#haldaub: A Case Study on Twitter's Promotion of Critical Conversations

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Introduction

Several weeks ago, a certain man's name, in the form of a hashtag (#haldaub), reached the trending charts on Twitter. A sort of chain initiated this particularly interesting rhetorical situation on social media: the recent shootings of African Americans in the United States (particularly by law enforcement), responsive uprisings and protests across the nation, kneeling protests during the national anthem of both professional and college-level football games by players such as Colin Kaepernick and Michael Rose-Ivey, defense of the protesting by student-athletes such as Rose-Ivey, himself, and, ultimately, the widely-circulated comments (responding to the previous events) of University of Nebraska Regent, Hal Daub.

Background

The exigence of #haldaub and the strategic use of Hal Daub's name on Twitter lies within a much greater cultural context, that of the recent rise in racial tensions between blacks and whites within American society. Specifically, the hashtag and name usage symbolize a widespread reaction to Hal Daub—former war veteran and member of the House of Representatives, and Republican mayor of Omaha, Nebraska and Regent of University of Nebraska. More broadly, they work as part of a social response to the discussion of racism in America, as reflected by NFL—San Francisco 49ers—quarterback Colin Kaepernick, whose refusal to stand during the national anthem initiated a series of protests and statements to draw attention to the widening divide between races in America. Kaepernick and others started a mini-movement of kneeling during the national anthem before a pre-season game against the Green Bay Packers on August 26th. Three college players at the University of Nebraska—linebacker Michael Rose-Ivey, defensive end DaiShon Neal, and linebacker Mohamed Barry—joined Kaepernick in protesting at their own game on September 24th, against Northwestern University. On Tuesday, September 27th, Rose-Ivy spoke to press in defense of their participation in the protesting. Later that day, a local newspaper, the

Lincoln *Journal Star*, published Daub's response to Rose-Ivey's statement at the press conference. The Journal Star reports:

> Regent Hal Daub of Omaha, who served two years in Korea during the Vietnam War-era, and a former Omaha mayor, said that student-athletes at NU "are not supposed to do things that create disparagement or negative implications."
>
> "It's a free country," Daub told the Journal Star on Tuesday. "They don't have to play football for the university either.
>
> "They know better, and they had better be kicked off the team."
>
> Daub later denied saying that the players should be removed from the team in a phone call to the Journal Star, but he stood by his other comments on the players.
>
> "They won't take the risk to exhibit their free speech in a way that places their circumstance in jeopardy, so let them get out of uniform and do their protesting on somebody else's nickel," he said.
>
> "Those publicity seeking athletes ought to rethink the forum in which they chose to issue their personal views at the expense of everyone else."

The hashtag and unusual use of Hal Daub's name are part of a response to these comments by Daub, yet, according to the *Journal Star*, Nebraska governor Pete Ricketts also agrees the players were "disgraceful and disrespectful." According to the Omaha World-Herald, "When elected officials dip their toe in these waters, ripples start. Their criticisms quickly made national news. While Daub denied he told the Lincoln *Journal Star* the players should be kicked off the team, the quote, and Daub's subsequent denial of it, is out there, bouncing away on the Internet."

Case Analysis

Tweets circulate by two primary methods, retweeting and trending. Because #haldaub, used in several of these tweets, reached the top 20 trending topics on Twitter, this particular discourse circulated through both means. How exactly did #haldaub find a spot in Twitter's trending list? Twitter (the company) explains the feature of trending in their blog:

> Trends are automatically generated by an algorithm that attempts to identify topics that are being talked about more *right now* than they were previously. The Trends list is designed to help people discover the 'most breaking' breaking news from across the world, in real-time. The Trends list captures the hottest emerging topics, not just what's most popular. Topics break into

> the Trends list when the volume of Tweets about that topic at a given moment dramatically increases.

Regular viewing, liking, and retweeting of tweets does not add much power to the rhetoric of the discourse, unless the numbers of likes and retweets are significant (in this case, they are not.) However, the movement of topics from individual tweets to the trending list creates a new level of credibility for the discourse. They tend to become more popular—or at least more viewed and, consequentially, *more discussed*—by their obtaining a spot in the rankings. When a hashtag or topic hits the trending charts, Twitter seems to say, "look what *everyone* is talking about," and thereby encourage users to explore more on their own about the highlighted content.

