

Do Christian Hashtags Rally the Faithful or Inspire Troll Attacks?

Standing on the sidewalk outside an imposing downtown church, Michael Corral carried a portable loudspeaker and a handmade wooden cross with an old-fashioned message: “REPENT & BELIEVE.”

“They’re twisting Scripture to see through their sins,” he said, as a group of pro-LGBT evangelicals met inside.

Meanwhile, halfway across the country, conservative activist Eric Teetsel was monitoring the same conference from his home in Kansas, firing off 140-character tweets using the conference hashtag, #TRPinDC.

“I have more respect for those who acknowledge what the Bible says and reject it than those who twist it to serve their goals,” tweeted Teetsel, the executive director of the Manhattan Declaration project, which works to preserve traditional marriage.

It was essentially the same message, but two different mediums and two different audiences. In 2014, activists like Teetsel can reach a far broader audience—3,600 followers in his case, not counting retweets—than streetside evangelists like Corral.

Some leaders use trending topics or hashtags to build momentum around a certain conversation. The idea is that by pointing followers to a catchy hashtag, activists can spark conversation and rally supporters around a cause. On Monday (Nov. 24), for example, Twitter lit up with the hashtag #PrayForFerguson after a grand jury decided not to indict a white police officer who fatally shot a black teenager.

One of the earlier noteworthy mobilizing campaigns included #KONY2012, a movement founded by a Christian who launched a campaign to try to capture African Lord's Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony. First Lady Michelle Obama famously participated in the #BringBackOurGirls campaign after more than 200 Nigerian schoolgirls were kidnapped by the terrorist group Boko Haram.

But everyone on Twitter is learning that a hashtag cuts both ways: It can be hijacked or lampooned by detractors, and it's a key way that online activists are pushing back against opposing messages or what some might even call hate speech.

Last week, embattled comedian Bill Cosby posted a photo of himself and wrote: "Go ahead. Meme me! #cosbymeme." The idea immediately backfired, as people began making rape allegations against him. The New York Police Department too asked followers to send photos of themselves posing with officers and using the hashtag #myNYPD. The effort morphed into a slew of negative tweets about aggressive policing.

The Duggar family of TLC channel's *19 Kids And Counting* recently posted about daughter Jessa Duggar's marriage to Ben Seewald and the criticism they received for posting a photo of the chaste young couple kissing.

"We challenge all married couples to take a happily married picture and post it here," they posted. Several same-sex couples gladly took up the challenge, knowing full well that the Duggars have spoken out against homosexuality.

When more than 1,000 Southern Baptists gathered in Nashville last month for a massive Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission conference on homosexuality, the live stream set off fiery debate. Its official hashtag, #ERLC2014, was quickly hijacked with negative responses.

Aaron Meares, an evangelical pastor in western Michigan, wasn't able to access the conference's live-stream feed, so he

followed the #ERLC2014 instead. At a conference that was notable for its kinder, gentler tone toward gays, “seems there’s a vast diff. in tone b/w the presenters and the critics,” he tweeted.

Evangelical author Barnabas Piper saw the hits from the other side coming in live time as Southern Baptist leader Al Mohler gave the opening address. “It’s daylight, trolls,” he tweeted, using the online term for take-no-prisoners critics. “You have to wait until sundown to tweet about #ERLC2014.”

Evangelical author Rachel Held Evans did not attend the conference but followed the live stream, offering steady pushback to the conference speakers to her more than 56,000 followers. “You can’t promote a livestream and hashtag and then get annoyed when people use it,” she tweeted.

One of the conference sponsors said his company considered promoting materials through the official conference hashtag but decided against it because he didn’t want his product associated with a feed that was already ripe with conflict.

Most organizers know online dissent is part of the game.

“It doesn’t bother me,” said ERLC head Russell Moore. “I think that just goes with the territory of social media right now. I think most people know that and understand that.”

Indeed, Ed Stetzer, a veteran observer of the evangelical scene and a prominent pollster, tweeted that he was “glad to see people are (generally) not trying to troll #TRPinDC. It is a shame that so many use Twitter to twist & distort.”