THE KARDASHIAN MOMENT: HASHTAG, SELFIE AND THE BROKEN INTERNET

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Abstract

The article focuses on a hashtags as a tool of networked culture and networked social move-ments, and – at the same time – on self-expression phenomenon of a selfie. Although today hashtags, in particular, can been seen as a frequently used weapon in information wars and a tool of propaganda 2.0, seen from historical perspective, this very tool aligns itself first and foremost with emancipatory forces in the Internet history. These forces, expressed in A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace and in participatory ideals of Web 2.0 are now in withdrawal.

As the Internet is now in a peculiar development phase, ruled by the logic of surveillance capital-ism, those early ideals of free speech and exchange of ideas are now overshadowed by a "darkening of the digital dream (Shoshana Zuboff).

The central argument suggests that the "Kardashian moment" on the one hand, and Occupy Wallstreet, on the other hand, constituted a point in time where new media affordances and social phenomena were aligned. At the same time, both hashtag and selfie can be viewed as a response to the betrayalof individualization processes started in the 1960s, then carried on and amplified by the early Internet, and in the end commodified by the growing Internet giants and established structures of power.

Keywords: hashtag, hypertext, selfie, activism, Internet history

1. Introduction: the Internet before social media

Television, the age-old enemy of the written word, seemed to be in decline as a mainstream medium after the emergence of personal computers and the Web on uni-versity campuses and schools in the 1980s and finally at homes in 1990. Today, it is returning to favor with an Orwellian vengeance. Television, in its hyper personalised ver-sion, emerges as a most appealing model of communication and interaction within a post-PC and post-internet context of the "walled gardens" or "information silos" curated by a handful of technological giants: Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Tencent (in China). These major players own the most popular social networks, the most popular hardware andthe most popular communication apps which results in tying users to their own closed software/hardware ecosystems and digital entertainment playgrounds. For millions of people, Facebook is not on the Internet – Facebook is the Internet.

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Yet the formula of centrally distributed content interrupted by personalised advertising − exemplified by Instagram or WeChat − in the 1980s and 1990 could appeal to barely anyone but dystopian authors. Free movement of content and ideas introduced by the invention of PC and the Internet made the demise of Television almost imminent, at least at the influential forefront of media and communication discourse. With the advent of PCs, and then the Internet, the hierarchical, unidirectional model sender- receiver was replaced by the many-to-many model of mass self-communication [Castells, 2013, p.6]. Hypertext was at the heart of the transformation of communication which gave rise to subsequent transformation of power relations throughout the globe. As an underlying structural feature of every Internet page, marking its presence in the acronym *http* in the web address ("hypertext transfer protocol") the hypertext is a backbone of non-linear network of nodes and links: a vast and highly distributed repository of data connected by an overlay of digitally implemented semantic relations.

The vertical communication model of a sender - receiver and one-to-many had been giving way to a vast, horizontal model of many-to-many with an increasing pace as more and more users were willing to connect with each other, share ideas and publish their own stories without a centralised and controlling intermediary.

It is important to note that − in the early stages − Castells' notion of mass-self communication would relate rather to a paradigm shift than to an actual communication practice on the Web. Before the social media and before Web 2.0 the Internet was mostly text based. This limitation gave way to networked communication's natural affinity to those users who could effectively express themselves in writing. Scholars and writers were natural allies of the Web and many of them were its prominent propagators. The situation was far different from today when social media are seen as a disruptive force undermining traditional public discourse. Web 1.0 was not facilitating for the world of post-truth, post-ideas and superfluous citizenry in the form of "slacktivism". Although one cannot agree more with Agata Bielik-Robson who states that the Web's many-to-many model of communication is killing the print culture and bringing us back to dark ages [Czarnecka, 2018], or with Neal Gabler who exposes social media as accelerating exchange of information at the expense of exchange of ideas and thus catering for the culture of knowledge but not the culture of thinking [Gabler, 2011], it has to be pointed out that the Internet was not designed to take us where we are now. The early Web was not a foe of print. In fact, behind Timothy Berners-Lee's invention of the modern Internet there was a community of scientists in need of a fast way of exchanging articles and other text-based forms.An illustration on a web page was initially perceived by Lee as a distraction [McCullough, 2018, p.14]. In 1997, in his avant-pop manifesto, the artist Mark Amerika announced that hypertext is a Literary MTV. [Amerika, 1997]. Yet during these days the state of the Web was closer to what Michael Joyce, the author of the first hypertext novel *afternoon.a story*, recognised few years earlier, that hypertext is the revenge of the word on television [Joyce, 1996, p.206].

