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The original publication is: Chapter 4, Empowering or silencing: The #MeToo campaign in retrospect by McCarron, Jemma and Mitra, Barbara; in Gender in the Digital Sphere: Representation, Engagement, and Expression edited by Barbara Mitra; Sharon Young And Mehreen Mirza, 2024, reproduced by permission of Rowman & Littlefield [<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781538155684/Gender-in-the-Digital-Sphere-Representation-Engagement-and-Expression>] [<https://rowman.com/>].

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Public Sphere, Social Media and the #MeToo Campaign

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On 15 October 2017, following accusations of sexual assault against American film producer Harvey Weinstein, Alyssa Milano tweeted: “If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted, write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet” (Milano 2017). By the end of the first week, over 1.7 million tweets using the #MeToo hashtag had been shared around the globe. This hashtag campaign can help us explore the role of Twitter as a public sphere and forum for social activism or hashtag activism (Augenbraun 2011).

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Pinterest, LinkedIn, TikTok and emerging technologies are used by more than 4.7 billion people worldwide (Global Social Media Statistics 2022). The private ownership and profit focus of social media are often glossed over, but need to be acknowledged when considering these platforms as virtual public spheres (Habermas 1989).

By enabling navigation of previously challenging barriers such as geography, language and social status, the hope is that the Internet will facilitate democracy (Wellman et al 2001), in part by providing opportunities for a new form of political and social advocacy (Blanchard et al. 2008; Dixon 2014). However, others contend this as overly optimistic, especially with respect to online advocacy. Morozov (2009) talks about lazy activism or *slacktivism* (slacker activism) which he argues might give the feeling of engaging in productive activism, but actually has little or no tangible impact. This includes micro-actions such as liking or sharing a post encouraging individuals to engage online rather than in offline actions such as attending a protest or writing a letter to an MP. Critiques of virtual advocacy and online activism, argue that they potentially undermine and threaten meaningful support for causes in the physical world.

Twitter is a popular source of news and celebrity gossip but is also increasingly a platform for political and cultural debates (Papachrissi 2002). Superficially, at least, Twitter promises the opportunity for genuinely open debates across geographical, political, and social borders, giving the impression of an environment conducive to the development of a modern public sphere. Social media's virtual spaces appear to offer marginalised groups – who have access – a place to gather, discuss and raise awareness of topics that mainstream media would typically exclude (Blanchard et al. 2008; Munro 2013; Dixon 2014; Loney-Howes et al. 2021) and we have seen an increase in hashtag activism over the past decade. One of the most impactful examples of hashtag activism has been #MeToo. This research examines the most

popular #MeToo tweets across three data sets, between 15 October 2017 and 30 November 2019, to explore whether these hopes or fears are justified. Through the lens of the viral #MeToo campaign, we set out to establish whether social media platforms can provide spaces for free democratic debates and explore whether Twitter is a modern-day public sphere.

The Public Sphere and Counter Spheres

The public sphere (Kuper and Kuper 2004) is commonly associated with German sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas. His concept of the “bourgeoise public sphere” consisted of spaces outside the private sphere of family homes. Individuals came together in public spaces such as coffee houses, where intellectual, middle-class white men discussed and debated the topics of the day (Habermas 1989). Such coffee house debates were credited with empowering individuals to hold the ruling classes to account (Eder 2006) and in some cases political change. The public sphere is seen as integral to the existence of a participatory democracy (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum 2018) and enfranchised society (O’Mahony 2021). Ultimately, Habermas argued that the public sphere became a space which “serves the arcane policies of special interests” through “public relations work” (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1964, 55) in the pursuit of public recognition. As the press became more commercialised it also led to a “refeudalization of the public sphere” (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1964, 54) and subsequently, less conducive to public debate.

In thinking about the public sphere in relation to social media, in theory at least, social media is “embedded with opportunities for free and equal participation” (Demirhan and Cakir-Demirhan 2015, 308), even if only superficially. Social media platforms have themselves become more commercialised (Dahlgren 2005, McChesney 2015) leading to an emphasis on profit and advertising, similar to Habermas’s (1964) observations of the public sphere. More recently, Habermas noted that “social media also foster a further advance towards the commodification of lifeworld contexts” (Habermas 2022, 163). In fact, the impact of the Internet on public debate could be over-hyped (Hindman, 2009) as people find themselves in echo chambers (Colleoni, Rozza, and Arvidsson 2014) rather than freely discussing issues of the day. Rather than providing a level playing field we find many offline hierarchies and inequalities recreated online (Mittra and Golz 2016).

