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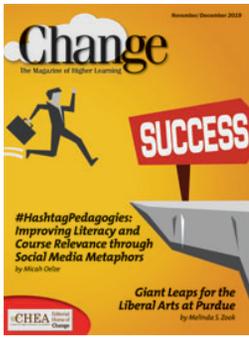
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#HashtagPedagogies:

Improving Literacy and Course Relevance *Through Social Media* METAPHORS

By Micah Oelze

In the past five years, scholars have made clear that social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have serious consequences for intellectual development and community engagement. These platforms create behavioral addictions, something we now know is intentional and engineered (Alter, 2017; Schüll, 2014). The constant engagement with cell phones has neurological consequences for students. Anxiety is heightened, sleep quality is lowered, and students struggle to gain the focus skills necessary for mastery of complex topics (Crawford, 2015; Kardaras, 2016). Finally, social media constructs virtual spaces that appear universal and objective but are in fact tailored to personal and political preferences (McNamee, 2019; Pariser, 2012). This contributes to our polarized political atmosphere and robs us of

opportunities for civil engagement with people holding different perspectives. In sum, social media jeopardizes brain development, the classroom, and democracy.

These findings have made many faculty members loathe to incorporate such technologies into the classroom. Certainly, such discoveries should discourage teachers from wholesale or uncritical adoption of social media. But a complete dismissal of such platforms means, first, that educators lose the opportunity to teach their students about cautious and disciplined engagement with current technologies. Second, such dismissal precludes educators from understanding the pedagogical potential of these platforms. Built into social media platforms are today's most advanced research technologies. They can be harnessed for classroom use. More significantly still, component parts of the platforms

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In Short

- Social media's architecture parallels that of the archiving and curating process.
- #Hashtags can be incorporated into classroom lectures and discussions to strengthen student metacognition.
- The architecture of the social media platform Instagram can be used to help students develop their critical literacy.
- Teachers can assign projects on Instagram that challenge students to identify course concepts at work around them beyond the walls of the classroom.
- Ultimately, such projects invite students to re-envision these platforms as spaces to raise social awareness and brainstorm community change.

can be leveraged to strengthen a student's research schema, the mental architecture enabling students to capture, explain, and label their surroundings.

In short, we can use social media for higher-education research training.

This article opens by noting similarities between social media use and the scientific research process. The comparison uses the photo-sharing platform Instagram as its primary example, which then provides a guide for reframing college-level lectures, literacy training, and course assignments. Even minor interventions of the sort suggested here bring notable improvements in student competence with course concepts while heightening the perception of course relevance. Taken together, these shifts in media engagement and in classroom language form part of what I refer to as #HashtagPedagogies, the use of hashtags (#) and other social media research icons as invitations to higher-level thinking and scholarly research practices.

USER ENGAGEMENT

Instagram, the photo-sharing social media platform with 500 million log-ins a day, serves a total community of more than a billion users. The photos are rarely educational. Users scroll through pictures of puppies, matcha lattes, and memes when they could be writing sociology essays. Focus on the photo content and Instagram, it seems, is a waste of time.

But if we look beyond this content, we can reflect on user engagement, here referring to the sequence of actions (routine) and larger objectives (goals) of Instagram users. Surprisingly, user engagement in Instagram shares an uncanny resemblance to the process and aims of professional scholarship.

Instagram sets up users to be the researchers and curators of an archive of their own life. Before even opening Instagram, users are required to find and photograph a primary source: a meal, a letter, a memory. Like researchers, they then upload that evidence into a database and label it with a caption, allowing the photograph to be understood even years later. The photo is then "published," making it available for public view. Since each user profile is set up as a virtual gallery, any user designated as a "friend" can come in and view the complete series of photos and sources. Finally, since these virtual visits are so frequent, profile owners quickly pick up curating skills. They learn to recognize how value systems and aesthetic preferences are encoded into photos, and so they begin to publish only those pictures that substantiate certain overarching narratives about their own lives. This is complex stuff.

