

Digital Standpoints: Debating Gendered Violence and Racial Exclusions in the Feminist Counterpublic

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Abstract

In this study, we integrate counterpublic sphere theory and feminist standpoint theory to examine the discursive labor and debates shaped by the hashtags #YesAllWomen and #YesAllWhiteWomen. We identify the most influential users in these hashtags' networks and critically analyze their tweets. Our findings illustrate how feminist counterpublics use Twitter to produce and progress feminist frames about violence against women while simultaneously engaging in community debates about race and inclusion. Our work illuminates how contemporary feminist discourse continues to reflect historical tensions in feminist movements, and how digital media platforms (and user generated tools like Twitter's hashtag function) can equip feminist cultural workers with new ways to upend mainstream narratives and elevate conversations within feminist sphere(s).

Keywords: standpoint theory, counterpublics, hashtag activism, critical discourse analysis, race

Introduction

On May 23, 2014, a gunman opened fire on the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara in Isla Vista, California, killing 6 and injuring 14. Once the shooter was identified, videos posted to his YouTube channel, in which he detailed his motive for the massacre, quickly went viral. In these posts and a 141-page "manifesto," the shooter described his hatred of women in graphic detail and justified his violence as "retribution" for a lifetime of rejection. As people, particularly women, took to social media to process the tragedy they were met with some resistance. Attempts to frame the event as a consequence of toxic masculinity and male entitlement were derailed, as some interpreted the conversations as a series of sweeping generalizations about what "all men" do or are like. Many male commenters rejoined with "#NotAllMen... [rape, kill, hate women, etc.]" (Duke, 2014).

Within a day, Twitter user @gildedspine posted the first tweet using the hashtag #YesAllWomen as an attempt to use the Isla Vista event (and the defensiveness of men in response to women's reactions to it) as a focal point for a conversation about the things all women fear because of the ubiquity of violent masculinity:

@gildedspine: "Guys, I'm going to be tweeting under the #YesAllWomen hashtag. Let's discuss what 'not all men' might do, but women must fear." (May 24, 2014)

The hashtag quickly became a trending topic on Twitter, generating over 60,000 tweets in a 24-hour period and more than a million within the week (Pachal, 2014). On May 26, 2 days later, Twitter user @JennMJack created #YesAllWhiteWomen to address the lack of intersectional analysis of women's experiences within the #YesAllWomen conversation and to make visible the erasure of the women of color who had launched and popularized the first hashtag.

In this research, we examine how these hashtags worked to challenge dominant silences about gendered violence by centering feminist frameworks, while illustrating how feminist standpoint theory can be used alongside counterpublic sphere theory to study internal counterpublic debates. We argue

that #YesAllWomen became representative of a more traditional feminist counterpublic seeking to influence, challenge, and rewrite dominant public narratives about violence against women, while #YesAllWhiteWomen reflected an oppositional counterpublic that challenges the tendency in traditional feminist spaces to collapse women's experiences only along lines of gendered oppression. #YesAllWhiteWomen brings to light racial hierarchies and power dynamics within the feminist counterpublic, signifying the ongoing negotiation among members to define and redefine counterpublic narratives from their respective standpoints.

This case study and our multitheoretical approach allows us to assess how historical divisions in the feminist counterpublic are manifested, articulated, and challenged by feminists using social media. Our analysis answers questions about how feminist counterpublic actors interact with and leverage new media to build common narratives from shared identities and experiences, challenge the reproduction of hierarchies within social movement spaces, and transform and influence broader public narratives on issues central to women's lives. Our analysis is an effort to bring feminist theory to practice by illustrating a critical feminist approach to online counterpublic activism research.

