COUNTERING THE COUNTERPUBLIC? THE GERMAN #METOO NETWORK ON TWITTER

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Questions of representation and visibility have a long tradition in the field of gender media studies, and digitization and the structural change of the public sphere have given them fresh momentum. While certain varieties of feminism have become more popular, so have anti-feminist reactions to it with both sides competing for visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009). Establishing the concept of feminist counterpublics that arise in response to the exclusion from dominant publics, Fraser (1990) noted already in her constitutive writing that counterpublics are not necessarily progressive and democratic. However, newer research on this topic seems to focus on either the potential of digital technologies (and especially social media platforms) for the formation of progressive and desirable feminist publics or on the rising of anti-feminist networks exclusively; thus, leaving questions about power inequalities *within* platforms and the (gendered) interplay between multiple, strongly conflicting counterpublics unanswered.

This study sheds light on the networked structure of the German-language #MeToo protest on Twitter in order to reveal who succeeded in becoming visible and influential in this digital protest and in order to show differences in networking practices among those involved. It will be shown that on the one hand, the hashtag enabled, also in the German-language Twittersphere, a network of individuals protesting against sexism and sexualized violence; on the other hand, Twitter accounts of traditional news media play a central role in the #MeToo network from the very beginning, indicating that protest networks are less "equal" and horizontal than often assumed. At the same time, few but very loud voices used the #MeToo protest to strategically mobilize against migration in Germany and Austria and to promote their racist agenda, even before a centralized campaign that exploited #MeToo – the "120dezibel" campaign from the radical right Identitarian movement – was launched.

Theoretically, this paper draws not only on research in the field of feminist media studies, but also on network science as well as research on social movements. Previous research on social (protest) networks suggests that they consist of a number of heterogeneous actors, e.g. highly connected *hubs* and peripheral actors

that play a crucial role in spreading information (González-Bailón & Wang, 2015; Bennett, Segerberg & Yang, 2018).

We collected all German-language tweets containing '#metoo' from the first tweet on October 16, 2017 to January 28, 2018, the last day before the radical right '120dezibel' campaign was launched. We built a network of Twitter accounts as nodes (N= 31,918), and retweet, reply, and @mention relations between them as edges (N= 84,341). The majority of nodes are part of one large connected component, indicating that Twitter's networking affordances where broadly used. In order to identify the most central actors, we calculated centrality measures for each node: Indegree, Outdegree, Betweenness and Eigenvector centrality. Using k-core decomposition technique, we identified the core and the periphery of the network. This technique recursively removes edges from a network, so that as a result the core consists of those nodes that are not only highly connected but also connected to other nodes in the core. Analyses were conducted using Python's NetworkX library (Hagberg et al., 2008). Those Twitter accounts with the highest values for each centrality measure, the core and a random sample from the periphery were analyzed and classified as actor types, such as media actors, political actors, civil society actors and private accounts (N=692; two coders, intercoderreliability Krippendorff's α: 0.95). In the last step, a qualitative-quantitative content analysis was conducted for the core's retweets and tweets.

As expected, the network consists of some highly connected hubs and a majority of nodes with only few connections. The most central nodes, only 1.1 percent of the Twitter users involved, account for 35 percent of interactions within the network. From those accounts that were most often a target of interaction, half belong to journalists and media outlets (53 percent), indicating that they play a central role as broadcasters in the German #MeToo protest. On the other hand, primarily private accounts (89 percent) retweet, mention and reply to others' tweets on very high levels, functioning as amplifiers of #MeToo. Surprisingly, no celebrities and only few political and civil society actors take a central position in the network. The core-periphery decomposition revealed that in the very well-connected core of the network we find large amounts (re-)tweets with racist and/or anti-feminists and sexist conent (67 percent). These actors seem to use Twitter's networking affordances more strategically and effectively than feminist activists while striving to counter feminist action.

Of course, the protest on Twitter is only one part of the larger #MeToo movement. However, it is the participatory potential of Twitter that has sparked high hopes for feminist mobilisation and therefore it is necessary to critically examine the platform's dynamics. Also, this study shows how the concept of social networks and networked publics cannot only serve as a theoretical background but also as a fruitful methodological approach within the field of feminist media studies. Further, this study presents another example that while we experience a transnationalization of political communication (and feminism), it is still important to pay attention to the local context, as we assume that the rising of an anti-migration network within the German-language #MeToo protest is very context specific.

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