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Theory of the Hashtag, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019, de Andreas Bernard

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Abstract

Theory of the Hashtag by Andreas Bernard may be a small book but opens great avenues of thought around the discrete but central hash sign. The book is constructed around seven chapters that seem to be written in total autonomy in which each chapter adds a layer of comprehension to the preceding ones. It can be read like a cultural biography of the hashtag and accompanies the spectacular rise of # symbol from its predecessor keyword to two fundamental domains: political activism and marketing. Using emblematic examples such as #MeToo or #OccupyWallStreet social movements, Bernard elucidates not only the ways the hashtag has influences social-political life, but also some of its central tenets and consequences. This is a recommendable book that presents an easy to read introduction to a cultural perspective on the hashtag. Although it does not fully address the topic of how the hashtag is shaping the public sphere it certainly is an important reading on the historical and cultural ways the hashtag is transforming contemporary digital culture.

Keywords: hashtag; public discourse; political activism; digital culture

The triumph of social media and digital communication has transformed public discourse. In *Theory of the Hashtag* – the translation of the 2018 German book *Das Diktat der Hashtags*] Andreas Bernard tries to give sense to the re-shaping of collective speech these mutations through the descriptive study of the power of an element of typography and a symbol: the hashtag. Following previous books, *A Cultural History of the Elevator* (NYUP, 2014) and *Komplizen des Erkennungsdienstes – Das Selbst in der digitalen Kultur* (S. Fischer Verlag, 2017), Bernard questions the significance of the hashtag as a networking principle of discourse and its conceptual scope as both text and metatext.

Theory of the Hashtag may be a small book but opens great avenues of thought around this discrete but central element on the production and accumulation of public attention. The book is constructed around seven chapters that seem to be written in total autonomy in which each chapter adds a layer of comprehension to the preceding ones. The book can be read like a cultural biography of the hashtag and accompanies the spectacular

rise of # symbol from its predecessor keyword to two fundamental domains: political activism and marketing. Using emblematic examples such as #MeToo or #OccupyWallStreet social movements, Bernard elucidates not only the ways the hashtag has influences social-political life, but also some of its central tenets and consequences.

Theory of the Hashtag attempts to “fathom the power of a symbol that, until recently, was no more than a mysterious typewriter key or button on a telephone” (p.7). After a small introduction, the book begins, in chapter two, by underscoring the hashtag as a coordinating mechanism of discourse. Drawing extensively on a Chris Messina’s text¹, that established the hashtag as a “thought collective”, the chapter gives a tough-provocative and stimulating association between the symbol and Foucault’s ideas on discourse contained in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Comparing the function of the hashtag as a coordination mechanism with Foucault’s laws of distribution that govern what can and cannot be said within a particular thematic field, Bernard establishes an analogy between the hashtag and statements. Just like Foucault departed from traditional instances such as “author”, “work” or “origin” and emphasized how statements always belong to a series and plays a role among other statements, Bernard emphasizes that “the keyword marked by the hash sign corroborates Foucault’s central definition of statement” (p.16). This means that the inclusion of the hashtag in Twitter and Instagram posts can be seen as similar to statements: “its power derives from the distribution of statements and documents in a strictly functional sense, one that is independent of the meaning of the tweets or photographs in question” (p.17).

Chapter three breaks this promising line of thought and presents the contexts the # first acquired its meaning. It is a brief genealogy and evolution of the symbol from the *libra* until the universal keyboard. “Up until the end of the twentieth century, the hash sign did not (in semiotic terms) have any semantic content but rather only syntactic content in the processes of communication technology. It was only the early era of the internet (with its “internet relay chats”) that the use of the symbol began to change. In these online forums (...) the hash sign was used to indicate themes” (p.27).

Chapter four links the hashtag to the keyword of library’s catalogues and stresses its indexing value. Bernard here is not only pointing to some similarities as, above all, he is distinguishing the hashtag of Instagram and Twitter from traditional keywords: first, in the hashtag there is an absence of an overarching principle or regulatory authority (p.33). Second, the hashtag alters its relation to the object of reference. “The keyword attached to a hash sign is not simply a classification added later on; often enough, the relationship is

¹ Chris Messina. 2007 (August). *Groups for Twitter; or A Proposal for Twitter Tag Channels*, Factory Joe <https://factoryjoe.com/2007/08/25/groups-for-twitter-or-a-proposal-for-twitter-tag-channels/>

inverted. That is, tweets or pictures uploaded unto Instagram are often a reaction to a popular hashtag and people take advantage of this popularity for their own posts” (p. 34). Three, the generative power of the hashtag is also associated with the amalgamation of text and metadata (p.35). So, the hashtag departs from the keyword as used by the library sciences because there is an absence of authority, a redefinition of the referential hierarchy and an inseparability of text and metatext.