This does not, however, mean that there is no space for public debate online. Smaller counter public spheres (Fenton and Downey 2003) arise during periods of instability, in response to a growing distrust of established systems and authorities. Counter public spheres occur outside the central sphere – like eddies in water which ebb and flow. These are small

groups that coalesce around a common goal, aim or belief but impact the broader public debate (Dahlgren 2005), and actively challenge the dominant sphere(s) while opening ways for those groups to collaborate across geographical and social borders.

Social Media: Twitter and Hashtag Politics

It is estimated that around half the world's population will be engaging with some form of social media everyday by 2025 (Statista 2020). Twitter has an estimated 330 million active monthly users around the world (Lin 2021) with just under one third female (Statista 2022) although there are significant geographical variations. For example, in the Philippines women account for 76.2% of Twitter users and in Guinea they make up less than 15% (Statista 2022). In the U.S., the most prolific tweeting country in the world (Statista 2020) 29.6% of the 19.8 million active Twitter users are female (Aslam 2023 and Datareportal, 2022).

This chapter draws on analysis of Tweets gathered via Twitter's native software which displays the 'top tweets', i.e., the most popular, according to Twitter's criteria. The research criteria consisted of tweets in English with a minimum of 800 'likes', 500+ retweets shared (See Table 1: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria) as directed by the University Ethics Committee. The resulting dataset primarily consisted of tweets from US and UK users. The hashtag went global during the dates analysed, however, over the three years studied, it was localised and adapted to better suit specific regional or current issues. For example, there were some tweets that met the criteria relating to a #MeToo scandal in India, these were removed from the data as, while they informed the global nature of the movement, they risked confusing the overall data as much of the discussion took place in other languages, so was not represented in this dataset. Although it is not possible to explore here such tweets would be an interesting avenue of research particularly with reference to how English-centric campaigns include, alienate or silence non-English speaking Twitter users. Unlike other forms of social media, Twitter users can be anonymous and are not required to use real names, nor are they restricted to single accounts, as is the case with Facebook. Twitter offers a one-to-many system, with no reciprocal relationships needed (Colleoni, Rozza, and Arvidsson 2014) and this has significant ramifications for Twitter as a public sphere and international democracy. Like many other social media platforms, Twitter users curate their feed by only seeing the tweets of accounts they 'follow' unless they intentionally seek out tweets via keywords. This is further complicated by the increasing involvement of platform driven algorithms, linked closely to advertising, which seek to present users with content that

may appeal to them. Thus, Twitter lends itself to creating echo chambers where individuals only see things that reinforce, rather than challenge, their worldview.

Much of this is only made possible due to the hashtag (#). Hashtags enable the organisation and grouping of tweets using relevant words or phrases helping Twitter users bring some level of organisation to the 500 million daily tweets. The hashtag is used widely across multiple social media platforms to help messages reach a broader audience. They are so popular that they have made their way into daily language offline. Hashtags monitor and promote advertising campaigns (Nam, Joshi, and Kannan 2017), highlight news stories (#BreakingNews) and facilitate research and networks. They have become part of the communication process, driven by different motivations (Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt 2019), such as personalising tweets, engaging with current trends and of course, reaching potential audiences.

In 2011 the term hashtag activism was coined (Augenbraun 2011) to describe how these hashtags create debate and raise awareness of an issue (Tombleson and Wolf 2017). It is now a popular and recognised method of campaigning and online activism. The word slacktivism draws on the context of lazy activism or ‘slacker’ activism (Morozov 2009) which can be perceived as less important than offline physical activism. Associated with this, is the perception that clicking in support of something, stifles more productive action because the clicking satisfies the need to engage with a particular campaign as a feel-good factor is achieved (Christensen 2011). Those who engage in slacktivism perceive that clicking on a link or sharing content has real impact (Kwak et al. 2018) which is difficult to measure. In fact, impact (or offline activism) may take months or even years to translate into the offline world. Thus, the distinction between activism and slacktivism is complex, dynamic, and blurred (Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya 2017). Individuals might start the process of interrogating their stance on something through the clicks. Hashtag activism can also raise awareness of an issue or a campaign and may impact others to join and become active campaigners offline. Therefore, whilst slacktivism often is perceived negatively, it could be argued that it is impossible to measure the impact that such online activism might have in the longer term.

