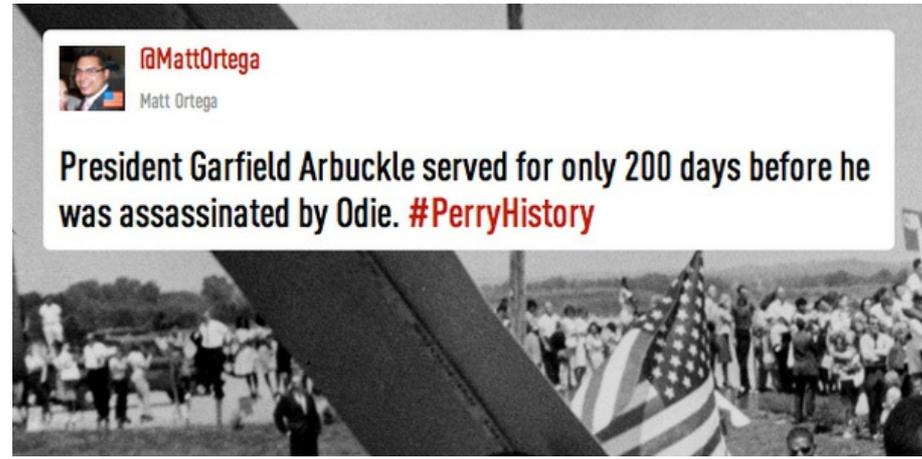NANCY SCOLA- Nancy Scola is an *Atlantic* correspondent based in New York City. Her work has appeared in techPresident.com, the *American Prospect*, *New York* magazine, *Seed* magazine, *Salon* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

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How the Hashtag Became a Campaign Battleground

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Twitter's content-sorting mechanism is the latest messaging weapon in the 2012 presidential contest

@MattOrtega
Matt Ortega

President Garfield Arbuckle served for only 200 days before he was assassinated by Odie. #PerryHistory

One of the most contested battles in the online political arena in recent weeks was a fight over Obama's new push to make policy by executive order -- and which ideological camp could best define the hashtag that described it.

"We can't wait," proclaimed the president on Monday, Oct. 24, announcing that in the absence of congressional action on his jobs plan, he'd be advancing orders on mortgages, school loans, opportunities for veterans, and more.

Republicans had a field day. "#WeCantWait to make @BarackObama a one-term president," tweeted Republican National Committee chair Reince Priebus that day. A flurry of tweets followed. By Tuesday afternoon, the White House, which, notably, initially hadn't bothered making use of the tweet-friendly mantra as a hashtag, made an attempt to reclaim it. Tweeted the White House: "#WeCantWait for today's Office Hours" -- a reference to an online chat with economic advisor Brian Deese on Obama's new initiative. Minority Leader Pelosi tried her own spin. "#WeCantWait for GOP to stop blocking #AmericanJobsAct & #ChinaCurrency jobs bill," she tweeted, adding a kick at the end: "PS to GOP: #HashtagsArentAJobsBill." Oh, snap.

Through late Wednesday, the hashtag had been used some 13,800 times, peaking at 45 tweets per minute, says Gilad Lotan of the social media analysis company SocialFlow. "That's not bad."

Once the Dewey Decimal system of Twitter, hashtags are

Once the Dewey Decimal system of Twitter, hashtags are being embraced by the political class as an ideal way to snark.

It wasn't always so. In 2007, digital advocate Chris Messina floated the idea of using the pound symbol, or

being embraced by the political class as an ideal way to snark.

hash, as a way of tying together ideas and conversations on the network. Twitter eventually baked the tag into the product.

But it wasn't new. The hashtag was a carryover from the old days of Internet Relay Chat, when the hash sign -- # -- was the way you joined channels, giving entry to anyone into a world where text and ideas reigned. (The "@" sign used to name people on Twitter, points out Lotan, is another IRC convention.) As technology goes, the hashtag is dead simple: type a hashtag, and, lo and behold, it exists. Observers cite the 2009 Iranian elections (#IranElection) as the moment the tool really took hold in the political realm. Closer to home, the taxonomic application found high-profile usage when the White House encouraged people to use #immigration to discuss a major Obama immigration speech and #AskObama to group together questions for the president for an online forum hosted by Twitter's Jack Dorsey.

