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iScotland: Crises, the Integrated Model of Activism, and Twitter

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Abstract:

We are living through a period of technological, social, cultural, and political change where even the ways that we engage with each other and issues that matter to us are also changing. This chapter uses the contentious political environment surrounding the Scottish independence debate to explore the influence of social media and crises – Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic – have on the prospects for Scotland’s independence. The study provides important contributions to an integrative model of social media activism. Using in-depth interviews with supporters of the Scottish independence movement, the findings suggest that both crisis and social media play important roles in affecting the future of an independent Scotland. These findings also suggest critical revisions to the integrative model of social media activism.

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Twitter isn't really about changing people's minds who aren't already favourable to independence – the algorithms manipulate what we see to create a bubble, so we see the messages and the types of messages that agree with us, so Twitter can create and empower the community. – An Influencer's View

Across Europe there are several nations facing active independence movements. However, the Scottish independence movement (Yes) is unique because it is politically powerful, despite losing a referendum on independence in 2014. For example, in 2020, approximately four weeks of consecutive polling placed support for Yes substantially over 50% (Curtis, 2020). This stands in comparison to 2014 when the first independence referendum was held – at the highest point ahead of the failed referendum polling showed a statistical tie (Dahlgreen, 2014) between Yes and No in Scotland. What has changed in the United Kingdom (UK) to tip the scales? Two crises have emerged that seem to be persuading Scots that independence may be a better option than remaining in the union. First, in 2016 the UK voted to leave the European Union (EU); however, in Scotland every voting area (councils) voted to remain in the EU (BBC, 2016). Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted Scotland's ability to manage its affairs as well and if not better than England. For example, pandemic leadership approval ratings of Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon through the pandemic have been consistently higher compared to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's with one polling expert remarking that the foundations of the union itself look weak at this point (Webster, 2020).

Scotland's socio-political environment is also complex because of a negative UK media environment for Yes supporters (Dekavalla, 2016; Morisi, 2016) and the existence of a robust social media environment supporting independence (Lachlan & Levy, 2016). Therefore, the aims of this chapter are to: better understand the influence that crisis can have on political movements and the role that social media can play in a complex media and political environment.

Contextualizing the Scottish Independence Question

Mackay's (2015) analysis of the 2014 independence campaign argues to fully unpack the political arguments, it is important to understand the contextual demands of the political campaign and place it within a specific cultural context. Though Scotland has been an identifiable polity since around 850, the UK was formed when the Acts of Union in 1707 formally unified England (which already included Wales and Ireland) with Scotland as 'equal' partners. In Mullen's (2014) legal reflection on the 2014 referendum and its implications, he points out that Scotland has always retained distinct with political, legal, and educational autonomy within the Union, which was institutionalized with the establishment of the Scottish parliament in 1999 and the formal devolution of many domestic matters like education, health, and social services (Solly, 2020).

The Stability of the United Kingdom

In his analysis of whether the union will survive, Mullen (2014) identifies three litmus tests for the viability of the it. First, whether people identity being British and/or Scottish is vitally important. Second, continued support for 'society' through public programs is necessary to maintain the union's viability. Third, from a Scottish view, the health of the union is only preserved if there are more benefits than disadvantages. Initially, Brexit constitutes a crisis for Scots because the fear of being outside of the EU was one of the critical reasons that many Scottish residents voted to remain in the union in 2014; essentially with Brexit Scotland voted twice to remain in the EU (Ross, 2019). Moreover, COVID-19 might highlight

differences between Scottish and UK governments to tip the balance in the evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of union membership.

Not Just Fake News

An analysis of media framing in the 2014 referendum suggests the battle for independence was not the social welfare and social justice that the SNP wanted (Mooney & Scott, 2015); rather it was dominated by the UK narrative because the media framed it as a strategic game to be played and about issues of economics and governance. Media outlets focused on shared 'British' identity, whether Scotland should be *allowed* the right of self-determination and portrayed the vote as a difficult or undesirable 'divorce'. Coupled with findings suggesting when there was asymmetry in risk assessments between independence and remaining in the UK, concerns about personal economic situations also swayed voters to reject independence (Morisi, 2016). However, the media's framing of the 2014 referendum may well contribute to a pro-independence interpretation of the Brexit and COVID-19 crises in 2021 and beyond.