This is similar to virtue signalling – highlighting virtuous behaviour to others (Wallace, Buil, and De Chernatory 2020) and aligning oneself with particular issues. People click ‘like’ because they want to be seen to be supporting a particular campaign or issue. This conspicuous virtue signalling sees morality communicated to others (Brown et al. 2022). Yet virtue signalling has its social rewards, so whilst the behaviour may not be altruistic, it can

still be a pathway to further and more impactful cause engagement and “an invaluable instrument for social change” (Westra 2021,177).

Women and the Public Sphere

Critics point out that the public sphere has a history of not being inclusive (O’Hallarn et al. 2018). The exclusion of women, and particularly their voice, has continued more recently in relation to limiting their representation in the media. Gerbner notes that representation in different media forms amounted to ‘symbolic annihilation’ (Gerbner and Gross 1976, 182) where women were limited to passive roles or excluded altogether. Symbolic annihilation describes the absence or distortion of representation of women (Stanley 2012). Women are more present in the public sphere today but the media “continues to underrepresent women and/or portray women’s lives and their accomplishments in stereotypically sexist ways, such as with an overt focus on women’s appearance and sexuality rather than on their professional value” (Mir and Paschyn 2018). Tuchman (1978) found that media representation of women and their symbolic annihilation in media negatively impacted their perceived value in wider society. This went on to affect their actual contributions in the real world. The question is whether social media, where users create and direct the content themselves, offers an environment that can derail and challenge the symbolic annihilation seen in traditional media, giving women and minorities a voice There is though, the issue of how much credence is given to these voices and whether they may be speaking but still marginalised.

There is evidence that these platforms are not always “safe spaces” for marginalised groups. There are examples of both organic and organised backlashes, and rather than freely discursive debates there is often little tolerance for differing points of view (Kruse et al. 2018). One such example was a short lived #HimToo (Boyle and Rathnayake 2019) campaign which formed as a backlash to the perceived threat from #MeToo. Retaliation, internalised surveillance practices and even platform algorithms may limit and negatively influence the free exchange of ideas. The apprehension of harassment and trolling may prevent voices being raised in the first place, excluding some women from engaging at all. Therefore, despite the opportunities of this social media, it is clear that symbolic annihilation is still an ever-present reality even if it is not actively pursued.

Methods

The aim of this research was to gather Tweets in relation to the #MeToo campaign. Ethical approval was gained to include tweets from verified users (celebrities and public figures) and

those with over 5000 followers at the time of data collection. This was before Musk's takeover of Twitter and before the changes to verification process (of purchasing a blue verification tick). The algorithms used by Twitter led to which Tweets are shown and thus which can be collected. Tweets were gathered using Twitters' native software and search functions and search criteria included #MeToo tweets with a minimum of 800 favourites and at least 500 retweets and to compare 2017, 2018 and 2019.

This campaign's first tweet was on 15 October 2017 and led to the first relatively short time period that met the criteria above (15 October 2017 to 22 October 2017). After this time, as the momentum waned, the date range needed to be extended in order to meet the criteria leading to the second time period covering 1 November 2017 to 30 October 2018. The third and final time period consisted of 1 November 2018 to 30 October 2019. The final dataset consisted of 75 Tweets from 2017, 88 from 2018 and 86 from 2019. These were gathered via copy and paste into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

<Table 5. 1 near here>

This research was carried out using thematic analysis as identified and detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Close analysis of the gathered tweets was undertaken using an inductive and reflexive approach which allows the data to speak for itself as themes emerge from the text. Tweets were coded and collated as themes which were reviewed in relation to relevant literature. These themes formed patterns which offered insight into how the Twitter #MeToo debate influenced attitudes both within Twitter and beyond.

