackOurGirls*, Twitter, Transnational Activism.

*Este trabajo estudia el desarrollo de la campaña #BringBackOurGirls en Twitter, durante 2014, a través de seis apis de medición de redes sociales. El objetivo es aproximarse a las ventajas que supone el* Slacktivismo*, como fenómeno de movilización social en Internet, desde los presupuestos de la Teoría de Movilización de Recursos (tmr) y su efectividad para impactar la agenda política mundial.*

*PALABRAS CLAVE: Slack*tivismo*, Teoría de Movilización de Recursos, #BringBackOur-*
Girls, Twitter, activismo transnacional.

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Introduction

Nowadays, the success of any political cause seems to be directly proportional to the amount of *likes*, on Facebook; *retweets*, on Twitter; or views on YouTube, that such cause may generate. During the last years, we have witnessed a growing civic engagement on global campaigns through social networks. For instance, it is worth mentioning the KONY 2012 video, from *Children* –an invisible organization–, or the *#IceBucketChallenge* solidarity campaign*,* both intended for fund raising, which reached millions of views and broke YouTube records (Clarín, 2014).

However, some authors do not consider it a real participation, but rather simple actions provided by technological tools that allow users to exchange information without actually getting personally involved in such causes. This is what some authors have pejoratively referred to as "Slacktivism" (Morozov, 2009). The term stems from the combination of the words *activism* and *slacker,* and it describes a cluster of political activities that do not have an impact on real life, but that help to increase the feeling of wellbeing of citizens participating in them (Christensen, 2011; Glenn, 2015; Morozov, 2009;).

The following question motivated us to carry out this research: Taking the Resource Mobilization Theory (from the late 20th century) as a starting point, Can slacktivism be considered a mobilization and citizen engagement resource through social media? For that purpose, we wanted to analyze the *#BringBackOurGirls* hashtag, used to protest against the kidnaping of 276 girls, by Boko Haram, in Nigeria[3].

The #BBOG hashtag was used for the first time by a Nigerian lawyer, on April 23, 2014, to comment about a speech given in a UNESCO event (Lyons, Robinson & Chorley, 2014).

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[3]   Despite its many terrorist activities during recent decades, Boko Haram became strongly notorious in the Western hemisphere, when he kidnapped 276 girls, in a boarding school in the town of Chibok, Borno (Nigeria), on April 14, 2014 (El País, 2014). When the news of the kidnapping became public, thousands of Nigerians came out to protest by demanding more effectiveness from the president, Goodluck Jonathan, in the search for the minors.

FIGURE 1

FIRST TWEET USING THE #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS HASHTAG
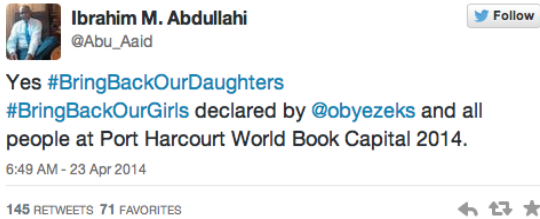


Source: Abdullahi (2014).

In a matter of two weeks, the hashtag became popular all around the world (Bajo, 2014; Collins, 2014). The most popular action of the campaign, which many celebrities joined, was to post pictures on social media accounts such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, holding signs reading #BBOG. (Fernández, 2014). As Litoff (2014) and Morse (2014) affirm, #BBOG became a "war cry" in favor of the girls.

In order to make a descriptive examination on the performance of #BBOG, we took a sample of the hashtag's use on Twitter between April and December 2014. This research is similar to studies using tweets as an investigation and analysis source, both at a descriptive and exploratory level as well as at a macro-level through *big data* work (Berry, 2011; Borra & Rieder, 2013; Boyd & Crawford, 2012; Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014).

For our case, we wanted to benefit from the public data and APIs (Application Programming Interface), which allow the software to "talk" to another software and reply on particular movements and activities (Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014). Such data were analyzed from two categories: Virality and Influence reached by the hashtag.

Due to the analysis of the results, we can conclude that #BBOG is a typical case of *Slacktivism*, but, far from demonizing these campaigns by claiming they do not lead to an effective political action, this study intends to acknowledge them within a concrete effectiveness as mobilization resources.

