

Foreword

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One of the most recognizable aphorisms about the plight of Millennials is that we are overeducated and underpaid. The causes and effects of this have been detailed in the abstract, but for me this meant that when I joined Twitter on December 22, 2008, I was working two jobs to make my student loan payments every month. My supplemental job at a popular midrange clothing retailer would provide me with discounted business attire and some extra cash, while my meatier employment—working the night shift in the communications department of a twenty-four-hour, international corporate law firm—would provide me with a salary, benefits, and lots of downtime to tweet.

Initially, tweeting was not natural to me. Blogging had become popular about a decade earlier, and yet I had a difficult time understanding why I would publish my own thoughts on the internet. My personal blog, *MoreAndAgain*, in its earliest days was often neglected. Compounded by Twitter having the reputation of being the site where navel-gazers talked about what they'd just eaten, in 140 characters or less, and you'll understand why I spent much of my time on Twitter stumped. Although an acquaintance helped me find my cohort in a group of under- or unemployed insomniacs who kept me company as I counted

down the hours until I could clock out, even that small community seemed to lack a *raison d'être*. It was basically *Seinfeld*, the show about nothing, but with much looser relationships. Twitter didn't become compelling for me until the protest following the 2009 presidential election in Iran and the resulting hashtag #IranElection.

I have always been the type of person who is sensitive to the plight of other people. As a child, I wanted to aid those who were less fortunate. In high school, friends and I walked out of school to protest the acquittal of the police officers who were responsible for killing Amadou Diallo. And, as I continued my education, it became important for me to learn about the ways people were treated unfairly around the world. When the #IranElection hashtag dominated Twitter's global trending topics, it was the first time I had a front-row seat to a revolution. Suddenly, this platform, which previously had seemed rather pointless, allowed me to communicate directly with people on the ground in Iran, and I wanted to learn everything. I spent less time tweeting with fellow New Yorkers in my Twitter community and more time reading the minute-by-minute updates of protesters several time zones away. I had seriously lucked out, having a job that required me to be awake during times of peak #IranElection activity. Retweets, not nearly as sophisticated then as they are now, led me to news accounts that were updating their feeds much faster than twenty-four-hour news networks were airing their coverage on television. My Twitter feed, made up of roughly 150 people, finally had a reason for being: to spread the word and unpack what it meant with the help of witnesses and experts. "What are you doing?" would soon become "What's happening?"

One of the first mainstream news outlets that seemed to share this mission and fully embrace Twitter was CNN. Retweeting the

accounts of journalists on the ground using the #IranElection hashtag seemed to lend legitimacy to the user-generated idiosyncrasies that made sharing and finding information easier. Being stuck in an office for hours meant I wasn't able to turn on a television—and streaming television broadcasts online wouldn't be possible for years to come—but I could log on to Twitter and refresh my Twitter feed to make sure I had the latest news. I didn't realize it at the time, but the way tweeters engaged in this movement would become the framework for signal-boosting information on Twitter. In the years that followed, creating a hashtag would become the artery for organizing resistance.

In the years after #IranElection, my own Twitter community grew at a steady pace. The more I engaged in Twitter conversations, the more people I was able to converse with. When the #FailWhale wasn't spoiling our fun, we used hashtags to share tunes (#MusicMonday), share grievances (#HereBeforeOprah), and even share favorite tweeters (#FollowFriday). In just three years after its inception the platform had allowed users to create a taxonomy, with no major overhaul of the underlying program; this feature would later be adopted by other social media networks such as Facebook. Regular tweeters became so accustomed to organizing tweets by hashtags that when someone decided to hashtag a name, it immediately made sense. On my Twitter feed, the first occurrence of a hashtagged name was #TroyDavis.

#TroyDavis first appeared in my Twitter feed on September 11, 2011—ten days before Troy Davis himself was scheduled to be executed by the State of Georgia. Davis had been tried for and convicted of the murder of police officer Mark MacPhail, but recanted testimony and new evidence pushed activists to argue there was too much doubt to warrant his execution, thus leading to the affiliated hashtag #TooMuchDoubt. Through the

hashtags, a Change.org petition was shared encouraging tweeters to sign and demand Davis's clemency. The petition, which garnered 258,505 signatures, was addressed to the State of Georgia's Board of Pardons and Paroles and Chatham County district attorney Larry Chisolm.

