

## **Hashtag Activism as a Form of Political Action: A Qualitative Analysis of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign in Nigerian, UK, and U.S. Press**

SYLVESTER SENYO OFORI-PARKU  
University of Oregon, USA

DEREK MOSCATO  
Western Washington University, USA

Researchers have argued that social media such as Twitter redistribute news media's power over how issues are framed to scattered networks of activists and citizens. But what happens when an online campaign such as #BringBackOurGirls against Boko Haram's kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls garners global media coverage? Using qualitative frame analysis, this study assesses how news media in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States framed the #BBOG activism campaign and finds key differences in news coverage. Despite Twitter's potential for "networked framing" and diffusing news media's power over discourses, the differential framing and localization of #BBOG in the United Kingdom and the United States vis-à-vis Nigeria demonstrates how institutional norms, local politics, and contextual realities can constrain social media activists' preferred framing of important issues. Thus, despite Twitter's promise for activism, online activists need to grapple with ways to maintain control over their issue discourses in the Twittersphere locally and (especially) internationally. We provide some recommendations on how to do this.

*Keywords: hashtag activism, online social movements, #BringBackOurGirls, qualitative framing analysis, Twitter activism, media framing and hashtags, Chibok girls*

This article examines how news media in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States remediated and framed the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG) activism campaign that was launched when the Nigerian militant group Boko Haram abducted 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria. Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—as networked communication spaces (Hermida, 2013)—are increasingly becoming avenues for social mobilization and protest (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Herman, 2014; Madden, Janoske, & Briones, 2016). Twitter, for example, has emerged as a "site of resistance" (Williams, 2015, p. 343) for Black feminists and other marginalized groups who rarely receive media attention. The effectiveness

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Sylvester Senyo Ofori-Parku: [soforiparku@gmail.com](mailto:soforiparku@gmail.com)

Derek Moscato: [Derek.Moscato@wwu.edu](mailto:Derek.Moscato@wwu.edu)

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of such online activism in promoting lasting offline actions remains a subject of debate (see Loken, 2014; Madden et al., 2016; Vie, 2014). Some researchers observe that hashtag activism campaigns allow social actors to circumvent media inattention or bias (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Williams, 2015) and mobilize public support. But others criticize some of these activism campaigns as fleeting (Wasik, 2009). Considering the debate about hashtag activism, and using the #BBOG campaign, we ask: What happens when the news media (in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States) cover a hashtag activism campaign? What issues are made salient, and which ones are muted (Entman, 1993)? Do they focus on the cause, or do they reenact the debates regarding the legitimacy of hashtag activism? We observe that, in all three cases, news frames of #BBOG reflect the sociopolitical contexts within which media operate.<sup>1</sup>

### **Background: The #BringBackOurGirls Campaign and the News Media**

The 2014 #BBOG hashtag activism campaign will be remembered as much for its impact on global and national politics as for the events that triggered its conception. The campaign's objective was two-pronged: pressure the Nigerian *and* U.S. governments to take remedial actions to bring home the "Chibok girls" (Khoja-Moolji, 2015). In the early days of the kidnapping, the story received sparser coverage in mainstream media outside Nigeria. However, the #BBOG hashtag—started by Nigerian nationals to spur their government to take greater action—gained extraordinary support across the globe. Three weeks after the kidnapping event, "virtually no news-consuming person in the West could be ignorant of the story" thanks to the "unserious-sounding but ultimately serious answer . . . a hashtag campaign" (Olin, 2014, para. 3, 5). #BBOG's popularity on Twitter topped other international newsmakers during that time, including Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 (#PrayForMH370), the sunken South Korean ferry MV Sewol (#PrayForSouthKorea), and a squabble between two American pop music celebrities (#WhatJZSaidToSolange). The BBOG hashtag had staying power because it was sparked by a Nigerian Twitterstorm a week after the girls' abduction and got a second wind when Michelle Obama joined the campaign (S. N. & L. P., 2014).

Media commentary on the campaign ranged from highly skeptical to cautious: no match for real engagement, armchair activism, or slacktivism, and an empty online effort with no real prospects of actually bringing the girls back or of making the world beyond the keyboard a better place (Carr, 2011; S. N. & L. P., 2014). One magazine pundit quipped that #BBOG felt like "Twitter's cause célèbre, something people participate in regardless of whether they know the larger context or the campaign's aims" (Olin, 2014, para. 11). These media discussions align with the academic critique of some hashtag campaigns as ephemeral, lacking context, and emblematic of public inaction (see Herman, 2014; Loken, 2014; Williams, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> The Nigerian press—because of, among other things, its proximity to the issue at hand—focused more on the on-the-ground dimensions of the #BringBackOurGirls activist campaign. The UK and U.S. press reflected the historical connection to Nigeria (as a former British colony) and national political polarizations, respectively.

### **Literature Review**

This research is informed by literature on online activism, the discursive power of hashtags and tweets vis-à-vis news media's ability to frame issues, research on the #BBOG movement, and international affairs.

