

Hashtag activism can effect real-world change

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'Beyond the Hashtags' examines Black Lives Matter activists' use of online media

in 2014 and 2015. Credit: Center for Media and Social Impact

American University School of Communication's Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) announces new research on the rise of the nationwide Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The study "[Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice.](#)" coauthored by AU Communications Professor Deen Freelon, examines how social media drove the biggest push for racial justice the US has seen in decades.

Videos, images, and stories of violent encounters between police and unarmed Black people circulated widely through news and social [media](#) in the summer of 2014, galvanizing public outrage. This media activism fueled the rise of Black Lives Matter (BLM), a loosely-coordinated, nationwide movement dedicated to ending police brutality.

BLM ignited an urgent national conversation about cases of excessive police force against minorities and police killings of unarmed African American citizens. Deen Freelon and his co-researchers, Charlton D. McIlwain, associate professor of media, culture and [communication](#) at New York University and Meredith D. Clark, assistant professor of digital and print news at the University of North Texas, researched the online media tools credited with transforming the hashtag into a household phrase and influential national movement.

"BLM hubs were successful in projecting their anti-brutality messages through various nonactivist networks; in criticizing the media harshly for their portrayal of anti-black police brutality; and in educating some audiences rather than simply preaching to the choir," the report concludes.

The study examines the movement's uses of online media in 2014 and 2015. Researchers analyzed three types of data: 40.8 million tweets, over 100,000 web links, and 40 interviews of BLM activists and allies. The following findings are a result of an extensive Twitter, web network and hyperlink analysis:

The Birth of a Movement

- Although the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag was created in July 2013, it was rarely used through the summer of 2014 and did not come to signify a movement until the months after the Ferguson protests.
- In the early days, #Blacklivesmatter was only one of several popular hashtag slogans along with #HandsUpDontShoot, #NoJusticeNoPeace, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, and #Justice4All, among others. Unlike many of its competitors, #Blacklivesmatter was one of the few widely-used hashtags to articulate the issue in explicitly racial terms.
- #Blacklivesmatter was not widely used until November 24, the day St. Louis County prosecutor Robert McCullough announced that a grand jury had decided not to indict Darren Wilson for the death of Michael Brown. The previous day, the hashtag appeared in 2,309 tweets; but on that day, the total soared several orders of magnitude to 103,319.
- Social media posts by activists were essential in initially spreading Michael Brown's story nationally.

BLM Social Media Strategy

- Protesters and their supporters were generally able to circulate their own narratives without relying on mainstream news outlets.
- Activists used digital tools to generate alternative narratives

about police violence to counter the so-called neutrality of the mainstream press.

- Activists managed to spread their messages much further than ever before by appealing to the moral sensitivities of non-activists such as celebrities, politicians, online humorists, and ordinary citizens who in turn endorsed and shared the activists' posts with their followers.
- The primary goals of [social media](#) use among our interviewees were education, amplification of marginalized voices, and structural police reform.
- Evidence that activists succeeded in educating casual observers came in two main forms: expressions of awe and disbelief at the violent police reactions to the Ferguson protests, and conservative admissions of police brutality in the Eric Garner and Walter Scott cases.

BLM Twitter Communities

- There are six major communities that consistently discussed police brutality on Twitter in 2014 and 2015: Black Lives Matter, Anonymous/Bipartisan Report, Black Entertainers, Conservatives, Mainstream News, and Young Black Twitter.
- The vast majority of the communities we observed supported justice for the victims and decisively denounced police brutality.
- Black youth discussed police brutality frequently, but in ways that differed substantially from how activists discussed it.

According to the report, BLM borrowed many of its digital tactics from prior movements, including the development and independent distribution of new issue narratives, media criticism, systemic critiques, and enlisting well-known endorsers. One of the most substantial differences between BLM and its predecessors has to do with the nature of police brutality as an issue. Unlike wealth or income inequality, police

brutality is concrete, discrete in its manifestations, and extremely visual. Hashtagged full names and other digital memorials remind the public of the irreplaceable losses felt by the victims' families.

In sum, "this report showcases how Black Lives Matter and related movements have used social media tools to broaden conversations about the general capacity of online media tools to facilitate social and political change," the report states. "Our BLM interview participants were asked about the kinds of social changes they wanted to see as a result of their online activism; the primary type of desired outcome was policy change."

Provided by American University

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