

#Bringbackourgirls, #Kony2012, and the complete, divisive history of 'hashtag activism'

By **Caitlin Dewey** May 8, 2014

More than one million people — including First Lady Michelle Obama — have tweeted the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. But whether they're helping the roughly 250 schoolgirls kidnapped in Nigeria or hopping on some kind of first-world digital bandwagon depends, frankly, on whom you ask.

We've all heard this debate before — first over “slacktivism” in the '90s, then over “clicktivism” in the aughts. “Hashtag activism,” a term apparently coined around the turn of Occupy Wall Street, is just the latest iteration of a long-standing debate between people who think “awareness” is its own kind of protest ... and people who, for various reasons, do not.

The case of the Nigerian schoolgirls, abducted by a militant Islamist group in northeastern Nigeria three weeks ago, is perhaps particularly instructive. The girls — who militants have said they will sell into slavery — earned little attention outside of the country, or from the Nigerian government, until supporters took to Twitter to demand their safe return.

That seems like a pretty uncontroversial demand — I mean, who doesn't want the Nigerian schoolgirls brought back home? — but it hasn't sat well with everyone. Just last night, the Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole went on a sort of Twitter rant against #BringBackOurGirls, arguing that the recent spate of Internet interest has not only oversimplified and sentimentalized the country's issues, but failed to achieve anything:

Boko Haram killed more human beings yesterday than the total number of girls they kidnapped three weeks ago. Horrifying, and unhashtagable.

— Teju Cole (@tejucole) May 8, 2014

For four years, Nigerians have tried to understand these homicidal monsters. Your new interest (thanks) simplifies nothing, solves nothing.

– Teju Cole (@tejucole) May 8, 2014

Remember: #bringbackourgirls, a vital moment for Nigerian democracy, is not the same as #bringbackourgirls, a wave of global sentimentality.

– Teju Cole (@tejucole) May 8, 2014

Of course, critics of lazy or “slacker” activism love to blame its existence on the Internet — as if signing petitions or sending postcards to Congress wasn’t equally passive (... and, in many cases, equally pointless). It’s difficult to pin down exactly when the preferred form of slacktivism switched from analog to digital, but the change appears to have happened in the past three years. In 2007, Twitter users began unofficially organizing groups and conversations around hashtags; in 2009, just in time for the election protests in Iran, the network had adopted them officially. By 2011, references to “hashtag activism” — most of them negative — began popping up in the media, always in connection to Occupy Wall Street.

#StandwithPP

We #standwithPP in our shared commitment to putting women’s health first, always.

– Breast Cancer Action (@BCAction) February 3, 2012

It wasn’t until 2012, however, that “hashtag activism” congealed in a major way around an actionable, concrete cause. On a Tuesday in January, the Susan G. Komen Foundation, which annually contributed \$680,000 to Planned Parenthood for breast exams and mammograms, announced its plans to cut that funding off. The decision was largely political, which outraged Planned Parenthood supporters. By Friday of that week, more than 100,000 people had tweeted hashtags like #singon and #standwithpp — and Komen had restored funding.

“I absolutely believe the exposure on Facebook and Twitter really drove a lot of coverage by mainstream media,” Planned Parenthood’s president, Cecile Richards told the Los Angeles Times. “I’ve never seen anything catch fire [like this.]”

Richards had a point. While activist hashtags like #ows had trended before, rarely had a hashtag been aimed at such a specific policy — something that could, with enough awareness, be easily reversed by a handful of people.

It also helped that many of the #standwithpp activists were stakeholders in the conflict: women who used Planned Parenthood, or women’s health services more generally, and used Twitter as a platform to speak up for their causes.

#Kony2012

That was a major, immediate failing for #Kony2012, which trended only weeks after #standwithpp. Sparked by a documentary of the same name on Ugandan military leader and indicted war criminal Joseph Kony, and fueled by tweets from celebrities like Rihanna, Stephen Fry and Nicole Richie, #Kony2012 earned nearly 2.4 million tweets in March 2012

... but failed to articulate any specific demands, besides the self-evident “stop Kony.” Worse, the documentary (and the hashtag) were organized by do-gooder Americans, not Ugandans.

