

Online Environmental Activism in South Africa:
A Case Study of the #IAM4RHINOS Twitter Campaign

Joanne Carew

Abstract

The microblogging platform Twitter allows users to read and deliver short pieces of information called tweets. With the growth of social networks and various new media technologies, both locally and internationally, websites like Twitter have become platforms for activist groups to disseminate their messages, gather support, and start policy-related petitions championing a specific cause. The Internet and digital technologies open the door for everyday citizens to rally support for an initiative, and in so doing create large networked communities of normal people with shared beliefs. This article presents observations about the use of Twitter during the 2013 #Iam4rhinos conservation campaign. The article draws on data generated from Twitter users who participated in the campaign, which will be studied through a qualitative content analysis. Using the 2013 #Iam4rhinos Twitter campaign as a case study, this article traces some of the trends that emerged over the course of the 10 day initiative. The article also examines the online environmental activism landscape in South Africa, determining the power of retweets in message diffusion and highlighting the importance of regular users who, through their ardent support of the initiative, emerged as prominent influencers.

Keywords: *World Rhino Day, Twitter, #Iam4rhinos, World Wide Fund for Nature*

I. Introduction

Twitter can be described as a conversational microblog (Barash & Golder, 2010). Less than a decade old, the social network allows users 140 characters to deliver their message (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2011). Similar to blogs, the social media platform connects people with each other when one user “follows” another and in doing so chooses to expose themselves to messages authored by that individual (Himmelboim, McCreery & Smith, 2013, p. 155). The fact that these messages have a limited length makes the production and consumption of this content less time consuming for authors and audiences (Himmelboim, McCreery & Smith, 2013). Despite the limitations due to the brevity of tweets, individuals, businesses, politicians

and brands are increasingly using Twitter to communicate with large groups of people (Himmelboim, McCreery & Smith, 2013). Twitter has developed into a multi-billion dollar business and is estimated to host over 500 million accounts, with close to 300 million regular users according to Twitter CEO Dick Costolo (Holt, 2013). In addition to being an important channel for the mass dissemination of news and information, Twitter has created new relationships among peers, between businesses and their customers, and between the state and the people they are elected to serve (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2011). The social network platform has also become an important asset for journalists and journalism researchers and has extended beyond interpersonal communication to facilitate journalistic, para-journalistic and quasi-journalistic activities (Burgess & Bruns, 2012). Mobile technology and the Internet have facilitated an ever more networked society, and this modern technology has become an integral part of many aspects of communication (Allan, 2007). According to O'Reilly and Milstein (2011), using social networks like Twitter or Facebook, businesses can find out what people think about their products, run promotions, engage with stakeholders and respond to customer enquiries. On a social level, platforms like Facebook and Twitter better enable citizens to engage with each other and learn more about pressing societal issues (Allan, 2007).

Using the #Iam4rhinos Twitter campaign as a case study, this paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on social networks as a means to rally support for a cause, particularly by environmental activist groups in South Africa. To contextualise the present study, and using a qualitative content analysis, the paper will begin by detailing the nature of global online activism before honing in on the online environmental activism landscape. As social networks like Twitter increasingly become platforms used by online activists to further their efforts, the social relevance of this research is to explore the interactivity and interconnectedness of this type of campaign and to unpack some of the key trends and lessons

that emerged during the #Iam4rhinos campaign in order to assist future online activists (Hemmi & Crowther, 2013). The paper will also examine the impact of celebrity endorsements on the campaign and will show how the fervent support of regular Twitter users proved invaluable in the diffusion of the campaign message.

A. Networked Action

The notion of social networks as a place where pertinent topics can be discussed ties into the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas' teachings around the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). Habermas (1991) described the public sphere as a place where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems and matters of mutual interest and, where possible, reach a common judgment (Habermas, 1991). These interactions traditionally took place in coffee houses, salons and taverns and saw people of all classes meeting to discuss topics that were of public interest (Calhoun, 1992). In the age of social networks and the Internet, these conversations have moved online (Calhoun, 1992). Online social networks support the democratisation of knowledge sharing because they are about listening to the ideas of others and offering a response (Stassen, 2010). Marshall McLuhan's assertions that the medium is the message – which posits the existence of a symbiotic relationship between the message and the medium, with each influencing how the other is perceived – can be used to understand the role of online social networks in the protest/activism space (Solberg, 2013). In this regard, different media affect the viewer, listener or reader in different ways and social networks can be attributed with fostering a sea of change in how people communicate (Solberg, 2013).

