"Say It Louder for the People in the Back!":
Analyzing the Power of Antirape Feminist Digital Activism

by

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Abstract

        Because of the surge of the #MeToo Movement in 2017, antirape activism has now largely established a digital presence by creating a virtual community. When the inclusivity of this movement's community was called into question, it led me to doubt the influence of its digital presence and pose the research question for this thesis: exactly how powerful can digital activism be in resisting rape culture? Answering this required research on both the proven benefits and disadvantages of antirape digital activism. In this context, rape culture is defined as the normalization of sexual violence in American culture. Paired with this paper is an act of antirape digital activism of my own: an informational podcast on the same subject composed of audio bits from three interviews I conducted that all represent different angles of perspective and expertise regarding rape culture. The interviewees include: Dr. Amy Dellinger Page, Professor of Sociology and the Undergraduate Programs Director for Sociology at Appalachian State University; Dr. Michael Eng, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Appalachian State University; and Sara Crouch, Outreach Coordinator for the non-profit organization OASIS located in Boone, North Carolina. This paper references these three interviews in addition to outside research to support that the power of digital activism is extremely complex. From the depth of this paper, it seems there are as many benefits as there are disadvantages. But many questions remain with much more research to be done. It is my conclusion that antirape digital activism be utilized to resist rape culture mainly because of its influence on voice; however, it cannot and should not replace the large "real work" role that antirape traditionally-practiced activism fulfills and should instead be utilized in tandem with these traditional practices.

Introduction

As a student of Broadcasting interested in paving a career in radio, my education has taught me how truly influential media can be and more importantly, the power of voice. In addition, my minor in Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies allowed me to explore my interest in rape culture as a societal phenomenon; specifically, its different facets and why it has been largely ingrained in our culture for so long. Rape culture has always been something I knew existed, but I just didn't realize until my higher education that it had a name. It was when I first learned the term that I experienced what feminist author Sara Ahmed calls "the clicking moment" when suddenly it all makes sense and it all "fits into place" (Ahmed, 2017, pg. 29). As the #MeToo Movement in 2017 finally seemed to shed light on this systematic issue that nearly everyone already knew about but barely anyone wanted to out right discuss, a kind of empowering virtual community sprouted from it. As I researched more, it became clear that there were people who didn't feel welcomed within this community of #MeToo participants, as I will discuss further later on. This was heartbreaking to discover because I believed #MeToo should be a movement for all survivors. This discovery led me to doubt the actual influence antirape digital activism has had compared to more traditional activism such as donating, volunteering, protesting, etc.

My honors thesis became the perfect opportunity for me to explore this question of "Exactly how powerful can digital activism be in resisting rape culture?" To quantify "power" in this context, the power of digital activism can be measured through the amount and degree to which it causes real-life effects that go beyond the digital realm. These include spreading awareness, a change in thinking, the beginning of long overdue conversations, helping survivors of sexual assault heal one by one, and giving survivors and other feminists hope that their efforts are making an impact. Exploring this question for me required research into the benefits of

digital activism as well as its proven disadvantages. As part of my own individual effort in fighting rape culture, I decided that if media had the potential to be so influential, why not make a piece of media out of my research? The piece of media I've created to pair with this paper is a podcast composed of outside research as well as interviews from three individuals who all have a distinct background with work in rape culture. My hope is that in addition to publishing it on all my social media, I am able to publish it through the university as well as a podcast publishing site. Being published on all these public platforms will allow it to take the form of antirape digital activism in that it will primarily spread awareness and reach a virtually infinite audience of people. It is my hope that my podcast will lead to someone else's clicking moment, or maybe that of many someones. I will expand upon the history of antirape activism later on, but like the first small-group conversations of antirape feminist activism, the goal for my podcast is to raise a feminist consciousness for maybe those who don't currently idenitify as feminists.

The power of digital activism is, simply put, complicated. Specifically, though, digital activism has its place in providing a space that is oftentimes safer and more accessible to engage with than a space of traditional activism such as protesting, volunteering, donating, etc. Digital activism provides a "low-stakes" space that welcomes information, education, and virtual solidarity and community through empowering users to employ their voices to break the long-term silence. However, the language and framing of these communities has caused them to be perceived as exclusive and unwelcoming for certain groups of survivors. In addition, digital activism can be just as harmful as it is empowering because its screened component allows users to post without having to look the audience in the face. It has been shown as a threat to participation in traditional activism by serving as a distraction from the "real work" that is protesting, volunteering, and donating. These digital spaces also seem to be just as accessible to activism as it is for the problematic language and beliefs that digital activism fights against. It is

my conclusion that the feminist and antirape culture community needs to utilize the benefits of both traditional and digital activism working in tandem to achieve their goals. However, it is also part of my conclusion that many questions still need to be answered before the antirape activist movement can be successful in diminishing rape culture.

To lead to this conclusion, first, I discuss why rape culture is so harmful and problematic to begin with. Then, I define and provide background information and histories of both antirape traditional activism and antirape digital activism. Then, I discuss three benefits and the accompanying limitations of antirape digital activism, each section ending with a question and possible area of further research. Ultimately, it is clear that digital activism is powerful. But, real change will not be achieved if traditional activism is rendered obsolete.

We Live in a Rape Culture

One minute and 13 seconds. Most everyday activities take longer than that. Brushing your teeth, taking a restroom break, engaging in a small talk conversation, finishing a song on Spotify. Every single one of those everyday activities all take longer than the time it takes for another American to be sexually assaulted in the United States (RAINN, 2020). Every 73 seconds. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, known as RAINN, this statistic equates the number of yearly sexual assault survivors to around 433,648 people per year (RAINN, 2020). That number represents the United States alone.

This statistic is evidence to the fact that Americans live in a rape culture. In its simplest terms, rape culture is the normalization of sexual violence. First coined by American radical feminist philospher Susan Griffin in 1977, the term "rape culture" has come to describe this normalization, but it also encompasses all the ways through which this normalization happens (Griffin, 1971). In the first essay in which she coined the term, Griffin describes one of these

ways. She discusses a type of burden of protection that certain individuals in society must adapt to in order to avoid being sexually assaulted (Griffin, 1971). This burden of protection Griffin talks about was later discussed further and coined as what Gill Valentine called the "geography of fear" (Valentine, 1989). In 1989, Valentine defined the "geography of fear" as a term used to describe how female-identifying individuals, whether consciously or subconsciously, are constantly aware of their behavior and change it to decrease the likelihood of being sexually assaulted, especially in public places. An essay written by scholar Rachel Hall describes also how following the "geography of fear" leads to female-identifying individuals feeling this pressure to become and maintain being a "tough target" (Hall, 2004, pg. 6). Hall talks about how, within this pressure, there is a hidden disclaimer that essentially tells potential survivors that "only you can save yourself" (2004, pg.6).

