Activism Through Social Media Creates Bigger Buzz

By Atlanta Journal-Constitution, adapted by Newsela staff
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"I am out here because I am part of the masses of people in St. Louis and soon to be in the nation that is exhausted and fatigued with the progression of police genocide. It's not police brutality anymore. It's genocide against young black Americans," said Sunny Ford during a rally on Aug. 12, 2014, in Clayton, Missouri, protesting the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a Ferguson police officer.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

What are the main points of this section of the text?

Why is this important to activism through social media?

SECTION/GROUP 1

ATLANTA — In the new use of social media as activism, few hashtags have generated as much buzz as "#iftheygunnedmedown," which has been circulating on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The hashtag is being used to counter media images shown of Michael Brown, whose shooting by Ferguson, Missouri, police has sparked riots.

After the fatal shooting of Brown, 18, several media outlets used what many said was a distorted image of him taken from his Twitter account — casual, bordering on menacing. They argue that a majority of his photos show a different side, like broad smiles, hearty laughs, and the tenderness of high school graduation photos. He was set to begin college on Monday.

The trending hashtag was several hours old before Alexis Nwaiwu, a 19-year-old sophomore at Georgia State University, decided to post.

SECTION/GROUP 2

Two Photos Collide
It wasn't necessarily Michael Brown's photo that inspired her. Rather, it was a news image of Brown, placed along with that of James Holmes, the Colorado theater shooter, that enraged her.

Someone posted the photo of Brown in his red Nike tank top flashing a peace sign. The headline, taken from a news site, read: "Police: Michael Brown Struggled With Officer Before Shooting."

On top of that was a photo of Holmes, wearing a tie in what looked like a class picture. The headline: "Theater Shooting Suspect Was Brilliant Science Student."

"I just thought it was interesting how they portrayed someone who is Caucasian as a brilliant scholar — who was a mass murderer," Nwaiwu said. "Michael Brown is shown as a thug because he was throwing up a peace sign."

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Both Sides of the Story or Image

Brown was shot and killed last weekend after an encounter with a police officer in his hometown. His death has not only sparked unrest in Ferguson, but social media have also exploded, picking up his cause.

Nwaiwu, a varsity cheerleader at GSU, has also taken up his cause, posting a picture of herself laughing at a party and flashing two peace signs. Next to it is a smiling image of Nwaiwu in her high school graduation robe.

"The one at the party with a peace sign portrays my generation," she said. "But don't get it confused. I still graduated with honors from high school. I am in college. I am a cheerleader and I make good grades. But the media will always show one side of you."

SECTION/GROUP 3

Dangerous Perceptions

Brown's death comes nearly 2 1/2 years after the shooting of Trayvon Martin and about 13 months after George Zimmerman was acquitted at his trial in the Martin case. More recent episodes fueled the Michael Brown protests: the videotaped death of Eric Garner at the hands of New York City police, and the second-degree murder verdict against Theodore Wafer. Wafer shot Renisha McBride, 19 after she knocked on his door after crashing her car.

"The assumption is that black males are predators and because of that perceived threat as a predator, you can do anything to them," said David Wall Rice, a professor at Morehouse College. "You can gun them down and not be worried about being convicted, like with Trayvon. You can ask what Michael Brown was doing wrong instead of what the person with the gun was doing wrong?"

Al Tompkins, a teacher at the Poynter Institute, a school for journalism in St. Petersburg, Florida, posted on the school's website that the hashtag campaign forces people and news organizations to re-examine how images are received and perceived.

"No single image can define an individual. It is possible for an image to be accurate, real, and unaltered and still not be a true depiction of who that person is," Tompkins said. "A booking photo could be a single image of a person at the worst moment of his or her life. A wedding photo could be of that same person at the best moment of his or her life. Both are extremes. Seek context."

Hearing the Voices of Many

Since the hashtag campaign started, the phrase "#iftheygunnedmedown" has been used on Twitter more than 158,000 times, according to The New York Times. Many of those posted similar photos with similar stories.

Eric Deggans, a television critic for National Public Radio, said the use of social media, particularly among African-Americans, has given voice to people who might have otherwise been silenced.

"With social media, we get to tell our story," Deggan said. "We can put up a blog post or Tweet that reflects our attitude and it reaches millions of people."

Morehouse's Rice said black people shouldn't have to worry about which photo of them might be used and argues that both images contribute to a complete picture.

"That does add to the complexity of how black men are viewed in the United States," Rice said. He says the media reduce black men to an image they are comfortable with. It ignores "the complexity of the wholeness of who black men are — it should not be a question of which one, but rather showing the whole person."

Tarshia Stanley, chairwoman of the Spelman College English Department, said that while she agrees that the hashtag campaign has been positive, she cautions about it ultimately being reduced to just a slogan.

"We have to, as a community, think about these issues of safety and violence toward young black men," Stanley said. "We have to get a real dialogue going. Where is the dialogue with law enforcement before things like this happen? We have to figure out how we move beyond the hashtag."