

## Political Power of Social Media Extolled at Duke

By Lynn Bonner - [lbonner@newsobserver.com](mailto:lbonner@newsobserver.com)

DURHAM Blogs, Twitter and online petitions are forceful tools that activists can use to galvanize support for local and national causes, participants at a Duke University forum said Saturday.

Social media can quickly draw attention to issues and lead to national and international news coverage, said panelists taking part in the Black Thought 2.0 forum on new media and black studies. Twitter users can release a flood of news as it's happening, and social media can link like-minded people from around the world, creating international crusades.

"The petition, on-the-ground protests, blogging – a combination of these is creating a zeitgeist to talk about these issues more and more," said Salamishah Tillet, an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

Saturday's forum came just weeks after an online petition and Twitter users brought international attention to the shooting death of black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida. Activists can use social media "to change the conversations about things that are important," said Jasiri X, an emcee who uses hip-hop music for social commentary.

Social media also helped highlight the case of the Jena 6, black high school students from Louisiana who were charged with attempted murder and conspiracy after a school fight with white students.

And because of social media, Troy Davis, a Georgia man executed last year for murdering an off-duty policeman, convinced thousands around the world that he was innocent. A Twitter campaign argued for a stay.

"This represented Twitter at its best," Jasiri X said. "It was such a powerful generation of tweet support (and) online town halls," he said.

### **Going viral**

Jasiri X experienced the expansive reach of social media firsthand after he wrote a song about the Jena 6 that was posted online. Soon, nationally syndicated talk show host Michael Baisden played it on his radio show.

Jasiri X said he just completed a song about Trayvon Martin.

"I'm writing this song and putting it in a space to help lead a conversation about violence against black men and race in this society," he said.

Twitter and blogs are also important in local protests, participants at the Duke event said.

“If you’re not on Twitter, you’re not getting the news first,” said Kimberly Ellis, a blogger and activist from Pittsburgh.

### **Fighting a casino**

Ellis used her blog in 2006 to fight a plan to put a casino in her neighborhood. The casino plan died. She also said she live-tweeted during a protest of a G-20 summit in 2009 and found that mainstream news outlets were following hers and others’ tweets.

“Being the first to reveal the news is extremely important,” she said.