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# Employing digital spaces to resist harmful discourses: intersections of learning, technology, and politics showing up in the lowcountry

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## ABSTRACT

The intersections between learning, technology, and media are often the scene of tumult and change. The forces of learning, technology, and politics are pervasive in the lives of young people. These contexts of learning are fueled by the current political moment, but also informed by historical contexts that impact our youth, regardless of socioeconomics, culture, race, or gender. Educators are struggling with how to discuss these trends, and their impact on the learning and engagement of youth. This study focuses on how local Charleston activists formed groups, and utilized technology and media in order to resist socio-political discourses post Trump.

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## Introduction

The Internet and other communication technologies (ICTs) have increasingly shown opportunities to revolutionize various aspects of the ways in which we socialize, communicate, and learn (Buckingham 2013). One of these such areas is the use of information technologies as an increasingly important tool for political and social activism (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2014). In particular, digital texts and social media tools have showed significant opportunities in shaping relationships between citizens, politicians, governments, and other social organizations (Tufekci and Wilson 2012). These forms of digital activism have transformed political protest over the last two decades (Dalton 2013), especially among youth (Bennett 2015). These activities serve not only to disrupt policies and legislation but also expand the ways in which citizens make their voices heard, often bypassing the existing world of politics, social movements and campaigning. We are witnessing digital activists and average citizens take advantage of new technologies to provide an alternative way of organizing society and push back against harmful societal narratives (Brown and Duguid 2017).

The purpose of this study is to focus on how activists in the area around Charleston, South Carolina utilized technology and media in order to resist socio-political discourses post Trump. The data includes interviews with key leaders and facilitators within one of the groups, as well as collection and analysis of comments and reactions shared to one specific event, a debate held between representatives from rival groups broadcast via *Facebook Live*. This *Facebook Live* event was selected and analyzed as it helps make sense of the current climate and actions of activists in the Charleston area.

The forces of learning, technology, and politics are pervasive in the lives of young people. The contexts of learning are fueled by the current political moment, but also informed by historical contexts that impact our youth, regardless of socioeconomics, culture, race, or gender. It is imperative

that we explore how information and technology shape the contours of the spaces in which learning takes place (Selwyn 2015). Media and technology are used to create social bonds for community dialogue and the promotion of social justice (Ngai et al. 2015). Adults and youth utilize digital texts and tools to promote the values necessary as participants in civic and democratic societies (Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop 2004). The emergence of ICTs as tools for social justice also is reflected by changes to our communication ecology as the audience can now generate content.

Educators and researchers need to be cognizant that the youth are watching and learning from these events. In this study, we review current and historical contexts in which technology can be used as a tool to enact change. This is relevant to our study of how young adults and youth interact with each other in school, at home, and in society. We seek to understand the role that technology has in reinforcing or perhaps resisting hurtful discourses. We also study the 'real world' reactions and implications of connecting using digital texts/tools to enact change. This study responds directly to these pressing needs in the following question.

- (1) What are the characteristics of discourse between members of the general public engaging in political/social discussion on a *Facebook* Live video post?

## Research context

This study focuses on how activists in the 'Lowcountry' formed groups, and utilized technology and media in order to resist socio-political discourses post Trump. The 'lowcountry' is a distinct geographic and cultural region along the southeastern Atlantic coast from the middle of North Carolina to northern Florida. This region includes the city of Charleston, a southern port city that was one of the major entry points of entry for enslaved Africans. Over 40% of all slaves traveled through the port city and until the 1980s, the majority of its population was of African descent. During the era of slavery, there were over twice as many slaves as whites (Davis, 1981). Slavery was the basis for Charleston's opulence, the region's wealth, and the nation's economic vitality until the Civil War. As such, Charleston harbors deep historical significance as a municipality founded upon racial oppression and exclusion. These historical forces continue to shape Charleston today.