#### ***Online Activism as a Legitimate Means to Political Action***

As a growing body of literature suggests, activist activities conducted online—from protests to fundraising—are increasingly necessary and complementary to offline efforts (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Hermida, 2014; Madden et al., 2016; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009). For example, women's rights activists, recognizing the potential of the Internet for social change, are creating new resources and technology networks to organize and empower their communities (Sutton & Pollock, 2000; Williams, 2015). Such activities enjoy a unique diffusion on Twitter—a medium whose technology protocols “foreground interaction, enabling a greatly expanded reach for critique and organization among interlocutors” (Hands, 2011, p. 18). Thus, activists can expand their reach via message clustering, modification, rebroadcasting, or replying within the context of more extensive conversations. Twitter also facilitates “live tweeting” events in real time. At protest events, it provides on-the-ground views, serves journalistic and publicity roles, and helps garner attention from policy elites (Penney & Dadas, 2014). Retweeting, meanwhile, allows members or sympathizers of a movement who are not physically present at an event to still disseminate information and help shape public opinion (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Penney & Dadas, 2014).

When issues and places are mediatized online, they lead to the formation of “ad hoc” (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) or “intimate” (Khoja-Moolji, 2015) publics—sometimes around hashtags. The hashtag (#) symbol is often used to mark conversations on social media, most notably on Twitter. It serves as an indexing system, making it easier to store, search for, and collect information (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014). Semiotically, hashtags mark the intended meaning of an utterance—what a statement is *really* about (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). This function allows for communities to form around issues or causes (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). In this article, we use the term *hashtag activism* to refer to the activity of using hashtags to bring attention to social issues and mobilize communities for action. Yang (2016) defines hashtag activism as “discursive protest on social media united through a hashtagged word, phrase or sentence” (p. 13). Such campaigns also contribute to decentralized *analog* organization around social causes (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). For example, the #BlackLivesMatter protests happened in the streets *and* online (Williams, 2015). Thus, hashtags can become political slogans, and political slogans can become hashtags. Therefore, hashtag activism is best understood as hashtag-related activism.

#### ***Online Activism and the Mediation of News***

In a Twitter environment, framing and gatekeeping practices become outsourced—involving ordinary users and elite actors; this network framing process is “fluid” and “iterative” as actors persistently revise, rearticulate, and rework narratives and frames (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013, p. 139). Such online activism involves a redistribution of power away from traditional news to scattered networks of users, who can tweet about events in real time as they engage with or witness them (Siapera, 2014). Tweets by activists

are neither as random nor as fragmented as critics suggest (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). They embody the accumulated frustrations of discourse communities and their allies. Because of their indexing, semiotic, intertextual, and interdiscursive properties, hashtags also have an aggregative effect. When used for activism, they position different instances of marginalization “not simply as isolated contemporary phenomena but as long-standing [and] systematic” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 10; Herman, 2014).

Within hashtags, users have the freedom to decide the content of their tweets (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). At the aggregate level, hashtagged tweets evolve into a shared terminology or networked frames, and to a social structure where leaders and followers emerge (Callison & Hermida, 2015). But critics have argued that hashtags and online activism encourage “slacktivism,” where people become satisfied by merely posting from the comfort of their rooms (see Herman, 2014; Loken, 2014; Wasik, 2009; Williams, 2015). Thus, social movements need to make a connection between online and offline environments to realize desired social change (Valenzuela, 2013). But it is those communities (e.g., women and Blacks)<sup>2</sup> who are often misrepresented in the news media and marginalized by society who turn to digital activism to find and build community and sidestep the traditional news media’s systematic inattention (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Vie, 2014; Williams, 2015). Therefore, the critique of hashtag activism as slacktivism ignores the transformative power of discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Plus, the aggregative nature of hashtag activism speaks to the phenomenon as a movement, where people do not merely document issues and events but build identifiable communities of engagement (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 11). With #BBOG, however, some scholars have expressed reservations (similar to news media) on grounds such as its appropriation of the girls’ experiences (Berents, 2016); BBOG narratives as underpinned by imperialism (Maxfield, 2016 or of the girls as “sisters and daughters” (Loken, 2014); and the potential for it to encourage slacktivism without offline actions (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015). Also, Olutokunbo, Suandi, Cephass, and Abu-Samah (2015) observe that online mobilization campaigns like #BBOG are emblematic of how essential unity among nations is during times of international crises.

Building on the view that discursively mobilizing diverse communities around social issues online is an inherently transformative process, some researchers (e.g., Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Lim, 2013; Madden et al., 2016) have observed the online–offline dynamic involved in hashtag campaigns. For example, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) highlighted how #BlackLivesMatter “activists shift seamlessly across spaces and modes of engagement” (p. 11). Some have even credited the convergence between online and offline activism for the success of the 2010 Tunisian uprisings (Lim, 2013). In another example, the 2013 #IdleNoMore movement supporting indigenous rights in Canada via the retweeting process establishes conditions for potentially reframing and supplanting existing media narratives (Callison & Hermida, 2015), although the platform can also be critiqued for echoing existing dominant structures by elevating the already-prominent voices of journalists and celebrities. Social movements have always used various means to circumvent news coverage that distorts or ignores them (Kowalchuk, 2009). Generally, movements have three media-related goals: standing, which refers to the press taking them seriously; preferred framing, which occurs when the news media provides accurate coverage of the movement and its views; and sympathy, which indicates positive

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Pew Research Center (2017), while only 16% of the White Americans online use Twitter, 29% of African Americans use the microblogging site. Similar patterns exist for Facebook and Instagram. Also, Black women use Twitter more than any other demographic group (Smith, 2014).

coverage (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Twitter affords activists additional opportunities to achieve these ends (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Williams, 2015). Since this study examines how news media in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States framed the #BBOG campaign (an issue that extends into the domain of international affairs), we also reviewed some relevant literature on news framing and international affairs.