The rise in the use of social network platforms has produced a new breed of citizen or deliberative journalism, which puts the power to disseminate ideas, and to champion causes, in the hands of the public (Romano, 2010). Deliberative journalism sees citizens recognising the issues that affect their communities, formulating responses to these hurdles and

strategising about how they should go about taking action (Romano, 2010). The flow of news and information has been altered from a society governed by a traditional mass media to one that has embraced more networked digital media technologies (Lotan *et al.*, 2011). The commercial mass media have been forced to adopt platforms like Twitter to engage with audience members, which has also changed how they rely on and republish sources (Lotan *et al.*, 2011). Social networks are of particular value during unplanned or critical world events like the uprisings that took place in Tunisia and Egypt, dubbed the ‘Arab Spring,’ which saw citizens on the ground functioning as the main sources of real time updates (Lotan *et al.*, 2011).

O'Reilly and Milstein (2011) describe Twitter as “the nexus” of many charitable campaigns and fundraising efforts. Because of the platform’s incredible reach, when enough people get involved in Twitter campaigns, the awareness, and the funds skyrocket (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2011). These campaigns call on users to show their support for a cause by donating money, sharing content or posting a tweet featuring a specific hashtag. The spread of modern Internet technologies sees people constantly glaring into the screens of their various mobile devices, making this method of raising awareness a viable one (Solberg, 2013). “Issues formerly demanding social action and political participation have been reduced to an expression of 140 characters,” with the consequences of this being the birth of a culture of passive engagement characterised by online anonymity and assurances that the information and social comforts needed to engage with or bypass unwanted conversations are just a mouse-click away (Solberg, 2013, p.3).

While digital media and the Internet have made it easier for activists to reach a wider audience, the technology does little more than amplify communication (Davis, 1999). For Davis (1999), the success or failure of a campaign should not be attributed to the technology – as it is not the technology that is garnering support for the cause – but it is rather a socially

engaged group of people who are strategically using technology to further their efforts. According to O'Connor (2013), while new social network platforms can play a catalytic role in creating political change, these tools should not be seen as a substitute for "real world activism" (p. 247). Some have labelled a 'like' on Facebook or a Twitter retweet as 'slacktivism' (Kapin & Ward, 2013). 'Slacktivism' is a combination of the words 'slacker' and 'activism,' which sees an individual showing support for an issue with little to no tangible result other than to allow the person to feel good about having contributed in some way (Kapin & Ward, 2013). This type of support requires little more than the click of a button and very seldom has any real impact according to research from the University of British Columbia (Kristofferson *et al.*, 2014), which found that wearing a cause-specific bracelet or ribbon, liking a page on Facebook, retweeting a hashtag or signing a web-based petition rarely served as a precursor to actual social action. The University of British Columbia study found that public displays of endorsement, like those detailed above, actually made people less likely to provide financial support for a cause or volunteer their time at some point in the future (Kristofferson *et al.*, 2014). Solberg (2013) agrees, arguing that there is more "slacktivism" than activism because most of the people who actively participate in social media-based campaigns never actually engage in or organise any formal protest action. However, Kapin and Ward (2013) point out that these token acts of support do still constitute a large-scale community response to something, describing these small touch points as a way to keep people engaged and connected amid the demands of their busy lives.