Few Instagram users, of course, see themselves as researchers or professional curators. And few scholars would want to wade through the platform's brackish photo stream of selfies, fast food, and drunken handstands. But if students came to view their own social media activity as work in a digital archive or as an opportunity to curate an exhibit, how might their posts change? Conversely, if students recognized that information from course lectures and readings could be tagged and captioned as in Instagram, might they feel more confident in engaging new course material? And where might faculty start in order to create an engagement like this that enables students to successfully reach course objectives?

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#HashtagPedagogies

A solid starting point is the Instagram caption or, more specifically, the captioning process. After users log when and where the photo was snapped, they include "hashtags," terms that speak to the nature of the photograph's content. These terms are preceded by the pound sign (#), notifying Instagram's program code to register this not as narrative text but as *metadata*, information to be used in the classification of the post. As soon as the picture is published, the #hashtag goes blue. This signifies it has been converted into a hyperlink, a clickable button transporting viewers to a visual listing of all posts ever published with the same piece of metadata. That tag then remains attached to the photograph, allowing it to become permanently searchable and classifiable.

The invention of the hashtag marks a historic and significant step in bringing research-thinking skills to a wide public. Two decades ago, the practices of coding sources and searching for keywords were basically limited to PhD students and card-catalog librarians. But with the hashtag, Instagram (alongside Twitter) democratized metadata. By this I mean that social media made metadata accessible as a concept and second-nature as a practice. Since metadata is a critical component of the research process, we as educators can appropriate this component of Instagram to strengthen student comprehension, literacy, and research. But doing so requires we help students recognize that for scholars, working with metadata is an everyday practice.

Our more advanced students are already working with metadata in their own heads, often without realizing it: they put labels on the day's course material so they know where to catalog it in their minds. In English 101, they name the literary device used in a certain passage, or in Intro. to Psychology they abstract a specific psychological principle from a historic social experiment. When students use metadata, it indicates that they recognize the significance of the example and know how to relate it to preexisting knowledge.

Not all students have this habit, and even advanced students are often unaware of the process as they perform it. This is where the hashtag comes in. When educators point out the overarching principle and label with it #, something powerful happens. As an automatic reflex, students recognize this is no longer actual text, but rather a concept, one that is distinctively searchable and can be applied to any number of relevant cases.

Every time I organize a lecture or prepare a discussion I search for a central hashtag. The hashtag goes on the board at the start of the class or gets its own PowerPoint slide. I arrive at these hashtags by answering three questions. What are the critical vocabulary terms or concepts here? Second, what components of this case study make it important today? Finally, why do I personally care about this event? Behind these three questions lay hashtags that will help students understand the significance of the material.

For example, consider a history lecture on such late 19th-century captains of industry as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J.P. Morgan. Some of the important

vocabulary terms and concepts here might be cartels, anti-competitive practices, and government antitrust legislation. These can be turned into hashtags as simple as #cartels and #antitrust. The simple application of the # sign helps students pay attention to the practical example without losing sight of the broader concept.

In addition to such concept-based hashtags, faculty can develop hashtags that invite students to draw comparisons between course material and their own lives. Open-ended hashtags can be developed by answering the question, "Why are these historic cases important today?" Considering today's corporate landscape, Rockefeller's anticompetitive practices can help us evaluate the actions and strategies of such current behemoths as Facebook and Amazon. Or, as a second example, the physical and institutional distance between Carnegie and his employees that made the Homestead massacre possible can give students a new perspective on current debates over how the ride-sharing companies Uber and Lyft interact virtually with their own workers. After thinking about such contemporary connections, I can make open-ended hashtags like #thenewStandardOil or #echoesof Homestead. Such hashtags can also serve as prompts for student discussions or small-group work.

Finally, hashtags can be generated from the question of personal investment. I am invested in the lecture because these late 19th-century cases have convinced me that monopolistic corporations unchecked by regulatory agencies repeatedly harm the environment, exploit workers, and undermine local democracy. Articulating my personal convictions allows me to make a final hashtag, perhaps #dangersofconcentratedcapital. It also allows me to become more aware of my own biases and political leanings (e.g., that I am generally in favor of regulations and against monopolistic practices). Keeping my own political slant in mind, I might shorten the hashtag to #concentratedcapital, giving students the chance to consider for themselves if the consequences of such market and capital accumulation outweigh the benefits.

