Conclusion: #HashtagActivism: Here to Stay

In this book we have illustrated how hashtag activism works to naturalize and center the politics of counterpublics, develop repertoires of political contention, and attract allies. Our analysis leaves us convinced of the efficacy of hashtags in aiding progressive efforts as ordinary people and those without access to traditional forms of power create compelling, unignorable narratives. While we do not claim that hashtags are all-powerful (no single communication strategy is) and have noted the limitations placed on networked counterpublic actors, we are keenly aware that the political and cultural power of counterpublics is leveraged and bolstered through the shorthand of hashtags.

We push back against the notion promulgated by some that the *real* work of change only happens offline. Networks and narratives matter, and both are built digitally and corporally. In every era, media technologies have been central to the maintenance of counterpublics and the safe development of counterpublic identity and politics. For the networks we study, Twitter represents a very real opportunity to work toward change by reintroducing and reframing issues for the public that have been either misrepresented or ignored in the mainstream public sphere. At the same time, Sasha Costanza-Chock and others rightfully caution

against focusing wholly on advocacy in online spaces when considering mechanisms of social change.[1] We agree that true social change requires coordinated action that extends well beyond the internet. Indeed, the issues we study here all involve a complex interplay of events and responses that occurred online and offline, often simultaneously.

Further, though we focus on Twitter hashtags in this book, we recognize that the political work of hashtag activism has spread and continues to proliferate on multiple platforms across the media ecosystem. It was the cell-phone video footage uploaded to YouTube of the murder of Oscar Grant that initiated the use of hashtags to mark a movement against the extrajudicial killings of Black people. #BlackLivesMatter had its debut not on Twitter but on Facebook. Activist hashtags are frequently reported on in the news, and Twitter use is encouraged in entertainment television and film content through specific promotional prompts and actor-fan connections.[2] Each chapter of this book has shown how Twitter activism, within this interconnected environment of media and platforms, influences journalistic and political narratives in the United States.

A good example is the impact that #BlackLivesMatter organizers have had on conversations about race and racism in the United States since 2012, not just online but offline. They have organized freedom rides to places such as Ferguson that draw inspiration from the Mississippi Freedom Ride of the civil rights era. They met with a sitting president, have influenced campaign cycles and rhetoric, have become advisers for policy institutes, think tanks, and universities, and have moved criminal justice reform measures not just into the public consciousness but onto the ballots of voters nationwide. They have inspired scholars to engage outside the academy in new ways—as in

the case of Marcia Chatelain, who ushered in the practice of creating public bibliographies by way of a hashtagged syllabi (some examples are #CharlestonSyllabus, #SayHerNameSyllabus, #LemonadeSyllabus, and #FergusonSyllabus) that include links to and titles of important texts to provide context for trending social events.

In Ferguson alone, the place that activists worldwide regard as a stand-in for Everywhere, an upsurge in registering and organizing Black voters led to the April 2015 election of two new Black city councilors and record voter turnout. Likewise, in 2018, Bob McCulloch, the seven-term, white incumbent county prosecutor who failed to produce an indictment of Darren Wilson, was voted out of office, to be replaced by Wesley Bell, a Black Ferguson councilman and former public defender. Lezley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown, announced her intention to run for a seat on the Ferguson City Council on August 10, 2018, just one day after the four-year anniversary of her son's murder. Her platform, informed by the needs of the community, has three prongs: "community policing, economic equality and access to health care for Ferguson's young children."

Likewise, gender justice hashtags and offline feminist organizing have proliferated, resulting in measurable backlash and change. As the *New York Times* has reported, more than half the powerful men who have been brought down by #MeToo have been replaced by women.[3] The last months of 2018 saw a record-breaking number of women elected to office, many of whom directly addressed the demands of hashtags like #MeToo and #StopKavanaugh in their campaigns. And related hashtags and actions continue to proliferate, such as the November 2018 walkout by Google employees protesting sexism in the company, accompanied by the hashtag #GoogleWalkout.

#MeToo has generated so much attention that corporate entities have strategized on ways to capitalize on the movement across media content and platforms. In a widely circulated 2019 commercial, the Proctor & Gamble razor subsidiary Gillette used the #MeToo movement as fodder to reinvent their classic tagline, "The best a man can get." In the ad, diverse men and boys look into the mirror as they listen to montaged news reports on the #MeToo movement and toxic masculinity. Following a video mashup of men and boys sexually harassing women, bullying each other, and otherwise participating in toxic behavior, Gillette offers visions of men intervening in these behaviors, along with real-world examples of men such as actor and survivor Terry Crews speaking out against sexual harassment. Gillette then offers a revised slogan: "The best a man can be."

