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Rhetorical Futures

The Rhetoric of the #MeToo Movement: Will It Survive?

The date Harvey Weinstein's jury verdict was delivered and made known to the public, February 24th, 2020, Twitter was going crazy. Amidst the myriad of Tweets expressing sympathies for the victims, expressing unhappiness with the conviction, expressing anger for the legal system, there were a handful of disturbing ones. Below are some of these:





Another Tweet expressed the hope that Weinstein would get a taste of his own medicine in prison and be raped or assaulted.

When we as a society decide that people who do bad things should die or should be assaulted, we have shown that it is possible for someone to “deserve” those things. We are conceding that you actually can be deserving of death or severe sexual abuse, and that *we* get to decide who the people deserving of those things are.

Harvey Weinstein is popularly thought of as the man whose actions led to the start of the #Me Too movement, an online campaign where survivors of gender violence share their stories and/or express solidarity with other survivors with the #MeToo signifier. Jodi Kantor and Megan

Twohey famously published an expose in the New York Times about Weinstein's abuse of power, systematic sexual harassment, and silencing of women over years of his career—and the movement took off from there (Burgess, 343). As Sarah K. Burgess writes in her article “Between the Desire for Law and the Law of Desire: #MeToo and the Cost of Telling the Truth Today,” this movement holds the potential to rewrite possible futures (Burgess, 343). By this, she means a future where abuse and harassment claims are taken seriously, where women are believed and respected, and where the political climate surrounding these issues is not so turbulent. Unfortunately, it does not appear that we are on the right track to arrive at a future such as this. Instead, the trajectory we are currently on positions us in a polarized, antagonistic, and stagnant society. Burgess acknowledges how the #MeToo movement lends itself to elements of tribalism and polarizes thought between groups (Burgess, 343). The movement creates two groups—good and bad—and the qualification comes from which group you are in (Burgess, 343). The future that #MeToo supporters are vying for, one of legal and social justice and less pervasiveness of gender violence, will not be successful if the movement continues to exclude certain voices and groups. #MeToo is an echo chamber currently (Burgess, 360), and echo chambers cannot be effective at systematic change. What specific rhetorical elements of the #MeToo movement are inhibiting its mission? Primarily, its delivery solely on social media, the group dynamics it fosters, and its binary language. On top of these, the post-truth society we are all living in further hurts the movement's progress.

It is first pressing to address the platform of this movement, as it has been primarily housed on various social media outlets. There are affordances and shortcomings of using digital media to progress a social movement like #MeToo. James E. Porter's piece “Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric” delineates five components of digital delivery that are important

to analyze when delivering a message online (208). These five elements are body/identity, distribution/circulation, access/accessibility, interaction, and economics (Porter, 208). Of particular importance in the context of the #MeToo movement are body/identity and interaction. Body and identity concerns how certain identities like gender are performed and represented online (Porter, 208). Through the #MeToo movement and the thousands of posts that primarily women (though of course also men and non-binary individuals) have made, there has been a clear shift in how women are represented in digital media. Women have shifted how they perform their gender; they are taking up (virtual) space, speaking their truths, and demanding to be heard. While I absolutely support all of these sentiments, I am afraid we are on a path where the individuals outside of the #MeToo movement could become overwhelmed with these intense stories and truth-telling, and that they may decide to actively disengage with those who are in the movement. It is necessary for the shouting to continue on the part of equal treatment and respect for women, but we need to consider who we are yelling at. And more importantly, is yelling the best way to get them to listen? Interaction is closely tied to this phenomenon. Porter describes interaction as “the range and types of engagement” between people and/or information that the digital delivery allows for (208). A majority of posts for the #MeToo movement can be found on Facebook or Instagram; both of these platforms direct an audience’s focus towards the original post itself, with the ability to click and see who “liked” or commented on it. In many ways this is conducive to the movement—the stories people are sharing are the primary focus and are not as easily undermined by any critical comments. However, social media comment threads are a dangerous place. The relative anonymity and low-risk nature of online comments lend themselves to elements of demagoguery, a concept Patricia Roberts-Miller coins in her book *Demagoguery and Democracy*. Demagoguery simplifies the world into good and bad people,

where of course the good are us and the bad are them (24). Online commenting often breaks down into an us versus them mentality, good versus bad people—and in this case, supporters and opponents of the #MeToo movement. Instead of understanding the complexity of issues surrounding gender violence (of which there are countless), we have categorized ourselves into groups that set up camp on either extreme. Social media platforms only exacerbate these polarized thoughts and beliefs—which is why housing a movement almost entirely online, like the #MeToo movement does, can be ineffective.