Some educators, especially those in the humanities, may consider their subjects too abstract to provide keywords promising immediate relevance. Moreover, as my colleagues in the discipline of history know well, historical narratives are too multivalent to be reduced to any single lesson. At worst, the application of a hashtag could appear a reductionist or even utilitarian approach to teaching the past.

But this misses the broader point. Once the first hashtag is placed, students catch on. They begin to apply their own. They even challenge your choices. Hashtags invite students to take part in what we as faculty already recognize as the rich work of scholarship: the continual return to evidence to work out new meanings and applications for our own lives and communities.

Students respond positively to the hashtags and repeatedly speak of their value in making lectures relevant and memorable. One of my students explained that the hashtags take "the small aspects of history and make the overarching concept understandable, as well as keep it interesting and

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relevant to our generation." Another student commented that "the societal issues I started to notice more and more as class went on were fascinating as I would have never been made aware of them if it weren't for [the hashtags] and definitely made attending every lecture worth it."

But the larger evidence of their value lies in how quickly students carry the hashtags with them beyond the classroom in their readings, conversations, and writing assignments. It does not even matter that the hashtags, at this moment, are on a chalkboard and cannot be clicked. Thanks to constant reinforcement coming from virtual platforms, hashtagged words incline students to search for connections even away from the computer. Students then improve their ability to discover and name these connections when faculty provide an opportunity for frequent practice. This begins with reading, where students practice using hashtags to connect texts with course conversations and their own lives. It then continues as students are invited to return to social media platforms, but with new goals and modified routines. Ultimately, such practices help students cultivate critical reading and metacognitive skills that can shape even the non-academic spheres of their own lives.
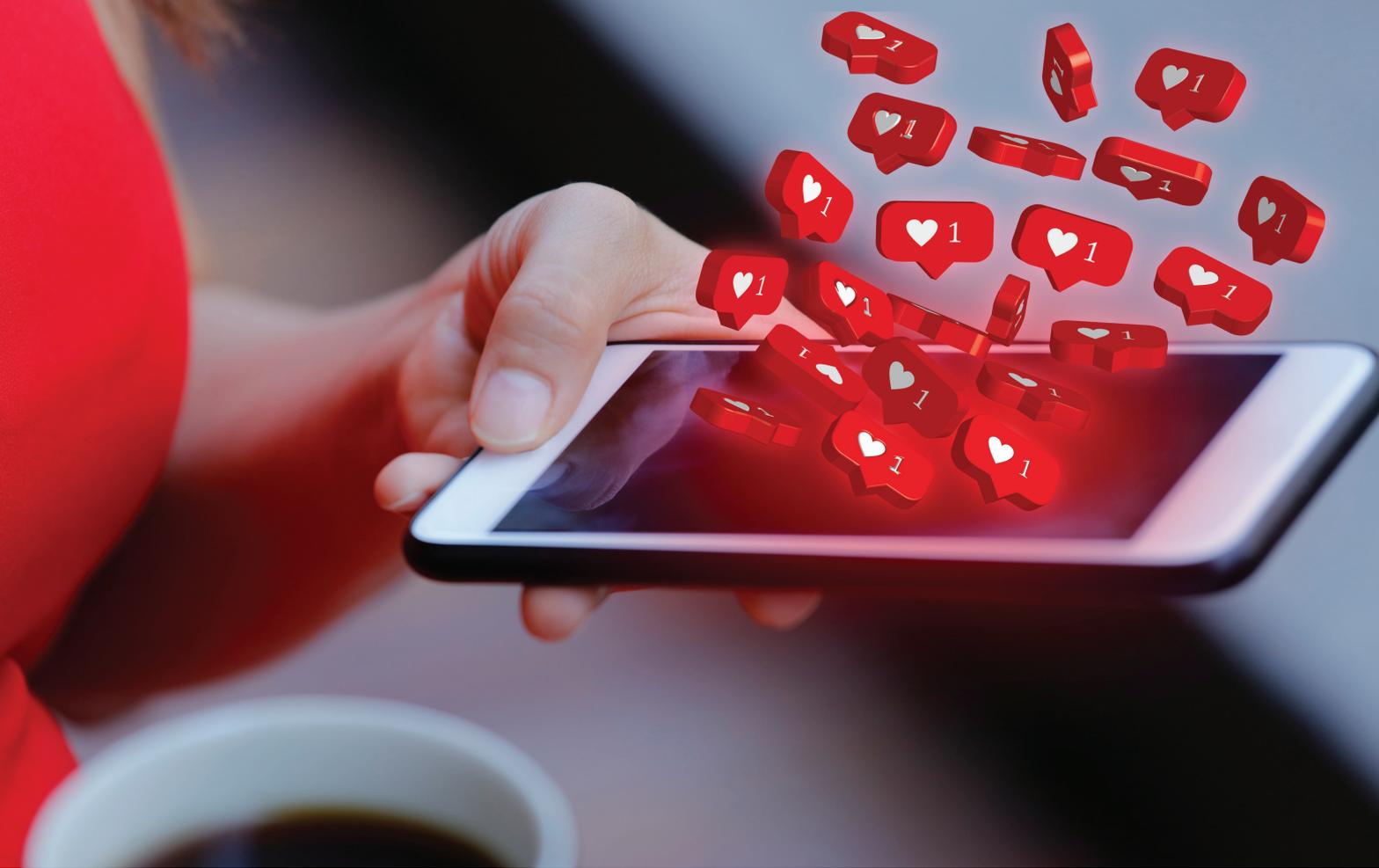
InstaLiteracy