Charleston is today known for its historic cities and communities, natural environment, cultural heritage, and vibrant tourism industry. However, a long history of racial tension undergirds the city's tourist boom and distinction as a desirable vacation destination. Charleston's longer, often overlooked history produces a socio-political milieu that is a microcosm of our larger society. Reflective of national trends centered upon racial tension, the local Charleston area provides an insightful crucible within which to study the impact of these discourses on societal systems in and out of the classroom.

On 4 April 2015, the city of Charleston witnessed on cell phone footage as police officer Michael Slager shot Walter Scott eight times as he fled the scene. A little over two months later, on the evening of 17 June 2015, this former Confederate stronghold recoiled in horror as Dylann Roof killed nine black parishioners at the Charleston AME Church. Events such as this have inspired ongoing battles over removing the Confederate flag across the state of South Carolina. Within this milieu, a local group of individuals have been actively using technology and social networks as a tool for resisting hurtful discourses.

This research focused on members and the collective work of the local chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). The Charleston area chapter of SURJ was founded in the months between the Walter Scott shooting and the massacre at the Charleston AME Church, and since that point, they've been one of the more well organized groups in the Lowcountry pushing back against harmful discourses before and after the 2016 Presidential election. The data collection for this larger study includes interviews with key leaders and facilitators within SURJ, as well as collection and analysis of posts, comments, reactions, and files shared within their *Facebook Group*. For the purposes of the

study, one important event was analyzed (i.e., the debate held broadcast via *Facebook Live*) to help illustrate how these individuals and group leverage social media tools and applications to advance their narratives.

Specifically, this study focuses on the work of one of the SURJ leaders, Shakem Amen Akhet and a public debate he organized with the South Carolina Secessionist Party (SCSP) that was broadcast via a *Facebook Live* video. Shakem, who is also identified as a vocal leader of the local chapter of the Black Nationalist Movement, organized this public debate in an attempt to build dialogue and prevent racially motivated violence in the Charleston area. These efforts focused on building dialogue between the SCSP, an organized group of (nearly all) white members who defend the public display of the Confederate Flag and the public defense of Confederate ‘heritage,’ and Black nationalists in Charleston. As indicated by their website ([www.scsparty.org](http://www.scsparty.org)), the SCSP is a non-profit ‘heritage defense and political activism organization’ that is identified as the ‘states leading confederate flag support group.’ This *Facebook Live* debate was organized as a safe public space for the debate over the public display of the Confederate Flag and other Jim Crow-era monuments that commemorate a history of Confederate leaders, soldiers, and others who defended the use of slavery. A major point of discussion focused on condemning violence ‘on all sides’ and to foster collaboration on achieving objectives and projects that they determined were beneficial to both organizations and to the public at large.

These tensions have long been simmering in the Charleston area after the murder of Walter Scott and the AME church shooting in 2015. However, recent violent and racist acts since the election of Donald Trump and the violence that rocked Charlottesville, Virginia, in August of 2017 have raised serious concerns that violence might also strike the Lowcountry. When cities across the South began debating, often through large-scale protest, the display of Confederate statues in the cityscape of the region, the SCSP asserted their right to free speech through ‘grand flagging’ events where the group would meet in popular public spaces to wave the Confederate flag, much to the chagrin of groups like SURJ and others who condemned the use of the flag and the display of Confederate memorial. This research involves interviews and document or artifact analysis of a debate between members of SURJ and SCSP broadcast as a *Facebook Live* video that included live comments embedded in the video feed on *Facebook*.

## Methodology

A qualitative method was selected for this study due to the relatively limited amount of scholarly research on *Facebook* discourse, and most notably the use of comments and content utilized in a *Facebook Live* video stream. This study utilized a computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2013) of political, local, and racial discussion within a *Facebook Live* video stream. A *Facebook Live* video stream is a feature that allows users to broadcast live video from their mobile device to a post on their account on the *Facebook* social network. The *Facebook Live* post then allows other users to add comments and reactions (i.e., like, love, haha, wow, sad, angry) to the broadcast. Viewers can add this commentary and reaction during the event and following the conclusion of the event.