Chapter five is the most relevant to political communication and public discourse. It describes how the hash symbol had been use in political activism and defines the “rebelliousness of the hashtag” (p. 50). First, it is said that the hashtag “allows individuals and groups of people who have been excluded or misrepresented by the conventional mass media to offer a visible corrective simply by pushing a few buttons on their phones or computers” (p. 50). Bernard is here elevating the hashtag to a resistance mode that marginalized groups have at their disposal to counter elite interests. Citing a 2015 study on #Ferguson protest², the chapter posits social media as a communication channel for oppositional public spheres establishing a rapport between media misrepresentation and the highest media activism (p.53). Social media and digital hashtag discourse are seen, therefore, as a true possibility to compensate the interference of distortive filters of the mass media.

In chapter six, Bernard continues to describe the effect of the hashtags but now he directs his attention to marketing. It is argued hashtags represent a central element of digital marketing since they drive user engagement. They become an incredible opportunity to constitute and join a community of like-minded people (p. 58) and are an inconspicuous but effective way to increase the online presence of a brand (p.59). At the same time, by instigating individuals to post within a hashtag, this symbol is also converting social media users into positive advertisers (p.60). Of course, as Bernard pertinently remarks, this is not so different from previous methods of content marketing but at least it augments the scale of diffusion and adhesion.

The last chapter functions as a conclusion and here it is easier to hear the voice of the author. While other chapters assume a descriptive function, this one synthesizes the perspective the author offers: the hashtag can be empowering (in the case of political activism) but also can be levelling (in the case of hashtag marketing). This is called “the dilemma of the hashtag” (p. 75): while it can be a medium and a catalyst to debate, the media condition of the hashtag also points to the very dangers of homogenization. As Bernard states, this is an irresolvable ambivalence of the hashtag: “at the same time it

²Yarimar Bonilla & Jonathan Rosa. 2015. “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States.” *American Ethnologist* 42: 4-17.

allows for scattered voices to be heard, it menaces them by tending to suppress their unique, nonexchangeable qualities” (p. 77).

Theory of the Hashtag is easy to be read because it is short, concise and based on several real-life illustrations. It draws attention to key changes digital communication and the hashtag are implementing and even alerts to the dangers of massification. But what, probably, is most distinctive in this book is how Bernard traces the history of the hash sign without totally abdicating academic reflection and key contributions of social theory such as Foucault’s *Discursive Practices*, Latour’s *Actor-Network Theory* or Lukács’ *Theory of Commodification*.

It is also at this level that the book may be a little disappointing to some readers. None of these social theories is further developed or completely discussed. When it seems that a chapter is starting to move to its core assumption, it abruptly ends without more commentaries. This is the case especially with chapters two and six. Namely, chapter two only cites Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* but his *Order of Discourse* would certainly have been useful to better explain hashtags as dispersion of statements. In fact, the principles of Foucault’s method (such as reversal, discontinuity, specificity and exteriority) would have added an extra layer of meaning that would help to understand the discursive power of hashtags.

Another problem has to do with the English translation: *Theory of the Hashtag*. Readers might expect a general and critical essay that exposed fundamental principles of the discursive functioning of hashtags. However, by focusing in the cultural transformations of the use of the hashtag, it seems the book fails to provide a systematic theory of the symbol, since there is no system of interrelated ideas intended to explain the scope of the changes introduced by it. It is true this is a competent and interesting book on the hashtag but “theory” does not seem to be the proper word. No doubt, there is a critical perspective present in chapter seven but there are passages that enlighten reader by being a cultural biography of the symbol without necessarily being an accomplished and sustained analysis of the social implications of the hashtag. For example, the “dilemma of the hashtag” (p.75) could be more developed making the range of its consequences clearer. In addition, the sense of levelling (p.75) is not further discussed. It seems a rather plain concept that encompasses both massification and homogenization meanings. However, this distinction is not subject of specific examination.

Some readers may also be dissatisfied by the fact that this is a book about the hash sign and not so much about the consequences of the hashtag to public discourse or the public sphere. Even though these notions are present (especially in the hashtag activism), there are presumed claims deserving more discussion. For instance, it is assumed that

hashtags contribute to “collectively amplified speech” (p.27) and that they represent a great potential to democratize political communication. Yet, these assumptions that put hashtags as discursive practices of resistance and counter-discourse seem not to be critically questioned. One could also ask if they could serve as mechanisms to propel dominant views of the world. Unfortunately, the book does not give an answer to this question. Besides, one could expect a whole chapter dedicated to that role of coordinating publics (p. 49), instead of just seven pages. A reference about a typology of hashtag publics would seem quite helpful at this respect³.

In sum, this recommendable book presents an easy to read introduction to a cultural perspective on the hashtag. Although it does not fully address the topic of how is the hashtag shaping the public sphere, it certainly is an important reading on the historical and cultural ways the hashtag is transforming contemporary digital culture.

Nota biográfica

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³ Bruns, Axel, Moon, Brenda, Paul, Avijit, & Münch, Felix. 2016. “Towards a typology of hashtag publics: A large-scale comparative study of user engagement across trending topics.” *Communication Research and Practice* 2(1): 20-46.