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ASIASCAPÉ: DIGITAL ASIA 7 (2020) 69-87

ASIASCAPÉ:
Digital Asia

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The Hashtag Game: Disrupting Dissent during the Bersih 4 Protest

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates how protest tactics, such as the use of hashtags, can be co-opted by counter-protesters, as evidenced by how the cybertroopers operated against the Bersih 4 protest in 2015. This is achieved via focusing the analysis on how geographic places were communicated on Twitter around the time of the protest. The Bersih movement in Malaysia is an example of how a digital-savvy social movement organisation (SMO) operates in a hybrid regime. In this paper, I explore a form of reaction that, on the surface, appeared to be a bottom-up initiative against the Bersih movement. Based on the fieldwork conducted around the Bersih 4 protest in 2015, I focus on place mentions on Twitter to detect the cybertroopers who attempted to disrupt the discussion and narrative through the use of hashtags.

Keywords

Bersih – cybertroopers – digital activism – hashtag – social media – Twitter

1 Introduction

The use of digital media by social movements has become a common feature of contemporary activism, ever since the landmark events in the early 2010s such as the Arab Spring in the Middle East and the Occupy movement in North America (Castells 2012; Fuchs 2012). Digital activism is also prevalent in Asia, as demonstrated by the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong, Taiwan's Sunflower movement, and the Bersih movement in Malaysia (Abbott et al. 2013; Bruns et al.

2016; Lee & Chan 2015). Contemporary activism also seamlessly manoeuvres between digital and physical space (Lim 2016; Rafael 2003). However, academic studies typically focus on how digital, particularly social media have been used by social movement organizations (SMOs) to mobilize and organize actions and, more recently, on the relationship between digital media and participation in the movements (Agur & Frisch 2019; Suwana 2019). Nonetheless, a growing body of literature now focuses on how dissent has been interrupted by disruptive forces using methods similar to those of SMOs. This paper contributes to this line of enquiry by examining how hashtags mentioning place names have been used as an arena for contestation during the Bersih 4 protest in Malaysia in August 2015.

Activism in Malaysia has been incorporating new media since 1998 in the Reformasi movement, with the use of listservs and websites (Hopkins 2014: 6). However, not until 2008 did the use of digital media for activism come of age because of the emergence of social media such as Facebook and YouTube (Liow 2012: 301). Operating in an environment that was hostile to dissent, SMOs adopted new technologies to ensure the existence of a democratic space. Malaysia is an 'illiberal democracy', possessing the institutions and procedures of democracy but constraining civil liberties (Weiss 2006: 35). The Malaysian state's treatment of dissent has been characterized as repressive, with the use of media and libel laws to silence dissenting voices (Lim, 2018: 485; Pandi 2014; Postill 2014; Tapsell 2013; Weiss 2013) and regulations on where protest is permitted in order to limit its effectiveness (Azlan 2018). These are top-down approaches to limiting dissent. This paper contributes to our understanding of how dissent can be disrupted by what appear to be bottom-up approaches, in which disruptive forces mirror the tactics used by SMOs in digital activism.

As new media became involved in dissent, the term 'cybertroopers' began to emerge in the Malaysian public sphere (Liow 2012: 304).¹ Cybertroopers are online media users whose actions are coordinated to counter content that supports the opposing side (Hopkins 2014; Leong 2015), and the term typically refers to social media users who support Barisan Nasional (BN), the political coalition that served as the Malaysian government until the thirteenth general election, in May 2018. Although it initially denied that it used cybertroopers, the BN seems to have embraced them in recent years, as the then—government minister Mahdzir Khalid openly called for members of

1 Cyber troops and cybertroopers can be used interchangeably since they conceptually refer to similar modes of operation. However, for the purpose of this article, I use cybertroopers because that is how they are referred to in Malaysia.

the United Malays National Organization (UMNO, a key part of the BN coalition) to engage in 'cyber war' (Star Online 2015). However, both sides used cybertroopers to conduct cyber-attacks (Freedom House 2017); Leong 2015: 56-60). Through economies of scale, cybertroopers could hijack particular discussions and communications on social media by flooding them with their own posts.