It is impossible to overstate how penetrative #TroyDavis was on Twitter, from September 11 through September 21, the day Davis was unjustly executed. I cannot recall a single tweeter I followed who not only tweeted about #TroyDavis but also called on DA Chisolm and the Supreme Court of the United States as the justices deliberated over whether or not to stay his execution. There was even a vigil on Twitter: ten minutes without a single tweet at 7:00 p.m. on September 21, in the hopes it would sway the SCOTUS decision. Though our mission seemed to be failing at every turn, my entire Twitter feed remained engaged, making calls, encouraging action, saying virtual prayers. Briefly, it looked as though the SCOTUS decision would go our way, after Jeffrey Toobin reported that the deliberation was "unusually long." Unfortunately, our efforts to save one man's life were unsuccessful. When the DA failed to act, followed by the SCOTUS failing to act, the result was the state's murder of Troy Davis at 11:08 p.m. In that moment, I could feel the devastation ripple across Twitter. We contemplated what it meant that all these people could act in unison and still not save one life, and what it meant to be at the mercy of the criminal justice system.

Though the campaign to stop the execution of Troy Davis was unsuccessful in saving his life, it did succeed in giving this subgroup, which would soon become known as Black Twitter, a collective sense of obligation. After Davis's execution there was no shortage of tweets imploring people not to skip jury duty and to pay close attention to local elections—both sentiments I had

heard expressed before, but now there was more weight behind them. A heightened awareness of how our legal system worked informed our conversations, with the accompanying reminder that these instances of injustice weren't increasing, technology just allowed us to learn about them as they happened.

With each instance of social media activism, Twitter, specifically Black Twitter, grew faster at signal boosting and raising awareness of the issues and events that needed attention. Twitter's introduction of native retweets meant important tweets could be shared without editing the text to fit character limits, thereby improving the accuracy of the information being shared. Each exercise in hashtag activism brought lessons in what worked, what didn't, and what to be mindful of to be more effective in the future. We made our virtual arteries work better.

When word of Trayvon Martin's death made it to Twitter, I found those arteries at work once again. George Zimmerman, who fatally shot Martin on February 26, 2012, had been walking around free for eleven days without being charged, thanks to the "stand your ground" law enacted in Sanford, Florida. Without needing a poll or a vote, the general consensus was that something had to be done to change this. It was all hands on deck. The response was intuitive.

#JusticeForTrayvon was created, like the #TroyDavis tag before it, to draw attention, connect, and spread information. We knew that the best chance of getting justice for Trayvon was to get national news organizations to cover the case. The Change.org petition that was dispersed using #JusticeForTrayvon was the fastest-growing petition to run on the site, as reported by the *Orlando Sentinel*. The phone numbers of Sanford mayor Jeff Triplett and State's Attorney Norman Wolfinger were both shared with the hashtag, encouraging tweeters to call and

demand that George Zimmerman be charged for Trayvon Martin's death. Many tweeters even went so far as to mail bags of Skittles and AriZona-branded beverages to the Sanford Police Department, in protest of George Zimmerman being allowed to go free (Trayvon had only the Skittles and AriZona Tea in his possession when he was killed).

At this point, I was no longer working overnight, and had to rely on tweeters who could watch news broadcasts during the day for updates. Through my Twitter feed, made up of close to five hundred tweeters, I could now find out about the latest call for action, statements released by the family, and, most important, whether George Zimmerman was finally being charged with the murder of Trayvon. Along with the steady flow of information regarding the case, a discussion about the social significance of Trayvon's murder provided perspective on what was happening. Almost as a coping mechanism, intellectuals and academics unpacked the ways race and class worked together to create the circumstances we were fighting against. It felt as though if we thoroughly understood the problem, we could fix it.

