

Chapter 22

Collective Voices Online: Discursive Activism in #MeToo

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ABSTRACT

The chapter investigates how women use the practice of speaking out in their activism to bring issues that are significant to them from the private sphere into the public sphere. Specifically, it focuses on analyzing how this was achieved in the case of the #MeToo movement, taken as the most prominent example of activism against sexual harassment in recent years. Using the conceptual tool of counter public sphere developed by Nancy Fraser, the chapter examines two relevant events from #MeToo: the sexual misconduct allegations against actor Aziz Ansari and the circulation of the so-called “Shitty Media Men” list.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in October 2017, the voices of millions of women emerged to fight against sexual harassment and sexual violence. The hashtag #MeToo has collected over 19 million posts on social media, expressing a wide range of intents. Women participated in the movement with the aim of making their voices heard, to raise awareness, and to support one another.

This process can be compared to the classical feminist practices of consciousness-raising and speak-outs. On the one hand, women construct their own spaces for the group sharing of their experiences and for the building of collective consciousness. On the other hand, they also aim to have an impact on wider society, by having their experiences recognized as valid and inequality framed as a social problem.

This chapter focuses on this dynamic between feminist spaces and the mainstream public sphere. Using the concept of subaltern counterpublic developed by Nancy Fraser (1990), the chapter focuses on the #MeToo movement to understand how women speaking out against different forms of sexual violence influences public discourse of feminist issues. Because of the central role played by digital media in the unfolding of #MeToo, an overview of the main characteristics of digital feminist activism is provided. Two relevant #MeToo cases are then selected for analysis: the sexual misconduct allegations

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against actor Aziz Ansari and the circulation of the so-called “Shitty Media Men” list. Through a critical reconstruction of these events, the chapter concludes that, despite the limits imposed by the commercial logics at play, these incidents have made a feminist contribution in public discourse.

FEMINIST COUNTER PUBLIC SPHERES

In liberal democracies, the division between private and public sphere has historically coincided with unequal relations between women and men. For women, being kept out of the decision-making sphere of political discussion meant continued subordination, since they were hindered in their capacity to bring their own needs and interests forward in order to initiate social change. The different characterization of female and male subjectivity in classical Western political thought has meant that women and men were ascribed to different social spheres, resulting in different roles in history and in the political arena (Pateman, 1988; Landes, 1998). Whilst men have been the protagonists of the process of civilization, able to transcend nature through the construction of culture and society, women have been relegated to the a-historical realm of domesticity. As Seyla Benhabib (1986) observes,

It is the very constitution of a sphere of discourse which bands the female from history to the realm of nature, from the light of the public to the interior of the household, from the civilizing effect of culture to the repetitious burden of nurture and reproduction. The public sphere, the sphere of justice, moves in historicity, whereas the private sphere, the sphere of care and intimacy, is unchanging and timeless (p. 410).

Challenging this division between private and public sphere has been one of the key objectives of feminist movements since the late 1960s in advanced industrial societies, as feminists contended that the subordination of women was deeply intertwined with their relegation to domestic life (Landes, 1998). This view was famously condensed in the slogan “the personal is political”, which served to highlight how women’s domestic role was politically and socially constructed to perpetuate their subordination in society. Consequently, the slogan has since been used by feminists to emphasize that “private” matters should be brought into the public sphere and become “political” rather than “personal”.

In order to analyze how feminist movements operate in relation to the mainstream public sphere, it is especially useful to employ the concept of “subaltern counterpublics” that was coined by Nancy Fraser in her seminal critique of the classical Habermasian ideal of the public sphere (Fraser 1990). She defines subaltern counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). When socially subordinated groups have their own space for discussion, this can be turned into a source of empowerment, by allowing them to strengthen their identities, formalize their needs, and, more generally institutionalize their existence. The example of second-wave feminist counterpublics in the U.S. demonstrates the crucial role of women’s separate spheres for developing new language and concepts, including terms such as “sexism”, “sexual harassment” and “marital, date, and acquaintance rape” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). These were coined by feminists in counter public spheres to frame issues that were significant to them, and that they were able to recognize in their collective discussion, at a time when the mainstream public did not yet have a name for them. Subaltern counterpublics therefore contribute to a “widening of discursive

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