## Theoretical Framework

There are numerous studies on whether the Internet enhances participation or not. Some authors fall into skepticism, arguing that the Web has a negative effect on participation, as it replaces citizen's interpersonal relationships. (Putnam, 2000). Others, however, are more optimistic about the positive effect that Internet has on participation (De Marco & Robles Morales, 2012; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001) or about the fact that it helps mobilize individuals who would otherwise remain inactive and left outside the traditional participatory process (Anduiza, Gallego & Cantijoch, 2010;  Cantijoch, 2009; Delli Carpini, 2000; Di Genaro & Dutton, 2006; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Ward, Gibson & Lusoli, 2003; ;).

In this sense, academic literature draws an independence line between the online and offline political participation, turning digital activism into a new way of participation with its own mechanisms and resources (Best & Krueger, 2005; Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2005;).

This paper considers digital activism as a phenomenon that affects the logic of political participation, due to reduction in participation costs (Bimber, 2000; Borge, Cardenal & Malpica, 2012; Kiesler, Zdaniuk, Lundmark & Kraut, 2000). And it is precisely there, where it connects with the classical Resource Mobilization Theory.

Something similar to what we see today in the indexes of participation and virality of political actions in networks occurred during the seventies, with the striking citizen intervention in mobilization processes. By then, McCarthy & Zald (1977), tried to explain the phenomenon under two hypotheses. According to the first one, citizens participated due to events that triggered mobilization; And, according to the second one, participation was given due to the increase of available resources for mobilization (Ortíz, 2015). This latter option seduced them more and it was the postulate that gave rise to the Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), which was quickly adopted by other authors (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Jenkins, 1982; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Rogers, 1974; Tilly, 1978).

However, although the RMT is previous to the appearance of the Internet, the possibilities of connection and participation demonstrated

by this mean have renewed its topicality. The Web has significantly decreased participation costs, which have always been a motivating factor for citizen mobilization (Olson, 1968). Many individuals are being able to make smaller contributions through social networks that, all together, can achieve a greater mobilization (Butler, 2011;) (Garcia & del Hoyo, 2013).

It is understood that reduction of participation costs goes beyond the monetary aspects and takes into account other elements that explain the multiplication of collective political actions over the Internet. First of all, the exponential and unprecedented increase of information circulating on the Web (Anduiza, Gallego & Jorba, 2009; Bimber, 2001). Secondly, the technical possibilities that allow citizens to have a direct interaction on political decisions; it is all about decentralized actions, without the need of intermediaries, with less direct connection ties with political parties, unions or groups starting the protests (Batlle & Cardenal, 2006; Bennett, Breunig & Given, 2008). And finally, the fact that the Web allows the creation of discussion and deliberation "spaces" on common interest topics (Karakaya, 2005).

At the same time, as participation costs decrease, the types of mobilization are also different from previous ones. In these actions, a new kind of activist, with flexible political ownership, less personal commitment and less ideological tensions, emerges –the *Click-Activist*– (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Butler, 2011; Henríquez, 2011; Resina de la Fuente, 2010).

In this context, visibility still remains –as in classical activism– a central axis and, in many cases, more than social change, campaigns and protests need, above all, to seek support and public visibility among the population and the media, while respecting the plurality of protesters who have their own personal and customized codes (Sampedro, 2005). It is rather about, what Rheingold (2002) calls *intelligent multitudes*: anonymous individuals who are able to act without knowing each other due to he fact that they are attracted to a message, but without compromising their political identity.

Many global campaigns, including #BBOG, have received several criticisms, for being considered a simple example of *Slacktivism*, a combination of

the words: Activism and Slacker (lazy, loafer, idle). A low-cost, low-risk activism on social networks, which seeks to sensitize and give emotional satisfaction to people involved in such activity (Lee & Hsieh, 2013).

Although the trademarks of on-line political activities are particularly prone to this accusation, it should be taken into account that *Slacktivism* does not cover them all. The phenomenon excludes actions such as those carried out by hackers, because it is considered that they require a greater effort and, therefore, they are actually considered valid examples of political participation. The diffusion of political jokes – which have no other purpose than to entertain– is neither considered as *Slacktivism*. According to the definition of Morozov (2009), for an action to be considered as Slacktivism, it must have a clear intention to influence political decisions, and it must have a political nucleus, even if it is a bit concealed.

