The Power of Social Media Sites: A Case of #BackOffIndia

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Abstract

This article explores how the hashtag united Nepali people against the hegemonic attitude of India by analyzing the tweets with hashtag (#) BackOffIndia to expose how this hashtag worked as a platform for horizontal connectivity and dissemination of information, citizen journalism, pervasive nature of power and multiple resistance sites. The analytical study of the blockade conducted with the help of a digital platform Twitter (now X) led to the direction that the Indian Government had imposed a state of blockade on Nepal in denial of the promulgation of the constitution in 2015. From the analysis, Twitter has been found useful and an easier and successful tool to spread the voice of protest across the world.

Keywords: #BackOffIndia, digital activism, Twitter, social movements

Introduction

Social media sites, co-constituting with social movements as the actors for activism, contributed and have been contributing to the pressing issues like human rights, humanity, and social justice. Through wider and rapid dissemination of information, these sites influence the psychology of the users, making them ready for collective action (Khondker, 2011; Timsina & Baral, 2023; Tudoroiu, 2014). They provide a virtual forum for the intellectual, socio-political discussion and accretion of awareness among the users, which, by uniting stifled and ignored voices, can initiate and accelerate the protest movement for humanitarian and social causes.

Social movements have a significant impact on addressing the issues of humanity, human rights, justice, and social inequalities. These issues would have never been highlighted in the manner they have done today had there been no invention of the internet and digital tools such as social media platforms. Tufekci (2014) has rightly pointed out, "Attention is oxygen for digital social movements. Without it, they cannot catch fire," which is very intriguing (p. 30). When a hashtag gets a space on Twitter and gets attention, it starts connecting people through retweets, likes, and replies. Depending on the intensity of the issue, the organization takes place throughout the world. Shirky (2008) believes that "revolution doesn't happen when society adopts new technologies— it happens when society adopts new behaviors" (p. 160), and it can be seen remarkably

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in the digital social movements like #BackOffIndia. This hashtag created a significant impact among Nepali people and showed that social media has the power to organize without organization (Shirky, 2008). This article aims to explore how the hashtag united Nepali people against the hegemonic attitude of India.

Setting Background

Literature shows that although social media networks have both positive and negative sides (Gladwell, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Rashid, 2012; Timsina & Baral, 2023), their roles in ousting Philippine president Estrada, Egyptian president Mubarak, Tunisia's revolution, the Iraqi anti-war movement, and the anti-G8 protest in Genoa, among others, show how powerful they can be. This article analyzes the role played by #BackOffIndia, a digital social movement through Twitter #hashtag against India's interference in Nepal's internal affairs. India imposed an 'unofficial trade blockade'—began in September 2015 and lasted about six months, resulting in an economic and humanitarian crisis in Nepal—as a reaction to Nepal adopting a new constitution in 2015. Utilizing Tufekci (2014) and Castells (2000)'s ideas on effective use of social media, Shirky (2008)'s concept on the power of social media, Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) idea on social media/digital rhetoric, and Foucauldian discourse of power (that undercuts the vertical nature of power and advocates for its horizontal nature), this article analyzes tweets with #BackOffIndia to expose how this hashtag worked as a platform for horizontal connectivity and dissemination of information, citizen journalism, the pervasive nature of power, and multiple resistance sites.

A social movement is "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups, and/or organizations engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of shared collective identity" (Diani, 1992, p. 13). All the social movements are not successful. And as we see these days, the social movements that have also been addressed on social media platforms are more vibrant and effective. However, there is not a singular definition of social media; rather, academicians define it in a variety of ways, such as "websites that allow profile creation and visibility of relationships between users," "web-based applications that provide functionality for sharing, relationships, groups, conversations, and profiles" or "a set of information technologies that facilitate interactions and networking" (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Kapoor et al., 2017; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Oestreicher-Singer & Zalmanson, 2013).