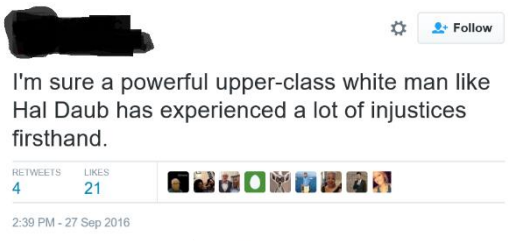
Many tweets seem to target Regent Daub himself, while others serve to entertain the general Twitter population, or perhaps even just the users with access to the tweets and retweets utilizing Hal Daub's name or the hashtag. Because #haldaub climbed to the top 20 list of trending hashtags in September (2016), the range of actual viewers reached further than just followers of the original tweeters, and even beyond followers of those who retweeted the original tweets; the actual audience also includes anyone who regularly monitors trending topics on Twitter—which, likely, does not include Daub himself, as only three accounts exist under his name, and the only one with actual content and without the word "fake" on the profile page has not tweeted or retweeted since 2009—and, specifically, anyone who clicked on and read the instances of its use when it reached the top 20 (or anyone who knows to type Hal Daub into Twitter's search bar). No evidence of Daub viewing or responding to the tweets exists on Twitter.

The tweets serve as representations of a broader reaction to the statements of Hal Daub, such as those reported on Omaha's own KETV: ESPN commentator Stephen A. Smith, for example, disagrees with Daub's comments proposing removal of the University of Nebraska protest participants from the football team, saying, "Hal Daub is the problem here and he needs to be dealt with." The conversation on Twitter, however, allows for reader interaction—through features like responding, retweeting, and liking—that is

unavailable in such news report contexts. The general atmosphere of this particular social media platform is also quite critical, and can even be sardonic, so content leaning more on the offensively sarcastic and judgmental side of acceptable socially commentary is neither unexpected nor unwelcomed on the site. Above all, most Twitter users recognize the site as a place to be 100% honest, without accounting for the feelings or opinions of others; this honesty tends to allow for more directly defamatory (and often subjective) material, such as in the tweets criticizing Daub.

The various users who tweeted using the hashtag "haldaub" or Hal Daub's name created the critical social media discourse. Though most of them destroyed their own credibility through various inclusions (or exclusions) of key information on their account, two did establish some measure of authority by stating their title/job position in their biographies. Several users include signs of their support of the University of Nebraska Huskers in their Twitter bios, which somewhat interferes with solid credibility for critiques against a suggestion to take players off the team. Many also include more explicitly non-credible content in either their usernames, profiles, or tweets. Yet still others seem to include more relevant biographical information, such as professional job titles, on their accounts to provide credibility for their opinions.

The intended effect of the rhetors (or tweeters) in the case of this hashtag and rhetorical name usage depends on each individual tweet. Some tweets, as the one pictured below, serve primarily to entertain readers; though, through their humor and sarcasm, they also encourage a discussion of the situation—and raised awareness is the first step towards activism and progressive and positivistic change. This tweet reading, "sometimes you have a good day and sometimes you're a Hal



Daub," seems to simply make light of the situation by poking fun at how intense the backlash towards Daub has been after his comments against the Nebraska players, but it also succeeds in starting a conversation about whether or not Daub actually deserves the treatment he is receiving (or, at least, the treatment Twitter users imply he deserves). Other instances of the hashtag and name use attempt to target Daub directly or to destroy the credibility of him and, therefore, his comments. One example of this type of tweet sarcastically states, "I'm sure a powerful upper-class white man like Hal Daub has experienced a lot of injustices firsthand," to emphasize the inappropriateness of Daub's opinion in light of the greater cultural context which motivated the protests in the first place. More impassioned tweets such as one telling Daub he is "an embarrassment to the University" and commanding him both to "resign today" and "fuck off" explicitly shame Daub and exemplify this idea of what being Hal Daub is like and how that identity might be a stark contrast to that identity of someone having a "good day." Both of the users who tweeted these messages included some form of affiliation to the Nebraska Huskers on their account biography and were likely intended for an audience of supporters of the team, its players and, accordingly, their actions (including, in theory, the participation in the protesting).

The population of these types of tweets, including responses to and mentions of them, compile a sort of emotionally-engaging critical mass, which has the potential to create a bandwagon effect amongst these tweeters' supportive and unsupportive viewers alike—some twitter participants who view the majority opinion (against Daub) might tend more to agree with that opinion, if for no other reason than they see these overly-subjective criticisms on their screen most often. (Of course, others might, instead, read the tweets with a pre-established opinion and, therefore be unaffected by the critical mass's influence.) So, even though the entertaining tweets successfully appeal to sympathetic audience

members' emotion through techniques like humor and fury, they also work to persuade them (even subconsciously) to agree with and join in the conversation (and critique) of Hal Daub's statements. Along with credibility and emotion, the tweets address reader identity—as in membership in communities such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and college sports fan-bases—and integrity—as in participation (or lack thereof) in conversations about justice in situations like this one involving Daub.

