

Media Policy Memes 3: #Hashtag History & Hysteria

*How did one little symbol end up critical to social movements, get wrapped up in libel cases, and integrate into our everyday lives? Our **Batsheva Lazarus** tells the story of this Friday's media policy meme: the #hashtag.*

The lowly “number symbol” or “octothorpe”, as it was officially named by the scientists at Bell Telephone, has been plucked from the obscurity of our phone keypads and elevated to a role as one of the most powerful social media tools of our time.

#Hashtag origins

The first reported use of the hashtag on Twitter was in 2007 when a member, technology expert @ChrisMessina, used the sign as a way to define a specific group on the site. Messina came up with the hashtag with the purpose of harnessing collective discussion about a technology conference, “#Barcamp”. This entirely user-invented concept quickly gained momentum as a way for people to connect, group together, and promote ideas and trends on social media platforms.

Hashtags make this connectivity possible because one can search for any given hashtag and get the entirety of the set of messages that contain it. Hashtags can be inserted anywhere before, within or after the body of a post as evidenced in these popular examples of #Leveson used on Twitter during the Leveson Inquiry:

Sharon Trotter @TIPSLtd Jun 13: “I just signed **#Leveson** Royal Charter Declaration for a *free and accountable* press – <http://hackinginquiry.org/?p=8643> . You too can **#BackTheCharter**”

Stefan Cross QC @StefanCross1 Jun 14: “All 3 main party leaders bowed down before The Sun this week. Leveson is now officially dead and buried **#leveson**”

Media Reform UK @mediareformUK Jun 6: “Murdoch spurned **#Leveson** & now he's trying to bury **#hackingtrial**. Get **@peterjukes**'s book for the full uncensored story <http://www.hackingtrial.com/>”

A recent example of the power of the hashtag phenomenon is seen in the “#yesallwomen” hashtag. Born in response to the recent murders at UC Santa Barbara, #yesallwomen is being used by millions in support of women's rights. You can now click #yesallwomen on Twitter to contribute and see how many users are active in this community.

Hashtag rules

The quantity of a hashtag is just as important as the type of hashtag used in a post or a tweet. When a hashtag becomes extremely popular on sites such as Twitter, it will appear in the “Trending Topics” area of a user's homepage, thus making it a very powerful social media marketing tool. The hashtag phenomenon used for advertisement, promotion and group activist coordination.

Three hashtags are commonly viewed as the maximum amount per post. Sites like Twitter are clear that using a hashtag without contributing to the conversation or repeating hashtags unnecessarily could result in account suspension.

Hashtag beyond Twitter

The hashtag is now commonly used in both broadcast and print media in order to bring communities of interest together by “throwing them” to connect via social media. It has also worked its way into everyday conversation and pop-culture.

In 2012 Tom Meltzer, reporting for The Guardian, wrote about a new hand gesture in which people used both hands to form an overlapping peace sign for a real-life “finger hashtag”.

Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake performed a spoof of the finger hashtag for The American Television Program, “**Late Night with Jimmy Fallon**”. They pok fun at the often misunderstood and misused hashtag in this video:



Musical artist Kanye West has even coined a style of hip hop called “The hashtag rap” which includes a metaphor, a pause, and a one word punch line.

This article gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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