This debate on *Facebook Live* was selected for analysis in this study because it was used to broadcast a joint press conference held on 15 August 2017 between Shakem, as a representative of SURJ, and the Chairperson of the SCSP. The *Facebook Live* video was shared openly on *Facebook* by a local news station, and in turn shared by the SURJ *Facebook Group*, and openly online. A follow-up debate was scheduled by Shakem and the SCSP for December of 2017, but was ultimately canceled by Shakem citing growing concerns about the safety of individuals that would attend the public debate, and a need to ‘focus on other things in the community’ as Shakem noted in one of our interviews with him. It should also be noted that in our data collection and interviews focusing on Shakem, he regularly shared that he was contacted and questioned by members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) following this initial public debate with the SCSP, about his online and offline

comments about the secessionist group. Members of this group, and related parties were further concerned when the FBI identified 'Black identity extremists' as a domestic terrorist threat.

### **Data analysis**

Critical discourse studies examine text and talk at micro and macro levels to conduct social analyses of power, its productive and oppressive qualities, its uses and abuses between and among individuals, organizations, and other social spheres (Van Dijk 2014). All discourse analyses are arguably critical (Gee 2015) and many types of critical discourse analysis exist (Fairclough 2013). A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (Fairclough 2013) is appropriate with research on *Facebook* as a platform as it focuses on dialogic conversations between individuals (Rambe 2012). Under the heading of discourse analysis, there a vast number of approaches available. Discourse analysis does not constitute a single unitary approach, but rather a constellation of different approaches (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011). In this study, we adopted a discourse analysis approach that was informed by Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis to unravel the opaque connections between language and society as tools in securing power (Riasati and Rahimi 2011).

To bridge the micro-level discourse to the macro-level discourse, we conducted critical discourse analysis using computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) which applied the coding and counting approach (Herring 2013) to analyze comments and reactions within a *Facebook* Live post (i.e., the debate between Shakem and the SCSP Chairperson). This process of analysis was modified from the constant comparison model (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which includes a repeated analysis of the data to allow for codes, categories, and themes to come from the analysis. CMDA identifies four domains of language (structure, meaning, interaction, social behavior) along with a fifth domain identified as 'participation.' The debate included 1637 individual and unique comments, as well as 1785 reactions (i.e., like, love, haha, wow, sad, angry). Participation was included as a domain in this analysis, and was operationalized as a phenomena of interest are number of messages and responses and message and thread length (Herring 2013, 358).

Analysis of data was conducted by the lead author (O'Byrne). The process of analysis consisted of six steps. First, I read the dataset (*Facebook* Live comments, reactions) twice to establish familiarity with the data. Second, I then examined and identified emergent trends in the data that were related to the research questions using a repeated and iterative analysis technique (Belkin, Brooks, and Daniels 1987). Third, I compared and revised my individual analysis to identify categories and develop operational definitions of these codes. Fourth, I coded the data based on these operational definitions. Fifth, I compared these analyses to other forms of data collected in this study, and the larger research project (i.e., interviews with participants, and researcher notes). For the purpose of validity and reliability, inconsistent results were identified and discussed with the other researchers to reach a consensus on data coding. Sixth, I returned to the data to confirm findings.

### **Results**

This study sought to understand the characteristics of discourse between members of the general public on a *Facebook* Live video post. Put simply, this research question sought to understand the focus and intentionality of comments in this discussion. A repeated analysis of the individual posts and reactions identified five types of information posted in the discussion: informative, cooperative argumentative, coercive argumentative, norm setting, miscellaneous.

#### **Informative**

The first category of codes was primarily informational in nature. These were posts in which a participant answered a question posed by another participant, or defined a term or place discussed in the *Facebook* Live video, or in the comments from other participants. An example of an

informational post is where a participant will answer a question about where the debate is taking place, or some of the names of individuals in the video feed. Comments in this section did not include any argument or did not include any setting of discourse or norms as shown in the other categories. Comments that were primarily informative only accounted for 3.5% of comments, or 58 out of 1637 total comments.