Bersih (Clean) is a prominent SMO pushing for electoral reform in Malaysia. It has the potential to affect change because its concerns with the procedures of democracy transcend social, economic, and political divides defined by communal identities (Pepinsky 2013), overcoming these divides by building a collective identity that did not remain only online but, rather, took action in the real world (Weiss 2013: 607). Conceived around the same time that social media emerged, Bersih was already fully using new media to mobilize people onto the streets in 2011, by the time of its second rally (Pepinsky 2013). Bersih organized street rallies in 2007, 2011, 2012, 2015, and 2016. The first three ended with a violent clash between the authorities and protesters, and although the fourth and fifth rallies, called Bersih 4 and 5, were peaceful, the area of protests was constrained by the authorities by barring entry to the intended venue and putting up roadblocks limiting access to the city (Azlan 2018). The Bersih 4 protest in 2015 was triggered by the 1MDB corruption scandal over the mishandling of public funds, which implicated the then-Prime Minister Najib Razak. The protest took place over two days, from 14:00 hours on 29 August to just before midnight on 30 August 2015, in time for the beginning of Independence Day on 31 August.

The hashtag #Bersih4 was used on social media, in particular Twitter and Facebook, in order to garner support and facilitate discussion about the protest. Between 28 August (the day before the protest) and 30 August (the day after the protest), 56,890 tweets hashtagged #Bersih4 were sent. The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission threatened to block websites that broadcast information about the protest. Moreover, yellow t-shirts that said Bersih 4 were also banned under the Publication and Printing Act of 1984 to ensure national security, and Bersih was barred from entering Dataran Merdeka (Merdeka Square), the intended venue of the protest. In addition to these top-down manoeuvres, Bersih also had to contend with cybertroopers attempting to disrupt dissent by using the same hashtags. Although much has been written about the role of digital media in the mobilization and construction of collective identities in social movements and protest in Malaysia (Lim 2015; Pandi 2014; Weiss 2013), little attention has been paid to the reaction and counter-protests against them. As digital media are increasingly becoming

the arena for holding public debate and constructing public opinion, understanding the ways in which dissent can be disrupted contributes to our digital literacy, which is crucial for ensuring a healthy public sphere.

This article contributes to the discourse on digital activism in Asia by examining how geographic locations were communicated on Twitter during the Bersih 4 protest, which took place from 29 to 30 August 2015 in three cities in Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur in West Malaysia and Kota Kinabalu and Kuching in East Malaysia. Rather than focusing on the locational metadata of tweets, I examine the textual content of the tweets. Only tweets tagged with #Bersih4 were collected, because hashtags serve as an aggregator that focuses the discussion. Through an analysis of these tweets, I discovered patterns in the postings that fit the description of cybertroopers via their use of place names in their tweets. The following literature review discusses these relevant concepts—the dichotomy between digital and physical spaces, hashtag activism, and the manipulation of social media—under the umbrella of digital activism.

2 Digital Activism

Activists are quick to adopt new technologies available to them (Lim 2016), from the use of transistor radios by the Cuban guerrillas to transmit from Sierra Maestra, to the role that text messages played in mobilising people against the regime of Joseph Ejercito Estrada in the Philippines, and listservs by the Reformasi movement in Indonesia and Malaysia exemplifies the early use of the internet for activism (Lande 2001; Leong et al. 2018; Lim 2015; Rafael 2003). In the past decade, movements such as the Umbrella Revolution, the Indignados in Spain, and the Arab Spring became notable for their use of digital social media applications in their activism (Gerbaudo 2012; Lee 2015; Tufekci & Wilson 2012). The use of digital media reduces the cost of participation because instant two-way communication is possible without the constraint of geographic distance (Harindranath et al. 2015; Leong et al. 2018). Activists have used social media to disseminate and broadcast information, mobilize participation, and organize and take action both in the digital space and on the streets (Juris 2012; Khondker 2011). The various tools and formats of digital media enable it to support activism both online and offline (Suwana 2019).

