

Transcript for: Author Talk: #HashtagActivism

Hannah Nyren: Hi, everyone. Welcome to MIT Press Live! a new virtual event series, brought to you by The MIT Press.

Hannah Nyren: My name is Hannah Nyren and I am the Digital Marketing Manager at The MIT Press and I will be your host for this series. Today, we are speaking with the authors of #HashtagActivism. Great, see you all today. How are you doing?

Sarah J. Jackson: Great.

Moya Bailey: Thanks for having well thanks for having us.

Hannah Nyren: Yeah, I'm so glad that you all could join us.

Hannah Nyren: I'm so glad you could join us. We're really excited about your book. And we're really excited to talk about it today. So, just to make sure everyone knows all about you guys, before we began. Could each of you go around and introduce yourself?

Sarah J. Jackson: Sure, I'll go first. My name is Sarah Jackson, I'm a Presidential Associate Professor in the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and I study media, social movements and particularly black and feminist activism.

Moya Bailey: Hello everyone, my name is Moya Bailey. I'm an Assistant Professor at Northeastern University in Africana Studies and women's gender and sexuality studies that I'm really interested in how race, gender, and medicine come together in media.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Hi everyone I'm Brooke Foucault Welles. I'm an Associate Professor of Communication Studies and network science at Northeastern University. I study online communication networks and marginalized communities.

Hannah Nyren: Great. So, does one of you want to tell us a little bit more about what this book is about?

Brooke Foucault Welles: Sure, I can take that one. And so in #HashtagActivism we explore how marginalized communities have harnessed the power of the internet and Twitter in particular. In order to infiltrate and change public debate about topics that are of great importance to them.

Brooke Foucault Welles: We specifically focus on race, gender, and their intersections and we use several different methods, including computational network analysis.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Qualitative discourse analysis and historical analysis, along with responsible responses from activists themselves to really paint an in depth picture of how various contemporary hashtags have changed the issues we're talking about and how we're talking about them.

Hannah Nyren: Awesome. So, um, what inspired this book? What brought you all together to write it?

Sarah J. Jackson: Yeah, thanks for asking that. So, it's actually a fun story Brooke and I, our offices used to be next door to each other. And I was at work, put on Twitter, which those things aren't mutually exclusive.

Sarah J. Jackson: In early 2014 and so you have to kind of transport yourself back to early 2014. This was before, most Americans had seen or heard of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag it was before. Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson.

Sarah J. Jackson: The New York City Police Department attempted a public relations campaign with a hashtag. They started a hashtag #MYNYPD

Sarah J. Jackson: And they sent out a tweet that said, share your photos and videos with the New York City Police Department, with the hashtag #myNYPD

Sarah J. Jackson: And we'll choose the best ones and share them to our Facebook and our Twitter account. Now of course in 2020 like hearing that we can all imagine how quickly, something like that could go down hill, but it's 2014 and people didn't quite have the savvy. And so what was fascinating. Was that immediately.

Sarah J. Jackson: This hashtag that was started essentially by those with power by the New York City Police Department, which they even had provided a sample photo of what they wanted, which was a smiling tourist wearing an I love NYC hat in Times Square with police officers.

Sarah J. Jackson: was overtaken by ordinary people first New Yorkers. And then, increasingly, people from all over the world and and talking about police brutality and sharing images of police brutality and not only contemporary cases but also historical cases, talking about the Amadou Diallo case talking about cases even earlier than that. And I thought, as somebody who studies the question of who has the power to shape the narrative...

Sarah J. Jackson: When we talk about issues of inequality, when we talk about issues of race, when we talk about issues of identity. I thought this was a fascinating, fascinating case in which the people who theoretically we would always think, have the power, which are those in a more elite social position in this case, the police really lost control of this hashtag.

Sarah J. Jackson: And it was overtaken by ordinary people telling their stories and sort of insisting on really reorienting and rethinking the role of police in society. So, I had walk next door to Brooke and said is there a way for us to study this because I am a qualitative scholar and I knew how to study it theoretically, and I knew how to do discourse analysis on what I was seeing people tweet, but I also knew that I was seeing millions of tweets.

Sarah J. Jackson: Which is a huge data set and Brooke, because she's a network scientist had the skill and the tools.

Sarah J. Jackson: To be able to sort of sit down and work with me on how to collect that data. And that was one of the first studies that we did prior to starting this book, and at the same time that was that was happening Moya, who is a digital humanist was studying issues of race, gender, feminism, the body, etc online and had particularly been studying the hashtag girls like us network which is a Hash. Hash tag network. We'll talk more about today...

Sarah J. Jackson: That was started by Janet Mock for transwomen in particular to talk about their experiences and concerns and sort of build both a collective identity and a kind of body politic. So that's, that's where this all started.

Hannah Nyren: That's amazing. It's so cool that you all were there, kind of at the beginning of this what I feel like has become a giant movement or at least a giant trend.

Hannah Nyren: Um, so it's great that you all have the resources to put this together and to do the due diligence on the subject. Alright, so I'll let you take it from here. I know you all have a lot to talk about.

Sarah J. Jackson: Sure. Thanks. Thanks, Hannah. So I'm just going to start out for our audience members who maybe aren't familiar, or haven't read the book yet. I'm just going to read a brief excerpt introducing the concept of hashtag activism why we think it's important...

Sarah J. Jackson: And then I will also read a very brief piece of our chapter titled from "Ferguson to Falcon Heights," which is one of several chapters in the book that looks at the sort of corpus of Black Lives Matter networks, which includes the names of people who were killed in cases of police brutality and other cases of anti black violence and many other name places, etc. So I'll read that and then we'll have a little bit of a discussion thereafter.