But having pointed fun with the hashtag is newer. "Until a couple years ago, anytime you used a hashtag, it was to group a conversation," says Democratic consultant Matt Ortega, who is known in political circles as a leading purveyor of the comedic arts. "But within the last year and a half or so, it's become a way to kind of use a subliminal message in a larger tweet." *The New Yorker's* Susan Orlean describes the result as sounding "like it's being muttered into a handkerchief." Says Ortega, "The way I and a lot of others approach it is the Jon Stewart-Stephen Colbert school of pushing a political angle or thoughtful comment using humor, like #HermanCainPizzaJams or #HipHopBBQActs" -- the points there being that, with the former, Cain is an unserious political candidate for signing a pizza song to the tune of "Imagine" and, with the latter, that FoxNation is dense on racial matters for using that phrase to describe a birthday gathering for Obama that featured black celebrities. Another example: #ImRunningForOfficeForPetesSake" -- Mitt Romney's explanation for why his landscaping company couldn't hire illegal immigrants -- "feeds into the meme that he's inauthentic," says Ortega. "The best ones take a poignant political point and match it with humor."

Hashtags have become a way for politicians to, as Rick Perry might say, "bump" ideas. (That cringe-worthy debate exchange prompted its own warning hashtag: #cootiesarereal.) "Democrats follow Republicans, and Republicans follow Democrats," observes one Democratic congressional aide. "We're using the medium to push back, because members don't like to see things like [the jobs bill fight] go unchallenged." Recently, Hill Republicans and Democrats engaged in a low-grade fight over #Forgotten15 and #Faux15, two takes on fifteen bills that Republicans say are jobs plans in stalled the Senate and Democrats dismiss as job killers. There was even a meta aspect: "When it comes to #HashtagsArentAJobsBill," says the aide, "the frustration is that, as great as Twitter is, hashtags aren't going to help the unemployed."

For political types, the opportunity, of course, is to give the conventional wisdom a little nudge in the rear. And to do it for free. The left picked up on #PerryHistory to emphasize that the governor of Texas didn't know all that much about history -- after he placed the American Revolution in the 16th century. Sample tweet, from SparkyGirl13: "The US could only finance the Louisiana Purchase thanks to Brett Maverick winning a hand of poker. #PerryHistory" Often, hashtags open up a fascinating contest. The hashtag #rubiofamilyhistory picked up on the mini-controversy over the Florida Senator's roots. (Point: "Actually, my parents put me on a rocketship two years before the destruction of Krypton. #rubiofamilyhistory" Counterpoint: "I became a Senator, and then some Washington Post reporter wrote a BS article instantly refuted by the Miami Herald. #rubiofamilyhistory") The National Republican Congressional Committee has pushed #ScaryDemMovieTitles to prod along ideas about what Democrats are up to. Tweeted submissions from the public at large included "No Country for Small Businessmen," "Barack Obama and the Deathly Taxes," and, a jab at the Attorney General as "Holdergeist." Researchers call tags like these "micro-memes": tiny ideas that aren't a huge deal and also aren't entirely trivial, that can bounce along for days on end before flaring out.

Hashtags that don't turn into trends simply disappear into the tweet stream, no harm no foul.

It all turns out to be catnip to the political class. "Getting traction," explains Ortega, "usually involves getting it picked up by people with established followers, like the Dave Weigels [of Slate] and other new-media savvy reporter types tweeting it and giving it validation. Then it really takes off." The tweets become easy pickings for aggregator-type sites looking to pull together quick coverage, particularly the *Huffington Post*.

But the thing is, it's not just the political class, traditionally defined. For every #FlipFlopMitt, a hashtag pushed by Perry's presidential campaign, there's an organic one started by some random person on the Internet. GOP honcho Priebus may have gotten all the attention for his tweet. But SocialFlow's Lotan actually traces the #WeCantWait proto-tweet to one @geezervision. On Sunday, Oct. 23, he or she tweeted a link to a *New York Times* preview piece on Obama's new policy push, and wrote "And #Obama's end [run] around #Congress begins, #wecantwait." GeezerVision tagged the tweet #tcot, shorthand for "Top Conservatives on Twitter" -- a list that persists mostly as a way to tag conversations on the political right. GeezerVision has a grand total of just 83 followers. But anyone tracking the hugely popular #tcot tag could see that tweet.