KONY 2012



They may have meant well, but the meddling, imperialist overtones of Kony would forever haunt the hashtag. Kony, critics pointed out, had been accused of abducting child soldiers since the '90s. But millions of Americans noticed only when it became trendy to do so, and when it was other Americans advancing the issue. Two days after the documentary “Kony 2012” premiered, the first (and to date, only) definition of hashtag activism appeared on Urban Dictionary:

The kind of activism undertaken when you “do something” about a problem by tweeting or posting links to Facebook, without any intent of ever actually doing something. Nothing more than a nonsense feelgood gesture so that one can say they “did something about” whatever trendycase they’re pretending to care about. Usually only lasts a week or two before the cause is completely forgotten (i.e. it stops being cool to forward/retweet on the subject).

[Example:] I forwarded a video about some unspeakable atrocities in a country I didn’t know existed until I watched the video. My hashtag activism is going to accomplish something!

All the attention did accomplish something, though: In the wake of the video’s publication, the African Union announced it would send a force of 5,000 to help quell violence in Uganda and bring Kony to justice. They were joined by 100 military advisers from the U.S., deployed for the same reason.

Said U.N. Central Africa envoy Abou Moussa — emphasis mine — “we need to take advantage of *the high level of interest*, goodwill and political commitment to finally put an end to this crime.”

#JusticeforTrayvon

That’s an intriguing result of the most popular hashtag protests. Despite the oft-repeated claim that awareness does nothing, it almost always does something — something small, perhaps, but something measurable.

Neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman was hardly investigated, for instance, when he shot and killed an unarmed teenager, Trayvon Martin, in the Florida suburbs. The case initially attracted no attention outside of Florida. But

when the case began to trickle out onto Twitter’s trending topics list, issues like contemporary racism, gun control and Florida’s controversial “Stand Your Ground” law suddenly became hallmarks of the national conversation.

Between March and April 2012, users sent more than 2.8 million tweets mentioning Trayvon. That virality was credited, in part, for attracting more than 2 million signatures to a Change.org petition calling for the arrest of Martin’s shooter — and for getting notables like President Obama involved.

To the disappointment of activists the campaign only half-succeeded. While local and state authorities did reopen their investigations against Zimmerman in light of the publicity, trying him for second-degree murder in July 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted on all counts.

Hey Justice Department: Open a Civil Rights Case Against George Zimmerman

<http://t.co/C71YHxxIFj> #justicefortrayvon Sign this y’all. Easy.

— Amanda (@ARaeAshcraft) July 17, 2013

Hashtag activists weren’t quite finished with the case, though. On July 15, news broke that one of the jurors from the Zimmerman trial had scored some kind of book deal with the agent Sharlene Martin. Thousands of people tweeted at Martin to abandon the book — which she promptly did.

“Black Twitter watchers know the power of the swarm,” wrote BuzzFeed’s Shani O. Hilton in a feature on what she calls “the power of Black Twitter.” “That obsessive and focused online conversation has gone from being a source of entertainment — and outside curiosity — to a cultural force in its own right.”

#NotYourAsianSidekick

A dope collection of #NotYourAsianSidekick tweets compiled by @ArtistMaeLee, b/c Storify confuses my eyes. <http://t.co/6x7yWnlMFh>

— Jimmy J. Aquino (@JimmyJAquino) December 16, 2013

And that’s one of the profound benefits of hashtag activism: The amplification of minority voices that other forms of media — or even other forms of activism — have historically ignored. That helps explain why feminist groups, for instance, have been so eager to jump on the hashtag train. (“The Hashtag Is Mightier than the Sword,” proclaimed one article in Ms.) It also explains why Suey Park, perhaps Twitter’s foremost hashtag activist of late, has become such a polarizing figure.

