

# Rhetorical Space and the Virality of the Bring Back Our Girls Campaign

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**Abstract:** On April 14th, 2014, at about 11:35pm, 276 girls were abducted by the insurgent group Boko Haram from their boarding house in Government Girls College, Chibok in Northeast Nigeria. Nigerians, joined by the rest of the world, began to demand that the Nigerian government rescue the abducted girls. This agitation birthed the tagline Bring Back Our Girls. What started as a simple hashtag on Twitter would later become a global campaign tagged Bring Back Our Girls. Rhetorical spaces—virtual, material, and agential— have contributed to the escalation, amplification, and sustenance of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. In this paper, I argue that social campaigns connect disparate spaces, virtual, material, and agential to propel, amplify and sustain conversations about their causes. This paper looks at the different spaces that added and continue to add agency to the Bring Back Our Girls movement. I conceptualize rhetorical space by drawing upon divergent views from rhetorical scholars and social scientists. To answer the research question—how did rhetorical spaces lend credence to the virality and sustenance of the Bring Back Our Girls movement? — the paper looks at Twitter, the media, public personalities and groups, and offline demonstrations as virtual, material, and agential spaces. This paper concludes that the 'spaces' examined gave credence to the virality of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign by using platforms, positions, and features as social capital to influence the conversation about the campaign. Twitter has been the most fundamental agential and virtual space in the virality and sustenance of the campaign.

**Keywords:** social campaigns, rhetorical space, virality, social media, Bring Back Our Girls, rhetoric

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## 1. Introduction

The Bring Back Our Girls campaign started as an agitation by individuals through the Nigerian local media. They demanded that the incumbent Nigerian government ensure the return of about 300 girls abducted by Boko Haram—an insurgent group—from Government Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State, North East Nigeria. The movement, however, did not have a tag until the #BringBackOurGirls went live on Twitter about ten days following the abduction. A lot of media reports confirming through Twitter analytics have credited the first ever use of #BringBackOurGirls on Twitter to a Nigerian corporate lawyer, Ibrahim Abdullahi. His tweet reads “Yes #BringBackOurDaughters#BringBackOurGirls declared by @obyezeks and all people at Port Harcourt World Book Capital 2014”. NBC (2014) reported this tweet to have been inspired by Obiageli Ezekwesili, a former vice president of the World Bank for the Africa region and lead convener of the movement. Abdullahi is also reported to have credited the phrase “Bring Back Our Girls” to Ezekwesili, following her use of it during a TV appearance. From that moment, several international groups, personalities and media began to refer to the movement as Bring Back Our Girls. Ofori-Parku and Moscato (2018), in alignment with these claims, mention that, “In the early days of the kidnapping, the story received sparse coverage in mainstream media outside Nigeria. However, the #BBOG [Bring Back Our Girls] hashtag—started by Nigerian nationals to spur their government to take greater action—gained extraordinary support across the globe”.

The turnout of the Bring Back Our Girls movement, although notable, is not novel. Authenticating the power of online platforms, Fabrega and Sajura (2014), in their article on emergence of political discourse on digital network, using the Occupy Movement as a case, situates the call to occupy Wall Street by the Canadian online magazine *Adbusters* on September 16, 2011, as one of the provenances of the Occupy movement, stating that, “within days, hundreds of public spaces were occupied around the US, and in the other countries around the world” .

It has been eight years since the abduction of the Chibok School girls, yet unlike many other social campaigns in the past, the Bring Back Our Girls movement is yet to fade off completely, although evidently not as loud as in the early days. While the return of the Chibok school girls is a cause the movement continues to pursue, advocacy for security and other related issues have now been adopted.

In this paper, I argue that social campaigns connect disparate spaces, virtual, material and agential, to propel, amplify and sustain conversations about their causes. In this regard, I will be looking at the different “spaces”—

virtual, material and agential—that add(s) agency to the Bring Back Our Girls movement. First, as context, I discuss the Chibok school girls' abduction. To situate my argument, I then conceptualize the rhetorical space, drawing upon divergent views from rhetoricians and social scientists. To answer the research question— how did rhetorical spaces lend credence to the virality and sustenance of the Bring Back Our Girls movement? — the paper looks at Twitter, the media, public personalities and groups, and offline demonstrations as virtual, material and “agential spaces.