Counterpublics and Standpoints

Feminist scholars Rita Felski and Nancy Fraser were among the first to critique and complicate Habermas' (1989) seminal theorization of the democratic public sphere. In particular, these scholars responded to Habermas' idealization of a public sphere where citizens collectively engage in democratic debate by noting that, by definition, both "citizen" and "public" historically excluded women. Felski (1989) proposed instead a model of a plurality of spheres, coining the term counterpublic to account for the specific discursive spaces and practices of women's experiences and knowledge. Drawing from this work, Fraser (1990) argued that the discourse within a feminist sphere seeks to infiltrate narratives within the greater, patriarchal public sphere, which is "rested on, or...was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions" (p. 59). In other words, counterpublics are characterized by the role they play in constructing and maintaining knowledge shared by members of marginalized communities while simultaneously working to make visible issues specific to marginalized experience, thus serving a key role in attempts to integrate and democratize the dominant public sphere (Asen, 2000).

Scholarship on raced counterpublics has augmented counterpublic sphere theory by highlighting the multiple counterpublics that can exist around the organizing praxis of a particular social identity. In extending the work of the Black Public Sphere Collective (1995), Squires (2002), for example, argues that "a model of multiple publics, consisting of a dominant public space and many subaltern counterpublics, allows for more contestation and more discourse" (p. 450). We rely on this distinction of multiple, overlapping counterpublics that sometimes contest one another, while working to critique and influence dominant public narratives, to understand how different types of feminist discourse and feminist identity politics are enacted on Twitter. Further, we argue that feminist standpoint theory can and should be applied in studies of counterpublics because it compels us to give equal attention to the standpoints of members of counterpublics who have historically been less visible because of intersectional axes of oppression. Our approach complicates traditional communication research that treats counterpublics as monolithic; instead, we highlight the role of shared and diverging experiences within the feminist counterpublic and the power dynamics endemic in these.

Standpoint was, in fact, central to Felski's original theorization of counterpublics. She wrote "the feminist public sphere does not claim a representative universality but rather offers a critique of cultural

values from the standpoint of women as a marginalized group within society” (1989, p. 167, emphasis added). Yet, Felski, too, presumed the singular nature of women’s standpoints rather than considering the effects of multiple marginalizations. Herein, we propose a critical approach that bridges counterpublic sphere theory with feminist standpoint theory in the spirit of the intersectional work of feminist scholars of color like Patricia Hill Collins and Chandra Mohanty. These scholars use standpoint theory as a materialist framework to highlight how multiply marginalized social positions yield crucial knowledges about power and inequality.

Like public sphere theory in the field of communication, standpoint theory has been both central to and contentious in feminist scholarship since its inception. Hartsock (1983) proposed standpoint theory as the extension of a Marxist framework that recognizes knowledge is situated within systems of power and that groups holding less power, like women, have a unique and valuable standpoint through which to assess social relations. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars debated standpoint from different perspectives, from attempting to assess standpoint theory’s epistemological potential to arrive at an objective truth (Harding, 1989), to a postmodern argument that standpoint theory supports a multitude of unique subjective experiences, each as valid as the next (Hekman, 1997). Scholars like Haraway (1988) argued that “situated knowledges,” despite being subjective and partial, can provide a rich understanding of social phenomena.

Collins (1997) situated standpoint theory in Black feminist thought, reemphasizing that standpoint theory is political as it deals with “historically shared, group-based experiences” within systems of power (p. 375), and that its purpose is to make explicit the power dynamics that influence negotiations within groups and lead to the creation of knowledge. Drawing heavily from Crenshaw’s (1991) theorization of intersectionality, this approach makes the case against trying to establish a monolithic narrative around womanhood without addressing the hierarchies and “epistemic privileges” that can exist within a particular identity group (Mohanty, 2003). To do so would erase how power dynamics between women of different races, ethnicities, abilities, sexualities, ages, and so forth affect the production of feminist knowledge.

Feminism and Digital Counterpublics

Increasingly, researchers are analyzing the transformative potential of two-way media, like Twitter, that, unlike traditional or alternative one-way media, are made up of online networks of users working more directly and immediately to “extend and pluralize” the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148; Castells, 2007; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). As Fairclough and Wodak (1997) have detailed, discourse “constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people” (p. 258); by extension, online discourse on the Twitter platform, and its functions, like retweets, hashtags, and trending topics, construct an environment for discursive practices that both reproduce and transform power relations between social groups and actors. Thus, Twitter has the potential to operate as a public or semi-public “social awareness stream” (Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010).