Conclusion

Since #haldaub and tweets using Hal Daub's name (in the context of his responses to the athletes) are no longer trending, the impact of the discourse has lessened. Perhaps the decline is because the reaction to the college protests has become less prevalent in relevant social media conversation, or perhaps it is simply a reflection of the speed with which social media—Twitter, especially—rapidly shifts from one hot topic to the next. The only way to find tweets on Hal Daub now, unless they are related to his political and occupational activities, is to use his name or #haldaub in the search feature of Twitter. Therefore, in light of other current events and, as in much other discourse originating on social media, the dialogue about Hal Daub's statements has become unimportant as anything other than an example. Social media tends to perpetuate critical conversation about current events through its exemplification of those events with specific situations about which certain populations of society are in disagreement—i.e., Daub's opinions about the punishment of the University of Nebraska football players who protested during the national anthem before a game. The hashtag "haldaub" and use of Hal Daub's name in tweets serves both to represent this critical conversation as well as to isolate an insubordinate player in a controversy *and blame* them for contributing to a greater societal issue, like racism.

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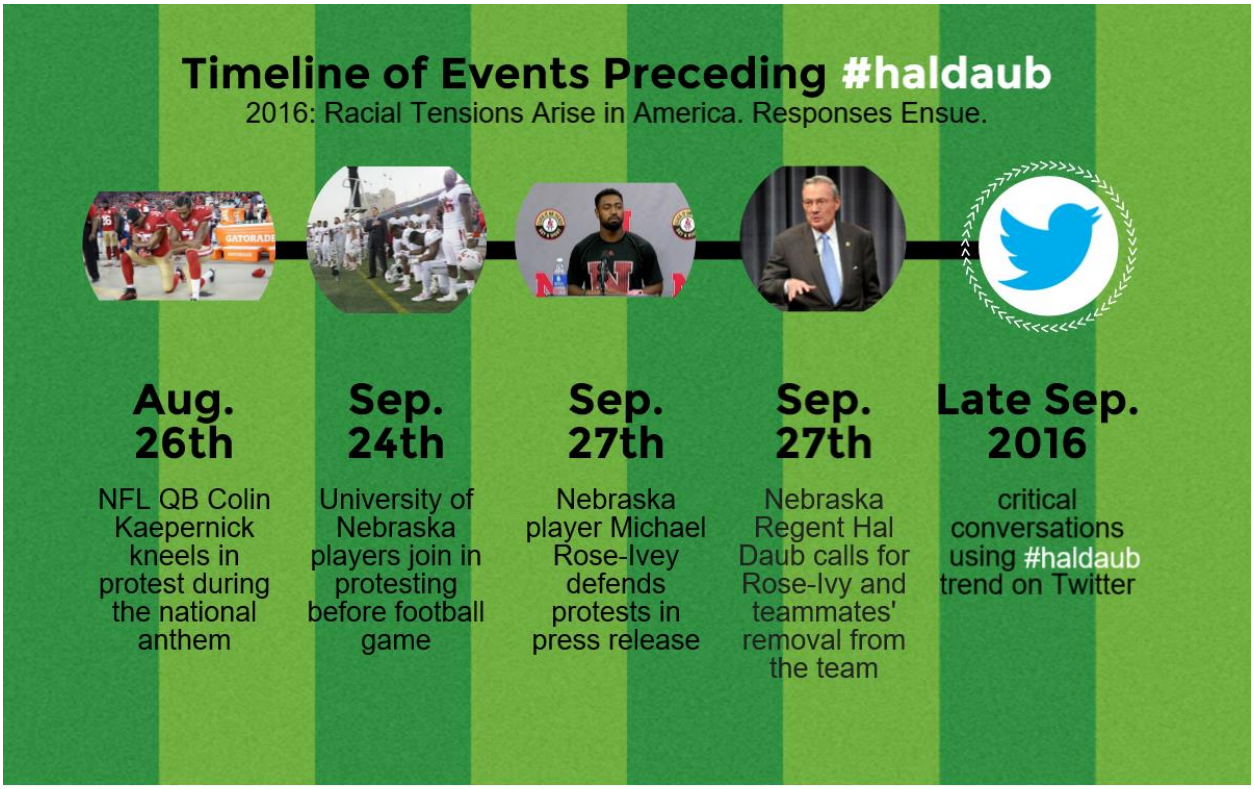

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