Lasting Effects of the #MeToo Movement

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Abstract

The #MeToo Movement has been around since 2006, started by Tarana Burke to promote “empowerment through empathy”. However, the phrase did not gain momentum in social change until the hashtag went viral on social media in 2017, thanks to actress Alyssa Milano on Twitter. Since then, the hashtag has made ripples in society, receiving both positive and negative critique from various groups, as well as starting off splinter groups such as #ChurchToo and #MeTooMilitary. While the #MeToo Movement has broken open the conversation of sexual abuse in the workplace, due to polarizing responses from various news sources, active steps must continue to be taken in order to bring about lasting change in the current rape culture of the United States. This article will begin to summarize the current socio-political scape of the #MeToo conversation and begin to analyze how efforts should be taken towards achieving permanent change. It will also seek to advise how leaders of future viral movements should seek to navigate the territory of news media in order to take best advantage of the use of social media.

Keywords: #MeToo, Mass Media, Viral Activism, Critical Theory, #ChurchToo, #MeTooMilitary

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When confronted with terrorism, war, global environmental degradation, and a host of other struggles happening throughout the world, American society lessened their energy spent on self-reflection. This pattern, however, was disrupted as the spotlight was turned to a phenomenon too often ignored. In recent years since the #MeToo Movement has moved into the wide awareness of American culture, sexual abuse and harassment has become the topic of much discussion. The polarizing response displayed in mass media about the #MeToo movement puts into question the long-term success of the movement towards social change and provides a framework, with which to examine the viral movement phenomena.

There can be little debate that the #MeToo movement, in origin, is trying to change society for the better by bringing awareness to the wide-spread realism of the subject its addressing. Tarana Burke, founder of Me Too before the movement went viral, appealed to the public eye through interviews and news articles promoting the slogan “Empowerment through empathy” (Rodino-Colocino, pg 97). This statement alone is clearly one driven by compassion and wanting the best for the suffering. However, even the idea of basing a movement around the action of empathy is a “promising and risky endeavor” (Rodino-Colocino, pg 96). However, the type of empathy Burke encouraged was not a passive one, but a transformative empathy that changes the way people treat those around them.

But this sentiment alone was not enough to start the viral movement. The #MeToo Movement was prompted by a recent push in mass media sources in the trivializing of sexual harassment. Inflammatory and sexist comments from a recently elected President Donald Trump, and eighty very public accusations against Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment to varying degrees were both required to prompt actress Alyssa Milano on Twitter to first encourage other victims to speak out about their own experiences with abuse. Her goal, as she said, was to “give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” (Rodino-Colocino, pg 98). This call to action succeeded as thousands upon thousands of people spoke up on social media to contribute their voices to the cacophonous shout that sexual harassment in America is rampant and unchecked.

The Movement quickly spread out of the realm of social media. Very soon, new stations, academic forums, even private blogs were writing about, reporting on, and discussing the movement and what it meant. The simultaneous attention gained by the movement on various forms of mass media gave momentum to starting examinations of just exactly how society, and specifically organizations, were handling cases of sexual assault and harassment. One of the places where this change appeared most quickly was within labor unions.

In the past, labor unions have a history of siding with accused men, writing off the accusation as false. Not just supervisors, but fellow coworkers found themselves at liberty to make sexual advances on others with little fear of repercussion. With the #MeToo Movement as a springboard, some leaders within organizations and labor unions began their own initiatives such as UNITED HERE’s Hands Off, Pants On campaign (Valente, 2019).

These kinds of changes have been especially prevalent in the entertainment industry, where most of the major controversies that instigated the #MeToo Movement originated from. New codes of conduct were drafted, training programs designed for employees to help lessen the amount of sexual harassment taking place within the industry. However, even with more rules and regulations, the likelihood of sexual harassment is still present. The main benefit of these changes is to lessen the plausibility of accidental sexual harassment. While steps are being made, these pocket groups within the industry continue working to end workplace assault and harassment.

Along similar lines of these programs, seeking to design training and new Codes of Conduct, News stations took a similar interest. Early in the movement, the *New York Times* published in 2017 an article covering the story of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Antioch College at the time was promoting the concept of “affirmative consent”, requiring “enthusiastic verbal consent during every stage of sexual interaction”. Although many readers of this story considered this to be an overreaction and unreasonable, *Times* supported the redefinition of consent, drawing attention to the numerous other colleges and universities that were adopting similar if not identical policies (Bugyis, 2019).

