Internet Platforms and the Affordances of Democracy

Threats to democracy either introduced or amplified by online platforms are myriad. Consider this grim list: election meddling from foreign countries; the proliferation of fake news (alongside the weaponization of “fake news” to describe real news); racist field-and-rank algorithms in searches and other feeds (Safiya Noble); polarization and “filter bubbles” that, among other consequences, advance populist candidates (Groshek and Koc-Michalska); trolling, doxxing, and other forms of unwanted attention (Jiyeon Kang); radicalizing YouTube algorithms (Zeynep Tufekci); and the whack-a-mole persistence of white supremacist groups and violent incels. By contrast, some minor victories appear pathetically paltry: the shutting down of Alex Jones’ Facebook account, for example, or the duration and presence of the #metoo movement. While each online platform has its own unique openings and closures for democratic possibility, all of them are subtended by profit imperatives that, among other consequences, incentivize flashy clickbait over sustained dialogue.

In this panel, contributors drawn from a range of fields, institutional affiliations, and career stages each engage a case study of a particular online platform to pursue a superordinate series of questions. Given that online platforms form an inescapable milieu for contemporary democratic engagement, how shall we go about the work of living together? Which platforms, habits, or practices hearken openings or predict foreclosures for the difficult but crucial work of democratic deliberation? Which conceptual resources from the long tradition of American philosophy on democracy must be reworked, reconsidered, or relegated aside given the pressures of the contemporary moment? According to John Dewey, democracy is at risk unless we cultivate the dispositions that support it. Taken together, the contributions on this panel argue that we need more than dispositions, but also a reclamation of the digital sphere as a common public good.

Works Cited


When Betty Friedan describes women’s widespread unhappiness in the 1950s as “the problem that has no name” (Friedan 1963), she provides a poignant example of what Miranda Fricker would later call hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007). Like the women who lacked the conceptual resources to understand sexual harassment before coining the term, Friedan expresses a historical difficulty women have naming, understanding, and articulating their experiences as women. Rather than fault women for this difficulty, Fricker points to structural gaps in social interpretive resources—gaps that harm members of marginalized groups in virtue of structural identity prejudice. Hermeneutical injustice harms individuals in virtue of their capacity as knowers insofar as it undermines an epistemic agent’s knowledge of their own lived experience.

Scholars have since expanded Fricker’s notion of hermeneutical injustice, but what Friedan, Fricker, and other scholars could not have anticipated decades ago is the way hermeneutical injustice intersects with contemporary social media. Now an indispensable component of daily life, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit emerge as new sites for debate, expression, knowledge, and interpretation.

New social media technology brings new hermeneutical tools, and so it is tempting to think that social media might help circumvent hermeneutical injustice. A case can be made, for example, that the #metoo movement trending on Twitter and Facebook helps victims understand their own experiences with sexual violence. Like the women who came together to articulate sexual harassment, women around the world are newly able to connect with one another and develop the tools necessary to understand their own experience with sexual violence. But just as social media can help users develop interpretive tools, it is worth exploring the ways social media creates opportunities for new forms of hermeneutical injustice.

In this paper, I argue that social media platforms can create an environment susceptible to hermeneutical injustice. Using Facebook as a case study, I first lay out Fricker’s criteria for hermeneutical injustice emphasizing that hermeneutical injustice (1) is structural, (2) involves bias, and (3) creates gaps in (4) collective interpretive resources for its users. I then argue that Facebook meets Fricker’s four main criteria for hermeneutical injustice. I examine the way Facebook purposefully employs biased algorithms to determine the content it displays to individual users. Pairing these structurally biased algorithms with Facebook’s popularity as a shared (i.e., collective) platform for social interpretation, I argue that Facebook can contribute to users’ difficulty understanding and articulating their experiences. That is, I argue that the algorithmic bias creates gaps in interpretive resources for Facebook’s users.

In the final section, I briefly explore how Facebook—as a new site for hermeneutical injustice—hinders democratic debate and free choice. Drawing upon Cass Sunstein’s #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media, I frame problematic dynamics (e.g., echo chambers, filters, polarization) in terms of epistemic injustice. This framing complements Sunstein’s work by identifying another unique obstacle to democratic debate on social media platforms. I also consider the extent to which the free choice to use Facebook is simultaneously a choice to submit oneself to injustice.
Works Cited


Contributor 2: Truth and Discursive Activism: The Promise and Perils of Hashtag Feminism

In the following, I explore both the potential and the perils of Twitter as a space for constituting a Deweyan public aimed at transforming how “we” (here, I mean not only citizens of the United States but global citizens) affectively receive, respond to, and resist sexual violation. I employ a Deweyan notion of ‘truth’: a democratically formulated (and revised) hypothesis concerning the nature of a social problem to fruitfully facilitate its amelioration. This melioristic view requires special attention to vital, important, and missing elements in our hypotheses that prevent them from doing their desired work. To this end, we need spaces and places that foster democratic publics skilled at detecting the work of domination—specifically in the assertion of misogyny (Manne 2019)—as a frame that constitutively excludes relevant, vital information. To the end we find these spaces in social media, the better we strengthen the formulation, and thus problem-solving capacity, of our concepts. A necessary condition to exposing how misogynistic, sexist framing continues to obfuscate the extent and nature of sexual violation demands a greater amplification of plural voices—particularly the voices of individuals most concretely harmed by misogynistic violence and thus acutely aware of the harmful, distorting, racist, sexist, heterosexist, imperialist stereotypes that continue to structure our perception of sexual violation.