What kind of actions does *Slacktivism* involve? All initiatives in which anyone with an Internet connection may participate: to click on the *like* button to show support on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram; to viralize hashtags and content on Twitter; to sign online petitions; to forward letters, videos or other content through social networking accounts; to make donations of small amounts of money; to change the status of personal profiles; to create causes on Facebook; to upload photos and selfies showing support for a campaign, etc. (Christensen, 2011).

As Knibbs (2013) reminds us, some consider that *Slacktivism* only generates the effect of a few "pats on the back" leading the individual to feel fine by clicking *like* or commenting on a social issue, without doing anything else (Gladwell, 2010; Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Morozov, 2009, 2011; Waugh, Abdipanah, Hashemi, Rahman & Cook, 2014). It also receives other derogatory names such as: "Folded Arms Activism", "Couch Activism" or "Keyboard Activism" (Butler, 2011), intended to undermine its effectiveness, as it can be easily made without leaving home. Morozov (2009) even claims that Slactivism is an on-line activism with no social or political impact.

Therefore, Slacktivism has become trendy by trying to degrade the versions of digital political participation. Its opponents do not

seem to have any problem with the causes themselves, but rather with the attitude of these new "Activists", as their actions are considered insufficient to achieve the proposed objectives (Christensen, 2011).

However, other authors do not condemn this digital activism, and try to see the bright side of it, because, in the right hands, it may be efficient, allowing to extend the scope of actions due to more cost-effective ways of protest (Knibbs, 2013; Vie, 2014). Authors such as Christensen (2011) and Chiluwa & Ifukor (2015), claim that Slacktivism may be successful, as it sensitizes with contemporary issues and is able to support mobilization, as long as it is accompanied with offline actions, such as those seen in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya.

## METHODOLOGY

In the research, we opted for a quantitative methodology (Hernández, Fernandez & Baptista, 2006) that could allow us to work on the data we collected from online APIs, in a descriptive analysis (Dankhe, 1989) that showed results on the behavior of the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag and its evolution, between April and December 2014.

The number of various on-line applications referred to below is explained because a single tool that could measure all the variables needed for the study could not be found. After tracing the features of different platforms, we chose to work with six of them: Topsy, Talkwalker, Twitonomy, TweetArchivist, CartoDB and Hastagify.me; Allowing us to measure the behavior of # BBOG since its appearance in April 2014.

As for the period of time comprising the research, results from three different moments will be presented and then compared to each other:

Period I: First two weeks of appearance #BBOG (04-23-2014 to 05-06-2014), to observe the initial success and virality of the hashtag.

Period II: Hashtag history (04-23 to 12-15-2014, by defining the sample), to observe the hashtag trend over time and its most prominent influencers[4] on Twitter.

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4    We have taken the expression "influencers" which the academic literature

Period III: Information gathering in a later random period (November to December, 2014), to analyze the visibility of # BBOG and the characteristics of the influencers after eight months of the hashtag's activity. This analysis allowed us to compare the profiles of the most influential people throughout the campaign to those who kept it alive at the end of the year.

Table 1 is a synthesis of how each of the research objectives was addressed in the follow-up of # BBOG, according to the two categories of analysis: Virality and Influence, and the tools used to work on each one. The other two columns explain the resources offered by the tools and the time period they were applied to, according to the three moments studied.

TABLE 1

ANALYSIS CATEGORÍES AND TOOLS USED

| Category | Tool | Resources | Studied Period |
|---|---|---|---|
| Virality | CartoDB | Heatmap of the places where the tweets appeared | I |
| | Talkwalker | Map with the places and languages of appearance of the tweets | III |
| Influence | Topsy | Trend chart of the hashtag during one month and top list of the most influential tweets during the same period | III |
| | Hastagify.me | Top 6 of the influencer users and the most related hashtaghs to #BBOG | II y III |
| | Tweet Archivist | Accounts follow-up, specific tweets and characteristics of the top 6 influencers in the cause's history. | III |

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uses to designate users who have more ability to spread something on the networks, either by the number of followers they have, or by the traffic of content they post.

| Category | Tool | Resources | Studied Period |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Twitonomy | Details on the profile of the influencer user and their activity on Twitter from the moment they joined the social network | II y III |

Source: Own elaboration.