By borrowing language from social media, longstanding critical reading strategies can be taught in a way that feels intuitive for students of the millenial and Z generations.

I teach students to approach their readings with a routine akin to their own on Instagram. I tell students that when they grab a book they should first hit "explore" (🔍). Instagram's "explore" (🔍) page provides an array of snapshots and headers to introduce users to the platform's diverse content. For similar reasons, a book chapter offers headings, key words, page headers, and photos. These are in place to help readers map out the chapter and make strategic decisions about how they want to traverse it.

Then, check your "likes" (♡). Instagram provides a page marked by a heart icon that notifies users which posts have triggered a friend's admiration or curiosity. Students, as they explore the text, should assign their own number of likes to each section. They can literally draw a heart icon in the margin of the sections they believe merit their time and attract their attention. Since educators affirm that students absorb the most when reading about material that already interests them (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014; Keene, 2008), I encourage students to identify those sections and allot them extra time. In Instagram, the "likes" page also reminds users of recent conversations and highlights who has added to them. Students, too, ought to take a second to recall ongoing conversations in our class. Which authors have spoken most recently to those debates? What were their main points? How might this upcoming reading add to that conversation?

At this point, students are then ready to go to their home page [⌂], called their "feed." The "feed" receives its name because it is the place where users *consume*. They consume pictures, videos, and news. But the best readers, like influential Instagrammers, do more than consume. They also share their own ideas and experiences. So, students must then learn to "post" up new ideas even as they digest a text.

"Posting" (⊕) starts at the moment that students encounter a paragraph that they feel has information connected to class or helpful for an upcoming assignment. I encourage students to literally draw a square around the paragraph (or bracket the sides), placing the text into the equivalent of an Instagram frame. Students then imagine they are going to post that paragraph. They do this by using the margin to write a one-sentence summary of the paragraph. For years, scholars have referred to this as "reverse outlining." I call it "captioning," since that concept is already part of students' daily life.

Captioning requires students to choose a hashtag for the paragraph. They can invent their own hashtag for the paragraph or apply one we have already used in class. Students struggle with this in the first weeks. But, by the end of the first month, the hashtags flow readily and become increasingly creative. Faculty can help students develop their abstracting abilities by engaging the process with an in-class reading. Together or in small groups, the class can read the paragraph aloud and then brainstorm hashtags with faculty guidance.

The Instagram reading process can be presented as a single lesson or slowly introduced over a series of class periods. Such an ongoing conversation makes it possible to include additional components, such as tagging. Photo-sharing applications use the @ sign followed by a username to identify individuals in photos. This "tag" links the photo-graph to the account of the member in the photo.

