

People & Places

Media

'Slackivism or activism'

#challengeaccepted' stirs debate on goal

By Kathleen Foody

'Challenge accepted', they wrote – female Instagram users across the United States, flooding the photo-sharing app with black-and-white images. Together they formed a grid of millions of magazine-style captures of celebrities, spur-of-the-moment selfies and filtered snaps from weddings or other special occasions. The official goal: a show of support for other women.

An accompanying hashtag, #womensupportingwomen, often was the only sign of the campaign's intent, along with friends' Instagram handles to encourage participation. And some users quickly began to wonder: What's the point?

To some observers of social media activism, #challengeaccepted represents a clear example of "slackivism" – campaigns based on social platforms that require little effort of participants. There's no donation requested, no volunteer shift required, just a few minutes to post a message or image that people are unlikely to fight over.

They say photo-driven campaigns can become a powerful push for social change. But they feel this latest effort so far lacks a concrete goal.

"Successful selfie protests made what's invisible visible," said Mona Kasra, an assistant professor of digital media design at the University of Virginia. "They are effective when they shift public perception, when they create a counterculture, when they resist, when they claim a place online."

Recently, more than 6 million Instagram posts had used the #challengeaccepted hashtag. Others just included the phrase "challenge accepted" in their post, making it difficult to count total participation.

Some participants praised the posts as a straightforward way for women to support one another – one that comes days after US Rep **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's** passionate speech on the House floor calling out sexist culture.



Ocasio-Cortez

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Streaming

Tara Abrahams joined the millions of women posting under the hashtag after a friend invited her to share. She chose a shot of herself smiling, her dark hair streaming across the square frame. Before posting it, the philanthropic adviser from New York added a caption encouraging people to check their voter registration status and make a plan to vote in November.

"I just kept smiling because I saw these very inspiring women flood my feed," said Abrahams, who also chairs a nonprofit focused on girls' access to education in 11 other countries. "I know that there are real women doing the real work. Instagram can be where the activism begins, but it's not where it ends."

Some researchers are encouraged by the debate. They consider it a sign that many Americans' expectations for social media communication have been honed by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and large demonstrations demanding change in US policing following the deaths of George Floyd and other Black Americans.

Questions about this latest photo challenge also mirror reaction to the #blackoutTuesday push in early June, stemming from an effort within the music industry to halt normal operations for a day.

Then, public attention focused on social media, where users posted all-black images on their Facebook or Instagram accounts as a show of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Some posters backtracked after activists criticized the action, saying it was drowning out existing material already posted by Black users.

The conversation about #challengeaccepted is further complicated by questions about its origin. Some social media users have tied it to ongoing work to raise awareness of women killed by their male partners in Turkey. But that link is difficult to trace definitively.

An Instagram spokesman said posts in Turkey about violence against women date to the start of July, while the black-and-white aesthetic and accompanying #womensupportingwomen hashtag that flooded the photo-sharing app this week first showed up in mid-July among users in Brazil before spreading to the United States.

Stephanie Vie, an associate dean at the University of Hawai'i at M'noa, said tracking the origins and changes in social media campaigns across countries and cultures is a constant struggle for researchers who study memes and other digital communication.

Rather than "slackivism", Vie prefers the umbrella term "digital activism" – because, she says, shows of support on social media can indeed be meaningful.

"Would I like #challengeaccepted to have more of an activist bent? Absolutely," Vie said. "Do I want to say people are doing it completely wrong and they shouldn't bother posting? No, because you have to start somewhere."

Spotlight

Activists who work on women's rights internationally say they are encouraged by any effort to spotlight the cause. But they suggested this latest push would have more impact if participants went beyond a photo posting – perhaps by encouraging support for an organization working on women's rights.

"It's powerful, but it's also helpful to see an action piece, like what am I fighting for?" said Rosalyn Park, director of the Women's Human Rights Program. "I would love to see people leverage that trending power and that momentum to really go one step further."

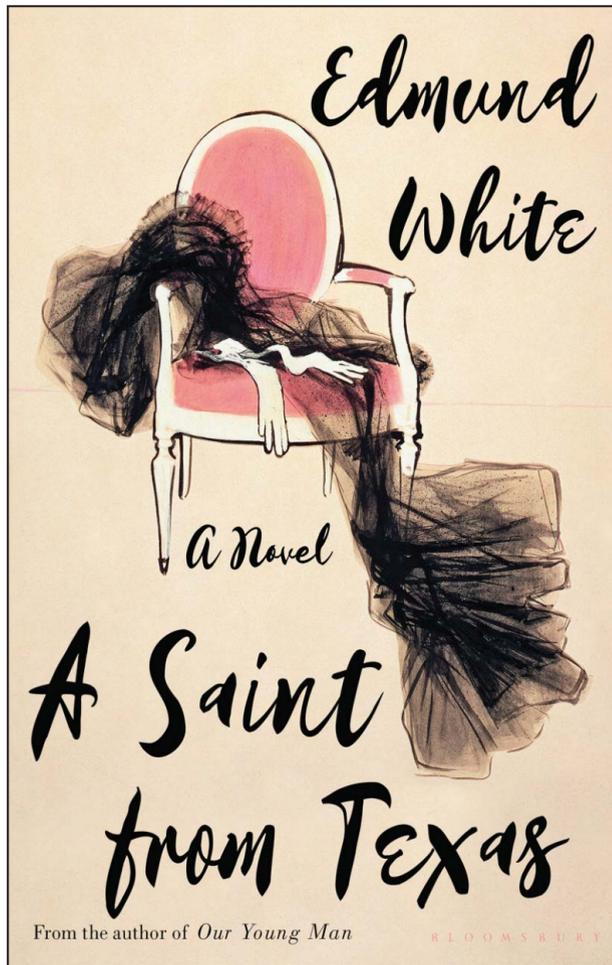
Yet simply talking about the way digital movements work – or don't work – can be a useful pursuit.