Hashtags, consisting of the “#” symbol followed by a text phrase, function as linked conversation anchors on Twitter, enabling users from across different networks to participate in a conversation around a particular topic by tweeting using the hashtag. Notably, public tweets from individual users containing a hashtagged phrase can be easily aggregated and retweeted, circulating messages to people outside of the original tweeter’s personal network and allowing for virality (boyd,

Golder, & Lotan, 2010). While there is great potential on the platform to create horizontal, grassroots dialogue, scholars have also highlighted that Twitter's structure allows for the reproduction of social hierarchies and exclusions (Latina & Docherty, 2014). For example, Kingston Mann (2014) notes that the ever-shrinking divide between public and private facilitated by online networks can pose as much risk as benefit to those already widely targeted for identity-based harassment, commodification, and surveillance.

Despite these real limitations, the reach and potential of social networks in particular means that contemporary feminist activism takes place in online spaces as much as on the streets. Scholars like Baer (2016), Dixon (2014), and Drüeke and Zobl (2016) contend that hashtagged conversations and other forms of digital community-building have expanded discursive forms of activism and have thus contributed to "a paradigm shift within feminist protest culture" (Baer, 2016, p. 18). For example, widely popular SlutWalk events, which work through creative disruption to change cultural narratives that blame women rape victims and shame women's sexuality, found their roots and greatest adherents in online feminists spaces (Mendes, 2015).

Measuring the influence of counterpublics on mainstream political conversations has long been used as an indicator of social impact; however, our research highlights other ways hashtag activism can be culturally and politically meaningful. Beyond gauging the "crossover" of certain online counterpublic narratives into mainstream discourse, we take a critical approach that examines how these hashtags enable negotiations within the feminist counterpublic between women with differing access to power and privilege. We contend that, in debates wherein counterpublic narratives are shaped, feminist standpoint theory can illuminate the power dynamics involved in both shaping the counterpublic and influencing mainstream responses to it.

Feminist scholars have offered cursory commentary on the hashtags we study here: Thrift (2014) briefly highlighted #YesAllWomen amid a larger move toward feminist "meme events" that become interventions for resituating social phenomena, while Rodino-Colocino (2014) briefly identified #YesAllWhiteWomen as a call toward intersectional inclusivity. Here, we add much needed expanded research and rigor to these considerations. We demonstrate the necessity of studying both #YesAllWomen and #YesAllWhiteWomen as part of the ongoing debates around race, identity, and inclusion in the feminist counterpublic. We subscribe to the ethic that feminist scholars must do a better job integrating critical questions of race and other identity matrices in studies of media if we are to avoid replicating the conditions that force women of color to the margins of both academic and activist feminisms (Kingston Mann, 2014). Black feminist hashtags like #solidarityisforwhitewomen and #youoksis have raised issues similar to #YesAllWhiteWomen about the marginalization of feminists of color from mainstream feminist spaces and the unique ways Black women experience gendered violence but have prompted little study by scholars or engagement from the larger feminist counterpublic. Loza (2014) notes, for example, that despite the ongoing work of women of color cultural workers to construct intersectional narratives in digital spaces, formalized and resourced feminist forums continue to exclude and misrepresent their contributions.

Our Data and Methods

Tweets in this analysis were pulled from a random sample of 10% of all publicly available tweets posted on Twitter using the Twitter streaming application programming interface. Statistically, this gave us a

10% random sample of all the tweets using either hashtag (#YesAllWomen, #YesAllWhiteWomen, or both) posted within 2 weeks of each hashtag's creation.¹ In total, we collected 183,331 tweets.