## 2. Context: The Chibok School Girls Abduction

On the night of April 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> at about 11:35pm, 276 girls were abducted by insurgent group Boko Haram from their boarding house in Government Girls College, Chibok in North East Nigeria. 57 of the schoolgirls were able to escape while Boko Haram carted away 219 of them (bbc.com 2017). Before the abduction, Saa (not real name)—one of the girls who later escaped—while speaking at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy 2015, mentions that, “they [Boko Haram], went into where the food are kept and they load all the food on the big truck... they didn't allow us to take anything out of the school and they started burning everything, our clothes, our books, everything” (UN Watch, 2015).

Boko Haram released a video about a month following the abduction, showing that the girls were in their custody. They threatened the Nigerian government, saying if members of the Boko Haram group who were in the government's custody, were not released, they (Boko Haram) will equally not let go of the girls (New York Times, 2014) and that the girls will be sold as slave brides (Jibril, 2017). Boko Haram had been operating in northeast Nigeria for several years before the attack on the Chibok schoolgirls. They had before been accused of and taken responsibility for various suicide bombings, massacres, mass bombings that had happened in various northern states of the country. Abimbola (2010) on the motive of Boko Haram, explains that,

*it seems that the group might not have explicitly given the name “Boko Haram” to itself; rather the name could come from the external view of its basic beliefs: “Boko Haram” is derived from a combination of the Hausa word Boko meaning “book” and the Arabic word haram which is something forbidden, ungodly or sinful. Literally, it means “book is sinful”, but its deeper meaning is that Western education is sinful, sacrilegious or ungodly and should therefore be forbidden. Characteristically, the sect not only opposed but outrightly rejected Western education, Western culture and modern science. Alternatively, it embraced and advocated the propagation of and strict adherence to Islam by all and sundry regardless of anyone's personal wishes.*

The abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls undeniably marked a turn in the conversations around the activities of Boko Haram. It instigated a different level of agitation which started from the Bring Back Our Girls campaign in the first week of the girls' captivity, from a national level and then brought up to the international and global institutional glare.

## 3. Social movement and/or social campaign

I use social movements and social campaigns interchangeably in this paper because the Bring Back Our Girls Movement can be characterized to have elements of both constructs. Scholars in the fields of sociology, political science, communication and the social sciences in general, have been concerned about the construct, social movements. According to Adelaku et. al (2015), citing Berjemo and Bekui (1993), sees “social mobilization campaigns” as mostly being “used to mobilize needful local, national and international available resources around a proposed social action in correcting social injustice”. Similarly, Rohlinger (2017) identifies five characteristics of social movement (present in Berjemo and Bekui's definition), as desire to affect social change, use of extra-institutional means to affect change, temporal continuity, organization and collective identity (t. 04:29). In Adelaku et. al's (2015) opinion, social campaigns differ from mass movements and/or social mobilization. He opines that the latter is usually carried out impulsively while social campaigns are usually “intentional focused action structured to solicit attitudinal or behavioral changes, or both in a society”. In contrast to Adelaku's definition, Martin (2015), citing Blumer, believes that social movements are first “typically amorphous and poorly organized, after which they develop a culture and social organization”.

The question then is, are social movements intentional and focused or amorphous and poorly organized? Smiths and Blumer's categorization of social movements appear as attempts to answer this question posed by the definitions of social movement. Smith (2015) citing Barker et. al, distinguishes “old” and “new” social movements, stating that old social movements were more concerned with established issues such as economic,

legal and human rights issues and they were typically hierarchical in nature, while new social movements are more akin towards identity and lifestyle-oriented issues and are usually more geographically distributed, can be transnational in nature, fluid and communication-driven.

In Blumer's theory of social movements, he identifies three kinds of social movements: (i) general social movement; (ii) specific social movements; and (iii) expressive social movements. General social movement is defined in similar parlance to the "old" social movement by Barker: "general movement operates over a wide range of areas of society and have vague aims, such as women's movement's general aim to emancipate women". However, Blumer believes that "general social movements lack organization, an established leadership, and a recognized membership," while Smith describes "old" social movements as hierarchical in nature. Specific social movements are believed by Blumer to be well structured, with definite goals, collective identity, clear membership and leadership. On the other hand, expressive social movements are "expressive forms of collective behavior that can have profound effects upon individuals and the social order"—examples are religious and fashion movements.

