Evaluating hashtag activism: Examining the theoretical challenges and opportunities of #BlackLivesMatter

Diana Zulli,

Purdue University, Indiana, USA

Abstract:
This paper argues for the reexamination of hashtag activism from the theoretical frameworks of liveness and appropriation. Scholarly discussions of online activism have, for the most part, focused on if and how technology revolutionizes social and political movements. Going in a different direction, I contend that scholars should examine how specific mechanisms for participation, such as the hashtag, enable and/or constrain online activism. Using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag as an illustrative example, this paper argues that hashtags are limited by the digital and social construction of liveness, and are too easily appropriated. The implications of these limitations and considerations for future hashtag use are discussed.

Keywords: hashtag activism, social media, liveness, appropriation, #BlackLivesMatter

Introduction

It began as a rallying cry protesting the 2012 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of African American teenager Trayvon Martin. It resurfaced after the deaths of African Americans Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014. Motivated by three simple words, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has turned into an internationally recognized and formidable online hashtag that draws attention to anti-Black racism. In some important respects, #BlackLivesMatter illustrates the potential of online activism. Digital technology and specific features of social media, like the hashtag, are beneficial to creating awareness, changing discourses, and encouraging widespread participation (e.g., Aday et al., 2010; Byrd, Gilbert, & Richardson, 2017; Myles, 2019). As digital technology creates spaces for discussions to occur, political issues can gain global attention in a matter of minutes.

At the same time, digital technology is criticized as a means of activism. A common critique is that online activism is really 'slacktivism' wherein digital technology users are only involved in a movement insofar as participation is easy and convenient compared to traditional or offline activism that requires a much greater time and physical investment (Gladwell, 2010). Even though digital technology enables widespread participation, scholars have found evidence that power imbalances still exist and only a select few are likely to be influential in the online space (Haunss, 2015; Jenkins, 2014; Stier, Schünemann, & Steiger, 2018). Given these contradictory perspectives, it is clear that there are advantages and disadvantages to online activism. Thus, continuing to compare online activism to offline activism, which is how many of these advantages and disadvantages have been determined (e.g., Gladwell, Haunss, 2015), is both uncritical of, and unproductive to, the study of online social movements, as this approach does not consider how each digital mechanism contributes to the advancement of political agendas.

Thus, this paper takes a different approach by isolating hashtags as a unique mechanism for online activism. Hashtags are central to social media activism, which has often also been dubbed *hashtag activism*. To this end, this paper proposes two theoretical frameworks for evaluating and improving hashtag activism, using the illustrative example of #BlackLivesMatter. Extending and combining the theoretical frameworks of liveness and appropriation, I argue that hashtags 1) are episodic and can sometimes be too dependent on specific events to start and continue a movement, which is problematic for sustainability, and 2) are subject to lexical and symbolic appropriations, which allows for easy contestation and opposition. This theoretical discussion is then used to discuss considerations for future hashtag use.

Digital Technology and Online Activism

To build a framework for assessing hashtag activism, it is necessary to elaborate on the debates surrounding digital technology and political participation. In a critical review of the literature on mediated social and political movements, Haunss (2015) catalogs a range of perspectives ranging from cyber-optimism to cyber-pessimism regarding how technology has affected these movements. As a central reference for cyber-optimism, Jenkins (2006) initially argued that the advent of digital technology gave rise to a participatory culture, where the audience was 'empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media', demanding 'the right to participate within the culture' (p. 24). Following this perspective, one of the most notable functions of digital technology for activism is its ability to facilitate widespread attention to social and political issues. Scholars have argued that digital technology serves as a means of framing political dissent that brings together diverse populations with a central purpose at little to no cost (Byrd et al., 2017; Freelon, McIlwain, Clark, 2016; Myles, 2019). The Egyptian and Tunisian protests provide early evidence of how digital technology could be used to jump-start these protests by turning fractured, localized, and individualized dissent into a cohesive community (Howard & Hussain, 2011). In the current context, tweets that included

#BlackLivesMatter have amplified specific cases of police violence, raised awareness for systemic racism, and unified individuals around a singular cause (Barnard, 2018).

Similarly, scholars have found evidence that digital media functions as a news reporting mechanism during times of political crisis (Barnard, 2018; Bruns & Highfield, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011). During the Egyptian and Tunisian protests, mass media often turned to Twitter to learn about the events on the ground as reported by average individuals (Lotan et al., 2011). The tweets, posts, and hashtags supplied by Egyptian and Tunisian protestors were critical to providing mainstream media the information they then disseminated through official channels. Even mainstream journalists now frequently turn to social media as a means of news reporting during social and political unrest. In the aftermath of Michael Brown's death, for example, journalists in Ferguson, Missouri, tweeted updates using #Ferguson to mark their on-the-ground coverage (Barnard, 2018).

A third claim made by cyber-optimists is that the use of digital technology as an activism tool helps to attract external attention and extends the sphere of influence to offline actions (Aday et al., 2010; Freelon et al., 2016; Mundt, Ross, & Burnett, 2018). Online dissent reaches a much broader audience than offline dissent alone. Through digital technology, international audiences, the mainstream media, and politicians can learn about and report on social movements happening around the world. Digital technology can function to increase recognition of political causes, which can put dissent on the political and discursive agenda of other countries (Aday et al., 2010). Moreover, digital technology has proven to be an effective mechanism for more formal movement creation. For the Black Lives Matter movement, social media activity (e.g., tweeting the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter) preceded offline organizing (Freelon et al., 2016) and was critical to establishing ties and mobilizing external resources offline, thus extending the movement's reach and influence (Mundt et al., 2018).

Despite some scholarly evidence that digital technology better facilitates, and in some cases fully enables, political activism, Haunss (2015) argues that digital technology does not address the most pressing issues for activists (e.g., power hierarchies that disadvantage marginalized voices, truly affecting offline politics), but merely alters the conditions for activism. Consequently, the use of digital technology is more accurately considered complementary to traditional means of activism, rather than wholly revolutionary. That is, many internet-based forms of protest such as website hacking, email bombing, or virtual protests often enabled by hashtags merely replicate offline forms of protest such as physical demonstrations, sit-ins, blockades, etc. (Haunss, 2015). In other words, the internet did not create these strategies but simply enhances the visibility of these efforts. Within this vein of cyber-pessimism, a common critique is that online activism is *slacktivism*, implying that those who participate in online movements are lazy and only committed to a cause insofar as it is convenient and effortless (e.g., Gladwell, 2010; Glenn, 2015). Digital technology makes political involvement simple, yet this type of *couch advocacy* is argued to be emblematic of low emotional attachment (e.g., tweet it then leave

it), weak ties (e.g., little interaction between members), and little meaningful impact (Gladwell, 2010).