B. Environmental Activism in the Digital Age

Online activism – also known as cyberactivism, digital activism and electronic advocacy – involves the use of the Internet and mobile communication tools to organise and facilitate protest efforts and to garner support for a cause or movement (Yang, 2009). This new breed of activism, enabled by modern technology, is a source of public discourse directly linked to

changes in how citizens respond to powerful figures in society (Yang, 2009). Looking specifically at the motivations behind online protest action, Yang (2009) outlines social activism as that which is concerned with corruption, the environment, and human rights. In early April 2009, protests broke out across Moldova after the Communist Party in the country secured a landslide victory (Mungiu-Pippidi & Munteanu, 2009). Some 10 000 young Moldovans ransacked government buildings and clashed with police in protest against what they believed to be a rigged election (Hands, 2011). The group coordinated their efforts using Twitter, and other social media platforms, with one protestor tweeting: “North of Moldova TV is off but we have the almighty internet. Let us use it to communicate peacefully for freedom” (Hands, 2011, p.2). Further east, in Iran, in another incident of alleged election fixing, Twitter served as a vital communication channel for protestors (Hands, 2011). It was such an integral part of their activism efforts that planned maintenance of Twitter was postponed because the company recognised what an important tool the social media site was to anti-government protestors (Hands, 2011). Perhaps the most famous of these politically-fuelled examples of online activism involved a wave of riots and demonstrations during the Arab Spring, where social media were used to organise action despite state attempts to censor the Internet (Khondker, 2011). These happenings raise many questions about social revolutions in the digital age (Khondker, 2011). “Networks of activists demanding a greater voice in global economic, social and environmental policies raise interesting questions about organising political action across geographical, cultural, ideological, and issue boundaries” (Bennet, 2003, p.143).

It is not surprising that interactive technologies support and accelerate traditional campaign methods and practices (Hemmi & Crowther, 2013). These network platforms foster the development of what Castells (1999) describes as ‘horizontal communication networks,’ which represent drastic changes in the realm of global communication. They are organised

around wireless communication and the Internet and enable the internationalisation of campaigns, which sees different groups of activists from across the globe sharing experiences and ideas (Castells, 1999). In the past, the mass media's coverage of environmental concerns served as the dominant frame of debates around these issues and has largely shaped the public's opinions on topics like climate change or renewable energy, for example (Anderson, 2009). However, with the decline in the traditional media's reach, coupled with a sharp increase in Internet use, these conversations are moving away from commercially generated content to user-generated content, as audiences engage with environmental issues via web-based platforms like blogs and online social networks (Anderson, 2009). For Pickerill (2013), environmental movements can be categorised as the sustained action of an organisation or a group of actors in an effort to safeguard the natural environment. According to Hemmi and Crowther (2013), environmental movements are increasingly using social networks as platforms to recruit members, to promote their causes, to facilitate fundraising efforts and manage campaign activities. For some time, social networks have been attributed with playing a key role in the establishment of protest communities, particularly environmental activist networks looking to disseminate information and garner support for a cause (Pickerill, 2013). In the case of web-based environmental activism, Pickerill (2013) highlights that much of the social network based activity involves individual supporters and informal grouping of activists, coupled with the backing of a more formal organisation.

II. #Iam4rhinos: Methods and Sample

The data from the #Iam4rhinos campaign were analysed using qualitative research methods. The aim of using this research method was to come to a comprehensive understanding of what governs behaviour, attempting to discern the reasoning behind decision-making and making sense of unstructured data (Boeije, 2009). Qualitative studies can be conducted using data gathered from focus groups, in-depth interviews, content

analysis and ethnography (Boeije, 2009). Most commonly, qualitative research is conducted on smaller, more focused data sets, which makes this approach a fitting methodological application for examining a specific case study (Boeije, 2009). The purpose of the case study approach can be investigative, descriptive and interpretive (Mariano, 2000). The case study approach also involves an inquiry into a single event or series of events as a means to describe and explain an interesting phenomenon (Bromley, 1990). The case study research method can be used to develop a well-rounded understanding about people and to analyse their actions based on their behaviour in a unique situation (Bromley, 1986).

As the first Twitter-based environmental activism campaign of this magnitude to be run in South Africa, the #Iam4rhinos Twitter initiative proves an interesting case for non-profit and other organisations which are thinking about using social networks as a platform for environmental activism. While the findings of a case study approach are limited to the unique event being examined, the ability of the researcher to pay close attention to the details of the specific case enhances the level of analysis and boosts reasoning lucidity (Zucker, 2009). Case studies attempt to understand the linkages and gaps in the causes of behaviour using either extreme or generic cases, which allow for future comparisons (Zucker, 2009). It must be noted that qualitative research lessons relate specifically to the particular case being studied; thus, the findings have a limited applicability to other situations (Boeije, 2009).