It seemed however, that for every article and news source supporting the movement, there were just as many critiquing the efforts made. Even going so far as to draw on imagery from classic stories such as the Evil Queen from Snow White, many expressed concerns that the movement would produce an unwanted by-product: privileged feminists. The argument made by news sources as well as scholars, was that the voices behind the #MeToo Movement were those of privileged white women who had no frame of reference for the possible magnitude of sexual violence (de la Garza, 2019). Whether this argument is an accurate and noteworthy critique or merely the words of a cynic is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say, it is far from the “empowerment through empathy” that Burke was looking to instill in people.

A second, stronger critique also immerged through the more critical side of mass media channels. The idea that the #MeToo Movement and other advances being pushed to the front of news stations and social media, were acting as more of a stage curtain to hide the worst of the sexual violence that continues to persist. The danger of this being, that the positivity and self-comradery found through the #MeToo Movement can blind activists who care about solving this issue. Thus, it would lull them into a false sense of security and bloated hubris in their own ability to make actual change.

Some of the strongest voices criticizing the movement were not those being put under the spotlight as possible abusers, but in fact were frequently women of color. Whether it was through social media or academic journal, they had a counter message. It was a message that things were so much worse than could be imagined, and that the small steps being taken due to the #MeToo movement were much too small. People such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson sought to tell the stories unheard, such as those of Native Americans who chose silence in order to protect the image of Indigenous Men so to avoid casting a negative portrayal upon all of them collectively (Rowe, 2019). The struggle of sexual violence was all the more complicated due to cultural interactions, especially found in America.

In light of such difficult situations that women, especially those of different ethnic groups find themselves in, many individuals have deemed this movement to be largely subjective, superficial, and fleeting. However, women of color have been finding their own methods of seeking empathy and solace without the public outrage that the #MeToo movement hinges on (Chawla, 2019). Perhaps, it would be prudent to turn ears to these stories of more consistent efforts. The practices that these women have and the empathy they hold with each other, might just be able to give the Me Too movement the staying power it needs to begin enacting lasting change within our society.

It would be dishonest to pretend that others have not seen the possibilities for change founded on this basis of empathy. In fact, several pocket movements have developed out of the larger #MeToo movement, in an effort to improve the current story of sexual violence in their own spheres of influence. One such person is Reverend Najuma Smith-Pollard, who is actively seeking to correct the current treatment of women that is being shown by black men of the clergy. Her talks focus heavily on communication styles as an avenue for assessing how those in the conversation are perpetuating the unspoken power dynamics. Her strategies for communicating her message make use of nearly every channel of mass media available: social media, online streaming services, and interviews with news websites. The news websites hosting articles about her message specifically are targeted towards the same audience as her; Evangelical Christians. Her focus particularly, is on discussing and navigating the different social dynamics that could make it difficult to draw the line between pastorally mentoring, and misconduct (Bell, 2019).

The #ChurchToo Movement is not just taking place in churches of color. Churches of all denominations, from Southern Baptist to Catholic, are having individuals stepping up to the plate and demanding change in how Christians are responding to cases of sexual abuse within congregations. Protestors are speaking out against the perpetuated silence of victims and leaders alike. They are fighting back against notions of submission and compliancy with abusive leaders and husbands. This engagement with ‘secular society’ from members of church congregations is perhaps new for many men and women who are actively supporting the #ChurchToo movement (Griswold, 2018). Because of this, many groups are running into the similar question of, what steps can we take to instill more permanent change. They are turning to scripture and leaders of other movements to learn about practices that are currently being attempted. During this period of learning, their goal is clear. They want churches to become the safe havens from abuse that they are hoped to be.

