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Work-in-Progress Draft for Futureproofing the Public Sphere

#ShoutYourAbortion and being heard: The affordances of hashtags for Counterpublics in uncertain and antagonistic digital atmospheres.

Abstract

My research looks at online responses to the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in 2022 and the intense contestation on X (formally Twitter) between pro-abortion and anti-abortion advocates. In this paper, I explore how networked acts of deliberation via #ShoutYourAbortion helped to curate digital Counterpublics and situate them in opposition to others. Hashtags provide a starting point for broader investigations into the contemporary public sphere. In particular, collectivising hashtags enable affected groups to share their experiences that are often marginalised by traditional media outlets, witnessing and affirming similar experiences with others within their community (Fitzpatrick 2023). In this article I examine the how the networked affordances of #ShoutYourAbortion on Twitter post-*Roe v Wade* impact the democratic quality of deliberation and listening (Scudder 2022). I suggest the potentiality of collectivising hashtags lies in their connective capacity, and their ability to bring attention to seemingly personal or isolated women's experiences of abortion discrimination and reproductive injustice. However, I maintain that fast-paced, folksonomic, and rhizomic technological atmospheres are not well suited to the attentive *work* of democratic deliberation (Hendriks, Ercan, and Boswell, 2022; Häussler, 2018; and Scudder, 2016, 2022). The hashtag is not merely a communicative device for public voice, but a formative Counterpublic network (Cappellini, Kravets, and Reppel, 2019; Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015; and Kuo, 2018) where dividing lines are drawn, points of difference are reinforced, and social divisions are maintained.

Disenfranchised Struggles for Democracy

> "One result of today's decision is certain: the curtailment of women's rights, and of their status as free and equal citizens." – Joint statement of dissent by Justice Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan.

There are few issues as divisive as abortion, with no shortage of political adversaries taking to social media to broadcast their support or condemnation. Inevitably, feminists both directly involved in the debate or observing from the sidelines are led to ask: with everyone passionately shouting at each other across political boundaries – is anyone actually engaging in productive deliberation?

Scholarship exploring the relationship between social media and democracy relies heavily on the notion of a public sphere and the theory of deliberative democracy conceived by German philosopher Jürgen Harbermas (2009). For Habermas, the internet

has the potential to facilitate public sphere access to information, enriching rational and critical deliberation surrounding public issues to empower democracy (Habermas 2006). Habermas' theory of communicative action is utilised by Kim and Kim (2008) to argue that casual everyday political talk is the cornerstone of democratic participation. It is through our everyday casual conversations both online and offline that people come to reason with one another, establishing a sense of one's own political views in relation to others.

At its inception, social media was cause for optimism amongst democratic theorists. The democratic quality of the internet in facilitating participatory practices and civic activism has been a topic of heightened academic debate over the past two decades (Bessant 2014; Dahlgern 2005; Fuchs 2022; Gerbaudo 2012; and Papacharisssi 2011, 2015). Democratic scholars hoped that the Internet would provide a safer space for marginalised communities to perform their political identities, share their lived experiences and multiplicity of political views, and build networked communities. New conceptualisations of the public sphere inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) *radical democratic imaginary* or Deleuze and Guattari's (2024) concept of the *rhizome* have been employed to explore the political potential of the internet for more equitable communicative freedom. For example, Perrin Öğün Emre and Gülüm Şener (2017) explore how social media has been used by minority communities to create an alternative public by "providing diffusion of oppositional discourse and activism, which were previously limited by power structures and conventional media" (138). Pippa Norris (2001) speaks poetically of a "democratic phoenix" suggesting that new forms of political participation could revive activism.

Habermas' public sphere has been widely criticised for being too idealistic and failing to consider the lived experiences of marginalised communities that face discrimination and exclusion because of unequal power relationships across social, economic, and cultural dimensions of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990). Poster (1997) maintains that the Habermasian approach is in decline because the digital public sphere is not a homogeneous space that embodies citizens in equal relation to one another.