Although linking nodes within a living network of Web 1.0 inevitably led to forming hierarchies − as more visited pages got more prominent − the lack of centralization and a certain mode of "free-market" network dynamics (new nodes were appearing constantly, some were disappearing, links were being broken etc.) remained a guarantee of a unique and empowering experience. New communities were being formed around the globe with no regard to geographical or linguistic limitations. It was a revolution not unlike the social revolts of 1960s, the fall of the Berlin Wall and other most intense cultural moments of the 20th century.

2. The golden age of blogs and the Internet Wall of China

Just a year before *Hypertext Consciousness*, John Perry Barlow[2] publishes his influential *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* [Barlow, 1996]. Cyberspace had indeed become an independent republic of websites and blogs, curated by individuals. In Russia, China and the Middle East the emergence of the Internet gave voice to individuals and communities not supported, side-lined or even persecuted by the state.

The golden age of the blogosphere lasted differently for different countries. Its demise is accounted in detail by Human Rights Watch and reports issued by this organisation [2006]. In China a big wave of repressions started in 2003 when,due to the request of Chinese government, Yahoo! disclosed e-mail and discussion forums data of dissidents. The same year an activist and blogger Jiang Lijunwas sentenced to 4 years in prison. It was followed by thrsrrests of Wang Xiaoning and Li Zhi. Other tech giants, in fear of their activity on the Chinese market being limited or cut down, followed suit. In 2004-2006 Chinese government forced Microsoft and Google to remove or filter the results of their search engines. Blog names, post titles, and even content of individual posts was filtered or deleted. In December 2005, the blog of an activist Zhao Jing, run on Microsoft's blogging service MSN Spaces, disappears completely. Finally, after years of external censorship and blocking access to its flagship browser, Google launches its Chinese version. The Internet Wall of China had been fortified and prevailed!

The steady stream of suppression took the Web away from the direction Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace imagined for it. Web users were censored and prosecuted for simply using the Internet according to its intended goal of unhindered exchange of information. For many users it became apparent that something went terribly wrong. The tragic paradox is that most important players who made their fortune on providing the internet services – Yahoo, Google and Microsoft – have greatly contributed to the suppression. Web 1.0 disappeared. Soon after, Web 2.0 was born with a promise of even greater user empowerment and with tools at hand for mapping and creating communities on an unprecedented scale. This promise did not last longeither.

3. In the safety of walled gardens

Around 2004, along with enthusiastically welcomed enhancements to existing web technologies introduced under the banner of Web 2.0, a global online system of mass data harvesting under the disguise of protection from malware, personalisation, and in exchange for using free web services was started. Although Siva Vaidhyanathan narrows this process to one company and calls it "Googlization of everything" [Vaidhyanathan, 2012, p.15], it can be seen asa general trend, as other technology giants exposed the same behaviour of building secure walls around their own software, services and hardware ecosystems. Google buys YouTube (2004), personalises the search engine (2007), creates a free, reliable and popular email service and starts introducing social media applications for instant online communication. Apple launches Safari web browser and starts tying its hardware to online services of music downloading and cloud storage. Microsoft enters video consoles market, introduces its own search engine and moves its productivity and communication apps into the cloud (Bing, Microsoft Live). As a result, web users start to experience the web services in a new, unprecedented way: some of them are able to check emails, read news and chat to friends without a need to leave the more and more consistent online world" of Google, Apple and Microsoft. The rationale behind the emerging model of a "walled garden" or "gated community" is on the one hand, and as presented to users, security. On the other hand, and seen from provider's side, it is users' loyalty. The model was soon perfected by Facebook, a new player who dominated social media with its free service to such an extent that for the growing numbers of users Facebook started functioning as a synonym or even replacement of the

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2   The Internet is a technology built on the basis of liberal premises: censorship free, decentralized and borderless" – wrote Barlow.

Internet altogether [Thompson, 2015].

The endless hypertext that was supposed to be the Internet according to Tim Berners Lee and Ted Nelson was being re-linearized and diminished. User generated content was compressed into a micro-blogging format while at the same time a constant social filter was applied to it. A blog post was replaced by a short Facebook post and even shorter 160 letter Twitter post. The audience of that content was not a general web audience but a self-curated list of friends in case of Facebook and a list of followers on Twitter.

Accolades of the empowerment and liberation made possible by internet technologies, with or without an intention of providing safety and security of online users, contributed greatly to the creation of infrastructure for the latest version of the global social contract: a form of post-capitalism, which Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism [Zuboff, 2019, p. 8]. As it stands, it is often enough to decipher and crack a single security protocol of Google, Apple or Facebook to freely navigate the whole digital lands of personal data and harvest the digital traces left by us, most often with our own consent, to use it for profit or political purposes.