Social Media Activism is More Than Slacktivism

Though Lachland and Levy (2016) found social media is becoming increasingly important during political campaigns and referenda and a central feature in the Scottish independence debate, others suggest that social media may not be the best places for referendum deliberation (Quinlan et al., 2015). Viewing social media as a platform for meaningful deliberation of political topics is probably the wrong way to frame its function in political campaigns. Increasingly research suggests that rather than social media engagement being illustrative of 'slacktivism' – making a lot of noise but has little impact – there are significant relationships between engagement online about politics, political information seeking, and offline political action – including voting (Brennan, 2018; Greijdanus et al., 2020; Karamat & Farooq, 2016; Štětka & Mazák, 2014; Tupper, 2014; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Data suggests rather than engaging political opponents, social media may best function to develop communities contributing to offline political efficacy and action (Greijdanus et al., 2020; Karamat & Farooq, 2016). UK-based research suggests that social media consumption can help to mobilize offline activism and political participation (Leyva, 2017).

Integrative Model of Activism on Contentious Issues

Though there is a preponderance of evidence suggesting that social media activism is more than mere slacktivism, there remains a paucity of research explaining what drives people to online activism and how that might relate to offline activism. However, Chon and Park's (2020) research, testing the integrative model of activism on contentious issues, provided explanations of the driving forces of activism in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. They found four factors drive social media activism – a hostile media perception, affective injustice, social media efficacy, and situational motivation in problem solving.

Crises as Contentious Issues for Situational Motivation

In their model Chon and Park (2020) examine contentious issues for the BLM movement like gun ownership and police abuse of power; however, they do not consider specific crises as a trigger point for coalescing and focusing engagement about contentious issues. Yet the authors also indirectly discuss triggers like protests over the deaths of black men caused by white police officers, suggesting the model would benefit from expansion to explicitly consider the role of crises, social media, and activism. Crises have three characteristics that can trigger activism – they are inherently public, activate many potential stakeholders, and pose a risk to traditional relationships between institutions and public stakeholders (Diers-Lawson, 2020). In their study of three Mexican social and political movements, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014) specifically found that cyberactivism needed more than an

enduring and negative situation, it required a triggering event to heighten the flow of information during political events or social disruptions. Therefore, directly exploring crises as triggers for activism represents a contribution to the model.

Applying the Integrative Model of Activism to the Yes Movement

To better understand the influence that crisis can have on political movements and social media's role in these complex media and political environments, this chapter applies and revises the integrative model of activism. This provides the opportunity to better understand the Yes movement a powerful independence and political movement and meet the chapter's objectives.

Method

Chon and Park (2020) used questionnaires to demonstrate the robustness of the model; however, as their research drew together disparate bodies of research to produce something new. To continue to evaluate and develop the integrated activism framework, applying different methodologies to interrogate the appropriateness of the connections drawn affords a greater opportunity to evaluate the model.

In-depth interviews of Yes supporters were conducted (N = 23). This involved one-on-one interviews conducted via email (N = 3) as well as over the phone and Skype (N = 20). Respondents (both via email and live discussions) were prompted with broad themes including their interest and involvement in the Yes movement, reflections on the role of Twitter in the Yes movement, contentiousness within the Yes movement online and views of pro-union supporters on Twitter, reflections on Brexit and COVID-19 on the Yes movement. The depth interviews yielded nearly 32 hours of discussion to produce thematic saturation after 10 interviews with additional interviews conducted to ensure saturation (Abraham et al., 2018; Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