Findings

Broadly, the core themes related to revelations about sexual assault, politics and silencing and from these sub themes were developed. In the case of revelations sub themes included sexual assault, rape, harassment, assault (general) and abuse. In the case of politics, sub themes included political agendas, Trump and Democrats, Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh, Biden, and Pelosi. Finally, in the case of silencing the sub themes included being scared to Tweet, minimising #MeToo, victim blaming, and silencing activities. Many of these themes were present throughout the data, but evolved over time to become more or less prominent as offline events shaped the online debate. Below we explore some of the core themes in more detail.

Core Theme: Revelation

The first week of the data revealed the core theme of revelation, which was central to the initial #MeToo tweets analysed. During this period individuals shared their experiences and highlighted the enormity of the issue. Within this core theme are several sub themes which illustrate the nuance of the debate:

<Table 5.2 near here>

Core Theme: Politics

Politics is another key theme which featured, with notable variations, over the three years. Clearly the campaign moved from individuals commenting in relation to their personal #MeToo moments to commenting on others' experiences – particularly political figures. According to one tweet “Any person who cannot admit that the #MeToo movement has fully deteriorated into a political weapon is either a liar or a coward” (Twitter 54 2018¹). There were individual accusations and counter-accusations of sexual misdemeanours relating to Donald Trump, Stormy Daniels, Cory Booker, and the allegations between Dr Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh, amongst others. All of this was set within the wider context of the leadup to the 2020 US elections. The data shows increasing politicalisation of #MeToo tweets and the hijacking of the movement for political point scoring. It is difficult to disentangle the politicisation of the #MeToo campaign and the US 2020 elections. However, some researchers have found that the #MeToo movement may have led to increased engagement in political activities and raised overall “awareness and concern about sexual harassment and assault” (Castle et al 2020, 936).

<Table 5.3 near here>

Theme - A Scary time for young men

During a 2018 interview on CNN Trump declared it was "a very scary time for young men in America" (CNN, 2018). This exact phrase even came up in one of the tweets and captures one of the core themes from the 2018 and 2019 tweets. In 2017 suggestions of false accusations or overreach of the movement did not feature, but this changed in the following years. Such concerns and counter accusations became increasingly common in the 2018 and 2019 data. Over a fifth of tweets in 2018, rising to almost 28% in 2019, highlighted concerns that men were being unfairly accused and even bullied by the #MeToo twitter campaign with real-world repercussions. These tweets implied that false accusations were commonplace, however, in reality prosecutions for false rape accusations are considerably rare, less than 1% in the UK (Crown Prosecution Service 2020) and 2–10% in the US (Lisak et al. 2010). Using

this terminology to sow doubt regarding the revelations around #MeToo was a proactive backlash and attempt at silencing.

<Table 5.4 near here>

Theme: Silencing

The theme of silencing was present in all three years to some extent. Tweets about silencing referred both to events which occurred as part of the #MeToo movement and examples of scenarios when individuals tried to speak out about sexual assault or harassment in the past. For example, “A well-meaning mentor told me at 25 that people couldn’t handle hearing about sexual abuse and it would sink my ministry. It didn’t. #MeToo” (Twitter 29 2017).

In the 2018 and 2019 data there was an increase in tweets which engaged in victim blaming. For example, the actions and behaviour of the victims was called into question, especially where there were delays in reporting or alcohol involved and there was a rise in hashtags, such as #SafetyTipsForLadies. It is possible that the revelations of #MeToo were too challenging for some who preferred to deny their validity rather than confront the social implications. Regardless of the reasons, prejudice against victims of crime is a damaging form of silencing and prevents people from speaking out or leaving abusive situations or relationships (Cravens, Whiting, and Aamar 2015).

This disbelief also manifested in a debate regarding what constituted a ‘valid’ sexual harassment scenario. In some cases, users dismissed and undermined #MeToo experiences, often while claiming to support and protect the movement and its aims:

Some jerk you met on a date or some creep in the office who tried to get too close, doesn’t qualify as sexual harassment. Unless the person didn’t back off when you said NO, please don’t trivialise what women are going through with sexual predators esp at work (Twitter 98 2018).

This represented gatekeeping and tone policing. Where tweeters endeavoured to set boundaries around who could speak and about what in relation to #MeToo. The data showed examples of fear of this response having a silencing impact for example “I didn’t tweet #MeToo bc I was scared it was attention-seeking or that my assaults weren’t Bad Enough, which feels like part of the problem” (Twitter 56 2017).