Contemporary dissent initially takes shape in social media before spilling onto the streets, which then provides images to be transmitted back into the media to be broadcasted (Juris 2012; Parkinson 2012). These images amplify the dissent, sparking awareness that perpetuates further action in both digital and physical spaces, either in the same place or in others. Activism also has

intermodality that transpires in digital and physical spaces, such as the use of sneakers to hide and transport memory cards from Algeria to Tunisia, enabling the broadcasting of police brutality on Al-Jazeera (Lim 2014: 64).² However, a dichotomy between cyberactivism and place-based analysis is created by treating them separately, even though digital media is rooted in the physical world (Lim 2015: 118). Lim's (2014, 2015) analysis of the Bersih 3 protests overcame this by mapping the locational data of the tweets exchanged during the protest, therefore arguing that online networks are not placeless. Hemsley and Eckert (2014), by contrast, argued that the 'geography' of Twitter is over-reliant on a Cartesian concept of space, which is not always reliable because of inconsistent metadata; only 1% or 2% of tweets are geo-tagged (Laylavi et al. 2016; Leetaru et al. 2013). Their methodology focused on the places mentioned in the tweets with the hashtag #Occupy, arguing that users identified with the places mentioned in their tweets. Place, in this sense, does not refer to a location or space but 'includes one's relationship and identification with geographic spaces, cities, neighbourhoods, and communities in which we live' (Hemsley & Eckert 2014: 1844).

Tweeters might choose not to geotag their tweets for many reasons, but for those engaged in activism and dissent, concerns about privacy are more immediate, especially if they are operating within a repressive context. A recent development at Twitter reflected this reluctance: the platform no longer allows users to tag their exact location, citing the lack of use (Twitter Support 2019). Furthermore, as Laylavi et al. (2016) demonstrated, even if tweeters hide their location, it is still possible to track where they are tweeting from, by analyzing both the metadata and the textual content of their tweets.

The spatiality of digital activism can also be perceived through how elements such as hashtags become a relational space where activists and those interested in the discussion come together in the digital space. The prevalence of hashtags such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #Occupy indicates their importance in the communication of dissent. The basic function of hashtags is to facilitate the aggregation of relevant information through a crowdsourced tagging system, which serves as an indexing system on social media platforms that can also function as a meme that helps the spread of ideas (Gerbaudo & Treré 2015; Giglietto & Lee 2017; Tonkin et al. 2012). The functionality of hashtags contributes to the 'politics of visibility' of the movement (Bonilla & Rosa 2015; Burgess et al. 2015; Giglietto & Lee 2017; Yang 2016) and the formation

2 Here I refer to Merlyna Lim's (2014) concept of intermodality in activism to mean how both digital and urban spaces overlap, creating a hybrid activist network.

of a 'hashtag public' (Bruns & Burgess 2015; Bruns et al. 2016; Rambukkana 2015). Thus, it serves as a useful tool in activism, because those who are interested can participate in the conversation by searching for relevant hashtags, to the point that the term 'hashtag activism' was coined to indicate the use of hashtags as a primary channel for raising awareness and encouraging debate on social media (Tombleson & Wolf 2017). Because of their participatory nature, hashtags allow the public to take a more autonomous role in information sharing and in co-creating meaning with corresponding SMOs (Wang, Liu, & Gao 2016; Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright 2019).

However, the participatory nature of hashtag activism and, more broadly, social media has also left them exposed to manipulation by those who oppose the particular cause. Although individuals can manipulate social media by spreading hate speech or trolling others, organized social media manipulation is also a global phenomenon (Bradshaw & Howard 2017). The term 'fake news', for example, has become a buzzword in recent years, to mean messages intended to mislead by adopting the look and feel of real news, which lends it a veneer of legitimacy (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling 2018). Although trolls are often defined as those who bait unsuspecting social media users into needless exchange (Jenks 2019), the term can also be used to refer to state-sponsored actors who attempt to manipulate public opinion on the Web (Zannettou et al. 2018). Bots, however, are bits of code designed to interact with and mimic human users (Bradshaw & Howard 2017). Thus, cybertroopers, which refer to 'government, military or political party teams committed to manipulating public opinion over social media', can also include trolls and automated bots (Bradshaw & Howard 2017). The cybertroopers operate in a clandestine manner because the perception of word-of-mouth communication promotes trustworthiness, to the extent that people trust online reviews from strangers outside their social network (Jansen et al. 2009). Therefore, the logic of how cybertroopers operate is not that different from approaches such as viral marketing and user-generated content.