Sarah J. Jackson: Okay, so, #HashtagActivism, a term that first appeared in news coverage in 2011 describes the creation and proliferation of online activism stamped with a hashtag.

Sarah J. Jackson: We argue that this online activism leads to material effects in the digital and physical worlds. While #HashtagActivism is a uniquely 21st century phenomenon. There is something familiar about the goals of those using Twitter to push for social change.

Sarah J. Jackson: Indeed, ordinary people challenging redefining and changing the terms of public debate is one of the most enduring and crucial characteristics of democracy.

Sarah J. Jackson: Much of the discourse related to U.S progress from the abolition of slavery to the sexual revolution was rooted in narratives created on the margins of society.

Sarah J. Jackson: Counter Publix, as we call them in this book or the alternative networks of debate created by marginalized members of the public have always played an important role in highlighting and legitimizing the experiences of those on the margins.

Sarah J. Jackson: Even as they push for integration and change in mainstream spaces.

Sarah J. Jackson: So I'm just going to skip quite a few pages forward and read a little bit from the beginning of our chapter "From Ferguson to Falcon Heights," where we talk about the Ferguson hashtag in particular.

Sarah J. Jackson: As we find elsewhere. The story of what happened in Ferguson began to circulate on Twitter.

Sarah J. Jackson: First through personal accounts from Michael Brown's neighbors after he was killed, whose tweets set the stage for how the larger activist narrative around the events of August 9 would evolve.

Sarah J. Jackson: The story was pushed along and the network enlarged by members of the local and national black community and public sphere.

Sarah J. Jackson: Together, these Twitter users help spread the story to a range of networks documented on the ground efforts and bullied called for aid from General, the general public, as Justice continued to be waylaid

Sarah J. Jackson: Soon increasing online attention to the events in Ferguson and particularly the conflicts developing around unarmed protesters journalist and the police became unignorable even in the most mainstream of spaces.

Sarah J. Jackson: The #Ferguson also became more than a geographic descriptor of the tower Michael Brown was killed, it became a stand in for any town, USA.

Sarah J. Jackson: Black Lives Matter activists across the country in the world were soon chanting "Ferguson is everywhere," and demands for justice and the extra judicial abuse and killing of black people.

Sarah J. Jackson: The diverse conversations in and uses of the hashtag mirror what we have seen in many of the other intersection of hashtags who study in this book, including those created by black feminists and other black lives matter related hashtags that emerged after Ferguson ordinary people using #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter contributed issue framing.

Sarah J. Jackson: Prescriptions and analysis in the network that extended far beyond the digital realm to penetrate national and international discourse.

Sarah J. Jackson: So we look in this chapter, in particular, how these various hashtags that came after that moment, and one that came before. Really spread, not just through Twitter and what the arguments there in Twitter were that were being made.

Sarah J. Jackson: But also how they spread out into the mainstream into the public so that this was sort of an issue that became unignorable for journalists and for politicians and etc.

Sarah J. Jackson: So, um, with that, I'd like to sort of just throw it out to Moya and Brooke to maybe reflect a little bit on what I read what maybe some of your favorite findings or the findings, at least you think are interesting from this particular set of hashtags is...

Moya Bailey: Thanks Sarah. I mean, I think for me, one of the most interesting parts of this is that we see really

Moya Bailey: Ordinary people, as you mentioned, the neighbors of Mike Brown really being the instigators of making this a national news story and what people, I think really can come to understand through this text is that it doesn't require traditional media to be at the forefront of this that it's really these ordinary people who are able to make

Moya Bailey: Mainstream Media pay attention through the work that they do in their communities that then help to make it something that local celebrities. Then take interest in, so I know you all talked a bit about Ted Poe, a local activist who had a lot of energy and momentum within the city, but then that then broadened the community through which the information about what was happening in Ferguson could be shared beyond just that particular community and then mainstream media starts to pay attention.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Yeah. So for me, obviously I spent most of my time sort of looking at numbers and trying to find patterns in the data. And one of the things that came out, particularly in this chapter, but throughout the book is a clever use of hashtags to kind of tell a broader narrative and so when Mike Brown was killed one of the common kinds of mainstream frames.

Brooke Foucault Welles: On what happened was that this was a one off incident like one bad apple right so that this sort of thing is rare and doesn't happen very often. And of course, we all know that that's not true.

Brooke Foucault Welles: And one of the devices that folks used in order to make these broader connections and was something we called hashtag co occurrence.

Brooke Foucault Welles: And so this is specifically using multiple hashtags on the same tweet and the thing that we noticed folks doing. In many of these instances was using co occurrence of names right so to try to string together, not just Mike Brown. It's Mike Brown and Eric Gardner.

Brooke Foucault Welles: It's Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin or Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown and Eric Gardner, you see. And so the story of this narrative builds up and one of the things that I found really breathtaking was when folks started to hashtag names of folks who were murdered long before Twitter ever happened, right. So we started to see #EmmettTill...

Brooke Foucault Welles: And so on. Alongside these other names. And so we paint this picture of this broad historical problem. And all of these individual murders then connected together in a way where it's really hard to write them off as a one off event right so he changed the narrative around how we're thinking and talking about these issues.

Sarah J. Jackson: Thank you both for that. I think that um you know those are two of my

Sarah J. Jackson: I think two of the most powerful findings of our art cases overall is both the power of sort of ordinary people to begin to frame and set the stage for how we talk about these issues. And then the ways in which the same people are insisting that we think and talk about these issues as a broad social problems and not individual stories and how this sort of discursive shortcut that is a hashtag can accomplish that in so few characters. Right. Thanks so much. And so I think we're going to turn it over to Moya, to share another brief excerpt from another section of the book and then we will discuss that.