This becomes related to what is known as victim-blaming, which is when language surrounding a rape incident places the rape victim at fault for their own assault. Dr. Amy Dellinger Page, a Professor of Sociology and the Undergraduate Programs Director for Sociology at Appalachian State University, discussed in our interview how our society is incredibly focused on "placing the onus [burden] on potential victims to alter their behavior to somehow reduce the risk of their assault versus focusing on what do offenders do or how should we talk to potential offenders about how not to offend.... So, if that's the case, then how do we better inform individuals so that they don't become perpetrators of sexual violence?" (Page, 2020, personal interview). It is important to note how incredibly harmful it is to focus extensively on victims instead of the perpetrators because in this way, rape becomes a passive event; something that happens to the unlucky people that don't take the necessary precautions. It also becomes something that can't be helped or changed and it discounts the fact that experiencing sexual assault has lasting long-term effects that a victim can carry with them forever. If the goal is to

ultimately end rape culture, then rape needs to be accurately framed as an active crime that someone wrongfully commits against someone else and needs to be held accountable for.

One way in which this framing is skewed is through the belief of rape myths, which are the false preconceived notions one internalizes about rape due to societal perpetuation. One of the biggest rape myths, according to Dr. Page, makes the majority of sexual assault seem "not that bad" (Page, 2020, personal interview). She explains how in a rape culture like ours, "when we picture rape in our minds, it is a stranger jumping out the bushes at night and attacking a virginal women who incurs a lot of physical injuries and goes straight to the police to report." While this type of situation does happen and has happened, she says, a situation like this does not represent the "vast majority" of rapes that occur. It is when we only accept this one stereotypical rape scenario as an actual rape that we are then discounting what happens during the majority of rapes. It is in this way that Dr. Page explains why the widespread belief of rape myths like this one continues to discount the atypical account of victims and perpetuate this problematic way of thinking.

Dr. Michael Eng, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Appalachian State University, argues that rape culture is deeply rooted in patriarchy and they are essentially one in the same (Eng, 2020, personal interview). First recorded in the 1630s, the term "patriarchy" comes from the Greek term "patriarkhia" which dates back to the 1560s (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2020). Simply translated, it means to be ruled by men (literally, "law of the father"). In our interview, Dr. Eng explained how a patriarchal, rape-prone society is founded by the underlying principle that women should have no subjectivity and should be treated as property. He says part of his understanding of rape culture is "this idea that women's bodies are material simply available for use." This is what is known as the objectification of women and women's bodies. Dr. Page discusses this very issue when she says how the objectification of women, along with

other problematic aspects of rape cuture like the infantilization of adult women and the sexualization of young women, "derives from the fact that rape began as a property crime not as an individual level crime" (Page, 2020, personal interview). She says it's all about "devaluing women in the sense of their only real commodity is their sexuality and that complicates how we think about sex interactions and then it affects how we view the crime of rape."

The devaluation and objectification of women is largely perpetuated by the ideals of toxic masculinity. Jeremy Posadas, an Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Austin College, says "if we want to eradicate sexual violence, we must transform the apparatuses by which boys are subjectified into toxically masculine men" (Posadas, 2017, pg. 177). By this, Posadas is echoing what author of *Asking For It* Kate Harding means when she writes, "every American boy is at risk of growing up to become a rapist" (Harding, 2015, pg. 37). When asked about this quote from Harding's book, Dr. Page said she somewhat agrees but she thinks that:

...we have to be careful that we don't make it sound like masculinity [or the multiple masculinities that exist] in that of itself is bad. I think how we socialize and how we describe masculinity can be problematic when it's...very toxic and very narrowly focused. The majority of men do not fall into that category. It's a small group of men that really adhere to these toxic masculinity ideals (Page, personal interview, 2020).

She goes on to say that it is actually extremely important that men be engaged in the conversation surrounding rape culture because toxic masculinity is toxic for everyone, not just women. She says, "We want to have a better understanding of the complexities, the harms that [men] feel, the pressures that they feel and that they experience and I don't think that it's fair to discount those." Sara Crouch, the Outreach Coordinator of the Boone non-profit OASIS (Opposing Abuse with Service, Information, and Shelter) agrees when she said in our interview,

"I don't think that maleness is inherently the issue; it's that toxic masculinity; it's those societal functions that allow masculinity to be seen as superior...and lead to sexual violence or intimate partner violence" (Crouch, 2020, personal interview).

In addition, Dr. Page discusses how problematic our language and messages surrounding sexual violence are in American society. She says, "We promote [sexual violence] in a lot of ways and some of that is through this contradictory messaging that we have. We say it's bad but then we don't treat it as though it's bad" (Page, 2020, personal interview). A large part of the reason why this messaging is so contradictory is because of the institutional role in promoting rape culture. Sara Crouch adds on to say how rape culture isn't only just about rape. To her, "it's also about the institutions....and the hierarchies that allow things to happen and for perpetrators to get away with it or to not be punished to the full extent of the law" (Crouch, 2020, personal interview).

In the discussion of institutions, Dr. Eng spoke in our interview on how one of the areas he is most interested in studying is this process of how "cultural logics" such as patriarchy are manifested and perpetuated within institutions like the university (Eng, 2020, personal interview). He argues that patriarchy isn't "outside" of institutions; rather, he says, "it's the air, it's what we breathe" in that "patriarchy shapes the spaces that we're in, even the spaces that we might be in to critique patriarchy." It is this toxic patriarchal air that we breathe that allows for what Susan Griffin described in her essay as a kind of "terrorism" which severely limits an individual's freedom (Griffin, 1971, pg. 34). It is because of this type of terrorism that the existence and constant perpetuation of rape culture and patriarchy is a public health and human rights issue. It is this threat to our wellbeing, safety, and humanity that antirape feminists have been resisting through activism.