### ***News Framing and International Affairs***

Scholars in communication and allied fields have devoted much attention to the concept of frames. Gamson (1992, p. 3) defines a frame as an "implicit organizing idea," which manifests in plays, conversations, media, and the policy-making process. Another way frames can be understood is by looking at their functions: They *diagnose* a problem or issue, *evaluate* possible causes of the problem, and *prescribe* actions deemed appropriate for resolving the issue. Similarly, Entman (1993) offers a four-element functional definition: Frames *define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest causal remedies*. They represent a schema for selecting and making sense of social phenomena. Since frames are implicit organizing ideas, they help individual and collective social actors interpret social phenomena.

The framing idea inherently emphasizes the power of communication texts to make particular aspects of phenomena salient while directing attention away from other aspects (Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 2001). As Pan and Kosicki (2001) explain, media framing is central to issues' ability to gain further public support, which in turn affects public policy. Therefore, different actors use discursive means to skew information in their favor. Moreover, news organizations do not operate in a vacuum; they are constrained by institutional practices, journalistic norms, and ethos such as news values as well as the broader culture within which they operate (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). News framing is also a deliberative and "discursive process of strategic actors utilizing *symbolic* resources to participate in collective sense-making" (Pan & Kosicki, 2001, p. 36; emphasis added) about important public affairs. Thus, public deliberation about policy issues is not a seamless process; it is a contest of ideologies and institutional norms, and frames are central to this contest (Pan & Kosicki, 2001). Due to the influence of professional context and norms, sociocultural milieu, and ideology on news framing, one can expect media in different countries to frame issues (in this case, #BBOG) differently. Given the transnational nature of media flow, issues of national representation and imperialism are also present in this case. For example, *The New York Times'* coverage of the 1994 Rwanda genocide was influenced by Eurocentric ideologies and conflated a nation-specific crisis with the entire African continent, contributing to a theme of "yet another African tragedy signifying darkness and hopelessness" (Chari, 2010, p. 333).

Yet Nigeria's media system features its own complexities and contradictions. In dealing with Nigeria-specific topics, national newspapers have been shown to offer more on-the-ground coverage and nuance than their social media counterparts in how they framed the Nigerian #BBOG protests (Egbunike & Olorunnisola, 2015), even as they create distance between country and subject in their coverage of homegrown terrorism (Ette, 2012). In the case of Nigeria's sectarian conflicts, the press uses its own stereotypes to reinforce or even amplify existing divides (Musa & Ferguson, 2013).

Thus, media systems (and news frames) take on a national character (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017). We had no specific hypotheses about how newspapers in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States

would frame the #BBOG campaign. But since frames offer a glimpse of how a society works (Pan & Kosicki, 2001), it would not be surprising to find different media framing of the #BBOG campaign in the three countries. For example, we expected the Nigerian media to have the deepest sense of ownership and contextual understanding of the issue. Because of the United Kingdom's historical position with Nigeria as a former colonial power, we also expected the UK news frames to be more similar to the Nigerian frames than the U.S. ones. Also, although both the United Kingdom and the United States have "advanced" media systems, research shows that Americans tolerate offensive speech, prioritize individual liberty, and believe that they control their own destinies more than British people do (Wike, 2016). Journalists in developing countries also are more likely than their counterparts in Western countries to support "development journalism" ideals instead of "detached, adversarial journalism" (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017, p. 533). So we expected that these values might manifest in the differential framing of #BBOG. Also, given the asymmetrical power relations between Nigeria and the two Western nations studied (Abrahamsen, 2004; Bayart, 2000), African countries' historical misrepresentation in Western media (Brookes, 1995), and the emergence of an "Africa rising" narrative (Bunce, Franks, & Paterson, 2016), we expected to find frames that reflect these power dynamics and contextual realities.

### **The Study**

Social movement activities and discourses are diffused not only across digital platforms but across traditional media (Wu, Atkin, Lau, Lin, & Mou, 2013). "The ability of hashtags within Twitter to diffuse and amplify information and ideas across social media has afforded new media outreach opportunities for activists" (Moscato, 2014, p. 9). There is, therefore, the prospect for further inquiry into how traditional media cover, frame, amplify, or attenuate online political mobilization efforts. Using the #BBOG campaign, we examine the different ways news media in three nations frame an activist campaign borne of social media. We observe what the media frames on #BBOG reveal about social networks' ability (and limits) to redistribute power away from mainstream media to citizens, activists, and the global South.