Building on feminist media studies, I characterize Twitter activism dedicated to publicizing and promoting awareness of sexual assault: hashtag activism. I focus on #WhyIDidntReport, which organized a Deweyan public soon after the Senate Judiciary Committee invited Dr. Christine Blasey Ford to testify before their vote to confirm Brett Kavanaugh. I select this specific instance of hashtag activism because its eruption on Twitter was a direct response to widespread deflating of Dr. Ford’s testimony, which illustrates sharply the specific way that “epistemic injustice” (Fricker 2007) prevents effective responses to sexual violation. This case is especially worrying because Dr. Ford, unlike the vast majority of assault survivors, seemed poised to be the perfect, credible witness—a witness, many hoped, could enable a very high profile accounting of sexual misconduct.

Responding to the all-too-predictable clichés designed to dismiss her (including President Trump’s tweet incredulous over why she didn’t report), a diverse and uneasy coalition of women—spanning differences of race, nationality, able-bodiedness, religion, sexuality and sexual orientation—took to the Twitterverse to resist. In doing so, they tweeted powerful and affecting stories of their own assault and the variety of ways they were dismissed when—or if! —
they tried to report. Looking at this hashtag activist event from the lens of Kristie Dotson’s (2011) description of “epistemic smothering,” I argue that the story-telling that ensued powerfully debunked and dislodged the highly influential, “controlling images” enabling misogyny to perpetuate violence on the most vulnerable women and trans people around the globe.

Twitter is a unique social media platform insofar as it is a live, reverse chronological, and arguably unregulated continuous stream of voices—or, at least not as well regulated by mainstream media interests insofar as it does not organize information by the same sort of algorithms that determine what should be read or paid attention to on Google, for example. For citizens in countries with state censorship of media, this feature has elevated Twitter as an important platform to bypass its propaganda to get live, on-the-ground reporting coverage (see Pappacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012). Twitter is also open source software, free, and all posts are public (namely, posts are not distributed only to those who subscribe to you or friend you). In this sense, Twitter better guards against—albeit imperfectly—what Dorothy Kim calls the “specific digital neighborhood bubbles” of Facebook (i.e., allowing users to isolate themselves among like-minded people who only reinforce their political and social views) (Kim 2018, 151). Anyone with access to the internet (including a smart phone) can ‘tweet’, i.e., no media affiliation, no celebrity platform, nor an institutional affiliation is required to be read, re-tweeted, or to start a viral hashtag. As such, this platform has advantages to Facebook, which can wall people off insofar as it notably affords a space of deliberation, criticism, and participation of typically marginalized, silenced, and discredited voices.


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Contributor 3: From Black Feminism to Black Male Studies

In September of 2017, the writer Damon Young published a short piece on his blog with the provocative title, “Straight Black Men are the White People of Black People” (Young 2017). Therein he argues that while Black men are “near or at the bottom in every relevant metric determining quality of life,” straight, Black men are the most privileged members of the Black community; moreover, the unacknowledged and un-checked articulation of that privilege poses a concrete physical danger to Black women and gay Black men. As Young himself notes, such a thesis is counterintuitive, to say the least, if not simply false, if one hopes to account for the sociological data and psychological phenomena (Johnson 2018; Curry 2017). Nevertheless, a cursory survey of blogs and social media will show that this thesis is popular and pervasive. Curry & Curry observe that “social media and the proliferation of online blogs have drawn consensus around Black men as violent, patriarchal, and homophobic without any real appeal to evidence, sociological or psychological” (Curry and Curry 2018, 56). A similar argument pervades in Black feminist scholarship. For example, in 2008 Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach introduced the idea of “intersectional invisibility” (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008). In short, they argue that even though intersectionality cannot account for the fact that Black men are, effectively, winning the “oppression Olympics,” intersectionality is still a useful explanatory model, predicting the relative “invisibility” of those with multiple subordinate group identities. In other words, (straight) Black men are “privileged” by virtue of being greater targets of socio-political domination.