Online spaces and social media are important public spheres and not simply virtual extensions of people's lives (Tufekci, 2014). It has been observed that Twitter and Facebook are some of the most powerful digital tools for social movements like #BackOffIndia, #MeToo, etc., which could be both local or global. Timsina and Baral

(2023) bring reference to the Egypt uprising and state that although the Egyptian revolution was not a unified campaign with political ideology or a proper leadership, social media such as Twitter and Facebook unified Egyptian citizens to fight against Mubarak's regime (p. 18). Likewise, on Twitter, #BackOffIndia was very popular at the local level. Although due to the lack of media awareness, the messages were not retweeted or shared in millions like in #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #YesAllWomen, although the virality of the issue was overwhelmingly successful in bringing all age groups voluntarily on the streets. National and international print, broadcasting, and online media viz. Al-Jazeera, BBC, CNN, *The Hindustan Times*, Kantipur TV, Setopati.com, Firstpost.com, etc. highlighted the issues and the hashtag campaigns every now and then, which added fuel to the fire inside everyone. Irrespective of age, gender, or caste, everyone was on the street to fight against India.

#BackOffIndia

There are very few digital social movements that took place in Nepal, particularly in its own context. #BackOffIndia is one of a few hashtag movements created in the history of Nepal to make noise against the inhumane steps of the giant neighbor, India. It was to observe the power of digital tools like social media platforms in shaping a particular social movement, #BackOffIndia—a digital social movement through the Twitter hashtag against alleged intervention by India in Nepal's internal affairs, accusing it of having caused the blockade. It was also repeated during the encroachment of Kalapani and Lipulekh (Nepal's territory) by India in 2020. This article specifically looks into the issue of the hashtag in reference to the 2015 blockade. I have chosen this movement in particular because there are only a few articles published related to the topic, but they do not address the concern about how Twitter or any other social media played an important role during that time. Shahid (May 28, 2020), for example, in *Atlantic Council* writes about how #BackOffIndia has been a long-term issue related to India's interference in the internal matters of Nepal but was incited by the incident of the link-road inauguration by the Indian defense minister in Lipulekh, which is Nepal's land according to the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816 (para. 1). Thus, #BackOffIndia has been continuing from the 2015 blockade issue to the 2020 Lipulekh link-road issue.

This article intends to investigate how digital activism impacts any incidents—locally and/or globally. An event, socio-political or diplomatic, if it is of small scale, has multiple effects on different aspects of a society, or if the event is significantly bigger, its effects cover a wider area. The event taken for this article is the (un)official blockade imposed by India over Nepal in September 2015, which had multiple effects—environmental, diplomatic, socio-political, and economic—to Nepal and Nepali people.

Nepal Blockade 2015

A geo-political and economic blockade is an effort to cut off supplies, war, material, or communications from a particular area by force, either partially or wholly. Shneyer and Barta (1981) write that blockade has a specialized meaning that signifies a belligerent measure taken by a nation at war to prevent an enemy from receiving aid (p. 452). While most blockades historically took place at sea, they are still used on land to prevent someone from coming into a certain area. A blocking power can seek to cut off all maritime transport from and to the blockaded country, although stopping all land transport to and from an area may also be considered a blockade. Blockades restrict the trading rights of neutrals, who must submit for inspection for contraband, which the blockading power may define narrowly or broadly, sometimes including food and medicine. Although the blockade discussed here is not exactly a warfare scenario or a maritime transport issue, some characteristics, such as the supply of everyday materials being restricted to going in and out of the border during this period, make it a blockade. As mentioned, a blockade is also different from a siege, as it is typically aimed against a whole nation or region rather than a fortress or city.