We are aware that "virality" does not exist on the Royal Language Academy´s dictionary, but is rather a technicality used for appointing the phenomenon on which certain content, usually with a great emotional charge, manage to massively replicate through the different social and traditional media (Berger & Milkman, 2012). This is important for our purpose, given that Slacktivism concerns viral content, which becomes trendy and triggers sudden interest on users.

In particular, to know the virality of #BBOG, we used CartoDB: a platform that allows creating interactive maps for data display and analysis. We generated a map showing the places where tweets containing #BBOG appeared, between April 23rd, 2014 (first appearance of the hashtag) and May 6th. In a matter of just two weeks, the hashtag had gone around the globe and presented more interaction focal points abroad than in Nigeria itself.

In December 2014, #BBOG was still active on Twitter, so we decided to run another measurement regarding its virality, but with real time data. We randomly chose one week, (December 4- 11, 2014) and introduced the hashtag in the Talkwalker interface to know where the publications came up and in what language they were written. The findings were plotted on two different maps, which together with CartoDB, allow seeing the diversity of places and countries involved in the cause.

Hereunder, we have the second category, and we have called it "influence", in line with the term influencer, which appears constantly. At this point, the analysis does not focus on how the hashtag becomes popular, but rather on the users who managed to make it popular; these are called "influencers", to use the Anglo-Saxon literature term (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason & Watts, 2011).

To determine the influencers' behavior, we worked with the historical evolution data of the hashtag's use, as well as with those who were moving in real time, stages II and III of the sample. Thanks to Hastagify. me, we were able to know who were the six most influential users since the hashtag was created on April 23rd[5]. For stage III, influencers in real time at the time of the analysis were determined, comparing the data of Topsy and TweetArchivist that allow to measure the frequency of # BBOG and the most influential tweet of each day.

Finally, we studied the profile of the influencer users on both stages using Twitonomy according to: mentions, retweets, number of followers, amount of favs, hashtags use and hyperlinks on their messages, etc.

With these two categories of Virality and Influence, it was possible to establish the diffusion of #BBOG, the amount of visibility the hashtag achieved as a global mobilization phenomenon as well as the characteristics of the most influential users.

## Analysis and Results
## #BBOG Virality during 2014

In April 2014, days after the attack of Boko Haram, there was a lot of misinformation surrounding the case. At that time, Nigerian Government asserted that the number of girls abducted amounted to 85, a number that eventually increased up to 276.

The first person to make the issue become a trend was Nigerian politician, Oby Ezekwesili, one of the campaign's leading supporters, who began tweeting with #WhereAreOur85Daughthers, on April 20, 2014. Two days later, the hashtag became trending topic in the African country. However, this hashtag did not achieve the popularity of #BringBackOurGirls, which was first used, on April 23, by Ibrahim M. Abdullahi, while watching Ezekwesili's speech on T.V.. According

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5   Specifically, those who got their highest levels of popularity by the number of times they managed to get #BBOG to appear in the time Line (TL) of other users and not necessarily by the number of times they used the hashtag.

to the data collected by Topsy, in just two weeks, the hashtag reached 1,334,864 publications (Neubauer, 2014).

In terms of virality, the Nigerian cause had a similar progress to the cause #StopKonny in 2012 (Bogart, 2014), as it also emerged in Africa, but in a few days it was more popular in the United States and Europe, and from there it was irradiated to the other continents. The following graphic summarizes, through a heat map, the situation of #BBOG in the first two weeks, when the United States and Europe were above the countries of West Africa.

FIGURE 2
#BRINGBACKOURGIRLS  VIRALITY MAP
(04-23 TO 05-07, 2014).



Fuente: Rogers (2014).

