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May 2014

#LGBT and the 2014 Olympics:
Tweeting for people who won't Tweet for themselves

1. Introduction

In this paper, I explore if and how Twitter users tweeting under the hashtag #LGBT represent the population they tweeted most about in February 2014: LGBT people in Russia. The discussion of current rights and injustices experienced by the LGBT community in Russia is a major talking point for Twitter activists. However, Russians do not appear to be part of that discussion, for several reasons. Using network analysis, the important influence of activist groups, over groups with primarily non-LGBT interests, becomes clear. This indicates a more genuine and healthy representation of LGBT people around the world than would the greater influence of other groups.

2. Research question

How do people use #LGBT on Twitter?

Who uses #LGBT?

Are the users tweeting about #LGBT representative of the LGBT community/counterpublic?

3. Early hypotheses

Before any data collection or analysis had gotten underway, I was interested in #LGBT from a social and political standpoint. From my initial, casual exploration of the hashtag, #LGBT appeared to be used in terms of activism, support for other LGBT people, and building community.

After collecting the first week of data about a week later, it became clear that the Sochi Olympics would be a heavy influence in my data set. My early hypotheses changed to reflect this development. At the beginning of my exploration of #LGBT, I hypothesized that Russia and the Sochi Olympics would be highly over-represented in the dataset. I also thought that a large part of the dataset would be devoted to the proliferation

of social education about LGBT issues, particularly as they related to the rights of LGBT people in Russia.

4. Literature review

With the spread of digital media have come widespread changes in the representation and participation of marginalized communities. Never before has there been a platform for connection, discussion, activism, dissent, and anything else, that is so widely accessible and so loosely regulated. The queer community is just one of many marginalized groups that has gained greater representation in modern culture, especially through social media. The Internet has “opened up a space for discussion of queer sexuality,” one that allows for the “active exchange of queer ideologies across distant spaces that facilitate the formation of ‘queer counterpublics’” (Soriano 2014, p. 20). These online spaces, and the counterpublic communities they can create, allow for the dissolution of some of the isolation queer youths have historically faced. They allow for the mobilization of political movements and parties. They allow for the spread of social education, *from source*.

Although Twitter represents probably the most watered-down possible form of a queer counterpublic, it still has enormous worth. Online media has changed and democratized the way in which news is distributed. The Internet “transcends the ‘one-to-many’ correspondence of traditional media,” operating instead on a “many-to-many” scale (Soriano 2014, p. 22). News and information no longer must come from one set of sources, through only specific political, cultural, or national lenses. Online social media means that the range of information and content available within a counterpublic may be generated by anyone with Internet access and a desire to speak. Any person with a computer is able to participate in the LGBT community, through Twitter or any other platform for a counterpublic.

The move away from “one-to-many” has generated effects that reach far deeper than just the media. Digital media’s *content* is perceived differently, too. With the online world’s intense interconnectivity, both the platform (media) and the content (sexuality) are changing in the minds of an Internet generation:

“The dense multidirectional flow of capital, intellectual property, media content, and labor made it increasingly difficult to think about media and sexuality as tethered to a single national culture, domestic infrastructure, or even technological platform.” (Ahn, Himberg & Young 2014, p. 119)

This untethering allows for the formation of Soriano’s counterpublics. As differences in geography, status, and even language are increasingly made unimportant, formerly non-existent communities are free to form based on shared ideas, experiences, and desires. As Alice Marwick argues, the Internet cannot ignore geography. What we see online is influenced by the existing values we and others hold—values that are tied integrally to the places we come from and know (Marwick 2013). The Internet will not erase cultural biases, and we cannot always know who and what we are *not* seeing; Eli Pariser’s filter bubble can be taken culturally as well as algorithmically (Pariser 2011). However, the Internet enables us not only to be more aware of values that differ from our own, but also to make invisible the differences we cannot hide in person.