#### 4. Rhetorical space

In this paper, I argue that space can be virtual and material but not merely geographical. Typical definition of space accommodates its geographical perspective only, which is mostly applicable to social scientists and highly contested by rhetoricians. Mountford (2001) defines rhetorical space as "the geography of a communicative event, and like all landscapes, may include both the cultural and material arrangement, whether intended or fortuitous,". Merriam Webster dictionary defines geography as "a science that deals with the description, distribution, and interaction of the diverse physical, biological, and cultural features of the earth's surface." This implies that Mountford's definition of space refers primarily to 'tangible' or 'material' elements. On the contrary, McGaughery-Summers (2013) argues that "space is beyond the 'geography of a communicative event.'"

Space is not simply a context where communicative acts take place; instead, *a space is an agential that creates or influences the content and reception of rhetorical acts* (emphasis mine). Barnett (2012) in agreement, argues that space is not just an inert thing in the world, but is "something that surrounds and grounds human existence or that does not hold sway in the production of political, social, and rhetorical relations", rather, critical spatial theory suggests an alternative look at space—appreciated by rhetoric and composition scholars—defining space as being "deeply implicated in the material conditions of a given time and place, and as such constitutes less a fixed, neutral, or transhistorical idea and more a dynamic, ongoing process or relations involving people, discourses, objects, ideologies, histories, and the built and natural environments that together help establish the conditions of lived experience in the world".

McGaughery-Summers and Barnett's argument forms the theoretical framework with which this paper examines space as not only virtual and material but equally as *agential, which creates or influences the content and reception of rhetorical acts*. In this regard, the artifacts studied are divided into Twitter and media platforms as "virtual" spaces, public personalities and groups as agential spaces, and offline demonstrations such as arts, venue of protest and sit-outs as "geographic" spaces.

#### 5. Analysis

##### 5.1 Twitter and the Bring Back Our Girls Campaign

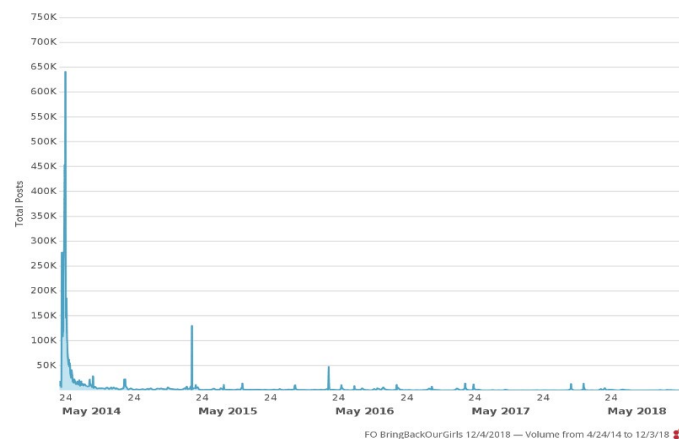
Until 2017, Twitter, a microblogging site allowed for posts not longer than 140 characters and "interactions can take the form of a mention (when a user writes another username in their messages), a retweet (when a tweet from another user is replicated verbatim, usually with a "RT" at the beginning of it), or a "via" (when a user quotes the message from another user" Fábrega and Sajuria (2014). Hashtags also allow for users to follow up on conversations making it possible to see what other users (beyond a user's network) are saying about a specific issue. Saxton et. al (2015) citing Bruns and Burgess conceptualize hashtags as "short words or phrases that follow the hash or pound sign (#)" and "they are used on social media platforms to brand advocacy movements, archive messages for the movement, and allow those not personally connected to a user to see and comment on messages that use the hashtag".

Mehtra and Gretter (2016) in their conference paper on Hashtag Activism and Gender Advocacy, identify social media as a tool that has made *virtual space* for "the exchange of ideas, perspectives and debates on social

matters of critical importance to people. Similarly, in their recent study, *protests in the information age*, Melgaco and Monaghan (2018) opine that “social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have increasingly played a central role in facilitating and mobilizing social movements throughout different parts of the world. (p. iii). In validation of this, Fábrega and Sajuria (2014), citing Boyd et al, (2010) assert that “the advent of new technologies, particularly Twitter, allows for a new type of conversation between the members of the movements, mainstream media, and the general public. They further argue that “because Twitter’s structure disperses conversation throughout a network of interconnected actors rather than constraining conversations within bounded [spaces] groups, many people may talk about a particular topic at once, such that others have a sense of being surrounded by a conversation, despite perhaps not being an active contributor”.

