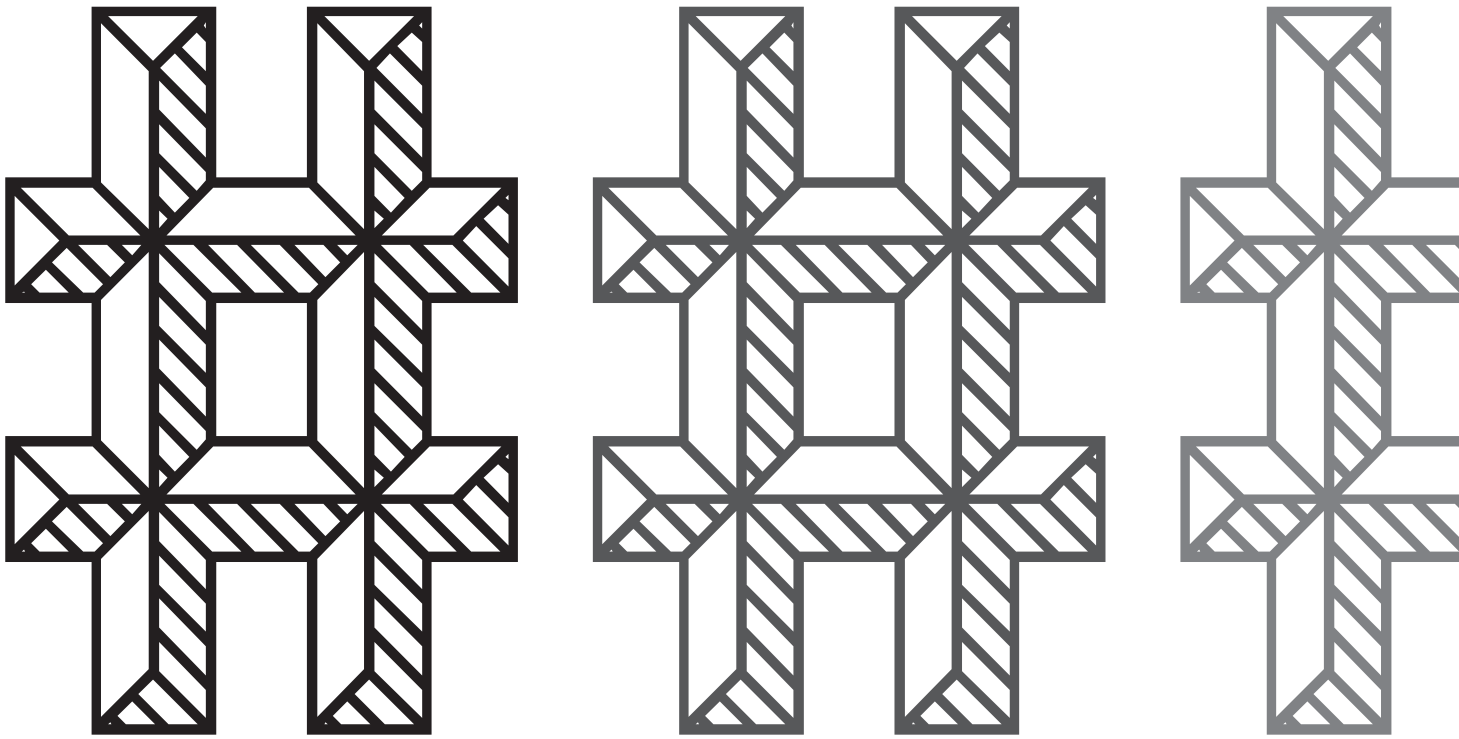


# THE EFFICACY OF HASHTAG ACTIVISM

## One Click Activism

The history of activism is a fascinating one. From free thinkers to muckrakers, humanitarians to revolutionaries, public engagement has always been peculiar in its mixture of empathy and anger, outrage and ideology. The integration of social media in everyday life has naturally followed the flow of activism as the social media addict now concerns herself with the ills of humanity. But some may call this idea of activism via social media ineffective in its rapidity. To these critics, the notion of expecting major sociopolitical change from behind a computer screen may be presumptuous one.

The term "hashtag activism" was coined during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests. Presently, it takes an entirely new role on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Some say that signing the occasional Facebook petition and mentioning a campaign to end hunger on Twitter is more harmful than beneficial in that it promotes a self-gratifying conception of aiding a greater cause. This criticism has led to the rise of the term "slacktivism," which requires little to no involvement with the causes themselves.

