Insights*

*Stick to your goal

Transcript of the guideline's voiceover

How to enjoy this interactive text?

Click on black words and sentences to deepen the topic quoted in the video

"Everyday, the world changes, people protest in the streets as well as on social media, and <u>hashtag hijacking</u> has become one of their strongest <u>weapons.</u> But how can we make it even better? How can we choose the most effective tactic?

Each hashtag can be hijacked in different ways according to the ultimate <u>objective of the protest</u>. In the last few years, several methods have been proven effective, but they change according to the situation. So, to learn about these tactics, we have to focus on one specific question: how did activists take over a hashtag?

As a future hijacker, you should know that there are three main <u>tactics</u> that you could use, but what can better show them than some examples?

For the first case, let's fly to Russia. In 2018, the <u>#RussiaNeedsPutin</u> hashtag was launched to praise Putin's abilities as a leader, but the campaign was soon hijacked. Citizens decided to flip the hashtag, switching its original sense and using it with a different meaning. Therefore, instead of showing their support to the President, many people used this hashtag to <u>highlight the issues</u> the country was facing and the restriction of political freedoms. It was an effective hijack, and surely gained a lotof attention from the media.

1

Find out what's behind
"Stick to your goal".

But let's move on, and consider the hashtag #QAnon. <u>QAnon</u> is a disproven conspiracy theory, alleging that a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles is running a global child sex-trafficking ring. Despite the lack of proof, this theory gathered a lot of attention, but in June 2020, <u>K-pop fans</u> hijacked the hashtag by flooding its feed: they silenced the original meaning, by posting a huge number of posts unrelated to the topic. In just a few days the hashtag was filled with over 22,000 tweets with fan-cams and photos of K-pop stars. It was a pretty invasive method, but it made the hashtag #Qanon completely ineffective.

Compared to this, the last tactic is sneakier and surely less appreciated, especially since it was used by <u>a specific group of people</u>. In the last years the hashtag #JustinBieber was hijacked by The Islamic State that used the popularity of the singer to share on Twitter a series of videos, showing the execution of four men, as well as the training of new recruits. The tactic they used consisted in exploiting the popularity of another hashtag, to spread an unrelated message or to show particular images to a big audience.

So, let's go back to our question. How can we choose the most effective tactic? The key is sticking to your goal. Reflect on your aim and use the most efficient method of hijacking. And to make sure you are up to the task, there are a few tips that may help you.

Remember, the *tips* are *our* suggestions to hijack, flawlessly.

If your goal is to challenge an idea promoted by someone you disagree with, you should flip the meaning of the hashtag, posting opposite content to disprove the original meaning.

On the other hand, if you want to diminish the importance of the message a hashtag is trying to spread, your best option is flooding its feed with unrelated content, to make it useless.

And finally, if you wish to spread your own message, you should try to exploit a popular hashtag to reach its huge audience.

We think you're ready! But remember, this is just one guideline: move the dot around to explore all the content in the page, or check out the rest of the website to find out more.

Go ahead to find out all the research that helped us to design this video

→

What does hashtag hijacking mean?

From the clicked words "*hashtag hijacking*"

Extract from

Austin Lucinda, Jin Yan,
"*Social Media and
Crisis Communication*",
New York, Routledge, 2017

https://tinyurl.com/y4vmntrs

"An attention grabbing and dramatic moniker, which has quickly become a favorite of the news media, the term *hashtag hijacking* typically refers to a situation in which a hashtag (#), a tool widely used for designating and organizing online conversations on social media sites, becomes commandeered by others in the community and is then instead used to mock, satirize, or negatively critique the original hashtag sponsor. The popular social media platform Twitter is most closely associated with the use of hashtags, but most online communities today commonly use the content-organizing method.

[...] The first widely publicized example came in January of 2012, when the global fast-food giant McDonald's launched a promotional campaign on Twitter using the hashtag #McDStories, with the intent of inspiring costumers and fans of the brand to post cheerful anecdotes about personal experiences at the restaurant and positive memories associated with the food. In an effort to increase awareness of the campaign, McDonald's paid Twitter to boost visibility of the hashtag through its "promoted trends" offering, in which the social network gives visual prominence on users' screens to a limited number of corporate-sponsored hashtags.