Twitter as a space was instrumental to the virality of the Bring Back Our Girls movement. At the time the campaign broke out on Twitter, it silenced hashtags associated with other conversations across the world. Ofori-Parku and Moscato (2018) mentions this about the campaign, “#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” .

The data generated below is from the #BringBackOurGirls campaign on Twitter between the period when the hashtag was first used online to the day this portion of the paper was written— April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014, to December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018. Crimson Hexagon and hashtagify.me are the social listening tools that enabled these analyzes to be carried out.



**Figure 1:** Twitter mentions of the #BringBackOurGirls, #BBOG and the phrase Bring Back Our Girls

From the first time the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls was used on Twitter on April 23, 2014 to December 3, 2018, there has been a total of 7,771,358 posts and 2.6 billion impressions about the Bring Back Our Girls campaign using the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, #BBOG and/or Bring Back Our Girls in their tweets. While posts refer to published images, texts, GIFS and videos on Twitter, impressions are the total number of times a post is displayed on other people’s Twitter timeline irrespective of the level of engagement with it. In the first year of the campaign, that is April 2014 to April 2015, a total of 6,420,434 mentions of related tweets to the campaign were discovered. The results however plummeted in subsequent years as there were 652,052 tweets by the end of the second year of the campaign in 2016. There were 419,448 posts in the third year—2017 and 204,955 by the end of the fourth year of the campaign in 2018 while the first six months of the fifth year recorded a total of 204,051 tweets.



**Figure 2:** Geographical spread of people tweeting about #BringBackOurGirls, #BBOG and the phrase Bring Back Our Girls

Data obtained from Twitter, through Crimson Hexagon, reveals that tweets about the Bring Back Our Campaign came from 191 countries of the world. According to sciencetrends.com (2017), there are 195 countries in the world. This implies that 98% of the countries of the world had representation in the Bring Back Our Girls conversation on Twitter. While the provenance country, Nigeria had 60,352 posts with about half of this, it is followed by the United States with 30,248 posts. The top 20 countries with participation in the Bring Back Our Girls campaign in order are- Nigeria, USA, India, UK, South Africa, Switzerland, Spain, France, Canada, Indonesia, Republic of Serbia, Italy, New Zealand, Germany, Kenya, Australia, Brazil, Japan, Netherlands and Ghana. Of the first 20 countries, only three are African countries –the continent where Nigeria is –except for the primarily affected country, Nigeria. Several factors like Internet access, Africans living in diaspora, US position as “the economic power of the world”, UK as the former colonial master of Nigeria amongst others may have contributed to the skew of participation in the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. This is beyond the scope of this paper.

## 5.2 The media

The media is often referred to as the fourth estate of the realm as a result of its role in providing access to information and expression of public interest (Amodu, et al, 2014). Amodu et. al, itemize information, socialization, motivation, education, debate and discussion, cultural promotion and entertainment as the fundamental roles of the media in the Nigerian society. Amodu et. al (2014) opines that the media was pivotal in the reception of the Bring Back Our Girls movement, stating that, “the issue [the Chibok schoolgirls abduction] had wide condemnation and protests both within and outside Nigeria, presumably because the media had set the agenda”.

According to Jibril (2017), the way the media frames news, determines to a great extent how the public receives the news and what decision they make about it. He argues further that “the process of framing is increasingly becoming pivotal to social movements in the age of the Internet and that media coverage affects how protests are represented to the public and equally may limit protesters’ ability to represent their own messages”.

In Jibril’s study of how online newspapers in Nigeria framed the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, he put forward six media frames on social movements: the Protest frame, the Ineptitude frame, the Abduction frame, Violence frame, the Prognostic frame and Marginalization frame. He concludes that the newspapers favored the campaigners in their report on the Bring Back Our Girls campaign and thus concludes that the media is socially responsible in making the government accountable.

As seen from Jibril’s analysis, the Nigerian media –online newspapers in this case, occupied an agential spatial role that influenced the framing and agenda setting of the Bring Back our Girls campaign. To better analyze this, selected posts about the Bring Back Our Girls movement on media platforms are examined.