The History & Evolution of Antirape Feminist Activism

It is clear that rape culture is a problem that affects everyone. It is my argument that antirape digital activism can most certainly be used to help resist this problem, but it cannot and should not replace the work done through antirape traditional activism. This next section aims to provide background information regarding the histories of antirape traditional activism as well as the more recent creation of digital activism. To clarify, antirape traditional activism in this context can be defined as protesting, volunteering, and providing donations in the effort of resisting rape culture. In other words, I would define traditional activism to be giving time, money, or other resources that will directly benefit the antirape cause. This next section begins with the great words of black feminist author bell hooks to explain how rape culture thrives and operates through the perpetuation of silence.

Antirape Traditional Feminist Activism

In understanding rape culture, one of the most important aspects to recognize is how similar rape culture is to other oppressive structures. Similar to racism, homophobia, ableism, transphobia, etc., rape culture was created and is currently sustained through the absence of voice. In other words, the existence of rape culture depends on maintaining silence: the silence of victims, the silence of perpetrators, the silence of bystanders, the silence of the institutions that have the power to change the system, and the silence and failure of law enforcement to treat sexual assault as it should be treated. When no one is willing to speak up about an issue like rape culture, nothing will be done because this silence gives everyone who is not directly affected by it a "pass" to act like it doesn't actually exist. Black feminist scholar bell hooks wrote in her 1989 book entitled *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*, that

> When we dare to speak in a liberatory voice, we threaten even those who
>
> may initially claim to want our words. In the act of overcoming our fear of speech,
>
> of being seen as threatening, in the process of learning to speak as subjects, we
>
> participate in the global struggle to end domination. When we end our silence,
>
> when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere
>
> who lives in silence (hooks, 1989, pg. 18).

Ultimately, silence allows more silence. This is why even prior to the development of the

internet, anti-violence-against-women traditional activism surged in the 1960s and 70s during

second-wave feminism because of the development of a feminist consciousness (Ake & Arnold,

2017). As Sara Ahmed defines feminism, she says it is like making like-minded friends through

literature (Ahmed, 2017). It is in this way that she describes the feminist consciousness. In an

article published for the *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Assistant Professor in the Department of

Communication at the University of South Florida and author Tasha N. Dubriwny argues that

rhetoric, and specifically feminist rhetoric, is a "collaborative activity" that makes up feminist

consciousness and has three elements (Dubriwny, 2005, pg. 395). She argues that collective

feminist rhetoric has "an active and participatory audience, the deployment of an experiential

epistemology, and the transformation of the meaning of individual experiences through the

articulation of those experiences" (Dubriwny, 2005, pg. 418). In other words, Dubriwny says the

feminist consciousness is based on the sharing of experiences from its participants, which is

engaged with by an audience who gives meaning to those experiences, which results in the

individual sharer feeling what Ahmed described as a community of friends. Dubriwny also says

that the emphasis on individualized experiences causes the collective rhetoric to be "particularly

useful to groups taking an anti-hegemonic stance" (Dubriwny, 2004, pg. 418). In the late 60s

and early 70s, survivors of sexual assault discovered that the experiences they had gone through

were not unlike the experiences of others (Loney-Howes, 2019). Conversations in small-group settings first allowed them to see how large of an issue sexual assault actually was (Loney-Howes, 2019).

Sexual assault first became part of public discourse because of early antirape activist events like the speak-out in 1971 led by the New York Radical Feminists group in New York City (Ake & Arnold, 2017). It was around this time that feminists began to understand rape as an act of power, not sex, that meant to further oppress the feminine and sustain the dominance of the masculine (Ake & Arnold, 2017). With this new framework in mind, more and more feminists sought to break down male-dominated institutions (Ake & Arnold, 2017). In this effort, the first Rape Crisis Center (RCC) was created in Berkeley, California in 1971 with many others to follow around the nation (Ake & Arnold, 2017). It is through these centers that local women were first able to volunteer, donate, and provide other support in the fight against rape culture. At the same time, hospitals and police stations became populated by feminist activists who believed and advocated for rape victims to be treated in a sensitive and timely manner (Ake & Arnold, 2017). In another way, feminist legal scholars began fighting for legal reform in order to discourage victim blaming in the legal procedure of a rape case (Ake & Arnold, 2017). The mid to late 70s brought about national organizations such as the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape (1975) and the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (1979) (Ake & Arnold, 2017). It was also in the late 70s that Susan Griffin coined the term *rape culture* and other feminist scholars began working towards calling out the falsities of rape myths (Herman, 1989).

The Boone non-profit OASIS (Opposing Abuse through Service, Information, and Shelter), whom Sara Crouch works for, was one of the centers founded in the late 70s (OASIS, Inc., 2015). Although, as Sara explains, OASIS is a dual agency which means they serve both

sexual assault survivors as well as domestic violence survivors. Currently, it serves Watauaga and Avery counties by providing survivors with free and confidential services such as legal and medical advocacy, crisis counseling, a 24 hour hotline in both English and Spanish, support groups, temporary and emergency shelter and many others (OASIS, Inc., 2015). Sara says their goal has always been to "provide direct client services, focus on their healing through trauma intervention and....eventually ending that form of violence." It is with the development of her position as Outreach Coordinator that a dual agency like OASIS is able to utilize both traditional *and* digital activism today. Specifics about her position and the role it plays in digital activism will come in a later section.

Similarly to OASIS, the "Me Too" Movement (different from the #MeToo Movement) actually began as an antirape traditional activism movement that sprouted within a low-income community of young women of color (Me Too, 2018). In 2006, a woman named Tarana Burke was serving as a youth worker in these lower-income areas (Burke, 2018). She worked directly with young people of color and one day, had a conversation with one of them that changed her life forever. After doing a session with the youth where many of them opened up about painful times in their lives, the instructors including Tarana encouraged these young women to come talk to them privately if they needed to. One girl named Heaven approached Tarana after the session and told her about how she was being sexually assaulted by her mother's boyfriend. Less than five minutes into the conversation, Tarana couldn't listen anymore because Heaven's experiences connected all too deeply with her own. She ended up cutting her off and turning her to someone else. On the official "Me Too" Movement website, Tarana voices this story and says as she turned Heaven away, she "watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone and I couldn't even bring myself to whisper...me too" (Burke, 2018). After this, Burke enlisted others to help begin "local grassroots work" (Me Too, 2018). Still currently,

the movement aims to start up and support community-based action in order to "interrupt

sexual violence" (Me Too, 2018). It wasn't until the development of antirape digital activism

and one of the biggest acts of it in October 2017 that nearly the entire world knew the words "me

too".