Most participants (N = 20) presently live in Scotland, three grew up in Scotland but currently live outside of Scotland. Fifteen self-identified as SNP members, six self-identified as members of the new Independence for Scotland (ISP) party or the Green party, and the remaining participants did not self-identify their party membership. Participants included a variety of professional backgrounds including labourers, public servants, political activists/politicians, former military, communications specialists, and professionals in industries like oil and gas or technology. This diversity of backgrounds is important because the consistency of attitude and experience emerging from these data suggest a common cultural and political experience of being a Scottish Yes supporter and social media user.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and data analysed from a grounded theory perspective employing Strauss and Corbin's (1990) constant comparative method approach to analysing the data with a focus on coding the data throughout (Richards & Morse, 2012). This method focuses on analysing data using three coding processes together: (1) *open coding* to identify critical themes emerging from each interview were identified as a way to compare, conceptualise, and categorise the data; (2) *axial coding* was used to interrogate the conditions, context, and interaction of attitudes emerging within the categories; and (3) *selective coding* was used to match the emergent themes in the axial coding process to components of the integrated model of activism. Emergent themes were discussed with known Yes supporters outside of the study for cultural accuracy and relevance.

Hostile Media Perceptions

Chon and Park (2020) found that hostile media perceptions represent people's perception of bias in new coverage of issues coupled with a belief that the media is negatively affecting the situation. In Scotland's case, this is a measurable phenomenon as the Mooney and Scott's (2015) findings demonstrate on the media framing of the 2014 Independence Referendum. It is also a common point of discussion amongst Yes supporters on Twitter itself.

When asked their views of media coverage of independence, three critical themes emerged from the participants: biased outlets, an anti-independence media spin, and a negative framing of Scotland. Participants consistently referred to mainstream media sources (MSM) as *biased*, for example one noted, "I personally don't think our media is that fair or independent...it's very difficult to understand what's happening unless you read across different publications."

More directly, participants consistently articulated the view that the MSM has an *anti-independence spin* citing newspapers as well as television and radio broadcasters. One of the more important points made by several participants was a concern about how people who relied on legacy media could get information could make an informed decision about Scottish independence. Beyond merely being pro-union, the hostile media perception also includes a belief that Scotland is negatively framed in the MSM. For example, one participant pointed to a BBC Scotland morning news report from June, 2020 where Scotland had its second day of no COVID-19 deaths while England's deaths were still over 100 and the lead story was how the economic upturn in Scotland was slower than England stating, "And that was just a typical spin of 'let's find something to knock the Scottish government for'".

Affective Injustice

The negativity about Scotland is something that came up as a central point of discussion throughout the interviews. Chon and Park (2020) found that it is an essential factor predicting social media activism because it describes a context in which a deep sense of unfairness exists at a group-level of deprivation. Comments related to affective injustice produced three distinctive themes. The first major theme was *talking down Scotland*. This referred to the denigration of Scotland and Scots including historic denigration with several participants reflecting on different moments in Scottish history with one participant noting that the 'Scottish cringe is real' because Scots are often taught that their culture is relegated to history, thus not modern. Another way the talking down Scotland theme emerged was how it manifested itself into a Scottish lack of confidence:

I think for most of my life, that message of too wee, too poor, too stupid to go your own way, I think has been the message. And I think most Scots have that innate kind of a loathing of their own confidence.

The lack of confidence was also discussed as participants highlighted that Scottish dependency on England is pervasive. Participants made comments like, "it's silly and emotive to say that we have been downtrodden for years" but would highlight different examples of dependency or that being Scottish is second best.

A second perception of affective injustice participants identified was *discrimination*. Discrimination was discussed in the context of English exceptionalism with references to 'Just get rid of Scotland' 'like we're a cancer to get rid of'. Also, discrimination was discussed as an element of Scottish cultural reductionism and the "promulgation of the myth of the Scotsman who turns up in London drunk, nuts the barman, and gets arrested." In a British context, if the participants questioned these, it would be brushed aside as 'just banter.' One participant reflected on his experience in the British military and the "abuse that I would

take, the name-calling and physical abuse just because of where you come from that's seen as banter." Multiple participants reported examples of direct discrimination where senior English managers were heard saying they would rather employ English workers than Scots.