Beyond the obvious challenges of slacktivism, scholars have questioned digital technology's ability to truly affect offline politics (Aday et al., 2010; Morozov, 2010; Mundt et al., 2018). During the 2009 Iranian protests, the Iranian government shut down access to several social media sites, signaling the government's recognition and fear of digital media activism. Morozov (2010) argues that censorship is not a valid indicator of authoritarian regimes losing their power. Rather, censorship represents a simple and efficient way of controlling the population. In the context of Black Lives Matter, Mundt et al., (2018) suggest that 'social media, on its own, cannot build and/or sustain movements for social change' (p. 10). It is one thing for online users to tweet their outrage over an incident, but it is another thing for meaningful policies and reforms to be developed in response. Thus, Aday et al. (2010) caution future scholars to not equate awareness with effect or influence.

A third critique raised by cyber-pessimists is that digital technology exacerbates or, at the very least, reflects power imbalances present in offline activist/broadcast models. In an updated conceptualization of participatory culture, Jenkins (2014) acknowledges that knowledge and access gaps exclude some people from contributing to networked cultures. Consequently, scholars have found that only a few voices are likely to be truly influential in online spaces. For instance, in an examination of tweets invoking #ClimateChange and #NetNeurality, Stier et al., (2018) found that online policy discussions surrounding these issues were primarily dominated by traditional actors such as regulatory agencies and politicians, not by public voices. This research suggests that digital technology and user-generated content are less revolutionary and egalitarian than previously thought.

Hashtags and Digital Counterpublics

In between the poles of cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists are those who acknowledge that technology functions as part of the communication 'toolbox' used by political activists (Haunss, 2015, p. 28, see also Earl, Kimport, Prieto, Rush, & Reynoso, 2010). This perspective follows Jenkins' (2014) urge to 'pull back from the utopian and dystopian rhetoric and offer a more nuanced account of the different mechanisms for participation' (p. 273). One particular mechanism for participation that this paper attempts to theoretically nuance is the hashtag. Proposed in 2007 by technologist Chris Messina, the hashtag was designed to filter discussions and contextualize conversations that occur in an online context (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Hashtags can be used in a variety of ways—to mark an ironic or satiric post, to signal the content of a post, to connect to a community or lifestyle—resulting in issue publics that converge around a topic or event (Deller, 2011; Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2020). Participation in hashtag activism is fluid as users can directly participate (i.e., use the hashtag), observe from afar (i.e., just follow a hashtag), or discontinue allegiance if the direction of the hashtag deviates from a user's understanding of it.

Digital technology generally, and hashtags specifically, provide a unique opportunity for counterpublics to emerge in the online world (Jackson et al., 2020). Counterpublics are

central to the discussion of political activism because they seek to legitimize marginalized voices and challenge dominant knowledge structures often found in mainstream discourse (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). Given the advantages of digital technology mentioned above (e.g., enabling widespread awareness to social and political issues, increasing access to protest for those with physical restrictions), scholars argue that social networking sites are generally the first space where marginalized voices can be articulated in their aggregate to publics outside their own groups (Leung & Lee, 2014). Moreover, social media and the hashtag particularly facilitate the virality of counterpublics as circulation is often structurally engineered into each social media platform (e.g., 280-characters, easy adoption of hashtags) (Penney & Dadas, 2014).

When discussing #BlackLivesMatter as a counterpublic, it is important to consider a second counterpublic that shapes and is shaped by #BlackLivesMatter: 'Black Twitter' (see Brock, 2012; Hill, 2018). Described as a 'virtual community of Twitter users engaged in real-time discourses primarily related to Black American culture and politics,' (Hill, 2018, p. 287), Black Twitter's prominence and recognition was due, in part, to hashtags and the algorithmic ordering of Twitter, which facilitated mass attention to these hashtags (Brock, 2012). Moreover, scholars argue that many longstanding traditions in African American communities, such as linguistic creativity and performativity, playful discursive style, and communal word-play, among others, map well onto the restricted character limit of Twitter posts and hashtags (e.g., Florini, 2014). Because Twitter marks hashtags with large engagement as 'trending,' many conversations within Black Twitter have gone viral, engendering widespread attention to social and political issues relevant to African American communities, redefining opportunities for organizing, and enabling Black users to more visibly resist the systems and narratives that result in their oppression (Hill, 2018), including #BlackLivesMatter. As a result, Black Twitter was, and continues to be, an important contributor to the spread and influence of the Black Lives Matter movement online.

Following Jenkins' (2014) call to provide a more nuanced critique of how digital technology enables and constrains political participation, and given how hashtags uniquely enable counterpublics, I argue for a more critical examination of hashtags as an activism mechanism. In particular, this paper works from the position that there is value in understanding the online world as its own unique space. I argue that hashtags have a distinct, separate value apart from associated offline movements and can usefully be evaluated as (online) entities in their own right. This orientation to hashtags follows Edelman's (1988) perspective that language creates political realities. According to Edelman (1988), it is the '*language* about political events, *not the events in any other sense*, that people experience' (p. 104; emphasis added). Hashtags as a discursive device are worthy of critical inquiry by the fact that many online users attach hashtags to posts to signal their experiences as part of a larger social and political conversation, apart from offline participation (Freelon et al., 2016).

#BlackLivesMatter: An Illustrative Example

To examine the theoretical challenges of hashtag activism, I turn my attention now to the important hashtag and counterpublic #BlackLivesMatter. On February 26, 2012, 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by George Zimmerman, a self-proclaimed neighborhood watch captain, in the name of self-defense. After Zimmerman's acquittal in 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi reacted by posting #BlackLivesMatter to their respective social media sites (McLaughlin, 2016). In reflecting on their motivations for starting #BlackLivesMatter, Garza explains that the hashtag was designed to 'connect people who are already buzzing about this stuff' and to 'offer an alternative. An inspirational message: Black lives matter' (Meyerson, 2016, para. 9, 12). Unfortunately, it was not until the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, and the subsequent grand jury decision not to indict the officers in question over a year later, that #BlackLivesMatter gained traction in the national consciousness (McLaughlin, 2016). On November 24th, 2014 alone—the date of Wilson's indictment decision—#BlackLivesMatter was tweeted 103,319 times (Freelon et al., 2016). #BlackLivesMatter was consistently tweeted from that point on, averaging over 10,000 tweets per day from January to May 2015.

