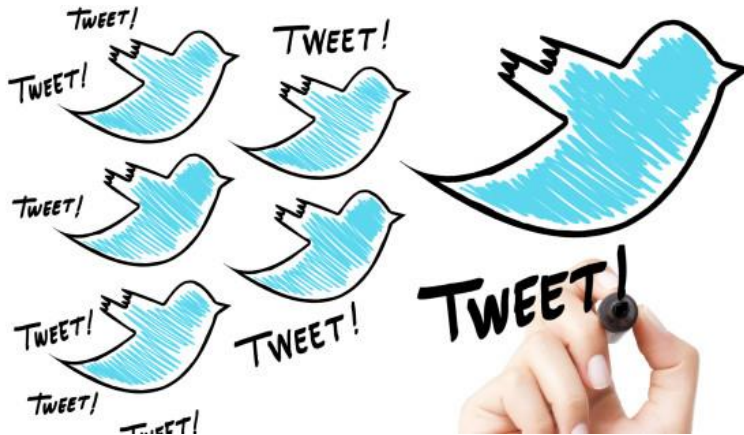


The Case for Social Media and Hashtag Activism

By [Sabina Khan-Ibarra](#), *Huffpost: THE BLOG*, 11/13/2014

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Social Media: Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking

Activism: The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.

My husband is one of those individuals who have chosen a life of complete abstinence from social media. Well almost complete — he has a LinkedIn account. It is a practice that I admired and at times am even jealous of. However, it wasn't until I saw how unaware of the atrocities occurring in Gaza he was that I began to revisit my envy towards his social-media-free lifestyle. That's when I became exceedingly appreciative of Twitter and Facebook.

People are on social media for very different reasons. I initially joined Facebook to keep in touch with family members in Europe and Pakistan. It wasn't until I joined Twitter last year that I saw the potential power of social media and started using it as a tool for my activism. As an activist, I saw social media as an opportunity to spread the word about various causes at a faster rate, and to a bigger number of people, than through traditional methods.

With the advent of computers and the internet, there were many skeptics who believed that email would never become an integral part of society. While hand-written letters are still considered a charming method of correspondence, in the United States and other developed countries, email is the primary source of communication. But the two cannot be fairly compared; each has its uses. People never thought banking could be done online or even that paper newspapers would be nearly extinct. We still have reporting, but the medium has changed. No one quite predicted the extent that these new methods would basically cancel out the old ones.

I propose that the use of social media as an instrument for activism will follow, if not already is, the same trajectory. Social media is one of the most powerful forms of activism, and (dare I say) a catalyst for change. Here's why:

1. With social media, you can send more messages to more people, more quickly.

It allows us to connect with people all over the world. According to [The Cultureist](#) infographic created in 2013, 500 million people log into Facebook every day and 175 million tweets are sent around the world daily. This is why large corporations are now on Twitter - they are dealing with customer service issues and even buying tweets to promote their companies. [Businessweek](#) reports that companies like Dell, GM, JetBlue and others realize the power of microblogging (such as Twitter) as a means to stay in touch with their customers. Because of the sheer number of people that can be reached, Twitter and Facebook ads are also used by companies to promote new idea and products.

2. Social media has the potential to bring to people fair and balanced news coverage with little or no bias of mainstream corporate media or propaganda, thereby becoming the de facto news.

Facebook and Twitter posts have the capacity to provide truthful, fairly unbiased, unedited stories and photos with an organic system of checks and balances, where the high number of people who are able to see posts at any given moment refute information they believe is false, helping to ensure that fictitious stories are nipped in the bud. Twitter and Facebook are also filled with reputable independent journalists who are on site and usually reporting stories firsthand. The 140 characters of Tweets are not sufficient to tell the full story, but enough to give initial report and provide links to full reports, otherwise inaccessible.

Social media also has its disadvantages and is still subject to a certain level of bias. However, it may be the closest thing we have left to a true form of news. It is a whole new structure of how we learn about the goings on of the world.

After NBC correspondent Ayman Mohyeldin was pulled out of Gaza for reporting on the killing of four Palestinian boys playing soccer on a beach by the Israeli Defense Force, the hashtag [#LetAymanReport](#) was created to bring attention to the issue. Within 24 hours he was on his way back to Gaza.

3. Social media gives people the power to call out injustices, inaccuracies and misrepresentations and brings about better understanding of other cultures and people.