Antirape Digital Feminist Activism

After the development of the internet in the 80s and most certainly after the

development of the first social media platforms, it would only make sense that the patriarchal

and rape-prone discourse that plagued the pre-internet public sphere would eventually also land

on this newly created and virtual public sphere. Thus, antirape digital activism was born. In this

context, digital activism is defined as "the use of new information - communication technologies

to support social and citizen movements" (Yang, 2017, pg. 362). It can involve posting words,

pictures, videos or popular images with social context called memes. For example, one of the

more popular memes within feminist discourse that indicates support or agreement is the

comment "Say it louder for the people in the back!" sometimes paired with a picture of Meryl

Streep shouting her support at the Oscars as seen below (Sadwick, 2019).
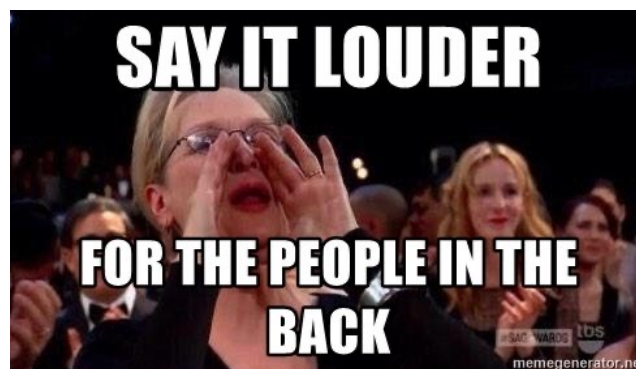
It is important to note that this definition of online activism describes it as "supporting"

social movements that are implied to be bigger than mere online activity. It is in this way of

"supporting" that digital activism's role seems to be primarily spreading awareness and, as Dr. Page points out, providing exposure to people who have never had to think about certain issues and "plant the seed" (Page, 2020, personal interview). It was years before the #MeToo Movement that social media first showed its power in raising worldwide awareness about sexual violence. In 2011, social media platforms became essential in drawing international attention to the antisexist, antirape movement that started in Canada called *SlutWalk* (Loney-Howes, 2019). It began after a Toronto police officer was quoted as saying that if women didn't want to get raped, they should stop dressing so provocatively (Loney-Howes, 2019). His comments triggered protests from Canadian women who identified his comments as harmfully encouraging victim-blaming (Loney-Howes, 2019). What started in Canada was shared on social media platforms and led to millions of women around the globe expressing their support for the *SlutWalk* movement (Loney-Howes, 2019).

This instance of sharing activism through social media highlighted how a digital activist's post can be the most successful in reaching the most exposure when it goes "viral". According to an article published in *Articles in Advance,* for an idea or post to be "viral," it must "grow through a person-to-person [online] diffusion process analogous to the spread of an infectious disease" (Goel, 2016, pg. 1). Essentially, something becomes viral when its popularity causes it to be shared between people enough to where it reaches an exponential amount of people over a relatively short period of time. Sara Crouch equates it to taking a megaphone in the middle of the street and shouting the contents or words of the post (Crouch, 2020, personal interview).

This virality can be boosted if the post includes a hashtag, which can allow it to trend and also be searched by users in the Twitter search box (Loney-Howes, 2019). Therefore, when one influential user who has a large amount of followers posts a hashtag, it can easily be circulated around the platform and cause, what I like to call, a flooded feed. Soon, more and more users are

seeing the hashtag, maybe engaging with the original post, and then using the hashtag themselves, allowing for even more users to see it. In essence, the exposure to one post with an original hashtag becomes exponential.

This is exactly what happened in October 2017 with a post from white American actress Alyssa Milano when she tweeted in response to sexual assault allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Pflum, 2018). Her influence and reach as a popular American actress sparked an eruption of replies from survivors all around the world (Pflum, 2018). Although initially unaffiliated with Tarana Burke's movement, Milano's tweet caused what started as "local grassroots work" to become a worldwide explosion of survivors posting the hashtag #MeToo in order to give voice to the sexual violence that had been silenced for far too long (Me Too, 2018). Dr. Amy Dellinger Page says, "The idea behind [the online movement] is to show how common, how frequent, how pervasive in all realms of everyday life the experience of sexual harassment, sexual violence, and street harassment [are]..." (Page, 2020, personal interview). And one could say it did. The #MeToo Movement made headlines for months in the media, became a household term that nearly everyone knew about, and ultimately exposed big-named perpetrators, many of whom were given immediate leave from their high-ranking positions (Loney-Howes, 2019). Because of this, Mendes (2018, pg. 1) calls it, "perhaps one of the most high-profile examples of digital feminist activism we have yet encountered." It wasn't until February of 2020 that the original perpetrator headlining the movement Harvey Weinstein was found guilty of rape in the third degree and a criminal sex act (CBS News, 2020).

If nothing else, the #MeToo Movement demonstrated that there is power in voice. Like hooks (1989) says, our words can be so powerful that once they are spoken, they have the power to establish connections between us and any other person who has ever been silenced. That is

especially true for the virtual connection, solidarity, and community created out of the #MeToo Movement. It is through this community of virtual voices and this one collective consciousness that the power of digital activism is proven.

However, there are caveats to this power. This next section explores more deeply into three of antirape digital activism's benefits along with an accompanying limitation, the first directly critiquing the community that the #MeToo Movement has created. As I have already said, the power of digital activism is very complex, which is why Dr. Page calls it a "double-edged sword" (Page, 2020, personal interview).

The "Double-Edged Sword": Benefits & Limitations of Online Activism

When asked about digital activism, Sara Crouch says, "It's a great thing, it's a hard thing, and it's so many things, so many different good things and bad things and opportunities and disadvantages...it's really something" (Crouch, 2020, personal interview). The role of digital activism is complex, which is why I argue it yields the best results for change when paired with traditional activism. Each of these next three subsections present research that proves a benefit as well as contrasting research that highlights an accompanying limitation. After the presentation of all research, each section poses its own question that will surely convince you of the complexity of this issue.

