

CHAPTER 1

HASHTAG ACTIVISM: THE PROMISE AND RISK OF “ATTENTION”

Caroline Dadas

Montclair State University

On May 24, 2014, the hashtag #yesallwomen emerged on Twitter in response to a killing spree in Isla Vista, California. The gunman left behind a video, widely circulated on social media, in which he claimed that his hatred of women spurred his rampage. The day after the killing spree, people took to Twitter to engage in what has come to be known as hashtag activism: the attempt to use Twitter’s hashtags to incite social change. Through its rapid circulation, the resulting hashtag #yesallwomen sought to call attention to the misogynist roots of the Isla Vista tragedy, emphasizing that yes, all women suffer from a culture that rewards men’s aggressive behavior toward them. By using the hashtag, Twitter users enacted a desire to redirect media coverage toward the systemic misogyny that allegedly inspired this rampage.

#Yesallwomen stands as only one example within a broader movement to use hashtags for directing attention to social and political causes. Beginning with the Occupy Wall Street movement (during which “hashtag activism” came into popular use), hashtags such as #kony2012, #justicefortrayvon, #bringbackourgirls, and #notyourasiansidekick have sought to bring attention to race, class, and gender-based injustices, often garnering mainstream media coverage. Regardless, critics have charged that simply bringing attention to a cause remains a vague and ineffective political goal; as David Carr (2012) put it, “Another week, another hashtag, and with it, a question about what is actually being accomplished.” In the case of the #kony2012 campaign, for example, concerns arose about outsider Americans presuming that they know how to best address events in another country. In response, this chapter focuses on attention as the motivating force behind several instances of hashtag activism. I have limited my scope to Twitter because the hashtags that I discuss originated on that platform. While other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have hashtag capabilities, Twitter is the source of the particular hashtags that I examine.

Using Sara Ahmed's (2006) work on orientation toward objects, I position hashtag activism as an effort that simultaneously draws attention to a cause and obscures important facets of the cause such as historical background or socio-political context. I am deviating from Ahmed's application by using this framework to study non-objects (e.g., socio-political environments, constructions of gender); doing so, I believe, highlights the flexibility of Ahmed's insight that attention inevitably also implies concealment. While #bringbackourgirls and #kony2012, in particular, have been credited with bringing media and governmental attention to injustices that had been largely ignored, these same instances of hashtag activism exemplify how "some things are relegated to the background in order to sustain a certain direction; in other words, in order to keep attention on what is faced" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 31). The "things relegated to the background" in these cases include the complex socio-political environments in Nigeria and Uganda, respectively, of which many hashtag users had only a cursory knowledge. While little debate emerged about whether the kidnapped girls in Nigeria should be returned home or that guerilla leader Joseph Kony should be brought to justice for war crimes, critics have argued that hashtags in general tend to oversimplify the contexts of the injustices they describe (Gay, 2013; Goldberg, 2014; Murphy, 2013). In short, the complex politics, histories, and economics that led to these injustices cannot be reduced to a hashtag. In this chapter, I employ Ahmed's concept of attention as a framework for considering the repercussions of backgrounding important context when we use hashtags to bring publicity to a social cause. I then provide an overview of Twitter as a network that enables both broad and fast circulation among actors. After analyzing the cultural and political contexts surrounding both #bringbackourgirls and #yesallwomen, I offer suggestions for engaging in hashtag activism in ways that take advantage of the affordances of Twitter while also negotiating the constraints of this approach to activism. Ultimately, I argue that those engaging in hashtag activism need an understanding of the political and historical context of the issue(s) they are describing; an awareness of how rhetorical velocity and remix might affect their tweets; and a willingness to include links to reputable news stories in their tweets, in addition to other factors.

TWITTER AS A NETWORKED, CIRCULATORY PLATFORM

During the past few years, scholars have interrogated the purposes for which people have used Twitter. Recent scholarly texts have explored Twitter as a method for circulating information during a disaster (Bowdon, 2014; Potts, 2013), as a way for companies to market their services (Ferro & Zachry, 2014), as a space for community building (Wolff, 2015), and as a site of activist gestures (Dix-

on, 2014; Loken, 2014; Loza, 2014). Twitter users represented in this literature range from Toni Ferro and Mark Zachry (2014), who detailed how companies utilize the platform in their marketing campaigns, to William Wolff (2015), who catalogued an in-depth corpus of Bruce Springsteen fans' Twitter activity related to a particular concert. More central to the focus of this chapter, Kitsy Dixon (2014), Meredith Loken (2014), and Susana Loza (2014) all identified the uses of hashtags (particularly #bringbackourgirls and #solidarityisforwhite-women) for activist purposes to alert Twitter users to instances of misogyny and racism. This chapter builds on this foundational scholarship regarding hashtag activism while also drawing on frameworks established by rhetoric and composition scholars such as Liza Potts (2013), who detailed how Twitter served as a critical platform for communicating in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. In her study of social media and disasters, Potts offered four stages of how social media participants create knowledge: problematization, interestment, enrollment, and mobilization. The first two terms refer to the lead actors' defining of the event and their efforts at encouraging more participants to accept their definition(s) via consistent hashtags (or "immutable mobiles"). The network becomes further stabilized during enrollment, when actors accept the definition of the space by contributing additional content, and finally through mobilization, when knowledge is effectively and efficiently disseminated. Potts' study offers a useful framework for understanding the rapid circulation of knowledge on social networks—particularly in critical moments such as disasters, when accuracy is paramount. Potts' study only references hashtags as organizational devices, however; she cites examples such as #mumbai, #eqnz (for the 2011 New Zealand earthquake) and #Japan (for the 2011 tsunami) to illustrate the capacity of Twitter to efficiently catalogue information. Aside from using hashtags as organizational devices, Twitter users may also harness them to advocate for causes. While Potts' framework proves useful in describing how a particular hashtag becomes stable, we in writing studies and technical communication need to further account for the particularities of hashtag use as an activist gesture (see also Kara Poe Alexander and Leslie Hahner's chapter in this collection).

