Hashtag Histories
Dr. Elizabeth Losh

Celebration and criticism of so-called "hashtag activism" rarely addresses the hashtag itself as an artifact or tries to locate its place in the history of information design. Although the story of the hashtag tends to be associated with Silicon Valley invention myths or power users like celebrities, the hashtag is actually the result of accreted sets of practices and invisible labor involving negotiating competing claims about identity, ownership, and naming conventions. This talk discusses how the #hashtag actually exists in two pieces, with two separate but related design histories. The # is a special kind of character used to facilitate non-human machine-to-machine communication that has a prehistory in teletype machines, touch-tone telephones, and IRC chat. The letters after the # also are part of a bigger narrative: the human-to-human story of metadata. The history of technological adoption and adaptation by social movements and hashtag feminism in particular offers a new way to think about theories of political performance and assembly. Case studies for this talk come from the United States, Ukraine, India, and Singapore

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