It is important to note that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and the Black Lives Matter network offline are not entirely synonymous, even though these terms are often used interchangeably (Blevins, Lee, McCabe, & Edgerton 2019; Bock & Figuero, 2018; Freelon et al., 2016). The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter originated in 2013 and remained the only marker of this movement for over a year. Eventually, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi organized chapter-based divisions of Black Lives Matter (BLM), which are much more formal compared to the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and must be approved by a centralized authority (Freelon et al., 2016). Although BLM chapters use #BlackLivesMatter (in addition to traditional activist tools such as protests, petitions, etc.), not all individuals who invoke the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag are members of or active with the BLM organization. Therefore, I follow Yang (2016) and Blevins et al. (2019) in their methodological choice in observing the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag separately from the offline BLM movement because the 'national online conversation about police brutality' online includes 'participants not affiliated with an official Black Lives Matter chapter' (Freelon et al., 2016, p. 9).

Focusing only on the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag is appropriate and consistent with previous scholarship as hashtag activism is structurally and discursively different from offline activism. In a critical discussion of #BlackLivesMatter, Yang (2016) showed how hashtag activism has a distinct narrative character that includes storytelling, increased personalization, and the creation of a 'contentious collective' (p. 14). Furthermore, although all hashtags function to index conversations online, not all hashtags are oriented toward change and action (e.g., perennial tags like #ootd or #phdchat would not be considered 'activist' hashtags). The emphasis on personalized storytelling for collective action, in particular, distinguishes hashtags from offline tactics such as signing a petition or attending a protest. Because hashtag activism centers discourse as the mode of argument, compared to the body during a protest, scholars also argue that hashtag activism has the potential to

cut across a greater variety of topics (see Gallagher, Reagan, Danforth, & Dodds, 2018). Consistent with the above literature, then, I consider the hashtag as a specific mechanism for participation that is worthy of evaluation (see also Ince, Rojas, Davis, 2017). In doing so, I make no critique of the BLM movement, but rather use the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag as a necessary, albeit incomplete means of illustrating the theoretical challenges of, and opportunities for, hashtag activism.

Analyzing #BlackLivesMatter: Evaluating Hashtag Activism

This article aims to provide useful theoretical frameworks for evaluating hashtag activism, paying particular attention to the role of digital affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Myles, 2019). As a basis for this theoretical discussion (i.e., identifying relevant theories and subsequently illustrating the theoretical insights gained from these theories), non-participant observations (see Barnard, 2018; Myles, 2019; Yang, 2016) and a platform studies approach (see Bogost & Montford, 2009) were utilized.

Non-participant observations include observing 'events, activities, and interactions with the aim of gaining a direct understanding of a phenomenon in its natural context' (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010, p. 609). Specifically, non-participant observations were conducted as I adopted a more 'distant and separate role' having 'no contact whatsoever with the researched' (Mills et al., 2010, p. 610). I did not participate in #BlackLivesMatter discussions, never tweeting, retweeting, or commenting on posts, but merely observed the discussions using the hashtag. Given that the object of investigation is a technological artifact (i.e., the hashtag), I also drew from platform studies. Platform studies is a 'set of approaches which investigate the underlying computer systems that support creative work,' or in this case, online activism (Bogost & Montfort, 2009, p. 1).

Observations of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag were conducted on Twitter and Facebook between December 2014 and December 2015. Through these observations, it became apparent that #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter were also prominently used in the discussion that came out of #BlackLivesMatter and were included in subsequent observations. Observations were conducted nearly every day during December 2014 due to the prominence of #BlackLivesMatter right after Officer's Wilson's indictment decision. Observations were conducted approximately once a week between January and December 2015. These observations took the form of searching for the hashtag on Twitter and Facebook and reading through the posts that were returned until the point of saturation, which occurs when 'further observations begin to add little or nothing to researchers' understanding' (Mills et al., 2010, p. 610). Because the goal of these observations was to prompt a theoretical discussion, a grounded theory approach to analysis was followed. Grounded theory is an inductive qualitative research approach aimed at theory identification and development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory emphasizes the need for bottom-up theorization derived from the empirical data collected for analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Initial observations revealed two trends of hashtag use that aligned with/could be explained by prominent theoretical frameworks: liveness and

appropriation. These theoretical frameworks were then used to continue the observations as a means of refining the analysis.

The intention throughout this critique was to promote a theoretical discussion of how hashtags function as a means of online activism. The strength of theory and example-based research is that it provides unique insights into a specific phenomenon. However, I recognize that there are biases associated with this approach, such as researcher subjectivity, data selectivity, and input/output algorithmic biases (see Mills et al., 2010; Kulshrestha et al., 2017). While scholars are still grappling with how to overcome algorithmic biases, I attempted to mitigate my subjectivity in two ways. First, I observed hashtags during moments of both high and low activity over a significant period of time (i.e., December 2014 when #BlackLivesMatter activity was at an all-time high and throughout 2015 when there was not always a specific episode driving the hashtag use). Doing so ensured that my evaluation of hashtag activism was not clouded by any one moment of hashtag use. Second, I opted not to operate a personal Twitter account during the analysis timeframe. Doing so mitigated content filtering/biased interpretations based on the personalization of social media content (see Kulshrestha et al., 2017). With this in mind, I now turn my attention to two theoretical frameworks that usefully reveal potential challenges of hashtag activism: liveness and appropriation.

Liveness and Episodic Hashtags

The first challenge observed in hashtag activism is the tendency toward sporadic and episodic participation, which, theoretically, can be explained by/understood through the concept of 'liveness.' A commonality between #BlackLivesMatter and various other hashtags (e.g., #HandsUpDontShoot, #BringOurGirlsBack, #MeToo) is that they were created because of, and thus signal to some extent, specific events. Earl and Kimport (2011) claim that the focus on specific episodes is a feature of a 'new digital repertoire of contention' (p.179). Beyer (2011) agrees, suggesting that episodic protests are both common and anticipated online. This is due in part to what Couldry (2003, 2004, 2011) describes as 'liveness,' which is the 'live transmission' that 'guarantees a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening' (2003, p. 97). Liveness is often structurally engineered into digital technology and is produced through various features, such as the ability to continuously scroll on a 'newsfeed,' the constant flow of tweets, signals to 'trending topics,' and even Twitter's prompting question – 'What's Happening?' In these ways, among others, liveness is technologically coded into a platform's design. These features represent a main appeal of social media because they enable/encourage 'live' activity and connection to the world. Liveness also reflects the social perception that one must contribute to conversations as they are happening to be visible amidst the barrage of online citizen journalists and content creators (see Deller, 2011). The discourse surrounding liveness, then, 'naturalizes the idea that, through media, we achieve a shared attention to the realities that matter to us as a society' (Deller, 2011, p. 223).