In summary, instead of focusing on the locational metadata of these tweets, I go beyond the dichotomy between cyberactivism and place-based analysis by examining how places were communicated on Twitter during the Bersih 4 protest. This is due to the unreliability of the metadata (Hemsley & Eckert 2014), which I have also collected and examined; further explanations are in the Methodology section. The examination of hashtags indicates how they were used in the context of the Bersih 4 protest, and the discovery of the cybertroopers contributes to our understanding of how they operate and to what extent and how they can be detected.

3 Methodology

Between 28 August (the day before the protest) and 31 August (the day after the protest), 56,890 tweets hashtagged #Bersih4 were collected. Less than 1% of these tweets were geo-tagged, meaning the locational metadata was missing for more than 99% of the tweets. Focusing our analysis on these tweets would be untenable, because they are not representative.

Within the corpus, I thematically analyzed the 12,896 tweets that mentioned place names. Actual mentions of the place names in the content of the tweets were used, in the absence of locational metadata. This works on two levels: first, as mentioned above, the locational metadata is hardly representative because of its low percentage and, second, because the content of the tweet is input manually by the tweeter, it is assumed that the mentions of places are deliberate. A sentiment analysis of the tweets was first conducted to determine the temporal distribution of tweets that showed support for Bersih 4, that opposed the protest, that reported about the protest, and that were neutral. Tweets containing the most-frequently mentioned places were then examined more closely and cross-checked with the sentiment analysis to ascertain their correlation.

4 Case Description: Bersih 4

The data for this research were collected around the Bersih 4 rally, which took place in 2015. Even though in previous rallies Bersih had focused mostly on electoral reform, the main trigger for Bersih 4 was the 1MDB (1 Malaysia Development Berhad) corruption scandal, which concerned the mishandling of public funds. 1MDB is a strategic development company wholly owned by the government of Malaysia. Even though the case was investigated in ten different countries, Malaysia halted its investigation after it was cleared by the attorney general, hence the reason for organizing Bersih 4.

The protest took place over two days, from 2 PM on 29 August to just before midnight on 30 August 2015. There were three official venues: Kuala Lumpur in Peninsular Malaysia and Kuching and Kota Kinabalu in East Malaysia. However, smaller rallies were also held in various places, mostly outside the country, organized by Malaysians who were living abroad—loosely coordinated by Global Bersih, an advocacy arm of Bersih that is registered in Geneva as a non-profit organization.

Bersih 4 was significant for two reasons. First, it was the first Bersih-organized rally that occupied the streets without clashing with the authorities,

although in the days leading up to the protest, those found wearing yellow Bersih t-shirts there were threatened with arrest. On both days, however, the police presence was minimal. Although it remains unclear why the authorities were unusually lenient with Bersih 4, civil society in Malaysia has also typically served as a safety valve for social discontent (Case 1993). Second, it triggered a reaction, the Malay Dignity Rally, which mirrored Bersih's actions by taking to the streets. Bersih 4 took place on the eve of Independence Day (31 August), and the Malay Dignity Rally also chose a significant date, 16 September, the anniversary of Malaysia's formation as a country in 1963.

Using the hashtag #Bersih4, on 28 July, Bersih announced that the protest would be held on 29-30 August. However, this hashtag had already been in circulation since at least 6 July, when Bersih tweeted about the possibility of having the protest take place. Although the hashtag was subsequently used intermittently to discuss the possibility of the protest happening, not until 28 July, when Bersih made the official announcement, did the hashtag start trending on Twitter. From 31 July to 30 October 2015, 257,997 tweets were sent with that hashtag.