On 20 September 2015, the long-stalled Constitution of Nepal was passed with 90% approval from the representatives in Nepal's Constituent Assembly (CA). CNN reporter Pokharel (October 3, 2015) writes, referring to the spokesperson of Home Ministry Laxmi Prasad Dhakal, "Just after the constitution was put into effect, India stops the trucks at the border, citing security issues. Our stand is that this is a vengeance from India, as they are not happy with Nepal's new constitution. This is a trade blockade just not announced" (para. 5). Likewise, a Nepali student, Gurung (September 30, 2015), writes in the *Quint*, an online news portal based in India, that the sixty-six Members of Nepal's 598-strong Constituent Assembly, belonging to Madhes-based groups, abstained from voting in protest (para. 1). Al Jazeera (September 20, 2015) reports that according to the Agence France-Presse (AFP), by 20 September, more than 40 people, including 8 police officers, were killed in clashes between the protesters and the police (para. 5). These instances portray the effects that have been caused in Nepal due to the (un)official blockade by India.

Nepal is surrounded by India in the east, west, and south and by China in the north. Landlocked Nepal, due to Himalayan geography with basic infrastructure, depends on India for almost all its import needs. Due to an open border treaty between Nepal and India, citizens of both countries can move freely, work, and live across borders without passports, making tracking the movement of people difficult. Nepal's increasing cooperation with China, including its purchase of Chinese weaponry, was also suspected

of being an unseen factor behind this blockade, but there was no sufficient evidence to support it. Nevertheless, India had warned Nepal for breaking the fuel stranglehold of India during the premiership of the late prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala.

As a landlocked nation, Nepal imports all of its petroleum supplies from India. For United Service Institute of India, group captain Tewari (n.d.) writes about the Nepal-China Transit Agreement and highlights the issue of fuel shipments during the 2015 blockade: "Roughly 300 fuel trucks enter from India on a normal day, but this has dwindled to a sporadic passage of 5–10 fuel trucks daily since the start of the crisis, though shipments of perishables like fruits and vegetables have generally been allowed to pass" (para. 4). He further adds that, "The government of Nepal accused India of imposing an undeclared blockade. India denied the allegations, stating the supply shortages have been by Madhesi protesters within Nepal and that India had no role in it" (para. 4). Although the scene does not look like the blockade India has imposed over Nepal, the real-life scenario felt like an India-enforced blockade. Nepali people suffered the lack of medicines, petroleum products, food, vegetables, earthquake relief materials, and many other day-to-day essentials due to the blockade. According to *The New York Times* (April 11, 1989), in 1989 also, India had closed 19 of the 21 border crossings after a dispute over renegotiation of lapsed trade and transit treaties between the two countries (para. 7). This blockade violates the right of Nepal as a landlocked country as claimed in the treaty. Khanal (2017) rightly remarks:

> The argument in support of the right of access to the sea by landlocked state was originally predicted on the principles of natural law held in the 17th century. It was believed that the right of free transit was conferred on every landlocked state by its sovereignty. Every state has a right to go high seas and exploit their resources and conduct scientific research. Hugo Grotius generated this principle at first and developed it by Thomas Jeferson. (p. 22)

Indian encroachment had long been an issue straining Nepal-India relations. *Peace Gospel International*, an online news portal, through its story section says that "*Madheshis* share strong socio-cultural ties to the neighboring Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. India had expressed concerns over the violent protests and had asked Nepal to take *Madhesi* interests into consideration" (para. 1). Pushing it further, Ghosh (2023), the editor of Alchetron.com, writes, "The government of Nepal and the Nepali media portrayed *Madhesi* movements as subversively backed by Indian infiltrators and as an assault on their sovereignty; furthermore, Nepalese feel it is ultimately an attempt to absorb Nepal into India in whole or in part, citing the case of Nepali-dominated Sikkim" (para. 7). These evidences support the hegemonic nature of

India over Nepal, which imply that India wants to keep a strong grip over Nepal's internal affairs, which would have caused the #BackOffIndia movement on Twitter.