I encourage students to use tags as they read. At the most basic level, students can tag historical characters in the text (by writing "@dwightdeisenhower" in the margin), giving easy access to names when they review the text on a later occasion. But the tag can also encourage students to engage an author in a direct conversation. Armed with a fictitious tag, students can use the book's margins to send imaginary "direct messages" to the author or even to scholars from earlier in the semester (e.g., "@HowardZinn: how would you respond to the claim made here?"). These and other practices can be taught and adopted throughout the semester.

None of these reading strategies are new or revolutionary. On the contrary, they are time-tested strategies that have been given different names in each generation. But the practices become less intimidating and more memorable for today's students when we use contemporary platforms as our guide. Students simply have to think about the icons that they see every day at the bottom of their phones: ♡ ♡ ⌂ ⊕ # @. Once students begin to redeem social media icons and processes for critical engagement with concepts and texts—away from their phones—they can eventually return to their mobile devices and practice scholarly work that mirrors Instagram itself. Such projects allow students to re-envision their daily lives in light of the concepts they learn in class.

The Histagram

At the end of each course unit, I ask students to turn in a "Histagram" (a portmanteau of History and Instagram). As students go through their lives on campus, at work, or in the grocery store, they must keep their eyes open for a real-life example of one of our unit's hashtags. When they find a case, they snap a picture of it. They upload this to our course Learning Management System (LMS) along with a caption. The caption must explain the contemporary situation, connect it to a historic case, and include relevant hashtags.

The students here are not actually using Instagram. Instead, they are repeating Instagram's steps of engagement on our private LMS. This anticipates the diverse problems that arise when teachers try to use social media, such as students not wanting to use private accounts for university purposes. I support students keeping their social media accounts private. Using the university's LMS maintains this separation. The assignment relies on the *process* of Instagram, not on the platform itself. And this has lasting results. Every semester, I have students who tell me they can no longer log into their Instagram accounts without thinking about our course material.

The assignment makes a minor intervention in the typical Instagram order of operations that has a significant, beneficial consequence for student learning. Traditionally, students snap a picture and only subsequently label it with hashtag metadata. Here, instead, students are required to think about the metadata beforehand and then search for those ideas at work around them. By searching for scholarly concepts, students develop what the American sociologist C. Wright Mills termed the "sociological imagination," the ability to connect a personal experience with larger institutional, historical, and political frameworks.

Figure 1 shows a student developing that sociological imagination while standing in line for her morning coffee. She saw reflections of 19th-century labor practices at the campus Dunkin' Donuts shop. The student later reflected, "The histagram ... made me realize that what happened in [the] past is still happening today. At first we can think ...