In 2013, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) revealed that rhino poaching in South Africa increased by 5000% since 2007 (Rodrigues, 2013). The environmental organisation also highlighted that similar increases in rhino poaching incidents were occurring throughout the rest of Africa and in parts of Asia (Rodrigues, 2013). The South Africa branch of the WWF (WWFSA) gave local communications agency, Flow Communications, a week and a half to create a “Twitter storm” around rhino conservation in the run-up to World Rhino Day on 22 September 2013. The goal was to generate one million tweets in ten days with the

predetermined campaign hashtag, #Iam4rhinos (Tara Turkington, personal communication, 27 November 2013). According to Tara Turkington, CEO of Flow Communications, the WWFSA was concerned that World Rhino Day would go unnoticed, and they wanted to use the day to facilitate a global conversation around the plight of rhino populations (Tara Turkington, personal communication, 27 November 2013). The idea was to leverage South Africa's passion for these animals and in so doing to get the rest of the world interested in rhino conservation. By the end of World Rhino Day, the campaign secured just over 150 000 tweets from close to 53 624 individuals (Tara Turkington, personal communication, 27 November 2013). This makes #Iam4rhinos one of the biggest Twitter campaigns run with a predetermined hashtag in the world (Tara Turkington, personal communication, 27 November 2013). According to Turkington, London's '1 Year to Go' global Twitter campaign, which was launched a year before the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, is the only other campaign in the history of Twitter to compete with the hype that was seen during the #Iam4rhinos initiative (Tara Turkington, personal communication, 27 November 2013). The '1 Year to Go' concept encouraged competitive tweeting using a specific hashtag and saw Twitter users from 153 countries generating 165 000 tweets ahead of the global sporting event (Temin & Anderson, 2013).

Hashtags make topics more visible. They build networks and allow Twitter users to search for a specific subject regardless of whether the tweets originate from established followers or unfamiliar users (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). In this way, hashtags are keywords that link loosely connected groups of people and can be used to establish a new community of users, with those using the hashtag acting as a conduit between the new hashtag community and their own follower network (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). "As a simple platform where open communication reigns, Twitter elevates the individual voice; the strength of its platform is in the strength of its users. In this way, individual activism can change the world" (Diaz-Ortiz,

2011, p.1). Using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) one is able to download large numbers of tweets and to organise this data around a specific keyword or hashtag (Lewis *et al.*, 2013). This case study involved a detailed analysis of the #Iam4rhinos network, as well as a qualitative content analysis of the tweets generated using the Iam4rhinos hashtag (Du Plooy, 1995). Network analysis views the world as a series of interconnected pieces. For the purpose of this study, a social network analysis of the #Iam4rhinos tweets will reveal the connections between the people and organisations that participated in the initiative (Hansen *et al.*, 2010). Content analysis is understood as being systematic and objective while providing a detailed examination of communication (Lewis *et al.*, 2013). This research method, which involves electronic collection of data, offsets concerns around accuracy and reliability with issues around data management, interpretation and privacy (Garton *et al.*, 1999). In line with this, the sizable amount of information gathered through automated methods can present some challenges in terms of analysis and interpretation (Garton *et al.*, 1999).

According to Lewis *et al.* (2013), the analysis of web content differs from traditional content analysis methods but only minor adaptations are necessary. Bruns and Burgess (2012) cite the study of activity patterns over time as the simplest way to analyse Twitter data, which entails looking at a number of tweets sent over a specified period and breaking this data down into various categories. Data gathering was conducted using NodeXL, a Microsoft Excel open source software application that supports social network analysis and visualization (Hansen *et al.*, 2010). For the purpose of this study, a stratified sample of tweets featuring #Iam4rhinos sent between 12 September and 22 September 2013 were examined with the purpose of determining who the most influential participants were and ascertaining how the campaign message moved through the Twitter network. In addition to this, a random

sample of 1000 tweets was also examined to outline if any interesting trends or patterns emerged as part of the campaign.