### ***Overarching Research Questions***

Based on the literature reviewed, the following questions were addressed:

- RQ1: Do news media in different contexts (Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States) differentially frame the #BBOG campaign?*
- RQ2: Do news frames focus on the cause (and in what way) or do they reenact the debates about the legitimacy or otherwise of hashtag activism?*

### **Method: Frame Analysis**

This study is based on a constructionist (D'Angelo, 2002) frame analysis of news stories on the #BBOG campaign in the Nigerian, UK, and U.S. press. As Altheide (1997) observes, although techniques such as counting and coding may be helpful for text analysis, interpretivist epistemology does not typically rest on these techniques. Our goal is, therefore, to obtain an interpretive understanding of media attributes and their meaning in a broader social context (Golafshani, 2003). We observed frame elements such as information placement (e.g., the lead paragraph), repetition, exclusion, and inclusion in media texts to highlight what is salient and what is not (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Pan & Kosicki, 2001). Devices such as word choices, metaphors, stock phrases, exemplars, descriptions, arguments, and information sources also helped us identify media frames.

### **Country and Media Selection**

We used Nigeria for this study because it is the prime country of interest—the Boko Haram kidnapping took place there. In addition, the online (and offline) activism started there. The United Kingdom and the United States were chosen to represent two contrasting and powerful Western nations. For each country, we selected two leading national newspapers: *This Day* and *Vanguard* (Nigeria), *The Guardian* and *The Times* (United Kingdom), and *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* (United States). Leading national newspapers are useful for framing studies because news stories are likely to have a cascading effect on other media outlets, elite views, and ultimately mass opinion (Entman, 2008). These publications represent an integral aspect of national discourses in their respective countries. Notably, *This Day* and *Vanguard* are considered to be independent of political control in Nigeria, allowing them to freely critique government policy similar to their counterparts in the United Kingdom and the United States. All these publications are also among the top 10 for circulation and readership in their respective countries.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

Using the LexisNexis database, we examined the months of May to July 2014, representing the launch and crescendo of the #BBOG campaign. After experimenting with different search terms (#BringBackOurGirls, #BBOG, and Bring Back Our Girls), we did not find a significant difference in the number of news articles retrieved. We also used the hashtag-based search term because we are primarily interested in how mainstream media framed the #BBOG campaign, not just the Boko Haram kidnapping. The initial search yielded 45 and 51 news stories, respectively, for *This Day* and *Vanguard* in Nigeria; 10 and 13 news stories, respectively, for *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* in the United States; and 10 and four news stories, respectively, for *The Guardian* and *The Times* in the United Kingdom.

For all six publications, stories that contained casual or peripheral mentions of #BBOG were removed. We also removed articles (e.g., from news wires and letters to the editors) not generated by the focal newspapers. This step was necessary given the study's interest in how the selected news organizations framed the campaign. These screening processes reduced the overall corpus of news stories. In the end, we analyzed 12 articles from the United Kingdom, 14 from the United States, and 14 from Nigeria. Despite the relatively small final corpus used for the analysis, it was the result of a systematic selection and screening

process. Similar to qualitative research conducted in the interpretivist tradition, the goal of this frame analysis is to examine the particular, not the universal (Golafshani, 2003). Thus, these news stories convey a snapshot of how the selected news media frame a topical global activist campaign.

### ***Coding and Analysis***

We read the articles several times to identify frames using Entman's (1993) framing definition described earlier. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument, and subjectivity is key. However, to enhance the credibility of our analyses—the equivalent of reliability in quantitative research (Golafshani, 2003)—we both simultaneously conducted the frame analyses as a form of investigator triangulation (Johnson, 1997). Both of us closely read all the articles. Elements such as article focus, language use, tone, sources, and differences or similarities in the coverage among the newspapers across the three countries were recorded. Also, using language elements such as catchphrases, terms, and metaphors, we identified possible frames, which we later categorized, assessed, discussed, and recategorized into particular central organizing ideas. Frequency and percentage counts were not employed. As others (e.g., Altheide, 1997; Risse & Van de Steeg, 2003) have observed regarding constructionist frame analysis, it is the symbolic meanings a text evokes that matters; "sometimes, only a hint is enough to invoke particular frames" (Ofori-Parku, 2016, p. 757). The unit of analysis was the sentences in each news story.

### **Results**

#### ***Nigerian Media Framing of the #BBOG Campaign***

As expected, the Nigerian press's framing of #BBOG provided the most on-the-ground, localized, contextualized perspective. Frames ranged from a focus on protests, police reaction, and critiques of government action to calls on the international community to get involved.

##### *Peaceful Protest in the Face of Government Crackdowns*

This frame highlighted on-the-ground challenges facing protesters in Nigeria at street demonstrations and other protest events. Stories cited numerous cases of public officials muzzling or detaining #BBOG demonstrators. *Vanguard* called the tension between the activists and the police a "Cold War." A *Vanguard* (Akinboade, 2014) stated:

A leader of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign group and former Minister of Education, Mrs. Obiageli Ezekwesili, was on July 21 briefly detained by security agents at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja, on her way to London. (para 1)

This quote illustrates the analog dimensions of the #BBOG campaign. This frame contrasted protesters' assertions of using "peaceful advocacy" and "lawful means" with potential disruptions from outside sources, including the possibility of "criminal elements linked to the Boko Haram" infiltrating such protests. The possibility for confusion and misinterpretation of the advocacy was realized with a "fracas" and "ugly incidents" between #BBOG activists and a rival, government-sponsored group called Release Our Girls. Also,



stories compared relations between police and protesters by city. *This Day* pointed out that, while protesters in Abuja were battling for “freedom of movement to carry out their daily sit-outs,” protesters in Lagos claimed to “have the full backing of the police” (Ezeobi, 2014a, para. 5).