Counterpublic sphere theory considers the important role of women (Fraser, 1990) and other marginalised civic actors (Warner 2003; Downey and Fenton 2003; Wimmer et al., 2017). Emre and Sener (2017) explore the evolving structure of alternative public spheres and highlight the importance of social media in "exposing women's voices and transforming them into political subjects" (138). They refer to Dahlberg's (2007), "agonistic position" to explain political potentiality of the internet for marginalised communities stating: "the agonistic position is important here because it focuses upon discursive power and political practices from 'the margins' deploying the concept of counterpublics to do so" (129). Agonists suggest that the internet can support marginalised individuals to develop their own deliberative spaces, to link up with other excluded voices in developing representative, strategically effective counter narratives.

Importantly, these Counterpublics contest those meanings and practices dominating mainstream public spheres.

Our online interactions can result in greater emotional identification with Others, bringing stories of suffering directly into the lives of privileged onlookers and arousing compassion and greater understanding across differences. In some ways social media has lived up to its deliberative potential, fostering communicative freedom and inclusion that exposed systemic gender and racial inequality through citizen led movements such as Me Too (unmasking sexual abuse and gender based issues), Black Lives Matter (fighting for racial justice) and Love Wins (affirming the LGBTQIA+ and countering discrimination). Emre and Şener (2017) assert that social media has played an important role in platforming women's voices and transforming them into political subjects explaining,

> "women consider social media applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, digital dictionaries and blogs, as a means of debating public problems to produce alternative discourses and in creating activism." (Emre and Şener, 2017, p138).

However, a growing number of critical race and feminists scholars have reconsidered social media's democratic potentiality in light of algorithmic inequalities (Ruha, 2019*;* Noble, 2018; Risam, 2019*;* McIIwain 2019*;* and Brock, 2020). Dahlberg (2001) warns against a "techno-fetishist discourse" maintaining that the online public sphere is limited by

> "Increased colonisation of cyberstate by state and corporate interests, a deficit of reflexivity, a lack of respectful listening to others, the difficulty of verifying identity claims and information put forward, the exclusion of many from online political fora, and the domination of discourse by certain individuals and groups" (2).

Indeed what little deliberative potential social media once held seems to be fast eroding. In recent years feminist activists have witnessed political backlash (Grady, 2023), experiencing a regression of legal rights, the consequences of which have extended beyond the United States. The future of feminist online activism and democracy (conceived in deliberative terms) is more uncertain than ever before.

Key characteristics of democratic equality that ensure productive deliberation such as inclusion, mutual respect, equal communicative freedom, equal opportunity for influence (Sørensen, 2002) are under threat on social media. A myriad of issues including the digital divide (Cooper 2006; Correa 2016), the spread of fake news, misinformation and disinformation (Cover, Rob and Haw 2022), digital surveillance (Morozov 2011), digital colonisation (McIIwain 2019; Chen, 2020), and growing polarisation (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021) means the future of the public sphere is unclear. In light of this changing environment, this article seeks to understand the role of social media and the affordances of hashtags for feminist Counterpublics. The goal of online deliberation is for users to

reflectively determine not only their own preferences, but also provide reasons for others to support them, to feel heard and valued by others in return (Scudder 2020). This is of utmost importance when it comes to divisive issues like abortion rights, where failure to deliberate across difference acts to threaten women's status as free and equal citizens.

Methodology

The hashtags #RoevWade and #ShoutYourAbortion provides insight into how people from opposite ends of the political spectrum come to encounter contrary perspectives on the United States Supreme Court's decision Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (2022) which overturned Roe v. Wade (1973) that guaranteed a constitutional right to abortion. This article seeks to better understand how we can best utilise the affordances of hashtags to deliberate across differences. In order to assess the affordances of collectivising hashtags and their potential for deliberation across difference, I employ Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis "CTDA" (Brock, 2018) to qualitatively explore the discursive power of hashtags shared by feminist digital Counterpublics. I use Twitter's streaming Application Programme Interface ("API") to download a sample of tweets referencing "Roe v Wade" and the #ShoutYourAbortion and #RoevWade hashtags *(N=2676).* I highlight conversations across pro-abortion and anti-abortion groups, paying particular attention to critical feminist activists. I follow the exemplary methodological approach of Maria Francesca Murru (2017) whose research on discursive engagement considers modes of *publicness* resulting from the networked affordances of social media platforms.