Perhaps you haven’t heard of Park, but you’ve surely seen her “movements.” In December, the 20-something activist and freelance writer launched the tag #NotYourAsianSidekick to prompt discussion of Asian-American feminism and media representation. Three months later, after an account affiliated with Comedy Central’s “The Colbert Report” tweeted a contextless (and apparently racist) joke about Asians, Park lit up Twitter with the hashtag #CancelColbert.

#CancelColbert because racist humor comes from racism.

– Suey Park (@suey_park) March 27, 2014

#NotYourAsianSidekick and #CancelColbert were fundamentally different, despite sharing a founder and central theme. #NotYourAsianSidekick was about having a conversation — not terribly different from [#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen](#), or even the common Twitter chats of yore. But #CancelColbert appeared to target a specific, actionable policy, like #standwithPP before it. And lots of Colbert fans — pointing out, rightly, that the joke had actually been a critique of racism — did not take that suggestion well.

Park has since clarified that she just wanted to start a conversation about racism and racial humor — something she clearly accomplished, if not in the way she may have hoped. The hashtag has been tweeted 125,000 times. Think-pieces on the incident, of which there are many, frequently condemn the campaign as silly or ill-conceived.

“If we take #CancelColbert at face value, we can easily dismiss it as shrill, misguided, and frivolous,” wrote [Jay Caspian King](#) in [The New Yorker](#). “But after speaking to Park ... I wonder if we might be witnessing the development of a more compelling — and sometimes annoying and infuriating — form of protest, by a new group of Merry Pranksters, who are once again freaking out the squares in our always over reacting, always polarized online public sphere.”

#BringBackOurGirls

Our prayers are with the missing Nigerian girls and their families. It's time to [#BringBackOurGirls](#). -mo pic.twitter.com/gLDKDotJrt

– The First Lady (@FLOTUS) May 7, 2014

Let's be very clear, here: The people tweeting on this latest activist hashtag are in no way “merry pranksters,” and their objective does not involve “freaking out the squares.” But the online quest to free Nigeria's missing schoolgirls, if it can indeed be termed a quest, springs from this same varied, iterative tradition of social media activism. Accordingly, it suffers from two of the criticisms that have been leveled at #CancelColbert, #Kony2012, and a hundred other eclectic campaigns.

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First, critics argue, “hashtag activism” is lazy — it's a frictionless convenience, conducted from the safety of a computer screen, that often serves more as a flattering public symbol of concern than concern itself. More insidiously, some claim, these hashtags are often started not by the people they're supposed to help, but by privileged, pitying outsiders on the other side of the world, gender gap or class divide. That's what made #Kony2012 so vaguely icky. And that's what made #NotYourAsianSidekick and #JusticeforTrayvon so great — those hashtags transcended whatever paternalistic or imperialistic traditions may exist in traditional media and discourse, and gave a platform to an oft-disenfranchised group.

#BringBackOurGirls, for better or worse, doesn't fit neatly into either category. It was [started by Nigerians](#), but co-opted by outsiders. You can argue that it's lazy, but you can also argue that it's doing good. In the days since #BringBackOurGirls

began trending, the U.S., U.K. and France have all promised to aid Nigeria in its search for the girls; the U.S. alone will send a team of logistics and communications experts within the next few days.

Hashtag activism does deserve our skepticism and vigilance; there is, clearly, plenty of room for critique here. But it's neither fair nor particularly wise to dismiss the phenomenon out of hand. I'm inclined to agree with the writer and actress Clarke Wolfe's reply to Teju Cole:

@tejucole @RobertMackey Shaming people for awareness, even if it comes from a #, simplifies everything and also solves nothing (thanks).

— Clarke Wolfe (@clarkewolfe) May 8, 2014

http://www.washingtonpost.com/posttv/world/africa/angelina-jolie-speaks-out-on-nigerian-missing-girls/2014/05/09/d1df9b5c-6789-404a-a260-96446aabe03b_video.html

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