"Children of the Web" – users of Web 1.0 and enthusiasts Web 2.0 for whom the Internet was a generational experience – by signing up to the convenient and free services provided by Google or Facebook, began to support a state of affairs unwillingly, it clearly betrayed their ideals. Things would be getting even worse if not for a single, modest invention: the hashtag.

4. The hashtag counter revolution

Hashtag as a tool for grouping, filtering and discovering content was conceived as bottom-up proposal, introduced and adapted by users. Chris Messina, who came out with the idea and suggested Twitter users to embrace it in August 2007 [Salazar, 2017, p. 17]. Messina was deliberately referring to the spirit of pioneering, libertarian times of the Web. Hashtag sign # had been used on IRC communication channels where it served as an identifier to a chat channel. Bringing it back onboard a Web 2.0 micro-blogging site was intended to make Twitter a bit more convenient. If people start using hashtag, Messina thought, users will be able to connect to each other in a more specific and selective manner which at the same time would bypass and transcend the built-in formula of micro-posting / liking / sharing. Hashtag as an enhancement tool for Twitter empowered everyone to create a communication channel, a broadcast, to which others could instantly subscribe and contribute just by typing the same string of characters into her/his own 160-word tweet. It allowed people to share the same time, space, idea or emotion; to connect to each other, share their thoughts and their media in order to make their stance visible and to amplify its importance.

Initially, Messina's proposal was not enthusiastically received [Salazar2017, p. 26]. It was not until the forest fires in San Diego in 2007 when the new tool found its first use. Hashtag #sandiegoonfire almost instantly became an effective means of group coordination in face of natural disaster. It helped to broadcast live updates about help centres, about location of fire brigade, food collection points, et cetera. The participants of the spontaneously created channel were not only local residents and support services, but also Twitter users in the USA and around the world. The era of self-broadcasting and grassroots citizen information channels reached a new turn. CNN television crew with their live footage from helicopter was no longer needed. There were plenty of broadcasters on the ground, many of them affected themselves and witnessing the destruction first-hand. From now on, social media users and their live tweets under the hashtag enabled channel were the primary source of row news that TV stations had to start to listen to. You did not even have to be a journalist to be heard.It was enough to post a photo and type the hashtag to be seen and heard. From this point onwards, official sources and

traditional sources of news started to be of secondary status. The real news was broadcast by people with their phones or laptops. Thanks to hashtags Twitter has become something more than a social medium: a distributed form of mass medium [Halavais, 2014, p. 37].

After the fires in San Diego, hashtag began to win the hearts of users of all other social media platforms. Events and protests subsequent to the financial crisis of 2008 which would normally reach local or national scale,due to hashtags have gained a global impact which resulted in similar protest across the borders and culture. #occupywallstrett #blacklivessmetter demonstrated that hashtag is a viable tool for establishing and supporting not only a single protest but a bigger entity: a sustainable social movement of a new kind, a networked social movement [Castells 2012,p. 249]. This became apparent even before the Arab Spring. The use of hashtags during the election protests in Iran in 2009 which seriously threatened the status quo of the Ayatollahs' regime or the international outrage channelled through hashtag #bringbackourgirls, thanks to which a local tragedy in Nigeria – abduction of 200 high school students in the city of Chibo by terrorists from Boko Haram – forced diplomatic interventions from most powerful global players clearly demonstrated that within a changed communication paradigm even a cheap mobile phone can make a difference [Emma, 2015]. Within a general loss of trust in official establishments, even the far-away frontiers of the Web – Nigeria or Iran – are able to position themselves in the center of attention by mediated and networked actions of social media users.

In the years 2009 - 2011, hashtags – as a kind of extremely useful addition to social media protocols – were able to bring back the revolutionary potential of Internet communication to the fore, in the spirit of the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Even shutting down the Internet, as was the case in Egypt [Gunning & Baron, 2014, p. 16], did not stop the momentum the networked social movement had gained – both in cyber and urban space – and did not rescue Hosni Mubarak from being removed from power.

Unfortunately, the Arab Spring will also mark the beginning of the end of the truly liberational potential of social media in the developing world. Autocratic governments will soon do their homework and start introducing countermeasures: from surveillance of Facebook and Twitter activity of citizens to setting up of troll factories able to generate thousands of government-friendly entries, pro-government hashtags and fake news.