In October 2018, writer and producer Lee Daniels announced his intentions to co-create a #MeToo comedy set in a college ombudsman's office where staff struggle to negotiate "PC culture." #MeToo founder Tarana Burke spoke out against the show, saying, "To put Me Too and comedy in the same sentence is so deeply offensive and not because I'm uptight and I don't see comedy in things. We're not ready for a comedy and it's just so offensive that you think in this moment when we're still unpacking the issue that you can write a comedy about it."[4] The Gillette commercial and Lee Daniels's project raise questions about how advertisers, brands, and media-makers can embrace hashtag activism but also potentially co-opt it.

In 2019 the Lifetime Television docuseries *Surviving R. Kelly* featured the creators of the hashtag #FastTailedGirls, Jamie Nesbitt Golden and Mikki Kendall (discussed in chapter 2). Their voices were instrumental in explaining why the singer was able to abuse Black women and girls for decades with little to no

consequence. This renewed focus on R. Kelly's actions spread the #MuteRKelly and #SurvivingRKelly campaigns that worked to get Kelly's music off the nation's airwaves, taking hashtag activism out of the digital universe and into the analog. The campaign continues to grow and has prompted Sony to sever its ties with the singer, as well as consumer boycotts of concerts, streaming services such as Spotify, club spins, and more.[5] From Twitter to TV, from radio to records, hashtag activism that addresses misogynoir is being cultivated by Black feminists.

Janet Mock, the creator of #GirlsLikeUs (discussed in chapter 3), has leveraged her media savvy into an entertainment career. Her #RedefiningRealness hashtag and the subsequent book of the same name launched her into a media sphere with enormous reach, and as she has become more famous, so too has #GirlsLikeUs. In addition to connecting the creators of the web series *Her Story*, #GirlsLikeUs proved instrumental in Mock's work with MSNBC on her digital show *SO Popular!* and her podcast *Never Before* on the feminist outlet, Lenny Letter. These forays into media production allowed Mock to return to her heart's work of doing trans entertainment advocacy in the form of the FX series *Pose* about the trans women of color who were central to the creation of the 1980s ball scene in New York City. The show is groundbreaking in that it is the first prime-time drama to feature a predominantly trans person of color cast. She and her fellow writers on the series were nominated for a 2019 Writers Guild Award.[6] Through Twitter, web series, and TV, #GirlsLikeUs has found a home on the television and phone screens of a generation.

Elon James White's allyship with the #EmptyChair continues to show up in his various media platforms, and the debates over who is served by feminist hashtags have challenged the

way people enact allyship both on- and offline. White actresses, for example, are acting increasingly in the spirit of #TimesUp to show solidarity with their women of color counterparts in the entertainment industry. Jessica Chastain said at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival that she would insist Octavia Spencer be paid equally to her on joint projects in light of the raced nature of the gender pay gap in Hollywood. Their resulting negotiations with Universal Pictures on a film in-development led to the actresses receiving equal salaries five time higher than initially offered.[7] Such acts reveal the offline solidarity that is fostered through hashtagged discourse and debate.

#HarassedAndSurveilled

While we celebrate the real impact that digital counterpublics and hashtag activism have had in progressive movement building and culture creation, we acknowledge the serious limitations of the technological platforms and corporate logics within which racial justice and feminist narratives evolve. In chapter 4, for example, we discussed the horrific viral hashtag #Trayvonning, which was attached to images of overwhelmingly white youth taking pictures of themselves as though they were a deceased Trayvon Martin, with Skittles and AriZona Iced Tea in hand. The hashtag and photos appeared on Twitter and a number of other platforms, most notably Instagram. The insensitive imagery raises questions about the role and responsibility of digital platforms regarding problematic content. Although many countries around the world have imposed content regulations on social media platforms, the United States has few requirements. Under Section 230, Title V, of the U.S. Telecommunications Act, platforms are "safe harbors," neither required to censor content nor

penalized if they choose to do so. All the major social media platforms do impose community standards on content but none has been particularly consistent about enforcing them. As Tarleton Gillespie explains in his book on social media moderation, this is partly because the available options for identifying, preventing or removing objectionable content are not especially good.[8] Professional moderation and editorial review cannot scale up sufficiently to cover the overwhelming quantity of data on social media platforms; relying on users to flag questionable content is reactive and can be used to unfairly target and harass people; and algorithmic detection technology is still limited, especially for the photos and videos that dominate most modern social media platforms.