In Malcolm Gladwell's controversial New Yorker article, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," Gladwell was amongst the first to critique social media's inept take on activism by comparing it to real-life, "high-risk" activism. He does this by referring to prominent examples from the civil rights movement and comparing them to activists that he deems to be inadequately representative of social movements.

Gladwell continues on to build his argument by mentioning historian Robert Darnton's take on the phenomenon as a solipsistic trend that ignores the history of communication networks. Darnton states, "The marvels of communication technology in the present have produced a false consciousness about the past—even a sense that communication has no history, or had nothing of importance to consider before the days of television and the Internet."

However, Darnton neglects to give credit to modern activists who are very much knowledgeable about the history of dissent. In fact, the protestors of yesteryear often inspire these dissenters. Sure, they may not be chanting 'Ay Carmela' while waving red flags in the streets of Paris or Prague, but don't these Internet-age activists build upon the very foundations of social unrest?

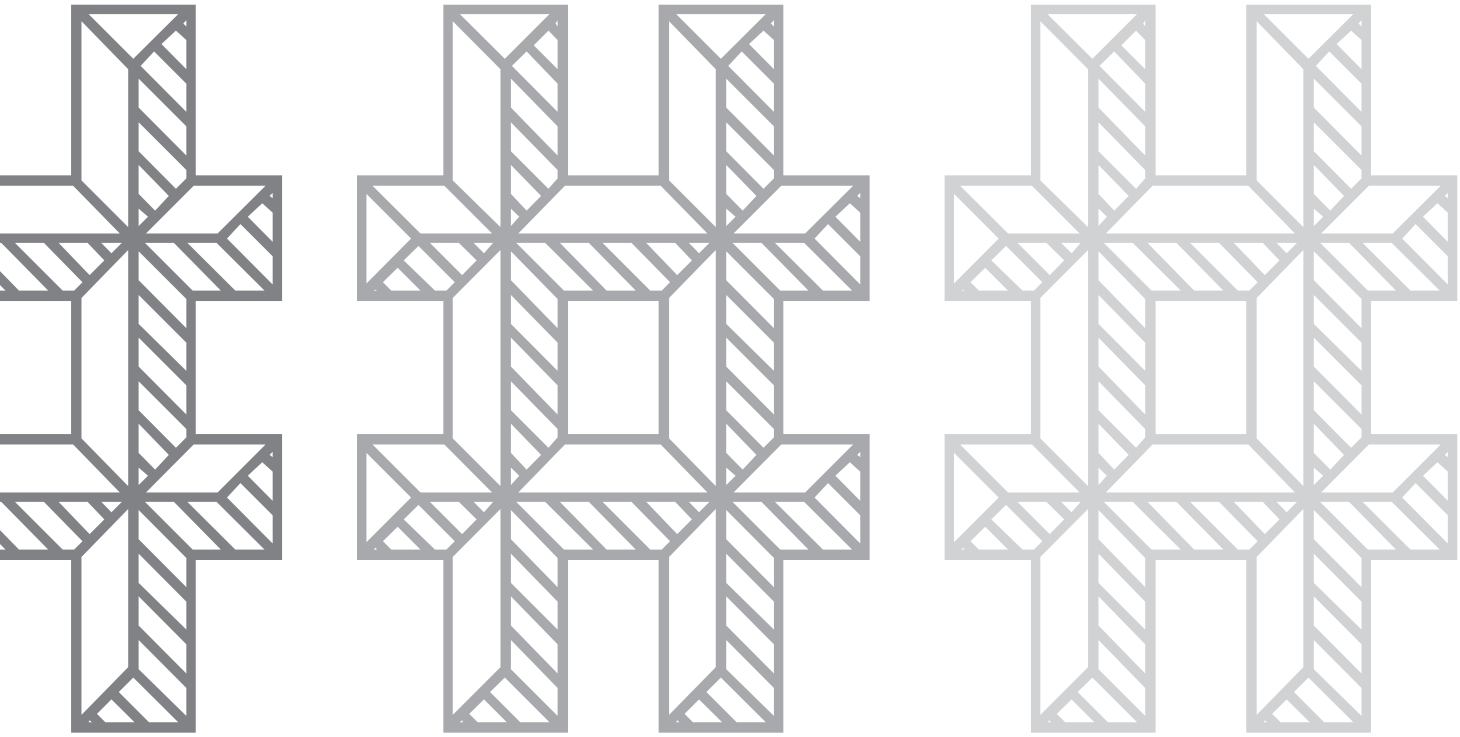
Though this is an idea that is most common amongst American discussion of the evolution of the civil rights and women's movements, the universality of continuous public dissent certainly exists. It is not that the modes of communication are better than in, say, the 1960s; it is the evolution of communication as an instrument for social justice.