5 Cybertroopers during Bersih 4

The first step in the analysis is to sort the sentiments in the tweets hashtagged #Bersih4 that mentioned place names. A significant majority, 63%, that mentioned places in these four days support the protest, while only 28% opposed Bersih 4, and the remainder were tweets that reported the protest; only 3% were deemed irrelevant (see Figure 1). I then plotted the timeline of the tweets according to the sentiment analysis, indicating surges of tweets that opposed Bersih 4, following surges of tweets that supported the protest (Figure 2).

The cybertroopers were identified by examining the places mentioned in the tweets. A total of 12,896 tweets mentioned 167 places, ranging from the Song Kee Beef Noodle Restaurant in Kuala Lumpur to St. Stephen's Green in Dublin (Figure 3). The presence of places such as Dublin indicate the global support for Bersih, often by Malaysian students who intersected with a more permanent diaspora. The scales are diverse; places mentioned are not always as precise as the two mentioned above, but neighbourhoods, cities, regions, states, and country names were mentioned as well, and I coded the tweets as such to reflect the hierarchy of places accordingly. The findings reveal that Penang (a state in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia) was mentioned the most after Malaysia, followed rather predictably by Dataran Merdeka (the venue of Bersih 4 in Kuala Lumpur), and finally Kuala Lumpur as the city where Bersih 4 took place (Figure 4). Because Penang was not an official venue

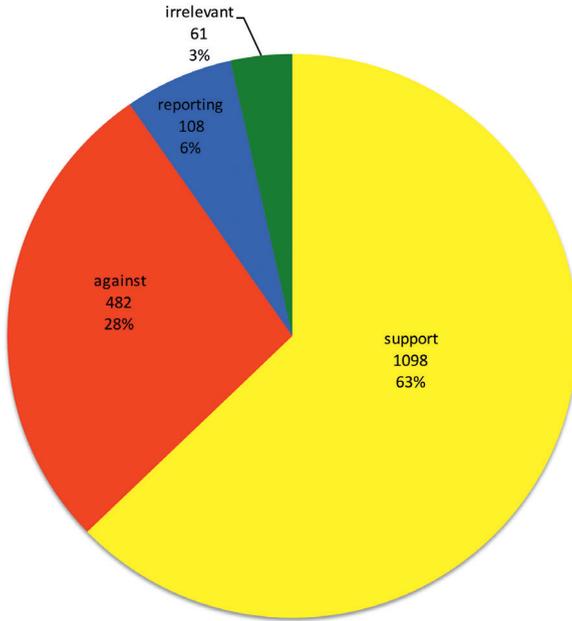


FIGURE 1 Sentiment analysis of tweets that mention places

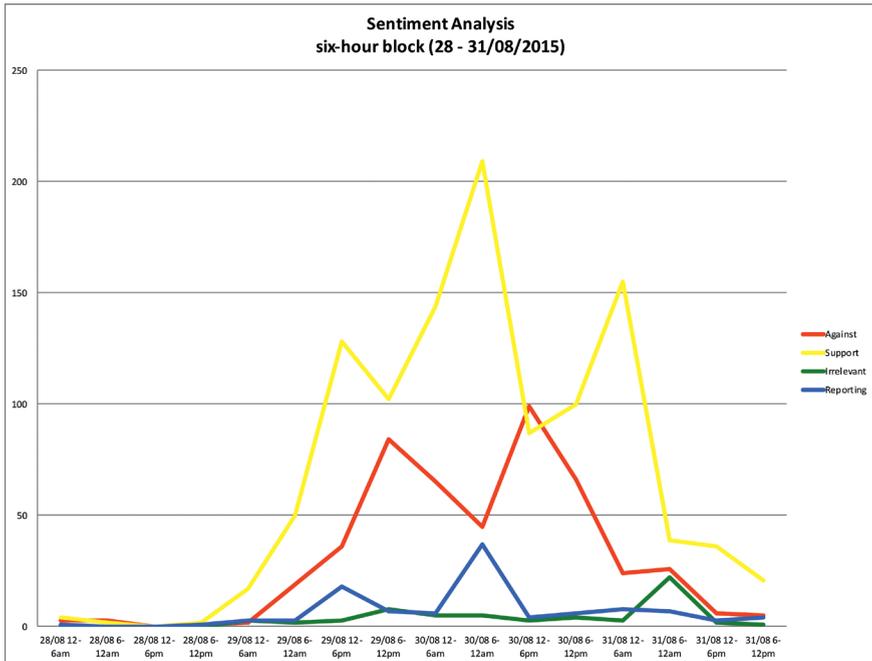


FIGURE 2 Sentiment analysis of tweets that mention places over time, in six-hour blocks, from 28 August 2015 (before protest) to 31 August 2015 (day after protest)

