



Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

THE INTELLECTUAL LABOR OF DIGITAL BLACK FEMINIST ENCLAVES IN THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF #MUTERKELLY

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Abstract: While existing research has examined counterpublics in hashtag activism, little attention is given to digital enclaves that emerge when mainstream media disregards the voices of these communities. This paper helps us understand the process of hashtag activism that derives from the intellectual labor of digital enclaves. I examine the digital Black feminist enclave that emerged through the Black online magazine, *Ebony*, mobilizing #MuteRKelly on Twitter. #MuteRKelly brings attention to musical artist's, Robert Sylvester Kelly, sexual exploitation of Black women and girls. I combined digital Black feminist theory with critical technocultural discourse analysis to demonstrate how this Black feminist enclave maximized *Ebony*'s interface to defy ideologies of capitalism, racism, colonialism, and sexism that underpin the music industry's public allegiance to Black women's exploitation on and offline. This digital Black feminist enclave solidified in the rhetorical and technical demand of #MuteRKelly, for (1) the music industry to dispatch all financial, commercial, and social engagements with the Kelly and resist negative ideologies of Black women inscribed in his musical lineage, (2) for mainstream media to eradicate discourse that romanticizes domestic violence from celebrity Black men, and (3) for survivors' take space in the digital sphere to assemble a grapevine committed to advocacy aimed at legal justice and increased protection for Black women and girls. It is important for scholars to trace the lineage of internet practices that traverse to hashtag activism and for us to look at the digital enclaves that produce these practices.

The digital affordance of hashtags on social media platforms like Twitter allow users to streamline their messages nationally and centralize discussions around a single issue or focus (Moscato, 2016, 3; Brock, 2020, pp. 279-281). Hashtag activism describes how users raise awareness for specific social issues through hashtags that foster political debates, communal belonging, and identity construction (Wonneberger, Hellesten, & Jacobs, 2021, p.1697). Research on hashtag activism has primarily focused on the ways counterpublics, or public spheres separate from the dominant group, emerge on

Suggested Citation (APA): Hardy, A.(2022, November). *The Intellectual Labor of Digital Black Feminist Enclaves in the Narrative Construction of #Muterkelly*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

social media platforms (Fraser, 1990; Ku, 2018, 499; Jackson, Bailey, and Welles, 2018).

While existing research has examined the construction of counterpublics online, little attention is given to digital enclaves that emerge when mainstream media initially disregards the voices of marginalized communities. Catherine Squires described enclaves as hidden spaces for minority groups to strategize and gather resources for intervention into dominant discourse (p. 458). Inside the enclave, group members can interpret the rhetorical messages in public debates and create rhetorical strategies to build a movement that is dedicated to their interests and needs (Chávez, 2011, p. 13; Squires, 458). Through the intellectual labor of the enclave, the group can develop into a counterpublic that then challenges ideologies of race, gender, and class (Squires, 2002, p. 448).

This paper helps us understand the social construction of a hashtag that derives from the intellectual labor of digital enclaves. In this study, I examined the digital Black feminist enclave that emerged on the Black magazine platform, *Ebony*, mobilizing #MuteRKelly on Twitter (Brock, 2018; Steele, 2021; Jones, 2019; Collins, 2000). #MuteRKelly formed within the digital sphere to bring attention to musical artist, Robert Sylvester Kelly's sexual exploitation of Black women and girls.

Combining digital Black feminist theory with critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), I analyze how users fostered enclaved discourse that sharpened language and cultivated research about Kelly's harassment from 2012 to 2016 (Brock, 2020; Steele, 2021). I used CTDA as a technique to examine the discourse on *Ebony* in a way that connects the sites digital affordances including imagery, format, tools, and codes, with underlying ideologies of Black womanhood. I collected my data by using the Wayback Machine website to examine the initial interface and discourse on the platform during that time. To understand how the message to silence Kelly in the music industry circulated across the digital sphere, I mapped the links between *Ebony* and bloggers from other platforms that used digital affordances to connect themselves to the conversations happening on *Ebony*. While there were many people engaged in this movement, I examined the intellectual labor of Aya de Leon, Danielle Britni, Josi Pickens and Jamilah Lemieux to demonstrate how these women collectively worked to construct this movement against Kelly.

The Black feminist enclave that emerged on *Ebony* challenged the tradition of silencing and devaluing Black women's intellectual work in activism. Even before hashtag activism, Black women were commonly denied entry to mainstream conversations. Public spaces reproduced coloniality that privileged white supremacy and patriarchy in public debates ignoring the voices of many Black women activists. To counter this oppression, kitchens, churches, homes, and beauty shops emerged as enclaved spaces for Black women to speak freely about their daily lives and resist ideologies in civil society (Davis, 1999, 367; Collins, 2000). These Black feminist enclaves cultivated healing, empowerment, self-definition, and relationships that uniquely enhance members' ability to collectively confront physical and discursive effects of intersecting oppressions in wider public arenas (Collins, 2000, pp. 101-110;). Extending this research to online platforms, Steele (2022) argued that digital Black feminist enclaves

are online spaces created for and by Black women that “produces knowledge through discussion” (84-85). This study builds on this scholarship by demonstrating how the digital Black feminist enclave that emerged on *Ebony* participated in the reception, construction, and stratification of #MuteRKelly.

The digital Black feminist enclave that emerged on *Ebony* solidified initiatives in the rhetorical and technical demand for (1) the music industry to dispatch all financial, commercial, and social engagements with the Kelly and resist negative ideologies of Black women inscribed in his musical lineage, (2) mainstream media to eradicate discourse that romanticizes domestic violence from celebrity Black men, and (3) survivors’ take space in the digital sphere to assemble a grapevine rhetorically committed to fighting, aimed at legal justice and increased protection for Black women and girls. On *Ebony*, many bloggers used the feature of the hyperlink to mobilize self-defining practices across media platforms that allowed bloggers to criticize dominant discourse about Kelly (Collins, 2000). In Lemieux’s 2013 blog post, she uses sarcastic undertones in language and the bolding of text to differentiate between the blatant ostracization of these women and the factual evidence from the case. In bold text, Lemieux posted, “Save ‘where were their parents?’” and “Save ‘he was not guilty!’” She attached hyperlinks to her post that connected viewers to others engaged in this counter discourse and provided explanations for why these excuses marginalize Black women. Her intervention largely critiques patriarchal discourse that publicly dehumanized and victimized Black women to mask the severity of Kelly’s exploitation. Lemieux uses the hyperlink as a self-defining tool to build her own story that included evidence from other media posts. Together, her self-defining rhetoric fortified the demand to mute the artist and created fertile digital space for the arrival of #MuteRKelly. By giving increased scholarly attention to the digital enclave’s discursive practices and the digital tools used on the interface, we can better trace the lineage of internet practices that traverse to hashtag activism.

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