Digital Counterpublics

Society for Linguistic Anthropology
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Black Twitter in the Aftermath of Ferguson

On November 24, 2014, St Louis prosecutor McCulloch announced that the grand jury trial did not indict Officer Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown. As the news media reports and subsequent protests unfolded, the Twittersphere erupted in thousands of tweets condemning the non-indictment, especially given his self-confessed shooting of an unarmed 18-year-old. These tweets are constitutive of a digital Black counterpublic that provides a strong opposition to mainstream media reporting and analysis.

In the days that followed, online commentators critiqued the mainstream media coverage of Ferguson, the non-indictment, and other shootings of unarmed black men by white police officers. For example, following the shooting, several mainstream media organizations reported that Michael Brown was a black man, rather than an 18-year-old teenager. In addition, the media released photographs in which Brown’s image appeared physically large, wearing a Nike Air jersey, and flashing a hand sign. A hashtag (#IfTheyGunnedMeDown) emerged to critique the use of this image of Brown which de-facto represented him as a “thug” as opposed to pictures of him in his high school graduation robes or in family portraits, which might have represented him as an approachable friendly teenager (www.upworthy.com). The focus on the circulation of photos by social media users emphasizes their consciousness of how certain images, eg those marked by smiles and graduation caps, rendered Brown as humanized and valuable, while other images and discourses aligned him with a thuggish persona that framed as dangerous. For some viewers, these visual markers might have altered that perception of a tall, black body into something recognizable and into a life that matters. These critiques were generated by what has come to be known as “Black Twitter”, which is a controversial term for the online Black community on Twitter©, where African Americans are most active but other groups also participate (see Bonilla and Rosa 2015.) A Washington Post article (January 20, 2014) describes Black Twitter as a virtual community ready to hashtag out a response to cultural issues, specifically dealing with the value and validity of black life. When I read this article and others like it, I wondered: does black Twitter constitute a modern-day counterpublic?

Today, the public sphere revolves around the inescapable 24-hour news cycle and the daily online periodicals circulated worldwide. Admittedly this notion of the news media as the public sphere, in the Habermasian sense, is debatable given the constraints wrought by the market and concentrated corporate ownership. However the mainstream media continues to provide the most-circulated discourses regarding current events—the Michael Brown case in Ferguson, the Eric Gamer case in Staten Island, et cetera. While the African-American community has a long history of asserting voice and making connections between the social and the political since slavery, perhaps what makes this online counterpublic remarkable is how it is showcased in a digital modality, which is accessible and observable by non-members (who can then become members if they would like).

Despite the brevity and ephemerality of 140-character limits on Twitter, there is something of anthropological import that we must attend to in the political statements circulated online and their relationships to other media and socio-political events. If the public sphere is found in the mainstream news media, we find the counterpublic in the interstices of social media where individuals link political statements about police brutality to hashtags about popular culture, movies, TV shows, and music.
For example, as an avid fan of Shonda Rhimes’ shows, I regularly follow the tweets for #HTGAWM. For those in the know, #HTGAWM stands for “How to Get Away with Murder” and the pound sign marks the metadata tag for any word/phrase on the social media networking service Twitter, as well as links it to similarly marked conversations on the same topic. Every Thursday night during the show’s first season, beginning on September 25 until November 20, 2014, fans tweeted ferociously, tracking each plot twist. The show follows a law professor as she mentors a group of first year law students competing for a coveted internship with her office.

The show managed to capture the imagination of audiences, specifically because of a correlation to broader sociopolitical events that were taking place simultaneously. For example, in late October, I began to notice a barrage of tweets about #HTGAWM co-occurring with #Ferguson, #MikeBrown, etc. Again Black Twitter users expressed a connection between HTGAWM and the critique of Darren Wilson’s non-indictment as a way to literally get away with murder.

Through the co-occurrence of #HTGAWM with #ferguson or #mikebrown, Twitter users create a new counter public linking up fans of the TV show with other protestors and critics of the mainstream news media. In fact, by citing a network television show in parallel with the police brutality cases in Ferguson, Staten Island, and elsewhere, the metadata tags quickly become politicized slogans for the movement by helping to sustain a social media buzz even when mainstream media was not actively pushing the issue.

By analyzing multiple mediated events in dialogue with one another, perhaps these tweets make the political an immanent feature of private leisure life. In danah boyd’s discussion of networked publics, she defines the term as a public that is restructured by networked technologies and as an “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.” In this sense, we can understand the phenomenon known as Black Twitter to be a sort of networked counterpublic where the only entry fee is “knowledge” of the hashtags and what they organize (WashPo). Yet “knowledge” is never disembodied, meaning that counterpublics come into being through an address to indefinite strangers who have a particular “stakes” in the event or issue (Wamer, 2002). These counter publics are socially identified by their participation in the discourse and as such the co-occurring hashtags signal an understanding of how politics, entertainment, and news align in social media.

Furthermore, the cheeky but powerful use of the #HTGAWM speaks to an older ambivalence around the validity of state-based justice systems within the black community. In Racial Paranoia, Jackson explains the long-standing belief by African-Americans that racial inequality is not disconnected from official policies that continue to be inflected along racial lines. In some ways, the bundled hashtags express a bitter wryness that in the end, even if the system claims that justice is blind, it appears to not be race-blind.

A genuine concern arises when we consider how this kind of social media commentary is demonstrating an irony that laminates the justice system, that seems to exist only for show, with a fictional show that mirrors too closely the tragedies of real life for a marginalized population. The purpose of a counter public is to create a common space for those who feel estranged from the public sphere—a space that protests and laments a world in which some people are getting away with murder. In today’s moment, the social and political importance of the Black Twitter discourse should not be trivialized or underestimated. #blacklivesmatter.

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