As well as the stories that were being shared, the types of people who were given space to speak were also moderated. For example, Black activist, Tarana Burke is the originator of the #MeToo hashtag a decade before it went viral, she endeavoured to raise awareness of the harassment experienced specifically by black women, yet her voice was

initially lost in the early days of #MeToo. Although the topic of racism does come up, it is not in relation to the lack of diversity within the mainstream #MeToo Twitter movement. The groups at highest risk of harassment and assault, women of colour, disabled women, indigenous women, transgender women and working-class women were barely acknowledged. Within this data, silencing of women's voices is taking place both proactively and passively, but despite that, the #MeToo campaign still went on to have significant social and tangible impact both online and offline.

<Table 5.5 near here>

Discussion

The core focus of this research was to understand, through the lens of #MeToo, whether Twitter can act as a public sphere, particularly for groups that have previously been excluded. Over time, there was a clear shift in themes around the #MeToo debate. The #MeToo campaign enabled re-evaluation to take place, particularly in 2017. Despite accusations of slacktivism, the #MeToo campaign raised awareness, encouraged debate and discussion, and gave women a place to raise their voices. The political tweets emerged as the US presidential elections loomed and became quite specific, often focusing on individuals rather than the wider issues. Hijacking the #MeToo campaign for political motivations may have reduced the impact of the Twitter campaign, but it may also have enabled individuals to take advantage of the political climate and highlight specific issues. Such political contexts could also enable further campaigns to be launched by piggybacking on other campaigns and reaching new audiences.

The analysis revealed an increase in silencing behaviour, which presents as an attempt of modern-day symbolic annihilation of women (Tuchman 1978). We saw examples of women being dismissed, victims being blamed, and the issue of sexual assault and harassment being undermined and discredited. Over time there are examples of a change in tone from that of listening to women and believing their stories to concern that the #MeToo movement was overstepping its bounds and 'ruining' men's lives. The research shows that there was an increase in anti #MeToo rhetoric and questioning of the veracity of the campaign's claims. The #MeToo movement however, continued to contribute to informed debate and engagement, giving voice to those who were previously voiceless.

There have been significant repercussions beyond the online campaign, including prosecutions and policy changes as a result of #MeToo. At the end of 2018, following employee action, Google, Facebook, Airbnb, and eBay announced that they would be ending

forced arbitration in sexual harassment claims and removing NDAs in settlements. The US Congress introduced legislation requiring members to pay sexual misconduct settlements from their own pockets and removed forced mediation.

A report from equalities campaign group, the Fawcett Society (2018), found attitudes to sexual assault and harassment had changed since #MeToo went viral. Thirty six percent of women and men had heard of the campaign, and 38% altered the way they thought about the issue and adapted their behaviour. Just under a third (31%) had spoken to someone of the opposite sex about sexual harassment due to the campaign, and over half (53%) of women and men agreed that there had been a shift in perceptions of acceptable behaviour.

In early 2019, Pope Francis formally acknowledged the sexual abuse of nuns by priests for the first time (NPR 2019). In May 2019, the US Military introduced a new programme to identify and manage repeat offenders of sexual assault (New York Times 2019). In the UK, the Government Equalities Office credited the #MeToo movement with helping to "bring sexual harassment to the forefront of public awareness by highlighting its prevalence and impact" (Government Equalities Office 2019). China introduced a new Civil Code in January 2021, which defined sexual harassment for the first time and made provision for individuals to take civil action and, crucially, compels organisations to adopt "reasonable measures" to prevent sexual harassment (China Justice Observer 2021). The #MeToo debate is also credited with re-invigorating Moroccan activists to make a final push resulting in a new law criminalising violence against women finally coming into effect (Arab News 2018).

The descriptive nature of tweets and hashtags combined with the connection to an international network offers a particularly interesting platform for feminist activism. Raising social awareness around issues of sexual harassment and assault often relies heavily on personal narratives (Clark 2016) and to this end, Twitter has the potential to offer a space for "victims of inequality" (Dixon 2014) to share and discuss their experiences with one another and a wider, broader international audience. Under the right circumstances, social media are powerful spaces for demanding meaningful change.