#### *Government Indifference and Failures*

The Nigerian news stories employed a frame of government indifference in repeated harsh criticisms of the Nigerian government. For example, *This Day* observed:

It is amazing how life can carry on as normal when 100s of our daughters have been abducted and more have disappeared or [been] killed. I have no doubts that if children of our leaders and the super rich were among [those captured], our governments would have negotiated and even pay [*sic*] heavy ransoms. (Ezeobi, 2014a, para 11)

Another example of this frame is seen in a magazine publisher’s admonishing of the Nigerian president for not addressing the nation until the abduction became an international news story, and that such inaction had the potential to haunt the people of Nigeria “forever.” This critique points to the (perceived) effect of international coverage of policy issues on political actors. One tweet from a #BBOG leader accused the group’s critics of making the kidnapping victims “mere pawns in their soulless political game” (Ezeobi, 2014b, para 1). Another lamented that “indifference to the cause of #ChibokGirls is the loudest statement yet on the state of our shared humanity. They are alive and can be rescued” (Ezeobi, 2014a, para 7). That the government was reported to have sent requests for proposals to international public relations firms in London indicated that the kidnappings were proving to be politically and economically costly. *Vanguard’s* (Animasaun, 2014a, para 4) asserted that “the world has taken notice of the extent in the breakdown of law and order in Nigeria.” This subframe reflects two issues. First, the Nigerian government deemed the #BBOG campaign a powerful enough concern to warrant professional public relations help: investor confidence was at stake. Second, it reflects the international public relations industry’s potential impact on global affairs and human rights issues. Although most firms reportedly adopted a contingency approach, some were simply keen on making a deal with the Nigerian government. For example, *This Day* (Amanze-Nwachuku & Soniya, 2014, para 9) reported:

Almost all the PR firms are insisting on a long-term commitment with most of them advising the minister and her team to improve the transparency of government’s communications in the light of intense global media scrutiny. . . . One of the PR firms with offices in London and New York . . . said despite the numbers of PR firms in contention, it remains optimistic about getting the lucrative deal for a period of three to four years.

#### *The International Community Has a Role in Supporting Nigeria*

This frame emphasized the crucial role of global support for Nigeria’s ability to end the crisis. In line with the kidnapping as a terrorist act trope, this frame argued that religious and ethnic sentiments were anathema to the fight against Boko Haram, not necessarily an outcome of religious difference. To the

contrary, the frame advanced solidarity as a solution to the Boko Haram insurgency. As stated in the *Vanguard*:

Because they know we are religious people, they wanted to divide us using religion, but when we defeated them, they resorted to attacking the citizens. It will take a collective responsibility of all citizens to come together to defeat them again, we must rise up as one people. (Ujah, Agande, Avansina, Una, Elebeke, & Daniel, 2014, para 12)

The frame also reiterated the efficacy of global online activism as a meaningful political action. "We must salute the gallantry work of our social media warriors and the organizers of the #BBOG campaign [...] The world truly queued up and united behind Nigeria and it was awesome," wrote *This Day's* Dele Momodu (Momodu, 2014, para 2). Widely reported statements from President Goodluck Jonathan contributed to this theme, with the Nigerian leader expressing the belief that the international community's contributions and Nigeria's commitment would boost the efforts to rescue the abducted girls and that "support of world leaders is cardinal to ensuring the safe return of the girls" (*Vanguard*, 2014, para 4). Thus, the Nigerian president's preferred framing cut through this media narrative.

The international community frame also positioned Boko Haram away from its identification as an Islamic sect. Muslim demonstrators in Spain criticized the actions of Boko Haram and invoked the Arabic greeting *salaam*, meaning peace, to underscore the organization's lack of Islamic values. The secretary of the Nigerian community in M-Laga declared that "all Nigerians, Christians, and Muslims are united" against Boko Haram (Asiegbu, 2014, para 5). This frame also cited countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and China as lending their support to the #BBOG effort.

### ***UK Media Framing of the #BBOG Campaign***

Similar to their Nigerian counterparts, the UK media's framing of #BBOG offered a contextual understanding of Nigeria as an emerging market/democracy, Boko Haram, and what the kidnappings meant for the West. The frame also reflects Nigeria's historical relationship as a former British colony and long-existing tropes of female education as a human right.

#### *The Kidnapping as an Attack on Western Education*

This frame positioned the Boko Haram kidnappings as an attack on Western education. UK media pointed out the English translation of Boko Haram: "Western education is sinful or forbidden." *The Guardian* averred that "civilians and schools have increasingly been targeted. Pakistan and Nigeria have some of the highest numbers of children out of school" (Mark, 2014b, p. 13). The newspaper captured how Boko Haram militants "stormed" the Chibok government girls' secondary school, "loaded" the girls into lorries, and drove away, leaving in their wake "abandoned desks" and "burned down classrooms." Although the UK media also spoke about how the kidnapping prompted Western governments to offer military assistance to Nigeria to tackle the insurgency, the international support dimension was not as pronounced as it was in the Nigerian news media.

