Chapter 5

Hashtag Ideology: Practice and Politics of Alternative Ideology

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ABSTRACT

Hashtag is powerful in nature and gains undivided attention of the social media users. The dialectical phenomenon existing around these hashtags portrays collective consciousness spread across continents. Moreover, the discourse specific political engagements have one thing in common – fuelling global sentiment, perhaps, that is more homogenous and speculative. But the real question is how powerful as this hashtag phenomenon has become? Is it a disruptive culture that has become part of our everyday life? Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to deal with the recent hashtag phenomenon, engaging users in personal and social level. Hashtags such as #BringBackOurGirls and #HeForShe are used in this chapter as a case study to understand the power relations they exercise in the social media space and across cross-media platforms. The aim of this chapter is to contribute to the growing literature of social media activism and the hashtag ideology.

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INTRODUCTION

Hashtags are metadata tags used to organize contents. It serves as a unique window to a large number of content, especially social media data, organized for the users to easily go through or interact. Small (2011) considers hashtag as a keyword that aids in searching. “Hashtags are keywords or strings of text prefixed with a hash symbol (#) that can be clicked as a link to a global search of tweets using that same keyword” (Bastos, Raimundo, & Travitzki, 2013, p. 264). Increasingly, these hashtags are serving non-linear content interaction points.

Using hashtags in different forms of social media posts might sound natural these days, but in a carefully constructed online social and political discourse, these strings of text carry the expressive character. The hash sign reflects the social consensus for organized activity and collective discourse. Its regular and conscious use defines the contemporary culture and the media practices. The attempt to document expressive contents and facilitate easy access by providing universal hashtags is a part of the activism culture or protest related content diffusion mechanism. “As digital artifacts, hashtags locate cultures across time and space. No matter the context—that is, grassroots, institutional, or corporate—hashtags compel us to act” (Conley, 2014, p. 1111).

As we know, in a networked society, cyber-activism is a rational choice to sustain the cyber-democracy, as democracy in its simplest form is contested. When people wish to develop a dialogue, there is a desire to build consensus. As there is a risk to the common interest of the larger social group, activism of any form strives for democratic rights (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Kim & Sriramesh, 2009).

Be it in fragmented or a full force activism, the existence of technology and interface supports the rhetoric. One can witness immense political possibilities embedded in hypertexts. Furthermore, the change in protest related choreography has now assumed a larger social space and networked individuals. The democratic right to dissent and hope for a change is practiced like a religion. What we witness is the redesigned protest landscape with multiple source points. And, with the arrival of the ‘shout out’ culture, we also experience diversity in view points and their complex yet subtle unison under the effect of politicized techno-subcultures (Kahn & Kellner, 2005).

However, the technology itself is ideological as it restricts and defines our viewpoints. We are given what we like the most, not the opposing views that would build a rational argument. The views posted on social media networks are heavily influenced by the kind of personalized search tools we use. As an activist, people do not get to decide what gets through their filter. It’s the technology that determines our visuality (Green, 2011).
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