A secondary problem presents itself: criticisms of Black feminism generally, and of intersectionality in particular, are often considered heretical. Jasbir Puar notes that women of
color feminists “invested in other genealogies”—such as Puar’s use of “assemblage theory”—are labelled ‘race-traitors’ (Puar 2012, 53). Jennifer Nash notes that the scholarly exercise of critique often yields “an allegation challenging my political commitments,” where criticisms of intersectional interpretive lenses are construed as literally violence against Black women (Nash 2019, 36). Concurring, Africana womanist Valethia Watkins argues that feminism has become a “hegemonic discourse […] rendering feminism as a compulsory filter […] in all gender analyses and historical examinations of women” (Watkins 2016, 63). And the charge of heresy is compounded if the “critic” is male and/or heterosexual. Objections raised by a straight (Black) man are considered defensive and symptomatic of a blindness akin to “white ignorance.” The only acceptable engagement is self-flagellation, repentance, and public deference, lest they are labelled sexist, misogynist, or misogynoir. The effects of this “compulsory feminism,” however, extend beyond the silencing and preemptive dismissal of interlocutors. It facilitates an actual harm. Characterizing Black men as privileged and threatening justifies their continued criminalization and death. Additionally, Black feminist accounts of Black maleness actually occlude the honest study of Black men, and undermines work to redress their vulnerability.

I will argue that Black male studies, with its conceptual grounding in empirical findings and its emphasis onhumanizing its subjects, offers a methodological corrective, at least in the case of the intersectional. Also, drawing upon psychologist William E. Cross Jr.’s 1971 “Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience,” I will trace an analogous progression from “Black male feminist”—a former self-ascription—to Black male studies scholar. Cross describes five stages in the journey to “wokeness,” to employ the contemporary idiom. Similarly, I will argue that while (Black) feminism is generally considered progressive, there is an important sense in which it is instrumental in perpetuating the status quo. We must also ask whether this popular and scholarly culture—one that precludes dialogue, and undermines research—is a consequence of the seemingly democratizing effect of social media and platform capitalism, such that expertise is lost in the cacophony.

Works Cited


Contributor 4: Reddit as Pseudo-Civic Platform: A Case Study of r/SmallDickProblems

The online platform Reddit, self-dubbed the “front page of the Internet” is essentially a social voting and discussion site. Registered members called redditors “up vote” or “down vote” user-generated content in specific communities (called subreddits), with the goal of driving the best content to the front page where the most people can see it. With 330 million users, Reddit is on par with Twitter in terms of size, but outpaces Twitter with engagement rates. Called a “self-correcting marketplace of ideas,” Reddit is unique among social platforms in self-identifying as having a transparent democratic framework of governance. Volunteer moderators are responsible for creating the rules for each subreddit, and they police the rules by deleting posts or banning users that violate the rules. In a recent interview, Reddit CEO Steve Huffman expressed pride over this central feature of Reddit’s policies: “Empowering our communities, empowering our moderators, letting them define the rules and the culture and express their values.”

At face value, it seems as if Reddit is at the vanguard of democratic practices in the public sphere. After all, what could be more democratic than one vote per person, or allowing communities to define their own rules of engagement? However, my experience studying one subreddit troubles this assessment. In fact, Reddit’s democratic self-descriptions and formal neutrality often serve to advantage the forces of racism and sexism.

In this essay, I advance this argument by analyzing the communication practices of a subreddit called “Small Dick Problems.” While the title of this community may incite snickers, make no mistake: these redditors are quite serious about the difficulties of living with a small penis in what they would call a “big dick energy” world. In this community, common topics of discussion include how to produce accurate penis size measurements and pragmatic advice for sex positions conducive to smaller penises. While users rarely self-identify as incels, posters to this board tend to share vocabulary with the wider “manosphere”; for example, there are frequent references to “Chads” and “Stacy’s,” alphas and betas; and “sexual marketplace value.” Perhaps the most persistent topics of discussion are whether or not to give up on pursuing sexual intercourse.
altogether or the “size-doesn’t-matter lie.” Small Dick Problems can be a depressing place; suicide ideation appears frequently enough to garner its own rule from the moderators: “No comments or threads about self-harm, KYS [Kill Yourself] or similar topics are tolerated.”

Democracy-positive practices would necessarily include the cultivation of both dispositions and structures that challenge in-group’s confirmation bias, or the tendency to seek, interpret, and recall evidence in a way that supports a pre-existing belief. Digital communities such as Small Dick Problems reproduce confirmation bias at a scale that would be impossible without the network formations of platform capitalism. In Small Dick Problems, a common circulating belief (for example, that therapists are worthless because they just tell you lies about how size doesn’t matter) achieves a scaled-up level of confirmation bias through upvoting, and anything that does not match the Small Dick Problems reigning ideology and set of core beliefs is downvoted. Therefore, Reddit’s democratic voting system amplifies confirmation bias endemic to small communities, thereby limiting their conceptual resources for problem-solving and mitigating democratic potential. While the community’s rules formally ban “racism, homophobia, body shaming, misogyny, misandry, etc.,” many of these elements appear nonetheless.