

# Hashtags and Human Rights: Activism in the Age of Twitter

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Social networks offer new campaign tools. Kacper Pempel/Reuters

For those of us working in the field of international affairs, it can often seem daunting to encourage public interest and engagement with global events when competing with pop culture.

In 2013, [a survey](#) claimed Americans read 12 times more stories about pop star Miley Cyrus twerking at the MTV Awards than about the escalating situation in Syria, despite online media devoting twice as many articles to U.S. intervention there.

The culture of celebrity is such that, [according to a U.N. staff member](#) at the Special Court of Sierra Leone, "90 minutes on the witness stand by [supermodel] Naomi Campbell has given the issue of blood diamonds and the war crimes alleged against Charles Taylor more coverage worldwide than it's had combined in the three years the trial has been underway."

With this in mind, building engagement with the work of international institutions and concern about conflict overseas can seem an overwhelming and joyless task. To learn more I researched how two campaigns concerning human rights and international justice—Kony 2012 and #bringbackourgirls—went viral, and how they can provide a new approach for thinking about public outreach, engagement, and relationship-building.

I then examined three other recent Twitter and Facebook campaigns, #nomakeupselfie, the Ice Bucket Challenge and #yesallwomen, to think further about what can actually be achieved through social networking.

Despite the ongoing investigations, trials and first verdict of the International Criminal Court, nothing about its work seized the public imagination as much as the half-hour ["Kony 2012" video](#) released by the organization Invisible Children in March 2012.

Invisible Children aimed to make Kony a household name for his war crimes in Uganda as leader of the Lord's Resistance Army. The video's high production values, together with the skillful narrative and emotional voice-over, ensured it resonated deeply with viewers. It has been viewed nearly 100 million times on YouTube, while the hashtag #stopkony became the number one trending topic on Twitter and was used millions of times.

Just over two years later, after hundreds of schoolgirls were kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria, Nigerian activists started using the hashtag #bringbackourgirls on Twitter to start a grassroots campaign to draw attention to the inaction of the Nigerian government. This was seized on by the Nigerian diaspora and spread worldwide, with people ranging from Michelle Obama to Puff Daddy showing their support by tweeting pictures of themselves holding up signs featuring the hashtag.

Both campaigns took off extremely quickly, trending worldwide in days. This overwhelming support from social networking then led to widespread coverage in the mainstream media and official responses from governments

under pressure from this public interest. In both situations, individuals were moved to the extent that they wanted to show support and hoped this would result in some sort of action.

However, it is here that the complications begin. Given the format of Twitter and Facebook, the messages around the search for Kony and the situation regarding intervention in Nigeria were necessarily simplified. Instead of understanding the complexity of the Ugandan situation, it became "Find Kony," despite the fact he had not been in Uganda for years.

With #bringbackourgirls, instead of considering how the Nigerian government and surrounding region could respond to Boko Haram's actions, people living abroad were pressing their own governments toward intervention because they did not know what other possibilities existed. As both campaigns spread, a backlash developed with people criticizing the aims and objectives of the campaigns.

However, defining the aims and objectives of each campaign was problematic, since the campaigns went "viral" and reached far beyond what was hoped. Millions of people tweeted their support, but for different reasons. There was no easy solution and no obvious next steps in either case for the international community or Nigerian government respectively.

Because of this, opposing voices called for in-depth analysis around the specificities of each situation, as well as questioning more broadly what was actually achievable. Jumoke Balgun [claimed in \*The Guardian\*](#) that "the United States military loves your hashtags because it gives them legitimacy to encroach and grow their military presence in Africa," while [Teju Cole criticized](#) both campaigns. He dismissed the support for Kony 2012 as part of the white savior industrial complex resulting in a "big emotional experience that validates privilege," and [critiqued](#) #bringbackourgirls as a wave of "global sentimentality."

There is some validity to Cole's concerns and it could be very easy to dismiss

these campaigns as armchair activism or clicktivism. But for those of us who want to promote human rights and advocate for accountability, the groundswell of support started by the campaigns can show us a positive way forward.

First, the huge interest through social networking channels led to the debates being given space in the mainstream media. Whether supporting or criticizing the campaign, this enabled the general public to explore the situation more deeply and to approach it in a new way. It is true that awareness alone does not achieve anything, but opening up a politicized space is a good start.

Secondly, although it may seem that there is an overwhelming amount of content to compete with for people's attention, the multitude of ways in which people consume information means there are also more opportunities for people to share information, discuss and follow issues they are interested in and educate themselves further.

Finally, and most importantly, the changing methods of social networking and engagement provide a way to connect people with human rights and international affairs issues that may have seemed too distant to be relevant or to do anything about.