Figure 1. #Alienation Histagram
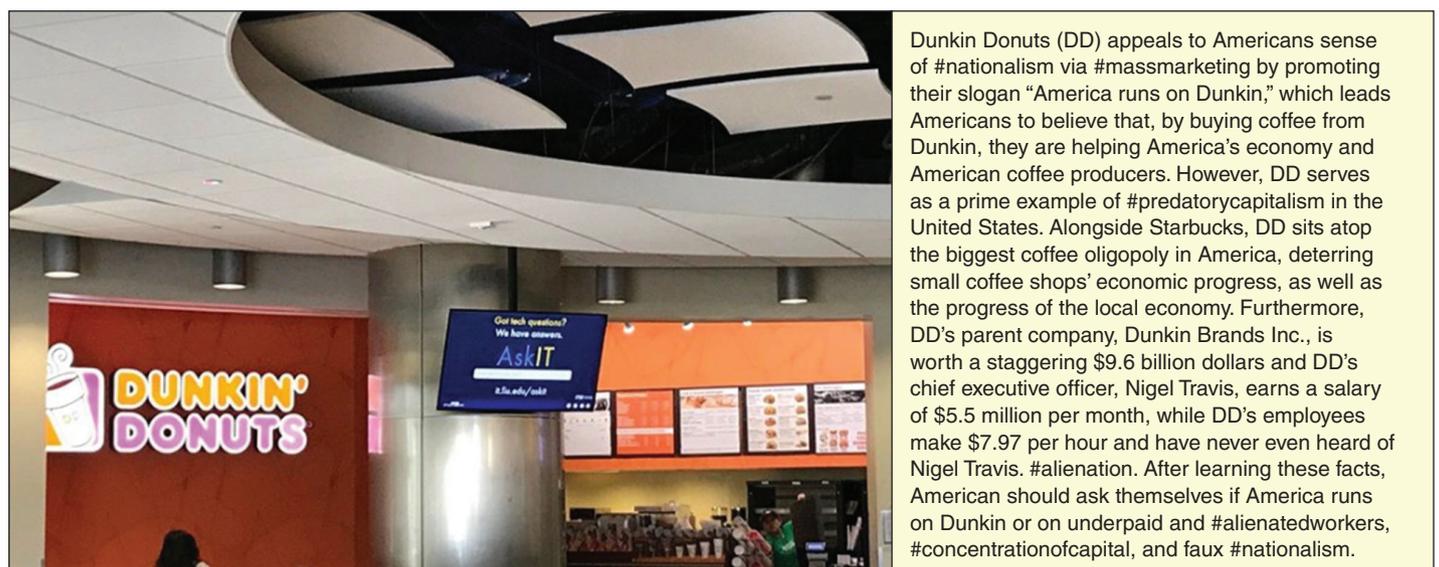
Dunkin Donuts (DD) appeals to Americans sense of #nationalism via #massmarketing by promoting their slogan "America runs on Dunkin," which leads Americans to believe that, by buying coffee from Dunkin, they are helping America's economy and American coffee producers. However, DD serves as a prime example of #predatorycapitalism in the United States. Alongside Starbucks, DD sits atop the biggest coffee oligopoly in America, deterring small coffee shops' economic progress, as well as the progress of the local economy. Furthermore, DD's parent company, Dunkin Brands Inc., is worth a staggering $9.6 billion dollars and DD's chief executive officer, Nigel Travis, earns a salary of $5.5 million per month, while DD's employees make $7.97 per hour and have never even heard of Nigel Travis. #alienation. After learning these facts, American should ask themselves if America runs on Dunkin or on underpaid and #alienatedworkers, #concentrationofcapital, and faux #nationalism.

FIGURE 2. #SYSTEMICVIOLENCE HISTAGRAM

"But none of them are like me!" @realushistory

It is currently the year 2018, and black children of all skin tones have yet to find a toy that looks like them. "What does this teach them?" one might ask; and the answer is, of course, the act of #systemicviolence. I was shopping in the toys section at Target with my niece who is two years old. Of course, we take a stroll down the Barbie aisle (although she is allowed to choose any toy she'd like, but that is a whole different topic) and I notice the one lone doll that Mattel, Inc. attempted to incorporate with a theme of diversity. One lone black doll among a sea of white dolls associated with a variety of costumes and careers. Toy companies whitewash their products in hopes to appeal to a white audience. But, what does this teach the black children? Does the whitewashing in something as juvenile as a toy tell them that they do not deserve a relatable toy solely because they are black? The application of #systemicviolence is clear in this situation; it is an act of violence against young children of color to force them to grow up thinking they are abnormal.

Stumbling upon this doll display brought me back to @MichaelMcGerr's "Shield of Segregation," where he mentioned that black men were seen as beasts whose intents were to do harm on white folk in the early 1900s. Mattel's lack of diversity makes it clear to these children that they are not the desired skin color and automatically excludes them from having a childhood like their white peers. This also brings in @WEBDubois' theory of #doubleconsciousness. Through the systemic act of violence at hand, black children must see themselves as undesirable through the eyes of others (Mattel and the audience they are appealing to), and they must also see themselves as a problem through the situations that they experience (not having a doll that looks like them). More than a century later, people of color have yet to be included in societal norms, especially in something as simple as a Barbie doll. Toy companies need to work on inclusion of all races in order to teach children that they have the same amount of potential as the kid standing next to them.

cartels, trust, buyout strategies, and alienation are things of the past. But no, histagram made me investigate to learn that such practices are still going on with Dunkin Donuts, Odebrecht, and other big captains of capitalism."