One of the more interesting threads of related comments that was still included in the Informative category involved information about the confederate flag and the meaning of symbols. Specifically, the Chairperson of the SCSP referenced the confederate flag, and suggested that the swastika was originally a peaceful symbol relating back to the hindus. Informative comments tried to focus on facts while not including argumentative or norm setting comments. The comments presented below are included in the order of their placement in the discussion. Pseudonyms are used below for the names of the commenters.

- [Josh] The swastika was a ancient sign for wind. Stop false claiming harmless symbols.  
 [Roxy] Don't know where he gets a Hindu with a Swastika from  
 [Joseph] The Hindu sign is reversed they don't look the same just like an upside down cross.  
 [Josh] The Hindu swastika or sun wheel is actually backwards from what fascists use.  
 [Yaritza] The Hindu swastika goes left. It's subtly [sic] different. Hindus would like to get the awful stigma removed from their symbol.  
 [Josh] There was a period of time, prior to the Nazis where the swastika was a symbol of peace that is true. There was never a time in the existence of the confederate flag where it did not stand for pro slavery! At least these two were doing it the way it supposed to be done with words and active listening  
 [Carl] If you are making the argument that the swastika was used as a peace symbol than why are they carrying around Nazi flags?

All of these comments received little to no reactions to other participants in the discussion. That is to say that they received one or perhaps two reactions per comment. For the most part, these comments were presented and not reacted to by others.

### ***Cooperative argumentative***

This second category of coded comments included statements that tried to argue a point, or present a perspective in a manner that was approachable and productive. This category included arguments presented on many sides of different issues. These may have been comments in support of taking the statues and flags down, or leaving them all up. They generally present cogent arguments that are congenial, and not inflammatory that are in search of some resolution to the problems being presented. Comments that were in the cooperative argumentative category accounted for 22% of the total comments, or 360 out of 1637 total comments.

Some of the more interesting comments from this section focus on possible solutions for what to do with statues and taking them down, putting them in museums, or leaving them alone. Some of these comments were presented by individuals that appeared to be on either side of these issues. The rationale or argument in these comments ranged from issues of education, to religion, to acting as a community. This commentary was a running thread was presented across the entire debate. Pseudonyms are used below for the names of the commenters.

- [Vontez] History be a good or bad history is history stop destroying history put it in a museum if it's a conflict for everyday passing on the street do you need history to remember and know right from wrong.  
 [Ricky] No one today can pay the sins of their ancestors nor should they.  
 [Kirstie] how does taking down statues constitute erasing history? Our history is our history. We dont [sic] need symbolism to know history. Read a book.  
 [Roderick] There is nothing wrong with raising monuments to the slaves that were tortured murdered and suffered that would be a beautiful thing to raise the monument for those beautiful souls destroy through hate let's not destroy when we can build together.

- [Ashley] Erasing history is stupid if they were to remove the Confederate monuments they might as well start taking down the African American monuments as well and any other monuments to the Irish the Indians and so forth no monuments for anyone we'll just have blank spaces in history because certain people don't agree with it that's exactly how the Nazis worked that's exactly how Isis is working.
- [Treanda] If we leave the statues up, our children will learn it's okay to marginalize minorities. Even more disturbing is our children would learn to memorialize statues of traitors. You cannot be a proud member of the Confederate States of America and the United States of America the same time.
- [Arlene] We need history and proper education of it regardless what anyone feels, it is history, both sides ancestors . . . history is exactly that, history, we don't have to repeat it, but if we don't learn about it or educate about it, it disappears and so do the mistakes leaving room for history to repeat itself.

### **Coercive argumentative**

This third category of coded comments included statements that tried to argue a point, or present a perspective in a manner that oppositional, unproductive, or did not appear to seek commonality in the discussion. This category included arguments presented on many sides of different issues. These may have been comments in support of taking the statues and flags down, or leaving them all up. This category also included comments that included racial epithets, labeling of individuals, (e.g., Aryans, Nazis), indications that the individuals on the *Facebook* Live video should 'go get a job' or that this was a waste of time and 'stupid.' They generally present cogent arguments that were in some cases inflammatory, and could be labelled as trollish. Comments that were in the coercive argumentative category accounted for 6.5% of the total comments, or 106 out of 1637 total comments.