Liveness, as a digitally and socially constructed notion, helps explain why hashtag activism is episodically oriented. The perception of liveness and the need to contribute to conversations as they happen results in many voices contributing to social and political movements at the same time. As single incidents spark deep-seated frustrations in a society, hashtags are often created and circulated. As a byproduct, hashtag activism resembles a flash-mob, where 'large numbers of people participate (and typically in short and episodic intervals)' (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 90). Thus, as events fall within the scope of a hashtag's message (e.g., a situation of police brutality or, on the flip side, a peaceful encounter with law enforcement), individuals will quickly organize around that event online.

There are three main challenges with the liveness and episodic hashtag activism. The first challenge is that hashtag activity can dissipate just as quickly, if not quicker, than it was created. As time passes, the gap between the motivating event (e.g., police brutality) and the use of the hashtag associated with that event becomes greater and greater. Without new events to captivate national attention and indicate a larger systemic issue at hand, active use of the hashtag is likely to decrease. An unfortunate result of episodic hashtags, then, is possible loose affective attachment to the movement. As events come and go, there is less chance for the formation of a collective identity, which is cited as a factor for sustained movements (Earl & Kimport, 2011). As Earl and Kimport (2011) argue, 'We should not expect movements to endure online when sustained mobilization is not needed or is likely to be ineffective' (quoted in Earl, 2015, p. 42).

Another unfortunate result of 'live' hashtag activism is the trivialization of social and political issues that do not capture Twitter's attention. Not every moment of racism, sexism, sexual violence, etc. will garner national online attention, yet they certainly contribute to the normalization and continuation of such problematic behavior. If a 'live' technical and social environment creates flash mob attention to only the *exemplar* cases of social and political discrimination/abuse, then, likely, certain experiences, identities, or voices that should be included in the hashtag's orientation and discourse but which are not, will be overlooked or dismissed.

The third challenge with liveness and episodic hashtags is that focusing on singular episodes potentially leads viewers to attribute responsibility to individuals involved with the incident rather than the government, other institutions, or society at large to the extent that the systemic roots of an issue go ignored (see Bennett, 2012; Iyengar, 1991). Since events compete for attention in the context of liveness, there is only so much time to examine events outside the actual incident that might contribute to larger systemic issues. As Bennett (2012) suggests, 'the isolation of stories from each other and from their larger contexts… make it difficult to see the causes of problems, their historical significance, or the connections across issues' (p. 47). Thus, as hashtags are created in the aftermath of specific incidents, the discussion is likely to revolve around the details of that event. For instance, in cases where police brutality is alleged, the emphasis is typically on whether or not the victim was involved in any criminal activity or had a record of wrongdoing. Debates engage questions of intent, lawfulness, responses to law enforcement, the use of excessive force,

etc. These questions, prompted by the specific details of the incident, turn the public's attention toward the victim. This tendency toward episodic hashtags, then, potentially diverts public attention off political officials/institutions and contributes to the trivialization of political issues.

There was evidence of these challenges in the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and subsequent creation of #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. First, all three hashtags were originated and popularized by particular deaths. #BlackLivesMatter was primarily a response to Trayvon Martin's death but gained traction with Michael Brown and Eric Garner's deaths (Freelon et al., 2016). Similarly, #BlueLivesMatter started after law enforcement officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos were killed (Geller, 2014). And while #AllLivesMatter was not a direct response to an isolated incident, it challenged the belief that the deaths of Martin, Garner, and Brown were indicative of any larger social, cultural, and political indifference toward black lives (e.g., Brazile, 2015; Carney, 2016). Instead, #AllLivesMatter suggested that Martin, Garner, Brown, and others were unique incidents and not representative of law enforcement abuses of the law in general, so its creation, too, was the result of singular events.

Through the observations it became clear that as memories of Martin, Brown, Garner, and others faded away, the amount of attention #BlackLivesMatter received online also dissipated, a reality substantiated by subsequent reports of #BlackLivesMatter usage. Even though #BlackLivesMatter continues to be tweeted, the numbers are not nearly as staggering (Anderson, Toor, Rainie, & Smith, 2018). While the conversations of systemic racism and police brutality continued to be relevant during the analysis timeframe as there were always new tweets and posts that incorporated #BlackLivesMatter, without new incidents to point to as examples of this widespread trend, I observed that it became easier for some to dismiss these cases as anomalies and not representative of an enduring social and political condition. As Kamarck (2015) further explains, 'The problem with #BlackLivesMatter…is that in 2014 these movements could not shake the sparking incident. The bigger ideas were drowned out by debate around the details of Michael Brown's death and the focus on the grand jury indictment' (para. 50). Kamarck also suggested that the overwhelming focus on the grand jury decisions in the Martin, Brown, and Garner cases online overshadowed discussions of the larger problems in society and ways to fix them. Thus, while #BlackLivesMatter needed a dramatic and controversial incident to spark long-held frustrations and sentiments of racism, without new events, the hashtag use, and one can assume, the attention to the matter, decreased.

Because #BlackLivesMatter continues to be centered on specific events, with subsequent spikes in hashtag activity, the resurfacing of the hashtag in relation to these events allows opponents to pick apart the merits of each case, diverting attention away from the matter at the heart of #BlackLivesMatter: the systemic roots of racism. For instance, the Martin, Brown, and Garner incidents all had cloudy details regarding what happened and who was at fault (Dougherty, 2012; Mitchell, 2014). Was Martin walking home innocently when confronted by Zimmerman? Did Brown have his hands up in

defense? Were the police officers that choked Garner justified in their use of excessive force? Were the individuals innocent victims or were they involved in criminal activity at the time of their deaths? Unfortunately, these questions often shifted attention from the ideological underpinnings of #BlackLivesMatter and other hashtags associated with these events (i.e., #HandsUpDontShoot, which was another hashtag observed to be used in conjunction with #BlackLivesMatter that specifically referred to the Michael Brown Shooting).