At the heart of these issues are matters to do with life and death, which have a strong emotional resonance. The two campaigns show that when people are able to look beyond the headlines to the individuals affected—the child soldiers in the case of Kony, and the kidnapped schoolgirls in the case of #bringbackourgirls—this leaves a profound impression.

But how can we move beyond this personal reaction, which Cole would criticize as only "sentimentality," to thinking about how these campaigns could have a broader impact?

In the case of the #nomakeupselfie, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram users

[were able to achieve something](#) nearly straight away: the raising of \$3.14 million in 48 hours and \$12.57 million in six days in March 2014 for the charity Cancer Research.

The meme seems to have taken off after author Laura Lippman posted a selfie of herself without makeup after criticism of actor Kim Novak's appearance at the Oscars. As the trend for posting photos with no makeup on went viral, at some point women started adding the hashtag #beatcancer or #cancerawareness and nominated their friends to do the same.

As the #nomakeupselfie started spreading through Facebook, some users started questioning exactly what these photos had to do with cancer awareness and what they could really achieve, resulting in a great deal of criticism filling newsfeeds. At this stage, people were just posting photos with #nomakeupselfie, #cancerawareness and no other information.

This coincided with the fact that other concerned users alerted Cancer Research, questioning whether the charity was directly involved. In response, Cancer Research began asking people to add donation requests and a text number to their posts.

Thus individuals came under pressure to add donation details to their posts and some women also posted the receipts to show the donations they had made. In the first 24 hours, Cancer Research received 800,000 text donations.

At its beginning, this campaign exemplified the criticisms of slacktivism. People wanted to post photos of themselves, receive "likes" on their photos and positive comments about their appearance without makeup, and it made them feel good that it was part of "cancer awareness," despite the lack of any sort of action linked to it.

The idea of "raising awareness" of cancer in general is in itself a vague goal. Although those taking part should be congratulated for raising such a substantial amount of money, the success of the campaign really came from

the growing social pressure to include donation details.

A few months later, the Ice Bucket Challenge became a worldwide phenomenon raising \$98.2 million for the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Association between July 29 and August 28 2014. The Ice Bucket Challenge involved posting videos of the participant's reaction to having a bucket of iced water poured over him or her, and was far more celebrity-driven than #nomakeupselfie.

The participants (including [Oprah Winfrey](#), [Justin Bieber](#), [George W. Bush](#) and [Bill Gates](#)) then nominated other people to do the challenge within 24 hours or donate to the charity. Similarly to the approach of Cancer Research, [ALS took advantage](#) of the widespread media coverage and support despite not having planned the campaign.

[Critical responses](#) focused on the narcissism of those involved, people who did not donate and the waste of water. Criticisms were also directed at the charity, including their involvement in animal testing and stem cell research. In addition, there was some concern that this was drawing attention away from other causes when ALS affects a relatively small number of people.

However, the ALS Association is now in a position to triple its spending on research into treating and curing the disease and the recorded increase in visits to the ALS association website and ALS Wikipedia page, and [Google searches show](#) that millions of people have informed themselves about ALS.

Unfortunately, although these two campaigns will be studied by fundraising department in charities across the world, they will be very hard to duplicate. It is incredibly difficult to plan for anything like this and [Upworthy's statement](#) "No-one knows anything" is important to remember when it comes to trying to predict what will go viral.

#YesAllWomen moves beyond the self-interest of the #nomakeupselfie and self-promotion of the Ice Bucket Challenge to demonstrate the power of

sharing experience through social networking. It has been highly successful in providing an empowering platform for women to speak out and come together in the aftermath of the [Isla Vista shootings](#) in late May 2014.

The remarks by [Elliot Rodger](#) in the YouTube video posted before he committed the murders portrayed his state of mind: "I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it." The Saturday after Rodger carried out his shooting, a twitter user named Kaye started using the hashtag.

As feminists tried to draw the link between Rodger's crime and the structural violence and threats women face on a day-to-day basis, they faced [the usual reply](#): "Not all men are like that." Through using #YesAllWomen, women could share the universality of their everyday experiences of sexism, discrimination, misogyny and violence to respond to this argument.

#YesAllWomen spread quickly as women tweeted their experiences and thoughts with the hashtag with over a million tweets shared by Sunday evening. In [Rebecca Sonjit's moving analysis](#), "the realms of gender shifted a little. They shifted not because of the massacre, but because millions came together in a vast conversational network to share experiences, revisit meanings and definitions, and arrive at new understandings."

As the debate about Rodger's killings continued, #YesAllWomen moved beyond the question of his motives to the broader issues women face every day and how they have to change their behavior accordingly. It is also an example of young feminists coming together and using social media to achieve their ends.