I hypothesise that the trending functions of the hashtag facilitate significant engagement across pro-abortion and anti-abortion groups in which the #RoevWade hashtag transverses both publics. An in-depth examination of the discursive content of the #RoevWade tweets reveals divisive in-group versus out-group messaging of an antagonistic nature that is potentially damaging to those seeking in-group listening and support. Whereas, the #ShoutYourAbortion facilitates more insular, meaningful in-group conversations that work towards democratic renewal. These findings suggest we need to think critically about how the trending affordances of hashtags negate democratic deliberation, creating networks that risk further polarisation.

Collectivising hashtag practises are filled with transformative potential, but it is important to understand how digital architectures aid the potentialities of these practices, influencing whose stories are shared and how they promote (or fail to promote) exchanges across difference, particularly in times of heightened agonism. This article aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of divisive political discourse, as well as of the affordances that facilitate and hinder in-group and out-group communication (Butcher and Helmond, 2018). Building on processes of 'democratic renewal' (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Ercan et al. 2022; and Hendriks, Ercan, and Boswell, 2023) and everyday 'connective practices' developed by Carolyn Hendriks, Selen Ercan,

and John Boswell (2020), I suggest that through strategic use of collectivising hashtag affordances feminist Counterpublics can collaboratively and incrementally work towards greater understanding across difference.

A Site to Be Seen and Not Heard

The technological, social, and economic underpinnings of trending hashtags are reflective of the prevailing socio-political underpinnings of inequality in modern society. In order to cultivate democratic deliberation, feminist Counterpublics must address deep-rooted systemic gendered issues, not only through everyday practices of hashtagging and storytelling but through an understanding of digital affordances and their architectures. Molly Scudder (2020) argues that "Even the most engaging storytelling will not necessarily make a perspective more amenable to being taken up" (509). Scudder argues instead for the ideal of "democratic uptake" which she defines as the fair consideration of the arguments, stories, and perspectives that citizens share in deliberation and maintains, "our efforts to secure uptake should be aimed at fostering the *conditions* for uptake, rather than fruitlessly trying to guarantee uptake itself" (Scudder 2020, p.514). In accordance with a CTDA approach this section considers the affordances of the #RoevWade hashtag and the extent to which they provide the *conditions* for deliberation across difference.

The fast-paced and folksonomic technological atmosphere of Twitter is not well suited to the attentive *work* of democratic deliberation. From the very beginning, hashtags were a user driven innovation. The development of the hashtag takes a 'folksonomic approach' (Mathes 2004), where categories are determined by users rather than added by content creators. Put simply, it is the ordinary 'folk' or people who create and add the tags for categorisation. Twitter aimed to take a user driven, bottom-up (as opposed to top-down, management determined) approach to the organisation of trending hashtags. The hashtag is a user-created metadiscourse convention (# + keyword) used to coordinate Twitter conversations by providing a topical coherence. Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles explain that

> hashtags, which are discursive and user generated, have become the default method to designate collective thoughts, ideas, arguments, and experiences that might otherwise stand alone or quickly be subsumed within the fast paced pastiche of Twitter (xxviii).