The capacity for a hashtag's broad reach stems from the way Twitter is structured. In their work on networks, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012) have articulated how our personal networks—the direct and indirect relationships we maintain via social media—organize how we engage with information. Their description of how information circulates on Twitter emphasized the speed and ease with which people can advocate for a cause:

The many bridges between Twitter clusters means that chains

of information from one Twitter follower to a follower of that follower and so on encompass about 83 percent of all Twitter users within five steps of interconnection. On average, about half of the people on Twitter are only four links away from each other. Of course, not all followers retweet each message—or even look at them—but the news spreads quickly. While messages usually get read and retweeted by those who speak the same language, they cross substantial distances, a mean of about 1,540 kilometers (955 miles). (p. 55)

In particular, the notion that “83 percent of all Twitter users [are] within five steps of interconnection” illustrates how a topic can reach a broad audience, considering the potential for retweets. The speed at which a concept (such as a hashtag) can circulate among various audiences eclipses face-to-face networks that require more time and personal connection between actors. Today’s social media networks are more dispersed, fluid, and informal, thereby generating great potential for a message to circulate broadly, thereby finding a sizable audience.

While the connection between actors represents one aspect of networked communication, the movement of information between those actors remains equally important. David Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony Michel (2012) have emphasized the importance of circulation in public rhetoric, arguing that composers must give issues of circulation equal consideration as other rhetorical features. In fact, they equate an understanding of circulation with success as a rhetor:

Our contention is that *all* successful public rhetoric is successful only if it effectively negotiates the material-cultural challenges of circulation . . . composers’ decisions *anticipate* future considerations of distribution. Processes of circulation inform both the material and the symbolic considerations of composing. The moment of circulation inhabits the moment of composition. (pp. 63-64)

In order for a hashtag to gain traction on Twitter, composers must consider an issue such as brevity; the hashtag must be short enough so that future participants will have plenty of space to add their own messages within the 140-character limit (p. 85). Conversely, failure to consider how the hashtag might be employed in future use could hamper its circulation. In his study of tweets about President Obama’s healthcare reform, John Jones (2014) detailed how using multiple hashtags in a tweet allows users to connect multiple networks, also called “switching.” Doing so illustrates the power of placing various networks

into contact with each other. An understanding of how networks function via hashtags, how tweets might be recontextualized by others, and how a writer must be able to utilize brevity to her advantage are all tactics that savvy Twitter users must learn to implement.

Twitter remains unique in its emphasis on concision, thereby increasing the circulatory potential of its messages (tweets). In addition to the brevity of tweets, the retweet function also encourages the rapid spread of information. In this sense, Twitter appears well designed for the project of garnering attention to a cause. The retweet function illustrates Jim Ridolfo and Danielle DeVoss' (2009) concept of rhetorical velocity, which they described as "the strategic theorizing for how a text might be recomposed (and why it might be recomposed) by third parties, and how this recomposing may be useful or not to the short- or long-term rhetorical objectives of the rhetorician." Retweeting allows for another party to repurpose the original tweet, including additional information or altering its context; users may also simply retweet a message in its original form without altering it in any way. As Liza Potts and Dave Jones (2011) have argued, the retweeting function holds considerable value because it allows writers to spread their message beyond their immediate network:

Retweeting can mean that some participants might see the same message multiple times if they are following both the tweet's originator and the person retweeting. It also means that the message may reach other participants who do not follow the tweet's originator. (p. 343)

By retweeting a message, a Twitter user can spur a tweet's velocity by circulating it beyond the author's visible network (people s/he is following or is followed by). In this sense, the rhetorical velocity of a tweet can ensure broad readership in a short amount of time. The ability to embed short URLs enables Twitter users to encourage their followers to read further about the context of a hashtag or brief argument—all while staying within the constraints and generic expectations of the platform. Knowing when and how to include articles about a topic constitutes a kind of social media literacy that helps protect against uninformed tweeting.

