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“MEANWHILE I’M OVER HERE BUTT NAKED ON CNN”: A MULTIPLATFORM DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE LESLIE JONES HACK

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Introduction

From the moment director Paul Feig announced the all-female reboot of *Ghostbusters* in October of 2015, the film and its castmembers became the target of online attacks from male fans who resented its apparent feminist bent. Leslie Jones, who played one of the four female leads, received the brunt of the online harassment. Following the film’s release, (now former) Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos posted a review of the film that singled out Jones as “the worst of the lot,” describing her as “spectacularly unappealing, even relative to the rest of the odious cast,” in particular for her “flat-as-a-pancake black stylings” (Yiannopoulos, 2016). His racist, sexist, anti-feminist review added fuel to the already sizeable fire of fanboy hatred for the film, and many of them set their sights on Jones as the main culprit. In late July, Jones temporarily left Twitter due to the barrage of hatred, and then on August 24, 2016, Jones's personal website was hacked and flooded with images of the slain gorilla, Harambe, photos of her driver's license and passport, as well as explicit photographs stolen from her iCloud account.

This harassment and the discourses that circulated around it provide a provocative case study for better understanding how digital platforms, specifically Twitter, and celebrity culture become spaces where ideological battles over race, sexuality, and gender take place. Through a multiplatform discourse analysis of the Leslie Jones hack, this project examines the connections between platform vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of women of color, as well as the links between the rise of the alt-right and the mainstreaming of racist, misogynistic trolling behaviors. Three themes emerged as most salient in the discourse. The first were messages of support for Jones alongside indictments of the trolls and hackers who attacked her. The second was the need for

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increased governance on Twitter in order to protect users like Jones. The third theme drew connections between Jones's treatment as a woman of color and the political climate emerging around the rise of Donald Trump and the alt-right.

Overall, this case study builds on the work of digital studies scholars to further explore the connections between digital platforms, systematic inequalities, trolling, and a resurgence in militant conservatism.

Relevant Literature

This paper draws from and contributes to the growing body of literature analyzing what Emma Jane (2014) terms "e-bile" (p. 541). Contextualizing this instance of harassment within a long history of online hate (e.g. Dibbell, 1994; Pfaffenberger, 1996; Shepherd et al, 2015), I build in particular on Whitney Phillips's (2015) arguments about the connections between trolling and mainstream culture. She argues that "trolls are born of and embedded within dominant institutions and tropes, which are every bit as damaging as the trolls' most disruptive behaviors... online trolling is par for the mainstream cultural course" (p. 8). Indeed, the connection between supposedly subcultural acts of online harassment and mainstream culture/politics has never been clearer. The links between Yiannopoulos, Breitbart, the alt-right, President Trump, and the United States' regression to increasingly institutionalized racism, misogyny, and xenophobia evince Phillips's arguments. This case study helps us map a moment when these subcultural behaviors were becoming more dominant and provides a microcosm through which to understand the interconnectedness between digital platforms, politics and Politics, race, and gender.

Research Design

My research design for this project draws on a qualitative interpretation of Jean Burgess and Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández's (2016) multiplatform issue mapping. I focus on "issue publics," tracking this controversy across platforms and qualitatively analyzing themes and media texts/objects associated with each issue and sub-issue. In order to understand the issues that arose around the Jones hack, I mapped and tracked the controversy across platforms and analyzed the key media objects associated with the hack, as well as samples of conversations that emerge among these issue publics.

In sampling and mapping this controversy, I follow the discourse analytic method used by Andrea Braithwaite (2016) in her analysis of #GamerGate. Like Braithwaite, "my path through this material most closely resembles the 'snowball' approach," following the links between social media, online news, YouTube, newspapers, magazines, etc. in order to demonstrate the most salient features of the controversy rather than provide an exhaustive account of all media objects related to the hack (p. 3). The resulting data set is drawn from Twitter, YouTube, network television, online news and commentary sites, newspapers, and magazines.

Findings

Through this multiplatform discourse analysis, three key themes emerged. The first, most dominant theme consisted of messages of support. These supportive, affirmative messages were primarily found on Twitter and articles that linked back to prominent tweets. Fans and colleagues of Jones started the hashtags #LoveforLeslieJ and #StandWithLeslie, and in the days following the hack, thousands of supporters tweeted and retweeted antagonism for the hackers alongside positive messages to and about Jones. However, the incident also garnered support for Milo Yiannopoulos; following news of the hack, as well as Yiannopoulos's ban from Twitter earlier in the summer, #FreeMilo trended on Twitter, with users defending his actions and sentiments. Discursively, the hack resulted in entrenchment among both sides.

A second key theme that emerged was the need for intervention, either on a self-regulatory or legislative level. Jones herself continually contextualized her statements in the need for technological or legal intervention, in her appearances on late night talk shows (*Late Night with Seth Meyers*, 2016), skits on *Saturday Night Live* (*Saturday Night Live*, 2016), and the Emmy Awards (Hope, 2016). Here we can see that mainstream discourse echoes debates amongst scholars and policymakers about the appropriate ways to address online harassment and abuse.

The final themes that emerged most strongly were the connection between politics and Politics. Online thinkpieces and Twitter users frequently forged linkages between rise of the alt-right and this instance of misogynoir. Beyond contextualizing the incident in systemic issues of racism and sexism, users explicitly connected the abuse to the rise of the alt-right; for example, NARAL president Ilyse Hogue tweeted, "If u think harassment of @Lesdoggg & rise of @realDonaldTrump r coincidental, u aren't paying attn. @AmandaMarcotte" (2016).

Conclusions

Overall, the discourse around Leslie Jones's hack evinces the mainstreaming of two phenomena: academic and policy discourse around online harassment, and the supposedly subcultural trolling culture that frequently aligns with the alt-right. While other instances of online harassment have garnered significant media attention (namely #GamerGate), the hatred toward Jones surfaced at a cultural and political tipping point, speaking to larger political divides within the United States. In this case, the support provided by the issue public around this incident resulted in backlash from members of the alt-right. It fed into their performance of victimization, allowing them to flip the discourse and frame themselves as oppressed and disadvantaged. Alt-right trolls exploited the vulnerabilities of Twitter and iCloud, trading on the ethics of free speech to harass and attack, defending what they see as increasingly vulnerable "traditional" values of masculinity and conservative politics. However, their fight is against power structures that are discursive rather than structural; white men are still far more powerful than women of color, and conservative politicians now control all three branches of the United States government. But the dominance of progressive, intersectional feminist values in social media and mainstream media discourse around this incident fed the alt-right's perceptual fallacy, throwing into stark relief the growing chasm between "real" and "fake."

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