Theoretical Insights on Social Media: Twitter in Nepali Context

Twitter was first created in March 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams and was launched in July of the same year. In 2012, it was the world's largest microblogging service and the third largest social network site after Facebook and YouTube (Parmalee & Bichard, 2012). In 2024, with the changed name as X, Statista.com ranks it in the 13th position based on the number of users, whereas khoros.com places it in the 7th position. Likewise, an online journal, searchengine.com, places it in the 6th position. These data show that Twitter is one of the most popular social media sites in the world. Jansen et al. (2009) describe Twitter as a microblog, i.e., a small derivative of a regular blog, albeit with content in the form of short tweets comprising 140 characters or less. These short messages in the form of tweets are often delivered to a network of associates, enabling the users to share updates with a network of followers (Jansen et al., 2009). Miller (2008) describes tweets as "kind of a cross between social networking, blogging, and text messaging. It allows people to keep in touch with friends through the internet and mobile devices" (p. 396).

Twitter is one of the most popularly known social networking sites that has its audience everywhere. In Nepal, Twitter was considered to be the elite social media platform in its early days because of its use of English for the tweets. Also, the hashtags could be made only in English, which did not interest common people. It was out of the reach of common people, in terms of language. Although Twitter existed in the digital world, it was not a prevalent one for Nepali people. Moreover, the limited characters that can be used in Twitter made it unexciting for youths who were in the world of popular Facebook, where one can post numerous pictures with a description of unlimited characters.

Twitter has limited character for a tweet. It used to be 140 earlier until November 7, 2017 (*The Washington Post,* n.d.). After November 7, the limit for a tweet increases to 280, including the spaces or punctuation marks. It is very significant that a social movement can be instigated with just 280 characters (Counting Characters, n.d.). Moreover, the best engaging tweet is considered to be between 71 and 100 characters. Since the #BackOffIndia movement occurred in 2015, the character limit on Twitter was just 140. Now, we can imagine how critical it would be for a social movement to be initiated to have 280 characters on Twitter and motivate people from different places to be organized for a cause. The digital hashtag movement is supposed to be addressed typically in a limited character with the ability of being retweeted, replied to, and

circulated all around. Needless to mention here that the tweets and the hashtags in 2015 were only allowed to be in English.

In 2015, Twitter was a 'thing' for educated youths with English proficiency, people in a good position in their jobs, academics, and only a few social activists. This could be one of the reasons for it being unpopular in Nepal. The barrier of language in creating hashtags, lack of knowledge about its existence and use in digital platforms, etc. could be some of the reasons people ignored using it in the beginning. On the other hand, it was already a tool for raising voice for social justice and social movements, or/and for any issues related to humankind through hashtags, in developed nations. Nepali youth were learning to practice it, and the #BackOffIndia movement was one of the most popular digital social movements with a positive change in Nepal.

#BackOffIndia Tweets and Role of the Hashtag

The hashtag was used by Nepali people around the world, accusing India of interfering in the country's internal matters. During September–December 2015, more than 6,750 organic tweets were created on Twitter with this hashtag (Wikipedia, 2016). The tweets were retweeted and liked by many and were second among the popular hashtags of time. But the organic tweets had such a small number in comparison to other popular social movements of the time—millions of likes and retweets. The effect was seen on the streets of Nepal, India, Pakistan, and also in many American and European countries as well, where people of all age groups showed up to protest against the harsh action of India.
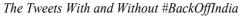
Print and broadcasting media together worked as supportive factors to highlighting the issues, citing Twitter and Facebook that added fuel to the fire inside everyone. People came across the streets throughout the country and also abroad to shout against India. Some popular media person and public figure of Nepal who were active in Twitter tweeted with the #BackOffIndia, which seemed invisible in the Twitter world because of the minimal presence of the Nepali on Twitter. Although the tweets were retweeted and commented on, the number was very low as the common people had no access to internet/Twitter accounts, and even the English language narrowed down the audience. Here are some of the tweets posted during the movement.