These hot spots were maintained throughout the year. With real-time measurement between December 4-11, 2014, the hashtag was still active on all continents. This time, the United States remained the place where the hashtag was used the most (4 600 tweets), while Europe reached the third place (1,800 tweets), behind Nigeria and neighboring countries (3,800 tweets).

As for the most used languages with #BBOG, in the December measurement, English was on top above all other languages. This is not striking, given the preponderance of the issue in the United States

FIGURE 3
#BRINGBACKOURGIRLS VIRALITY MAP
(DECEMBER 4-11, 2014).
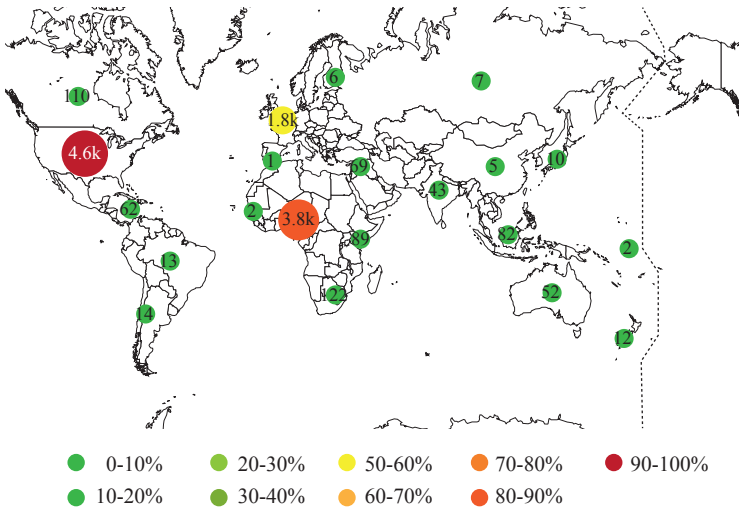


Source: Talkwalker.

as well as Nigeria being an English speaking country; the interesting fact is that the second most recurrent language was Spanish, despite the little influence of the issue in Latin America.

## INFLUENCERS AS VISIBILITY DRIVERS OF #BBOG

If the actions of the #BBOG campaign are understood as a slacktivism strategy, we must recognize that it is essential to increase the virality of the hashtag through its expansion by users who are able to spread it. In this sense, it is all about influencing with messages that reach many people (number of followers) and many repetitions (retweets obtained by tweets in which the hashtag was used).

From the moment #BringBackOurGirls was created, the top six most influential users on the social network, from top to bottom, were:

FIGURE 4
MOST USED LANGUAGES FOR #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS
( DECEMBER 4-11, 2014).
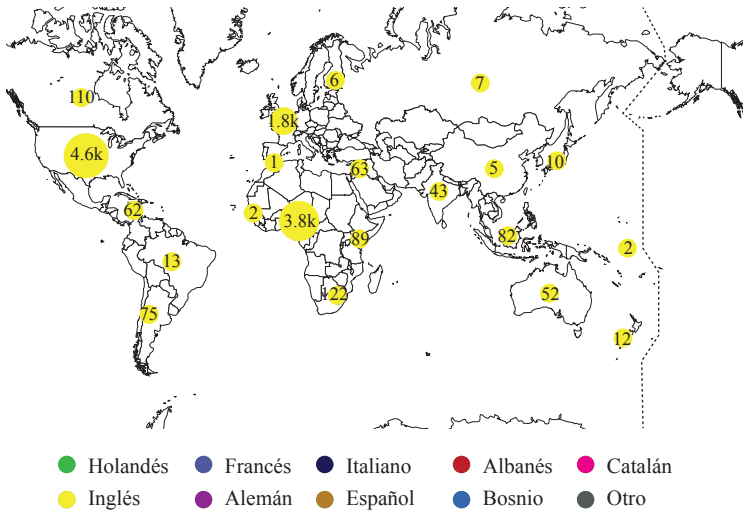


Source: Talkwalker.

Actress Emma Watson; television host Ellen DeGeneres; singers Katy Perry and Chris Brown; UNICEF and CNN. Here, influence is not understood as the number of times the hashtag was used, but rather the impressions it had on other users' *timelines*.