The two hashtags that I focus on in this chapter, #bringbackourgirls and #yesallwomen, both illustrate how a keen understanding of social media's functionality can yield thousands of participants in a short period of time. I chose these two hashtags not only because of the high number of times they have been used on Twitter, but also because they both gained mainstream media attention (which speaks to gaining attention for a cause). While I touch on the hashtags' effectiveness—whether they accomplished their stated goals—I primarily focus

on how their broad circulation brought attention to particular aspects of the respective issues they represented. I also trace some of the unintended results of such attention, in addition to the important contextual elements that became backgrounded as these hashtags logged thousands of tweets.

#BRINGBACKOURGIRLS: A WORTHY AND OVERSIMPLIFIED CAUSE

One of the more compelling examples of using a hashtag for activist purposes, #bringbackourgirls emerged in response to the April 14, 2014, abduction of 276 girls from a school in Nigeria. The perpetrators, a militant group named Boko Haram, object to the education of women, their name literally meaning “Western education is a sin” in the Hausa language. In July 2014, 63 of the girls escaped captivity; the rest have never been heard from again. In the immediate aftermath of the abduction, few outlets in the mainstream media even mentioned the tragedy. In early May 2014, *Salon’s* Mary Elizabeth Williams publicly wondered, “Why is the media ignoring 200 missing girls?” (as cited in Taylor, 2014). On April 25, 2014, Ramaa Mosley, a film director in Los Angeles, first tweeted the hashtag #bringbackourgirls to bring attention to the event (Dixon, 2014). By April 30, 200,000 tweets per day contained this hashtag (Taylor, 2014).



Figure 1.1. Pope Francis participates in #bringbackourgirls.

Because the hashtag sought to publicize the girls’ abduction, the effort reached beyond Twitter to other social media platforms such as Facebook, where people could be seen holding a sign with the hashtag written on it. Mainstream media coverage soon followed—some focusing on the abduction itself and others on the resulting social media phenomenon. In his May 6, 2014, *Washington Post* article, Adam Taylor bemoaned the incident’s initial lack of media attention. He then explained,

In the past few days, however, the situation appears to be different. Not only is the story a major news item, but, on

Tuesday, the United States pledged to send a team, including military personnel, intelligence and hostage negotiators, to help find the girls. So what changed? Although there are no doubt many other factors in the visibility of the Nigerian girls' story, one factor does stand out: the remarkable rise of #BringBackOurGirls.

As Taylor indicated, the United States soon offered military assistance to Nigeria to aid in the recovery of the schoolgirls. What remains unclear is whether the #bringbackourgirls publicity contributed to the government's decision. The "you" implied in the declarative sentence #bringbackourgirls could include both the United States and the Nigerian governments. According to *Time*, Nigerian President Jonathan "waited two weeks before speaking publicly about the attack. He also rebuffed immediate offers of help from the U.S. and U.K." (Walt, 2014). Indeed, many people who participated in the hashtag appeared motivated by the hope that they might shame government officials into taking more decisive actions toward a rescue. Regardless of whether the hashtag inspired them to search more aggressively for the schoolgirls, it was likely that Nigerian government officials at some point learned of the hashtag and of its participants' collective outrage.

From the perspective of effective circulation, the #bringbackourgirls hashtag achieved a stunning amount of publicity. The ability for participants to coordinate with each other—to tweet about the event in a concentrated period of time, building on each other's insights—also likely factored into the significant media attention. If the purpose of the hashtag was to bring attention to a cause, the hashtag's participants were successful. But to what end? As a July 7, 2014, *Time* headline read, "#Bringbackourgirls still hasn't brought them back." The fact that the majority of the kidnapped girls remain to be found stands as a stark reminder that attention does not necessarily lead to action. Or, perhaps, that action does not necessarily bring about the desired result. Although #bringbackourgirls offered an opportunity for many people to learn about the tragedy in Nigeria, it simultaneously backgrounded the broader context of why this incident happened—and why it has been so difficult to find the missing girls and bring their captors to justice. While it is impossible to know how many hashtag participants knew of the current political and economic state in Nigeria, the hashtag encouraged Twitter users to distill the situation's broader context into a pithy command. In her work on orientations toward objects, Ahmed (2006) addressed the capacity of technology to shape experience: "Technology (or techné) becomes instead the process of 'bringing forth' . . . The object is an effect of 'bringing forth,' where the 'bringing forth' is a question of the determination

of form: the object itself has been shaped for something, *which means it takes the shape of what it is for*” (italics original; p. 46). If we consider the hashtag as an object, it was “brought forth” in particular ways via Twitter: as concise, decontextualized, urgent. The tragedy ultimately took the shape of something that must have “attention brought to,” not something that must be carefully researched. Considering that many uses of the hashtag included little more than the phrase itself, participants in these cases were not encouraged (via a link to a news story, for example) to research the situation in any depth. Gaining a fuller understanding of the incident would require moving beyond the ways in which the incident was being brought forth to audiences on Twitter.

