

**“Yes, Hashtags Can Be Trivial and Annoying — but Discussion Threads Like #YesAllWomen Can Also Be Powerful”**

by Mathew Ingram, Gigaom.com, May 26, 2014

<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has spent any time on Twitter is probably well aware of the downsides of a real-time communications platform that connects millions of people, but also forces them to express their views in a message roughly the length of a bumper sticker or T-shirt slogan. When complicated topics like sexual abuse or gun control arise, Twitter often explodes with righteous indignation, trolling and other noise — and the killings on May 23 in California are no exception, since the killer appears to have been a violent misogynist intent on killing women.

<sup>2</sup> Much has already been written about the killer’s 141-page manifesto, in which he detailed his hatred of women who refused his sexual advances and plotted what he called his “Day of Retribution,” and the ongoing debate over whether his crimes were driven primarily by mental illness or the misogynist views of society in general and the “Men’s Rights” movement in particular. (I’m not naming the killer here, in part because publicity is the one thing such people seem to crave.)

<sup>3</sup> That debate continued to rage on Twitter over the weekend, but from it emerged something interesting: A hashtag thread — [#YesAllWomen](#) — that combined some of the best and the worst elements of Twitter discussions, but in the end showed how powerful even an abbreviated and noise-filled conversation about an important issue can be. Will it actually change anyone’s mind on the issue of society’s tolerance of misogyny or the men’s-rights movement? I have no idea, but it was still fascinating and moving to read and follow, and that is worth something.

<sup>4</sup> In many cases where complex issues arise on Twitter, the hashtag becomes a kind of weapon aimed at anyone who disagrees, and also a lightning rod that attracts the very behavior the discussion is trying to repel — and there was certainly plenty of that on the [#YesAllWomen](#)

**“Shonda Rhimes is Right: A Hashtag is Not a Movement”**

by Michelle Jones, The Stylish Standout, June 11, 2014

<sup>1</sup> After flipping through countless channels during the laziest of afternoons this past Saturday, I settled on an old episode of *Will and Grace* centered around the show’s namesake characters performing an act of good will — no pun intended — in appreciation for the twosome winning tickets to see one of their favorite performers in concert.

<sup>2</sup> When Will realized the selected organization worked with kids, he offered to write a check as his way of supporting the agency, until Grace convinced him that the donation would be the trouble-free way out.

<sup>3</sup> After all, it’s easy to give of your money, my dad used to tell me, because you can always make more of it and doing so doesn’t require much effort. Time, he says, isn’t a limitless resource — once it’s gone, it gone — so he always encouraged my sister and me to volunteer our time to worthy causes, and we did: We’ve both been years-long supporters of non-profits, on-campus organizations and community initiatives that survive not just off donations, but of course, through the unselfish on-site dedication to their missions.

<sup>4</sup> But I’ve noticed that social media has deposed the seemingly uncomplicated notion that we should do more and say less with the ever-growing popularity of hashtag activism. And it’s something that Shonda Rhimes mentioned at length during her Dartmouth commencement speech over the weekend, when she dared to declare: “A hashtag is not a movement.” ...

<sup>5</sup> “A hashtag is not helping. [#yesallwomen](#) [#takebackthenight](#) [#notallmen](#) [#bringbackourgirls](#) [#StopPretendingHashtagsAreTheSameAsDoingSomething](#),” she waxed on with urgency and in earnest. “Hashtags are very pretty on Twitter. I love them. I will hashtag myself into next week. A hashtag does not make you Dr. King. A hashtag does not change anything. It’s a hashtag. It’s you, sitting on your butt, typing into your computer and then going back to binge watching your favorite show. For me, it’s *Game of Thrones*.”

thread, including some “mansplaining” and even outright abuse. In other cases, hashtags can become a dumping ground of “slacktivism,” a gesture of solidarity so inconsequential that it accomplishes nothing, and there was plenty of this on the #YesAllWomen thread as well.

<sup>5</sup> University of North Carolina sociologist Zeynep Tufekci, who is one of the most perceptive researchers on social media and its effects, has written about how hashtags and the low-level activism they support can be a double-edged sword: how they can empower dissidents in Egypt or Turkey and spur them to action, but also how they can (paradoxically) help give power to the thing they are fighting against, and replace what might be a more lasting form of resistance with an ephemeral discussion that eventually fizzles out, having achieved very little.