Students consistently note how their vision and awareness expand with this assignment. "Since we started Histagram," one student wrote, "I've started to think more critically of the world around me as opposed to being clueless of what's going on in the areas I live in or visit." Another commented, "the Histagram assignments have made me more aware of my surroundings. Before Histagram I would never make connections with what I learned in class to the real world and my surroundings. The first Histagram was a bit rough since I was not used to making connections, but now I think it is a fun and creative way to realize that what we learn in this class is not completely in the past."

This scholarly vision is reinforced when students get the chance to see the work of their peers. After grading the Histagrams, I take the top 10 Histagram "posts" and share them with the larger class and use them as a catalyst for a group discussion or debate. We ask such questions as: Is this a valid example of the hashtag in question? Are there other hashtags that should be included here? Who else in class has come across this situation? Based on last week's readings, what are some historic precedents for this case?

These questions give students the chance to make sure they have a solid understanding of critical course concepts. I take advantage of the conversation to push students closer to broader course objectives, such as establishing historical significance, measuring change over time, and reading primary sources.

Such conversations have the added benefits of helping students review course material and develop their own scholarly vision. One student wrote, "I've enjoyed seeing the comparisons my classmates have made. Most of the time you don't stop and analyze the simple things in life & these Histagrams really put you to work. ... [S]eeing how other people analyze things is really eye-opening. It also helps us connect the class material to the real world, which makes understanding the material way easier."

The Histagram project then allows students to make connections: from personal to social, local to global, and past to present. Tags play an important role in that process. The caption in Figure 2 includes two @username tags, one referring to the week's author (@MichaelMcGerr) and the other to the historical civil rights activist and historian @WEBDubois (1868–1963). The tagging of Dubois is significant in that it demonstrates that Instagram allows students to mark even long-deceased historical actors as present in the photos. Philosopher of history Berber Bevernage (2015) recently

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pointed out that professors unwittingly discourage students from civic engagement when they teach that the past is long gone. He has encouraged faculty to see the past as a specter, lingering with us today in such forms of institutions, laws, and memories. Tagging @WEBDubois embodies this practice, allowing students to see the past and its actors as present in what we see and experience today.

Students also use the Histagram as an invitation to reconfigure how their worlds are visually rendered. As documented in Figure 3, one of my students figured out that Whole Foods had recently been purchased by Amazon. For his Histagram, he decided to staple an Amazon gift card above the Whole Foods logo and then use a Sharpie

marker to hashtag the grocery bag. In class we had learned how historic corporations tried to hide their anticompetitive practices from the public eye; this student used the Sharpie to bring the politics back into view. The small gesture gains significance when considering that this is not an isolated case: my students regularly undertake these kinds of rearrangements. This suggests that the Histagram project may be conducive to the type of playful creativity that serves as a critical prerequisite for more significant interventions in the public sphere (Sommer, 2014).

Finally, writing up a Histagram creates an invitation to further research. Since Instagram has such an enormous archive of photos, many scholarly hashtags (even invented ones) will