Additionally, the phrasing of the hashtag positioned the missing girls in problematic ways. According to Meredith Loken (2014),

While laudable in effort, scope, and reach, #BringBackOur-Girls reproduces the problematic narratives of women as rights-deserving only through their capacity to be claimed. In one circulated image, a protest sign reads, “#BringBackOur-Girls, our sisters and daughters deserve better.” . . . This dualistic construction of women as worthy of political recognition due to their relationship to a more privileged agent works powerfully in the age of hashtag activism through its ability to draw emotional response . . . however, this imagination also risks infantilization and positions women as full political and social actors only through their potential as property. (p. 1100)

The phrasing of the hashtag exemplifies Ahmed’s claim that objects takes the shape of what they are for—in this case, locating the girls. Simultaneously, this phrasing conceals the missing girls’ capacity to be seen as fully-realized, independent people who deserve their freedom irrespective of how they are related to others. Thus, the hashtag bears traces of imperialism and paternalism.

While our actions as social media participants are never determined (Feenberg, 1991), the case of #bringbackourgirls shows how easy it can become to support the cause of bringing attention to an unjust scenario while never delving deeper into the economic and political complexities that gave birth to it. In circulating the hashtag, many participants assumed that increased attention in itself was productive. But some participants failed to consider the full range of repercussions that might result from an increased media focus. According to Nigerian American author Teju Cole, “‘Part of the horror was that the girls were ignored,’ Cole wrote. ‘An opposite problem now is CNN’s heavy sensationalist interest’” (as cited in Taylor, 2014). Sensationalism carries notable repercussions

for Nigerians, who have long experienced a corrupt military and a low standard of living. The process of bringing attention often proceeds without acknowledging factors such as these. For example, on May 5, 2014, traders in Lagos shut down several major markets in protest over the missing girls; following the economic losses, Patience Jonathan—the president’s wife—ordered the arrest of the lead protesters and claimed that the kidnappings were a fabrication meant to diminish her husband’s power. Though impossible to say whether publicity from the hashtag contributed to these events, leaders in the government have experienced considerable pressure from within and outside of the country—and have reacted in ways intended to bolster the power of the government above all.

While it is not possible to make a pronouncement about whether #bringbackourgirls did more harm than good, we must remain cautious when using the considerable reach and speed of social media merely to bring attention to a cause. Yes, the schoolgirls’ kidnapping needed to be publicized more quickly and widely than it was in those first weeks after the incident. But simply circulating #bringbackourgirls without acknowledging the socio-economic complexities of Nigeria results in backgrounding critical information (information that also might help explain why the girls have not yet been rescued). It remains important to be aware of “the background” because, as Ahmed (2006) claimed, the background is often made so for a reason:

We can think, in other words, of the background not simply in terms of what is around what we face, as the “dimly perceived,” but as produced by acts of relegation: some things are relegated to the background in order to sustain a certain direction; in other words, to keep our attention on what is faced. (p. 31)

If bringing attention to the incident required brevity and decontextualization, then it is easy to see how more comprehensive details about the kidnappings would be omitted. But in offering an oversimplified version of events, we might unwittingly create additional turmoil.

#YESALLWOMEN: CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS

Only a month after the #bringbackourgirls hashtag found broad circulation, another widely-publicized hashtag emerged: #yesallwomen. As with #bringbackourgirls, this hashtag found its exigence in a specific event. Unlike the more time-sensitive goal of locating the kidnapped schoolgirls, #yesallwomen advocated for the elimination of structural and systematic misogyny. Spurred by the

previously mentioned Isla Vista shooting, #yesallwomen argued that all women have experienced misogynist treatment by men. Sasha Weiss (2014), among many others, argued in the popular press that everyday instances of misogyny contribute to an environment in which some men find violence an appropriate reaction to rejection by women:

Perhaps more subtly, [#yesallwomen] suggests that [the killer] was influenced by a predominant cultural ethos that rewards sexual aggression, power, and wealth, and that reinforces traditional alpha masculinity and submissive femininity. (This line of thought is not intended in any way to make excuses for Rodger's murderousness, but to try to imagine him as part of the same social world we all live in and not as simply a monster).

Weiss, along with others who used the hashtag, interpreted the Isla Vista shootings as a kairotic moment to address socially-sanctioned aggression toward women. Four days after the hashtag was first used, participants tweeted #yesallwomen over 1.2 million times (Grinberg, 2014), arguably making it more successful—from a circulation standpoint—than #bringbackourgirls.

Although past instances of online activism have often targeted fellow women as a community-building effort, participants in #yesallwomen sought to broaden their audience base in sophisticated ways. According to Emanuella Grinberg (2014), the hashtag accomplished the rare feat of espousing feminist perspectives while achieving mainstream appeal: “While most feminist-driven Twitter campaigns preach to the choir, #YesAllWomen has succeeded in drawing the mainstream—including men—into the conversation . . . More unique is the conversation's focus on misogyny and its negative impact on women and men.” At the same time, a feminist reading would critique the notion that women's concerns only achieve validation when they affect men. In terms of circulation, however, offering a connection to men's well-being enabled the hashtag to be tweeted on a broad scale. For some participants, doing so meant pointing out that four of the shooter's victims were men. Others made the argument that fathers should be concerned about the repercussions of misogyny for both their daughters and sons. By perceiving men as core audience members for this message, the hashtag exceeded the reach of previous online feminist activism.

