

Social Media and Activism

Enclosed is an ideal scene of activism: A diverse group of protestors with the fire of passion in their eyes, bearing the same T-Shirts across their defiant chests. Controversial statements and witty calls to action are scrawled in bold black ink across the cardboard signs that they hold up with wooden posts. The organized tones of chanting and marching is the anthem of protest that has been inherited from the founding activists before our time. These streets serve as asphalt stages, the perfect terrain for the public to hear these voices ring with a longing for revolutionary days. This is, and always has been, the tradition of protest. That is how the women's suffrage movement of the mid-19th century spread, by taking their beliefs to the streets and thus shifting conservative society into a more progressive era. However years have been ticking by before our mortal eyes and our world has become digitalized. Many have abandoned the streets, and it is now Facebook and Twitter that are the new gods on the block. Time will tell if there shall arise a Martin Luther King Jr or Mahatma Gandhi from this vast new setting called the inter web. Although Twitter and Facebook have introduced an entirely new mode of social activism that has this inconceivable ability to connect its users from across oceans and time zones which brings increased general awareness to the cause, they are nothing more than a promotion of the bandwagon ideology, as they only serve as a way for self-promoted activists to popularize the movement, make it a trend in popular culture, and then let it fade away, rather than bring substantial societal advancements to humanity.

There has been an ongoing debate over whether or not social media has taken the place of the streets that individuals once formed rallies of protest on, the signs that they once held replaced by that simple pound sign commonly known as a hashtag. While there is no doubt that Facebook and Twitter have become a new form of activism, one has to often wonder whether

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they possess the same type of effectiveness as the traditional model. This speculation is widely due to the fact that while they do bring increased and shared awareness of prevalent issues, they also turn those issues into trends that eventually seem to just fade away. Do you not remember the #Kony2012 movement, when it was an issue that was all the rage throughout the West? A Ugandan warlord by the name of Joseph Kony was suddenly the hottest topic on Twitter and Facebook after his recruitment of child soldiers was exposed in a 30 minute documentary online. According to the BBC, this video “became a viral sensation with more than 35 million views. #Kony2012 was the number one topic of conversation on Twitter and was shared multiple times on Facebook by concerned citizens and celebrities alike.” People were suddenly positioning #Kony2012 signs onto their manicured suburban lawns as if they were showing their support for a local Congressman running for office. I am proud to admit that I was among those who had already known of the issue of child soldiers in African countries before it became controversial on social media, and I certainly appreciated the increased awareness of it all over the country through Twitter and Facebook, but it has been 5 years, and many of us have forgotten about the yearlong campaign that once took place on the platform of social media. Today, Kony’s militant rebel army, the Lord’s Resistance Army, continues to kidnap child soldiers in not only Uganda, but has expanded its reaches to the Central African Republic, where it takes young boys and oftentimes young girls (for marriage) in the process of terrorizing and pillaging their villages. The mastermind behind the training of child soldiers himself, is still unaccounted for and children continue to learn how to pull the trigger of a gun despite the serious campaign that erupted all over Twitter and Facebook 5 years ago, which goes to show that it was merely a trend to us Americans that we have since forgotten about.

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To me, hashtags are lazy and complacent symbols of activism. However, Sabina-Khan Ilhema of the *Huffington Post* makes a valid argument when she stated that “*Hashtags have the power to bring attention to and mobilize a large population. Petitions, protests, letters to politicians and those in power are disseminated through social media, but what brings attention to a movement or a hashtag is the high number of mentions of a hashtag.*” It is important to acknowledge that the one power that Twitter and Facebook have is that they can bring awareness of an issue to the public like no other platform has before. Not everybody watches CNN or reads the newspaper, but a whole slew of people communicate through Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis. A *Washington Post* article was published on the ten Twitter hashtags that “*changed the way we talk about social issues*”. Among them were, of course, #Kony2012, along with #BlackLivesMatter, #YesAll Women, #BringOurGirlsBack, and #IceBucketChallenge. All of these hashtags got major followings and were mentioned millions of times on Twitter, thus making society more aware of these prevalent issues. But let me ask you, are those Nigerian girls who we were so eager to bring back after being kidnapped by the terrorist group, Boko Haram, home? No, many of them were peddled off into the black market for their bodies, and many of us have forgotten about them . And while I myself am a huge supporter of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, black men are still getting killed by law enforcement on the daily and many conservative government politicians have condemned #BlackLivesMatter and publicized it as an anti-white campaign to America’s predominantly ignorant white. There is no debate that all of these causes have brought awareness, but have they really and truly brought change? I profess, it has been difficult for me to see any substantial societal change. I think TV drama writer, Shonda Rhimes, said it best when she described the hashtag: “*It’s a hashtag. It’s you sitting on your butt,*

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typing into your computer and then going back to binge watching your favorite show” (Sabina Khan-Ibarra, 5)

I wonder, is it respectful or even justified to use the same symbol, the hashtag, in talking about important causes as well as talking about something as simple as “Netflix and Chill”? I believe that causes are undermined when it’s elevated-or de-elevated- on the same platform as something so simple and irrelevant, but popularized by my generation. To me, it means that #YesAllWoman, a campaign centered on misogyny and the physical abuse of women, is just as important or relevant as, say, #MillennialDisney? When it comes to activism, I believe that this new fad called “hashtag activism” is a movement that claims to be among people that are actually seeking to make a change in the world. Now those people, the people willing to make themselves uncomfortable by seeking change, are the real activists, because they believe that if they want to see any sort of change, then they’ll actually have to work from the grassroots. They look like that courageous woman known as Moses that led many to freedom on the Underground Railroad from the Antebellum South to the free North. These people look like the folks that walked the 55 miles with Dr. King from Selma, Alabama to the state capitol, Montgomery, Alabama, in 1966 and were met with violence by the police. These people look like the many women and men that decided to participate in a Women’s March on the same day as Donald Trump’s inauguration. These people have the same spirit as Mahatma Ghandi, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai, Muhammad Ali, Che Guevara, and Gilbert Baker. Those people, wanted it more than anybody with a Twitter account could ever claim to want it.

The only occupants of those once bustling streets that served as the stomping ground of protest are tumbleweeds. Our community activists have cast away their signs and have dug out their smartphones, logging into their Facebook and Twitter apps, typing out a brief call to action

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followed by a hashtagged tagline. Will these words, will that hashtag be enough to put a stop to human trafficking or eliminate the military recruitment of mere boys in third world countries? Or is it simply a personal conquest to prove to the always probing society that you are a “woke” individual that can stay in touch with social issues that you care? Sure, these avenues of social media certainly have the ability to bring awareness, which can serve as an aid to social change, but it has become clear, that in this case, doing it in the most advanced 21st century way can never compare to doing it the old fashioned, getting your hands dirty way. Do yourself a favor, if you really and truly care about an issue, then take the fight to the streets, to your fellow community members, to your representatives, and to those that you are trying to fight for. Start a movement where you don’t need to hide behind a hashtag.

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