Within a matter of hours of launching the promotion, McDonald's "pulled" formal sponsorship of the Twitter campaign due to the prevalence of overtly negative, sarcastic, and inappropriate responses tweeted by the platform's users incorporating the hashtag. Despite, or perhaps because of, the company's quick

decision to cancel the campaign, major news organizations capitalized on the opportunity to cover the embarrassing event for one of the world's most well-known and iconic brands, with many articles including examples of particularly harsh or humorous individual tweets ("*One time I walked into McDonalds and I could smell Type 2 diabetes floating in the air and I threw up. #McDStories*").

[...] The coordinated hashtag hijack has become a viable and effective strategic tool used by individuals and activist groups to publicly shame companies, to pressure organizations to action, and to help get their own messages amplified and heard by the general public."
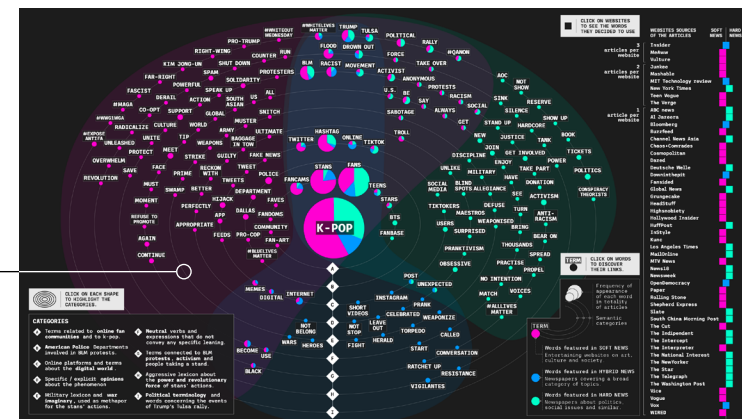
Why did we define this tool a "weapon"?

From the clicked word "*weapons*"

The phenomenon of digital activism through hashtag hijacking did not go unnoticed: the main online news websites covered their actions with critique pieces, describing these groups as a force of social and political action and acknowledging their power given by internet used as a *weapon*. This particular term, with others related to a military language, have been used to describe these collective actions in online media. Hard news generally prefer more neutral and broad terms, as opposed to soft news, which instead use a more powerful and aggressive lexicon.

Our website "*Stan wars: the rise of a new army*" investigates the various facets of language used by the media to describe the communities' behaviour.

One of the findings from
the interactive data visualization
on the website linked below
about how news media
talked of this phenomenon

https://dd16-group2.github.io/stan-wars/

Which could be the objectives of hashtag hijackings?

From the clicked words "*objective of the protest*"

For further information

Kashmir Hill,
#McDStories: When A Hashtag
Becomes A Bashtag
Forbes, 2012

https://tinyurl.com/y5bs6495

Sara Roncero-Menendez
*8 Hijacked Hashtags Gone
Horribly Wrong (or Right)*
Mashable, 2013

https://tinyurl.com/yxl5elmh

*#LGBTFacts, Hijacked Twitter
Hashtag, Pokes Fun At Anti-Gay
User With Parody Tweets*
Huffington Post, 2012

https://tinyurl.com/y5xeg2uy

Starting from the #McDStories in 2012, in the last 9 years several hashtag hijackings occurred across the web, spreading on one or multiple platform. However, they were not all the same: even though the general action was the same, they differed in both the tactic used and the objective of the protest.

As the video explains, objectives and tactics are often intertwined, but the reasons behind these collective actions outnumber the methods of hijacking.

For example, #McDStories, like other cases such as #ILoveWalgreens or #QantasLuxury, aimed to exploit an hashtag launched by the brands to promote themselves, and use their campaign to criticize their services, products, or company policies. In general, this particular objective is carried out by trolls or sarcastic and judgmental users, who still use humor as a way to spread their opinions.

Another common objective, more related to social issues, is to undermine the credibility of a hateful hashtag (or its general message), not only by supporting opposite statement, but also by ridiculing the original one. This is the case of #LGBTFacts, for example, a protest that hijacked an account and a hashtag that spread anti-gay rhetoric by using humor and wholesome content to support the LGBTQ+ community.