While some men participated in the hashtag, tweeting their own thoughts about the treatment of women, others resented the call to action. Within days of #yesallwomen's circulation, the hashtag #notallmen made the argument that men were being unfairly targeted as a homogenous group of women-haters. Those who participated in the #notallmen hashtag argued that because they per-

sonally had not committed violence against women, they should not be implicated in a male culture that mistreats women. Additionally, some men claimed that they objected to being associated in any way with the Isla Vista shooter. Such arguments were met with tweets and responses in the popular press that critiqued the denial of personal responsibility (see Figures 1.2 and 1.4). Participant Karin Robinson composed one of the more widely circulated tweets in response to #notallmen (see Figure 1.3), pointing out that even though not all men mistreat women, all women still have to live with the constant threat of violence:

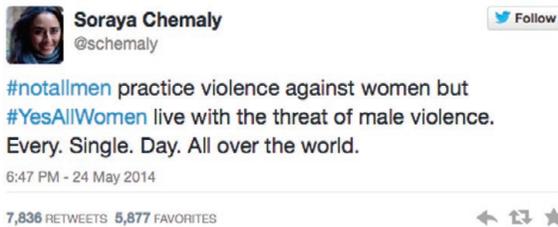


Figure 1.2. One example of how #yesallwomen supporters reacted to #notallmen.



Figure 1.3. #yesallwomen participant @karinjr (2014) pointing out the flawed logic of #notallmen.



Figure 1.4. A male #yesallwomen participant defends the hashtag.

The #notallmen hashtag played into arguments that have been used against feminists for decades: that sexism is largely a fiction forwarded by a feminist

agenda; that calling attention to misogynist behavior constitutes “reverse sexism”; and that only a small minority of men mistreat women, making misogyny an issue of personal responsibility instead of a structural, historical pattern of behavior. Those who objected to the #notallmen hashtag cited these arguments and others to point out how women’s concerns often become purposefully derailed.

In fact, the appropriation of hashtags frequently occurs for purposes counter to the hashtag’s original intent. Cultural critics, among others, have pointed out the tendency for hashtags that critique racial and gender-based inequalities to be quickly co-opted. Trudy, whose blog addresses black women, art, media, social media, socio-politics, and culture, makes a similar argument:

The constant pilfering of Black culture and ideas in social media . . . has become a behavior so common and pathetic that even as Black people are participating in a hashtag on any given day, we already expect the content to be exploited and stripped of context within minutes or hours, not days. (Gradient Lair, 2014, para. 6)

In the case of #yesallwomen, a hashtag designed to speak back to patriarchal notions about women became used as fodder in long-standing arguments about alleged men-hating women and the damage that they inflict.

Soon after the hashtag was established, debates about #yesallwomen moved beyond Twitter, finding their way onto a #yesallwomen Wikipedia page. Numerous contributors to the page charged that the descriptive history of the hashtag amounted to “misandry” and subsequently edited the page to say so. According to Kate Dries’ (2014) account,

In some instances, Wiki contributors have made edits to the page to give it a more “neutral point of view,” noting that despite edits, “It’s still kind of a giant pile of feminist propaganda.” Others have made changes because they allege that the page contains/ed lots of “misandry.”

The above charge of neutrality positions a male perspective as the default perspective. Additional perspectives are marked as Other, detailing imagined plights and unreasonable demands. In other words, because the hashtag itself alleged misogyny, it was not being neutral (as if neutrality was ever a desired outcome of activism). Rather than attending to the concerns raised by the hashtag, some of the Wikipedia authors sought to situate it as “feminist propaganda.” A sizable number of people have shared this opinion, considering that a current Google search for #yesallwomen yields the phrase “#yesallwomen is bullshit” as the fifth most-searched option. While the hashtag in itself does feminist work,

the urge to rewrite the history of the hashtag represents a recent example of how activism for women's rights continues to be pushed to the margins, as has historically been the case (Ritchie & Ronald, 2001). In this respect, some users seem to be using Wikipedia as a platform for silencing women's voices, particularly when those voices point out misogynistic behavior. As the page undergoes constant revisions—even years after its establishment, indicating sustained attention on the part of some contributors—a look at the revision history reveals how articulations of women's concerns undergo frequent contestation, their mere articulation threatening to some.

Both the #notallmen hashtag and the charges of misandry on Wikipedia reflect an attempt to relegate women's concerns to the background in order to keep attention focused on issues considered more important (by some). In the case of #notallmen, those who participated in the hashtag objected to the idea that violence toward women—often positioned as a marginal issue that only concerns a minority of women and men—was no longer being relegated to the background, as it so often is. The increased attention, via the Twitter hashtag, posed a potential threat to supposedly more important issues that involve the populace at large. Such a perspective, however, not only underestimates the pervasiveness of violence against women (and its negative implications for men) but also assumes that the public's attention exists in finite quantities: If we spend too much time talking about #yesallwomen, then other issues will lose out. Richard Lanham (2007) has addressed our recent cultural shift from an economy of goods to an economy of information, arguing that because we are inundated with information, the ability to garner attention holds significant value. While Lanham positions style as the new currency in this information economy, Twitter—a platform on which a thousand followers is not unusual—demonstrates how attention is increasingly perceived in quantitative terms. For some, the attention that #yesallwomen received, measured in tweets and retweets, became a threatening commodity.