Moya Bailey: Or and this actually builds on what we were just talking about these co occurring hashtags. And I want to look specifically at girls like us and how it was used. So I'm going to read just a little bit of this and get to this point where we really see how transwomen are using the #GirlsLikeUs to talk about issues of social justice.

Moya Bailey: Trans women use girls like us in three primary ways one, to connect with one another on everyday, often mundane experiences. Two, as a way to advocate for trans issues and rights, particularly through critiques of mainstream representations of trans people and anti trans violence and three, to celebrate the accomplishments of trans women and that third use of the hashtag often overlaps with the previous two but this issue of creating change is one that I think really connects with what Brooke and Sarah were just talking about.

Moya Bailey: #GirlsLikeUs tweets that focus on advocating for trans issues and rights do so by elevating the voices and histories of transwomen. And sharing facts and information about trans experiences within justice.

Moya Bailey: These tweets are educational, a call to action, or both. For example, Trans March a San Francisco organization that works to "Inspire all trans and gender non conforming people to realize a world where we are safe, loved and empowered" regularly tweets educational and biographical information about trans activists and figures like Marsha P Johnson, Jackie Collins, Billy Cooper and Chelsea Manning.

Moya Bailey: Tweets in this category also work to connect issues of transliteration to intersections concerns of poverty racism and sexism. For example, Janet Mock connects the case of CC McDonald to that of Trayvon Martin, the black for the teenager killed by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman whose case we consider in the next chapter.

Moya Bailey: By using the hashtag #JusticeForTrayvon alongside #GirlsLikeUs and free CC

Moya Bailey: Mock illustrates the connection between anti black silence and trans identities often left out of conversations on racial profiling. At the same time, Mark makes the issue of anti black violence too often excluded from the mainstream LGBT movement. Central to her brand of trans advocacy.

Moya Bailey: And I just think that this is just such a wonderful example of what these hashtags have been able to accomplish. So I'd love to hear from Sarah and Brooke about how this particular chapter in this reading really connects to some of your overall findings about the text.

Sarah J. Jackson: Yeah, thanks, Moya. Yeah, that's one of our favorite cases in the book, for sure. I mean,

Sarah J. Jackson: We care about all of them, some of them obviously were more somber to study, while others like the #GirlsLikeUs was really a happy story.

Sarah J. Jackson: Because it was about this building community and uplift. I think one of the things that stuck out to me across our chapters, particularly with the feminist hashtags, including #GirlsLikeUs was the way that we were able to trace how networks of hashtags around feminist issues from intimate partner violence, to street harassment, to trans women's issues.

Sarah J. Jackson: Were really built and connected far before anyone heard of the hashtag #MeToo. And so, what we're able to trace in the book is how there were these very strong narratives and these very strong networks of folks who were connected. For example, Wagatwe Wanjuki whose a contributor wrote us a little blurb for the book about her hashtag #SurvivorPrivilege hashtags, like #YouOkSis hashtags, lie #SayHerName hashtags like the empty chair and why I stayed all of these hashtags which tackled really. In some ways, long standing issues that feminists and often intersection of feminism feminist color have been discussing for a long time built community and built narratives, so that eventually

Sarah J. Jackson: When the two arises is sort of a global phenomenon. What we see in these networks is we see many of the same people who were early on in 2012, 2013, 2014, building these feminist hashtag networks.

Sarah J. Jackson: Challenging mainstream narratives about how we think about gender and violence and power and people have come to trust each other in those networks, they've come to share certain understandings of the politics of these issues and so that once those people start also engaging with #MeToo hashtag, it spreads like wildfire because there's already this sort of set of people and networks that are the Go To sort of Twitter.

Sarah J. Jackson: Feminist activists that participate in this. So that was, that was one of the interesting things that we were able to trace to show, you know, unlike what maybe the mainstream media depicts it it's not as hashtags come out of nowhere, or can trend, out of nowhere. It's that in fact there's entire sorts of communities being built online around particular political contentions that have to exist in order for something to be picked up and really proliferated at that level.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Yeah. So building on that idea. So, we do see these broad Coalition's and this kind of network substrate along which these hashtags can become activated.

Brooke Foucault Welles: And it's important to note that although we do focus on the book on like the most retweeted the most recognizable users and these networks. There's also all of these

outliers that make it happen. Right. So, we have these activists at the core crafting these messages and then ally spreading them around.

Brooke Foucault Welles: And we have a whole chapter in the book on allyship where where we largely explore cases of sort of semi I would say semi failed ally ship. So we're folks had good intentions. But they ended up, for example, white folks Reese entered themselves and a discussion about racial injustice.

Brooke Foucault Welles: However, in the book are in the book and the chapter about violence against women, there's this really lovely example of Elon James White whose a journalist and comedian using the affordable says of Twitter in order to engage and really excellent allyship. And so this incident happens in 2015. You might remember this New York Magazine cover of 35 different women sitting in chairs, all of whom had been victims of Bill Cosby sexual assaults.

Brooke Foucault Welles: And there was one last 36 chair with no one in it to symbolize all the women who couldn't come forward or didn't come for it for whatever reason. And this kind of struck

Brooke Foucault Welles: White as a particularly poignant a...statement about the silencing of women and the inability to share experiences. So what he did was he opened his DMs on Twitter and invited women who would like to share their story.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Who would like to have some kind of public acknowledgement of what happened to them.