Folksonomy is often thought of as a powerful democratising tool; it allows ordinary users to 'vote' on the trending tag with their use of it. In this way, folksonomic approaches allow social media users to have some say in how their content is structured, by selecting topics in a way that is as scalable and fast moving as popular opinion. One of the key functions of the hashtag is its ability to collate talking points, bringing individual messages together to develop a larger narrative. The problem with the folksonomic structure of hashtags is

that they create networks that often reflect hegemonic views. This is not truly democratic but rather a majoritarian approach where the dominant narrative acts to silence minority perspectives. The folksonomic function of the hashtag demonstrates the power of the collective in that it allows individuals to centre themselves and their views within a broader public narrative (Mathes 2004). The inequitable deliberative implications of grouping privileged bodies' voices online are exacerbated by folksonomy, because large groups representing majority views can more easily influence the development of hashtags as a tool to better support privileged narratives. In this way, the folksonomic mechanics of a hashtag can enhance the online action possibilities of already dominant users and constrains action possibilities of underrepresented users. Resulting in unequal and power laden conditions for deliberation.

The connective affordances of hashtags like #RoevWade that are used across pro-abortion and anti-abortion perspectives are not indicative of productive democratic deliberation. Neutral hashtags like #RoevWade (Higgs 2024) fail to enhance the democratic *quality* of deliberation and do not guarantee *uptake* (Scudder 504). I found that #RoeVWade tweets that directly addressed the opposite side of the abortion debate were often used to voice a personal grievance and animosity that acted to further polarise the discourse. For example:

> **Tweet ID 346:** Ever notice how these loud crazy women are literally the trash of society? They're jobless, on drugs, mentally unstable, and have poor family relationships. They are failures. And so they take their anger out on society. #Feminism #feminismiscancer #RoeVsWade #RoeVWade #feminist
>
> **Tweet ID 125:** FUCK YOU IF YOURE AGAINST WOMANS RIGHTS #RoeVWade #prolife
>
> **Tweet ID 1486:** What do you expect from cowards who want to and have murdered babies? Y'all pro-murder/choice cowards are a joke bro. #prolife #pregnancy #roevwade #Ahayah #Yashaya

I suggest these tweets fail to meet Scudders (2019) ideal of deliberative uptake which demands fair consideration of arguments, stories, and perspectives of other citizens. Instead, the tweets focuses on preconceived notions of the person on the other side of the debate rather than being open to listening. The tweets also fail to exact the mutual respect required of productive deliberation. This lack of mutual respect is heightened by the affordance of anonymity on Twitter that negates visibility and social recognition. The atmosphere of the online environments we find ourselves in impacts political talk. The intersubjective base of political talk means that while the anonymity offered by the internet allows affected women who might otherwise avoid speaking about politics share their lived experiences freely via #ShoutYourAbortion, it also allows citizens in positions of privilege to share their views without fear of social repercussions.

Jodi Dean (2003) is concerned with the flow of information on social media sites, and particularly the idea that what is most important to people is the torrent of and the adding to of this continuous flood of information without engaging critically with it. Dean (2003) argues that social media platforms are based on business models that favour profit, stating,

> They present themselves for a democratic public in their eager offering of information, access, and opportunity. They present themselves as a democratic public when the very fact of networked communications comes to mean democratisation, when expansions in the infrastructure of the information society are assumed to be enactments of a demos. But, as is becoming increasingly clear, the expansion and intensification of communication and entertainment networks yields not democracy but something else entirely: communicative capitalism (102).

Dean (2003) contends that the programmability, popularity, connectivity and "datafication" that characterises the current media ecology means that "the occupiers contribute to the production of digital media content being partly constitutive of current capitalism" (236). Dean (2005) terms this concept "communicative capitalism" (53), a system in which the circulation of messages and the exchange value of online interactions dominates rather than their usefulness.

For Dean (2005), the content or use value of our online interactions becomes secondary or even irrelevant. Hence, any response to them becomes irrelevant as well, and any political potential disperses into the perpetual flow of communication. She explains:

> A constitutive feature of communicative capitalism is precisely this morphing of message into contribution…The message is simply part of a circulating data stream. Its particular content is irrelevant. Who sent it is irrelevant. Who receives it is irrelevant. That it need be responded to is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is circulation, the addition to the pool. Any particular contribution remains secondary to the fact of circulation (58).