TABLE 1 Sample of cybertrooper tweets

Tweeter	Tweet
@Piscean_J_07	<p><i>#Bersih4 berdemo di KL, Sabah, S'wk dan Johor ... kenapa tak demo jgk di Penang?? Pelik kan?? #AgendaYahudi #changeenang</i></p> <p><i>#Bersih4 demonstrating in KL, Sabah, Sarawak, and Johor. Why not also demonstrate in Penang? Weird isn't it? #JewishAgenda #changeenang</i></p>
@Sazura09	<p><i>Orang melayu islam perlu bersatu utk Selamatkan Malaysia. Hapuskan peserta #Bersih4 sampah negara #Perlisboleh #MalaysiaSelamat</i></p> <p><i>Muslims should unite to save Malaysia. Get rid of #Bersih4 participants the trash of the nation #PerlisCan #MalaysiaIsSafe</i></p>
@rosly35	<p><i>Kenapa kaum Cina yg beria-ia dgn demo Bersih4 kali ni? Tanya hati, tanya akal #Bersih4 #MalaysiaSelamat #melakamajuf2</i></p> <p><i>Why are the Chinese so enthusiastic about this particular Bersih4 demonstration? Ask your heart, ask your mind #MalaysiaIsSafe #MelakaDevelopedF2</i></p>

They exemplify the general sentiment of tweets with these hashtags, in which communal identities, such as race and religion, were used to raise suspicion (see the tweet by @rosly35) or rile up support (see the tweet by @sazura09). The tweet by @Piscean_J_07, by contrast, questions why Bersih did not take place in the state then governed by the opposition, Penang. The hashtag #AgendaYahudi (Jewish Agenda) signifies anti-Semitic tendencies and subsequently the convenience of using Jews as a scapegoat to fuel suspicion. In the weeks leading up to Bersih 4, Jamal Yunos, a member of UMNO and an advocate of a counter-protest group, the Red Shirts, filed a police report against Bersih for allegedly receiving funds from Israel (KiniTV, 2015).

The places mentioned in these tweets were also mostly at the level of 'state', rather than 'country', 'city', or 'street'. This pattern indicates that a majority of the tweets with these hashtags or that mention standalone states as hashtags were sent in a coordinated effort—from this, I consequently deduced that they were the work of cybertroopers. Hashtags of places, such as a 'city' or 'street', however, tended to support Bersih 4. The vast difference between the two word clouds (Figures 4 and 5), in which Penang was no longer as prominent in Figure 5, indicates the high level of amplification by the cybertroopers.

The authorities blocked Bersih's websites around the time of the protest but did not extend this to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Hence, Bersih could still disseminate information via these platforms. Specific accounts or pages on these platforms could not be selectively shut down without cooperation from the platform owners, whereas shutting down access to entire platforms might invite the ire of other users who were using it for other more benign purposes (Zuckerman 2015). Because shutting down the platforms was out of the question, but communication still needed to be disrupted, the emergence of cybertroopers was inevitable. Cybertroopers used social media subversively by generating content to signal that they were acting on their own volition and were not part of a coordinated effort to disrupt dissent. One method used to counter online discussion is to overwhelm it with content, which is why the cybertroopers tagged their tweets with #Bersih4.