Brooke Foucault Welles: To DM our story and then under the cover of his Twitter account, which was pretty well followed, which was pretty recognizable people repost those anonymously right so folks got recognition. They got airtime and yet they didn't have to help themselves in a way that might make them feel unsafe. So I think that there are clever ways that allies have developed to support these efforts. So you don't have to be only you know only having symptoms advancing these hashtags about violence against women, you can have these Coalition's of allies and those networks as well really spreading that message.

Sarah J. Jackson: Yeah. Thanks so much, Brook. Thanks. I think with that, I mean, I'm really curious what questions the audience has. We of course could talk about sort of our favorite stories and approaches and like bumps along the road and things that we faced in writing the book forever.

Sarah J. Jackson: But for the sake of time, I think what we want to do is open up the Q&A.

Sarah J. Jackson: So if it looks like Hannah is dropping in the chat, how to use the question and answer feature. So, if folks want to drop questions and answers in there. We're happy to answer questions for as much time as we we have today and sort of, you know, as personally as possible, though none of us can be together about the book.

Hannah Nyren: Thank you so much. All of you. I think that was a great chat and I'm interested in what questions we have today. There are already a few questions lined up. So I'll let everyone else get a chance to ask their questions.

Hannah Nyren: Don't feel obligated to ask a question. If you don't have one, but I'm sure a lot of you have questions you're dying to ask. We'll try to get through as many as possible. Today, we do have a sufficient amount of time. So we shouldn't be able to get through them all. But if we are unable to I'm sure you could follow up on Twitter or a number of different ways. We'll discuss that at the end.

Hannah Nyren: Alright, so let's start with one question about Twitter algorithms. I think this one's for Brooke. I'm not quite sure. But you all decide who's the best person to answer this: Did you examine how Twitter's algorithms mediated these hashtags? How did they interfere with the distribution of tweets? Did they censor any of the hashtags by suppressing or obscuring them and followers feeds?

Hannah Nyren: I'm not sure how much data you would actually have access to this because it may be proprietary, but I'm a little curious. Did you find anything on this?

Sarah J. Jackson: I'll let her take it. To say more. But I will say one thing is that there's a problem about lack of transparency from Twitter. The organization to the public and to researchers in general. But I'll let her talk about sort of how we collected the tweets, because I think that will answer some of the questions about how we know we included everything.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Sure, yeah. So, on some level of course Sarah's answer is the right one that we don't have access to the underlying algorithms that run Twitter and they're updating them all the time, right. So, something that was true for one hashtag is probably not true for another hashtag.

Brooke Foucault Welles: And that said we were lucky at Northeastern that have proprietary access to a 10% sometimes called the garden hose Twitter feed.

Brooke Foucault Welles: And this is just a 10% random sample folks have done some robustness checks on this seems to point to that this is more or less random. So, from that we were able to extract the data that we worked with, which is not to say that there weren't differences in visibility.

Brooke Foucault Welles: So I suspect that not all of the tweets got the same level of attention that they appeared to get inside the data set. That said, without getting too far into the technical weeds. We did leverage and network analysis technique that is pretty robust and missing data.

Brooke Foucault Welles: So, I'm fairly confident that we've captured tweets that had widespread attention that we may have missed some tweets that didn't get so popular. But, the methods that we had kind of they have a lot of fail safes built in for buffering against that I'm on the question of suppression or amplification.

Brooke Foucault Welles: You know, we do talk about in the book and the introduction to the book that we certainly are cases are biased towards things

Brooke Foucault Welles: That happen in densely populated areas they skew a little bit young they skew a little bit more towards rate black folks. And that's partly reflective of the composition of the users of Twitter. So of course we aren't getting great coverage in places where Twitter isn't well established or isn't widely used by most populations.

Moya Bailey: And I just wanted to add a little bit something that comes in our epilogue here in the last part of the book where we talk about the fact that we were able to finish this when we work because of what we had access to at Northeastern and that we really don't think we would have been able to write this book in this current moment because of how Twitter itself has changed what it is that researchers have access to. So, even this question of algorithms is interesting because it opens up, what are the limitations that the platforms themselves actually put on researchers in terms of being able to conduct a project like this. So, we were really fortunate that we started when we did because, again, I don't think we would be able to do this project now.

Hannah Nyren: That's, that's a really good point to make, because even from our own angle of social media marketing. We've seen a drastic difference in the information available over the past year because of the laws that have been made in and the liability there.

Hannah Nyren: That's really interesting. So, we have two questions that are kind of similar. So I'm going to combine them, but they are questions that I myself probably would have wanted to ask. What was the collaboration like between three authors and this multi authored manuscript? And the other version of that question is what are some of the pluses and minuses of having multiple authors on such a mighty project like this book?

Sarah J. Jackson: Of those are great questions. Thank you to the people who asked them, we think it's a mighty project too. It took us five years, took a long time.

Sarah J. Jackson: And we have a lot of data. So, so look, I mean, I don't know if the people asking those questions are academics or not. Obviously in academia, there are pluses and minuses at any time strategic pluses and minuses to having co-authors, but in this particular case, we feel very strongly that this book wouldn't exist if the three of us hadn't worked together on it.

Sarah J. Jackson: We each brought sort of our own set of frameworks from our own disciplinary training. We brought our own ethical questions. We brought our own theoretical questions as Brooke mentioned earlier, we really needed the multiple methods here, we needed the count, we needed the call.

Sarah J. Jackson: You know there were very there's we each could have written a book alone about hashtag activism. And that book would be a different book. And then this one that we've written together. And so, you know, we really feel like we were able to thoroughly and effectively answer these questions and tackle this topic and sort of the scale of the cases that we looked at

and think about both network, networks and the power of networks and discourse and the power of discourse and history and politics and context and all this stuff because we have the three of us. It's the reason the book exists. Now that said one of the benefits and all of them chip in

Sarah J. Jackson: If they disagree, which I don't think they do is that we all like each other and we're friends in real life. So, it was easy to build the collaboration because certainly while now in 2020 we're better friends than we were when we started in 2014 partially because we wrote a book together.