In the face of imperfect solutions, platforms often take a "publish-then-filter" approach that, while efficient, allows problematic content to persist. Decisions on whether and how to curate content are not neutral. The capitalist decisions of billion-dollar social media corporations are often mired in the same racism and sexism that hashtag activists are addressing in society. Work by scholars such as Safiya Noble, who describes how algorithms absorb and replicate the racial and gender biases of their programmers and users, and Joy Buolamwini, whose work highlights intersectional gaps in standard algorithmic training sets, exemplifies the deeply embedded nature of platform prejudice.[9] Although Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and other social media CEOs vociferously deny actively coding prejudice into their platforms, not specifically coding racism, sexism, and other forms of hate into platforms is insufficient.[10] A systemic failure to imagine various ways platforms may incubate and magnify bias, however unintentional, allows them to proliferate.

Twitter does publicly acknowledge and celebrate its role in activist causes, and in some cases it has made (small) changes to its business practices to signal that support.[11] In 2009, Twitter rescheduled a major upgrade to avoid outages during the 2009 Iranian presidential election protests.[12] At the same time, the platform is routinely critiqued for being unresponsive to claims of bias and harassment against activists and people with marginalized identities. Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis's work on far-right media manipulation demonstrates how Twitter is used as a waystation for mainstreaming racist and sexist ideas originating in anonymous internet forums.[13] Jessie Daniels has shown how women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ folks are disproportionately targeted and harassed on Twitter, often in response to activism efforts.[14] In her book, *Crash Override*, for example, Zoe Quinn details the unrelenting harassment she experienced as a result of a targeted campaign against her and other women in the video gaming industry, which became known as Gamergate.[15] Twitter and other platforms demonstrated an extreme unwillingness to help, even as Quinn was chased from her home and forced to stop working because of threats advanced through the platform.

While Twitter has publicly made moves that seem to align with Black Lives Matter activism—such as creating a corresponding emoji image (or hashflag) that automatically appears alongside the hashtag—their algorithms, policies, and business practices have come under scrutiny for what Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández calls "platformed racism."[16] For example, despite the disproportionate use of and creation on the platform by African American women, in 2015 Twitter boasted zero Black women employees. Two years later, according to the company's 2017 Equal Employment Opportunity report, only 3 percent of its employees were African American, and none

of those held positions in senior management.[17] Users of color have complained for years of racist threats and harassment on the platform. A 2018 Amnesty International report confirmed that women of color experience intense harassment on Twitter; one in every ten tweets sent to Black women contains abusive language or threats of violence.[18]

Additionally, "minstrel accounts," in which white supremacist users present themselves as people of color with stolen or stock profile images and stereotypical names spread racist content under the cover of speaking for marginalized groups, have been allowed to proliferate despite the platform's policy of banning fake accounts.[19] In fact, Twitter's hesitation to ban Nazis has become something of a morbid joke in conjunction with a desperate demand on the platform as users change their display names to ones like "John BanNazis Smith" and "Jane BanAllNazis Doe." Celebrities, including Seth Rogan and Kim Kardashian, have expressed public frustration with the platform's inability or unwillingness to ban neo-Nazis.[20]

Though Twitter's CEO Jack Dorsey has acknowledged "our inability to address [harassment, abuse, trolls, and misinformation] fast enough," and though in 2018 the platform moved to ban some of the most egregious content, much of this activity came in response to complaints about the spread of fake news, as exemplified by the banning of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, rather than racist and sexist abuse.[21] In response to these conditions, collectives such as Data for Black Lives have begun working on analytical tools to intervene, and some hashtag activists have chosen to suspend or make their accounts private in response to racist and sexist abuse.[22] While Facebook came under scrutiny in 2018 for making it easier for foreign agents to target African American users with fake news during the 2016 election cycle,

Twitter has received less public scrutiny on how the corporation profits from the ideas and identities of its users.