The final affective injustice theme that emerged from the participants' that the relationship between Scotland and England was "the last bastion of colonialism". In many cases, participants referred to a democratic deficiency because of the sheer population differences between Scotland and England stating that what England voted for was what all four nations had to live with. They also referred to an argument that has been used over the years to try to dissuade former colonies from seeking independence that Scotland was, "Too wee, too poor, and too stupid" to be able to be independent.

Crisis as Problem Recognition

Though there are many aspects of problem recognition relevant to Scottish independence like participants' views of the union, politics, the 2014 referendum, the meaning of independence, and the importance of gaining confidence emerging from the interviews, most of these relate to participants' long-standing criticisms of the union. However, most participants believe that Brexit and COVID-19 have meaningfully changed the prospects for independence.

Though Brexit is not viewed as a crisis universally in the UK; in Scotland it is with most participants identifying four reasons that it may be a trigger for independence.

- Brexit will damage Scotland's economy, Scots value EU membership.
- Scotland's interests have been ignored in the Brexit negotiations.
- Brexit demonstrates the democracy deficit between England and Scotland as a simple population issue.
- England and Scotland have different priorities.

One participant noted, "I think it [Brexit] solidified the fact that we don't get what we vote for...and the differences between Scotland and England". Participants identified that Brexit demonstrates the comparative disadvantage of the union building the case for independence (Mullen, 2014).

Participants' reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic identify it as a collective confidence builder; demonstrating that Scotland will do at least as well if not better on its own as if it is in the union. Participants identified three reasons they believed this was true. First, the pandemic has materially shown Scotland's competence at self-governance characterizing it as imperfect but adaptive, humane, and well-reasoned. One of the points highlighted was the confidence that the daily briefings from Nicola Sturgeon had in providing clear guidance, explaining the situation, and responding to media questions and criticisms. Second, participants believe the Scottish government is trustworthy. Because of the daily briefings during lockdown, participants noted that people were able to see unfiltered and unframed information about the Scottish government's performance and that "Nicola has played a blinder" by simply being competent.

The third reason that participants believed that the pandemic has influenced those who never supported independence is the "shambolic handling [of the pandemic] by Boris Johnson and his cabinet which has highlighted the Union isn't the best way forward". The juxtaposition of the Scottish competence in responding to the crisis compared to the overall British incompetence is something that participants believe is helping to build support for Yes both online and offline.

There was one exception that reflects an engrained negative attitude – from a participant who is a passionate lifelong Yes supporter:

I think once it has cleared up [COVID-19] and disappeared everything will just go back to normal; everything will just go back to the way it was. Which is me being negative and Scottish.

Social Media Efficacy and Activism

Given the perceived hostile media environment, affective injustice, and the impact of Brexit and COVID-19, from a Yes perspective, the question is how to avoid the pessimistic outcome articulated by the participant. Chon and Park (2020) found that while hostile media perceptions and affective injustice would spur both online and offline activism, that in order to generate social media activism, people must believe engagement on social media will lead to a positive outcome.

Participants reflected on both Twitter and social media, articulating a consistent belief that social media is serving as a part of a political movement. Most expressed a general sentiment something like: “Twitter and Facebook have a place in independence and Scottish politics...” and three distinctive functions emerged – informational, relational, and activist. This suggests functions social media can serve may be more important than the efficacy beliefs Chon and Park (2020) found. First, participants suggest Twitter serves an information sharing function, “for the majority of ordinary Twitter users...it is a source of quick information” suggesting they believed they could find more fair and balanced information shared on Twitter than in the MSM. Participants also argued that social media is a tool for managing MSM hostility towards Yes. In fact, they view Twitter activism as a method to directly challenge the talking points repeated across the MSM by sharing more credible information.

