HASHTAG ACTIVISM – WHAT'S THE POINT??

Category: Commercial Law,Media and OTT
written by Manyani Maseko | May 26, 2014

Following the recent kidnapping of over 200 school girls in North East Nigeria by militant Islamic group – Boko Haram,[1] the world has seen a reintroduction of the concept of "hashtag activism". What is hashtag activism? Does it serve a purpose (if any)? Does it achieve the result intended? Is it merely a waste of social media time?

Hashtag activism refers to the "*act of fighting or supporting a cause that people are advocating through social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Google+ and other networking websites*." In essence, this form of social activism merely serves to "spread the word" about a cause. Although hashtag activism generally serves to contribute to a good cause, it has been criticised by many. One of the main reasons for the criticism being that hashtag activism merely allows an individual to feel good about themselves without to put any real effort into assisting a particular cause.

Since the kidnapping, millions of people all across the globe including human rights leaders, celebrities and heads of state have tweeted about the return of the kidnapped school girls by using the following hashtag: "BringBackOurGirls". The purpose being to obviously ensure the safe return of the girls, in addition to keeping their story alive, whilst gathering international attention.

Despite this hashtag gaining increasing popularity, one question remains – is it working? This follows the failed hashtag activism campaign of "StopKony" which served to hunt down Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army leader – Joseph Kony.[2] Will the "BringBackOurGirls" campaign fail? Do the tweets amount to any real action by anyone involved in the campaign? Will the campaign change anything for the victims? With Nigerian suffering from a large amount of criticism for (amongst other things) being too lenient with Boko Haram for allowing them to reign terror for over a decade;[3] the hashtag activism being used in this instance may be seen as somewhat of a saviour, forcing international countries to get involved and offer their assistance where possible been made aware of the situation.

Although hashtag activism may come and go, the fact that some sort of awareness is created around a real world issue is simply better than allowing the issue to be swept under the carpet with people remaining in the dark. Doing absolutely nothing will result in absolutely nothing getting done; however, hashtag activism may in the long run assist any cause for which it is intended to serve. What's your take? I say BringBackOurGirls!

—

[1] Between 14 and 15 April 2014, approximately 276 female students were kidnapped from the Government Secondary School in the town of Chibok situated in Borna State, Nigeria. These kidnappings were conducted by Islamic Jihadist and Tafikiri terrorist organisation, Boko Haram. Boko Haram kidnapped the girls in order to force the Nigerian government to release jailed rebels in exchange for the girls safe return

[2] Joseph Kony was an indicted war criminal and International Criminal Court fugitive who had orchestrated the abuse and killing of children in East and Central Africa during his leadership.

[3] Boko Haram which means "western education is a sin" has killed over 10,000 people since its formation in 2002.