Alice in Arabia was a show created by Brook Eikmeier, a woman "who previously served in the U.S. Army as a cryptologic linguist in the Arabic language." She decided her time in the Middle East gave her carte blanche to tell a story that didn't belong to her, not to mention one that perpetuated many stereotypes. It was a Twitter hashtag campaign, [#AliceinArabia](#) that highlighted the many issues people had with the show, such as perpetuating a stereotypical story of oppressive Arabs/Muslim men and the lack of using people of color as writers in the industry. Many demanded the humanizing of the "other" and in fact called out the network for perpetuating the "otherness" of Arab/Muslims.

The hashtag campaign created enough pressure and ultimately led to ABC pulling the show. Mediums like Twitter give people the platform to amplify their concerns, demand authentic storytelling, and create dialogue that may eventually dispel stereotypes.

4. By organizing, creating and supporting hashtag campaigns, people from all over the world can get involved in important conversations.

Hashtags have the power to bring attention to and mobilize a large population. Petitions, protests, letters to politicians and those in power are disseminated through social media, but what brings attention to a movement or a hashtag is the high number of mentions of a hashtag, which is what brings it worldwide attention. Twitter, and other social media platforms, has an analytics system where they track and follow hashtags. They are able to give followers the top ten hashtags in the world, in the U.S., or in chosen the area of the follower, as well. On the home page, twitter displays the “trends” for all to see and click on.

Twitter, more than Facebook, is more sophisticated than we think. It is more intelligent, in fact. (Facebook now uses the hashtags first used on Twitter, as well.) The use of hashtags (the hash or pound sign used to identify messages on a specific topic) is the most vital part of social media activism.

Hashtags have long been seen as a lazy, yet creative, way to clump up our thoughts and add to the end of our social media posts. Justin Timberlake and Jimmy Fallon even did a [skit](#) on the overuse of hashtags. By tweeting (a posting made on the social media website Twitter) and retweeting (repost or forward a message posted by another user) these Hashtags start to trend (a Hashtag-driven topic popular at particular time) and become more visible which brings attention to a certain topic.

Another example is [#WeneedDiverseBooks](#) and [#SupportWNDB](#) hashtags created by a group of writers who were concerned about the lack of diverse representation of protagonists in books. Because of the hashtag campaign, a [website](#) dedicated to diversity in literature was launched, and the [#WeNeedDiverseBooks](#) organization was a part of the BookCon Diversity Panel, which was held on May 31, 2014 in New York City. It is an ongoing project with a goal and a group of people dedicated to bring about change in literature.

5. Social media is a more accessible way of activism for those who cannot leave the home.

Individuals with certain disabilities, caretakers and those with young children can be involved in activism and not be limited by their inability to physically mobilize. This gives opportunity to highlight that which was previously unheard and unseen — making the voices we hear more diverse and a more true reflection of reality.

6. Social media equals power, as demonstrated by certain countries banning or controlling access.

In China, Google is censored by the government. The [New York Times](#) reports that, “In addition to Google’s search engines being blocked, the company’s products, including Gmail, Calendar and Translate, have been affected.”

According to [The Washington Post](#), “Iran has an extensive list of blacklisted sites. ... it’s not surprising that even those with close ties to the regime would have to resort to circumvention technologies to get their jobs done.”

The Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, accused Hamas of exploiting Palestinian deaths to create striking images on social media for international sympathy: “They use telegenically dead Palestinians for their cause. The more dead, the better,” he said. And, in recent years it has been [reported](#) that the Israeli government put out a national call for university students to come work for its new social media project, which aims to combat anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment.

The interest that these countries have in controlling social media demonstrates the perceived power of social media to create change and possibly cause political turmoil in their countries, which is not in the best interest of the governing party.

7. An engaged and interactive audience for live TV shows.

Network channels, such as ESPN and CNN use social media, especially Twitter, to update and engage with their audience by interacting with a live audience during reporting. Network channel reporting, like Al-Jazeera claims to be “prime news destination with a loyal and engaged fan base,” where they “focus on facts over opinion.”

Al-Jazeera won the [6th Annual Shorty Industry Awards](#) as the Best News Twitter Account.

According to the Shorty Award website, Al-Jazeera “use(s) a variety of means to engage followers on Twitter from timely news updates to user polls and hashtag campaigns.”