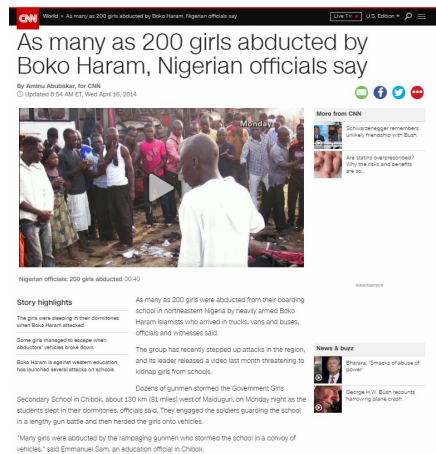


Figure 3: CNN's report on the Chibok schoolgirls abduction

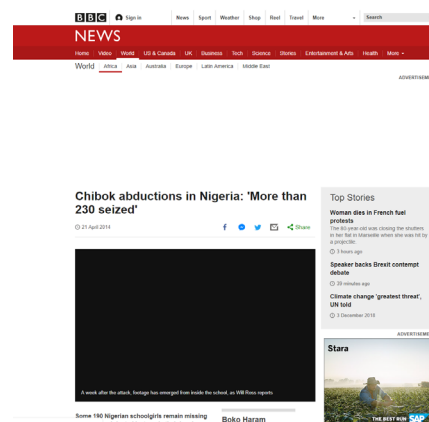


Figure 4: BBC's report on Chibok schoolgirls abduction

Two of the prominent media outlets in the US and the UK were at the forefront of reportage about the Chibok schoolgirls abduction and the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. One of the tools used for analysis in this paper, hashtagify.me, reveals that CNN and BBC are two of the top 30 influential Twitter profiles that participated in the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. While there are discrepancies in the figures released on the number of girls that were abducted, it appears that both local and international news media outlets in the early days of the abduction gave prominence to the abduction over the campaign that ensued almost immediately afterwards.

### 5.3 Prominent personalities and groups

In his analysis of the semantic network of the abduction campaign online, Smith (2015), identifies “many disconnected” users and “small interconnected” clusters and “isolate” tweeting about #BringBackOurGirls. “Charlie Hebdo”, “Malala,” “Amnesty” and “UN Women” were the main influencers of the campaign and the conversation included different geographic communities and communities of interest. Smith on interviewing participants about “the place of emotion in #BringBackOurGirls” reports that one of the participants was greatly offended that American celebrities only joined the Twitter activism of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign and did nothing more to support or influence but merely dropped the topic when it was “no longer fashionable”. Another interviewee, B. Ibrahim accuses the then First Lady of the US, Michelle Obama, for doing nothing but using the hashtag and “is now in the White House sleeping”.

Smith argues that the advent of mobile technology makes issues transcend traditional borders, “jumping from regional to transnational instantaneously on Twitter” which makes it easy for people to respond, retweet and ultimately make the hashtag go viral. He added that the Chibok schoolgirls abduction was perceived as an issue of international threat and since terrorism has been a global issue for a while, then the Bring Back Our Girls campaign was relatable to individuals and government worldwide.

The place of public personalities and groups in the semantic network of conversations on #BringBackOurGirls was established by Smith. Considering this, the paper will look at selected tweets, posts and images of top



influencers from the list of all-time influencers as revealed through using the Crimson Hexagon tool in order to analyze how they used their positions to forward the conversations on #BringBackOurGirls and how these positions serve as rhetorical space for the campaign to thrive.

#### Public Personalities



**Figure 5:** Malala



**Figure 6:** Michelle Obama



**Figure 7:** Ellen DeGeneres

Figure 5 shows Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girls' education advocate who at the time of the Bring Back Our Girls movement was rising into prominence. She had survived an assassination attempt by terrorist group –the Taliban in Pakistan her home country in 2012. Malala is passionate about girls' education and at the age of 11, she started writing for BBC about life as a girl in Pakistan, a country that denied girls of western education. In December of the year 2014, she became the youngest person to ever receive a Nobel Peace prize.

Figure 6 shows the then First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, lending her voice to the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. The United States is one of the strongest countries of the world and Obamas were the first blacks to occupy the highest office in the US. Michelle Obama's tweet according to data from Crimson Hexagon is the most retweeted tweet of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. This tweet was pinned to her Twitter timeline. Although this tweet received several backlashes from various political spheres in the US and across the world, it was undeniably instrumental to the virality of the hashtag and the Bring Back Our Girls campaign in general.

Figure 7 shows Ellen DeGeneres, a popular comedian and foremost LGBT activist. Ellen has a long career in the American entertainment industry and is also known as one of the first public figures to "come out" on her sexuality.