Tweets shown in Figure 1 are from two very renowned persons[2] in Nepal. Although there is no such agitation seen in the tweets, one has used the hashtag and the other has not; it sounds more like information than any form of resistance. The second one without

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[2] The anonymity of the Twitter user is maintained for the research ethics.

a hashtag seems to be of someone who supports the Indian government. The Firstpost online news portal of India also highlighted the tweets of Nepalese, which were all against the Indian government. The tweets have more patriotism and allegations against the Indian government. Some of the tweets have harsh comments to Narendra Modi, the then (and present) prime minister of India.

Figure 1

The Tweets With and Without #BackOffIndia

Source. Twitter.com

The news from a frontline online Indian media about Nepal and Nepali's agitation also implies that the steps that the government of India took seem to be unnatural to Indians as well.

Some other tweets from some popular media person in Nepal also expressed their solidarity against the #BackOffIndia movement. To note some examples:

Figure 2

The Tweets of Nepalese Highlighted in an Indian Online Portal, Firstpost.com.

Figure 3

Tweets From Nepal With #BackOffIndia

Modi ji, Your sympathy, support & suggestion are always welcome but stop your unnecessary interference in Nepal's sovereignty! #BackOffIndia 7:25 PM · Sep 21, 2015·Twitter for Android
Support & Suggestion—> Welcomed! Interference in our Sovereignty—> We won't remain silent. #Backoffindia 11:33 PM · Sep 21, 2015·Twitter for Android
Why not organize a big mass meeting in Terai by leading political parties and address the issues.#leadersgotoMadhesh #BackOffIndia 1:21 AM · Sep 22, 2015·Twitter for Android
All I being a NEPALI wanna say is #BackOffIndia and Nepali #leadersgotomadhesh 1:25 AM · Sep 22, 2015·Twitter Web Client
Its high time to have unity among domestic forces & convey a message that Nepali are capable enough in solving their problems #BackOffIndia 1:54 AM · Sep 22, 2015 from Nepal·Twitter Web Client
I urge Madhesis. ..speak up for your rights but also resist Indian interference..Say #BackOffIndia and #LeadersgotoMadhesh.. 3:06 AM · Sep 22, 2015·Twitter for Android
India could be gracious in welcoming Nepal's new Constitution while registering reservations on its shortcomings and concern for violence. 11:25 M . Sep 22, 2015
#BackOffIndia campaign in Nepalgunj Photo: 10:09 PM · Sep 26, 2015 from Nepal·Twitter for iPhone

Source. Twitter.com

This movement promotes the rhetoric of national unity and unified voices through Twitter. The use of the national flag during the protests in the streets of all over Nepal also rhetorically speaks that when it comes to the country and its sovereignty, all Nepali have the same voice.

Nepali social media took to immediate protest against the alleged Indian interference with the hashtag #BackOffIndia as well as street agitation. When news of the blockage of shipments reached the government, Kathmandu sent additional military forces to the border. Despite the suppression of the *bandh*, supplies were blocked on the Indian side. Many leaders of various parties claimed India had infiltrated the *Madhesh* with Indian

protesters, and *Madheshi* leaders have refuted the infiltration allegations, stating that the *Madheshis* should not be mistaken for *Biharis*[3] or other Indians.

Figure 4

The Images of Street Protests in Kathmandu and Janakpur, Nepal

Source. Twitter.com

The question can be raised: did the Twitter trends or hashtags really work to pressurize the Indian and Nepali governments to resolve the problem? Social media researcher and expert Dhital (2015), in an email correspondence says:

> People from Nepal, they made a forum to give counter to Indian media and Indian government. Social media during the blockade showed the dissatisfaction of our political leaders and interferences of the Indian government in internal matters of Nepal. Social media was able to help to pressurize the K.P. Sharma Oli government not to down against the Indian government. Public pressure played a vital role in the stability of the government in terms of sovereignty.

