

Blacks Lead Social Justice Charge on Social Media

By Jazelle Hunt
NNPA Columnist

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – What do “Bring Back Our Girls,” “Justice for Trayvon” and “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” have in common? They’re all rallying cries that began on social media. And when big things happen through social media, Black people usually lead the charge.

Internet activism, also called “hashtag activism,” is an emerging side effect of the digital age, as ordinary people take to social media websites to organize and agitate. Today, Black people use sites such as Twitter and Facebook at higher rates than other groups. Last year, the Pew Research Center

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found that 29 percent of all Black Americans who are online use Twitter, and 76 percent use Facebook, compared to 16 percent and 71 percent of Whites, respectively.

On Twitter, the trend has led to the term “Black Twitter,” in which a conversation among African American users can and often does become the dominant conversation on the site.

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Twitter is a website that allows users all over the world to send and respond to public messages, or Tweets, in real time. Users can also create and use hashtags, denoted by the pound sign (“#”). Hashtags communicate an idea, and allow Tweets to be grouped together, creating a global, real-time public conversation around that idea.

“Twitter is the Internet’s answer to the telephone tree,” says Mikki Kendall, who uses Twitter to chat with the more than 23,500 “followers” who opt to include her Tweets in their tailored stream of conversations. She Tweets under the username @Karnythia; on Twitter, usernames are called “handles.”

Almost exactly a year ago, Kendall created the hashtag, #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen to highlight White feminists’ lack of support for women of color. The hashtag drew millions Tweets on the topic and generated feminist forums and events around the country on the topic. Media outlets such as NPR, Huffington Post, The Root, even The Guardian and Al Jazeera, penned articles on Kendall’s hashtag and the questions it raised. Twitter users still use and discuss it today.

“I’ve since heard from a lot of people about how educational that [hashtag] was, and how it informed some people’s work,” says Kendall. “You look on Twitter and see people in Egypt and Palestine explaining to people in Ferguson how to handle tear gas and dog bites. Even as police push media out—you can push media out but can’t push out the people who live there and have a smart phone.”

In 2012, Black Twitter produced #JusticeforTrayvon to discuss and spotlight the murder of Trayvon Martin, and the lack of law enforcement attention on his assailant, George Zimmerman. The hashtag grew into an online petition calling for Zimmerman’s arrest, then spilled into the real world to become the rallying cry. The mobilization around #JusticeforTrayvon eventually led to Zimmerman’s arrest, two months after the shooting.

In the days following Zimmerman’s acquittal, Black Twitter got wind of the

news that Juror B37 had secured a literary agent and book deal for her involvement with the trial. Genie Lauren, Twitter handle @MoreAndAgain, found the agent’s professional contact information online and Tweeted it to her estimated 3,000 followers.

“[Black Twitter users] knew we could stop this book. We’d gotten Paula Deen kicked off her TV show, we’d gotten published pieces taken [offline] for being offensive,” Lauren says. After suggesting that her followers contact the agent, Lauren also launched an online petition to pull the plug on the book deal. Within an hour, the petition had more than 1,000 signatures. Shortly after, the agent contacted Lauren to say she would no longer represent Juror B37. By the time Lauren shut down the petition, it had 1,343 signatures, and she had attracted approximately 6,000 new followers.

“I have a love-hate relationship with the term [Black Twitter]. It’s a thing, but at the same time it’s not a thing – it’s just Black people on Twitter,” she says. “Black people find each other no matter where we are, especially if we don’t own the space. And just like in real life, we’re not a monolithic group. There are lots of different circles making up the group.”

Lauren explains that Black people have always been trendsetters, and the rise of Black Twitter and Black-led hashtag activism is not surprising to her. But it seems to have surprised others, particularly media outlets that occasionally put the activity and trends among Black users under the microscope.

Major media outlets, advertising and marketing companies, and the Pew Research Center have examined and discussed the way Black people operate on social media sites. In May 2013, The Root got ahead of external chatter by launching The Chatterati, a hub for all the top topics of the day among Black social media users.

“I think [Black Twitter] became such a thing because via Twitter, a previously silenced group now has the opportunity to broadcast their thoughts and voices themselves, without having to go through a middle man that may or may not give them the stage,” says Tracy Clayton the former editor of The Chatterati. “With sites like Twitter, marginalized people can speak for themselves and drive their own narratives.”

The subject of social media organizing often begs the question: What good does this do offline? There’s a bit of debate about whether hashtag activism is activism.

Yesha Callahan, current editor of The Chatterati, points out that social media can be the springboard, but should not be the final destination.

“I can see both sides. It speaks upon what [a person] finds important. If they think hashtagging is more important than volunteering...what’s the point?” Callahan says. “At the same time, I know a woman who is handicapped and can’t be in the streets, but what she does online is organize. For people who have no excuse, I question their motives.”

Kendall agrees that activism should not start and end on computers.

“People like to say it’s hashtag activism... and that doesn’t make it real,” she says. “But now you know what’s happening, you know where you’re needed, and that matters in real life. When you think about Freedom Summer, the marches, the sit-ins...we forget how things got organized. This is just another aspect of that.”

When done well, a Twitter hashtag sparks a sprawling national or international conversation, then inspires offline action. A recent example is the hashtag, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. C.J. Lawrence, posed the question, “Which photo does the media use if the police shot me down?” With it, juxtaposes two photos of himself: one in which he is a commencement speaker at his grad-



C.J. Lawrence took to Twitter to pose the question: “Which photo does the media use if the police shot me down?” His accompanying hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown goes viral.

uation, with Bill Clinton and other notables in the background laughing at a joke he’s made; and other with him dressed in all Black and posing with a bottle of liquor.

“What most people wouldn’t realize, if they just grabbed the second photo of me, is that it’s me at a Halloween party, pretending to me Kanye West at the [Video Music Awards]. Neither [depictions] deserve to die,” says James, who Tweets as @CJ_musick_lawya.

“I was trying to highlight that no matter your education, class, or fashion sense, nobody deserves to die in the street that way. And you can’t capture the essence of a person in one photo, one quote.”

Before #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, most

media outlets had been reporting on the police shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. using an unsmiling photo of Brown in a basketball jersey, with his thumb, index, and middle fingers up.

After the hashtag took over Twitter, with other users posting their own dichotomous photos, media began to report on the conversation.

“I didn’t have the slightest inclination it would take off as much as it did. The power of social media forced mass media to question itself,” James says. “It caused media to have to talk about it, how it represents us, and how it will continue to moving forward.”

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