Similarly, the UK newspapers framed the #BBOG campaign as a fight for solidarity across religious and ethnic boundaries. *The Guardian* recounted how Hadiza Bala Usman, coordinator of #BBOG, earned cheers and a standing ovation as she declared: "I feel empowered as a Nigerian to see people across religious lines, across ethnic lines, standing together. We will say no to insurgency" (Smith, 2014, para 13).

#### *Nigeria in a Wider Political and Economic Context*

This frame explained the abduction of the schoolgirls as part of the larger story about the volatilities and potential of a growing nation in a globalizing world. The *Sunday Times* observed that Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, had recently overtaken South Africa as the largest African economy. In a case of poor timing, Nigeria hosted the World Economic Forum in early May, "hoping to showcase its achievements" (Lamb, 2014, p. 19) and provide a forum for discussing Africa's positive growth story. Instead, public attention was diverted to the kidnappings. News reports observed that, while Nigeria had enjoyed an annual economic growth of 7%, the growth was masking gaping inequality between the north and south. The *Sunday Times* lamented the destabilizing effect of the kidnappings in the region and the ultimate threat it posed to Nigeria's economic and political stability.

#### *Boko Haram in Historical Context*

The UK media examined Boko Haram beyond the most recent kidnappings, for example, calling the Chibok girls a "global symbol of defiance against the militants"—a battle that had lasted for more than five years. In consonance with Britain's colonial relationship with Nigeria, a report from *The Times* emphasized the United Kingdom's aim in bringing back the Chibok girls: to help solve the kidnapping crisis and defeat Boko Haram as an organization. A report in *The Guardian* described official documents that show that Boko Haram relied on "bank robberies, protection money, car smuggling and the quiet ransom of dozens of wealthy Nigerians to fund arms, food and fighters' salaries" (Mark, 2014a, p. 15). The term *kidnap economy* was invoked to explain a scenario whereby the increase of global publicity of the abductions could buoy the insurgency and lead to more kidnappings. Describing attacks on border towns as a "heavy price" for cooperating with government and security officials, this frame explained the wariness of some locals to choose sides. Since its founding in 2002 by what the *Sunday Times* dubbed "a charismatic cleric," Boko Haram had been responsible for attacks against police, civilians, and religious leaders. This frame extends the frame of the kidnapping as an attack on Western education to include an assault on civil liberties. It notes how Boko Haram attacked people at "churches and even mosques" as well as police and military targets in its attempt to strike fear into "the hearts of ordinary Nigerian people of all religions and ethnicities" (see e.g., Adesioye, 2014, p. 7).

#### ***U.S. Media Framing of the #BBOG Campaign***

Unlike Nigerian and UK media, newspapers in the United States focused the least on the Nigerian context in which the kidnappings and subsequent protests occurred. Instead, #BBOG was used as a platform to discuss U.S. foreign policy might, the war on terror, celebrity culture, and online activism.

*Boko Haram and the War on Terror*

This frame positioned Boko Haram and its actions as a potential new front in the United States' ongoing war on terror. Thanks to the militant group's emergence, *The Washington Post* suggested that anti-jihadism was once again trending online (see Chayes, 2014; Gearan & Miller, 2014; Krauthammer, 2014). U.S. media also reported that women U.S. senators who promoted the #BBOG hashtag pushed for the United Nations to designate Boko Haram as a terrorist organization. Senators from Maine and Maryland reportedly drafted a letter to President Obama condemning the kidnapping of the schoolgirls by "Islamist radicals." Every woman senator signed this letter (e.g., Parker, 2014). Symptomatic of existing political dynamics and foreign policy contestations, this frame included former U.S. secretary of state and 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton coming under fire for failing to classify Boko Haram as a terrorist group. Clinton supporters reportedly noted that such branding could elevate Boko Haram's prestige. This put into motion a "blame Hillary" effort fueled by conservative politicians and talk shows. *The Washington Post* observed: "Now word is because we did not place [Boko Haram] on the terror list . . . it's going to be harder to go after them. And who exactly made sure that they were not placed on the terror list? Hillary Clinton" (Milbank, 2014, para 15). This frame includes calls for congressional hearings; a former congressman characterized media reports on the kidnappings as a "wag the dog conspiracy" to distract attention from the 2012 terrorist attack on a U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi. This frame is an example of how news media can co-opt "networked frames" when such frames transcend the Twittersphere.

*Celebrities Emerging as Political Actors in #BringBackOurGirls*

This frame reported "Salma Hayek . . . , the first lady, and students at Cambridge University" as engaging in a campaign in support of the kidnapped girls. The frame was both favorable toward and critical of hashtags as legitimate forms of activism. Articles cynical of the U.S. official response to the kidnappings (e.g., *The Washington Post*; Jenkins, 2014) saw the hashtag as "rhetorical emptiness" that betrays the United States' "impotence and indifference." Reflecting a more nuanced position, *The Washington Post* (Krauthammer, 2014, para 1)—noting that previous Boko Haram kidnappings and murders had mostly gone unnoticed—asked whether the #BBOG hashtag was "an exercise in moral narcissism or a worthy new way of standing up to bad guys?" The same story noted that the #BBOG hashtag campaign had originated in Nigeria and was intended for Nigerians—and that attention from abroad was a form of soft power that intensified the pressure on Boko Haram to return the girls. The U.S. publications also pointed out that, although the campaign had been derided as "superficial," it was producing results—forcing Boko Haram to take notice and shift its strategy. An important aspect of this frame is captured by Nicholas Kristof's *New York Times* article, which noted that, whereas "world leaders and the news media dropped the ball," a confluence of women's rights advocates from Nigeria and "social media mavens around the world" helped grow a movement via Twitter, Facebook, and online petitions, ultimately putting it on the "global agenda" (Kristof, 2014, p. A27).