Sarah J. Jackson: We already admired and respected each other's work when we started this process and we were already curious and open minded to learn from each other when we started this process. And so I didn't think there were any negatives at all, except maybe that it's a little slower when you have to schedule meetings and come to agreements and make editorial decisions with three people than with one person. But other than that, I thought it kind of went brilliantly.

Moya Bailey: I would, I would definitely second that. And just to speak more to the process of writing with three people. We really instituted a weekly practice in terms of meeting together to physically write. I do think that that is something that might be a little unique in terms of some people perhaps working on different pieces which we did, but we were always most of the time, physically writing at the same time, which I think is a unique part of our, our practice for this project we each took different, we each were working on different pieces, but we were physically in the same space working on those different pieces. And that, to me, definitely made a difference in terms of our collaboration and being able to bounce ideas off each other.

Moya Bailey: And keep the process and the momentum for the book project going. I mean, I can definitely remember

Moya Bailey: That there were times where we were feeling a little bit low because some of this, even though this is in the context of the resilience of ordinary people in terms of making movements happen. Some of this can get really dark and some of the tweets were really discouraging. But, I think having the three of us gather was such an important piece for our own mental health in terms of working on this project that had some of these elements that were particularly hard to deal with.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Now, I mean plus one on everything. Everyone said I don't also like to lift up that I personally didn't come to this book with you know I had a lay person's understanding of race and gender justice. I did that kind of as a participant right so I did race and gender justice. You know, organize activism as a participant in protests and things like that. So I am particularly grateful to Sarah and Moya for their patients with me. So I learned a lot, not only about the book, but about how I can be a better human in general.

Brooke Foucault Welles: And I, and I think that that is probably true for everyone but wanted to lift up that the friendship and the work kind of extended beyond just what showed up in the book and amplified all of our all of our activism mark in our own lives as well.

Hannah Nyren: Great. So, you all mentioned at the beginning, a little bit that this project originally started in about 2014. So since then, how has the power of hashtag use for activism changed?

Sarah J. Jackson: Yeah, that's a great question. I think not to be too wonky about it but it depends on what your measurement of power is because there are actual ways to measure power. Obviously, one thing to note is that since 2017 Twitter use has declined. So, we actually started this project in the midst of the Twitter boom. When Twitter had it's sort of highest. I think it was around 2015 when Twitter hit its peak of users. And a lot of our data which are collected between you know 2014 and 2019 are from that peak, but we saw while we were working on the book engagement with Twitter did start to decline a little bit. We also saw the problem of that first story I told about the hashtag my NYPD. Well, one of the things of course that happened was,

Sarah J. Jackson: It wasn't even though maybe activists caught on it a little early in terms of the power of organizing online and the power of hashtags.

Sarah J. Jackson: It wasn't long before people with progressive political agendas also picked up on that. And so in some ways the environment has changed because people are using Twitter for. You know, all kinds of political projects that are not always positive ones I think also the culture of Twitter changed a little bit. I've told the story before I was an early adopter of Twitter and in 2009 or so. And in the early days of Twitter, you know, Twitter was really marketed as a micro blogging site.

Sarah J. Jackson: And a lot of the networks. And in fact, a lot of the very influential tweeters in these in these feminist networks and racial justice networks moved over to Twitter as early adopters.

Sarah J. Jackson: Between 2009 and 2011 or 12 and they knew each other from the blogosphere so even though people didn't necessarily know each other in real life, there was a sense that people's usernames were familiar, you had seen them in the comments in the blogosphere before. And so there was a sense that you could give, you know, assume that people's responses and reactions were their best intentions, but of course we know now that increasingly over the years harassment, fake accounts, other forms of abuse online, have proliferated and it's become a little bit more of a scary place for people to talk about these issues. So, that's kind of saying a lot to your question, and I'll turn it over, so I don't take up all the time, but I think, you know, I think. Hashtag activism still has a lot of power, but I try to always remind people that just like any other tool in a social movement toolkit. It's one tool.

Sarah J. Jackson: So, Twitter was one platform hashtags are one tool. And activists and people trying to change the world, where we'll use that as long as it's effective. And when it's not they'll move to another platform or another tool and it's part of a toolbox that has to include offline organizing it has to include in person consciousness raising and conversations and, you know, kind of all kinds of things to have power.

Moya Bailey: Yeah, and just building on what Sarah said I'm also interested by the shifting demographics of Twitter. So, the fact that I think the average age of the user has gone up since we started this project. And so you know Brooke was saying before our data skewed young. I do think that people who are using Twitter now and 2020 are much older or bit older than the people that we were looking at before. And so one of the things that's happening is, I think younger activists might be finding other platforms.

Moya Bailey: So I think we've seen TikTok being a new place where people are organizing and using that to create a fact, not just with the challenges, but also through different types of social justice organizing through memes and other tools. So I'm really interested to see where young people are going to take us because I don't assume like Sarah that Twitter will always be the platform that people decide to use.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Yeah. So when you do research on technology, which I've done my whole career, there's a risk and being kind of typecast as like the Twitter researcher, which, you know, it's still probably relevant now, but it will certainly not be relevant 20 years from now. Right. And so, one of the things, although our book is certainly about Twitter and uses Twitter data. One of the things that's important to note is that the the afforded says, own the hashtag based communication will shift and transfer elsewhere so we're going to see network counterpublics forever.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Whether or not they continue to exist on Twitter. I mean, if I had to place a bet, I would bet against it, right, that that same kind of communication, though, will still exist. It will transfer to some other platform. So I think that there are lessons here that are pretty timeless.