Prior research has suggested that “crowdsourced elites,” or users with the highest level of engagement with their tweets, tend to inform and influence the most salient narrative frames in hashtagged Twitter conversations (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). We thus determined top tweeters for each hashtag examined here using a programming script that identified the number of retweets and mentions (responses that include a user's Twitter handle) of all Twitter users in the dataset. We then conducted a discursive analysis of the tweets written by the top opinion influencers tweeting using #YesAllWomen and #YesAllWhiteWomen and identified the most frequently occurring discursive frames to ascertain the most significant ideological work done in the two respective conversations. We gave particular attention to how #YesAllWomen and #YesAllWhiteWomen reinforced or challenged existing narratives about feminism and violence against women, and how contentions between more and less privileged standpoints were navigated within these conversations.

Findings

#YesAllWomen

The majority of conversation influencers using #YesAllWomen were people with an activist legacy on and off Twitter including users @gildedspine, Rebekah Bolser (@RebekahBolser), Elizabeth Plank (@feministabulous), and Lauren Chief Elk (@ChiefElk). Conversation influencers also included journalists and advocates with ties to media, such as feminist activist and media critic Soraya Chemaly (@schemaly), political commentator @ZerlinaMaxwell, and cultural critic Lindy West (@TheLindyWest); several crowdsourced elites were unaffiliated with any organizations, such as Hanna Geldart (@hgeldss).

Celebrities like actress Sophia Bush (@sophiabush) and male comedians Patton Oswalt (@pattonoswalt) and Louis C.K. (@louisck) not only amplified women's tweets but also contributed their own to #YesAllWomen, demonstrating the capacity of popular hashtags to spread across multiple publics.

The three most frequent frames in #YesAllWomen discourse included (1) an attempt to reprioritize the public's focus from narratives that downplay the prevalence of men committing violence to narratives acknowledging the frequency of women's experiences with violence, (2) a discussion of the connection between violence and everyday sexism, and (3) a legitimization of the concept of rape culture.

Centering women. The most common discursive frame constructed by conversation influencers using #YesAllWomen sought to replace dominant narratives about gendered violence that suggest a minority of men are perpetrators with an acknowledgment that the majority of women are subject to masculinist violence. In doing this, members of the feminist counterpublic sought to convince readers of their tweets that violence against women is a large scale social issue that should be understood as a universal rather than isolated phenomenon, and that women's experiences with violence and the frequency and commonality of these experiences should be prioritized in conversations following the Isla Vista shootings rather than attempts to rehabilitate the reputation of men. For example, @schemaly tweeted: “#notallmen practice violence against women but #YesAllWomen live with the threat of male violence. Every. Single. Day. All over the world.”

@Schemaly's use of capitalization and punctuation in “Every. Single. Day.” and explicit acknowledgment of the global pervasiveness of gendered violence reflect an attempt to illustrate the dramatic toll and

universality of women's experiences with violence, regardless of other social positions. Some tweets told compelling stories about women's individual experiences with violence using first person narratives alongside the hashtag; however, the majority of highly retweeted posts were written using the plural "we" or incorporated the hashtag #YesAllWomen into the sentence syntax. For example, @kassiaedwardss tweeted: "No, #NotAllMen are like Elliot Rodger. But #YesAllWomen reveal[s] the little pieces of him we encounter every single day." As a discursive tactic, this serves to establish a collective voice drawn from a commonly shared (gendered) standpoint—in this case, living under a constant threat of patriarchal violence.

The violence of everyday sexism. The second most common discursive frame sought to link extreme violence, like the Isla Vista shooting and other high-profile cases,² to women's everyday experiences with sexism. Within this frame, experiences with things like street harassment, denial of reproductive health choices, and the wage gap were explicitly framed as examples of a social and cultural environment that fosters more extreme forms of violence, like rape, physical assault, and femicide.

For example, user @CristaDesir tweeted: "Because when we say "no", we have to consider the repercussions of that. In every context. #YesAllWomen." This and similar tweets expounded on numerous social punishments administered to women who set boundaries. While "saying no" is a discursive phrase commonly used to discuss sexual consent, @CristaDesir and other tweeters extended the conversation on the consequences of women saying no to other contexts, for example, in the workplace, after unwanted romantic solicitation, or in relationships.