Exclusion from the Community around #MeToo

I have already discussed how the #MeToo Movement is an act of antirape digital activism that has broken the silence that bell hooks so eloquently describes as a necessity for oppressive structures to exist. It is this breaking of silence through engaging with the feminist consciousness that explains why a social media movement like #MeToo exploded in the way that

it did. Specifically, by using the hashtag that so many others had used before you, it becomes empowering to understand the very same four words that draw your eye when you land on the homepage for Tarana Burke's "Me Too" Movement: "You are not alone" (Me Too, 2018). It is in these four simple words that comfort is found, solidarity is established, and quieted voices feel just a little bit more empowered to speak than they did before.

However, it becomes problematic when this formed online community of survivors is portrayed and perceived to be helping the "women's issue" of sexual violence. The reason for this societal framing, Dr. Eng says, is because living under patriarchy means "the primary material...for patriarchy to establish itself and maintain itself is the feminine. And so women-identifying individuals, they are subject disproportionately to violence" (Eng, 2020, personal interview). However, this portrayal is problematic for two main reasons and they both have to do with this framing of the feminine as the universal "victim". First, to equate "woman" with victim perpetuates the problematic gender norms that allow rape culture to happen in the first place. Dr. Eng says that this allows for experiencing sexual assault to become "part of what it means to be a woman within rape culture." In other words, if someone equates "woman" to "sexual assault victim" in their minds, then there will undeniably be the thought that women are *meant* or *well-equipped* to be in that position, meaning there is no reason for women not to be victims. Therefore, it does not need to be changed. Furthermore, this definition of woman as victim positions "woman" as automatically *beneath* men or the masculine. It places "woman", "victim", and "inferior" all in the same definition. It is in this way that positioning rape culture as a "women's issue" perpetuates the harmful gender norms that operate with the feminine being inferior or "less than".

In another way, framing sexual violence as a "women's issue" leads to the erasure of victims or survivors who do not identify as women. It is in this way that Dr. Page says we lose

the truth, which is that sexual violence is a human rights issue (Page, 2020, personal interview). She says we discount the experiences of survivors of color as well as non-binary, male, trans, and other non-female-identifying survivors because "we don't give them a space to acknowledge what has happened to them, give voice to their experiences, pull them into the movement [or] understand how their asssaults are different in some ways.". It is in this way that she says we lose the important nuances that make each individual's experience different.

In an article for *Mel Magazine*, the author interviews several male survivors of sexual assault and asks them why they never felt comfortable engaging in the movement (Holden, 2019). One interviewee says, "Women have been oppressed for so long that the #MeToo movement felt more like a recognition by society of all the atrocious things women have experienced...As a male, I tell myself that it's not about me and that it's important for the spotlight to be on women" (Holden, 2019). Another male survivor equated #MeToo male involvement with the #AllLivesMatter movement saying that, "Sure, there are problems [for men], but I feel like the focus is best on the most affected communities." Essentially, by #MeToo being framed as a "women's issue" rather than a human rights issue, it is clear many male survivors felt out of place sharing their own stories.

Even when well-known male survivors shared their stories, like actors Terry Crews and Brendan Fraser, many men still felt like it wasn't their place to say anything. A different article discusses Terry Crews's experience of being groped by Hollywood executive Adam Venit and how many people kept referring to his physique and size, asking him, "well, why didn't you just punch him?" (Bradley, 2018). The author points out how comments like that completely discount the consequences Crews would have faced for physically retaliating. It is in this way that masculinity is perceived to be a fail-safe way to say no to an assault, and therefore a reason why many men feel ashamed to come forward, as they feel like they were not "man" enough to

handle the issue. In the case of a female offender and a male survivor, the author of a *USA Today* Opinion article explains how "getting laid is getting laid" for a guy and counts as an achievement, even if they didn't want it to happen (Bruggeman, 2019). These articles all relate back to the concept of toxic masculinity wherein a man is only a man when he is not emotionally vulnerable, can physically fend off any assault without consequence, and are expected to enjoy all sex, even when it is not consensual on their part.

Similarly, many transgender and non-binary survivors have experienced the same sense of hesitancy in joining the movement themselves because of the "women's issue" label. In a 2017 article written by a queer, non-binary survivor published by *The Huff Post*, the author explains the danger of gendering spaces like #MeToo because "for those who identify outside of the binary, gendered spaces can feel incredibly uncomfortable. Worse, we can be rejected from binary gendered spaces because of how we identify" (Clements, 2017). They also speak on how nonsensical it is that resources available for transgender and non-binary survivors are incredibly limited, when statistics show that this community of people is "an especially vulnerable population."

In a later article written by the same author for the platform called *them.,* Clements (2018) cites a 2015 Transgender Study done in the U.S. and points out that what the #MeToo movement has failed to highlight are the facts such as that over half of the nonbinary respondents who were assigned female at birth, like the author, reported experiencing sexual assault. Clements recounts their own story and explains how they have wondered where they personally fit in within a movement where "too many still believe that it is only experienced by conventionally attractive cisgender women, or that is only perpetrated by 'bad' cisgender men." Another article for *them.* adds onto that by highlighting the lack of attention #MeToo has shed for everyone but *cisgender white* women (Talusan, 2018). One interviewee of the article draws

attention to the sexual as well as physical violence that many black trans women and femmes have endured. They say, "there are femmes and black trans women out there who….are screaming 'me too' from the ground that they've just been beaten up on. Some of them are screaming 'me too' from the hospital that they're laying in. And some of them can't scream because they're dead." In fact, Clements also writes in *The Huffington Post* that trans people of color are at an even higher risk of being sexually assaulted with percentages in the 60s and 70s (Clements, 2018).

In addition to becoming a gendered space with the label "women's issue", Sara Crouch tells us that the #MeToo movement has been criticized for becoming a racialized space by excluding many survivors of color (Crouch, 2020, personal interview). Despite "Me Too" being created by black activist Tarana Burke, as was mentioned in the earlier section, the movement gathered the largest following when white actress Alyssa Milano tweeted a digital call to action (Pflum, 2018). While not directly excluding non-white, non-women identifying individuals, it was in this way that #MeToo became a movement highly popularized among cisgender white women. An article published by *NPR* on the sexual assault and rape allegations against rapper R.Kelly features the interview of *The Washington Post*'s global opinions editor Karen Attiah (Garcia-Navarro, 2017). In it, she tells *NPR* that "part of [the problem], unfortunately, has to do with whether or not we see black women and girls as worthy of care and worthy of protection."