Hannah Nyren: Great that answer was so thorough that it not only answered that question. I think it answered three more questions that we had about how hashtags are used on other networks, aside from Twitter. Um, so is there anything else you want to add about hashtags on other networks.

Sarah J. Jackson: I'll just have one quick thing and then we can move on for that because I did see the question about other other networks, absolutely, we do talk about in the book how Twitter is connected to other social media platforms like YouTube and like Facebook in many of these campaigns. An obvious example of that is that the first time, Alicia Garza used the phrase Black Lives Matter was on Facebook. And so that was, you know, the platform that was used similarly, and in a more sobering and difficult example when Philando Castile could still which was, was murdered by police in Minnesota, his girlfriend was in the car and used Facebook Live to share that video. And so in both of those cases, those things happened on Facebook first and then were picked up and they trended you know they proliferated and more and more people became aware and shared the information on Twitter, but they're very clearly was a cross platform interaction there. And if you go back far enough, which, as it happens, we do in the book, you see something similar.

Sarah J. Jackson: In the Oscar Grant case in 2009 when Oscar Grant was killed by BART Police on New Year's Eve somebody recorded it on their cell phone now in 2009 Twitter didn't have the technological Florence's to directly upload video and so that person that video was uploaded to YouTube.

Sarah J. Jackson: And so people on Twitter started sharing the link out to the YouTube video to talk about that case. And so that's another example of how, you know, these these platforms where we're connected. So we definitely did see that.

Moya Bailey: Actually, I think that connects to another part that we touch on just a little bit, but the changes in the platform over time, so from going from seeing that as a YouTube link to now Twitter, being able to actually be able to show video or to show an image as opposed to a link so we can see Twitter as a platform shifting and that also shifting the way that people engage with it for organizing.

Hannah Nyren: Great. I think we definitely have all the bases covered on that. We have a few other questions. I am trying again to see where I can combine them, because there are so many, but some of them are really fantastic. Um,

Hannah Nyren: So there were a lot of questions about accessibility and how sometimes those for most disadvantaged have the least access to these technologies. So, how can people advocate for themselves if they don't necessarily have constant access to technology?

Sarah J. Jackson: Yeah, that's a great, that's a great question. And we don't we don't talk a lot about questions of digital divide. In the book, but it's a very important question. Um, one thing I will note, though, is that Twitter really has been lauded by folks who historically haven't had access to the public sphere. So this question of access is an interesting one because it's true that there are certain groups and particularly people in rural areas and I think Brooke mentioned earlier, that's partially why many of the stories in cases that 10 on trend on Twitter, are those that happen in cities or suburbs or, you know, places where there's reliable internet at rural reliable broadband. So, you see less representation of rural folks.

Sarah J. Jackson: But in terms of, for example, people with disabilities who may have some reason that they can't physically attend you know offline protests or meetings. Parents and low income people who cannot afford because of you know the labor they do at home or the second or third job they have to go to a rally or come to a meeting offline folks like that have really found Twitter to be something that opens up who has access. And so I think this is kind of one of those bulk end questions where we definitely are proponents I think I can speak for more amber. We're proponents of

Sarah J. Jackson: You know, stronger broadband I'm personally I don't speak to them. I'm, I'm a proponent of nationalized broadband access. I think access to the Internet is a civil right. And so of course people who do not have that access should have that access and that there's a lot of people working on that which is great. I think that one of the things that our book actually shows, though, is that there's large groups of people who historically haven't had access to the

mainstream public sphere to mainstream politics to mainstream media and these people, particularly our young African Americans queer and trans people, people with disabilities, etc, who really have created an avenue for access through social media like like Twitter.

Brooke Foucault Welles: Can I build on that? So, when we talk about the digital divide access is only part of the equation, right. So, we also need to think about skill and differences in skill and and you know it's not a different answer than one Sarah just gave. Right. So, so one of the things that's nice about Twitter is that folks can engage in a pretty widespread coordinated action with a pretty low skill level right so you don't need to be a programmer to post something on Twitter or to retweet something on Twitter and you don't need to be able to even understand the network, right. So even if you just know about your little piece of the network. You can propagate a message if enough people get involved. So, of course not everyone even has, you know, is literate, or has the skill to know how to use Twitter. But, the barrier to entry is much lower than a lot of the technology is particularly if we look back to what folks are trying to use just before Twitter activism really took off.

Moya Bailey: And just to build on that. I think in this current moment we're seeing the need for more accessibility and access to broadband. I mean, I'm sure people have heard stories of, you know, K through 12 students who are trying to get WiFi from, you know, the neighborhood McDonald's because they don't have access at home and are trying to do their work. I mean, one of the things about Twitter is that you don't need broadband, you can actually use whatever data that your phone has. And so again, in terms of a lower bar of entry that makes a difference in terms of how people can use that platform for organizing and to communicate with lots of people. So as things change as you know network net neutrality has been challenged. I think it's really important for us to start to make sure that we are advocating to make sure as Sarah said that there's a national understanding that this is a human right to have access to the material that you need to participate in in civic discourse.

Hannah Nyren: OK, thank you. So, a couple more questions. Some of these are a little bit more personally directed to you all and your experience. So, one question is how much were you personally connected with your work and how were you able to detach yourself from everything you were saying, I guess?