From communication theory standpoint, hashtag suspends, or at least complicates, the process of secondary centralization introduced by the Timeline paradigm by which social media sites started imposing a more hierarchical and filtered mode of information delivery. As an improved type of a multi-link, an object thoroughly discussed in early hypertext and Web theory, hashtag does not stop on displaying a list of related entries, but instead it takes users to and alternative, semantically focused collaborative live Stream. This alternative version is the result of user queries, not the algorithm's attempt to guess what entries to display. Thus, in terms of functionality, hashtag redefines both the node-link model of the network and the Stream model of Web 2.0. The pragmatic, performative and social dimensions of hashtag are even more profound. The default timelines on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which run on different frequency for different users, are made instantly equal for anyone subscribed to the same hashtag and turned into a shared immanence of the each passing moment[3].

Thanks to the temporal unification of the Stream, a hashtag which relates to social issue of utmost importance at a given time, can easily take the urgency of the issue out of cyberspace up to institutional level (signing a petition, for example) or out to urban

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3   Time on Twitter flows differently for different users. If user A has 100 followers and user B has only 10 their timelines refresh at a different rate, much faster for user A, much slower for user B. If both click on a hashtag this difference disappears. Within the channel established by the same hashtag, time flows equally.

space (organising a street protest). Especially in the latter case, the hashtag timeline synchronises with real time, with hashtag users broadcasting updates in the same time and quite often at the same space, discussing the same issues shoulder to shoulder and face to face. In this case hashtag crosses both the limits of hypertext and the limitations of the feed. The cyberspace, the urban space and the autonomous space, that for Castells is situated in between, on these rare occasions allows participants to move from reading to action, from a social group to a social movement.

Of course, this has potential for affairs. So far, the world has not seen many successful changes in the power structure that could be bound to social media activities and were both initiated and finalised by them. There are perhaps some good reasons that many if not most of the "augmented" revolutions, did not bring lasting results [Jurgenson, 2012, pp. 84-85]. I will come back to these reasons later. Before that, however, let us take a look at a phenomenon that owes a lot to the hashtag charged communication and which on its own can be seen as an antidote to the "darkening of the digital dream" which is at the center of my reflection: the selfie.

5. Hashtag as a motor of selfie culture

The publishing of Kim Kardashian's illustrated book *Selfish*, containing hundreds of selected selfies by the Hollywood celebrity, each of them accumulating up to million likes on Instagram(Kardashian, 2015), it can be considered that a recapitulation of a whole selfie culture was epitomised by Kardashian. Almost every single shot in the 500 pages album contains generic traits of numerous types of selfies which over the years were imitated by millions of selfies taking individuals. Opinions on the selfie phenomenon in the academic world are quite polarised, from treating the selfie culture as a platform for narcissists [Sorokowska, 2016] to seeing it as a challenge to dominion media representations [Enli and Thumim, 2012] and taking back control of the network distributed self-image [Rettberg, 2014]. Recent research additionally points out a political aspect of selfie and its use in action of protest and social mobilisation [Kuntsman, 2017]. All of these selfie characteristics and contexts are true and yet neither is able to grasp the complexity of the phenomena.

One perspective, worth applying here, as it fits well into the reflection on revolutionary and emancipatory ideas aligned with the emergence and development of the Internet, is proposed by Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). Zuboff points to three distinct periods in recent 150 years of Western history, identified as 3 types of Modernism, with a distinct dynamic between the ideas of the self and the ideas of a group. The first period is marked, among others, by American pioneers, migrants who were brave enough to leave their old lives behind and start a "journey of exploration and self-creation" which ended in a new life on a new continent. In this period, despite the individual self-creations, collective solutions and ideas were prevailing. The second period, second modernity, is the 1960s where nothing is given, and individuals learn through trial and error how to live their lives. The idea of a family, religion, sex, gender, morality is strongly individualised and negotiable. The emergence of the Internet marks the third wave of modernity which amplifies claims of the second modernity. Collective values prevalent in the first modernity were in line with hierarchical motifs of concentration, centralization, standardization which define the industrial society. During the second modernity, a visible rift has occurred between the values of individual and the neoliberal values of contemporary forms of capitalism. The Internet and the rise of information capitalism carried a promise of aligning the market values to individual values. Google, Facebook and Apple were set to cater for the "my life, my way, at a price I can afford" generation. For Zygmunt Bauman this rift was the deepest contradiction of our time: "the yawning gap between the right of self-assertion and the capacity to control the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible. It is from that abysmal gap that the most poisonous effluvia contaminating the lives of contemporary individuals

emanate" [Bauman, 2013, p.39]. For Zuboff, the promise of aligning consumer's genuine interests and hopes with commercial interests, epitomised by the iPod, online one click ordering and Google's personalised search engine, was never kept. In fact, the information capitalism quickly turned into a surveillance capitalism and – as Zuboff puts it – the "darkening of a digital dream".