What makes Al-Jazeera more interesting and successful is that they involve the Twitter audience in their pitches by asking them what issues they want to see discussed and then using their tweets as part of the discussion. This keeps the audience engaged because not only are they involved in the conversation, but their opinion matters.

Social Media Limitations

A big drawback with social media, is the sharing of photos and links without verification of information. We are all guilty of this because sometimes misinformation is hidden so well that we are unable to see it for what it is — unsubstantiated and false. Because of the hyper speed of the internet, this misinformation is spread at a fast pace and can be difficult to contain.

Another issue is the capability of trolls who undermine posts and derail important discussions. Trolls are able to follow trends and hashtags and deter followers from productive conversations. Some trolls even resort to bullying those with opposing ideas.

Then there is the ability to buy tweets and even tweeps (people to tweet on your behalf). As mentioned above, the Israeli government has been reported to hire people to counter-tweet and tweet against anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment. This is a major blow to social media activism, because those with money can buy space on social media and take away from momentum activists work hard to create.

Also, while social media may help those who are hearing impaired or are unable to physically be a part of activism on the streets, it still has a long way to go in terms of being accessible to those with other disabilities, such as those with visual impairments.

And, perhaps one of the biggest criticisms of hashtag conversations are that they are short lived and issues easily forgotten. My argument is that those who easily forget the issue are not the actual activists but a vehicle for the activists to get the word out. But how does one ensure that hashtag conversations go beyond Twitter conversations? That is the million dollar question. I think that when having hashtag conversation, that both people who are diligent Twitter enthusiasts and activists need to be tagged when having a conversation.

In June of 2014, Shonda Rhimes (the creator, writer, and executive producer of Grey's Anatomy, Private Practice and Scandal) gave a commencement speech at Dartmouth, in which she told students to pick a cause they loved and go out in the world and devote real time to it. It is worth noting that this speech came a month after #AliceinArabia was pulled by ABC.

During the speech, Rhimes said:

“A hashtag is not helping. #yesallwomen #takebackthenight #notallmen #bringbackourgirls #StopPretendingHashtagsAreTheSameAsDoingSomething ... Hashtags are very pretty on Twitter. I love them. I will hashtag myself into next week. But a hashtag is not a movement. A hashtag does not make you Dr. King. A hashtag does not change anything. It's a hashtag. It's you, sitting on your butt, typing into your computer and then going back to binge-watching your favorite show. For me, it's Game of Thrones.”

Instead, she told graduates to “volunteer some hours.” While this is good advice, I still believe social media activism can be a vehicle to spark change if done right.

Social Media Enthusiasts Vs. Activists

Whether Rhimes is aware of it or not, the landscape of social media is rapidly changing. Two years ago she may have been right, however today the social media scene is much more sophisticated. There are a population of people who will still just click “like” or “retweet” because they like things and there will be nothing beyond that. There is also a fear that people will lose interest in the cause they supported.

But while these people may be “Social Media Enthusiasts,” they are not “Social Media Activists.” A social media enthusiast is someone who spends a lot of time online clicking “like,” posting things on Facebook and Twitter but not doing anything beyond that. However, these people are still important to the social media activists because they act as a vehicle for getting the word out.

People who are activists offline tend to use social media activism as online and offline organizing strategies. They are the ones committed to a cause, become part of a movement and stick to the issue until there is change. These are activists who know the power of social media and use it as a tool to further their cause.

These people are social media activists.

Social media activism is a movement: A group of people working together to advance their shared political and social ideas. While it may not make one a Dr. Martin Luther King (or could it? This project is so young that the jury still has not pronounced judgment), maybe 10 years from now there will be MLK. We cannot simply write it off. Social media activism can bring about change.

Specifically, social media has the power to do three things:

First, show people reality — or at least a version of it - independent of what TV networks show. Second, journalists on the ground are using social media to report, thereby short-circuiting the normal editorial processes that used to filter what they said.

Third, to get into your real life consciousness much more powerfully than traditional media.

Like anything else, social media should be used responsibly. Verify tweets before believing them and re-sharing them. And most of all, understand the limitations.

Social media activism is useless if it doesn't create awareness that leads to action off the internet. Social media has taught me to critically think about the news and information I am fed by anyone, and to do some research using non-conventional methods, like following individuals of different points of view whom I trust and reading material to formulate my own educated opinion.

This piece was originally published on Patheos' [altmuslim blog](#).