

Rethinking Labor Histories and Production Cultures in #MeToo and #TimesUp Hollywood

Elizabeth Affuso, Pitzer College

Social media—primarily Twitter—has been a key avenue for criticism of Hollywood’s strategies in the last decade: whether it’s calling out racially problematic casting as with Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell*, addressing workplace safety issues with the #safetyforsarah campaign after the death of camera assistant Sarah Jones, or expressing solidarity with #MeToo and #TimesUp. Much has been made of social media as a participatory space for fans, but I want to explore it as a participatory space for above and below the line talent to share workplace grievances in an industry structured on transient, freelance labor. My response explores how social media spaces can provide scholars workarounds for increasingly common non-disclosure agreements in the industry and think about best practices for using social media and related spaces such as blogs and gossip to study Hollywood labor, as well as the limitations of hashtag activism for producing meaningful disruptions to structural patriarchy.

Social media activism campaigns and related hashtags provide spaces for a wide variety of people to share their experiences with regard to workplace harassment and have been a key avenue for the revelation of #MeToo stories. While the mainstream news stories of sexual harassment and workplace safety concerns in spaces like *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* have been primarily focused on stars such as Ashley Judd, Asia Argento, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Uma Thurman, the public inclusivity of social media spaces provides a forum for victims who lack access to structures of power to reveal their stories. The more than 67,000 responses to Alyssa Milano’s tweet “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a response to this tweet” point to the pervasiveness of the issue beyond celebrity culture. The willingness of so many people to respond to the post also points to the new visibility of sexual harassment and the social acceptability of participating in the conversation.

However, hashtag activism has a host of limitations due to its position on social media. These limitations include: marginalization, the dismissal of claims as gossip, and a lack of organizing structure with access to changemakers who can resolve the structural patriarchy issues. Additionally, social media often replicates preexisting structures of power whereby those who are wealthy and/or famous typically have the most visibility. Thus far the media industry’s primary response to these allegations has been to treat them as PR scandals where bad actors are publicly chastised and removed, but the structural issues that produce the culture of harassment remain.

Of particular concern to me and many other gossip aficionados and industry watchers is how many of these allegations were not new claims, but rather ones that had been whispered about, alluded to, and even reported on for years. While media studies as a

field has long studied the gossip industry and its relationship to Hollywood, the content of gossip has not often been taken seriously as a source. Given the acknowledged power of whisper networks in providing workplace safety for exploitable workers, I'm interested in addressing best practices for using gossip content in academic work. Using gossip in combination with social media and blog posts potentially provides access to information about workplace circumstances that is otherwise inaccessible due to non-disclosure agreements, lack of substantiation for mainstream media reporting, and absent from official archives. These spaces are especially important in an industry that is reliant on freelance labor where workers may not know how to make official complaints or may not feel able to do so for fear of retribution in future employment, but who might express their concerns within the available anonymity of digital culture. Social media spaces and blog comments sections with their normalization of sharing with strangers—and their ability to do it anonymously if desired—provide particularly robust venting spaces. Taken along with other resources, social media and interactive digital spaces are a potentially rich archive for scholars working on media industries and labor as demonstrated by #MeToo and #TimesUp.