Users compete for visibility in an environment which diminishes recognition in terms of production, distribution, and consumption time. Dean (2005) contends that activists struggle for visibility, which is the currency of the internet. Here, affordances of social media are determined by the temporality that architectural aspects of social network technologies imply and correspondingly the kinds of user behaviours and practices that temporality affords. A hashtag that achieved viral status like #ShoutYourAbortion makes it far more likely to be seen by the public, but it makes no promise of Counterpublic voices being heard.

How then can we move beyond visibility, publicness, and influence towards receptivity? Hashtags enable encounters across differences codified by a variable mix of technical affordances. However, "technical affordances are not univocal prescriptions in their undisputable materiality" (Murru, 2017 p145) but rather filtered symbolic frames that make their function plural, fluid, and open to change. I suggest democratic deliberation is facilitated by a cross-section of the technological aspects of a collectivising hashtag's affordances and, importantly, social conventions and users' practices. The following section builds on existing theoristions of "democratic repair" (Henriks, Ercan and Boswell 2020) and "democratic uptake" (Scudder, 2020) by considering the affecting aspects of hashtag discourse that make participants "*feel* as if others have listened to them." (515). The empirical research I present here will not give an exhaustive and definite overview of the wide ranging variety of discursive strategies used alongside #ShoutYourAbortion and #RoevWade. Rather, I will explore in-depth four prominent discursive strategies used by reproductive activists that enhanced the conditions of deliberation in an antagonistic online atmosphere.

Storytelling and Counterpublic Lived Experiences with #ShoutYourAbortion

Online storytelling and hashtagging is part of the complex work of doing digital feminist activism. Collectivising hashtags enable non-dominant groups to share their experiences that are often marginalised by traditional media outlets, witnessing and affirming similar experiences with others within their community. Murru (2017) suggests that social settings can hinder or facilitate political talk. The anonymity offered by the internet allows people who might otherwise avoid speaking about politics for fear of social repercussions to speak up and share their views and lived experiences. In their inquiry into hashtag activism Mendes et al. (2018) looked into the ways in which #MeToo and #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtags are used by women to share personal stories of sexual violence. They found that after sharing their own stories and reading the stories of others, participants shifted from believing the experience was limited to 'just them' to viewing sexual harassment as part of a broader phenomenon, one that stems from gender inequality and targets the most vulnerable communities (Mendes et al., 2018). Collectivising hashtags make participants *feel heard* by building meaningful and worthwhile networks of solidarity. Equally as important, it creates an opening for democratic listening to help people recognise their role in perpetuating systems of gender inequality.

The rise of digital storytelling in the early and mid-2000s in part mirrored the broad shift towards more participatory online culture that privileges user-generated content and ordinary stories of everyday lived experiences (Hancox 2007). Historically, storytelling has played a key role in social movements and, in particular, antiracist movements (Diamond et al., 2013). Hashtags associated with the Black Lives Matter movement include #MyNYPD, #IAmTryvornMartin, #AmINext, and #ICantBreathe, all of which relate to incidents of police brutality. Individual stories of racially motivated violence are

recorded on street corners and shared on social media platforms to express the differences in lived experience for Black people in America (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles 2020). André Brock (2020) explains that the visibility of Blackness can be partially attributed to "the conflation of Black folk in online spaces that are not exclusively our own: we are finally present online in ways that the mainstream is unable to disavow" (1). Collectivising hashtags enable non-dominant groups to share their experiences that are often marginalised by traditional media outlets, witnessing and affirming similar experiences with others within their community. Hashtags afford users storytelling processes by bringing individual stories together. Hashtags also enable users to collate and archive their stories on the same topic. Without the affordances of a hashtag, individual stories could easily dissipate, and conversations be quickly extinguished.