A question arises what has Kim Kardashian and her selfies to do with broken promises of the third modernity? As one of the first influencers and celebrities who thoroughly exploited the affordances of social media in the times when creation of self-image and identity is fastest and most affordable by digital means, Kardashian represents a massively popular reaction to the situation highlighted by Bauman and Zuboff. The act of taking a selfie, from this perspective, is an emancipatory gesture directed against the established order of gaining social status and capital. In the same manner, the act of using hashtag might be considered an emancipatory gesture of coming together against the elite 1% of global society by the remaining 99 %. The seemingly anti-social "networked movement" of a generation obsessed with the need to build their self-branding and in creating their unique identity is, in fact, closely related to the highly apprised and widely discussed networked social movement of Occupy Wallstreet, Black Lives Matter and Me Too. They are both anti-establishment in nature, directed against the existing domination of one discourse, narrative or a segment of society over the other: either a traditional path of sacralisation of a Hollywood celebrity, the workplace dominance of white males, or a conservative model of family and relationships.

Both the "Kardashian moment" and the wave of protests which took place between 2009 and 2015 across the globe, were logistically supported by hashtag and many other digital tools of social media which amplified and fortified their message within "mass self-communication". It is the moment when the Internet once again supports the people and their will to be free, independent and self-determined. Unfortunately, not long after, the same Internet tools and the same human ideas were turned upside down to be used and exploited against their initial premises in the world of "Googlization of everything" state surveillance and fake news.

6. The fall of the third modernity

The Internet today is not following the vision of its creators [Lee, 2019]. The project of the third modernity has so far failed. The Kardashian moment had demonstrated that anyone taking a selfie can have a moment of complete agency to present themselves in their individual controlled surroundings. At the same time, some scholars agree that selfie-takers, by the very act, in a pursuit to claim themselves as valuable in a cultural system, turn themselves into a commodity [Mehita & Jonathan, 2016, p. 3]. As such, the self-expressions are also embedded in a regulative regime of the market or the state [Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 227] and are being exploited as a resource by marketing and advertising companies. This also means that in the very moment of taking a selfie, using an update on Instagram we become an object of surveillance.

This double-edged nature of both networked self-expressions and collective activities became increasingly apparent from 2013 to 2018, starting from Edward Snowden revelations on state surveillance of Americans by the NSA, alleged interference of Russian state into American elections, revealed activities of Cambridge Analytica and other companies employing tools of propaganda 2.0 on social media in order to influence national referendums and elections. These developments had proved that the Internet was taken in thedirection which had never been imagined by its inventors and enthusiastic masses of users. Shutting down the Internet by authoritarian regimes pales in comparison to the tactics of fake social media accounts spreading misinformation and generating anti-hashtags whenever the remains of the free Internet speak against a state, a company or a person with these tactics at their disposal. Even the so called hashtag wars documented during the Arab spring were closer to the idea of free speech on the

Internet than the later misinformation campaigns and the use of both official and Deep Web social media tools aiming to findnew recruits and even terrorists in attacks by ISIS. The organisation whichproved to be highly literate in digital communication.

Finally, the pivotal events of 2011 at Tahrir Square in Cairo, other North African countries, and later in New York and around the globe, proved to be the highest moment in social media history. Hashtag #Egypt was the most popular hashtag of the year 2011 on Twitter. But even these events did not change the structures of power they intended to disrupt. It is true that social media enhanced communication between participants of the protests and helped spread the message across the world. Twitter and Instagram were the best response to the alternative reality of state media. At the same time, the Egyptian revolution showed that the networked social movement cannot be maintained without a political infrastructure on the ground. As Yuval Noah Harari points out, one of the basic distinguishing features of homo sapiens is the ability to create durable social structures founded on several main ideas, but also having a material support in the form of a support apparatus of power. Social media is not able to easily map this phenomenon [Harari, 2016, p.137]:

"It is one thing to bring 100,000 people to Tahrir Square, and quite another to get a grip on the political machinery, shake the right hands in the right back rooms and run a country effectively. Consequently, when Mubarak stepped down the demonstrators could not fill the vacuum. Egypt had only two institutions sufficiently organised to rule the country: the army and the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence the revolution was hijacked first by the Brotherhood, and eventually by the army".

Today it is difficult to believe in what one sees and reads on social media. It is better not to trust a post, a feed, and even a hashtag as we never know who might be behind it. Like the magic in Neal Stephenson's novel *The Rise and Fall of Dodo*, the hashtag has lost its power and it is hard to say if any hashtag "agents" from the future will ever come back to fix this rather broken Internet.

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