The existence of any meaningful debate about a meme campaign focused on women is encouraging, says Katherine DeLuca, an assistant professor of English and communication at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Participants likely have good intentions, she says, but it's healthy to consider what else they can do to support a broader goal. "People having the time to think critically about what they're circulating in online spaces is a great place for us to be, especially going into an election season," DeLuca said.

After Abrahams made her initial post, she took things a step further the next day by posting a second image: a black-and-white drawing of Breonna Taylor, a Black woman fatally shot by police in March during a drug investigation. Abrahams included a link to a petition demanding charges against officers involved.

The warrant to search Taylor's home was in connection with a suspect who did not live there and no drugs were found, making her death a regular focus of protesters in the US this year. And with that #challengeaccepted follow-up, Abrahams tried to connect something widespread and unspoken to something that, for her, was focused and essential.

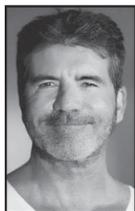
"It's OK to hold space for joy and for fun and for supporting one another," Abrahams said. "It's OK to have all of those things as long as there's real work." (AP)



This cover image released by Bloomsbury shows 'A Saint from Texas', by Edmund White. (AP)



In this March 21, 2009 file photo, Italian actress Franca Valeri attends Italian State RAI TV program 'Che Tempo che Fa', in Milan, Italy. Valeri, an elegant, ironic and versatile actor, who pioneered Italian female comic roles in the post-war years, died in her sleep at her home in Rome, nine days after her 100th birthday on Aug. 9. (AP)



Cowell



Klum

Variety

ROME: Franca Valeri, an elegant, ironic and versatile actor who pioneered female comic roles in Italy's post-war years and helped the nation laugh at its foibles, has died at 100.

The Corriere della Sera newspaper quoted her daughter, **Stefania Bonfadelli**, an opera singer, as saying that Valeri died in her sleep at her home in Rome on Sunday, nine days after her 100th birthday. Milanese by birth but Roman by adoption, Valeri will be honored with a wake Monday at a theater in the Italian capital, Rome's City Hall announced.

Beloved by Italians, especially for her roles in the 1950s to the 1970s, first on radio, then on TV and in movies, Valeri was recently toasted by many celebrities and was interviewed as her 100th birthday approached.

President **Sergio Mattarella** sent a condolence message, praising Valeri as a "versatile and popular actress who will remain in the hearts of Italians for her great talent and her extraordinary likability."

Valeri was a sophisticated, intelligent comic interpreter of post-war Italian society and often wrote the scripts or monologues for her performances, especially on stage.

Signature roles featured comic scenes in which she appeared solo, holding a phone, real or imaginary, including as "Signorina Snob," a role for which she drew upon her Milanese bourgeois roots. Another popular comic character she created poked fun at Roman middle-class vulgarities. After decades in which comic roles in Italy were virtually the exclusive province of men, Valeri held her own against top male comic actors, starring against **Toto** and **Alberto Sordi**. Of the six films she made with Sordi, arguably her most popular role came in "Il Vedovo" (The Widower), a 1959 hit directed by **Dino Risì**, a master of Italian comedy films. (AP)

LOS ANGELES: Simon Cowell underwent surgery to repair a broken back, the result of an electric bicycle accident, and was recovering at a hospital, a spokesperson said Sunday. "Simon has broken his back in a number

Books

Pandemic parody of 'Goodnight Moon' set for fall

Deceit, desire await in White's new novel

By Molly Sprayregen

'A Saint from Texas', by Edmund White (Bloomsbury Publishing)

There is a lot to appreciate in Edmund White's "A Saint from Texas" the artful prose, the vivid storytelling, the darkly whimsical tone.

It is the story of twins Yvonne and Yvette, two young heiresses growing up in Texas in the 1950s with an abusive father. From a young age, the twins find themselves on opposite journeys through life. Yvette moves to Columbia become a nun, while Yvonne moves to France and marries into high society.

While living completely separate lives, both sisters find themselves struggling with what will ultimately make them happy. Through salacious chapters, White explores both women's sexualities as Yvette finds herself in love with a fellow nun and Yvonne finds herself loathing her husband and in a torrid affair with both a man and a woman.