Additionally, liveness and the episodic nature of #BlackLivesMatter allowed opponents to use lexically similar hashtags—#AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter—to draw attention to other incidents in an attempt to discursively discredit the validity of #BlackLivesMatter. It was observed that the deaths of Officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos just a few weeks after the grand jury decided not to indict Officer Pantaleo in Garner's death provided a direct counter reference to the deaths of Martin, Garner, and Brown, suggesting that the murders of police officers were as indiscriminate and targeted. #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter, then, were used to shift discursive focus from episode to episode. This observation demonstrates that hashtag use can, unfortunately, become a competition to win discursive and ideological attention that is predicated on the recurrence of incidents. Because of liveness, the more episodes that occur the more hashtag support for the issue; however, if nothing new happens, online activity dissipates.

Theoretically, if digital technology encourages live participation in political events by coding in opportunities for flash mob-like engagement, and users are socially conditioned to participate in political events as they are happening, then hashtag activism will likely be sporadic, reactive, and non-responsive to everyday inequality. When exemplar moments consistent with the orientation of a hashtag occur, online attention is reestablished and hashtag use spikes. While this trend is appropriate for a time (i.e., events are needed to highlight political issues) and each incident can serve as a resource for the movement, merely reacting to singular episodes potentially stunts a hashtag's ability to consistently draw attention to issues with severe social and political implications.

Appropriated Hashtags

The second challenge observed in hashtag activism is lexical (e.g., the actual words of the hashtag) and symbolic (e.g., the ideological meaning of the hashtag) appropriation. As mentioned above, contestation over #BlackLivesMatter resulted in the creation of the oppositional hashtags #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter may not have the widespread influence as #BlackLivesMatter (see Anderson et al., 2018), but their similar lexical form, ideological assumptions, and the timing of their use make these hashtags relevant to this discussion of hashtag activism (Gallagher et al., 2018). Similar to patterns observed during the analysis timeframe, the Pew Research Center reported that spikes in these oppositional hashtags, particularly #AllLivesMatter, paralleled that of #BlackLivesMatter (Anderson et al., 2018). Consequently, these hashtags functioned as a direct response to #BlackLivesMatter and thus enabled the opposition to more readily

contest and shift attention away from the issues and discussions surrounding #BlackLivesMatter.

The #BlueLivesMatter hashtag was the 'narrative that the #BlackLivesMatter movement is denigrating and endangering police officers with its rhetoric, further deteriorating the public's respect for the police' (Geller, 2014, para. 5). #AllLivesMatter attempted to challenge #BlackLivesMatter by suggesting that singling out a particular race was not a form of equality but rather promoted one race (African Americans) above others. Instead, #AllLivesMatter suggested that every life, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or orientation, should be valued. In doing so, Carney (2016) argues that #AllLivesMatter centered on 'color-blind politic' and 'depoliticized and deracialized the specificity of #BlackLivesMatter' (p. 191, 190). Critics of #AllLivesMatter said that this hashtag was dismissive, racist, and ignored a long history of racial discrimination (Brazile, 2015; Carney, 2016; Gallagher et al., 2018).

An obvious challenge to the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag during the observational period was that it was appropriated by #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter through similar hashtag wording and by exploiting the symbolic capital that #BlackLivesMatter had established. Appropriation refers to 'any instance in which means commonly associated with and/or perceived as belonging to another are used to further one's own ends' (Shugart, 1997, p. 210). Appropriation is about taking, co-opting, and inherently discrediting that which is taken from. Appropriation is about challenging the 'other,' whomever they may be and by whatever means are suitable to the ends. As such, appropriation is a popular strategy among marginalized groups because it allows them to reclaim and validate their identities through the same means utilized by their oppressors (Rowell, 1995; Shugart, 1997; Young, 2000).

At the center of appropriation is power (Ziff & Rao, 1997). Bottom-up appropriation, where disenfranchised groups appropriate from their oppressors, suggests a taking back of power. Top-down appropriation, where dominant cultures co-opt from an oppressed group, represents a 'special case of appropriation because it is done from a position of power and privilege' (Rowell, 1995, p. 138). In the case of top-down appropriation, we see 'the original meaning, which may pose a threat to the appropriator, is deconstructed, distorted, or destroyed, so that the perceived threat is undermined' (Shugart, 1997, p. 211). Another distinct form of appropriation relevant to this discussion is discursive appropriation, 'whereby the utterances (or speech acts) of one group are co-opted and used strategically by another group for their own sociopolitical gain' (Anspach, Coe, & Thurlow, 2007, p. 97). As Bourdieu (1991/1999) argues, discursive appropriation is similar to economic exchange, wherein the appropriator benefits from an already established lexical and symbolic capital. The appropriation is thus effective as its discursive construction is already ideologically loaded and familiar to a wide audience.

Top-down and discursive appropriation are particularly prominent in hashtag activism because personalized storytelling and experiences, compared to embodied protests or petition signing, are the dominant mode of argument (Yang, 2016). Discursive

appropriation was at work in the interactions of #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, and #AllLivesMatter. First, the hashtags #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter utilized a similar lexical structure, all three using 'LivesMatter' and thereby exploiting the capital already established by #BlackLivesMatter, with only slight alterations to fit their purposes. The hashtags were similar in that they implicated color as representative of a certain group (i.e., blue or Black), expressed deep frustrations for the current police/societal relations, and raised awareness to the disrespect and denigration of certain lives (Geller, 2014).

Beyond the obvious issue of #BlackLivesMatter's appropriation, which was that #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter attempted to co-opt the narratives and power of #BlackLivesMatter (see Carney, 2016), these appropriated hashtags also contributed to the society of the spectacle. According to Debord (1967), media [technology] functions as an apparatus for distracting the masses (through pacification in Debord's sense but diverting attention from real life issues, nonetheless). Kellner (2003) elaborated on this idea of mediated spectacles suggesting that the 'phenomena of media culture,' which are hashtags in the current context, can serve to 'dramatize its [individuals'] controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution' (p. 2). Following this perspective that technology enables sensationalized conflict, an additional issue with appropriated hashtags is the increased *debate* and *tension* that can arise because of the appropriation.