Women also used #YesAllWomen to draw attention to the online harassment and threats that ensued shortly after the hashtag's launch. Some users tagged screenshots of the threats they received with #YesAllWomen, framing the backlash as evidence for why the conversation was warranted. For example, user @petrichortardis wrote "#YesAllWomen because I've seen more men angry at the hashtag rather than angry at the things happening to women." In response to men's online retaliation, comic Angela Cobb tweeted: "Oh I'm sorry, does a hashtag campaign threaten you? Yeah, well we feel the same way about rape culture. #YesAllWomen." Another tweet, by Lindy West, stated: "Because the same 'harmless' misogynist rhetoric that fills up my inbox every day also fills a mass murderer's manifesto. #YesAllWomen." This draws an explicit comparison between women's everyday experiences with online gendered harassment and the motivations behind the Isla Vista killings, implying that the same cultural norms that normalize one embolden the other.

Defining rape culture. The third discursive frame used by #YesAllWomen influencers identified cultural norms that condone or normalize rape and sexual assault. Women discussed examples of victim-blaming, the impossible burdens of "proof" often placed on survivors, and the fear associated with the normalization of sexual violence. For example, @feministabulous tweeted: "#YesAllWomen are taught safety tips to prevent rape but not all men are taught about consent." Users like @phoenixarnhorn offered concrete examples: "Because we're taught 'don't leave your drink alone' instead of 'don't drug someone.' #YesAllWomen." These tweets highlight women's familiarity with the omnipresent threat of sexual violence, and the burden placed on women to assuage that fear by employing various precautions. In the former tweet, by employing "not all men" in a way that subverts the phrase's initial meaning from insisting on the majority of men's innocence to their complicity, the user identifies the widespread lack of male-focused education about sexual consent as a contributor to violence against women.

In another example, user @paige_marie26 tweeted: “Because when girls go to college they’re buying pepper spray and rape whistles while guys are buying condoms #YesAllWomen,” signifying a cultural expectation that the responsibility to not get raped falls on women while men are safe to treat sex as a pastime.

Together, #YesAllWomen reflects the discursive practices commonly attributed to the feminist counterpublic. Women using the hashtag legitimized and centered their experiences while appealing to a collective identity and seeking to directly interrogate patriarchal narratives about gender and violence. Without a doubt, this work is powerful both for its role within and outside of the counterpublic.

Feminist blogs and alternative media, both domestic and international, contributed to amplifying the #YesAllWomen conversation, such as UK-based Femusings Magazine (@femusings), one of the hashtag’s most retweeted accounts. Traditional media elites, too, paid attention; Time magazine and CNN used their Twitter accounts to tweet links to their stories on the hashtag, which included coverage of tweets that dealt with popular topics including rape culture and everyday sexism, and received high rates of retweets and mentions for doing so. This coverage was generally positive. For example, The Los Angeles Times credited #YesAllWomen with sparking a “long-overdue discussion of male privilege” and equated the hashtag to the 1970s “consciousnessraising movement” (Abcarian, 2014), while Democracy Now! interviewed feminist activist Rebecca Solnit, who credited digital feminist campaigns like #YesAllWomen with mainstreaming discussion on men’s “sexual entitlement” (Goodman & Mate’, 2014). Reporters largely failed to credit @gildedspine as the creator of #YesAllWomen, instead reporting that the hashtag had “sprung up” out of nowhere.

Notably, @gildedspine abandoned the conversation after two days because of the abuse and backlash she received both from men for creating the hashtag and from white women for attempting to include discourse about her specific standpoint as a Muslim woman of color (Kaye, 2015). Ultimately, none of the popularly circulated discourses using #YesAllWomen, nor coverage of it in the mainstream press, addressed issues of intersectionality or highlighted the explicit standpoints of women who experience multiple axes of oppression. This absence, in terms of what discourse members of the feminist counterpublic did and did not amplify, and what standpoints as a result infiltrated mainstream spaces, is also powerful, particularly as an indicator of how privilege works within counterpublics. We discuss this in more detail in the following section.

