

Activism in the age of social media

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They feel justified and aren't swayed by the court of public opinion

Social media activism has its perks, but a displaced mother of three from Zimbabwe is neither going to eat blogs nor the ranting scribbles trending all over our newsfeeds, for those who find themselves in this precarious situation the basics are fundamental.

They don't need our pity, but instead for people to extend and offer tangible solutions, thus raving from the comfort of our air-conditioned offices and couches is neither going to give them shelter nor resolve their displacement. Mind you, poor leadership has been displayed since the volcano erupted, but this remains everybody's responsibility.

The strings of violent attacks in South Africa are a monumental embarrassment that reflects badly not only on the perpetrators who set things in motion, but also those of us who carry South African passports. To a large extent, our violent past and the inaction against perpetual violence in this country has deemed us a violent state, this identity looms over the nation like an ugly scar on the face. It's always there waiting to rear its ugly head no matter how hard we try to cover it with expensive make-up.

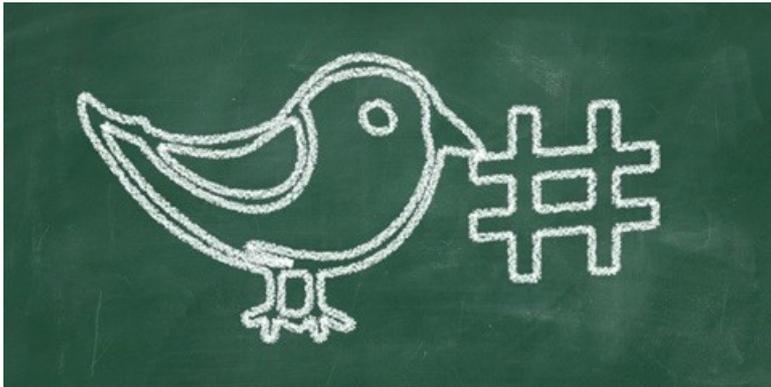


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As bystanders to attacks against foreign African nationals we can share our sentiments and express as much anger as we like because the situation is quite distasteful, but is that really helping the situation on the ground? Who are the blogs, hashtags and status updates really speaking to? What do those of us who write them imagine ourselves to be doing? Let's be honest, the guy who stabbed Sithole in Alex and the mob of under-age children looting and throwing stones at Somali spaza shops aren't going to go through Twitter when they get home to see how the world of the internet deciphers their actions, frankly they are doing this because they feel justified and aren't swayed by the court of public opinion. Many of them are prey to ignorance, poor education levels, an unproductive economy and unemployment, hence they are not acting in isolation, but that's a story for another day.

There is a desire to feel like we are actually doing something without having to do anything

In the marketing industry, we are taught that before launching a brand into the market, the client needs to understand their target market, with that, they know where to place their product and how to price it. The same principle should apply when people are campaigning for or against something; hence it seems to me that the activism against xenophobia that has taken over social media is speaking to the wrong target. Despite our 'good intentions' the people who must hear what the rest of us have to say are out on the streets singing struggle songs that have nothing to do with their so-called intent to be rid of African foreign nationals.

Thus with this in mind, how effective will the counter campaign that has taken the country by fire be? What purpose does social media activism serve in situations of this nature? In essence, who are the people who fancy themselves to be social media activists campaigning for? Are our actions an act of selflessness or is there a desire to feel like we are actually doing something without having to do anything? These questions must be raised because despite knowing that the perpetrators aren't being reached, the internet continues to scream as people of like minds debate the dynamics between right and wrong, morality and immorality, justice and injustice.

The majority of people online mirror each other's sentiments, so who the hell are we shaming if we all agree? Doesn't addressing the wrong crowd defeat the purpose of campaigning? The social media platform would be ideal if this was only an ideological struggle or war of words between avatars, but the lives and livelihoods of real people with friends and families are on the line.