These ideas, experiences, and desires are what define a counterpublic, and what set it apart from the public. As its name suggests, the queer counterpublic is in many ways set not to the side of, but *against*, the existing public. The driving forces behind the mass public are not the same as the ones that drive the queer counterpublic movement. This is apparent in media responses to the creation of counterpublics. Networks that initially speak to a specific group are apt to eventually mainstream their programming. In this way they essentially remarginalize the group they originally catered to. One such channel, the U.S. based company Logo, originally created content that targeted the entire LGBT community. Since it began in 2005, Logo’s programming has changed to reflect the company’s emerging goal of cultivating a viewer base among “homosexual women, imagined to share particular affinities with gay men” (Ng 2013, p. 258). The channel increasingly addresses a very slim portion of the community it originally sought to attract. In addition, the portion addressed is that which is most easily aligned with a large sector of the existing public. In this way Logo has “remarginalized queer subjects whom [its] earlier programming partially addressed” (Ng 2013, p. 258). This leaves it once again up to the counterpublic to generate its own content, driven not by consumerism and mass media values, but by those ideas and desires which created the counterpublic in the first place.

5. Methods of data collection and analysis

I collected 196,913 Tweets using the free and open-source software Scraperwiki. Because #LGBT is a fairly popular hashtag, Scraperwiki did not have enough API calls to collect data continuously for one month. To get around this and collect a month's worth of data, I refreshed the data collection each week. I lost my first week of data, so although I began collecting on January 27th, 2014, the data that is used in this paper is from February 5th to February 25th, 2014. No data was collected on Feb. 11, 18, 19, or 20. These days were left out of any statistical analyses.

Several different forms of analysis went into my efforts to understand and explore this dataset. I used Microsoft Excel to do statistical analysis. I created graphs on the number of Tweets collected, and the languages in which they were tweeted. I used the free, online software Wordle to do text analysis and see the frequency with which certain words appeared in my dataset. I used BatchGeo to do spatial analysis of the geo-tagged Tweets in my dataset. Using BatchGeo I was able to create a map and see the locations and languages from which people tweeted. Finally, using Gephi, I performed a network analysis and was able to create a visualization of the communication within the LGBT hashtag on February 7th. There were 29,468 Tweets that day; this network used a representative sample of 2,948 Tweets. I used Python to prepare data for use in Gephi.

6. Findings

Statistical analysis:

Descriptive statistics for public #LGBT Tweets, collected 2/5 - 2/25	
Total # Tweets collected	196,913
Mean per day	11,583
Median per day	10,267
Range	24,736
Maximum in one day (Feb 7)	29,468
Minimum in one day (Feb 17)	5,732
Standard deviation	5,923.6

Sochi overload:

My initial look-through was done around January 25th. By the time I began looking through the data I was collecting, the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia,

had started. I had little sense of what the focus of the LGBT hashtag was before Sochi, but especially once February started, #LGBT was dominated by Tweets that referenced the Olympics and Russia’s policies regarding LGBT people. Nearly every tweet made mention of an athlete, a sport, Russia, Sochi, or Vladimir Putin.



Figure 1. Word Frequency in #LGBT, 2/5-2/25 (Source: Sibinga/Wordle, 2014)

As visualized in Fig. 1, after *LGBT* and *RT*, the most commonly used words were *Russia*, *Sochi*, and *Sochi2014*. Close after those come *CheersToSochi*, *Olympics*, and *Russia’s*.¹ The strong connection between LGBT and Russia was to be expected, for several reasons. Firstly, Russia’s increased global visibility in the time surrounding the Olympics meant that its policies regarding LGBT people were under much greater scrutiny than they might have been otherwise. Secondly, to a large extent the Olympics are universally popular among people who also have access to Twitter; people tweeting and retweeting tweets in #LGBT may be people who followed the Olympics, but do not necessarily usually follow LGBT policies in other countries. And thirdly, because ostensibly the whole world was watching the Olympics, it was an obvious choice for visible activism and conversation by LGBT activists who *would* have otherwise been tweeting about LGBT issues.

This last party of people— the already-active activists such as @hrc (Human Rights Campaign) and @queernationny— took full advantage of Sochi’s Opening Ceremonies. On February 7th, #LGBT was dominated by retweets of activists’ Tweets.

The overwhelming message was of solidarity, and a stand against intolerance and injustice in Russia. The usage of #LGBT on February 7th was more than double the usual daily usage of the hashtag (fig. 2).