#YesAllWhiteWomen

The top conversation influencers using #YesAllWhiteWomen were all women, and predominantly women of color with less mainstream access than those using #YesAllWomen. Users whose tweets generated the most engagement and whose narratives reflect the hashtag’s salient themes include Jenn M. Jackson (@JennMJack), a Black woman scholar and activist; Jamie Nesbitt Golden (@thewayoftheid), a Black feminist writer and cocreator of the online space HoodFeminism; Vanessa Noelani (@bo_bessa); and white writer and social justice advocate Amelia Shroyer @PayMyRant. Two primary discursive frames arose from these users: (1) an emphasis on using an intersectional perspective in the broader discussion on violence against women and (2) a specific debate around the validity of women of color’s standpoint in #YesAllWomen. Discursive frames in #YesAllWhiteWomen also received significant resistance from women using the #YesAllWomen hashtag.

Centering intersectional experience. The primary discursive frame used by conversation influencers in #YesAllWhiteWomen expressed the need for intersectionality in conversations about gendered violence.

Many tweeters critiqued the overrepresentation of white women's experiences in #YesAllWomen, contextualizing the situation within the historic exclusion of women of color from dominant feminist discourse. In response to tweets asking about the reason behind the hashtag, user @PalavaWoman stated, "Historically #YesAllWomen has meant #YesALLWhiteWomen. That is what we're decrying." Another woman of color, @ToujoursDeva, drew attention to how the popularity of some tweets over others upheld that pattern, writing: "#YesAllWomen experience violence but #YesAllWhiteWomen have an easier time coming out because society believes White stories/people more."

Other tweeters used this frame to highlight the disproportionate and specific threats of violence faced by Black and indigenous women. For example, user @do_you_vape wrote, "Black women experience domestic violence at a rate 35% higher than White women. #YesALLWhiteWomen should know these stats if they're allies." @bo_bessa tweeted, "Because domestic violence against Native women are amongst the highest in the country #YesAllWomen #YesALLWhiteWomen," while another tweet by @feministfists, a Black woman activist, read, "WoC [women of color] experience DV [domestic violence] @ higher rates, our bodies are hypersexualized, our prison rates are higher. #YesAllWhiteWomen." Using statistical trends to highlight that race and ethnicity are significant variables in women's susceptibility to violence, the tweeters drew attention to fissures in the supposed universality of women's experiences (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Several tweets elaborated on why the erasure of these narratives from the #YesAllWomen discourse warranted a separate hashtag. For example, @MotherJustice noted that "#YesAllWomen experience patriarchy, but #YesAllWhiteWomen is a great way to discuss the intersectionality of patriarchy."

Although the hashtag's discussion was led and shaped primarily by women of color, tweeters using the hashtag also included white women expressing support for the conversation. For example, user @xoarv tweeted: "Hey fellow white feminists...please check out #YesAllWhiteWomen and consider the ways we are complicit in a system that harms WoC." Another white user, @Princessanie, contended: "#YesAllWhiteWomen need to redefine 'solidarity'. We need to stand against racism, cissexism and misogyny. That is true solidarity." By using the plural "we," these women expressed their standpoints as women with race privilege to echo women of color's call to action to acknowledge white women's complicity in racial oppression.

Responding to criticism by debating standpoint. Another significant discursive trend within this hashtag provided a counter to white women's claims that pointing out racism within the feminist counterpublic was antagonistic and divisive. Jackson received online backlash almost immediately after launching the hashtag, exemplified by numerous users in our sample who viewed the counter-hashtag as incendiary. For example, @keriRN, wrote: "#YesAllWomen brought us together and #YesALLWhiteWomen tore us apart." Another white Twitter user, @sunflwr1975, accused women who were drawing attention to racial power dynamics of harming the feminist movement, writing: "#YesALLWhiteWomen is why feminism is still divisive let's be #YesAllWomen and seek justice for all women." These sentiments reflect an ongoing phenomenon in feminist debates where women of color and Black women in particular are accused of "toxicity" (Risam, 2015).