The language inherent in the #MeToo movement also offers challenges to the movement itself. The language of gender violence tends to be binary. Examples of these all too prevalent binaries are victim/perpetrator, man/woman, yes/no, consent/rape (Burgess, 353). While these classifications can be helpful, and in some cases necessary, for understanding stories of gender violence, they are also simplistic and polarizing. The main takeaway I have from my three years working to educate college undergraduate students on gender violence prevention is that these situations are rarely black and white. The majority of cases happen in the gray area, and that is why parsing out these issues can be so difficult. There are real consequences of employing binary language—it excludes unstereotypical victims and perpetrators, instances without a clear yes or no, and people who feel their story does not mirror the traditionally understood “rape scenario.” If the creators and supporters of the #MeToo movement want to continue to advance their objectives forward in society, then they must break out of the chains of binary language and acknowledge the countless nuances that often plague these situations.

Another element of present-day society that complicates the #MeToo movement is the post-truth world we are living in. Post-truth refers to a phenomenon where facts and objectivity are less influential on public opinion than pathos is, namely emotional appeals and strong

personal beliefs (Burgess, 355). The emergence of a post-truth society has only become more apparent over time, specifically with the introduction of the Internet. Eric King Watts describes post-truth as “a kind of excess and excessiveness wherein grammars of common sense making are overrun (441)” in his piece “Zombies are Real: Fantasies, Conspiracies, and the Post-truth Wars.” In a world like this, facts, truth, logic—none of these prevail when challenged by strong emotions and beliefs. The irony of this is that the #MeToo movement seeks to tell the truth and make the truth known widely. “Truth-telling in post-truth politics” (Burgess, 348) is exceptionally difficult to accomplish. These post-truth times have substituted belief for truth (Burgess, 356), which can make a movement that wants to deal in truths forced to deal in beliefs. This makes it much easier to discount people’s stories in the #MeToo movement; you need not think what they say is true or not, but you can decide to simply believe or not believe them. Going forward, it does not seem likely that we will escape a post-truth rhetoric anytime soon. Thus, the #MeToo movement must adapt to this unfortunate reality and determine a way to gain credibility without the benefit of widespread belief in truth. Sarah Burgess recommends that the solution for post-truth is not to rely solely on objective and scientific fact, but to acknowledge that truth is still significant by reintroducing it to politics (357).

While it is evident that several rhetorical elements of the #MeToo movement are hindering their mission, I do not want to give off the impression that the movement is doomed to fail. Absolutely not. The change in dialogue around issues of gender violence that have come to fruition as a result of this movement is incredible. And I believe that the movement is critical for advancing society towards one of equality between genders. However, this movement must mobilize and move off of a purely digital platform in order to see these changes come to life. Fred Turner puts it well in his online article “Machine Politics:” “The Black Lives Matter and

#MeToo movements have taught us that social media can be a powerful force for liberating us from the fiction that all is well just as it is. But the attention these activists have brought to their causes will mean little if the changes they call for are not enshrined in explicit, enforceable laws.” Now is the time for the #MeToo movement to reevaluate what its core demands are and what methods it hopes to use to achieve those. Harvey Weinstein’s trial was a good step in the right direction—taking this movement to the courthouses is an imperative move in order to ensure its success in the end. However, we need to hold accountable the online “trolls” that take to harassing those who are involved in the court cases, whether they are victim or perpetrator. This addition to the #MeToo movement where perpetrators are “cancelled” and sent to a virtual death in the eyes of the public will not be the tactic that propels the movement forward. Instead, hold the perpetrators accountable. Support the victims. And then open up a dialogue between these groups and the greater public to work to prevent these instances in the future. Collaboration, empathy, and rehabilitation are the new core values that the #MeToo movement should adopt.

Works Cited

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