III. Findings

When tracking Twitter activity, from both a sociological and a viral marketing perspective, measuring user influence involves honing in on things like their connectedness in a network, how regularly their posts are retweeted or how often an individual is mentioned (Cha *et al.*, 2010). “Influencers are loosely defined as individuals who disproportionately impact the spread of information or some related behaviour of interest” (Bakshy *et al.*, 2009, p. 66). Upon unpacking the data, it is evident that there are three ways to measure user influence (Cha *et al.*, 2010). A user’s ‘indegree’ is a measure of an individual’s popularity based on how many followers they have (Cha *et al.*, 2010). ‘Retweets’ indicate how many times a tweet is forwarded by others, which is seen as an indication of the fact the person values the Twitter user’s content. Finally, ‘mentions’ are a determinant of the significance of a person’s name and include the number of times other users mentioned someone by name in a tweet they posted (Morris, 2009). Journalists commonly follow influential people on Twitter in the hope that they will receive tips on breaking news stories, and it is not uncommon for celebrity tweets to become the topic of news stories (Stassen, 2010).



Figure 1. A tweet by Stephen Fry including #Iam4rhinos (received 685retweets)

In recent years, researchers have questioned if the diffusion of a message can be maximised by showcasing a piece of information or a cause to certain individuals, dubbed ‘influentials’ (Bakshy *et al.*, 2009). These individuals have various desirable traits that allow them to influence large numbers of people – be it expertise, enthusiasm, or network attributes

such as connectivity or centrality (Bakshy *et al.*, 2009). Mentions are also an indication of when someone is trying to get the attention of another Twitter user, a particularly relevant idea when looking at the data from the #Iam4rhinos campaign (Morris, 2009). Unsurprisingly, @WWFSouthAfrica was mentioned 47865 during the entire campaign, and over a third of the tweets in the random sample featured this handle. Many of the campaign supporters mentioned prominent celebrities in their tweets, petitioning them to get involved in the cause (Morris, 2009). Some of these celebrities included musicians Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, Coldplay and One Direction, as well as businessmen Rupert Murdoch and Richard Branson, and even the Queen of England. One of the celebrities who received the most mentions during the ten day campaign was the English comedian, actor and activist Stephen Fry (Figure 1). Fry's handle, @stephenfry, was mentioned 3751 over the campaign lifespan, with users calling on Fry to show his support for the initiative in the hope that his popularity would encourage others to do the same. Another celebrity that featured prominently during the campaign was retired heavyweight boxer Lennox Lewis (Figure 2). @LennoxLewis was mentioned 1 030 times over the 10 days of the campaign, during which time he actively called on his 288 508 followers to show support for rhino conservation. He used his influence to generate tweets with the hashtag by promising to spend 30 minutes replying to questions posed by any Twitter users who tweeted using the Iam4rhinos hashtag.



Figure 2. Former professional boxer Lennox Lewis encouraged his followers to support the campaign

Other famous supporters included actress Kirstie Alley, author Neil Gaiman and cricketer Kevin Pieterse as depicted in Figure 3. However, the #Iam4rhinos data shows that it was not only the famous/influential Twitter users, i.e. international celebrities, local personalities and sports stars, who were the most prominent campaign participants (Cha *et al.*, 2010). This phenomenon is evidence of the growing reach of ordinary users, particularly during a specific news event or campaign (Cha *et al.*, 2010). It must be noted that influence is often associated with a person’s level of interest in, or a vast amount of knowledge about, a topic (Cha *et al.*, 2010). The campaign participants who were deemed to have the most influence, these being the ones with the most followers or retweets, were influential participants in the #Iam4rhinos campaign despite lacking an extensive knowledge about, or any clear connection to, rhino conservation efforts (Cha *et al.*, 2010). When looking at the #Iam4rhinos data, the users with the most ‘influence’ were not necessarily the ones with the largest follower network or the most mentions (Cha *et al.*, 2010). One must note that influence is not only determined by the number of people who follow a Twitter user, and it can be gained spontaneously (Cha *et al.*, 2010). As is seen in the data from the campaign, influence can be achieved through the resolute effort of seemingly insignificant Twitter users (Cha *et al.*, 2010).