While the criticism of hashtags as slacktivism have been well rehearsed in the popular press, feminist-oriented hashtags such as #yesallwomen have generated a significant amount of interest both within the feminist community and from audiences who do not identify as such. Perhaps the most notable example of social-media-based debates among feminists occurred when Twitter users critiqued a 2013 report entitled *Feminist Futures*, authored by Vanessa Valenti and Courtney Martin, by tweeting under the hashtags #FemFuture and #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen (Loza, 2014). At issue was the perception by some that the report privileged the role of white feminists at the expense of women of color. The ensuing debate illustrates the dialogue that can happen (not all of it positive) when voices that have been silenced for decades within the feminist

movement—those of women of color, genderqueer individuals, working-class women, and those who identify as having a disability—find a platform to speak candidly. Adam Banks (2006), for example, has written about “the ways cyberspace can serve as a cultural underground that counters the surveillance and censorship that always seem to accompany the presence of African Americans speaking, writing, and designing in more public spaces” (p. 69). While Banks made this observation in the same year that Twitter was founded, more recently others in the popular press have written about the role of black Twitter as a vibrant and valued cultural space for often-marginalized voices (McDonald, 2014). Similarly, when challenges such as #notallmen surface, communities can find the experience of speaking back to the hashtag helpful in terms of coalition-building and intra-community dialogue. In her examination of the #yesallwomen hashtag, Kitsy Dixon (2014) argued, “What’s important to understand in the online discussion community of Twitter and other social media formats is the grounding of community being formed through identity as a ‘feminist’ and emotions shared with the collective group.” From this perspective, counter-arguments—as offensive as they can be—can serve to refine the purpose and (re)direct the attention of a loosely-organized group. The strong reactions that the #yesallwomen hashtag generated suggest that consciousness-raising does carry considerable consequences.

Perhaps the evidence of people feeling threatened indicates a capacity for hashtag activism to effect change. As the examples in this chapter show, establishing causality between a hashtag and significant, timely change remains difficult. But the strong reactions of people opposed to a hashtag such as #yesallwomen signals that attention may have value in itself. Activist Suey Park, the woman behind the #notyourasiansidekick and #cancelcolbert hashtags, has argued that before change occurs, a significant number of people must become aware of the injustice at hand:

I was struck realizing how a shift in historical consciousness was necessary before any large social movement. For me, hashtags are a way to use a tool created for corporate branding and use it for base building and consciousness raising. (as cited in Yandoli, 2014)

Here, Park alludes to the subversive nature of hashtag activism: Repurposing a corporate advertising technique by using hashtags to critique social inequalities. She also makes a distinction between the hashtag as the activist moment and the hashtag as a tool that can help bring about the activist moment. In other words, a hashtag does not (and cannot) comprise the entirety of a movement. While Park’s hashtag #notyourasiansidekick garnered 50,000 tweets from over

sixty countries, she responded to questions about the hashtag's material consequences by tweeting, "This is not a trend, this is a movement. Everybody calm down and buckle down for the long haul, please" (Loza, 2014). In the years since her hashtag trended globally, Park has joined 18 Million Rising, a grassroots Asian American advocacy group (Loza, 2014). Park's actions demonstrate how one of the most well-known hashtag activists in recent years acknowledges that even effective uses of online advocacy should be used in conjunction with a grassroots component.

MAXIMIZING THE PROMISE OF ATTENTION

As both #yesallwomen and #bringbackourgirls have shown, hashtags can prove a valuable resource through their ability to bring attention to a cause; at the same time, they also run the risk of oversimplification by backgrounding important contextual information. The risks of this activism should not dissuade participants from using hashtags to bring publicity to their cause, however. Like any form of public activist work, hashtags require a critical awareness of audience, context, and purpose. In particular, Ahmed's work on attention reminds us that what comprises the background has been placed there in order to keep attention focused elsewhere; backgrounding is an active process of exclusion. With that in mind, we as hashtag participants (and social media users in general) need to be cognizant of what is being concealed when we advocate for increased attention to a cause. The costs of not doing so can significantly temper any good that increased attention might bring.

Being more aware of the background also means developing a more critical, well-rounded socio-political perspective. For example, in the case of #bringbackourgirls, some participants used the hashtag as an opportunity to comment on United States foreign policy, complicating the argument that the United States should intervene in Nigeria based on the horrific nature of the kidnappings. When Michelle Obama posed with #bringbackourgirls written on a sign, users remixed the image by altering the writing on the sign (see Poe Alexander and Hahner's chapter in this section on the use of photographic-based argument and hashtags on Instagram). In one striking example, the new text read, "My husband has killed more Muslim girls than Boko Haram ever could." The designer of this remix made the point that while #bringbackourgirls directed many U.S. citizens' attention to violence committed against girls in Nigeria, we have largely excused our own president's use of violence via his drone attacks. This critique implicated the many users who forwarded the unaltered Michelle Obama photo, suggesting that they need to think more critically about the circumstances in which people across the globe become victims of violence. While compari-

sions between Boko Haram and Barack Obama require more detailed justifications than the image could provide, calling attention to the number of lives that each has allegedly ended represents an incisive rhetorical strategy. Drawing on Ridolfo and DeVoss' theory, the representatives of the Obama administration responsible for this photo failed to account for rhetorical velocity. The remixed #bringbackourgirls sign undermined Michelle Obama's attempt at boosting the hashtag's underlying message in addition to causing #bringbackourgirls to lose some traction. Whoever in the White House's communication office authorized this image of Obama made her (and President Obama, by implication) vulnerable to the remixing efforts of anyone with photo-editing capabilities. This incident remains representative of both the complex nature of navigating social media networks and also the ability for social media users to call attention to previously backgrounded contexts.