Sarah J. Jackson: Okay, so I saw this question. I was like, I hope she reads it because I don't know the person who asked it, but um and I don't want to speak for my co authors, but I think the concept of research detachment or objectivity is a complete fiction. Obviously as scholars and as researchers, we hold ourselves accountable to rigorous methods we use theory and we use all the things. So, to ensure that the work we're doing is done with rigor.

Sarah J. Jackson: But, the idea that we should detach ourselves from the work I actually reject that. And I think, you know, as, as a black American, as a woman, I'm not detached from racism. I'm not attached from sexism. I'm not attached from the forms of violence that have evolved into hashtag campaigns and and and larger, you know, offline social movements and so I would never say that I that I should be that would be, you know, denying a part of myself.

Sarah J. Jackson: But certainly, you know, as mentioned, as Moya mentioned earlier, there were times doing this research that I think it was hard. I mean, there was an impact on us to some of the content. I had to write a section of one of the chapters where I listed the number of people who were killed by police in this very short period between the summer of 2014 and the summer of 2016 and just even writing it was was emotionally tumultuous right not to mention them studying the stories and the images and you know the videos that are associated it so um, you know, I think we picked this topic to write about, because it's a hopeful topic because we think it's important to highlight the fact that ordinary people can tell and do tell their own stories, you know, they use tools that weren't made for them to do that.

Sarah J. Jackson: There are some interesting characteristics about those tools that are worth studying and thinking about, but that doesn't mean that we approach any of those topics as if they don't matter to us. And certainly, I think we all in our own way. We're in some way connected to some of the networks. Not all, but some of the networks that we studied.

Moya Bailey: Yes, and relatedly. Part of the reason that we wanted to make sure to include the voices of the people who are active in these networks, what's, you know, really trying to address that question of what does this mean for those who are most impacted? Those who are actually using these hashtags to tell their story. And so for me, I think that's also part of this question of erasing the fiction of objectivity that people are very much embedded in this research. It's not just something that we are studying for our own, you know, academic interest that this has like material consequence on people's lives. And that's part of the reason that we all came together to do this project.

Brooke Foucault Welles: So, there are a few things I can add here. But, here's one that I'll throw out in graduate school. So, I've been studying the internet and online communities, since the beginning of my academic career and in graduate school ahead and advisor who insisted that we were participants in all the communities that we study. It didn't order to build some cultural competency and literacy and those faces and the reason he gave was that, you know, imagine a film studies scholar, right, we just never watches movies like no one would trust their credibility and so you know I am an active participant on Twitter and I became more active as we're doing this work. But, I think it's important to acknowledge that these media farms are their own cultures and their own communities. So, in order to be conversant in them. You need to be a participant in them. So, of course we all participate. Right. It would be absurd for us not to.

Hannah Nyren: So, we've got a few more questions. A lot of people are just saying thank you for the talk. So, share that along with all of you. But one interesting question, and I can't read this verbatim. But, the question is about how POC or individuals can gain access to spaces that generally belong to a large white majority before even engaging on Twitter or social media that goes and I know what we're talking about today is about activism on social media. But considering your broad range of expertise between the three of you, you may have something to say about this topic as well.

Sarah J. Jackson: Hmm, okay. So, I'm not sure without seeing the phrasing of the question exactly what's being asked. There are, they're asking about gaining access to sort of like mainstream political debate offline. Is that right?

Hannah Nyren: I think that's it. I think the question is how can someone who is not in a certain category of privilege enter into these spaces where changes are happening and where these conversations are being made.

Sarah J. Jackson: Gotcha, gotcha. Um, activism, agitation, organizing, I think, you know, this is kind of a larger umbrella, you know, question that, then the book but but definitely connected to, you know, my own work in social movements and social movement theory, which is that the idea that an individual should have to gain access or should can somehow be able to be heard and included as part of the problem. It has to be about collective action. And that's actually one of the powers of hashtag activism is that when millions of people are spreading a discourse and sharing a thing and debating it, other people have to listen. And so I would say similarly offline and and I didn't have a chance to read all the questions, but I saw a couple people asking about offline activism as well.

Sarah J. Jackson: You know, the reason that social movements work is because they engage collective action. They're not individual people, you know, making a demand to be heard by Congress there 500,000 people, you know, marching to the Washington Monument and making a demand to be heard by Congress. And so, you know, I would say that online and offline. It's about collective collective agitation for people who historically have been disenfranchised to really insist on their right to be heard.

Hannah Nyren: You're right. There are a lot of questions about online versus offline activism. So while we're kind of on that subject, we should address that a little bit more as well. So, um, this other question says, sorry, as people ask questions my place gets lost, but basically like there is a lot of discourse about online activism not having an effect in the real world. So do you see this more as a function of the quote (often flawed distinction) between offline and online activism, or the marginalization of those speaking up about issues of racism, sexism, etc?

Sarah J. Jackson: Yeah, thanks. Um, I know one of those questions. I saw was asked by one of my former students Claire So hi, Claire and I think the other one is just by Joshua, um, Yeah there. As I mentioned earlier, and, and I'll let Moya chip in this earlier from my own framework as a social movements person who studies, you know, the role of media and social movements.

Sarah J. Jackson: There is kind of this early on. There were two groups of people. There were the people that said, oh, anything that happens on the internet is slow activism. It's lazy. It doesn't really make a difference. And then there were the people who said the internet is going to democratize the world and change everything. And like everyone's going to be able to be heard. And what has happened over time is that the nuance of that question has brought us to a middle ground, which is that in some ways, the internet has in fact opened up the public sphere

in that people who historically haven't had access as we talked about in the book to mainstream media can make arguments there. But, what's really really important is, of course, they still face limitations. Those arguments aren't always heard; they aren't always taken seriously. They are always framed fairly by the media.