In their inquiry into hashtag activism, Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller (2018), looked into the ways in which #MeToo and #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtags are used by girls and women to share personal stories of sexual violence and why they did not report them to authorities. They found that participating in a hashtag was both triggering and affirming to participants. Online storytelling and hashtagging was part of the complex work of doing feminist activism. One woman explained:

> It was very emotional and it was very upsetting to me, this whole thing, being part of that hashtag, reading other women's little tweets, 140-character tweets. One resonated and it was really a tough couple of weeks. Even though it was positive, it was very, very difficult for me. There were some nights where I didn't sleep. (238).

Mendes et al. (2018) found that hashtags like #MeToo and #BeenRapedNeverReported made survivors feel heard by building meaningful and worthwhile networks of solidarity with fellow survivors. Importantly, this solidarity often transformed feminist consciousness. One participant in their study explained that #MeToo allowed her to understand that her own history with sexual violence was part of a broader structural social problem, rather than an individual experience that rose from an encounter with "one bad man" (Mendes et al., 2018, p238). The transformative potential unlocked by the widespread use of a hashtag is important both for the individuals sharing their lived experiences and for those who witness the trending hashtag. The visibility and overwhelming response to collectivising hashtags like #MeToo and #WhyIStayed (amongst others) cannot be easily dispensed with. The cross-cultural resonance of these feminist hashtags demonstrates the prevalence of the issues they are speaking to that remain unaddressed in society.

In an interview with *The New Yorker* Amelia Bonow explained how she and Kimberly Morrison helped coin the hashtag #ShoutYourAbortion in 2015, as a way to destigmatize abortion by encouraging women to share stories online about having the procedure (Vauhini 2015). At the time, Republicans in Congress were trying to defund Planned

Parenthood (Vauhini 2015). Lindy West, a well-known blogger with more than sixty thousand followers, published a photo of Bonow's post, adding the hashtag #ShoutYourAbortion. Bonow subsequently developed Shout Your Abortion into a full-fledged organisation and a nationwide movement. The hashtag resurfaced and gained widespread attention following the overturning of Roe v Wade in June of 2022. Bonow's unapologetic abortion disclosure catalysed a viral outpouring of abortion stories on social media via the hashtag #ShoutYourAbortion. Bonow explained her role in developing the #ShoutYourAbortion hashtag and subsequent movement saying: "I'm seeing myself more as the creative director of an emerging network of voices" (Kingsberry 2022)." Examples of #ShoutYourAbortion hashtags include:

> **Tweet ID:** I had an abortion when i was 19 and I've never felt comfortable talking about it online. People have terrifying opinions on the topic and even now I'm scared to speak about it. We talk about destigmatizing a lot of things but we desperately need to destigmatize abortion.
>
> **Tweet ID:** I had a legal abortion not long after Roe v. Wade was passed. I do not regret it because it was an accident and I was too young to be a mother.
>
> **Tweet ID:** I made the best decision I could when I had an abortion and I have always stood by it. I will stand by and fight for your right to choose too. Abortion is healthcare. We haven't come this far just to come this far - we're NOT going back. Show up, get involved, get angry.
>
> **Tweet ID:** You don't go to a clinic to get a "Roe"—you go to get an abortion. Roe may be gone, but abortion is here to stay.

The stories shared with the #ShoutYourAbortion hashtag often speak to women's lived experiences of getting an abortion, their reasons for doing so, and the stigmatisation they faced because of their decision. #ShoutYourAbortion Counterpublics shared their concern about the overturning of Roe v Wade and what a lack of accessible healthcare would mean for other women in the future.