The appropriation of #BlackLivesMatter was not hidden or disguised, but rather was an active part of the discussion around these hashtags. As #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, and #AllLivesMatter users interacted in the online space, I observed that the discussion often turned to the legitimacy and ideological underpinnings of each hashtag, with social media users actively challenging whether or not each hashtag had the *right* to even exist and be used, rather than allowing each hashtag to exist as its own entity. This point is substantiated in recent research on #AllLivesMatter. For example, Gallagher et al. (2018) found that much of the conversation that invoked #AllLivesMatter involved proponents of #BlackLivesMatter debating whether the #AllLivesMatter hashtag was a valid argument or worldview. As individuals chose to discursively and symbolically with one side or another, individual, social, cultural, and political divides were further constituted and the spectacle endured. Simply put, because hashtags enable ideologically laden positions to be uniquely articulated and appropriated in the online space, hashtags have the potential to distract from and co-opt narratives that necessitate changes to the cultural and political landscape.

The contestation over these hashtags on social media exacerbated racial tensions both online and off, further diverting attention away from the systemic roots of racism implicated by #BlackLivesMatter. One such story observed to demonstrate the debates surrounding hashtag appropriation was that of Steven Hildreth, an African American and self-proclaimed gun enthusiast, and his peaceful encounter with law enforcement. After Hildreth posted about his peaceful encounter on Facebook under the hashtags #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, #BlackLivesMatter advocates began contesting his 'Blackness,' making death threats and discrediting his experiences. This story went viral on

social media during the time of analysis and was picked up by conservative news outlets as proof that police brutality is sporadic and only directed at those involved in criminal activity (see 'Black veteran,' 2015). Hildreth suggested his post was controversial because he challenged the narrative of #BlackLivesMatter, even though in his mind, hashtagging #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter was not a condemnation of #BlackLivesMatter, but rather specific to the encounter he had with law enforcement. Yet, the debates turned to the merits of his hashtag use and the appropriated hashtags altogether, which appeared to be the main concern. Unfortunately, what this example illustrates is that the lexical and symbolic appropriations of #BlackLivesMatter shifted attention from a unique set of conditions, which potentially made the use of hashtags part of the problem rather than the solution.

Discussion and Conclusion

This essay argues for the reexamination of hashtag activism from the theoretical perspectives of liveness and appropriation. This paper contends that hashtags have a unique value in the online world, namely that they enable counterpublics and confer the status of important socio-political movements. Hashtags also facilitate activism for those who cannot or do not want to engage offline. Thus, we should think critically about the challenges of hashtag activism and potential ways to make hashtag activism more efficacious in the future. Given this theoretical discussion, several points warrant attention.

First, critiques of hashtag activism should include a discussion about the way activists, particularly regular contributors to online protest discourse (Bastos & Mercea, 2016), can address some of the concerns raised by the theoretical discussion presented herein. Although a strength of hashtags is that they raise awareness to issues that might otherwise go unnoticed (see Aday et al., 2010), this awareness often results from sporadic engagement around specific incidents, emphasizing an individual's actions over hegemonic systems of oppression. To counter these limitations of liveness, activists should proactively and continuously solicit hashtag engagement between high profile cases. Activists should center activist hashtags—those oriented toward action and change—around everyday occurrences, effectively establishing their perennial presence over time. As one means of facilitating perennial hashtag activism, activists should be mindful to the ways different hashtags intersect and can interact to promote a more holistic narrative, such as creating sub-hashtags that engage different elements and identities that fall under the main hashtag (e.g., having sub-hashtags of #BlackLivesMatter that focus specifically on the experiences of Black women, men, adolescents, those who identify as transgender and non-binary, those with varying sexual orientations). Activists should also be mindful of how the heightened attention that will inevitably surround high profile cases can be used to educate users about the systemic roots of an issue and the tangible activities of associated (offline) organizations. Finally, hashtag users should be mindful about how engaging appropriated hashtags in their posts, even if utterances are oriented toward challenging the ideological underpinnings of the oppositional hashtag, can inflate the perceived support for a hashtag's

position. Although recent research does show that engaging counter-hashtags can prompt productive conversation and function as a meaningful form of activism (Foucault Welles & Jackson, 2019), disengaging could also mitigate some of the tensions that arise from hashtag appropriation.

Moreover, critiques of hashtag activism should also include a discussion about how hashtags function differently across social media sites, including who engineers/controls those options. Hashtag activism, is, to some extent, restricted by the features of each platform. Although users can adapt technology to fit their personal, relational, or activist needs (see Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2016), there are technological restrictions to online activism. Activists can solicit perennial hashtag engagement on Twitter but users will still be restricted to 280-characters, which limits the experiential detail they can offer about an issue. Activists can resist engaging oppositional hashtags to prevent inflated attention but the algorithmic abstraction of corporate social media prevents end-users from truly knowing how content gets sorted, filtered, and promoted (Bucher, 2018). Additionally, hashtag use on Twitter is very different than on other platforms. Whereas Twitter is primarily a discursive platform that prioritizes hashtags as a central mode of argument, Instagram, on the other hand, privileges photographic documentation of phenomena. Hashtags are certainly used by Instagram activists, yet users do not encounter hashtags as they scroll on Instagram's search feed unless they select an image to view or explicitly search for a hashtag. On Instagram, the visual composition of an image is more important to engagement than the corresponding caption or hashtag (Zulli, 2018). Accordingly, whereas the above recommendations are perhaps more appropriate for Twitter or Facebook, Instagram may require different discursive and technological strategies. As scholars continue to assess hashtag activism, they will do well to 'reverse engineer' popular social media sites (see Gehl, 2014) and be further probative about how technologies evolve in ways that enable or constrain political participation, especially for marginalized groups.

Scholars interrogating online activism should also continue to be cautious of the metrics used to determine hashtag 'success.' As demonstrated above, if the metric for success is raising awareness and weaving together affective publics (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Papacharissi, 2015), then hashtag activism has increased opportunities for political dissent. If the metric for success is offline 'impact,' such as policy reform (Aday et al., 2010), then hashtag activism may not be as effective. Because scholars have already demonstrated how #BlackLivesMatter is 'successful' as an online manifestation and tool for offline organizing, the goal of this analysis was to theoretically nuance our understanding of hashtag activism. This discussion was not an indictment of #BlackLivesMatter, nor the movement's use of the hashtag to raise awareness for racial discrimination. On the contrary, the fact that the hashtag is still being used indicates the hashtag's significance. However, I recognize as a limitation the successful/unsuccessful dichotomy often inherent to evaluations of online activism.