Sarah J. Jackson: And so the distinction. The online, offline thing to me is also kind of false if we're considering successful activism, which is to say things have to be happening simultaneously.

Sarah J. Jackson: Offline when they're happening online. And so oftentimes I always thought it was fascinating. I'll give the example of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. People who are trying to dismiss it would say, well, what, what do they even do they even have a plan. Who's even a leader, what are they even asking for and the whole time there were seasoned lifelong organizers leading this movement in every city across the country.

Sarah J. Jackson: There was a coalition of, of, you know, racial justice organizations, there was a website, you could go to where you could look at their demands in their platform depending on you know where people stood in that movement. People were organizing their local communities. People were meeting with local politicians.

Sarah J. Jackson: There was a meeting with the president then President, the United States at the time. Right, and so it wasn't as if the hashtag alone was the movement right and that's certainly not what we're arguing at all. The hashtag is a communication tool in the movement. And so you know that online, offline distinction is that these two things really work together. Um, but promulgation of messaging and spreading of messaging and networks is always good for democratic and and political debate, even if some people only are able to retweet something or share something on Facebook that helps spread the message.

Hannah Nyren: Great, Oh, sorry Brook, we only have time for one more question...

Brooke Foucault Welles: Yeah. If the last few weeks have shown us anything, it's that the distinction between online and offline is pretty fuzzy. We haven't become less human. We haven't become less relatable right, we've just started to mediate everything. And so we're able to do this. There's no reason to believe that we need to make a strict distinction between online and offline activism either.

Hannah Nyren: So, the last question is as COVID-19 affects so many marginalized communities, have you seen any unique strategies or hashtag usage in terms of spreading health information or social movement mobilization during this time? And if we were to have one COVID-19 question. I feel like this is the best one.

Sarah J. Jackson: Yeah, I mean - Sorry, Moya. I'll just say quickly then I'll let Moya take it, but just the other day I was teaching virtually and you know my students said #FlattenTheCurve. Right. Um, two months ago, if someone had said flatten the curve to you, you would have no idea what they were talking about or what that meant. And the larger concept that that hashtag plan this curve described is a very technical mired in sort of like medical speak concept, but

within weeks, maybe even a week. People who were paying attention knew what it was to flatten the curve and then I think that's a great example.

Moya Bailey: Absolutely, and I am interested in how people have connected their digital activism to their offline activism as it relates to COVID and some of these car protests. So people who have stayed in their cars, but have been organizing through Twitter to figure out where they're going to meet when they're going to get together, but then are able to support people who are incarcerated to support and say, Actually, these people should be released because this is one way that COVID-19 can spread is in prisons and similar institutions. So going out to those areas and honking and really showing support for people has been one of the ways that I think this offline online question is really being dissolved in this COVID-19 moment.

Hannah Nyren: Anything else to add on that? I do think it's interesting that people are now protesting in cars honking. I don't think we would have expected that a few months ago, either.

Sarah J. Jackson: Yeah. But, in some ways it's like a traditional social movement strategy right the disruption of traffic, for example, or the disruption of space and sound via noise making are two very traditional social movement tactics. So rather than congregating on our feet on the street, people are congregating in their cars in front of the State House or in front of the county jail or you know whatever to maintain the social distancing roles at least the people that care about not spreading the disease are doing that and and yeah. And as Moya said, this has really shown that, you know, in a moment when we can gather together, we can use technology to still figure out how to engage in physical agitation in the real world around health. Health healthcare issues and all kinds of other issues.

Hannah Nyren: Great. Well, thank you all for your fantastic talk and for answering all these questions. I'm actually really impressed by how many questions. We were able to get through, but there are still remaining that we weren't able to get through. So, is there anywhere that people can ask these questions online if they want to, after this session is over?

Moya Bailey: Yeah, I was going to suggest. We're all on Twitter. So please feel free to tweet us your questions and I'm sure we'll all be able to answer. And you can see all of our handles in The MIT Press tweet that announced this event.

Hannah Nyren: Yes, that's a great place to direct people, if you go to our Twitter, you will find all their handles and you can join the conversation on Twitter, which is very meta in this particular scenario. I'll also share the links to find the book. So again, it's at mitpress.mit.edu. The book is hashtag activism. I've shared the link in the chat.

Hannah Nyren: And then we also have a blog post on all the different ways that you can find our books right now, as you know, there are some concerns about shipping or supporting Independent Businesses, so we have shared a link to that blog post as well in the chat. Let me just double check that. Yeah. That goes to everyone, anyway.

Sarah J. Jackson: For folks that want to tweet us. I mean, I know we have to run, but not shockingly, we have a hashtag for the book. So the hashtag #HashtagActivism. So, you can

either tweet directly at our handles, or you can use the hashtag, or both. And we'll see it because we are obsessed with hashtag activism as a hashtag.

Hannah Nyren: I need the book title really spells it out for you. Exactly. Remember, but yeah, definitely, if you want. If you have a question or you want to join the conversation just tweet out hashtag activism in your question, and I'm sure we'll be taking a look at it later. And thanks again to our authors today you've been amazing guests and thank you to everyone who joined us. You've been an amazing audience. And I just want to invite you all to join our future MIT Press live events. If you want to find all of them. You can go to [MIT press.mit.edu/mitpresslive](http://MITpress.mit.edu/mitpresslive)

Hannah Nyren: Our next one is with John Troyer, author of *Technologies of the Human Corpse* and next Tuesday at 12:30pm um, and yeah, we'll tell you more about that. There again, thank you so much everyone

Sarah J. Jackson: Thank you everyone!

Brooke Foucault Welles: Thanks everyone on the call.

Hannah Nyren: Thank you!

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