This widespread use has led Sonjit and others to say that this is a turning point for feminism in the United States. Time will tell if this is a watershed moment, but in any case the sharing and testimony have had a powerful impact on those involved.

Drawing on the experience of these five campaigns, how can we think about harnessing social networking to encourage engagement with international affairs, human rights and international justice, and to work toward change?

### **1) Use all the space that has now opened up on this topic**

Be prepared to capitalize on additional media coverage and see the inevitable backlash as an opportunity. All five campaigns took off virally and once they reached a certain level of popularity there was a backlash.

The backlash is not necessarily always negative in its effects, since we can participate in the debate at all stages. First, when the campaign first comes to prominence, we can highlight its importance, and secondly, as people are challenged to look more in-depth into the issues, we can provide information and discuss what can be achieved.

The short format of Twitter and Facebook posts means that things are being communicated in a shallow and simplified way. This should not be seen as a problem, but rather an opportunity to be used to create a space for discussion and explore issues in more detail.

### **2) Convert Twitter activity to active participation**

Be prepared to act and use a campaign as a platform when the opportunity arises. Cancer Research was not involved in the beginning of #nomakeupselfie but was able to guide later posts to include donation requests.

Another possibility would have been to ask people to include a link on risks, prevention, warning signs or diagnosis and treatment for certain cancers. For example, although some people specifically tagged #breastcancerawareness, they did not provide links to how women can check themselves.

The emotions driving the campaigns mean that people don't want to just stand by and do nothing, providing the opportunity to encourage action.

However, as all these viral campaigns show, any strategy needs to start being implemented in a matter of hours, since the trends last a few days at most.

### **3) Be aware of the privilege of social networking users versus the situation they are concerned with**

A criticism of the #nomakeupselfie was that Facebook users stating they were "brave" to post photos with no makeup seemed very insensitive when compared with the actual bravery of those living with cancer. This disconnect between supporters and the people they are purporting to help is also visible in #stopkony and #bringbackourgirls, where the majority of supporters are white Western Internet users giving their perspective on a situation they have only just learned about in Africa.

Although this is part of a broader conversation on human rights activism, it is definitely something to consider to ensure that a perceived disconnect does not undermine the aims of the campaign.

### **4) Count the number of campaigns**

Following the success of these viral campaigns, many charities, NGOs and human rights activists will seek to launch their own. The sheer number of campaigns could be confusing and dilute the overall messages if some are considered similar.

For example, around the time of #bringbackourgirls, some photos started circulating of celebrities such as Sean Penn holding signs saying "Real Men Don't Buy Girls." These seemed to be supporting the key message of #bringbackourgirls. However, these photos were actually recycled from a 2011 campaign about sex trafficking. This shows how easily messages can be confused, especially when it is unclear when photos were taken.

The June 2014 global summit on Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict in London had a number of social networking strategies attached to it,

including a Twitter campaign #Timetoact. Instead of starting a completely new campaign, the summit could have thought about using #bringbackourgirls as a platform to show that the situation in Nigeria is not a one-off but just a single example of what women and girls face in conflict every day.

Now that it has recognition, the hashtag could be used to press for accountability, reminding states of their obligations for protection and prevention. Instead, although there has been good press coverage because of the presence of Angelina Jolie and celebrity tweeters, #Timetoact has been used a couple of hundred thousand times to date, which is successful but could have had greater reach with links to other campaigns.

### **5) Tweeting and Facebook sharing is not enough**

Twitter and Facebook activity needs to be integrated with real world campaigns. Real interaction and engagement comes from action taken on the part of users. This needs to directly connect with the cause and have a visible impact.

Despite the hundreds of millions of views and millions of pledges of support, a night of action organized by Invisible Children a few weeks after the Kony 2012 video went viral was [very poorly attended](#). This was partly due to the [growing criticism of the campaign](#) but also shows how important it is that social networking needs to be tied to grassroots action.

### **6) Explore the way social networking facilitates the ability to bear witness and share testimony**

Finally, as shown by #YesAllWomen, there is something powerful in seeing hundreds of thousands of voices speaking on the same subject and sharing experiences. People can look and respond in their own time and make connections with others. This needs to be considered more fully and could be the basis for a number of testimonial campaigns.

It is clear that there remains a great deal of discussion and research to be done on this topic. It is impossible to set out to create "the next" Kony 2012 or #Bringbackourgirls with a sure hope of success. In addition, the thorny question remains of whether social networking can result in long-term meaningful engagement.

Nevertheless, we should be optimistic that a new space has been created which provides an opportunity for education and a platform for action. For issues to do with international affairs, international justice and human rights that can seem far away, social networking provides the opportunity to make them feel real and closer to home.

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