What is interesting about these comments is that there were relatively few, when compared to the other categories of coded comments. Even with the relatively low percentage of comments, these comments attracted a lot of reactions and responses from other participants. These comments may be viewed as being 'louder' than the other, more cooperative arguments as they were often written in all capital letters, and this is sometimes viewed as yelling in online text. The names listed with the comments below are pseudonyms. The comments are presented in the order of their timestamp in the event, but they were not linked sequentially.

- [Darrell] I want be standing with blk [sic] lives matter they disrupt an destroy others property. Tell protesters in the streets stay OUT THE STREETS some people fear for there safety don't BLOCK TRAFFIC ANYWHERE ... .. If you block my right to drive on any road/ highway crowding around my vehicle I'll PROTECT MY FAMILY.
- [Susan] You only lead you. AMERICAN PEOPLE YOU TWO GROUPS DO NOT TALK FOR US ... ..MARTAIN [sic] LUTHER KING MUST COME DOWN IT OFFEND ME ... ..FAIR IS FAIR
- [Linda] Y'ALL better get together. PRESIDENT TRUMP comming [sic] for you and there will b no groups. Leave are history alone ...

### **Norm setting**

This third category of coded comments included statement that generally focused on setting the social rules and 'norms' of the discussion by having most members understand and assimilate the community ethos. The comments included in this category generally did not take one side over another. They mostly were in support of good discussion and supportive of the individuals speaking on the *Facebook* Live video event. They celebrated the discussion, showing respect for others in the comments, and harassed or shamed commenters that trolled or spread anger and hate in their comments. Comments that were in the norm setting category accounted for 38% of the total comments, or 663 out of 1637 total comments.

A large swath of comments across the response set suggested that individuals from the Charleston area were specifically suited to have discussion or debate like this. Specifically, these were comments that suggested that commenters were proud that this was happening in ‘Charleston’ or ‘SC.’ In this section, there were many responses of ‘Charleston Strong.’ This last comment is a reference to a rallying cry and form of tribute to the individuals murdered in the Emanuel AME Church on 17 June 2015. They also indicated that they wished that this debate, and the ideas behind it could be brought to ‘mainstream media’ or the ‘MSM.’ They also wished that this could be brought to ‘Charlottesville’ or ‘Atlanta.’ There was also a group of comments in this category that indicated they would see value if legislators, specifically ‘Donald Trump’ or ‘45’ were to see this video.

Within these comments, there was also a very interesting thread of comments that were critical of mainstream media, or other entities that they perceived had some agenda they were trying to use to manipulate others. Commenters negatively suggested that groups like ‘NAN’ (which is a reference to the National Action Network), ANTIFA, or protestors paid by ‘George Soros’ were all positioned as outsiders to the discussion, and they should stay out of this discussion. Individuals questioned ‘What y’all gunna [sic] do when Soros sends his goons Antifa here to cause chaos?’ or ‘The real question is what they do when Soros \$\$ and manipulation challenges this great opportunity.’ One commenter indicated ‘I’m sick of the violence, sick of the KKK < BLM AND ANTIFA, if you can’t call it all out, NO I am not the problem, you are.’

An interesting intersection between categories is the role of several commenters that would present points that were viewed as argumentative in structure, but coercive in format. One, in particular, was Carla (a pseudonym). Carla would present points that may be viewed as somewhat inflammatory to others, and following her comments, other participants would push back against her comments and get into verbal disagreements and spats. The responses to Carla’s comments were often coded in the ‘Norm Setting’ category as they were specifically suited to dictate what was in and out of scope in these discussions. A sample of this correspondence is included below in which Carla questions the attire of one of the representatives of SURJ on the *Facebook* Live video. The comments presented below include pseudonyms and are presented in the order of their inclusion in the chat