"Democracy ultimately resides with the citizens who engage in talk with each other" (Jackson and Valentine 2014,194) and at first glance it appears that Twitter provides the channel, or sphere, for this to take place. Look a little closer and the imperfections come into view. Twitter is designed in a way which actively facilitates and encourages users to create bubbles within which they can by choice or accident be exposed to a limited number of perspectives. This can lead to reinforcement of world views and a reduction of challenge to ways of thinking. In some cases, these bubbles end up as sub-spheres, in others echo

chambers (Colleoni, Rozza, and Arvidsson 2014). If we accept that democracy does indeed function best when many people have their say, then the Twittersphere may be more of a hindrance than a help. In addition to involving many people, a public sphere needs "repeated and open-ended interaction" (Bohman 2004, 134) between those people. Something akin to a town hall or community meeting place. At best, Twitter is a collection of micro public spheres or communities, more likely Twitter is simply a series of networks, either way it is not a broader community (Bauman 2019).

This research shows an ongoing, open-ended discussion around the #MeToo hashtag which gave voice to many people and momentum to a movement with repercussions and impacts offline. However, even within this space, we see the inequalities of the offline world replicated, the debate is dominated by a minority, who also hold power and influence offline. Those individuals are supported by algorithms and financial and technical barriers that reinforce those inequalities directly and indirectly. Finally, there are groups of individuals who endeavour to manage the debate through gatekeeping and trolling. In reality, Twitter is more akin to a private club, that anyone can visit and even speak but only those with the appropriate privilege, self-awareness, confidence and a large following such as Alyssa Milano, will be heard, while others, like Tarana Burke, will be drowned out. The hard truth is that too many voices are silenced or unable to access the platform for Twitter to be a modern-day public sphere.

Conclusion

Citizen debate and engagement is essential for democracy (Dahlgren 2005; Jackson and Valentine 2014) and social media platforms appear a promising space where such democratic debate can take place. Yet, we are also witnessing a rise of increasingly polarised rhetoric and activities that seems to flourish on these very platforms. Twitter is not a level playing field, instead it can replicate and in some cases nurture offline inequalities. Many voices are silenced or unable even to access the platform. The barriers to access are, however, ever decreasing as internet connectivity becomes more widely available through cheaper networks and mobile technologies. The enormous success and offline world impact of the #MeToo Twitter movement shows that social media platforms are enabling users to influence the collective narrative. While the privileged voices are still often heard first and loudest, other groups are beginning to carve out space to gather, mobilise and tell their stories.

Twitter and other social media platforms are not yet modern-day public spheres, and there is a risk that by behaving as though they are, they will never become genuinely positive

spaces for debate and discussion. However, they do already offer an environment for social movement mobilisation and that makes it more important than ever to understand social media platforms and the groups that use them.

We cannot ignore the implications of a movement which set out to highlight the prevalence of the harassment of women and girls, went viral, influenced a debate about power and gender inequalities around the globe and resulted in tangible actions for change. Hashtag activism is many things, it ranges from likes and retweets through to public truth telling and in too many cases, putting one's safety on the line. It is likely that even the smallest acts of virtual advocacy are not 'lazy activism' but instead the first step on a longer journey. Keeping initial barriers to activism low may encourage more people to engage with social advocacy, which could go some way to counteract political and social disengagement and rekindle offline communities. Online activism should not be dismissed as just lazy activism but can be a potential force for positive change.

Bullet Point Summary

- The public sphere itself excluded certain groups – women, working classes, minorities, those without property, those with disabilities and children.
- Twitter seems to promise the opportunity for debates across boundaries, raising awareness of issues despite the negative associations of slacktivism.
- Social media's virtual spaces can offer marginalised groups a place to gather, discuss and raise awareness of topics that mainstream media would typically exclude.
- The #MeToo campaign included Tweets relating to sexual assault in the initial stages and then moved towards political Tweets, but the increased silencing behaviours tend to challenge the notion of Twitter as a genuine public sphere.
- Twitter's potential as a public sphere and platform for activism means that attention should be paid to who manages it and how.

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Endnotes

¹ In order to keep the Tweets anonymised and to comply with ethical approval, the tweets have been numbered instead of names being used.