Figure 3. #Buyout Histagram
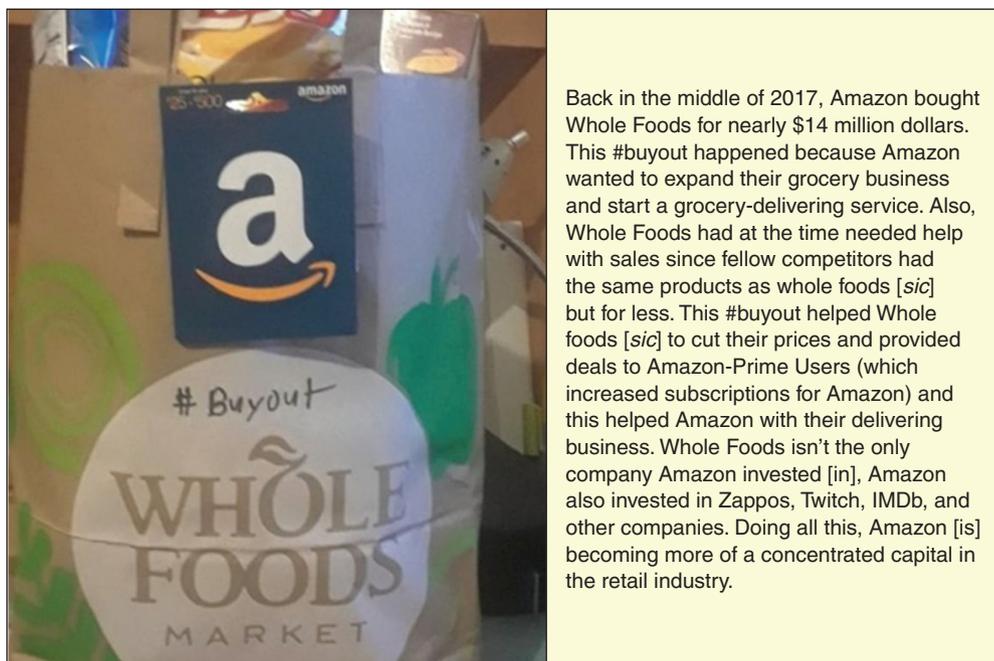
Back in the middle of 2017, Amazon bought Whole Foods for nearly $14 million dollars. This #buyout happened because Amazon wanted to expand their grocery business and start a grocery-delivering service. Also, Whole Foods had at the time needed help with sales since fellow competitors had the same products as whole foods [*sic*] but for less. This #buyout helped Whole foods [*sic*] to cut their prices and provided deals to Amazon-Prime Users (which increased subscriptions for Amazon) and this helped Amazon with their delivering business. Whole Foods isn't the only company Amazon invested [in], Amazon also invested in Zappos, Twitch, IMDb, and other companies. Doing all this, Amazon [is] becoming more of a concentrated capital in the retail industry.

already be associated with a vast collection of photos. Students can access these by running a search for #alienation on Instagram's "explore" page. Faculty can quickly achieve the same result by pulling up their computer web browser, and typing in https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/alienation, adding the hashtag as the final word in the Uniform Resource Locator (URL). Finally, if they so choose, they can actually upload the Histagram to their own personal account (although they will have to submit it separately to the LMS for their professors to see it). Once classroom hashtags go live on a digital platform, they automatically convert into hyperlinks. Students can click on these links to browse through the Instagram universe for other examples of that hashtag, further expanding their vision of how #alienation and other course concepts play out across the world.

Toward a Social and Scholarly Media

The platforms Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook are marketed as "social" media, and yet their results are bound to be antisocial so long as users are committed to constructing a self-centered archive of their own life. But rethinking social media's component parts and intertwining them with classroom lectures and course assignments can eliminate the more solipsistic elements of the social media experience. As students come to understand social media's research capabilities and adopt new rules of engagement, they can experience media that helps them develop as scholars. In small yet important ways, class practices can train students to think about such platforms as Instagram as more than an individual race to photograph, label, and display moments of their own lives. Instead, students can experience social media as a platform allowing them to take part in a community endeavor to understand the world.

Such projects must be ongoing and regularly modified. When I noticed that some of my students began taking screenshots of news headlines and submitting them as Histagram "photos," I responded with a new rule: students could use neither screenshots nor photographs of their televisions for Histagram posts. In addition, I required students to get out of their own room. They had to find hashtags at work, in a restaurant, in the library, on the road. Such parameters help students recognize that they are no longer documenting their personal experiences, but instead tracking how their community and surroundings intersect with larger social and historical forces.

#HashtagPedagogies aims to teach students to process the data they learn in lectures, discussions, and readings. It does so through leveraging social media's research language and tools so that—whether on or off their devices—students can collect evidence, explain relevance, and speak with authority. On the horizon lies a final goal, namely that students continue to publish critical-thinking posts to their social media accounts even after finishing our courses. Such posts denote public, active, and applied engagement with digital platforms. If students can reach that point, they no longer need to liberate themselves from the social media trap. They will have already transformed the platforms into something new: a research media. C

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