Hashtag participants, then, need to compose with an anticipation of rhetorical velocity, keeping in mind that future participants will add their own content to a hashtag and perhaps even remix it. When online memes and other forms of communication are remixed, they often spread more widely than if they remain the same throughout their circulation due to their identification with multiple audiences (Vie, 2014). In seeking to advance an argument, writers also need to consider who/what might be excluded by a hashtag that advocates a particular course of action. While most would argue that #bringbackourgirls voiced a noble cause, participants varied dramatically in their opinions about how that goal should be accomplished. What struck one participant as a straightforward rationale for rescuing the kidnapped girls struck another participant as a conflicted perspective in light of current U.S. policy. In Stephanie Vie's (2014) examination of online memes, she argued that users should investigate the original intent of a meme before they spread/remix it; that argument can be extended to claim that hashtag participants should be aware of the origins of their particular hashtag, as well as its multiple iterations. Doing so reflects a technological literacy that acknowledges the practices of remix and rhetorical velocity: an understanding that online arguments can be repurposed quite rapidly. Vie acknowledged that because memes—and similarly, hashtags—must circulate quickly in order to be effective, “a tension will likely remain between the swift transmission and rapid peak of Internet memes spreading and the careful attention required to critically assess political campaigns, companies, and causes before supporting them.” While this tension will likely persist, gaining a broader awareness of the historicity of a hashtag and all its variations can offer hashtag activists a broader, more nuanced perspective than they might otherwise have.

In the present fractured media landscape, social media users need to be proactive in not only seeking out opinions different than their own, but also in

gathering the contextual information that often gets ignored. As mentioned earlier, linking to a reliable news story represents one way of encouraging other participants in a hashtag to develop a deeper understanding of an issue. Other social media platforms such as Facebook may be more well-suited in this respect, as users have more space on that interface to provide details about a story. The capability to embed concise URLs means that even on Twitter, however, a participant can incorporate a link in addition to a hashtag and her own brief message in one tweet. With a link, audiences have the option of reading the longer news story after their attention has been attracted by the hashtag. This kind of composition requires an anticipation of how misunderstandings might occur on a platform such as Twitter, which privileges brevity. For example, in 2014 *The Colbert Report* tweeted a racially insensitive remark without indicating that the comment was part of that night's satiric take on racially insensitive remarks. Having included a link to clips from the show may have provided important contextual information to readers and averted some of the outrage. Dan Zarrella's (2012) findings complicate this scenario; however, as he found, "there is no correlation between retweets and clicks. In fact, 16.12 percent of the link-containing tweets I analyzed generated more retweets than clicks, meaning many people will retweet a tweet with a link without even clicking on that link." The pressure to compose quickly in a social media environment means that some people do not read all of the content that they circulate. Zarrella suggested that users counter this tendency by composing concise tweets (between 120 and 130 characters), trying different link placement in tweets, and experimenting with timing, word choice, and other factors. In short, a good deal of strategy factors into the effective, responsible circulation of content on social media platforms. While the use of activist hashtags can focus readers' attention, we should also seek to acknowledge that which falls beyond the field of attention: politics, historical context, competing arguments.

The cases of #bringbackourgirls and #yesallwomen demonstrate that increased attention to a cause via a social network may carry significant repercussions. In light of these and other recent examples, those of us who use Twitter for activist purposes need to consider Twitter more seriously as a platform for composition. Doing so means thinking more carefully about who is excluded and how misunderstanding might occur. While the platform itself encourages speed and brevity, we can still compose in such a way as to include information that will make our activism more meaningful. Additionally, we should address effective techniques for circulating messages on Twitter in our classes, particularly in professional writing courses. Whether in activist or workplace contexts, students should be aware of the tactics needed to use social media for purposes other than socializing. Finally, scholars in rhetoric and composition need to