The creation of the “separate” sphere of #YesAllWhiteWomen spurred tense intergroup debates between individual members of the two counterpublics. As exemplified by the exchange below, Jackson’s tweets in particular frequently incited replies from white women expressing discomfort or disagreement about her reasoning for launching #YesAllWhiteWomen.

@JennMJack: Black wmn have had to contend w/ Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel since this country’s inception. Is it #YesAllWomen? #YesALLWhiteWomen (May 26, 2014, 5:19 p.m.)

@kcaloca: @JennMJack This conversation is about what all women have in common, to unify us regardless of race or creed. #YesAllWomen (May 26, 2014, 5:23 p.m.)

@JennMJack: @kcaloca Is it really though? How are we unified when the voices of WoC [women of color] are drowned out or watered down? (May 26, 2014, 5:25 p.m.)

@kcaloca: @JennMJack How are they being drowned out or watered down? How would watering down #YesAllWomen to #YesALLWhiteWomen help anything? (May 26, 2014, 5:26 p.m.)

Exchanges like this one replicate debates that have long existed between white feminist scholars and activists and women of color scholars and activists. User @kcaloca’s attempt to enforce narrative boundaries by suggesting that acknowledging the intersectionality of women’s experiences would complicate and make meaningless any attempts toward “unification” aligns, for example, with contentions levied by the National Organization for Women against women of color and queer feminists in the 1970s (Endres, 2009). Conversely, Jackson’s fear that women of color’s voices are being “drowned” reflects an intersectional standpoint politics that recognizes that a singular group narrative that fails to name social inequalities between members of the group will perpetuate those inequalities.

Women responding to ingroup attacks on #YesAllWhiteWomen compared them to men’s critiques of #YesAllWomen. By drawing this parallel, they positioned women of color’s standpoints as just as valid and worthy of public attention as narratives in #YesAllWomen and likened white women holding and abusing discursive power within the traditional feminist counterpublic to men dominating the public sphere, implying similarly oppressive consequences for women of color. User @PayMyRant attributed both examples of resistance to the discomfort in recognizing one’s position as a member of a dominant group, tweeting: “Ignorant men reacting to #YesAllWomen=ignorant women reacting to #YesAllWhiteWomen it’s uncomfortable to face your own privilege.”

Notably, in tweets containing #YesAllWhiteWomen, #YesAllWomen was frequently included in the tweet as well, which fulfilled two discursive functions: it affirmed the tweeter’s voice and experience as part of the dominant feminist counterpublic, and increased the counternarrative’s visibility by infiltrating the more popular #YesAllWomen stream. The use of both hashtags created a bridge or transition into a specific conversation about gender-based violence affecting women of color and their erasure and exclusion from the mainstream feminist counterpublic. This capability was, however, thwarted by the lack of amplification #YesAllWhiteWomen received from the larger feminist counterpublic and the resulting lack of feminist or mainstream media attention it received.

In fact, women of color using the hashtag accurately predicted that #YesAllWhiteWomen would not receive the same attention as #YesAllWomen and critiqued white women for their complicity in this. For example, @bani_amor tweeted: “#YesALLWhiteWomen could never reach mainstream awareness the way #YesAllWomen has. Think about it. #whitefeministshighjackthemovement #again.” The final

two hashtags in this tweet reflect a common feeling of marginalization among women of color within a movement they were central to starting and the frustration young feminists of color continue to feel.