It is also important to note the limitations of theoretical research. Using one example to demonstrate theoretical insights often limits generalizability in the service of a greater

understanding of the phenomenon in question (see Mills et al., 2010). For this analysis, #BlackLivesMatter was selected due to its prominence during the analysis timeframe. #BlackLivesMatter is also considered one of the more 'successful' hashtags movements in recent history, lending itself well to the theoretical discussion herein. However, the theoretical frameworks proposed in this analysis are not specific to #BlackLivesMatter. Take for instance the recent #MeToo movement. Centering the experiences of sexual violence survivors, Tarana Burke first uttered 'Me Too' in 2007, but the hashtag did not receive mass attention until the 2017 Harvey Weinstein controversy when Alyssa Milano used the term (Garcia, 2017). The Pew Research Center (2018) shows how this movement is episodic in ways similar to #BlackLivesMatter. Again, while I argue that specific episodes are needed to spur collective action, a challenge associated with episodic #MeToo activity is that survivors (typically) must publicly reveal their experiences with sexual assault to participate in this movement. In between specific events when hashtag activity is low, survivors may be less inclined to reveal their trauma because collective attention to this issue (i.e., the hashtag use), and thus affirmation of experiences and support for victims, is less prominent in online discourse. Similar to my claims about #BlackLivesMatter, scholars are also increasingly concerned that the heightened visibility of #MeToo that results from high profile cases will be perceived as a solution to the problem of sexual violence, privileging discourse over material resolution (Zarkov & Davis, 2018). And there are discussions of cultural appropriation at work, although to my knowledge #MeToo has yet to be lexically appropriated with a similar hashtag. #MeToo was initially attributed to Alyssa Milano despite the phrase's decade-long use in Black activism (Garcia, 2017). #MeToo was said to have only received mass attention because celebrities and white victims co-opted the #MeToo narrative online (McCullers, 2018). There are thus tensions within the movement about who gets to speak and which experiences are captured and prioritized with the hashtag. Creating intersectional hashtags under #MeToo could usefully alleviate some of the tensions in this movement as well.

All things considered, this analysis hopefully contributes to the understanding of online activism and the use of hashtags to further social and political agendas. For now, this analysis moves us in the direction of better understanding the theoretical limitations of hashtag activism and opportunities for future use.

Biographical note:

Diana Zulli (Ph.D., University of Utah, 2018) is an assistant professor in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University. Her research interests include political discourse, communication theory, and digital technology. Contact: dzulli@purdue.edu.

References:

Aday, S., Farrell, H., Lynch, M., Sides, J., Kelly, J., & Zuckerman, E. (2010). Blogs and bullets: New media in contentious politics. *United States Institute of Peace*. Report no. 1-31.

Anderson, M., Toor, S., Rainie, Lee., & Smith, A. (2018, July 11). An analysis of #BlackLivesMatter and other Twitter hashtags related to political or social issues. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org.

Anspach, W., Coe, K., & Thurlow, C. (2007). The other closet?: Atheists, homosexuals and the lateral appropriation of discursive capital. *Critical Discourse Studies, 4*, 95-119.

Barnard, S. R. (2018). Tweeting# Ferguson: Mediatized fields and the new activist journalist. *New Media & Society*, *20*(7), 2252-2271.

Bastos, M. T., & Mercea, D. (2016). Serial activists: Political Twitter beyond influentials and the twittertariat. *New Media & Society*, *18*(10), 2359-2378.

Bennett, W. L. (2012). *News: The politics of illusion* (9th ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

Beyer, J. L. (2011). *Youth and the generation of political consciousness online*. Seattle: University of Washington, Department of Political Science.

'Black veteran gets death wishes after praising police on Facebook.' (2015, November 2). *Fox News Insider*. Retrieved from http://insider.foxnews.com

Blevins, J. L., Lee, J. J., McCabe, E. E., & Edgerton, E. (2019). Tweeting for social justice in #Ferguson: Affective discourse in Twitter hashtags. *New Media & Society*, 1-18.

Bock, M. A., & Figueroa, E. J. (2018). Faith and reason: An analysis of the homologies of Black and Blue Lives Facebook pages. *New Media & Society*, *20*(9), 3097-3118.

Bogost, I., & Montfort, N. (2009). Platform studies: Frequently questioned answers. *Digital Arts and Culture 2009*.

Bourdieu, P. (1991/1999). Language and symbolic power. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (eds.), *The discourse reader* (pp. 502–513). London: Routledge.

Brazile, D. (2015, July 22). Why 'all lives matters' misses the point. *CNN.* Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com

Brock, A. (2012). From the blackhand side: Twitter as a cultural conversation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(4), 529-549.

Bruns, A., & Burgess, J. E. (2011). The use of Twitter hashtags in the formation of ad hoc publics. In *Proceedings of the 6th European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference 2011*.

Bruns, A., & Highfield, T. (2012). Blogs, Twitter, and breaking news: The produsage of citizen journalism. In R. A. Lind (ed.). *Produsing theory in a digital world: The intersection of audiences and production in contemporary theory* (pp. 15-32)*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

Bucher, T. (2018). *If ... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2017). The affordances of social media platforms. In L. Sloane & A. Quan-Haase (eds.), *SAGE Handbook of Social Media* (pp. 233-253). London: SAGE.

Byrd, W. C., Gilbert, K. L., & Richardson Jr, J. B. (2017). The vitality of social media for establishing a research agenda on black lives and the movement. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *40*(11), 1872-1881.

Carney, N. (2016). All lives matter, but so does race: Black lives matter and the evolving role of social media. *Humanity & Society*, *40*(2), 180-199.

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Couldry, N. (2003). *Media rituals: A critical approach*. London: Routledge.

Couldry, N. (2004). Liveness, 'reality,' and the mediated habitus from television to the mobile phone. *The Communication Review*, *7*(4), 353-361.

Couldry, N. (2011). Making populations appear. In M. M. Kraidy, & K. Sender (eds.), *The politics of reality television: Global perspectives. Shaping inquiry in culture, communication and media studies* (pp.194-207). Routledge.

Debord, G. (1967). *Society of the spectacle*. France: Buchet-Chastel.

Deller, R. (2011). Twittering on: Audience research and participation using Twitter. *Participations*, *8*(1), 216-245.

Dougherty, M. B. (2012, March 26). Why lots of people think the media is wrong about the Trayvon Matin case. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from http://www.businessinsider.com

Earl, J. (2015). The future of social movement organizations: The waning dominance of SMOs online. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *59*(1), 35-52.

Earl, J., & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the Internet age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Earl, J., Kimport, K., Prieto, G., Rush, C., & Reynoso, K. (2010). Changing the world one webpage at a time: Conceptualizing and explaining Internet activism. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *15*(4), 425-446.