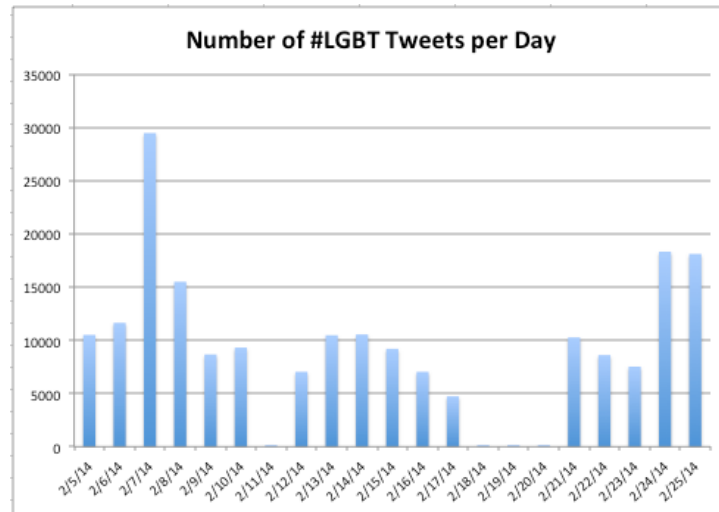


Figure 2. #LGBT Tweets per Day, 2/5-2/25. (Source: Sibinga/Excel, 2014)

Social outrage and education:

Most of the tweets and retweets were cries of social outrage, catalyzed by events in Russia. For the most part, Tweepers were using Twitter to express their disgust with Russian policy, based on what they had gleaned from the media. For example:

from user @Rhian_Paolella on 2/5: *“I am 10 mintures [sic] into watching Hunted and i am already fuming, devastated by this hate crime in Russia. #channel4 #hunted #LGBT”*

from user @TheSamGibbs on 2/5: *“#Hunted on @channel4 was shocking. Russia needs to wake up. #LGBT”*

Another agenda apparent in the hashtag was using social media as a form of mass social education. Many tweets from larger or more visible accounts— such as @hrc, @google, and @stonewalluk— aimed to inform the public and create social change. Phrases such as, “See what you can do to help,” and “Want to know more about #LGBT people in #Russia?” abounded among these and other users.

Lack of Russian Tweepers:

Despite the overwhelming prevalence of Russia and Sochi in the LGBT dataset, there was a noticeable lack of people tweeting in Russian or from Russia (fig. 3).

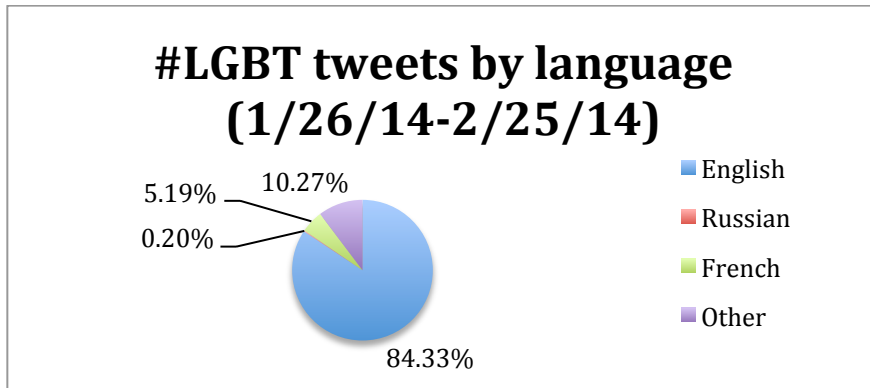


Figure 3. #LGBT Tweets by language, 2/5-2/25. (Source: Sibinga/Excel, 2014)

Even more unlikely than a Tweet in Russian is a Tweet geotagged in Russia. Geotagging is uncommon and generally applies to about 1% of all Tweets. 1.44% of the Tweets in my dataset were geotagged. However, out of the 2,798 tweets geotagged worldwide (fig. 4), only 8 were from within Russia's borders (fig. 5).