The selling or giving away of user data and content on social media platforms is part of what makes them lucrative and of interest not only to advertisers and other corporations but also to the state. Academics and journalists alike have documented how police and corporations use social media to track particular activists and social movement trends in the interest of "national security" or "corporate reputation."[23] In a particularly salient example, Jeffrey Juris has described how he and his colleagues at the Independent Media Center were targeted by Italian police seeking to destroy digital footage of police violence during the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001.[24] More recently, Simone Browne has charted the way technologies of surveillance have a history rooted in enslavement in the United States and continue to be used to enforce state violence that is disproportionally visited on Black bodies.[25]

As we presented earlier versions of our work, several activists we spoke to described their experiences with surveillance and resistance to it, from being electronically followed by law enforcement during protests to deliberately altering or deleting content to avoid inadvertently revealing protest plans. Even without the explicit cooperation of social media platforms, state agencies increasingly make use of social media content to surveil activists. Nashville police, for example, claim that their creation of fake user profiles on Facebook is a way to ensure public safety, even though activists allege these profiles are used to monitor their activities.[26] The Boston Police Department has engaged in digital surveillance of Black Lives Matter and anti-Trump activists, and similar tactics have been used by Canadian law enforcement agencies.[27]

Yet activists have also developed thoughtful ways to bypass unwanted state attention. In 2016, indigenous organizers working to prevent the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) from crossing through the Standing Rock Sioux territory encouraged social media users to "check in" or change their location to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, effectively masking who was actually present at the protest. Over one million people checked in at Standing Rock on Facebook, and even more used the hashtags #NoDAPL and #StandWithStandingRock across platforms, making it difficult to ascertain who was really protesting at the site.[28] This shows how the interconnectedness of platforms and the solidarity built in digital spaces can also be used to address activist concerns in the wake of heightened surveillance.

Characteristics of Hashtag Activism

Although Twitter and other social media platforms have been repurposed by activists and marginalized groups for the promulgation of political claims, there is little evidence that the companies specifically sought to support this sort of work. Unlike the case with other platforms, such as Facebook, which has been accused of unfairly suppressing posts by Black Lives Matter organizers, independent assessments suggest similar claims of censorship by Twitter are unfounded.[29] However, the particular factors that lead racial and gender justice hashtags to trend on Twitter may be a serendipitous result of the events and people popularizing the hashtags, rather than a specific effort by Twitter to promote activism.

While the particulars of how and why items trend on Twitter are proprietary, Twitter representatives have confirmed that the algorithm preferences hashtags that are novel, used across

multiple subgroups, and accelerate in popularity over a short period of time.[30] To the extent that racial and gender justice hashtags tend to center on particular events (with novel keywords and short timeframes) and draw in a coalition of activists and everyday people, they may appeal to algorithmic features not specifically designed for their benefit. That said, the hashtags examined in this book also exemplify a survivorship bias insofar as we selected on success when we chose hashtags to include. That is, *these* hashtags may have had certain features that benefited from the trending algorithm, but it is almost certainly not the case that *all* racial and gender justice hashtags benefit from the algorithm, as there is no evidence that Twitter goes out of its way to make that happen.

With few exceptions, there is remarkable consistency in the composition and shape of the counterpublic hashtag networks we examined in this book. Hashtags that trended, and in doing so garnered attention in the larger public sphere, were almost always started by a woman in response to an incident or cultural repertoire not initially covered in depth by the mainstream media. Black women are disproportionately adept users and creators of persuasive hashtags and play influential roles in both racial justice and feminist networks, from insisting on #JusticeForTrayvon to championing #GirlsLikeUs. This speaks not only to the overrepresentation of African Americans on Twitter relative to other social media platforms (as some scholars have oversimplistically suggested is the cause of this influence) but also to the role Black women play as cultural influencers in U.S. society: from popular culture trends to activist politics, what they say and do is repeated and copied.

We have illustrated that through counterpublic networks, compelling narratives often authored by regular African Americans

and women are picked up by local leaders and regional celebrities with connections to their counterpublic, and ultimately ushered into widespread visibility by mainstream (often Black) celebrities, journalists, and politicians. Discourse across counterpublic networks reflects a nuance rarely seen in mainstream media coverage of issues of gender-based and anti-Black violence. These networks center, struggle with, and develop identity politics alongside social movement demands.