6 Discussion

By analysing place names in tweets collected using the hashtag #Bersih4, I could detect the patterns of behaviour disrupted communication concerning the protest. Because these patterns indicate organized manipulation of the hashtags, they fit the definition of cyber troops by Bradshaw and Howard (2017), known in the Malaysian context, as cybertroopers (Hopkins 2014; Leong 2015). Although individual social media users might have been asking for Penang to change its state government while praising BN-led states, the pattern of posts consisting of incessant retweets that tended to spike after the surge of pro-Bersih tweets indicates that they were the work of cybertroopers. Some of the tweets repetitively copied messages, so they could also be the work of automated bots, instead of paid/organized trolls. Tweets that were sent around the thirteenth general election in May 2018 have more pronounced characteristics associated with being sent via bot farms, particularly after the hashtags created to assist voters, such as #PulangMengundi and #UndiRabu, were hijacked by spambots at around the same time.³ These accounts had similar traits, such as names or descriptions in Cyrillic, indicating that they came from Russian bot farms (Baroan 2018).

The hashtag #Bersih4 had been used by the organizers since the very beginning and functioned as a placeholder that concentrated the discussion while also working as a meme that helped spread ideas (Gerbaudo & Treré 2015: 865;

3 Spambots are web robots designed to send spams by mimicking human behavior in order to bypass system checks (Hayati et. al 2010).

Tonkin et al. 2012). An ephemeral 'hashtag public' emerged in which communication about the protest took place mostly on Twitter (Bruns & Burgess 2015; Bruns et al. 2016; Rambukkana 2015). However, the examination of other hashtags mentioned within the #Bersih4 tweets also revealed the use of hashtags in other ways. Pairing the hashtagged place names with verbs or adjectives, such as #changeenang or #melakamajuf2 (Melaka Develops Phase 2), showed how hashtags have evolved to accommodate succinct phrases that serve as mini-statements (Giglietto & Lee 2017). The use of these hashtags also repeatedly led to the detection of the cybertroopers, indicating that hashtags work as placeholders or aggregators of discussion on the Web, although in this case perhaps unintentionally. It remained unclear why these tweets were marked with such distinctive hashtags that in the end enabled detection.

By focusing on how places were communicated in the #Bersih4 tweets, I could detect the cybertroopers because of the particular ways in which the place names were mentioned. This indicates the inherent relationship between the online and the offline, in which not only are digital media rooted in the physical world (Lim 2015: 118) but geographic places are also ever present in the digital space. In this instance, the geographic place names seemed to be used as a system of tags to distinguish these posts from the rest of the #Bersih4 tweets. Thus, focusing on the mentions of places instead of the locations from which they were transmitted, demonstrates how notions of place shaped by socio-political conditions can be manifested in the digital space. In line with Hemsley and Eckert's approach (2014), this contributes to understanding of place in social media, beyond the locational metadata typically associated with the geography of Twitter.

7 Conclusion

This article demonstrates that a close reading of the content of social media postings, informed by background on the context in which the data were harvested, can be productive in research on digital activism. How the thread was analyzed, enabled the systematic discovery of cybertroopers and indicate the vast potential for using 'place' in social media as opposed to locational data as an analytical framework. This contributes to our understanding of the geography of social media. The ways in which the cybertroopers in this analysis operated also show that dissent can be disrupted via seemingly bottom-up approaches, by engaging the protest at the same level at which they were operating.

To paint a more complete picture of Bersih 4 in particular, future work could examine the Malay Dignity Rally (also known as the Red Shirts), which seemed to complement the cybertroopers' actions, albeit via mirroring the protest by going to the streets two weeks after Bersih 4 took place. The lack of social media presence and over-reliance on more mainstream modes of communication in dissent at a time when digital activism is the prevalent method, could also be revealing because it raises the question of who would (or could afford to) abstain and how they would operate when communication has become mostly digital.

The main contribution of this article to the scholarship of digital activism concerns the methodology. First, by focusing on the cybertroopers who attempted to disrupt communication during the Bersih 4 protest, this study adds to the growing body of literature on disruption in social media communication by bots and trolls. Second, it demonstrates that, even when data are collected and analyzed remotely, researchers with a close acquaintance with the socio-political or, in this particular case, geographical context can connect otherwise disparate pieces of information. This reminds us that communication does not take place in a neutral vacuum but is deeply shaped by the context and nature of communication.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference DIAS 2018: Rethinking Communities in the Age of the Digital. I am grateful to the editor for inviting me to submit the paper to this special issue and to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

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