



BLUE SKY ORIGINALS

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U. of C. professor on the power of hashtags in black activism

By **Kate MacArthur**
Blue Sky

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#BlackLivesMatter, #Ferguson, #BillCosby, #SayHerName and #ConfederateFlag are more than social media hashtags. They're each the digital equivalent of a rallying cry, amplifying black voices and empowering the next generation of activists.

Cathy J. Cohen is an author and professor of political science at the University of Chicago and the founder of the [Black Youth Project](#). She's also a member of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on [Youth and Participatory Politics](#).

She explains the growing role of hashtags in political discussion and what digital media can and can't do for activists.

Q. How is black activism changing with digital media?

A. If you think about the structure of black activism today, especially among young people, there isn't the one charismatic leader that speaks for the movement, but lots of different organizations doing the very important work, often with shared responsibilities at the top.

The ways in which those organizations coordinate their work is through offline activities, but also through online activities through the mounting of very specific campaigns, whether it's the Black Lives Matter campaign or the Say Her Name campaign, which was meant to bring attention to girls, women and trans women who have been killed by police.

When you think about the activism taking place in different parts of the country, part of the infrastructure that's supporting those movements is very much rooted in digital media. Digital media in particular allows people to put an issue out there and have others respond.

It is a moment of amplifying the voices, often of a community that have been largely excluded. Those moments are not the same as organized campaigns, which use digital media, but also the traditional tools of offline organizing, and we wouldn't want to confuse the two.

Q. How does a hashtag transition to activism?

A. I think that it takes the capacity for people to do offline organizing. You could have really active and wonderful, collective conversations that start with hashtags on Twitter, and #BlackLivesMatter is an example.

But the ability to move those offline means you have to have organizations in different cities and parts of the country that can have face-to-face conversations, that can provide leadership and that have the resources to continue this work

beyond Twitter.

Q. Are there situations where digital media isn't helpful?

A. When you put information online it means making your organizations possibly more vulnerable, that people will troll what you say, that companies will look for data to sell or exploit.

There's a history of the [Cointelpro](#) where state agencies engage in surveillance on activist organizations. In an age of digital media that becomes much easier.

On digital platforms, especially like Twitter where you have 140 characters, it's hard to give a complete analysis, and that can be dangerous or at least problematic.

I don't think we want to confuse moments of "digital activism" with long-term commitments ... to the much longer struggles for the issues that we care about.

Q. What's the most successful digital activism that mobilized offline?

A. Black Lives Matter has provided a framework for national and international recognition of the conditions under which black people exist, including and especially the killing of black people by police but also the resistance to it.

It's a way for people to put all of the activism together and to understand that it's a much bigger movement that includes the harassment and killing of black women and trans women, and questions about jobs and empowerment and incarceration.

Q. What about the response on Black Twitter to other issues?

A. When you think back to Ferguson, to think about Twitter for a generation as the online, up-to-the-moment force of information about their community, that's huge.

With Twitter, people who care about black communities can write and report on black communities and it's successful. It is an important turning point in the dissemination of information, often about marginal communities, that were neglected in the past.

Q. Twitter has been a key conduit for me to many other voices.

A. I feel the same way. I'm often reading Twitter and Black Twitter and it's largely young people. I'm learning a lot. I have a better sense of what's happening in LA as well as DC and in Charleston.

It's good to hear people representing themselves in their own authentic voice, and that it has to be a plus in the world.

Q&As are edited for length and clarity.

Kate MacArthur is a freelance writer.

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