"It's all geek culture," says Lotan, "and it's amazing how Twitter has brought it to the masses so that

everyone and their mother is using it. It's about letting people dive into conversations they wouldn't have seen otherwise. Twitter is one massive conversation, and those conventions let you dive into ideas, into funny inside jokes."

It might seem like little more than gossip. But gossip has an evolutionary purpose -- to coalesce and spread conventional wisdom about reputation and relationships. Far more people can participate in that process than in the past. Twitter expands the chattering class beyond the professional chatterers. Anyone with a free minute and a Twitter account can join in and, for better or for worse, find themselves part of a national media messaging battle.

Of course, things do go squirrelly. Online feminist write Jill Filipovic lamented last week that a tweet about a saucy note left in her luggage by a TSA agent lept the bounds of her "relatively limited audience" and led to the agent being punished. Once unleashed, digital content has a life of its own. Lotan points to the #BlameTheMuslims hastag, which was started by a Muslim woman in the United Kingdom in the hours after the horrific July shootings in Utoeya, Norway, took place, but before the identity of the shooter was known. "It was, 'Your watch isn't working? #BlameTheMuslims,'" explains Lotan. "It trended locally, and died down that night. But the next morning, you saw it spike and jump out of context in the States." The tag had lost its irony. It had become a way of grouping together tweets that, quite literally, blamed Muslims. Anthony Weiner also did battle using sarcastic hashtags: One of his last tweets in office complained about the sudden swelling of his follower count, asking "#IsThereTrollRemovalSoftware?" Or take #WeCantWait itself. The characteristic ambiguity of Obama's messaging leaves it susceptible to mischief. In some hands, it's a cri de coeur over congressional intransigence. In others, it becomes confirmation of Obama's high-handedness.

Purists lament that hashtag creativity can break Twitter's functionality. No normal person, after all, would think to look for the latest jobs plan updates using #WeCantWait. "We tried working with #SaveUSPS," explains Seamus Kraft, digital director for the Oversight Committee in the House of Representatives, under California Republican Darrell Issa. "But it's just padding. No one is searching for that." Instead, his office now sticks to #postal or #USPS in tweets discussing the future of the U.S. Postal Service. Hashtags aren't zero-sum, though. There's nothing saying that a creative tag can't share its 140 characters with a dry, utilitarian one.

"The fact is," says Lotan, "Twitter is built on what people are willing to pay attention to."

At the moment there's far more art than science to all this. For political professionals, figuring out what people are willing to pay attention to is a work in progress. Are ideas spreading beyond the boundaries of Washington, D.C., for example? Or are they pooling in place? Did @GeezerVision truly start #WeCantWait? Tough to say. Systematic tracking the origin and flows of tweets requires the capacity to handle huge amounts of data -- equipment and expertise that few have beyond the walls of Twitter and a handful of research companies. When we spoke, Ortega had just left a meeting with Twitter's political advertising representative in D.C. They'd been discussing the political ad tools launched by the company last month that include promoted tweets, which push paid-for tweets to the top of search results, and promoted trends, which bump selected hashtags to the top of Twitter.com's trending lists. A hashtag that shows organic promise might deserve a little cash turbo-charge. "I'd love to put some money behind tweets that are really funny and poignant," says Ortega.

For now, though, it's hit or miss. In May, Newt Gingrich was reported to have racked up a Tiffany's bill up to a half-million dollars. "I was pushing #NewtBlingrich, and it got a little pick-up" says Ortega. "But it was no #ImRunningForOfficeForPetesSake."

High-minded types might grumble that this snarky hashtag business is juvenile. For all the Internet's promise, this is what we've come to? But snarky doesn't have to mean stupid. You can learn a great deal about the news of the day by watching Jon Stewart, for one thing. For another, media theorist Clay Shirky used to talk about publisher types who complained that all that today's teenagers were reading and writing to each other online was fluff and nonsense. You're missing the point, argued Shirky. These were teenagers who were voluntarily reading and writing to each other. So the bright side here is this: these are people who are voluntarily tweeting about politics. And having fun doing it.

Image credit: @MattOrtega/Huffington Post

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The RNC seems to be taking the #WeCantWait hash tag offline as well. If you text the word WECANTWAIT to number 91919 you can signup for a free NObama bumper sticker.

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