We would need that can-do attitude because progress was agonizingly slow. I knew that Twitter activism would bring national attention, and local action on the part of elected officials, but those elected officials were taking a long time to respond. We tweeted to organize rallies and raise funds for Trayvon's family while continuing to make phone calls to the mayor, governor, and state's attorney to demand that George Zimmerman be arrested and charged with murder. The officials in Florida, however, seemed resigned to ignoring the protests or waiting them out. Almost two months after Trayvon's murder, Zimmerman was finally charged with second-degree murder.

Technically speaking, I never watched the trial. Having to be at work during traditional business hours, I was never near a television to see a single moment of it, but I knew the people who contributed to my Twitter feed would be on top of it. Each day, those who could watch the trial live-tweeted what often read like line-by-line transcripts of the testimonies of witnesses for the prosecution and witnesses for George Zimmerman's defense. It was a nerve-wracking experience. Here we were, once again, wondering whether all the work we had done to get to this moment would pay off. There was so much evidence against Zimmerman, and yet, if it took this much work to get an indictment, we knew a conviction was no sure thing.

When I watched the tweeters on my feed report news of Zimmerman's acquittal on July 13, 2013, a familiar sense of dismay washed over me. What kind of world did we live in where all the evidence that was mounted against Zimmerman meant nothing because the life he stole was that of a Black child? What had we changed? Was all that effort for nothing? Shortly after I would read that not only Zimmerman didn't care about Trayvon's life, neither did the prosecution or the jurors—specifically juror B37.

When the trial concluded, reports of juror B37 having a book deal were widespread. I recall one report mentioning she had started looking for a publisher as soon as the trial began. I, and many of the tweeters I followed, grew suspicious. We questioned whether she was concerned with justice at all, or whether she was simply happy to have stumbled upon what could have been a major payday. It was bad enough that the jurors voted to let Trayvon's killer go free, compounded by the racists who raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to help Zimmerman pay for his legal fees, but now juror B37 was also planning to walk away

with money and fame while Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon's mother, had neither her child nor redemption. It was too much to bear.

I knew we had to do something. Fellow tweeters @miss_hellion and @MF_Greatest pointed out that our Twitter activism had previously resulted in the firing of Paula Deen. We could do something. We couldn't bring Trayvon back, and we couldn't change the verdict to convict Zimmerman, but we could still stop the juror from profiting from the death of a child she clearly didn't care about. So I decided to take action.

A few minutes on Google provided me with the name of the agent, Sharlene Martin, who was brokering the deal for juror B37's book. A few more minutes of Googling led me to her contact information, which I then tweeted out to my timeline in the way we typically called for action to influence elected officials. My previous experience with signal-boosting information let me know it would be easier to share links than tweets, so I consolidated all of Sharlene's contact information into a Google doc, to be shared far and wide. The more I tweeted about stopping the book deal, the more people wanted to help me stop it. Soon other tweeters had located both Sharlene's personal Twitter account and the Twitter account for her business, Martin Literary Management, and I directed people to tweet to those accounts to ask that Sharlene stop representing juror B37.

As people were participating in the action I was organizing on Twitter, I started to feel disconnected. I was receiving lots of encouragement, but there was no way for me to gauge how many people were actually calling Sharlene, and there was no way to show people that anyone else was involved other than myself and the handful of people who were tweeting at me. I didn't want the momentum to die as soon as I went to bed, so I created the Change.org petition.

I expected the Change.org petition to consolidate all the information in one place: what the issue was, whom to contact, and how many people were already contacting them. I also expected that this would build into an action that would take days before the desired results would be seen: if we couldn't get the agent to drop juror B37, the next step would be contacting whichever publisher signed on. What I did not expect was Sharlene Martin herself to message me within hours of the petition going up, telling me the deal was off and asking that the petition be locked. I was floored. I immediately shared Sharlene's message with my Twitter followers, and my mentions were, as we say, in shambles.