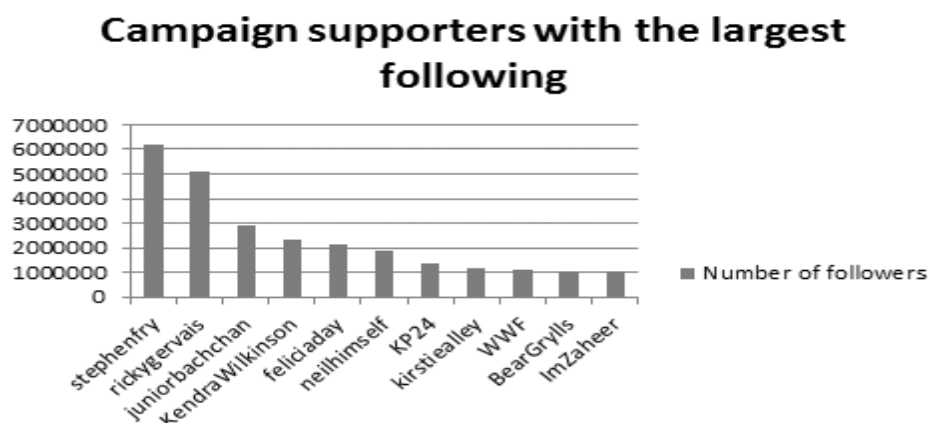


Figure 3. The Twitter users with the largest following are depicted in the graph above

Thus, one can conclude that there is only a minor intersection between people who are well-informed, people who post compelling content, people who are popular and people who are well-known. While the most influential users need not be experts in order to have some prominence on a wide range of topics, regular Twitter users can be seen to have a high influence by focusing their content on a specific topic or cause. There exists a subtle difference between the varied groups of prominent Twitter users – those with a high ‘indegree’ and those who are mentioned the most do not necessarily garner the highest number of retweets (Cha *et al.*, 2010).

- *The Diffusion of the Message – Retweet Patterns*

When analysing a campaign running over a designated time period, one is able to scrutinise the temporary social networks that occur around a specific happening based on retweeting and response patterns (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). According to Bruns and Burgess (2012) retweets tap into the connective power of the Twitter network because in passing along a tweet, the user is amplifying its visibility. Original messages will only reach the individual’s unique followers, but retweeting can be viewed as an implicit endorsement for the message and the sender (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). Tracking retweets is one way of determining the flow of a piece of information through the Twitter network but following a retweet can be a complex process because the text morphs each time a user passes it along the network (Barash & Golder, 2010). Analysing responses and retweets allows one to determine the visibility of any given Twitter account (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). Retweets contribute to a casual ecology “in which conversations are composed of a public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context” (Boyd *et al.*, 2010, p. 1). Thus it is not surprising that some of the most visible Twitter participants – including marketers, celebrities and politicians – retweeted other users (Boyd *et al.*, 2010).



Figure 4. A tweet by the WWF SA received the most retweets (1650) during the course of the campaign

Retweets function to diffuse information and to engage with other Twitter users, with a tweet more likely to be retweeted when it contains a URL or hashtag (Boyd *et al.*, 2010). The number of followers a user has and the number of times that a user is retweeted are different measures of popularity, as is seen when looking at the stratified sample from the #Iam4rhinos campaign (Starbird & Palen, 2012). The number of followers did not correlate with ‘retweetability,’ as the highest number of retweets for a single tweet was 1650 (Starbird & Palen, 2012). This specific tweet was from @WWFSouthAfrica and is shown in Figure 4. The most active tweeter was @Jorisnab who tweeted with the hashtag 2842 times, even outdoing the campaign organiser @WWFSouthAfrica by 288 tweets. Other prominent #Iam4rhinos participants are detailed in Figure 5 below.