<sup>6</sup> It would be easy to see the #YesAllWomen thread as just this kind of ephemeral discussion, one that will likely fail to generate any substantial change in society’s views about misogyny or how men approach issues like the UCSB killer. But even if it doesn’t produce legislation or topple the Men’s Rights movement, the fact that it allowed many women — some of whom had never spoken publicly about their abuse, or what it’s like to live in fear — to share their experiences with others, many of whom they might not even know, is a worthwhile thing.

<sup>7</sup> As Tufekci described in a piece about the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt in 2012, one of the most powerful things about social-media platforms like Twitter and Facebook is the “weak ties” they create between complete strangers, and how those ties can provide a feeling of solidarity with others who share a certain experience or point of view. In some cases, that can create a kind of tipping point that spurs a particular group to action, as it did in Egypt.

<sup>8</sup> But even if those feelings of solidarity with complete strangers doesn’t result in a revolution, there is still value in the discussion — and much of that value comes from the fact that it occurs in public, on a platform that allows anyone to participate. In other words, the exact same

<sup>6</sup> And for me it’s mocking misspelled words and trolling my friends with generational slang and gifs that would probably send my mom into a tizzy.

<sup>7</sup> I get the mobilizing benefits of hashtags, the ability to quickly round up like-minded Millennials often against the establishment and the ails that plague our societies. And I’m sure someone’s chomping at the bit to cite the successes of hashtag activism — the bad guys and girls who have been fired because of the pressure tweeters put on their corporations, the book deals that were jettisoned because publishers realized public opinion wouldn’t allow it, the world views that have been proven unworthy of a place in contemporary culture — which are unquestionably valid, but what’s so disappointing is how low our standard of influence is thanks to technology. And the fact that these instances of injustice continue to repeatedly occur could lead one to reason that more can and should be done after the social phase is wrapped up.

<sup>8</sup> In an op-ed on the Justice League, I contended that “In the aftermath [of a social-media takedown], the swarm of Twitter Wasps return to the nest, thinking job well done. There’s no follow-up, only to revel in the power of social media. There’s no evaluation, only to reference the tweets that made it onto BuzzFeed and analyze why they worked, so the same technique can be used next time (because there’ll definitely be a next time). There’s no consideration as to if the punishment actually fit the crime to begin with.”

<sup>9</sup> And why should there be when apathy reigns (see how react to gun violence), times are hard (I can barely take care of myself — there’s no time for activism!), and TV live-tweets are of highest priority (#LHHLA #OITNB #ScandalABC)? We’ve accepted that participation is only a retweet away, bonus points for an Instagram post.

<sup>10</sup> There are two opposing camps fueling this phenomenon: First, you’ve got the group who thinks, “I’m just one person, I can’t really make a difference” so they do next to nothing. Then, there’s the often-obnoxious group of fake leaders who all but guilt you into enlisting with the cool kids: “Oh, you can spend \$250 on a T-shirt, but

qualities that generate the noise and bad behavior that make such discussions problematic (as they are on sites like Reddit or 4chan) are what make them so powerful in the first place.

<sup>9</sup> Speaking as a man, and therefore part of the group that the #YesAllWomen thread was directed at (the name refers to the “Not all men” defence that many provide when the topic of violence towards women comes up), I found following the hashtag to be raw, disturbing, thought-provoking, challenging and many other things besides. In other words, the best kind of discussion. And now it’s up to me and everyone else who took part to put some of those feelings into action.

you can’t join the fight against racism. Hmph!” And in the midst of it all, the frustrating truth endures: Shit really isn’t getting done.

<sup>11</sup> But rest assured: We’re not the only ones. Reforms of immigration, student-loan debt and climate change have been on the docket for our pitiful Congress to address for months, and all we’re subjected to are partisan back-and-forth word wars about Benghazi, Bowe Bergdahl and the Veterans Administration. We’re simply following the leaders, no?

<sup>12</sup> Yes. Until Shonda came and pointed out our frailties and called us higher.

<sup>13</sup> “Volunteer some hours. Focus on something outside yourself. Devote a slice of your energies towards making the world suck less every week,” she urged. “Some people suggest that doing this will increase your sense of well-being. Some say it’s just good karma. I say that it will allow you to remember that, whether you are a legacy or the first in your family to go to college, the air you are breathing right now is rare air.”

<sup>14</sup> Thanks for the reality check, Ms. Rhimes. We needed it.