Human rights, hate crimes and hashtags: Evaluating community discussions on social media

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It is obvious that culture and time shape language. The word "tweet" was once used to exclusively describe communication between birds, but now millions of humans tweet on a daily basis. These tweets still send messages but they resonate much louder than a simple chirp. Although flighty like birds, tweets can hold tremendous weight in spite of their short window of relevance (Tweets are extremely replaceable and hard to find in the time after they are posted due to the massive circulation of tweets around the world) with the aid of the pound sign. Much like the term "tweet," the pound sign has undergone a verbal transformation. There was a time when the rarely used keystroke was only used to signify a numeric value, but now holds societal value. Enter the "hashtag."

On March 21st, 2006, Twitter founder Jack Dorsey created the social media website that would transform the now-ubiquitous pound sign forever. Although Dorsey's first "tweet" didn't actually include the iconic symbol, as Twitter gained ground in the realm of social media, social technology expert Chris Messina created the first hashtag, #barcamp, referencing an online group-gathering technology. His infamous tweet read**:** "how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?" Termed a "hashtag," Messina intended the pound sign to be used as a symbol to circulate online discussions and it didn't take long for the hashtag to gain popularity not only on Twitter, but also on other social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, and even in verbal conversations. Messina's hashtag has become iconic and is a useful tool to promote online discussion. If a hashtag is circulated enough, it gains "trending" status and can be seen by millions and even billions of people. Because of this, Twitter has been imperative in the midst of emergencies and in areas operating under censored governments but is also used for entertainment like any other social media site. What sets Twitter apart is the hashtag, which enables anyone with a Smartphone or computer to be a journalist and to get their message out quickly and concisely, as Twitter has a 140-character limit, including hashtags. Because of the increased opportunity for citizen journalism, hashtags range from serious (#BlackLivesMatter) to critical (#ReasonsObamaMissedPeaceRally) to entertaining (#MomTexts) to promotional (#CFBplayoff). Clearly, the hashtag is incredibly versatile and can carry heavy societal implications. However, hashtags are fleeting and go in and out of style faster than a pair of designer shoes. As media consumers, it is imperative to understand the power hashtags contain and how something so temporary can still impact society so heavily. The purpose of this study is to explore the hashtag's ability to promote social movements, and how hashtags bring about social change.

This year has been a big year for human rights, hate crimes, and hashtags on social media and Twitter helped bring to light many hot-button issues, which will likely be key points in the upcoming 2016 presidential election. #ShoutYourAbortion and #UnplannedParenthood were two popular hashtags highlighting the pro-choice and pro-life sides of America's ongoing abortion debate. #ShoutYourAbortion encouraged women who have undergone abortions to tweet about their experiences in hope of discouraging the House of Representatives from defunding Planned

Parenthood (La Gagna, 2015). The movement hit a hitch, as The House of Representatives voted to defund Planned Parenthood on September 18, 2015, much to the delight of the #UnplannedParenthood Tweeters, who used the hashtag to tell stories of their own. These Twitter users were unplanned children who were obviously not aborted and took to Twitter to praise their parents who chose life (Khazan, 2015). As of this writing, the legislative process regarding the funding of Planned Parenthood is still ongoing, with hashtags helping to bring awareness to a heated issue.

Since the death of Michael Brown, Twitter has been ablaze with race-related hashtags, as well, especially with the one-year anniversary of his death on August 9th, 2015 (Basu, n.d.). The #BlackLivesMatter movement was reignited (and remains a widely-used hashtag) and the Twitter war between #MichaelBrown and #DarrenWilson supporters raged on. The Rebel Flag was thrust in the social media spotlight as another racially charged controversy was "hashtagged." On June 17th, Twitter user @lifeandmorelife tagged U.S. senators Lindsey Graham and Timothy Scott in a Tweet which included a picture of the rebel flag flying outside of the South Carolina capitol building and read "Take this oppressive rag off a taxpayer building. #TakeItDown." Hours later, Black Twitter's (Twitter's loosely-defined African-American advocacy community) use of the hashtag exploded and users ranging from Mitt Romney to Michael Moore used the hashtag to air their viewpoints as well. Under a week later, the hashtag was transformed into a rally cry at a protest in front of the capitol building featured in @lifemorelife's original Tweet. Since the hashtag's creation, it has been circulated over 70,000 times in the form of either #TakeItDown or #TakeItDownSC (Sobel Fitts, 2015).