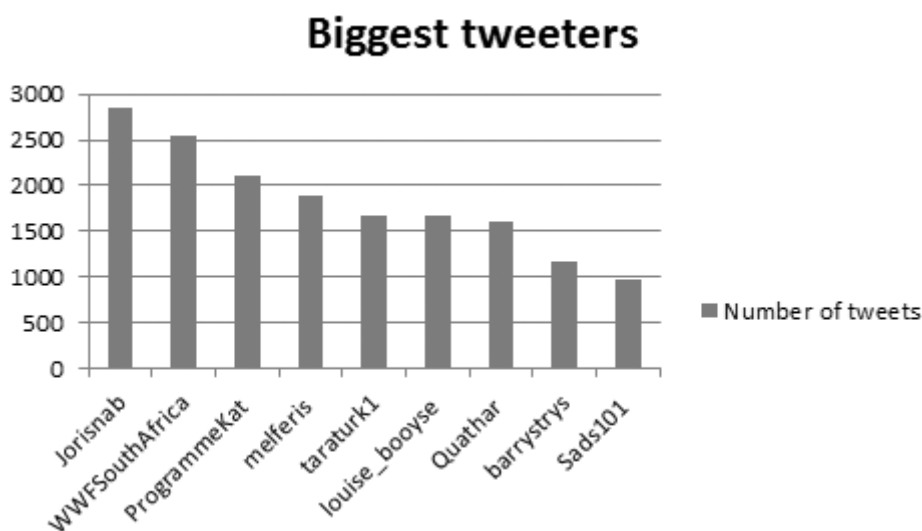


Figure 5. The graph above details the most active supporters of the campaign

Looking at the stratified sample, the Twitter user with the most collective retweets was also @Jorisnab whose extensive activity amassed 29 212 retweets. This user again outdid the

campaign organisers as far as retweets were concerned, with the tweets sent by @WWFSouthAfrica being retweeted 27 165 times during the campaign. It must be noted that these figures represent how many times a tweet that was generated or retweeted by a user was retweeted by others. In the case of @Jorisnab, tweets from her unique account were not necessarily retweeted 27 165 times, but this measure is rather an indication of the diffusion of a tweet from its origin, with @Jorisnab's activity being a part of this diffusion. Of the ten Twitter users detailed in Figure 5, 80% of the accounts are held by South African individuals or organisations, which suggests that rallying the support of South African social media users who have an emotional connection to rhino conservation proved a fruitful strategy. When looking at the participants who were retweeted the most, many of the Twitter users featured in Figure 5 also garnered the largest number of retweets seen in Figure 6. Interestingly, of these ten Twitter users, only one is a large organisation with a substantial following, this being @WWFSouthAfrica which has 24 772 followers. Collectively, the activity of the 10 Twitter users in Figure 6 was indirectly a part of the generation of 140 000 tweets/retweets during the course of the campaign – be it by retweeting a celebrity whose tweet ultimately generated a large amount of traffic or sending a significant number of tweets themselves.

User activity retweet data

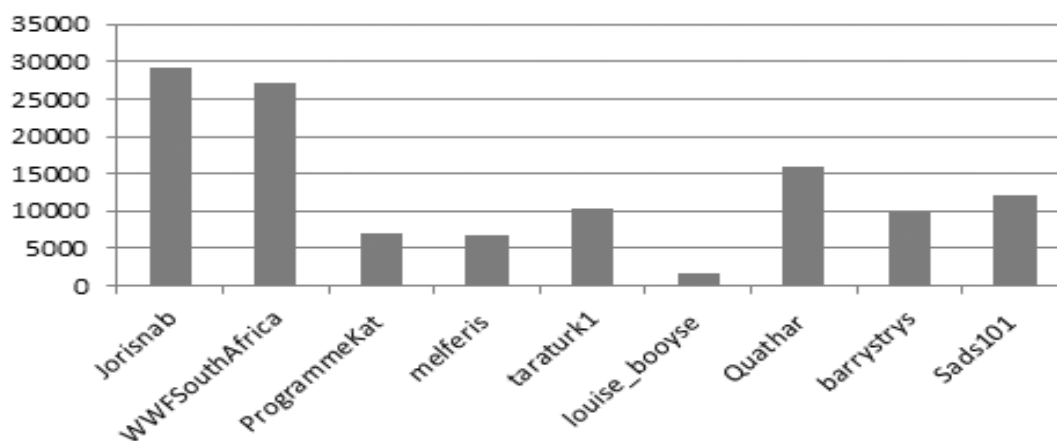


Figure 6. The graph above illustrates the Twitter users that garnered the largest number of retweets

Based on the random sample of 1000 tweets, the phrase ‘RT,’ which indicates that the tweet was retweeted, is mentioned 733 times outlining that close to 75% of the tweets in the random sample were not original tweets. Again, the trend proved similar when looking at the entire data set, with RT appearing roughly 105 500 times, meaning that two thirds of the traffic around the hashtag involved Twitter users simply forwarding on the tweets of others.