It is also because of the erasure of black women's experiences that leading scholar of critical race theory Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016) speaks on how the concept of intersectionality can change the way we frame issues. In the context of recognizing unheard stories of black female victims of police brutality, Crenshaw says in her 2016 TEDTalk, "when facts do not fit with the available frames, people have a difficult time incorporating new facts into their way of thinking about a problem…" I would argue the same can be said for an issue like sexual assault.

For the #MeToo movement, it is largely because of the language that is used in its digital activism, as well as in news stories, that perpetuates this idea of it being a cisgender white "women's issue". These become the frames that do not accept people outside of that group and leads to survivors who do not identify as cisgender white women becoming erased from the discussion of the issue itself. Crenshaw also says that the "trickle-down approach to social justice" does not work. She argues many people fall through the cracks and it becomes the responsibility of those who engage in these discussions to make sure these frames are not exclusionary. Just as Crenshaw argues for, our culture and society needs to do a much better job of "bear[ing] witness" to victims of crimes who end up falling short of these frames.

With so many survivors feeling out of place in a movement that is meant to empower them, provide validity to their experiences, and help heal them, Dr. Eng agrees with Crenshaw's argument saying: "the responsibility falls on those who do identify [with the movement] and don't feel excluded to ask, 'Well, why is it that there are those who are feeling excluded? What are they picking up on?'" (Eng, 2020, personal interview). He compares this to when he teaches and there is a student who understands his teachings in a different way than he intended. Like the #MeToo movement, this misunderstanding is surely unintentional, but Dr. Eng says this is a situation where it is not intention, but the effects of our language that carry the weight of importance.

Tarana Burke and everyone else working with the "Me Too" Movement realizes this responsibility. On the official "Me Too" Movement website, visitors will find this mission statement: "Our goal is also to reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors. Young people, queer, trans, and disabled folks, Black women and girls, and all communities of color" (Me Too, 2018). This mission statement is clear in placing the responsibility of the heard activists to ensure that their

space welcomes *all*. It recognizes that in order to dismantle rape culture, voices, *especially*

marginalized voices, need to be supported, heard, and fully considered in order for real change

to occur.

Within this section, I have demonstrated that the digital activism movement of #MeToo

provides an empowering, silence-breaking community among survivors. However, there exists a

limitation of digital activism when sexual violence is portrayed and perceived as a "women's

issue". This portrayal becomes harmful when there are non-women-identiyfing survivors who

do not feel welcomed to join the movement. This also becomes doubly problematic when the

framing of the movement itself fails to include or give attention to transgender women and

women of color. Thus, the question we are left with becomes: what tools can we use to reframe

the #MeToo Movement to welcome and include *all* survivors of sexual violence, not just

cisgender white women?

The Screened Interaction of Digital Activism: Empowering or Dehumanizing?

As Dr. Page puts it, there is a "perceived privacy" on social media which she describes as

almost this "safe space" where a user can have the courage to say something that they would

never be able to say to somebody's face (Page, 2020, personal interview). It is this quality of

social media that she says makes it a "double-edged sword." In a positive way, this courage

serves to be empowering for survivors who have never been able to identify as a survivor until a

digital activism movement like #MeToo. Dr. Page says how a survivor posting their experience

on social media can do it with tears streaming down their face or by punching a pillow after

every line they write. She says it allows for users to be vulnerable without seeing the immediate

facial reaction of their audience that one would usually get when opening up about something so

difficult in person. It is in this way that the screen barrier element of engaging in digital activism like the #MeToo Movement can be very empowering.

It is because of the courage of so many survivors on social media that it was "shocking", as Sara Crouch says, to see flooded feeds showing just how many people have been through sexual violence (Crouch, 2020, personal interview). Authors of the book *#MeToo And The Politics of Social Change* (2019) discuss consciousness-raising during the beginnings of traditional antirape activism and argue that the use of digital technologies has allowed for a more nuanced way of consciousness-raising which has extended far past small-group conversation and has ended up stretching around the globe (Loney-Howes & Fileborn, 2019). This consciousness-raising is important as it allows survivors to understand that they are not alone, but as Sara Crouch says, it was especially important for people who were not in the same "sphere" of an organization like OASIS to visually see #MeToo being represented through people's posts online. In our interview, she discusses how she remembers noticing how "a lot of my male-identifying friends and family members were really shocked by this outpouring of who has been victimized or who has been affected." Dr. Page said seeing the extent to which sexual violence infiltrates the lives around her was certainly "depressing and outrageous in so many ways" but for her and for a lot of others, it was also "validating" (Page, 2020, personal interview).

It is important to note that this protection which comes from a screen can also be negative in that it serves a similar kind of "courage-serving" role for the people who post problematic, antifeminist discourse. Even before #MeToo exploded in 2017, a 2016 New Zealand study deemed online platforms to be a "matrix of sexism" (Sills, 2016, pg. 10). During the interviews of 17 young adult women, the participants described examples of this sexism, which included "victim-blaming, 'slutshaming', rape jokes, the celebration of male sexual

conquest, and demeaning sexualized representations of women" (Sills, 2016, pg. 2). In a similar

2018 study published in the *European Journal of Women's Studies,* researchers in the UK

concluded that in general, Twitter -- the platform where the hashtag #MeToo originally took off

-- is "overwhelmingly a negative and toxic space for women" (Mendes, 2018, pg. 14). In addition,

similar to the New Zealand study, many participants in the study reported feeling anxiety using

social media, and a fear that they would be attacked for their feminist views. These fears and

anxieties are what caused the authors of the study to classify online activism as "risky,

exhausting, draining, and overwhelming" (Mendes, 2018, pg. 15). Ultimately, what Dr. Page

calls the"perceived privacy" of social media is empowering for survivors, but it can also

"empower" others to post harmful content since the authors of these posts never have to say it

directly to someone's face (Page, 2020, personal interview). Dr. Page says since there is no

face-to-face interaction, people can be especially cruel, which is why she argues there exists a

"dehumanizing" quality to social media.