In true feminist spirit, #ShoutYourAbortion emphasised that the personal was in fact inextricably political. #ShoutYourAbortion tweets called allies to join collective action and political change. In group deliberation amongst feminist Counterpublics was used to help repair a "problematic situation" (Bohman 1996, p58) and a breakdown in coordination. Counterpublics came together to emphasise that womens healthcare needs to be collectively addressed. For example,

> **Tweet ID:** The overturning of #RoeVWade is cruel—plain and simple. But we have to channel that frustration into action. Making our voices heard and voting

> this November is our best and clearest path forward to protect abortion rights in this country.
>
> **Tweet ID:** Men, want to support women? These are the conversations we're having when you're not in the room. You need to hear this to help them change the world. #RoevWade
>
> **Tweet ID:** With the power of reproductive rights in our hands in Harrisburg, it is critical now more than ever for us to come together to not only PROTECT but EXPAND access to health care!

Hashtags can serve primarily as connectors, Kuo (2018) explains:

> Because Twitter's algorithms are designed to value group amplification, the platform works well as a tool for racialised and gendered enclaves and satellites seeking to mobilise collectively as a counterpublic. As stories, experiences, and ideas resonate with actors, they play a dual role in circulating discourse on and beyond Twitter across multiple publics (511).

Fishkin and Mansbridge (2010) maintain that talking with like-minded others can give people, individually and collectively, the confidence to subsequently enter the larger public sphere. In-group enclave deliberation can have positive effects in the deliberative system (33). The powerful collection of individual stories shared alongside #ShoutYourAbortion provides a starting point for investigations into systemic injustices. If one of the aims of critical feminist research is to recognise and amplify the voices of marginalised groups and to present person-centric investigations of the world, then the intervention of storytelling on social media platforms can allow for more equitable power relations. Hancox (2017) highlights the fact that our ability to gain knowledge and insight into experiences outside our own is greater than ever before, "and with it comes a responsibility to acknowledge the experiences of others and consider how collaboration and participation are enacted" (59). It is important to note, Bonow's comment that it was not her place (or intent) to persuade women to tell their stories if they were not comfortable doing so (Kingsberry 2022). Especially given that the most marginalised women live in places with little access to abortion and could face community stigmatisation or isolation due to their decision. #ShoutYourAbortion highlights the importance of diversity within critical feminism, their strong commitment to reflexivity, and the increasing importance of embodied feminist activism in digital spaces. Aristea Fotopoulou (2016) argues that doing feminism and being feminist implies "enacting ourselves as activists – as embodied – and political subjects through media practices, technologies, the imaginaries linked to these new technologies and the internet" (5).

It is through our everyday use of collectivising hashtags that Counterpublics engage in productive deliberation and create public meaning. The things we say and do online matter; our online performances of self affect which bodies are afforded full democratic

equality and which are marginalised and left unheard. The processes through which hashtags trend or go viral are reflective of sociocultural norms in a precarious public sphere. They 'say something' about citizen led processes of democratic renewal and the future of democracy. Online storytelling practices are filled with deliberative potential, but it is important to understand how digital architectures facilitate the potentialities and limitations of these practices, whose stories are shared by and how they promote or fail to promote democratic engagement.

Hashtagging and Being Heard

Proponents of deliberative democracy have highlighted the value in using discourse itself to help foster democratic conditions. Following Tanja Dreher (2009), Emily Beausoleil (2015), Krista Ratcliffe (2005), and Molly Scudders (2022, 2023) work on listening towards democracy, I argue that feminist Counterpublics can collaboratively and incrementally work towards greater understanding across difference through strategic use of #ShoutYourAbortion tweets. An in-depth critical discourse analysis of my dataset revealed four key strategies used by feminists activists that build community, mitigate polarisation and work towards democratic renewal. Scudder argues that instead of trying to transcend the limits of our ability to understand others, we ought to pursue the ideal of "democratic uptake" by making room for difference in deliberation (Scudder 2020, p514). The following examples are just a sample of the tweets that demonstrate: 1) vulnerability; 2) attentiveness; 3) humour; and 4) reflexivity. I have no doubt that future deliberative scholars will uncover more strategies to engage listeners across differences, but I have begun with these four themes and provided empirical examples here to show that it is possible to engage in genuine deliberation on even the most divisive political debates, such as abortion.

… Final section forthcoming 😊

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