A great deal of the Nigerian campaign strategy was focused on the trend of posting pictures holding a sign that had some message as well as the hashtag. The most influential person shown on the hashtag history is the actress Emma Watson, who just used it on May 9th and 10th, 2014.

Adding the numbers of both tweets, the account had 62.000 retweets and 93 000 favs, in two days. Its capacity lies in the average of retweets by publication (5 115.17) as seen on the graphic, she is on top of the six most influential users.
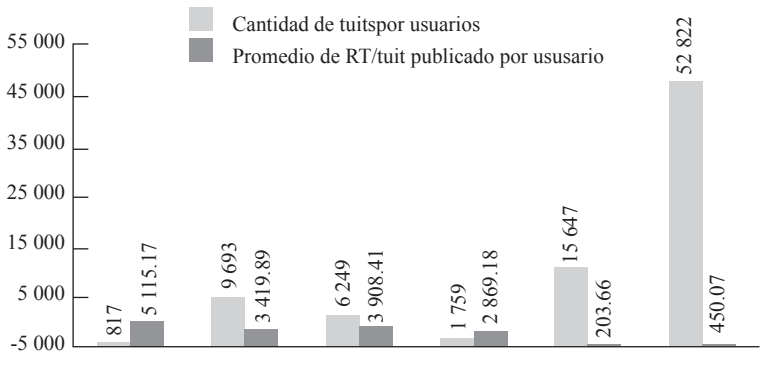
Eight months later, the issue was not the center of public debate, but the girls remained held by Boko Haram and the hashtag was still active

FIGURE 5

MESSAGES FROM @EMWATSON WHERE SHE USES THE HASHTAG
(9 AND 10 MAY, 2014).
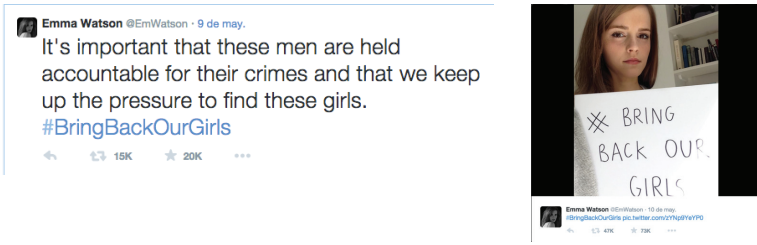


Source: Tweeter.

FIGURE 6

NUMBER OF TWEETS POSTED BY THE MOST INFLUENTIAL USERS
AND AVERAGE OF RETWEETS OBTAINED BY EACH ONE
(12/15/2014)



Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of data obtained from Twitonomy.

on Twitter. Data obtained from Topsy, show the trend maintained by the hashtag between November 9 and December 9, 2014.

According to the graphic, the highest peak of popularity was obtained by a tweet of the news account @bbcbreaking, on November 13, reaching 2,852 appearances on the timeline of other users.

FIGURE 7

#BRINGBACKOURGIRLS EVOLUTION

(NOVEMBER 9-DECEMBER 9, 2014)
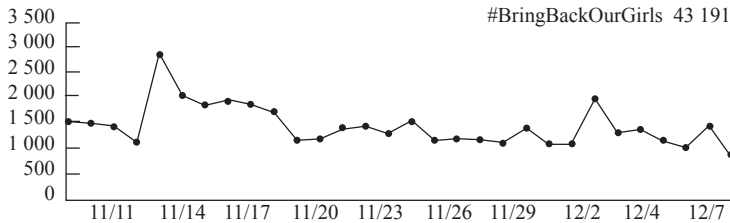


Source: Topsy.

Once the 30 most influential tweets of the month were extracted, we proceeded to analyze the accounts profiles. Again we found diversity of protagonists, in this case it was possible to establish that 12 of them were media or journalists accounts; Another 12 of them were NGOs or activists who identify themselves as such; Three more, of ordinary citizens who we were not able to establish a specific occupation according to the data provided by Twitter; Two celebrities and one Nigerian politician.

Analyzing the hashtag evolution, we selected the top six most influential users during that period, to analyze their profile and to match them with the top six historical users. The first finding is that users who kept the hashtag alive were mostly Nigerian citizens, activists or politicians.