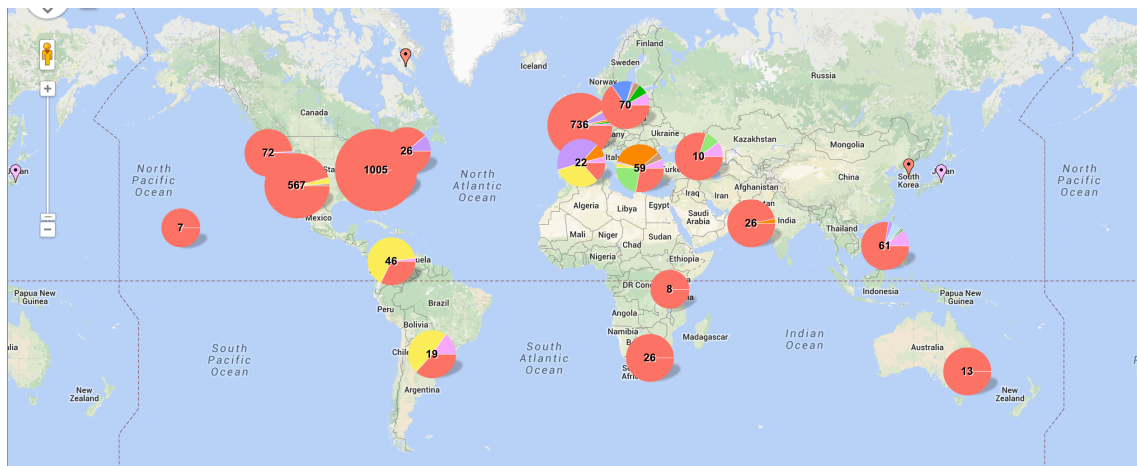


Figure 4. #LGBT Tweets by Location and Language, 2/5-2/25. (Source: Sibinga/BatchGeo, 2014)

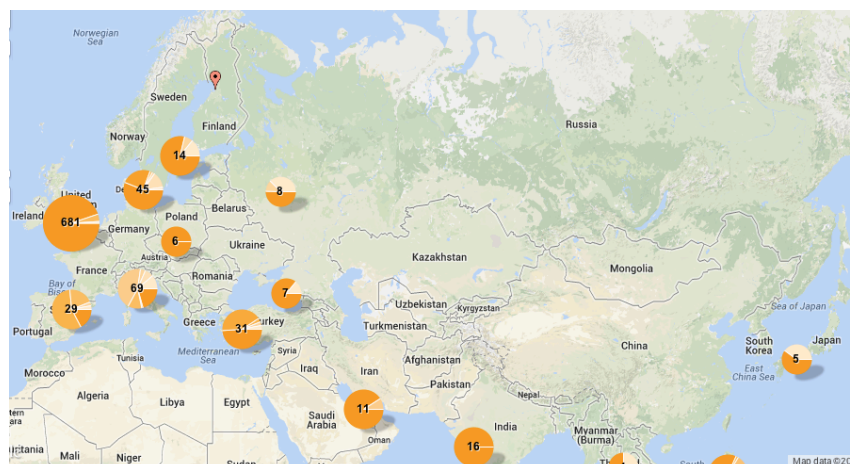


Figure 5. #LGBT by Location and Language in Eurasia, 2/5-2/25. (Source: Sibinga/BatchGeo, 2014)

This lack of participation by actual Russians makes sense for several reasons. Given the state of affairs for LGBT people in Russia today, it is not surprising that people in Russia do not feel safe aligning themselves with the hashtag LGBT. In Russia, it is illegal to “spread propaganda” about “non-traditional” relationships. In practice this means that providing information about non-heterosexual relationships to people under the age of 18 is considered illegal. It is possible that people in Russia are tweeting about LGBT issues, but it is understandable that they would seek privacy and choose not to share their location. For the same reason, it makes sense that people in Russia might choose to Tweet in English instead of Russian.

7. Discussion

At a very basic level, the Wordle and Excel visualizations and statistics show that on Twitter in February, people used the hashtag LGBT to speak in English about injustice being done to LGBT people in Russia. The BatchGeo maps provide some insight that Russian members of the LGBT community, the people who are the subject of most of the tweets, are not the creators of those Tweets.

