

Chapter 18

Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter in the Generation of “Hashtivism”: Constructing the Paradigms of Cyber–Race

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the hashtag battle #BlackLivesMatter vs. #AllLivesMatter and considers its ability to promote cyber race. It assesses the implications of constructing racial boundaries within the online space, its impact on identity politics and the viability for cyberspace to exist as a post-racial epoch in the digital age. This study takes an affordance and architectural approach to its analysis of BLM and ALM, incorporating a thematic analysis of the hashtags on Twitter. The research uses a theoretical underpinning of framing theory to analyze tweets from the ALM and BLM twitter timelines. It demonstrates that the hashtag battle, although, configured, and framed by the mainstream media as one that encapsulates a race war of Black vs. White, that actually, findings reveal that the battle consists of the tension and friction between mainstream media frames and what is termed digitized frames.

INTRODUCTION

Triggered by the trial and acquittal of George Zimmerman, responsible for the shooting and killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012, the rise of the hashtag as communicative method and of political identification has proliferated cries of “Black Lives Matter” across the globe. Research published by Pew Research Center (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016) show from its first use, mid-2013 to March 2016 #BLM had been used almost 11.8 million times on Twitter. It was marked not just as the birth of a movement, but as an activation of borderless politics; one sparking a debate about the value of black life worldwide and bypassing that considered to be professional journalism (Thrasher, 2015). The term black lives is

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described by Evans et al (2015) as a decision restoring a ‘healthy, holistic and purposeful placement of Blackness’ into meaningful political action and discourse, and more importantly, has disproven the idea of living in a post-racial America or world (Campbell and Chollier, 2018). BLM’s message of a shared notion of a black history of oppression and focus on systemic racism, epitomized in police brutality, sparked solidarity protests in the UK, Europe, Canada and South Africa, against anti-black racism and violence worldwide. With over 40 chapters worldwide, it was awarded the 2017 Sydney Peace Prize, in particular for its fight for the aborigine struggle; becoming in addition, a recognised global network (Wahlquist, 2017). However, as Weedston (2014) points out, ‘in the age of the Internet, conflict comes with corresponding online movements.’ Undoubtedly, this is believed to be the case for BLM in relation to the emergence of #ALM, a corresponding social media campaign; one supposedly rooted in opposition to the political statement concerning the state of black lives. Labelled as a declaration of ‘colour-blindness’ (Smith, 2017), the #ALM and its focus on racism as an individualist act has become categorised as a countermovement, affiliated with a resurgence of whiteness and white power. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (2017) brought with it a tumultuous white America. Predominantly secured by a white vote, America elected a man who openly targeted people’s freedoms; endorsing a white transphobic and misogynist power. Trump’s endorsement of the #ALM and use of it in public address (Weigel, 2016) solidified its ties to white nationalism and the hard right-wing. Transformative use of the hashtag translated to a physical white insurgency; becoming a white nationalist slogan accompanying the bearing of the confederate flag. This, essentially, led to #ALM being regarded as a ‘racist’ hashtag (May, 2016) with physical (clashes with BLM protestors and increase in white terrorist attacks) and virtual clashes, resulting in the framing of a ‘race-war’. Social media and new technologies have brought about new possible means for social interactions and personal and shared expression (Moore and Selchow, 2012). Virtual or online communities are dematerialised communities that can unify around collective features; or within this context, around a common cause or purpose. This is termed as digital or online activism (Breindl, 2010); hashtag activism (Stache, 2015), or as Hashtivism or Hashtactivism (Ibahrine, 2017). Hashtags have been studied linguistically, and its condensing mechanism and powerful effects have been explored (Caleffi, 2015) including social practices such as posting, tagging and sharing as a new way to merge language and people in the aim of generating visibility and awareness. A hashtag’s dialectal structure indicates an individual hashtag pertains to an integral socio-linguistic and socio-political meaning, often relating to the combination of an event and cause (Campbell and Chollier, 2018). Structures of online communities are identified as generic or specific; generic i.e. equality based (De Choudhury et al, 2016), specific referring to an event (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015) or an identified movement (e.g. Black feminism, see Williams, 2015). It has been determined that movements can be simultaneously the product and cause of new narratives and social action (Campbell, 2005; Yang, 2016).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND HASHTAGS

Recognition of computer software and technology as formulating an underpinning to ideas of culture or society has become a popular theoretical notion, with Lupton (2015:2) highlighting its role in actively constructing ‘self-hood, embodiment, social life, social relations and social institutions’. Some anthropologists have extended the concept of technologies in ‘becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human’ (Miller and Horst, 2012: 4). They claim, ‘just as investigating our interactions with digital technologies contributes to research into the nature of human experience, it also tells us much about the social world.’

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