Undermining a hashtag sometimes involves distracting the attention from the original message, in order to force everyone to talk about the hijacking rather than the primary aim of the tag. This does not need posting specifically opposite

Mikhaila Friel
*K-pop fans are protesting
a pro-Trump rally by flooding
the #MillionMAGAMarch hashtag
with pictures of pancakes*
The Insider, 2020

https://tinyurl.com/y3mpr34g

content, but unrelated posts and images that can make an hashtag feed useless and confusing, like it happened for #MillionMAGAMarch.

On the other hand, if activists prefer to focus on proving the errors that lays within the original message of a hashtag, they can post pictures and critical commentaries proving its false fallacy. For example, this is what happened the case of #MyNYPD or #ObamacareIsWorking.

Finally, some groups may aim to spread their own message, trying to reach the highest number of users in a short amount of time. Forcing their way through another hashtag to amplify the visibility of their own content is not often well received by users, especially because the new content has a negative meaning like in the case of the Islamic State.

What do we mean by the word "tactic"?

From the clicked word "*tactics*"

Back to the transcript ➔

As previously demonstrated, military language has been widely used to address elements related to hashtag hijacking, especially in the media, as if these protests were considered, even if just metaphorically, aggressive actions. Moreover, exactly like in war, hashtag hijackings require the contribution of a high number of people too. For these reasons, when talking about methods of hijacking, we refer to them as *tactics*.

The word tactic derives from Greek *taktikė* (tekhnė) "(art of) arrangement," from fem. of *taktikos* "pertaining to arrangement". In military contexts, different tactics are used to achieve different goals. Based on the type of enemy an army is facing and the battlefield in which the war is taking place, the tactic will change. This happens in the case of hashtag hijacking too: according to the type of hijack carried out by the users, the outcome of the protest will change.

The tactic is influenced by elements such as the platforms used or the type of content posted for the hijack (relevant or not relevant to the topic), but it depends especially on the ultimate objective of the activist involved in the project. As we saw in the previous section, there are several aims that could motivate a hashtag hijacking, therefore, the tactic must always follow the final goal: like in war, you need the right strategy to win.

Why was #RussiaNeedsPutin launched?

From the clicked word "*#RussiaNeedsPutin*"

Back to the transcript ➔

"The hashtag [#РоссииНуженПутин] which translates as #RussiaNeedsPutin, began as a choreographed political campaign by accounts linked to the ruling United Russia party ahead of the presidential election this year. The tweets praised Mr Putin's ability to unite the country and his role in guiding Russia through the turbulent post-cold war years.

The hashtag has been among the top trending topics on Russian social media since 14 January, and has been used almost 7,000 times on Twitter in the same period.

Although Mr Putin is running as an independent candidate rather than from United Russia, party-linked accounts began using the tag to coincide with efforts to collect signatures in support of Mr Putin's campaign for re-election. Mr. Putin needs 300,000 signatures from across the country to secure his place on the ballot for the election on 18 March.

Many included the hashtag when posting photos of themselves pledging their support to the President at a number of registration points. [...] However, those critical of the President seized the popularity of the hashtag to highlight issues facing the country and the restriction of political freedoms within it."

Which issues did Russian citizens wanted to highlight?

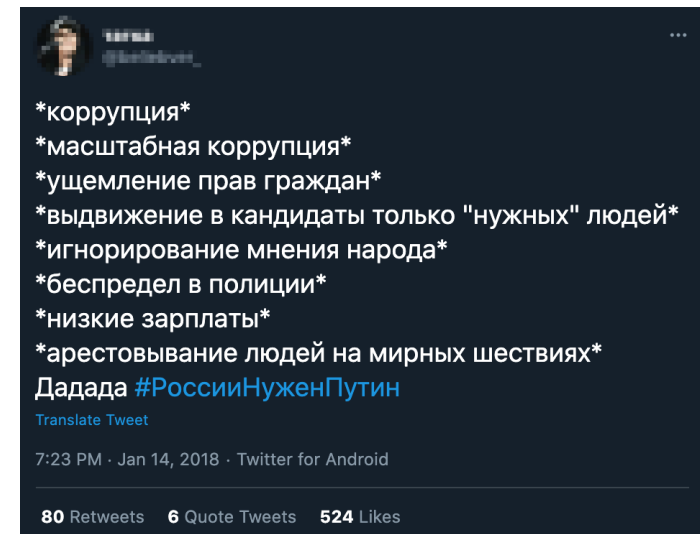From the clicked words "*highlight the issues*"

The hashtag was hijacked by Russian citizens starting from highlighting a local problem (a road that needed fixing), rather than attacking the once and future head of State head-on. However, it soon translated in a critique to Putin's political strategies, speculations of corruptions, complaints about the lack of freedom, and even questions about the role of pro-Kremlin bots in amplifying Putin's popularity.