Finally, network visualization done using Gephi helps to show that although the Russian LGBT community is not speaking for itself, its most influential advocates on Twitter are indeed the groups most interested in the rights of the LGBT counterpublic. Google, an LGBT-friendly but corporate- and mass media-driven corporation, has the highest Degree Centrality of any node in the LGBT network. @google’s Tweet expressing support of LGBT people in Russia during the Sochi Opening Ceremonies was retweeted 1,048 times. However, a significantly more influential node is that of @queernationny, whose tweet on the same day was retweeted only 858 times. @queernationny has far fewer followers than does @google, but @queernationny makes connections in the network, by retweeting and mentioning its followers. For this reason it has far and away the highest Betweenness Centrality in the network.

The two blue clusters below (fig. 6) represent a highly popular Tweet by @hrc, which @google retweeted. The Tweet dominated the dataset. However, the actual influence— measured by Betweenness Centrality— of @hrc and @google is miniscule compared to that of @queernationny.

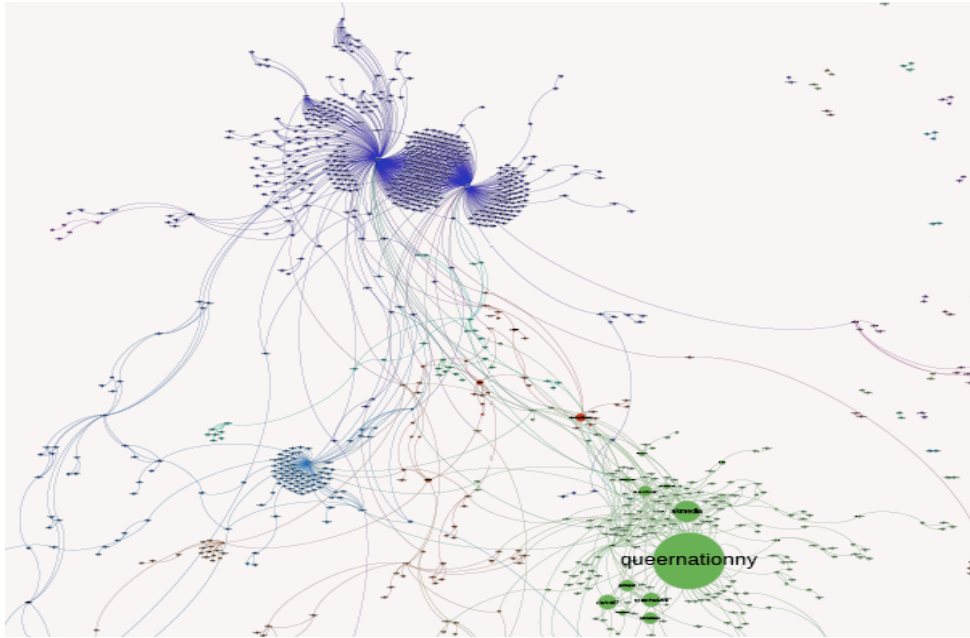


Figure 6. Detail of #LGBT Network sized by Betweenness Centrality, 2/7 (Source: Sibinga/Gephi, 2014)

The pair of Wordle graphs (fig. 7) highlights the way in which outliers affect data sets and obscure the stories that data may have to tell. Together, they call to mind Edward Tufte’s idea that good visualizations can and should reveal truth in data (Tufte 1997). After unnecessary data has been removed from the set, the chart becomes a useful tool for understanding the most common and highly proliferated ideas within the dataset. The chart becomes much more meaningful and impactful when pared down, because the words “people,” “equality,” “love,” “violence,” “celebrates,” and “marriage” appear. None of those were visible when “LGBT” (unnecessary) and “RT” (meaningless) dominated the charts.