This lack of face-to-face interaction also becomes problematic when it easily allows

people to disregard and not "listen" to what someone has to say online. Listening, Dr. Eng says,

means "actually having your subjectivity affected by the other in such a way that your

subjectivity gets called into slight question…Your sense of self is at least challenged" (Eng, 2020,

personal interview). In other words, to "listen" is to put your beliefs aside in order to hear the

grievances of others. Even in person this is difficult to do, which I say from my own personal

experience. I would say it's a skill that one must work on over time. So, through a screen, where

you don't even see the other person's face or feeling, there becomes an extra barrier that makes

it even harder to "listen" to someone of a different belief. In addition, as Sara Crouch talks

about, using a social media account gives you the agency to *choose* in some ways the content and

beliefs that you see and interact with (Crouch, 2020, personal interview). She calls it "existing in

a safe little vacuum" where you have the ability to give access to only the accounts you agree

with. She speaks on how on her personal accounts, it is so incredibly easy to simply unfollow

someone if they post something she doesn't agree with or report something as "fake news" that

she finds problematic. It is in this way that the ability to unfollow or report a post makes it even

more difficult to "listen" online.

        Within this section, I have demonstrated that the screened interaction element of digital

activism is helpful in empowering survivors to electronically share the stories they would have

had extreme difficulty sharing face-to-face. Within the #MeToo Movement, this empowerment

led to a "shocking" amount of people uncovering the depth to which sexual violence affects our

culture and overall increasing awareness to this issue. However, at the same time, this lack of

face-to-face interaction becomes harmful by allowing cruel comments to be unaccompanied by a

visual reaction that perhaps otherwise would have deterred such comments. In addition, no

face-to-face interaction more easily allows people to tune out or not "listen" to the words of

others. Thus, this section provokes the question: if users of social media are able to choose what

content they see and easily tune out or not "listen" to the beliefs differing theirs, at what point

does the empowerment of voicing your experience on social media outweigh the fact that

perhaps no one is hearing you?

With Digital Activism's Safer Accessibility Comes A Threat To Traditional Activism

        Roughly 70% of American adults say they have ever used Facebook (Perrin & Anderson,

2019). Out of those people, over half of them log in and check their account several times a day

(Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Close to 75% of young adults regularly use Instagram and nearly

44% use Twitter (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). One of the major reasons why social media has

blown up in popularity and usership could be because of how easily accessible it is to the average

person. For most if not all social media platforms, creating an online account requires very little but an internet connection and an email address. To create and sustain an online existence requires little but the knowledge it takes to navigate throughout the platform. With over 80% of U.S. adults actively using and engaging daily with a smartphone, it only makes sense that accessibility to these social media sites has allowed for most of the U.S. adult population to exist online (Pew Research Center, 2019). It is because of this accessibility that many people believe social media to be the platform that allows for voices to be heard that have never been given a platform before.

For some people, as the authors of the 2015 study "Speaking 'Unspeakable' Things," points out, traditional activism is not as easily accessible as it may seem. The study, conducted two years before the surge in online popularity of #MeToo, discusses how there are limits to the type of feminist activism teenagers have access to (Keller, 2015). Specifically, the teenagers they interviewed aged between 14 and 19 had much easier access to online activism than they did traditional activism. However, through online activism, these teenagers were able to find like-minded individuals at school who shared many of the same experiences and, thus, manifest their beliefs non-digitally with the creation of communities where they felt they were able to express their feminist beliefs safely. Through finding these communities, these teens were able to find more accessible ways of participating in traditional activism, such as protesting the dress codes at school. It is in this way that the researchers of this study label digital activism as a "mediation" that connects the worlds of online and traditional activism (Keller, 2018, pg. 3).

From the Sills (2016, pg. 2) article I discussed earlier, the researchers also concluded that engaging in digital activism on social media platforms was still able to provide a "buffer" for the 17 young adult women they interviewed, which "offered inspiration, education and solidarity that legitimated their discomfort with rape culture." In other words, participants overall

believed social media to be a safer space where they were able to find positivity, solidarity and opportunity for free expression. Additionally, Mendes's article (2018, pg. 14) concluded that for many participants, social media platforms were viewed to be "safer and easier spaces for engaging in feminist activism" in comparison to non-virtual, real life spaces like the workplace, school, or on the streets.

The question of safety thus becomes relevant within the comparison of accessibility between traditional and digital activism. Sara Crouch brings up that expressing beliefs through traditional feminist activism may be less accessible for an individual who may not be ready in their healing process or willing to engage in that way (Crouch, 2020, personal interview). In our interview, she says, because of the accessibility of social media, people are able to engage with OASIS in a "low-stakes way." She discusses the difficulty and strength it takes for someone to be able to walk through the doors of OASIS and ask them for help, while identifying themselves as a survivor or victim in the process. For someone to do that, she says, it takes a large amount of work and a lot of time in the healing process after an assault. If someone were to be pressured to do this when they are not willing or ready to, it can be harmful for them. However, for the people who are not there yet but are on their way, Crouch explains how as the Outreach Coordinator, she runs all the social media accounts and regularly posts educational infographics with information regarding topics like "What are some characteristics of a healthy relationship?" The one below was a Valentine's Day post on Instagram (OASIS, Inc., 2020).

Crouch says that in seeing informational posts like these, it can help "get your brain thinking and you're able to start thinking about your own relationship, like 'Am I in a healthy relationship? Am I in an abusive relationship? Should I reach out to OASIS?'" (Crouch, 2020, personal interview). Even without engagement through volunteering or attending events, she says OASIS's digital presence can "provide educational opportunities and information to people in our community who may not be ready or willing to identify themselves as a victim. Or who may not be ready or willing to seek help or support." It is in this way that digital activism allows people who are not able to participate in traditional activism to still receive helpful information through simply following an account like OASIS on social media.

It is important to note that although for many people digital activism can be less risky and more accessible, in some cases, digital activism can have similar consequences to traditional activism. Mendes's same study (2016) found that teenage feminists who practiced digital activism faced much tension from loved ones and peers at school who did not agree with their feminist views they had posted online. Many of the teens were met with dismissive comments from friends and family members, sexist or racist jokes in retaliation, and the feeling that they

themselves are the root of the conflict. One teenage feminist interviewed said, "I have come away from conversations feeling *as though the problem lies with me* - as though I'm imagining things, that it's about my personal issues, that I'm over-sensitive and so on" (Mendes, 2016, pg. 13). The authors of the article relate this feeling to what feminist writer Sara Ahmed called being a "feminist killjoy". In her book *Living a Feminist Life,* Ahmed discusses how one inevitable part of being a feminist is oftentimes feeling like you are causing problems for no reason and always making something out of nothing (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed says that in reality, this feeling is just the bi-product of calling out an issue that already exists. While this feeling isn't pleasant, Ahmed explains how this is simply a part of being a feminist. Therefore, one can conclude that this feeling is bound to be experienced whether a feminist calls out issues online or in real life.