The support I received in the wake of the agent dropping juror B37 was overwhelming. Before this action on Twitter, I had gained a little over one thousand followers. By the morning after I tweeted the petition, I had more than nine thousand Twitter followers, including television show producers, who were inviting me onto their morning news broadcasts. I had the attention of other Twitter activists, as well as those who were organizing offline, who were also inspired by #JusticeForTrayvon. Being a Tweetdeck user, I found it almost impossible to reply to anyone who mentioned me because so many people were mentioning me at once. I was especially appreciative of all the tweets of kindness because they also helped flush out the disparaging tweets and death threats I received from people who identified with George Zimmerman and juror B37. It felt as though our efforts, for once, had paid off.

While the win was not what we originally hoped for, stopping juror B37's book deal briefly put some wind back in our sails—and now with us even more connected than before. We did more than simply gain experience, as with previous instances of hashtag activism; we gained a much broader network. Black

Twitter seemed to grow larger and smaller at the same time. My own network now included leaders of organizations who provided knowledge and perspective on what direct action was taking place on the ground. Before, we had just heard about the protest; now we knew the people who were organizing it. Their perspective on the work being done helped me to see each incident that inspires a hashtag, and subsequent protests, not as a time we lost but as another moment of resistance—a push forward.

Hashtag activism is repeated resistance. Black Twitter tapped into our shared history of resistance and used the technology available to us to reach further and faster. We continue to draw national attention to local problems, to underscore the fact that these injustices are happening everywhere. No town in America is exempt—especially not in the north, and especially not New York City, home of the infamous New York Police Department.

The discussion about the NYPD's stop-and-frisk policies and other uses of excessive force had long made its way through various news outlets by the time the #myNYPD hashtag appeared on my Twitter feed. Unfortunately, Mayor Bill de Blasio and Police Commissioner William Bratton seemed intent on doubling down on their support for the status quo rather than working on any fundamental change that would actually improve the experience Black and brown residents of New York City had with the police. It seemed the NYPD was resorting to a publicity stunt to win favor while eschewing accountability for racist policies by asking for friendly user submissions that praised the police with the hashtag. The hijacking of the #myNYPD hashtag by ordinary New Yorkers like me redirected the conversation back to the injustices that were being doled out at the hands of those who had sworn to protect and serve. It was powerful (and

fun) to be a part of telling stories on Twitter about the NYPD that are often ignored, and it was those of us who subverted the hashtag who succeeded in trending it. A hashtag that might have otherwise gone under the radar with a handful of friendly pictures now put the NYPD back in the spotlight and reminded the nation that police officers were still not living up to their oath. There was still a need for resistance.

I am pleased to be included in this book as it explores the evolution of the hashtag networks I have contributed to and watched firsthand. In my time on Twitter I have found hashtag activism to be irreplaceable. It is both a means to an end, a tool to consolidate information, and way to share a call to action, it is used to share examples of the injustice and oppression that users have experienced. While there are several ways to deliver information, none are as compact, mobile, and easily digestible as a hashtag. While hashtag activism isn't the whole of any resistance movement, it is the arterial network of any movement that seeks to gain national support and impact.

***A note from the book's authors:** When Genie Lauren wrote this contribution for us, her @MoreandAgain account was going strong on Twitter, with more than 14,000 followers, and she had become one of the many influential Black women building activist and everyday culture narratives on Twitter. In March 2018 she was the victim of brigading—an online harassment tactic in which a group of opponents gangs up on a user they dislike or disagree with ideologically. In this case, brigading was used to silence her, as she was reported for abuse on the platform for her commentary by multiple unknown users and subsequently suspended because of the number of complaints. Despite her best efforts to contact Twitter support, they never

informed her of the exact reasons for her suspension—or the supposedly offending content that justified it. This exemplifies one of the failures of the platform. Without real people taking time to distinguish between legitimate complaints of policy violations and efforts seeking to silence members of counter-publics, Lauren’s account remained suspended for most of the year, while the accounts of avowed white supremacists and others peddling false and incendiary rhetoric remained. Her account was reinstated in October 2018 after the ACLU contacted Twitter on Lauren’s behalf. Her content history and contributions were absent for nine months of one of the most politically tumultuous years of recent history and almost lost to us entirely.

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#HashtagActivism

Networks of Race and Gender Justice

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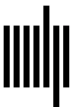
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