- [Carla] What’s with the Africa shirt, No one involved was actually from Africa, WE ARE ALL AMERICANS PERIOD.
- [Sandra] Why y’all worry about his wardrobe. Listen to his words.
- [Samuel] - Carla Sanders, what does his attire have to do with message. You definitely is THE PROBLEM
- [Carla] Sandra if you aren’t worried why comment? Were all Americans, no Africa in the U.S.
- [Maxwell] If you don’t understand why he is wearing the attire ask someone.
- [Jesse] Carla ... he can wear anything he wants last time I checked
- [Shane] Carla carry your ignorance elsewhere
- [Mike] Listening with your eyes closed, then you may be relevant
- [Marla] Shane, It’s are’ the problem
- [Shane] - CARLA SANDERS, I am not. Evidently you is tho
- [Marla] - Ya’ll get triggered by an Africa T shirt comment, yet claim you want discussion and have patience ... LOL
- [Marla] - Shane Essex you can argue with stupid we just gonna have to let em be
- [Casey] Marla Sanders is the only ignorant person in this thread. She’s worried about an article of clothing but won’t say anything about men in white sheets.
- [Shane] - Marla Sanders, they didn’t go live for a fashion show. So what’s your point?
- [Shanika] - Marla Sanders instead of speaking about garbs that you don’t understand the significance of why not do some research and gain knowledge what it represents! People who use rhetoric like yours incite unnecessary discourse!
- [Alejandro] - U want to troll we are here to listen but carry on
- [Virginia] - CIVIL discourse. Emphasis on CIVIL.
- [Alejandro] - His attire has nothing to do with their message
- [Marla] - Shanika I’ll speak when I wish
- [Samuel] - Just stop talking to her



Members of the local groups organized to investigate this death, yet little was uncovered up to point of publication of this article. The discussion broadcast on *Facebook* Live sought to bring together individuals with opposing viewpoints. Yet, a challenge in this research is understanding the risk to life and liberty some of these individuals have as they engage in acts of activism and advocacy.

In interviews with members of SURJ, and through the study of the texts and dialogues they share in these spaces, it has been suggested that educators need to help youth understand and contextualize what they are viewing. They cannot impart their own perspectives on these discussions, but should help frame it historically by sharing facts and dispelling myth. This study suggests that educators need to also help advocates and activists also contextualize and find the truth in their work. In discussions before this study, Shakem indicated that the comments in this *Facebook* Live video were ‘horrible’ and a ‘reality check.’ We heard much worse about this discussion and other related discussions from other individuals in the group (i.e., SURJ). Through analysis of this one discussion, we thought it would be much worse than it actually seemed to be. The topic for debate in this study was one that was selected because it potentially could be a source of violence, and has been shown to spark violence in other cities in the U.S.A.

## Conclusions

This study sought to understand the similarities and differences in the use of information technologies and the evolution of cyberactivism as a means to push back against harmful discourses. In this study, we recognized the opportunity to leverage a more integrated use of social media tools and applications to push a movement that is against the narrative or agenda that is promulgated by the highest reaches of power. In this instance, it is a narrative that echoes in the highest reaches of government and the White House.

Activists have used information technologies to promote an agenda or movement and gain local or global support. Single tools, spaces, or applications, (e.g., Twitter or *Facebook*), have been the technological basis for certain social and political movements. Perhaps through the effective use of these ICTs as tools for cyberactivism, the common person or group can organize social protests using information technologies. Perhaps there is an opportunity to skillfully employ digital spaces to resist harmful discourses and usher in social and political movements to improve the lives of all citizens. Perhaps work such as this is needed as we find inspiration in Selwyn’s call to start ‘talking more frequently and forcibly about education and technology in ways that foreground issues such as democracy, public values, the common good, morals and ethics’ (p. 6).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*W. Ian O’Byrne* focuses on the literacy practices of individuals in online and hybrid learning spaces.

*Jon Hale* examines the history of American education during the Civil Rights Movement. It specifically examines the history of student and teacher activism and grassroots educational reform.

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