

TACTIC

HASHTAG HIJACK

Don't have enough Twitter followers to trend better than your target? Pull the rug out from under them by stealing their hashtag!

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"WISH YOU COULD GO VIRAL FOR YOUR CAUSE WITHOUT THE GRUELING MONTHS OF UNPAID LABOR REQUIRED TO BUILD AN AMPLE AUDIENCE BASE?"

"The robbed that smiles, steals something from the thief."
—William Shakespeare

"I am not directly involved in this situation."
—Zhang Yiming, creator of TikTok

CEO Jack Dorsey once said of Twitter, "The first complaint we hear from everyone is, 'why would I want to join this stupid useless thing and know what my brother is eating for lunch?'"

Indeed, many activists wish they could go viral for their cause, but without the grueling months of unpaid labor required to build an ample audience base among a blizzard of food-porn and cheap celebrity gossip. If you're one such activist, then hijacking hashtags is for you!

Some social media algorithms — especially on Twitter and TikTok — cater to trending topics and not just user popularity. This means that even those without much of a following (and even bots) can latch onto the moment's discourse and drive it in whatever direction they prefer. "There's an entire universe in every single tweet," explains Dorsey, "and it all really depends on the content as far as how it's going to spread."

When the Maldives' tourism department welcomed tycoon-owned hotels to use the hashtag #SunnySideOfLife following a coup that ousted the first democratically elected president Mohamed

POTENTIAL RISKS

Apart from potentially overestimating the impact that temporarily embarrassing a target might have and thereby wasting your group's time, hashtag hijacking comes with few risks. Those who attempt to pull it off will want to consider their own spheres of influence and how hashtags will be received. In some cases, hashtags can trivialize or dismiss humans and their lives, even while advancing a just cause (see: PRINCIPLE: Punch up, not down).

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Nasheed, activists flooded the hashtag with calls for people power to be restored. When Donald Trump told armed white supremacist group Proud Boys to “stand by” during a presidential debate, the alt-right took to Twitter to display their bigotry, only to be overwhelmed by LGBTQ Twitter users sharing photos of #ProudBoys making out, and making “this hashtag about love, not hate” as Queer Eye’s @bobbyberk put it.

K-pop fans have become epic hashtag hijackers, relentlessly swarming right-wing and police-tip hashtags with K-pop videos. In one instance, K-pop fans crashed the iWatch Dallas app after police had called upon the public to send them videos of “illegal activity” during protests against police brutality. K-pop fans’ hashtags, in contrast, have raised money for causes they support, including over \$1 million in a day for Black Lives Matter.

To successfully hijack a hashtag, numbers matter. If you’ve got even just a handful of allies who share your vision, you can leverage Twitter algorithms through collaborating on a Tweetstorm set for a specific narrow window of time in the middle of the day. Tweetstorming can overwhelm an existing trending hashtag for a period of time to reframe the issue, or Twitter users can use it to create and advance their own hashtag.

In the words of Steve Jobs, “We have always been shameless about stealing great ideas” (just as we’ve, in turn, stolen many out-of-context tech bro quotes in these paragraphs). So if billionaires can do it, so can you! Hit that search button on your Twitter app and hijack a hashtag that’s already got decent traction. Expropriate the expropriators! Embarrass the chauvinists! Steal 15 minutes of fame for your rebel faction!

LEARN MORE

#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice
Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, Brooke Foucault Wells: Penguin
Random House, 2020

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/654033/hashtagactivism-by-sarah-jackson-moya-bailey-and-brooke-foucault-welles-foreword-by-genie-lauren/>

- Distributed action
- Hashtag campaign
- Music video

Principles

- Don’t expect a concrete outcome from a symbolic action
- Punch up, not down
- Recapture the flag
- Reframe the issue
- Turn the tables

Theories

- Alienation effect
- Framing
- Memes
- Society of the spectacle
- The propaganda model

Methodologies

- Battle of the story

TAGS

Communications, Digital organizing, Language, Social media