These are two of the most popular hijacked tweets: they both use sarcasm to criticize the consequences of Putin's re-election

#РоссииНуженПутин
Да, не знаю как вы, а я хочу еще нарушения моих прав, данных мне Конституцией, хочу деградации страны, хочу отупения народа в еще больших масштабах. Владимир Владимирович, да храни вас Русский Христос!

Translate Tweet

10:18 AM · Jan 14, 2018 · Twitter for Android

76 Retweets   2 Quote Tweets   533 Likes

"*Don't know about you, but I want more violation of my constitutional rights, I want our country to degrade me and the people to become even more stupid. Mr. Putin, may Russian Christ protect you!*"

"*Corruption, rampant corruption, citizens' rights abuse, nominating only the 'right' people as candidates, ignoring public opinion, police brutality, low wages, arresting people at peaceful demos, yesyesyes, #RussiaNeedsPutin*"

коррупция
масштабная коррупция
ущемление прав граждан
выдвижение в кандидаты только "нужных" людей
игнорирование мнения народа
беспредел в полиции
низкие зарплаты
арестовывание людей на мирных шествиях
Дадада #РоссииНуженПутин

Translate Tweet

7:23 PM · Jan 14, 2018 · Twitter for Android

80 Retweets   6 Quote Tweets   524 Likes

What is the history behind QAnon?

From the clicked word "*QAnon*"

Extract from

Amarnath Amarasingam,
Marc-André Argentino
"*The QAnon Conspiracy Theory:
A Security Threat in the Making?*",
CTC Sentinel, 2020

https://tinyurl.com/y52qzpv5

"The QAnon conspiracy emerged on Saturday, October 28, 2017, on 4chan in a thread called "Calm Before the Storm," when an anonymous user signing off as 'Q' stated that "Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM – 8:30 AM EST on Monday – the morning on Oct 30, 2017." Q's *nom de plume* is in reference to "Q" clearance, a clearance level in the United States Department of Energy.

However, QAnon finds its origins a year prior in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, which alleges coded words and satanic symbolism purportedly apparent in John Podesta's emails, hacked during his tenure as chair of Hillary Clinton's 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, point to a secret child sex trafficking ring at a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., called Comet Ping Pong. [...]

Q's claim on 4chan to have special government access and that he/she is part of a wider "anon genre" of government officials with top secret information is not entirely novel. Before Q, several 4chan posters asserted they had special government access, including *FBIAnon9* and *HLIAnon10* in 2016, and *CIAAnon11* and *WHInsiderAnon12* in 2017. QAnon devotees, many of whom may be familiar with this "anon genre," thus are familiar with Q's apparent need for anonymity and presumably take it as a sign of credibility. [...]

QAnon also represents a militant and anti-establishment ideology rooted in an apocalyptic desire to destroy the existing, corrupt world to usher in a promised golden age. This position finds resonance with other far-right extremist movements, such as the various militant, anti-government, white nationalist, and neo-Nazi extremist organizations across the United States. In February 2020, Omega Kingdom Ministries, in effect a QAnon church, was established in the United States and other countries where the QAnon conspiracy acts as an interpretive lens for the Bible and vice versa, and in which adherents are subjected to formalized religious indoctrination into QAnon. QAnon followers share roots with conspiracy theories that have fed other anti-government movements, such as the 90s militias that feared the "New World Order," or the anti-government apocalypticism and religious fervor of the Branch Davidians.

Recent criminal cases with a nexus to violence involving QAnon followers show how QAnon has contributed to the radicalization of ideologically motivated violent extremists (IMVE). According to the FBI, QAnon and other fringe conspiracy theories could "*very likely motivate some domestic extremists, wholly or in part, to commit criminal and sometimes violent activity*" and noted that "*one key assumption driving these assessments is that certain conspiracy theory narratives tacitly support or legitimize violent action*"."