Like race, "feminism" is a term that seems to spark emotion in people and therefore, hashtags. This past February, Facebook came under fire for banning pictures of women breastfeeding, and #brelfie (breastfeeding selfie) was born and accompanied many social media pictures of women proudly breastfeeding their infants (Coleridge, 2015). Other body-pride hashtags were popular in 2015, including #HonorMyCurves, #CelebrateMySize, and #DareToWear. The most popular, boasting more than 680,000 mentions of the hashtag #EffYourBeautyStandards, founded by plus-size model Tess Holliday and designed to encourage plus-sized women to challenge popular beauty standards by posting pictures of their unashamedly plus-sized selves (Dalessandro, 2015). Women are also using hashtags to look out for one another in a more dangerous realm. #YouOKSis addressed street harassment of women of color and generates discussion about how race, color, sex, and disability are all related to and contribute to these experiences. #MediaWritesWOC also combined gender and race by helping Twitter users lament about how the media portray women of color differently than white women. Rape was also the topic of several feminist hashtags, including #SurvivorPrivilege, which came into existence after *Washington Post* columnist George Will claimed that rape victims are "privileged." Using this hashtag, rape victims expressed their outrage over his claim and shared how their experiences of being sexually assaulted did not entitle them to anything, but shamed and deeply scarred them. Similarly, #RapeCultureIsWhen brought to light the unfortunate culture created when rape victims are disregarded and brushed aside as "hysterical," and created an online mini-community in which rape victims could vent, cope, and share their stories. #WhyIStayed had a similar effect on domestic violence victims when it emerged after the NFL

suspended Baltimore Raven's running back Ray Rice for only two weeks after a violent domestic assault case. The hashtag helped victims stir conversation about the complexity of domestic violence and deflected criticism aimed at Rice's fiancé at the time, Janay Palmer, for remaining faithful to him. Finally, men joined the Twitter feminism movement when #AllMenCan was created and circulated to deflect misogynistic stereotypes of men. The ensuing Tweets aimed to prove that all men can defend and respect women without threatening one's masculinity (Plank, 2014) .

   Although often controversial, and sometimes divisive, socially-salient hashtags can also be unifying and empowering. During the Army Ten-Miler run over the weekend of October 9th, family members and friends of fallen soldiers are encouraged to take a picture of themselves before, during, or after a run holding a sign with the hashtag #SymbolsOfHonor or #RunToHonor, followed by the name of the soldier for whom they are running. The idea behind the Run to Honor Campaign is "to increase awareness of surviving military families and the meaning (sic) behind the symbols of honor they wear" (U.S. Army MWR, 2015, para. 5). Other hashtags similarly help families and communities cope with loss. After the shooting that took place at the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, #CharlestonShooting became the no. 1 trending hashtag on social media and held that position for several days after the June 17th tragedy. Celebrities and everyday social media users alike Tweeted out their condolences, prayers, and words of hope to the devastated community. Other hashtags related to the shooting included: #PrayForCharleston, #CharlestonStrong, and #StandWithCharleston (Bazzle, 2015), all of which helped unite and comfort a community shaken by a horrific hate crime. #UCCShooting functioned much in the same way for the Oregon community that was affected by the recent shooting at Umpqua Community College (KGW Portland, 2015). #YesAllWomen raised awareness about misogyny in modern culture shortly after police released University of California Santa Barbara shooter, Elliot Rodger's 150-page letter explaining the blatantly sexist motives behind his actions. This hashtag was used to highlight everyday precautions women feel they must take as a result of misogynistic cultural views (Plank, 2014). #YesAllWomen helped women both cope and feel empowered in the wake of a misogyny-fueled tragedy, much in the same way #BlackLivesMatter has helped the African-American community mourn in the midst of a stream of alleged racist hate-crimes. Such hate crimes seem to breed hashtags, as members of the Lakota tribe experienced after a racist incident went largely unpunished in February of this year. #ISupportTheLakota57 and #Lakota57 were born after Trace O'Connell was accused of spraying beer on and hurling racial slurs at a group of 57 elementary students from American Horse Day School during a field trip to a local hockey game (Rickert, 2015). O'Connell was later found "not guilty" of disorderly conduct, much to the chagrin of the Native community who expressed their grievances on Twitter (Ecoffey, 2015). However, Natives weren't the only ones to react to the verdict. After #Lakota57 circulated around Twitter, many users responded with Tweets of both social and monetary support. Money donated to the school in the forms of fundraisers and t-shirt sales helped fund new art supplies and field trips for the students. Although the excitement of receiving money and new school supplies cannot compensate for the hurt these children experienced, #Lakota57 and #ISupportTheLakota57 hopefully helped raise awareness of racism within the Native community.

Just recently, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication held again its News Engagement Day – encouraging professors and students to join in and engage by "reading, watching, like, tweet, post, text, email, listen to, or comment on news" (AEJMC, 2015, para. 2). News Engagement Day explains online its mission:

> Despite more news platforms conveniently available 24/7 and diverse ways to engage with news, getting informed about news is no longer a national priority. For the Millennial generation news is less important, and for some young adults, news is not even in their lives. A recent Pew Research Center biennial news consumption survey called 29% of young adults "newsless (AEJMC, 2015, para. 2).

Considering news consumption of Millennials, the questions is raised: are social movements evolving with social media? Are more underserved and represented voices getting heard and by whom? How will this change in the future when the majority now is the minority? Questions that we all may be tackling in our classroom ,as we continue to teach diversity topics and as digital platforms continue to emerge.

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