Participants also described relational and community building function for Twitter by identifying its importance as the opening quotation to this chapter and also included reflections like, “Twitter has been invaluable to me – I have made so many new friends, but the most important thing is I have learned so much about the fight for Scottish independence”.

Finally, participants argued that online engagement, movement promotion, and support for offline activism are opportunities for social media activism to contribute to political change. The influencers I spoke with believed they had a responsibility to ensure the information they shared was accurate and not inflammatory because they knew that it was being shared to each of their relatively large audiences. Similarly, when non-influencers discussed engagement, they talked about it as looking at sources for credible information sources they could really read and share. Defining engagement as information sharing was about driving the language and conversations to counter negativity about Scotland and build a positive case for independence. Participants argued that social media activism directly supported the Yes movement. Respondents acknowledge that they may not sway hard-line No voters, but that for soft-no’s there is a meaningful opportunity to represent the movement suggesting, “it [Twitter] opens up avenues for conversations and ultimately people will be won over by a conversation”. Additionally, participants suggested a belief that online and offline activism are connected, “The more information that gets out there and the more informed people are, it tentacles out into the community” and with a cautious optimism that when the next vote for independence occurs, good information will tip the scales.

Social Media Activism Risks

However, participants acknowledged two internal risks associated with social media activism including speaking into the proverbial echo chamber indicating a “danger we only

communicate with those we agree with”. They also expressed concerns about creating toxicity within the movement because issues can be picked up by social media advocates and amplified, which in many participant’s views could weaken the case for independence.

Participants also identified two external risks emerging from social media activism – trolling and doxxing with participants remarking that, “Twitter is a bit like Marmite; it can be very good or absolutely shockingly bad” because of the way that people can be “piled on” (i.e., trolling) for saying something controversial. One participant described being trolled as “soul-destroying”, but also laughed and commented that she had learned to pick her battles better. In a less humorous way, participants reflected on being doxx’ed – where their identities had been outed. For example, one of the influencers discussed a feature story in the *Daily Mail* (a British tabloid) in 2014 where he and several other online activists were targeted and labelled as ‘cybernats’ and ‘nationalists’ (i.e., fascist). The article listed the organizations that each of these people worked for to “create hassle for them in their workplaces”.

Going Online, Offline, and Back Again

One of the consistent themes that participants discussed was the convergence of their online and offline experiences. Participants acknowledged that they did not or could not participate as fully in person; however, most discussed how either their online activities lead them to offline activism including creating new independence parties, attending marches, knocking on doors both during the 2014 independence campaign and/or during the more recent elections for both the UK and Scottish parliaments. A few also noted that their offline activities also led them online to keep engaged with the movement even when there were no upcoming elections or during the pandemic lockdown. Thus, instead of being a unidirectional flow from online activism to offline engagement as Chon and Park (2020) suggest, participants consistently talked about the online and offline going hand-in-hand that it suggests a bi-directional flow; where activism reinforced activism, no matter the ‘platform’.

Conclusions and Applications

The case of Scottish independence affords an opportunity to better understand complex interactions between political movements, the media, and crises to better identify the potential functions that social media can serve in enduring political movements. This chapter demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between online and offline political advocacy heightened once crises emerge. Beyond refining ‘contentious issues’ as crises, this chapter also builds on previous research about the role social media plays in political movements identifying informational, community building, and activist functions that it serves. These data also demonstrate a bi-directional influence of online and offline activism, further refining Chon and Park’s (2020) model. Finally, these data also reveal both internal and external risks associated with online activism as well, which may factor into how movement supporters use Twitter to engage with movements.

In the case of Scottish independence, these data demonstrate the importance of trigger events to push a political objective and provide a deeper explanation as to why the 2014 independence referendum did not pass – historic and enduring perceptions of affective injustice does not necessarily lead to political change; specific triggers seem necessary to overcome the inertia of the status quo.

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