**Figure 8:** US lawmakers

Figure 8 is Rep. Frederica Wilson, a democratic politician and member of the House of Representative in the United States. Her account @RepWilson on Twitter, is one of the recent most influential accounts still tweeting about the abduction of Chibok schoolgirls. As observed, the prevailing message about the Chibok girls on Rep Wilson's Twitter page is to reemphasize that she and her colleagues in the US House of Representative still remember the Chibok girls and thus will continue to demand for their return



Figure 9: Prominent groups based in Nigeria



Figure 10: Prominent groups based in Nigeria

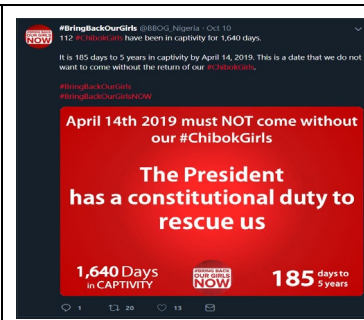


Figure 11: Prominent groups based in Nigeria

Figures 9, 10 and 11 are from prominent groups based in Nigeria still advocating for the return and rescue of the Chibok girls on Twitter. Figure 11 is the official Twitter handle of the Bring Back Our Girls while 9 and 10 is associated with non-governmental organizations advocating for child rights and government accountability respectively. While several non-governmental organizations joined the campaign at its inception, some others later joined to sustain the conversation on the Bring Back Our Girls campaign.



Figure 12: Intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies



Figure 13: Intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies

Figures 12 and 13 are intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies respectively that are saddled with the responsibility of protecting human lives and rights across nations of the world. Amnesty International not surprisingly continues to be at the forefront of international agencies demanding the release of the Chibok girls even several years after the abduction.

## 5.4 Offline demonstrations

At this point, the paper takes a new trajectory, to examine how geographic space was employed for the virality of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. This is in congruence with Mountford's (2001) definition of space as the geography of a "communicative event". Since the inception of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, conveners and supporters of the movement have organized several protests, sit-outs as well as artistic expressions, to communicate the demands of the campaign.

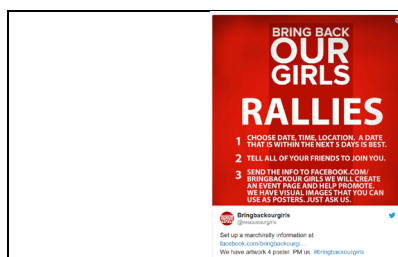


Figure 14: call and response to action



Figure 15: call and response to action



The figures above, 14 and 15 represent the call and response to action at the initial stage of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. While figure 14 shows how conveners used Twitter to call for protests across the world, figure 15 shows what could have been a possible response to the call in a different continent that is about 7,000 miles away in air travel.



Figure 16: Itinerary of the sit-outs in specific locations



Figure 17: Itinerary of the sit-outs in specific locations

Figures 16 and 17 show the itinerary of the sit-outs in specific locations of the country, which keeps the conversation about the campaign going. The sit-outs currently take place in the state capital and the most populated and economically viable states in the country.

## 6. In conclusion

The Bring Back Our Girls movement is still on. It is yet to end. Even though some of the abducted girls were returned by Boko Haram, the agitation for the remaining girls is still ongoing. The movement has included concerns for other girls kidnapped after the Chibok girls as well as security concerns in Nigeria.

In answering the research question, did rhetorical spaces lend credence to the virality and sustenance of the Bring Back Our Girls movement? The paper looked at Twitter, the media, personalities and groups and offline demonstrations. The Bring Back Our Girls campaign recognizably started on Twitter with the #BringBackOurGirls. The national and international media, public personalities and groups then latched onto the campaign.

While public personalities and the media influenced the spread of the campaign in its early stage, they cannot be credited for the sustenance of the movement. Several public personalities tweeted about the movement just once and never followed up on the conversation on Twitter anymore. Offline demonstrations like the daily sit-outs have been limited in geographical areas to Nigeria alone. However, Twitter as a virtual space has been fundamental to the start and sustenance of the campaign. Twitter has served as a hub for the media to know about the dealings of the campaign group. Also, for the media to disseminate information gathered about the activities of the campaigners as well lend their voice to the conversation. Twitter continues to serve as the notification platform for offline demonstrations and calls to offline actions.

All spaces examined in this paper gave credence to the virality of the BringBackOurGirls campaign by using their voice and positions as social capital to influence the conversation on the campaign. In conclusion, of the different 'spaces' looked at in this paper, Twitter has been most fundamental in the virality and sustenance of the campaign.

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