It will take more than the right words stop the carnage

From a safe distance we follow breaking news, like and share appalling pictures of African men being necklaced on the streets in Durban and townships in Gauteng, and as 'activists' of our generation we write about it, break the internet and leave the rest to sort itself out. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying social media activism is all fruitless, because that would be ignorant and biased. Social media is a necessary part of our lives that has had a big role to play when it comes to changing what and who constitutes as newsworthy. It creates awareness and serves as a platform for people to engage on different views and it has altered what is considered trendy. It has given a voice to tragedies and narratives to the likes of the Kenyan attack, which otherwise would have gone ignored by mainstream media.

Social media activism ensured that the #bringbackourgirls campaign had its 15 minutes in the spotlight because the world stopped for a second to pose for a picture and raise awareness about an African tragedy, despite the short life span of such trends of cause. A picture may speak a thousand words, but it will take more than the right words to stop the carnage. There is a gap that needs to be filled through honest engagement with the ideals we claim to stand for, because hypocrisy is not bliss.



The saying that a team is only as strong as its weakest link rings true here, thus social media activism is only effective if people actually stop typing for a second to actually do active things that bring about real change in the real world. For one, ensuring that the displaced African migrants have a safe haven and don't go to bed hungry, would be a good first step. I find that South Africans are quite reactive pupils, because even though the xenophobia mentality had been brewing for a while, we didn't do anything until people's blood was staining the very soil they helped us fight for. The very foreigners we are now trying to force out were catalyst in our own liberation, but none of that is important to us right! It's nothing personal it's just a question of borders. We treat nationality as though it's a natural phenomenon when it's only socially constructed. Is it unrealistic of me to say no forms of social ideals and emotions should be held above our humanity?

At times when the shame creeps up on us we joke with our colleagues and friends who happen to be from other African countries, as indirect perpetrators we express the distaste we feel about the situation because we don't want them to think we are like 'those' people running around with machetes. But nonetheless, we cannot relate to their situation since they are being reminded everyday that they don't belong here, thus their foreign status is like a growing tumour in their lives or untreated lice even.

Online efforts need to be practised offline to breed a uniform campaign

It seems to me that in cases of this nature social media activists who never leave their comfort zones act from a place of superiority. The foreigners are imaged as subjects who we speak for but don't engage with on an equal basis. We don't hear them because we always speak over them. We observe their plight from a distance because we don't want to be confused as one of 'them'. Since the attacks began I have heard so many South Africans commenting that they are against these actions, but they fear speaking out in public for fear of being confused as one of 'them foreigners'.

This is no surprise because self-preservation is in our nature. Social media is ideal because it meets our ends. The way we choose to engage with the subject matter suits our own selfish objectives. As part of our socialisation we are taught to internalise models that enable us to read and understand expectations; hence there is behavioural patterns we are expected to observe as humans sharing space with others in the world. Subconsciously, we realise that we are expected to be outraged, so social media gives us the spotlight to be followers without making the effort.

The manner in which social media blew up since the xenophobic attacks made me wonder whether it has become a cop-out tool that meets the end and egos of the middle-class white collar folks. Maybe it is true that it's making us more narcissistic because our engagement with this matter is more about us than it is about the people we claim to be speaking for. It appears to be a tactic that allows us to clear our own guilty conscience. Those of us acquainted with someone from the continent want to appear to be doing something, but it seems like a disguise because technically it's just a façade.

We regress towards social media activism because it's easy. I am an embodiment of this hypocrisy because I have engaged with the issue at hand via my social media, even though subconsciously the aim was not activism. In my mind I was driving social engagement and awareness about actions that frankly violate human rights. But then I found myself wondering about my own hypocrisy, asking myself how exactly my ranting would change the cause of the victim's present

realities. Would the attackers get home and read my angry rants and then rethink their behaviour?

It's good to say politically correct things, but we should also take the initiative and do something. People have a desire to feel like they are a part of something greater than themselves, but it only makes us seem like mindless sheep if we don't perform acts that cement our beliefs. Social media should serve as a foundation that initiates conversation, but it shouldn't end there. Our ideals and actions need to be parallel so there is consistency, thus online efforts need to be practised offline to breed a uniform campaign.

#socialmediaactivismwithsubstance

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