At times the story feels fresh and exciting, unlike anything else you'll read, but the dense writing can also become cumbersome. Thus, as the story goes on, White wanes in his ability to fully engage the reader. White has masterfully created deeply complex and dynamic characters, though the writing style doesn't always make it easy to feel wholly invested in their pursuits. Still, with "A Saint from Texas", White skillfully invites readers into an organized mess of a world filled with equal parts deceit and desire. It is a world full of sinners and saints, one that asks us to question what turns some of us into one and some of us into the other.

'The Hollow Ones: The Blackwood Tapes Vol. 1', by Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan (Hachette Book Group)

The writing team behind "The

Strain" trilogy is back with a new evil incarnate. This time it's more demonic than vampiric, possessing bodies and driving them to their deaths in all sorts of diabolical ways before exploding out of them in "ecstasy."

But let's back up. The novel plays out in present day Newark, New Jersey, as a young FBI agent named Odessa Hardwicke tries to piece together why her partner killed an innocent victim at a crime scene. In the course of her investigation, Hardwicke meets a dying agent named Earl Solomon, who came of age in the bureau while investigating the lynching of a white man in the Mississippi Delta in 1962. And lastly, we're treated to the origin of "The Hollow Ones" in Mortlake, a district outside London in the year 1582.

Tipping

At the center of all three timelines is a character named Hugo Blackwood, whose purpose and powers are slowly revealed as the plot plays out. The writers note in a preface that they are intentionally tipping their hat to Algeron Blackwood, an early 20th century English writer who is credited with creating the "occult detective" genre.

Fans of Oscar-winner Guillermo del Toro – the co-writer with Chuck Hogan – will appreciate the focus on the monsters at the center of the tale. Here's the first description we get: "Much like a lamprey, the mouth was made of concentric circles of vibrating flesh, lined up with cartilaginous protrusions, not properly teeth, but barbed nubs." Readers even get to go inside its mind as it chooses victims and then possesses them.

The book is a quick read, with propulsive action and just enough explanation to keep readers interested. Hardwicke is the story's skeptic and thus a stand-in for the reader at times. Told, among other things, that the Hollow Ones are only "mortally

afraid" of one thing – virgin roosters – she says: "This is 100%, completely insane."

Maybe. But del Toro and Hogan ground the story in just enough reality to keep you turning the pages. The relationship between Hardwicke and the dying Solomon feels real, as their twin investigations drive them deeper into a world of grave robberies, iron cauldrons and a reliance on the centuries-old wisdom of the mysterious Mr Blackwood.

By the end, his story is far from told – in fact, that "Vol. 1" in the title means it's just getting started.

Also:

NEW YORK: A popular online spoof of the children's favorite "Goodnight Moon", reworked for the coronavirus, will be published by Penguin Random House this fall.

The Penguin imprint Philomel Books announced recently that "Good Morning Zoom", written by **Lindsay Rechler** and illustrated by **June Park**, is scheduled for Oct 6. Currently self-published, "Good Morning Zoom" takes **Margaret Wise Brown's** beloved bedtime story and turns it into a narrative about Zoom, bread baking, home schooling and other familiar parts of life during the pandemic.

Rechler is a banking executive and mother of two who lives in **Manhattan**. Park is a graphic designer and illustrator who lives in Brooklyn. All author net proceeds will be donated to coronavirus relief charities.

"COVID-19 is a difficult topic, especially for young children," Rechler said in a statement. "I wanted to tell my children a relatable story – a story that would help them become familiar with their new everyday lives and within that story, touch upon what was happening in the outside world. I thought a lot about the contrast between quarantining safely inside versus what was happening outside my window." (AP)

of places" after falling from the new bike he'd been testing in the courtyard of his Malibu home Saturday, the representative said. Family members were present. The entertainment mogul was "doing

fine" and remained under observation after the operation at an unidentified hospital, the spokesperson said.

Cowell's partner, **Lauren Silverman**, accompanied him to the hospital and has been



Ross Ellis performs at Concerts in Your Car at the Ventura County Fairgrounds on Aug 8 in Ventura, Calif. (AP)

able to see him briefly. Cowell's overnight, six-hour surgery included placement of a metal rod.

Despite the ordeal, he mustered the strength to post a "massive thank you" to doctors and nurses treating him. Cowell, known for his tart-tongued comments about contestants, also shared some advice.

"If you buy an electric trail bike, read the manual before you ride it for the first time," he tweeted Sunday night.

The couple's son and Silverman's child by a previous marriage were with Cowell when the accident happened.

Cowell's injury will force him to miss the beginning of this season's live shows on NBC's "America's Got Talent." The live shows will begin Tuesday and Wednesday without him, the network said. He created the talent show, now in its 15th season, and serves as a judge. The show's other judges are **Heidi Klum**, **Howie Mandel** and **Sofia Vergara**, with **Terry Crews** as host.

Cowell also has been a judge on "Britain's Got Talent," "The X Factor" and "American Idol." After some success in the 1980s and 1990s as a record producer, talent scout and consultant in the UK music industry, Cowell came to public prominence in 2001 as a judge on Pop Idol, a show which he and its creator **Simon Fuller** successfully pitched to ITV Controller of Entertainment **Claudia Rosencrantz**. (Agencies)