Coverage of #YesAllWhiteWomen was limited to feminist blogs and websites with a woman of color-specific focus. Blogs like Racialicious and GeekFeminism were among the few to guide readers to the #YesAllWhiteWomen hashtag. The blog post on GeekFeminism also included embedded tweets that listed specific women of color Twitter users for their contributions to #YesAllWomen (GeekFeminism, 2014). The sole mainstream, although certainly very niche, publication to mention the #YesAllWhiteWomen hashtag was the Chronicle of Higher Education in a piece mainly dedicated to #YesAllWomen. The author, only partially accurately, wrote, “some participants in the conversation have asked whether #YesAllWomen would have started had the shooting involved college women of color,” and credited Jenn M. Jackson with launching the #YesAllWhiteWomen hashtag (Vendituoli, 2014).

Conclusion

Although complementary, little scholarship has drawn explicit links between counterpublic sphere theory and standpoint theory; yet in studying the discursive and political power of #YesAllWomen and #YesAllWhiteWomen, we view this link as both natural and necessary. Certainly, the hashtag #YesAllWomen represents the discursive labor of a feminist counterpublic working to dismantle patriarchal understandings of violence while reifying a collective identity based on the shared experience of womanhood. Yet, we cannot ignore that #YesAllWhiteWomen was created as a specific call to action by members of this counterpublic whose standpoints are often made invisible in feminist spaces. Thus, if we were to focus solely on studying the most popular counterpublic discourse in this case (#YesAllWomen), we would lose the nuance and incounterpublic debates that particularly reflect the standpoints of women of color, replicating oppression and marginalization along another axis. Bridging the two here allows us to build a much needed multitheoretical framework for analyzing feminist counterpublic discourse.

Our findings demonstrate the plurality of women’s standpoints in digital counterpublics and the ways this plurality complicates and challenges the impulse to construct singular feminist narratives. In particular, it is clear that even as Twitter works as a space where the historically marginalized standpoints of women can be elevated through virality and collective advocacy, the technological architecture of the platform’s trending, retweeting, and mentioning functions, along with the ways mainstream and elite individuals and outlets legitimate the “popular,” reproduce the marginalization of intersectional experiences. Further, while Twitter allows women of color who work to elevate concerns around multiple axes of oppression to create community (through their own hashtags) and to be visible in the larger feminist counterpublic (by engaging with more popular hashtags), it also subjects these women to both the defensiveness and attacks of the larger sexist and racist culture as well as the attacks of members of their gender ingroup.

As noted by Collins (1997), the social category of “woman” is unique among social constructions such as race and class because women constitute each of these other groups, all with different (institutionally shaped) histories of access to power and privilege. She argues that, “in contrast to standpoints that must learn to accommodate differences within, feminist standpoints must be constructed *across* differences” (p. 378, emphasis added). This logic helps to explain the discursive clashes that arose under the banner of the supposedly all-inclusive #YesAllWomen: the central issue lay

not in the attempt to universalize *individual* women's experiences, but in the obscuring of issues specific to *groups* that lay claim to the category "woman."

While it is surely worth celebrating that issues and vocabulary that originate in the feminist counterpublic (e.g., rape culture, everyday sexism) are enmeshed in popular discourse to an unprecedented degree, we must continue to be critical of which feminist standpoints become mainstream, and which continue to be scorned. As Castells (2007) has noted, it is often the activist discourse that most easily aligns with or can be co-opted by dominant cultural narratives that is rewarded with widespread attention, further marginalizing more radical critiques. In this case, the lack of credit to women of color for launching and sustaining #YesAllWomen, in addition to the nearly universal failure to amplify their tweets, marginalized the discursive labor and standpoints of women of color from the counterpublic and kept these largely invisible in popular debates. Thus, projects of feminist inclusion and solidarity continue to be works in progress even in new media spaces largely celebrated for increased democratic potential.

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Notes

1. Tweets using the hashtags for trolling or abuse were manually excluded from the study. It would be worthwhile, as part of a wider analysis of counterpublic spheres as sites of contention, to study hashtags and their proneness to being hijacked by individuals aiming to maintain the dominant status quo, but that is beyond the scope of this project. Also excluded were tweets including the hashtag only because it was trending, whose content was clearly irrelevant or solicitous.
2. For example, several popular tweets drew links between the Isla Vista shooting and the 1989 Ecole Polytechnique shooting.

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