However, because of the many people who do participate in digital activism, there exists a threat to traditional digital activism. As Sara Crouch explains, it is incredibly easy to like, retweet, and post words, images, and videos online that echo the values of feminist and antirape culture discourse (Crouch, 2020, personal interview). However, research shows that in some ways, participation in digital activism actually deters many people from participating in more traditional, non-digital activism (Lewis, et. al., 2014). The researchers in the study say that their findings about Facebook (the most popular social media site among U.S. adults) do not "[uphold] the notion of social media as gateways to civic engagement" (Lewis, et. al., 2014, pg. 7). Instead, they write that their "findings support the notion that 'the fast growing support and diffusion of protest enabled by the Internet is followed by an even faster decline in commitment' [towards traditional activism]" (Lewis, et. al., 2014, pg. 7). In other words, the many people who show their support or agreement with social causes online do so ONLY by liking a post, sharing a post, or engaging some other way online that does not translate to something actually beneficial for the cause, such as donating, volunteering, or joining a protest.

In our interview, Dr. Eng discussed how one major drawback of digital activism is how it becomes a "distraction" from the activist work that needs to get done (Eng, 2020, personal interview). He speaks on how social media platforms become a sphere which shapes the public using it. Ultimately, he says, "what we have is a public that is content with simply exchanging quick bits of information or snarking at each other or trolling each other on social media…" This becomes a disadvantage of digital activism in that, according to Dr. Eng, engaging with an antifeminist post or comment on social media is a "failed idea of actually intervening in the public space". In reality, he says, we are concentrating so much energy on breaking down one problematic post after another instead of engaging in more helpful, more traditional ways of activism.

Within this section, I have demonstrated that digital activism provides an easily accessible - and sometimes much safer - option to express and engage with feminist and antirape beliefs. Although, while accessible, one extreme limitation of digital activism is that it almost portrays traditional feminist activism as *un*accessible. Digital activism has been shown to decrease a person's desire to participate in traditional activism because it still gives us the same "feel-good vibe" as Sara Crouch says (Crouch, 2020, personal interview). This section leaves us with the question: in what ways can we promote the accessibility and relative safety of digital activism without discouraging a user's interest in contributing to the very important "real work" of traditional activism?

Conclusion

The quoted interviews as well as the outside research I have included within this paper indicate that the power of antirape digital activism is incredibly complex. The research clearly demonstrates that antirape digital activism has just about as many benefits as disadvantages.

While the digital activist movement #MeToo has given rise to previously silenced voices and established connections, as bell hooks says, between all these voices, it is the harmful framing of #MeToo and sexual violence as a "women's issue" that becomes problematic. Specifically, when it is possible that anyone can be a victim of sexual assault no matter their identity, the frame of "women's issue" contributes to the erasure of survivors who do not identify as women and furthermore, often fails to extend attention to transgender women and women of color. In another way, when framed as a "women's issue," sexual violence becomes an issue, in many people's minds, that women are equipped and *meant* to deal with, therefore reinforcing the gender norms that perpetuate rape culture.

It is also interesting that digital activism has a "screened interaction" element where a user is not required to see any other users face-to-face. This element can be empowering for survivors who have struggled with voicing their stories aloud and can ultimately express themselves easier through a digital platform. It is this element that contributes to the amount of awareness that was drawn to how pervasive sexual violence is and always has been. However, this lack of face-to-face interaction also allows for cruel words to be expressed without the requirement of having to look at someone's face and visually see their reaction. It also allows for users to tune out and not "listen" to a belief or experience that is different from their own.

Lastly, while digital activism in many cases provides an easier, more accessible, and sometimes safer outlet to engage with than traditional activism, it still proves to be a threat to traditional activism. Specifically, engagement with digital activism still gives a user the "feel-good vibe" that donating or volunteering or protesting does. Research shows that digital engagement discourages users from participating in traditional activism because they adopt the false notion that liking a picture or sharing a post they agree with makes the same amount of

difference as donating supplies or volunteering. It is in this way that online activism becomes a "distraction" from the "real work" that needs to be done.

It is clear that antirape digital activism cannot and should not replace antirape traditional activism. Dr. Page puts it nicely when she said that activism on social media is "no substitute for building empathy, building understanding of experience, building compassion, meeting people where they are" (Page, 2020, personal interview). However, it is not to say that digital activism still doesn't have its benefits and ultimate role in ending rape culture. The solution, I believe, is to use digital activism in the way that it gives voice to an issue and to survivors that have previously been silenced. It is clear that digital activism can reach an audience with numbers unprecedented by traditional activism. But as it says in its definition, it should be used to support traditional practices, not replace it.

Even from this conclusion, many questions are left: how can we make the #MeToo Movement more inclusive? Does the benefit of screened interaction outweigh the disadvantage? How do we encourage the positives of digital activism without rendering traditional activism obsolete? These are the same questions that I believe activist and founder of the "Me Too" Movement Tarana Burke recognizes and works to find solutions every day in her field. *#MeToo* might have blown up as a hashtag on Twitter three years ago and hasn't been used on Twitter much since. However, it is clear within the writings of Tarana Burke and other activists as well as the very recent notable change that came about with the conviction of Harvey Weinstein in February 2020, that the "Me Too" Movement is one that will not lose its fire any time soon. There is much more work to be done to bring quieted voices to light and to bring justice to all survivors who have endured truly an irreparable trauma. But even as I write this in the shelter of my Boone bedroom due to a nationwide quarantine, digital activism is still being done from other individual bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens across the nation and across the world.

One example is the podcast I plan to publish along with this paper. As I said, if there's anything I've learned from my time as a Broadcasting Undergrad, it's that the media is powerful. Digital media has power…along with its limitations, but it certainly has power.

I believe it is when utilized in tandem with antirape traditional activism, like the work Tarana Burke, OASIS, and everyone with "Me Too" strives to do, that we can begin to see change perpetrator by perpetrator and survivor by survivor. It is then that we will be able to break down the toxic ideals of rape culture, one by one. It is then that future generations won't need to know the terms "toxic masculinity," "geography of fear," "victim blaming" or "patriarchy." It is then that everyone will hear the voices of survivors without us having to "say it louder for the people in the back."

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