continue to theorize how composition on social media represents a rich site of rhetorical activity in a variety of contexts. Only through continued study will we gain a better sense of how massive grassroots efforts such as #blacklivesmatter seek to address deep-seated structural inequities through, among other methods, a social media campaign.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Banks, A. J. (2006). *Race, rhetoric, and technology: Searching for higher ground*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bowdon, M. A. (2014). Tweeting an ethos: Emergency messaging, social media, and teaching technical communication. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 23(1), 35-54.
- Carr, D. (2012). Hashtag activism, and its limits. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/26/business/media/hashtag-activism-and-its-limits.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
- Cho, E. [EugeneCho]. (2014, May 26). Don't hate the #yesallwomen hashtag. Hate that it has to even exist. Hate the injustice of gender inequality. Hate violence against women. [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/EugeneCho/status/470954496823398400>
- Dixon, K. (2014). Feminist online identity: Analyzing the presence of hashtag feminism. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(7). Retrieved from <http://theartsjournal.org/index.php/site/article/view/509/286>
- Dries, K. (2014). There's a battle going on over the Wikipedia page for #yesallwomen. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/theres-a-battle-going-on-over-the-wikipedia-page-for-y-1586704111>
- Feenberg, A. (1991). *Critical theory of technology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Ferro, T., & Zachry, M. (2014). Technical communication unbound: Knowledge work, social media, and emergent communicative practices. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 23(1), 6-21.
- Francis, P. [Pontifex]. (2014, May 10). Let us all join in prayer for the immediate release of the schoolgirls kidnapped in Nigeria. #BringBackOurGirls. [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/465189535672832000>
- Gay, R. (2013). Looking for a better feminism. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/08/22/214525023/twitter-sparks-a-serious-discussion-about-race-and-feminism>
- Goldberg, M. (2014). Feminism's toxic Twitter wars. *The Nation*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenation.com/article/178140/feminisms-toxic-twitter-wars>
- Gradient Lair. (2014, April 20). BuzzFeed's cultural appropriation and infantilization of Black colloquialisms. Retrieved from <http://www.gradientlair.com/>

- post/83350005053/fuck-buzzfeed-fuck-whites-who-appropriate-black-culture
 Grinberg, E. (2014). Why #yesallwomen took off on Twitter. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/27/living/california-killer-hashtag-yesallwomen/>
- Jones, J. (2014). Switching in Twitter's hashtagged exchanges. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 28(1), 83-108.
- Lanham, R. (2007). *The economics of attention: Style and substance in the age of information*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Loken, M. (2014). #BringBackOurGirls and the invisibility of imperialism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 14(6), 1100-1101.
- Loza, S. (2014). Hashtag feminism, #solidarityisforwhitewomen, and the other #fem-future. *Ada: A journal of gender, new media, and technology*. Retrieved from http://adanewmedia.org/2014/07/issue5-loza/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=issue5-loza
- McDonald, S. S. N. (2014). Black Twitter: A virtual community ready to hashtag out a response to cultural issues. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/black-twitter-a-virtual-community-ready-to-hashtag-out-a-response-to-cultural-issues/2014/01/20/41ddacf6-7ec5-11e3-9556-4a4bf7bcbd84_story.html
- Murphy, M. (2013). The trouble with twitter feminism. from <http://feministcurrent.com/8403/the-trouble-with-twitter-feminism/>
- Plait, P. (2014). #YesAllWomen. *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/blogs/bad_astronomy/2014/05/27/not_all_men_how_discussing_women_s_issues_gets_derailed.html
- Potts, L., & Jones, D. (2011). Contextualizing experiences: Tracing the relationships between people and technologies in the social web. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 25(3), 338-358.
- Potts, L. (2013). *Social media in disaster response*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rainie, L., & Wellman, B. (2012). *Networked: The new social operating system*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Ridolfo, J., & DeVoss, D. (2009). Composing for recomposition: Rhetorical velocity and delivery. *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 13(2). Retrieved from http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/ridolfo_devoss/intro.html
- Ritchie, J., & Ronald, K. (Eds.). (2001). *Available means: An anthology of women's rhetoric(s)*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Robinson, K. [karinj]. (2014, May 25). No, #NotAllMen are violent against women, but #YesAllWomen have to navigate a world where those who are look the same as those who aren't. [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/karinjr/status/470523930353352704>
- Sheridan, D. M., Ridolfo, J., & Michel, A. J. (2012). *The available means of persuasion: Mapping a theory and pedagogy of multimodal public rhetoric*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.
- Taylor, A. (2014). Is #bringbackourgirls helping? *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/05/06/is-bringback-ourgirls-helping/?utm_term=.b874b62d5a2b

- Vie, S. (2014). In defense of “slacktivism”: The Human Rights Campaign Facebook logo as digital activism. *First Monday*, 19(4). Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4961/3868>
- Walt, V. (2014). Nigerians critical of government’s slow kidnappings response. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/95558/nigeria-kidnappings-government/>
- Weiss, S. (2014). The power of #yesallwomen. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-power-of-yesallwomen>
- Wolff, W. I. (2015). Baby, we were born to tweet: Springsteen fans, the writing practices of *in situ* tweeting, and the research possibilities for Twitter. *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 19(3). Retrieved from <http://kairos.technorhetic.net/19.3/topoi/wolff/index.html>
- Yandoli, K. L. (2014). Do hashtags count as activism? Retrieved from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/krystieyandoli/do-hashtags-count-as-activism>
- Zarella, D. (2012). New data indicates Twitter users don’t always click the links they retweet. *Where marketers go to grow*. Retrieved from <http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33815/New-Data-Indicates-Twitter-Users-Don-t-Always-Click-the-Links-They-Retweet-INFOGRAPHIC.aspx>