Figure 7. Word clouds, with and without outliers, 2/5-2/25. (Source: Sibinga/Wordle, 2014)

It is heartening to see Twitter users across the world responding to Russia's anti-LGBT policies. Last June, Russia's State Duma enacted a law that prohibited the "promotion of homosexuality" among people under 18 years of age. This includes a ban on providing information about "non-traditional sexualities" to youths, punishable by a fine. Loose interpretation of this law means that protest is also illegal. On February 7th, four LGBT activists were arrested in St. Petersburg for displaying a banner that read, "Discrimination is incompatible with the Olympic Movement." The Human Rights Campaign cited these arrests as "undeniable proof that [Russia's] 'anti-propaganda' law is being applied widely to restrict the basic rights of LGBT people and [their] allies" (Rafter 2014).

The law's passage "had the paradoxical effect dramatically raising the profile of homosexuality in both the social and mainstream media" (Ennis 2014) in Russia. However, it has also led to a dramatic rise in homophobia. BBC Monitoring reported a ten-fold increase on Twitter of the incidence of the major Russian pejorative terms used against gays, from the beginning of 2011 to the end of 2013. Use of the words "pidoras" and its variations have increased from around 7,000 a month to over 70,000 a month.

The Russian government, too, has spoken out against homosexuality. In a report released in __, the government officially condemned other European countries for their "neo-liberal values." It went further to chastise those countries for promoting the notion that homosexuality and same-sex marriage is "some kind of a natural social phenomenon that deserves support at the state level" (Karpukhin 2014).

It is encouraging to know that there is a community within the LGBT hashtag that is dominated by social education, and by people who stand in solidarity against outdated, unjust policies. Mass retweets do not make up the majority of the dataset—as visualized using Gephi (fig. 8). In fact, 65% of the original Tweets created on February 7th were retweeted one or zero times. #LGBT really does represent to a large extent the voices of individuals. Only 24% of the Tweet volume on that day represented retweets of a Tweet that had more than 100 retweets. Social education is at the heart of LGBT activism on Twitter. To know that people are not just scrolling past another @stonewalluk retweet, but actively participating and generating their own content, speaks to the relevance and accessibility of the movement.

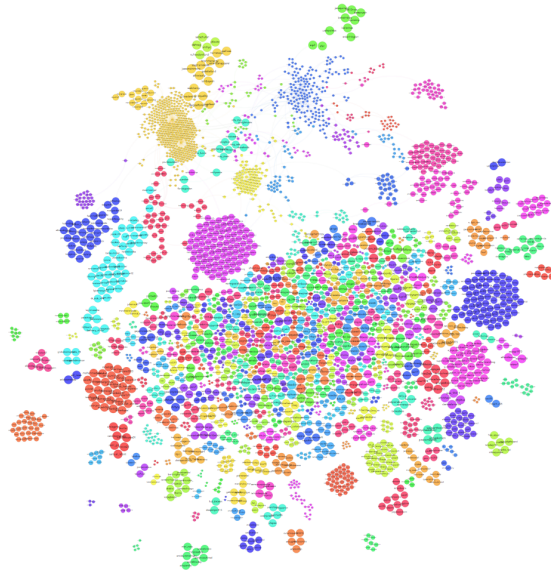


Figure 8. Network sized by Degree Centrality, 2/7. (Source: Sibinga/Gephi, 2014)

8. Conclusion

Does Twitter represent and cultivate an LGBT community that actually speaks to the issues that LGBT people in Russia face today? These are issues for which those LGBT people might seek the trans-geographic solidarity that social media can offer. Or, do those LGBT people remain as isolated as before, having to watch a term that should be theirs appropriated into mass culture that does not understand their circumstances. If this is the case, how can they stop this? There are good signs and bad. The fact that so much of the conversation going on is about people who are not speaking for themselves does not seem a positive thing.

However, if the people who *are* speaking may be trusted to accurately represent the feelings and desires of those they speak for, Twitter is an excellent platform for awareness and activism in the name of marginalized people. LGBT advocates on Twitter can make a difference by making their voices heard and building their own, legitimate and genuine community. It is a good sign that @queernationny has the highest Betweenness Centrality, even though @google has highest Degree Centrality.

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¹ I tried to make another Wordle graph that took out LGBT and RT, but unfortunately my personal computer is so weathered that it couldn't handle the task.