The hashtags we examined in this book span several years and a period of tumultuous political and social change in the United States. It is notable that over time, we see a more rapid mainstreaming of racial and gender justice hashtags. Mainstream media are quicker to report on hashtags in 2019 than they were in 2012, racial justice networks include more white users in later years, and feminist networks include more male users. In light of this, there is a case to be made that over time, these networks have done their job by promulgating messages to those outside counterpublics. Moreover, white and male allies tend to work as partners in later years, amplifying and assisting marginalized voices rather than speaking for them. As illustrated by Elon James White's #TheEmptyChair allyship work in chapter 1 compared to the #AllMenCan attempt at allyship in chapter 6, for example, when users with dominant identities become part of the community of a counterpublic network, their allyship works more effectively. This effective allyship can introduce messages developed and nurtured by marginalized groups into other networks of people who may not otherwise hear vital counterpublic messages.

Because of how technological networks break down longstanding separations between groups and access to media production, counterpublics are no longer spaces that allies must

actively seek out but spaces to which potential and yet to be converted citizens have a front-row seat. Networked counterpublics, then, present those who have always had more access with the choice of allyship—to read, learn, engage, act (or not)—but not knowing where to look for alternative narratives is no longer an excuse for those in the mainstream.

The time span of our research also saw the birth of expert online activists. Some users, such as Johnetta Elzie (@Neta-aaaaaaa) and Genie Lauren (@MoreAndAgain), played central roles in multiple viral hashtags, underscoring the savvy and adept nature of their engagement of the platform. As discussed by Lauren in her foreword to this book, it is not uncommon for those involved in earlier hashtags to play increasingly central roles in subsequent, related hashtags as people come to rely on them for information, both on Twitter and in mainstream news and political circles. Thus Lauren, Elzie, and others become another pathway for mainstreaming counterpublic narratives, lifted up by the networked counterpublics themselves as trusted and authentic authorities on issues and breaking news events.

Finally, just as we see particular people and ideas reappear within counterpublics on Twitter, we also see counterpublics connecting strategies and struggles that originated well before Twitter and online activism became popular. In the case of feminist and Black advocacy, group-based memories of past activists and demands clearly shape the development of new hashtag-centered discourses as such figures as Marsha P. Johnson and Emmett Till become linked to CeCe McDonald and Tamir Rice. Similarly, it was not uncommon to find tweets related to any given event string together, in the form of hashtags, a series of names, connecting multiple contemporary events to those that happened in the past, even several decades earlier. At the

same time, the discourses linked to these hashtags do new and unusually public work. As networks proliferate, both intra- and intercommunity claims are made in response to those that mini- mize, dismiss, or naturalize intersectional forms of oppression. Through these hashtags women argue that, yes, they are all hurt by sexism; African Americans demand we say the names of the lives taken by anti-Black violence; women of color call white women to account for erasing them from feminist proj- ects and men of color to account for misogynistic harassment; transgender women celebrate their accomplishments and call cisgender LGB people to account for agreeing to their contin- ued invisibility; and allies with privilege try to name, or perhaps experiment with naming, their responsibilities to these other groups.

Overall, these hashtags have been successful in creating a shorthand story that is easily recognizable and speaks to much broader concerns. Just a few words, such as #BlackLivesMatter, elicit past, present, and future political claims and tell compel- ling and difficult stories that members of counterpublics are more than familiar with and allies are encouraged to learn. Thus hashtags can be thought of as what psychologists and schol- ars of public opinion might call schemas; they recall complex, nuanced experiences and claims, histories and presents, and theories of social belonging in a succinct, easy to digest, and repeatable form.

Hashtagged protest has become a feature of the contempo- rary political environment, which for the first time includes a president who uses Twitter as much as those who oppose him. Hashtags such as #FamiliesBelongTogether and #WillNotBe- Erased have directly responded to some of the more egregious actions of the Trump administration on issues ranging from

immigration to transgender rights. As we have documented throughout this book, policymakers, presidential candidates, journalists, advocacy organizations, and celebrities have taken note of the messages and experiences of regular people advocating for social change. And they should continue to do so. As technologies change, so do the methods those at the margins use to make claims of belonging and for justice. Claims originating online—on whatever platform may rule the day—are legitimate and essential counternarratives. Taking these claims seriously is vital to social progress and civil society.