*Nigerian Government Failings and the Need for Western Intervention*

Akin to the frame present in the Nigerian press about government indifference and failures, this frame in the U.S. press identified the Nigerian government's inability to address the kidnappings in an

effective and competent matter by itself, therefore requiring some form of international intervention. An editorial in *The Washington Post* (Berman, 2014) described the Nigerian government as being shamed into accepting intelligence and advisers from the United States, Britain, and Israel. Descriptions of the government's failings ranged from "heavy-handed repression" and "a prickly refusal to accept advice" to its "poorly trained military forces that have too often conducted their own rampages." To *The New York Times*, "enough is enough" with regard to the Nigerian government's response—pointing to, for example, the government's alleged hiring of a mob to stage a counterprotest against #BBOG (see Editorial Board, 2014; Maja-Pearce, 2014). This frame point aligns with—although with less emphasis—the frame in the Nigerian press about the government crackdown on protesters.

#### *Advancement of Women Through Education*

Michelle Obama's support of #BBOG not only set off a new debate about the legitimacy of hashtag campaigns; it spotlighted her focus on advancing educational opportunities for women globally. She openly spoke of this strategic opportunity:

Now that we have a bit of the world's attention on this issue, we have to seize upon this moment and take the opportunity to make some significant changes. Right now, today, there are millions and millions of girls around the world who are not in school. (Thompson, 2014, para 2)

The frame emphasized that Western education was at odds with the values of Boko Haram. One wrote, "Boko Haram are right: Western education for a girl is dangerous to their cause. Hopefully even fatal" (Jenkins, 2014, para 18). *The New York Times'* coverage described female education as "extremists' worst nightmare" because of its ability to empower. Readers were encouraged to support global education initiatives such as camfed.org (a nonprofit organization supporting women's education in sub-Saharan Africa's poorest communities) and to pressure Congress to pass the International Violence Against Women Act. With this frame, the U.S. press adapts the #BBOG campaign to ongoing national policy concerns and legislative debates. In quotes published by *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, Michelle Obama referred to the abduction as "part of a pattern of abuse directed at girls across the globe" (see Shear, 2014, para 9) while urging members of Congress to remember the value of quality education in the United States.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

#### ***Similarities in News Framing of the #BBOG Campaign***

Although newspapers in all three countries pointed out the failings of Nigerian political actors and institutions in finding a solution to Boko Haram's kidnapping of the Chibok girls, this similarity in framing is only superficial. News frames, apart from promoting causal interpretations of issues, also offer particular problem definitions, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992). The differences between the Nigerian and U.S. newspapers studied were most acute and, thus, emerge as a focal point of this discussion. The only similarity in frames between the two countries is in their "causal interpretation" of the problem, not their problem definition or recommendation. For *The New York Times*

and *The Washington Post*, because of the Nigerian government's incompetence, support from the international community—qua the United States—was *the way* to solve the problem. However, Nigerian newspapers framed the campaign in terms of government failings and a call for the Nigerian government to own up to its responsibilities. Thus, although *This Day* and *Vanguard* also employed the frame highlighting the crucial need for support from the international community, the Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan was the primary driver of this theme. This is an indication that support from the international community was deemed necessary not just because of Nigerian authorities' political inaction but because of the view that "we are in this together," emphasizing global interconnectedness. Thus, U.S. newspapers used the "incompetence" of the Nigerian government as an opportunity for the United States to inject its might into Nigeria's governmental lacunae and show global leadership. In the Nigerian press, however, even when they called on the international community to intervene, their calls were anchored on the idea of global interconnectedness as opposed to the might of the West.

### ***Differential Framing of #BBOG Internationally***

The framing of the #BBOG movement in the Nigerian, UK, and U.S. media reflects the contextual realities of the three countries more than the issue at stake and reveals substantial differences in how #BBOG was framed internationally. The press in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States made different aspects of the campaign more or less prominent—echoing Entman's (1993) assertion that framing involves both selection and salience. The frames included a detailed focus on the kidnapping and subsequent protest (both online and offline); the (in)actions of political actors at the national and supranational levels; an emphasis on the politico-historical context of Boko Haram and Nigeria's place in global politics; and a focus on the value of online activism, the war on terror, and the weaknesses in the Nigerian government's actions vis-à-vis the might of the international community.

#### *Context and Localization of the #BBOG Campaign*

The debate over #BBOG as a hashtag and a social movement in the Nigerian and foreign press demonstrates how important issues can get localized and trivialized as they flow from the global periphery to the core (i.e., the United Kingdom and the United States) and the role context plays in news framing. Debates in the U.S. press over hashtag activism highlighted existing polarization within U.S. national politics, as evidenced by frequent criticism of the White House's response and the activist involvement of Michelle Obama. The UK press framed #BBOG as part of a larger discourse about Nigeria—the largest economy in Africa—in the context of global affairs and the long-standing issue of Boko Haram.

