

# Power Plays on Social Media

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## Abstract

Authority and influence are negotiated through the interactions taking place in the sociotechnical architectures of social media. Established elites transfer their institutional power to social media. But they operate alongside emergent, networked-sourced nodes of influence as ad hoc publics elevate certain actors on specific issues at specific times, within specific contexts and domains. A greater understanding of what forms of power play out on social media is essential to illuminating processes of networked gatekeeping, networked framing, and networked sourcing.

## Keywords

activism, journalism, social media, Twitter

In the early days of the web, John Perry Barlow (1996) declared “we are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.” Almost 20 years later, everyone seems to be talking, sharing more of their experiences, perspectives, and insights with more people than ever before using the technologies of social media. The problem, though, isn’t having a voice. It is being heard. The inconvenient truth about social media is that most tweets, photos, and videos simply wither in the perpetual onslaught of information. Usually, information travels from an individual to their immediate social circle and then quietly fades away (Weng, Flammini, Vespignani, & Menczer, 2012).

Yet, there are exceptions as unknown voices rise above the noise. One such voice was Patricia Stein. At the height of the Idle No More movement in Canada in the winter of 2012, Stein seemed an unlikely ambassador for the cause. A Native American from Dakota, she was living in Egypt when Idle No More developed from an Aboriginal protest into a loosely knit political movement. During December 2012 and January 2013, when the movement was at its height, she emerged as one of the most prominent voices on the Idlenomore hashtag, alongside activists closely identified with the movement and indigenous celebrities (Callison & Hermida, in press). Stein was part of a crowdsourced elite elevated by individuals engaged with the movement through #Idlenomore.

It is just one example of how social media enables for the emergence of networked microcelebrities (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), at times with an activism bent (Tufekci, 2013), that command attention in a noisy environment. Attention is

a form of power used to spread a particular message and influence others. The challenge is how to determine how power is assigned on social media. Established ways of measuring influence consider actors with a substantial following, who are seen as experts and are considered particularly knowledgeable in an area (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

What is less clear is how to account for the rise of individuals who do not necessarily possess these attributes in advance of becoming significant actors on social media, such as in the case of Patricia Stein. Understanding who is influential in a specific context, at a specific time, with a specific network of individuals is an emerging focus in the study of social media. The study of power on social media is complex as attention is relational, temporal, and contextual. Actors who inherit structural power from outside social media, such as officials or journalists, do not necessarily retain their influence within the network. Ad hoc publics may choose to elevate a particular actor at a certain time in the context of an issue, such as Patricia Stein.

Power becomes fluid as it is assigned and reassigned through interactions on social media. Social media functions as a contested space, where the dynamics of interaction can result in a crowdsourced elite that may challenge and neutralize traditional elites such as politicians, business leaders, and the media, articulating a counter-narrative that may be in

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opposition to mainstream discourse (Callison & Hermida, in press; Papacharissi & Meraz, 2012).

The work of Isaac Reed (2013) on the relational, discursive, and performative aspects of power offers a starting point to consider how to study the nature of authority and influence in a shared and contested space. Current work on crowdsourced elites has analyzed how power is a relational and dynamic resource allocated by the structure of relations between the actors in a networked space around a particular event, issue, or cause. This is just the start in understanding the dimensions of power and authority on social media.

There is scope for further work on the nature of the discursive power of interconnected publics, examining how the linguistic conventions, symbols, and objects of social media are deployed as expressions of power. One area, for example, is the use of multiple hashtags as framing devices, to draw connections between users, texts, and ideas.

Additionally, researchers could also address how the public spectacle of social media is being employed as a form of performative power. Performative power is based on situated actions and interactions, for example, through the use of expectations and emotion in messages that resonate with particular publics, as Kreiss (2014) outlines in his study of use of Twitter during the 2012 presidential election campaign.

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Alfred Hermida (PhD, City University London) is an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia. His research interests include social media, computational journalism, and emerging forms of digital storytelling.