In a different sphere of society, the #MeTooMilitary movement has also been making progress. Protests have taken place, accusing the Department of Defense from failing to take proper action against those committing sexual assault within the military. These protests were supported from employees working at the pentagon, some of which brought out hot chocolate to the protestors enduring the below freezing temperatures. The department officially endorsed the protest, agreeing that “No one should have to tolerate harassment as part of their military service.” (Shinkman, 2018). As a response, the army has been taking active steps to improve their response to sexual assault within the military. One of the most important examples of this being the testing of rape kits, many of which had been left untested for years. Prior to this, many investigated reports had been brushed off as first-time offences that were unintentional and a byproduct of confusing circumstances. After testing the rape kits however, they found that in several cases, the DNA matched up with other untested kits. The realization then being that many of what they thought were single occurrences were actual instances of serial rape, gone undiscovered due to the often-temporary nature of military deployments.

At this point, it is hard to disagree that the #MeToo Movement has lit the sparks of change in many areas of society across America. Now, in order to get a better understanding of the effect it has had and may continue to have, it is important to turn to the rhetoric that has been used, and the effects it has had. The strongest narrative seen throughout most of the discussion of Me Too has centered around the Guilt-redemption cycle. This cycle is centered around the prerogative of maintaining order within and throughout society. Any deviations from this order are met with responses that can be simplified into three base categories: mortification, scapegoating, and transcendence (Bloomfield, 2019).

Since mortification is the act of taking the guilt upon oneself, and transcendence is often recasting or reframing the issue to absolve anyone from guilt, the most common reaction we see in the #MeToo movement is the reaction of scapegoating. Scapegoating is the process of assigning the guilt to a person or outside entity from the event itself. Rhetoric of this movement has spared no one. Whether it is victim-blaming, perpetrator witch hunts, or accusing the system of society at large, the general consensus is what is happening is wrong and someone must be at fault for it. A good point to keep in mind here is that the scapegoat is never the sole entity responsible for whatever deviation is causing the unrest. Scapegoating does however, provide catharsis, which can be an important stepping stone towards reaching the redemption side of the cycle.

Transcendence does also have a place in this conversation, as it plays heavily into the “Empowerment through Empathy” model that Kenneth Burke strongly advocated for. The fine line to walk, however, is uniting over the shared suffering without washing out the unique and individual struggles found among individuals of diverse subcultures. Burke describes this dichotomy as “universalism and particularism”.

Scapegoating also has its risks. As has already been mentioned, these more public scapegoats, such as individuals in Hollywood and the admission of the Catholic church, can bring about a sense of catharsis far too soon, while a large part of the issue continues to arise and pollute the order of society. It also focuses on the individuals who have stepped too far out of line, instead of acknowledging and focusing on the larger scope of societies attitudes towards the problem. Essentially, is doesn’t address the larger rape culture of America as a whole.

Bloomfield, places the issues of this problem at the feet of news media, saying that “News coverage of #MeToo can enact a constellation approach by including calls for structural changes in its articles about individual perpetrators and allegations.”. News stations do have the unique position of being an authoritative voice that is heard by consistent masses. In that regard, Bloomfield is completely right that if change is going to continue, it must be headed by the news media. Their polarized response that is currently being seen leaves too many disagreeing voices to drive home the change that the #MeToo movement is so strongly calling for. Mass Media plays the important role of synthesizing the complicated nature of difficult topics to help people understand in a way that grabs their attention, but in doing so must also think about the ethics of how they are presenting an issue (“Bridging the Climate”, 2017).

Looking into the form of the #MeToo Movement, one of the most effective methods it took was that activists speaking out on the platform used supported and academically reliable infographics and data presentation to backup the claims of opinion based research (“The Voices”, 2018). Holding the debate of planes of both logos and pathos was, without a doubt, part of the success of the movement.

This movement is a prime example of the critical tradition of communication. Specifically, it can give insight into how mass media can be responsible for how sensitive or repressed society is to a topic (Griffin, 2019). While previously society had repressed this vague awareness to this issue of sexual harassment in America, many channels of mass media resurfaced the sensitivity this issue requires. Through a better understanding of critical tradition, those seeking to promote a more successful movement through mass medium can be better able to process the dynamics at work between the activists and the audience they are attempting to reach.

In summary, the temporary and long term success of the #MeToo Movement is entangled, almost entirely with the news and other media sources which report on it. Activists who support the movement should strive to do the most they can to make significant change in different organizations now while the effects of the movement are still being sensitized by mass media. In order to have staying power, viral movements must move out of the realm of conversation and news and into the realm of action and application if they hope to make lasting gains for their cause.

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