Some media analysts believe Nepalis were relatively active in social media, most relatively on Twitter. Another analyst Gurung (2015) writes:

> Many may argue that the success of an online movement should not be measured only on the basis of tangible change, but also on its role in initiating dialogue on issues that are not getting the kind of coverage in the mass media that they should. Social media campaigns also help to ease communication among various groups, foster coordination, and create a mass outreach.

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[3] The people of Bihar, an Indian territory in the border area of Nepal and India

On another level, if we think diplomatically, when Nepalese politicians failed in the series of discussions, the social media trends pressured the international organizations to talk on the blockade. The social media trends helped to directly connect to the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Foreign Minister Sushma Sworaj through social media. The crisis in Nepal was felt on some level by the international organizations that helped the Nepali people have hope the problem can be solved. Many online media covered the issues and crisis of the Nepali market. That also helped the Indian government to rethink their discontentment.

One of the most effective social media trends during the blockade was to donate the petrol to the Indian embassy by Nepali Twitter users. A group was formed on Twitter as a protest; they donated petrol to the Indian Embassy of Nepal. This protest played a crucial role in showing the crisis and the zeal of the Nepali people during the blockade. Dhital (2015) continues in his correspondence,

> If you talk about the actual pressure that was formed by the social media, it created a new kind of scenario. Many international media were under the illusion that a negative message was followed. Madhesi's issues are not included in the constitution, but it is a diversion of issues trying to set the agenda by Indian media. Actually, India wasn't happy with the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal.

The Indian media on one side tried to defy the border issues, which was the main cause of the blockade, and on another level, the parliament of India clearly indicated about the blockade and issues of the *Madhesi* parties. For more than 6 months, the rift went on between the Indian government and the Nepal government. The Nepal government diplomatically played the China card to tackle the Indian issues; on some level, it worked.

The media (print and broadcast) portrayed the incident through different perspectives, the one supporting India's steps of blockade in their favor, whereas the national and international media accused India as the perpetrator of the situation. Popular media houses like Al-Jazeera spoke for Nepal, whereas the BBC and CNN did not completely support or go against any. They were in a neutral position. This shows how the media plays a role in any incidents. Biasness was felt in all the news from some media. Even the local newspaper of India had both support and dissatisfaction for the blockade. The disappointed media group in India argued that India should not have imposed the blockade, though it sounds unofficial, was official in real. The reason diplomats said for the blockade was a diplomatic crisis. Whatever the reasons be, the imposing of blockade had a lot of issues raised in Nepal. Social movements or activism generate social actions (e.g., political campaigns, petitions, protests), aiming to ultimately promote systemic change. The rise of social media and technology has enabled people to share their

experiences or their thoughts with their peers or the public easily. The added anonymity feature on some social media platforms further makes activism possible for sensitive issues, such as violence against women, racism, and gender.

Conclusion

The analytical study of the blockade conducted with the help of a digital platform Twitter led to the direction that the Indian Government had imposed a state of blockade on Nepal in denial of the promulgation of the constitution, which was not on their behalf. Thus, it can be deduced that India seems to be imposing its 'Big Brother' attitude on Nepal, leading to the humanitarian crisis. To raise a voice against it, Twitter has been found useful in this context as an easier and more successful tool to spread the voice of protest across the world. The combination of words such as 'sympathy', 'support', 'suggestion', 'interference', 'unity among domestic forces', 'rights', 'violence', 'domination', etc. is noticeable and helps to reinforce the idea of unity against social, economic, and political injustice taking place with the blockade. The language of Twitter highlights the issues of loss to the environment, diplomacy, and the economy of the country, which could not be recovered easily. The minimalist technique has been found to be mostly used in the tweets set by the limitations of the characters provided by the site. Twitter as a public platform contributes to having insights that Nepali people have to develop ideas on self-reliance so that the geopolitical environment would lead to the creation of a better situation in the days to come. As a whole, Twitter helped to raise the unified voice of Nepali people, which made the Indian government back their steps, #BackOffIndia.

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