Edelman, M. (1988). *Constructing the political spectacle*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Evans, S. K., Pearce, K. E., Vitak, J., & Treem, J. W. (2016). Explicating affordances: A conceptual framework for understanding affordances in communication research. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *22*(1), 35-52.

Florini, S. (2014). Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin' Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter'. *Television & New Media*, *15*(3), 223-237.

Foucault Welles, B., & Jackson, S. J. (2019). The Battle for #Baltimore: Networked Counterpublics and the Contested Framing of Urban Unrest. *International Journal of Communication, 13.* 1699-1719. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/767.

Freelon, D. G., McIlwain, C. D., & Clark, M. D. (2016). Beyond the hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the online struggle for offline justice. *Available at SSRN*.

Gallagher, R. J., Reagan, A. J., Danforth, C. M., & Dodds, P. S. (2018). Divergent discourse between protests and counter-protests: #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. *PloS one*, *13*(4), e0195644.

Garcia, S. (2017, October 20). The woman who created #MeToo long before hashtags. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com.

Gehl, R. (2014). *Reverse engineering social media: Software, culture, and political economy in new media capitalism*. Temple University Press.

Geller, E. (2014, December 22). The rise of pro-police #BlueLivesMatter movement. *The Daily Dot.* Retrieved from http://www.dailydot.com.

Gladwell, M. (2010, October 4). Small change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com

Glaser, B, G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Glenn, C. L. (2015). Activism or 'slacktivism?': Digital media and organizing for social change. *Communication Teacher*, *29*(2), 81-85.

Haunss, S. (2015). Promise and practice in studies of social media and movements. In L. Dencik & O. Leistert (eds.), *Critical perspectives on social media and protest: Between control and emancipation* (pp. 13-34). London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Hill, M. L. (2018). 'Thank You, Black Twitter': State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance. *Urban Education*, *53*(2), 286-302.

Howard, P., & Hussain, M. M. (2011). The upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The role of digital media. *Journal of Democracy, 22*(3), 35-48.

Ince, J., Rojas, F., & Davis, C. A. (2017). The social media response to Black Lives Matter: how Twitter users interact with Black Lives Matter through hashtag use. *Ethnic and racial studies*, *40*(11), 1814-1830.

Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone responsible?: How television frames political issues*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Jackson, S. J., & Foucault Welles, B. (2015). Hijacking #myNYPD: Social media dissent and networked counterpublics. *Journal of Communication*, *65*(6), 932-952.

Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2020). *#Hashtag activism: Networks of race and gender justice.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jenkins, H. (2014). Rethinking 'rethinking convergence/culture'. *Cultural Studies*, *28*(2), 267-297.

Kamarck, A. (2015, February 10). Hashtag #Ferguson - Twitter reactions to Ferguson. Retrieved from http://thefoxandthehedgehog.com.

Kellner, D. (2003). *Media spectacle*. New York: NY: Routledge.

Kulshrestha, J., Eslami, M., Messias, J., Zafar, M. B., Ghosh, S., Gummadi, K. P., & Karahalios, K. (2017, February). Quantifying search bias: Investigating sources of bias for political searches in social media. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (pp. 417-432). ACM.

Leung, D., & Lee, F. (2014). Cultivating an active online counterpublic: Examining usage and political impact of Internet alternative media. *International Journal of Press/Politics, 19*(3), 340–359.

Lotan, G., Graeff, E., Ananny, M., Gaffney, D., Pearce, I., & Boyd, D. (2011). The Arab Spring. The revolutions were tweeted: Information flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 1375–1405.

McCullers, T. (2018, January 9). As a black woman, I won't say #MeToo in Rose McGowan's* movement. *Black Youth Project*. Retrieved from http://blackyouthproject.com.

McLaughlin, M. (2016, February 29). The dynamic history of #BlackLivesMatter explained. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com.

Meyerson, C. (2016, November 1). The founders of Black Lives Matter: 'We gave tongue to something that we all knew was happening.' *Glamour*. Retrieved from http://www.glamour.com

Mills, A. J., Eurepos, G., & Wiebe, E. (eds.). (2010). *Encyclopedia of case study research*. London: Sage.

Mitchell, A. (2014, December 6). Eric Garner criminal past emerges: 30 arrests in 34 years, including assault. *The Inquisitor.* Retrieved from http://www.inquisitr.com

Morozov, E. (2010). Why the Internet is failing Iran's activists. *Prospect.* Retrieved from http://ww.prospectmagazine.co.uk

Mundt, M., Ross, K., & Burnett, C. M. (2018). Scaling social movements through social media: The case of black lives matter. *Social Media+Society*, *4*(4), 1-14.

Myles, D. (2019). 'Anne goes rogue for abortion rights!': Hashtag feminism and the polyphonic nature of activist discourse. *New Media & Society*, *21*(2), 507-527.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Penney, J., & Dadas, C. (2014). (Re) Tweeting in the service of protest: Digital composition and circulation in the Occupy Wall Street movement. *New Media & Society*, *16*(1), 74-90.

Pew Research Center. (2018, October 11). The #MeToo hashtag has been used roughly 19 million times on Twitter in the past year, and usage often surges around news events. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org.

Rowell, J. (1995). The politics of cultural appropriation. *Journal of Value Inquiry, 29*, 137–142.

Shugart, H. A. (1997). Counterhegemonic acts: Appropriation as a feminist rhetorical strategy. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 83*, 210–229.

Stier, S., Schünemann, W. J., & Steiger, S. (2018). Of activists and gatekeepers: Temporal and structural properties of policy networks on Twitter. *New Media & Society*, *20*(5), 1910-1930.

Yang, G. (2016). Narrative agency in hashtag activism: The case of #BlackLivesMatter. *Media and Communication*, *4*(4), 13-17.

Young, J. O. (2000). The ethics of cultural appropriation. *The Dalhousie Review, 80*, 301–316.

Zarkov, D., & Davis, K. (2018). Ambiguities and dilemmas around #MeToo: #ForHowLong and #WhereTo? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *25*(1), 3–9.

Ziff, B., & Rao, P. V. (1997). Introduction to cultural appropriation: A framework for analysis. In B. Ziff & P. V. Rao (eds.), *Borrowed power: Essays on cultural appropriation* (pp. 1–27). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Zulli, D. (2018). Capitalizing on the look: Insights into the glance, attention economy, and Instagram. *Critical Studies in Media Communication,* 35(2), 137-150.