Context might account for the differences in the UK and U.S. media's perspectives. The political polarization found in the U.S. media's framing of the kidnapping offers a glimpse of the contestations that are already inherent in the U.S. political system. And Michelle Obama's involvement in the campaign, although well intentioned and viewed as a turning point, also provided fodder for the trivialization of the campaign in the U.S. press. The media frames that emerged from the #BBOG movement underscore differing interpretations not only of crucial news developments about the kidnappings and government responses but of the role of the hashtag itself. #BBOG proved to be a source of contention in the U.S. media, with pundits weighing in on the frivolous nature of the online communication tool. Unlike the Nigerian (and

UK) press, which covered #BBOG as a serious policy issue, in several cases, the U.S. media legitimized the social media tool *after* it became apparent its popularity was putting pressure on the Nigerian government. Ergo, a perceived success of hashtag activism signals the news value of the issue, stimulating further news coverage in the mainstream.

The view that news frames and contestations offer insight into how societies work (Pan & Kosicki, 2001) supports our argument that context explains the differences in news frames. Hence, although Twitter affords dispersed networks of activists the potential to frame and remediate issues widely (Hands, 2011; Sutton & Pollock, 2000), such preferred framings can easily mutate when they become meshed with politics and realities elsewhere. Thus, shared meanings proffered via activist hashtags can further evolve, sometimes distracting from the original and aggregate meanings—as they transcend the Twittersphere to the mainstream, and more so internationally.

#### *#BBOG as an Offline–Online Phenomenon*

Nigerian publications portrayed the BBOG hashtag as an outgrowth of street protests and rallies. But *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*—where coverage of on-the-ground activities in Nigeria was sparse—focused on the hashtag as though it was a separate entity, distinct from street-level protests. Related to the issue of context discussed earlier, by ignoring the broader milieu within which #BBOG emerged, the U.S. media (unlike its Nigerian and UK counterparts), while contesting the legitimacy of online activism, reified the very phenomenon it decried. Conversely, the Nigerian press's framing of the #BBOG campaign as an offline–online movement demonstrates the convergence of the two spheres (see Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Lim, 2013). The differential framing of the campaign points to the complex interplay of political, institutional, ideological, and occupational factors in media coverage and framing of public policy issues (Pan & Kosicki, 2001; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). In the United States, the frames revealed national priorities such as the war on terror, political struggles (e.g., Hillary Clinton's failure to classify Boko Haram as a terrorist organization), and the country's (perceived) might and interventionist posturing. The fact that the UK media portrayed a more extensive contextual understanding of Nigeria reflects the United Kingdom's historical proximity to Nigeria—a former colony. The Nigerian media frames revealed the local realities that fueled a global hashtag-related activism campaign.

#### ***Last Thoughts: Twitter and the Mediation of Activism***

News coverage of the 2014 #BBOG campaign globally indicates the extent to which traditional and new media exist in a symbiotic relationship: Media professionals scout Twitter for news, engage their audiences, and provide timely news (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). Citizens have also become what can be termed "prosumers." This phenomenon redistributes power away from the mainstream media to participatory platforms (Siapera, 2014), offering opportunities for scattered networks of citizens to engage in online activism and networked framing of issues (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Williams, 2015). Hashtags such as BBOG also represent information contraflow from the global periphery (i.e., Nigeria) to the core (i.e., the United States and the United Kingdom; Straubhaar, 2008). The salience and uncertainty surrounding a terrorist organization's capture of girls in a developing country offer a plausible rationale for the press in the United States and the United Kingdom to devote attention to the #BBOG campaign. Since

Twitter activism is a nuanced process, sometimes requiring news media's publicity power (Chase, 2012), #BBOG's popularity in the media across the globe is noteworthy. It supports Twitter's function as an interaction enabler (Hands, 2011), with cascading effects on elites both within and outside media organizations, political actors, and (potentially) the mass public. Thus, the BBOG activist hashtag, apart from providing an on-the-ground perspective on what was happening in Nigeria, also served a journalistic role for a broad audience, a publicity role for activists, and a way to gain the attention of power elites—a view also shared by Penney and Dadas (2014). Despite #BBOG's potential for networked gatekeeping and framing (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), the differential framing of the campaign in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Nigeria reveals the limits of social media's purported ability to redistribute power (Siapera, 2014). Twitter offers online activists a platform to shape public and policy agendas, but activists still need to grapple with ways to gain standing, attract positive coverage, and maintain their preferred framing (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993), especially when their campaigns garner global traction. This argument has some strategic implications.

One way online activists can accomplish this grappling is to think like journalists, applying principles such as news values. Also, emerging journalistic models such as community, development, solutions, civic, and engagement journalism present opportunities for activists to collaborate with journalists to exert greater control over how the news media frame their causes. Not by design, but born out of issue proximity and the fact that news media in the third world generally favor the development journalism ideal more than Western media systems do (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017), Nigeria more closely resembles the potential outcome of such collaboration: frames that resemble activists' preferred framing.

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