Second, the average tweets per day are much higher. We see, for example, the most influential user @ Remember_1914, with an average of more than 500 tweets per day; or the news network account @ Nairapark, with an average of more than 700 tweets per day. However, despite the high number of tweets, they do not reach the RT index of historical users.

If we look closely at the table above, it is confirmed that these users are much more active than those analyzed as more influential in the

TABLE 2

MOST INFLUENTIAL USERS ACTIVITY OF #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS

(11-09 TO 12-09, 2014)

| Data collected between December 5-12, 2014. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| User | @Remember 1914 | @Bukkysho-nibare | @Umar2k | @LorParadi | @WAKILIGENT-LEMAN | @nairapark |
| Tweets (historic) From Most Relevant Users (November 9- December 9, 2014) | 45.816 | 11.665 | 19.867 | 21.008 | 32.149 | 269.332 |
| Average Tweets/Day Most Relevant Users (November 9-December 9, 2014) | 500,96 | 108,33 | 87,55 | 87,15 | 103,57 | 788,07 |
| Average Retweets per Tweet Posted by Most Relevan Users (November 9-December 9, 2014) | 1,56 | 5,31 | 1,58 | 1,04 | 1,05 | 1,07 |

Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of data obtained from Twitonomy.

history of #BringBackOurGirls, both by the amount of tweets they have on their accounts, as well as by the average daily tweets they reach.

## CONCLUSIONS

#BBOG is an example of slacktivism. Between April and May, 2014, the hashtag managed to pack the media agendas and became a trending topic on social networks. Many celebrities and politicians posted pictures on their accounts, posing with signs where the hashtag could be read. Some of them never used it again and probably do not know what finally happened to the girls, but they could not stand aside of the worldwide protest back then. Nevertheless, and perhaps without pretending to do so, they made their contribution by serving as speakers to a cause that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

These slacktivists are part of a reactive audience that participates in certain processes in a specific, direct and independent way, thanks to the possibilities given to them by networks, but without crossing that line. However, the scope of this resource is measured by other standards. These actions do not seek the conventional political commitment; its effectiveness lies in being an opinion and visibility driver that generates sensitivity and transnational solidarity. In the case of the Nigerian girls kidnapping, the wave of opinion unleashed by #BBOG on social networks, managed to draw the attention of countries such as France, United States and the United Kingdom, who lobbied and helped Nigerian President to intensify the search for the girls.

Slacktivism matches the RMT for a number of reasons. First of all, because it increases available resources for citizens. Second, because it means a reduction in mobilization costs. And third, because the messages are so inclusive, that they manage to massively attract people of all kinds and social status who also feel identified with the cause. Hence the importance of seeing the networks management as a mobilization resource, given that the success of the campaign lies on the design of messages and hashtags that are able to captivate influencer users, rather than organizational structures and other types of material and economic resources.

According to the curve it followed, the evolution of this case is quite interesting. The hashtag emerged from a Nigerian lawyer with no ability to influence the networks, but when it went through the mediator sphere of media and public figures from the United States and Europe, it made a leap in popularity, enough to move the cause. It is there when Slacktivism is triggered, as a result of the worldwide commotion. Eight months later, the profile of the most influential users of the hashtag on Twitter, is different, with a more local and political approach: Nigerian citizens, activists and politicians. Profiles that are more committed to the cause and follow the girls' situation on a daily basis.

On the other hand, the analysis worked in order to test different free online APIs, which can also be used for academic purposes. In the study of social networks, companies have invested large amounts of money in the purchase of software and commercial APIs which make it possible to interpret content flows, from marketing and business reputation. The use of these interfaces may look like a novelty, but we have confirmed that it is useful in a first exploratory and descriptive level. For further analysis, a big data work is needed in order to study in more detail the networks' flow.

This study does not intend to align itself in the idealistic vision that considers that social networks are transforming the socio-political structures. Nor does it turn on the opposite and pessimistic side by not recognizing that a change is happening. Its sole purpose it to show the possibilities of actions such as those mentioned earlier. It is true, that in order for a mobilization to be effective, it must be accompanied by other conventional participation strategies, but this does not mean that slacktivism is not a resource of awareness and visibility for a cause.

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