How did K-Pop culture become so relevant?

From the clicked word "*K-Pop*"

For further information

Lia Savillo,
*Meet the BTS Fans Trying
to Change the World, One Online
Campaign at a Time*
Vice, 2020

https://tinyurl.com/y56prupe

Joe Coscarelli
*Why Obsessive K-Pop Fans Are
Turning Toward Political Activism*
New York Times, 2020

https://tinyurl.com/y823y6xc

In the 80s, Korean music was far from growing: most of the country's culture was in fact highly influenced by creations from the U.S. and Japan. The situation changed when South Korea lifted travel restrictions in 1988: it soon became much simpler for artists to research and take in musical elements from other cultures. This would eventually result in more experimentation in music, paving the way for bands that had "new" sounds to them, like Seo Taiji and Boys, who was responsible for the first spread of K-Pop.

In the 1990s, with the development of idol culture, massive, dedicated fanbases, started to grow. Three music studios (SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment , and JYP Entertainment) rode out this wave and assembled several groups, with diverse male singers (who could also dance). These boybands offered good-looking members, colorful clothes, and funky beats: their success was surely well-crafted. This idol culture spread through the '90s and into the 2000s, and groups (both male and female) created with a similar formula rose in popularity.

In the following years, certain K-pop artists' influence began echoing across the world, with Western fans frowing in number. Then, in 2012, one of most important moments in K-pop's history happened: "Gangnam Style", from the South Korean rapper Psy, became viral, becoming the first YouTube video to reach 1 billion views. This managed to launch Western fans into a frenzy looking for more Korean artists.

The evolution of K-pop, however, did not stop there. It peaked with one of the most important music groups in 2020: BTS. They managed to broke records and stereotypes in both their home country and abroad, making huge strides for the K-pop industry as a whole.

What differentiated BTS from many others K-Pop band before them is their choice to sing about more serious matters: societal pressures, mental health, politics, and so much more. These topics managed to resonate with a lot of people, who grew and united under the shared passion for the band. According to Ms. Saeji, a visiting assistant professor of East Asian culture at Indiana University Bloomington, the fact that "*these young, socially progressive, outward-looking people who are really adept at using these online platforms — who are stuck at home and online even more because of Covid-19 — are doing political things is not surprising. These are young people who are completely willing to learn about a new culture to follow their interest in some pop-culture product*".

Moreover, Nicole Santero, a fan and Ph.D. student with a focus on the BTS fandom who also runs the data-focused @ResearchBTS account, described K-Pop stans [specific term for fans] as "*really passionate people who just fight for what they love. Those characteristics translate well when you look at social issues*". Thanks to K-pop groups, these people who shared a similar outlook of the world managed to become aware of their collective power and the actual change they can bring to the world, to make it better for their future, as well as for the next generation. As Ms. Saeji said, "*What's really important about this entire thing is that young people are seeing their political power, they are flexing and they are feeling it. And you know what they are going to do next? They are going to vote. These K-pop fans are not feeling cynical right now. They are feeling empowered*".

How did the Islamic State exploited hashtag hijacking and digital media?

From the clicked words "*a specific group of people*"

Extract from

Cahal Milmo,
Iraq crisis exclusive: Isis jihadists using World Cup and Premier League hashtags to promote extremist propaganda on Twitter
Indipendent, 2014

https://tinyurl.com/y58eotum

"The tactic, which allows Isis to access millions of World Cup Twitter searches in the hope that some will click on links to its propaganda material, was being deployed this weekend to disseminate a video showing British and Australian jihadists trying to persuade other western Muslims to join their ranks [...], promoting vile "public relations" material showing atrocities and beheadings committed by the extremist group's fighters in Syria and Iraq.

The use of Twitter hashtags is just one part of an increasingly sophisticated social media campaign by ISIS as it seeks to capitalise on its dramatic territorial gains in recent days and establish a puritanical Islamic state or "caliphate" across a swathe of Sunni-majority Iraq. The militants have developed an Arab-language Twitter app which updates users on the latest ISIS developments but also requires signatories to surrender a large amount of personal data and gives the terror group the power to send tweets from that individual's account."

Did you find what you were looking for?*

*If you didn't, you can go back to the website to find out more.

Back to the website →