Gladwell also argues that social media activism is built around weak ties to acquaintances or to strangers. He argues that strong ties call for high-risk activism, while weak ties encourage little commitment. In actuality, there is much strength in these "weak ties." They act as connectors, producing information that often leads individuals to take some sort of action. Gladwell himself wrote a book called *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, in which he uses the term "connector" in a positive way. He even mentions the benefits of these weak ties in leading individuals to their "tipping points," or moments when they go from slacktivists to activists—from awareness to action.

## The Paradigm of Protest via New Media

In order to really understand the goal of hashtag activists, it's critical that we look at how social media has shaped popular opinion of major world events. This brings us to the paragon of activism and social media: the Arab Spring. To clarify, social media did not lead to the Arab Spring. The major causes of dissent in the Middle East and North Africa were due to the tremendously corrupt political regimes, along with reports of high unemployment, famine, and human rights violations.

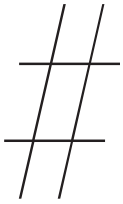
According to a chronicle in the Dubai School of Government's Arab Social Media report, the series of protests across these regions had the immense potential to shape "a participatory governance model, grassroots civic engagement, new social dynamics, in-



*By Hind Berji*

clusive societies and new opportunities for businesses and entrepreneurs."

Still, the report bases these principles of dissenters' effects mostly on theory. Though the topic of the Arab Spring was at its peak in 2011, there is an ongoing debate about whether or not social media acted as a catalyst for these events or as a convenient tool for Western media to document the Arab Spring's timeline—a means to see the revolution through the eyes of the protestor. According to *CNN* reporter Ivan Watson, social media allowed protestors in the Arab Spring to "circumvent state-controlled media," creating the ironic dichotomy of mainstream media's reliance on social media and social media's "circumvention" of mainstream media.



*The term "hashtag activism" was coined during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests.*

If mainstream media sticks to a narrow, panic-driven approach of delivering news, social media can call attention to stories that mainstream media would not usually cover. Such media outlets serve to sustain civil order, but social media looks at events with a far more critical lens.

When unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was shot dead on Aug. 9, 2014 by a white police officer, members of the Ferguson, Missouri community immediately took to the streets with protests (both violent and nonviolent) and riots. Mainstream media outlets initially covered the events in an unsurprisingly limited fashion by only describing the rioting and looting that took place in Ferguson. Through Twitter, however, members of the Ferguson community provided photographs and real time updates of demonstrations, with deeply analytical posts concerning the history of race relations and the militarization of public protests in the United States.

Soon, reporters were being threatened with arrest by Ferguson police, demanding that they remain within their "designated areas" in order to cloud any evidence of police brutality. This prompted journalists from news outlets like *The Washington Post* and *The Huffington Post* to produce detailed, minute-by-minute reports of the media blockade—all in just 140 characters or less.

## Patterns of Public Disquiet

No matter what the movement entails or how it is conveyed, there are common patterns to all modes of activism. For instance, all of these movements stem from some kind of anger, which is directed towards a social injustice. Then, empathy takes over. This is where images fill in the empty spaces of public conscientiousness. Where words fail, images of social degradation prevail.

Unlike most ideologically based and hierarchal movements, social media activism engages in endless self-reflection and observation. There is no single leader within these movements, no exclusive ego that drives them. And since mobilization plays a crucial role in their survival, the instantaneous way that information is shared online makes this mobilization and group formation far easier and more rapid than alternative forms of spreading a message.

These ideas have their pitfalls, too. The permanency and limitlessness of the Internet are both good and bad things. An endless outpouring of information could hinder any real change and lead to a case of information overload.

Perhaps the best way to put the active into activist is to avoid ta king a purist point of view on social media activism. It is informative, yes, but social media itself cannot bring about sweeping social revolutions. Our correspondence with one another as human beings should not have to depend on WiFi hotspots or smartphones. Media literacy, on the other hand, is vital. The Internet is no virtual utopia, and it is ultimately up to us to choose how we use this space to learn, instruct, and protest. ■