Figure 7. The word cloud above illustrates the most common phrases used during the campaign

It is important to briefly highlight the emotional appeals that formed part of the initiative (Turner, 1993). Emotional citizenship is a commitment to and sense of responsibility toward one's community, and it is these emotions that drive individuals to act (Turner, 1993).

Describing emotions as ‘social relationships,’ Turner (1993) highlights how an emotion like anger represents a relationship between the angry person and a provocateur. In the case of the #Iam4rhinos campaign, much of the sentiment present in the random sample of tweets featured emotive language (“Rhino poaching is no laughing matter,” “Stop the slaughter,” “Anyone with a weapon found in a nature reserve, should be shot on sight”) and emotional appeals to encourage people to show their support for the campaign (Turner,

1993). Anger proved a prominent emotion with many of the tweets directing negativity at the campaign, but mostly at rhino poachers: “RT @DesireeNasreen: #iam4Rhino ... #PoachersBallsCureAids.. #1Bullet1Poacher.. <http://t.co/0UAggvOOTt>” and “RT @MikeSimmondsZA: I would treat poachers the same way that they treat rhinos, chop IT off and let them bleed to death! #iam4rhinos” (Turner, 1993).

As was mentioned above, some have defined online activism as low commitment activism. The social networks that facilitate these protests are the same platforms used by individuals to construct their own unique identities, rather than being a forum for them to express their commitment to the goals of a social movement, which can be cited as one of the limitations of this type of campaign (Kristofferson *et al.*, 2014). Thus, one must highlight that the support for #Iam4rhinos does not necessarily result in the actual protection or conservation of global rhino populations (Kristofferson *et al.*, 2014). Another possible shortcoming of the initiative, as highlighted by Rucht (2004), is the ease of access to social media data, which can see researchers who are studying online activist networks overstating the importance of their studies. One could also argue for the use of social networks other than Twitter to run a campaign of this nature, particularly because the organisers were keen to tap into the emotional connection that South Africans have with wildlife and rhino conservation (World Wide Worx, 2014). Given the nature of social network usage in South Africa, running the campaign on a platform like Facebook may have been more successful (World Wide Worx, 2014). Twitter use in South Africa has grown 129% between August 2012 and August 2013 – jumping from 2.4 million to 5.5 million users – and South Africans post 54 million tweets a month (World Wide Worx, 2014). These figures do not even come close to Facebook usage statistics in South Africa, with 9.4 million South Africans currently on Facebook (World Wide Worx, 2014).

IV. Conclusion

The #Iam4rhinos Twitter campaign first gained momentum in South Africa, with 80% of traffic coming from users in the country, but by the end of the World Rhino Day on 22 September 2013, the amount of tweets being generated locally was equivalent to those posted from around the world (Tara Turkington, personal communication, 27 November 2013). Despite being more than 800 000 tweets short of the one million tweet target, tweets were cast from over 100 countries – including Brazil, France, China, Thailand, Canada, Ireland, Indonesia and Spain, among others – and the campaign sentiment was seen by well over 320 million Twitter users (Tara Turkington, personal communication, 27 November 2013).

This paper examined the online environmental activism landscape in South Africa, looking specifically at the #Iam4rhinos Twitter campaign which was held in commemoration of the World Rhino Day on 22 September 2013. During the campaign, the Iam4rhinos hashtag was tweeted extensively by Twitter users from across the globe garnering hundreds of millions of impressions. The campaign received global support from regular Twitter users, prominent celebrities, as well as South African sports, political and entertainment personalities. While retweets are commonly driven by the content value of the tweet, mentions are determined by the prominence of the user's name. Thus, it was these celebrities and prominent accounts that received the most mentions during the campaign.

Although one may expect that the backing of these famous faces would generate the most interest around the cause, it was actually the support of a handful of passionate Twitter users who had the most influence, generating sizable amounts of traffic around the hashtag. In fact, it was the efforts of a small group of Twitter users that indirectly contributed to a significant amount of the hype generated around the rhino conservation conversation, showcasing that influence can be gained spontaneously.

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