

Do we (mis)recognise the political power of Twitter?



*We are told that Twitter is the new public sphere, the place where we hold government accountable, encourage diverse voices, and provide resources for public benefit like education, healthcare, and welfare. Using the #metoo campaign as a case study, **Naomi Barnes** and **Huw Davies** question whether Twitter really is a public sphere or if it is simply a platform capitalist that monetises displays of outrage?*

Twitter is, of course, many things to many people. It is a place people have connected, had ideas developed, and views broadened. However, it is also violent – a place of trolls, masked and unmasked hostility, overt fascism, and even nuclear brinkmanship. Whatever the experience, Twitter is made possible by [platform capitalism](#) – a business plan that incentivises outrage to monetise it. But we are told we shouldn't give up on it just yet because it is also a place where social justice issues such as police shootings, domestic violence, and sexual harassment have been recognised and given a public platform; but so have their deniers. Therefore, whether Twitter holds the potential for social justice is an open and complex question: to explore it we apply two different conceptualisations of misrecognition to the [#metoo](#) campaign.

The #metoo campaign offers just one of many possible case studies that could help develop this critique. A decade ago Tarana Burke, an activist from New York, initiated the original #metoo campaign to aid underprivileged women of colour affected by sexual abuse. It was reignited in response to allegations of sexual assault against Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and other influential male Hollywood personalities. The hashtag movement encourages women to speak out about incidents of sexual harassment. It works as a clickable symbol of solidarity and has established momentum in recognising the immensity of the problem of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace. But is Twitter an effective public sphere to bring harassment and assault out into the open where it can be politicised?

What is the public sphere?

Habermas (1989, cited in [Fuchs 2013](#)) argues that the concept of the public is related to the notion of the common that is associated with ideas like community, the common use of resources like a marketplace or a well, and communal organisation. Fuchs has already made [a significant contribution](#) to the debate as to whether Twitter can be conceptualised as a public sphere but does not explicitly address these structural intersecting gendered, racial, and ethnic biases within Twitter and other social media platforms. He argues that Twitter's reality contradicts Habermas' utopic promise of an ordered and respectful bourgeois society, but that does not mean it is not a public sphere. Tweepers participate in a broader "[affective public](#)" with its own emerging rules, norms, and codes of behaviour, as well as structural racisms and subjectivity. Moreover, we don't all arrive at this sphere as equals [class and cost](#) shape digital participation. It is these institutionalised biases that we pick up and expand for analysis.

Feminist philosopher [Nancy Fraser](#) critiques the white middle-class boundaries of Habermas' definition. She describes second wave feminist activists' aim to make private matters public in order to politicise them by pressuring policymakers into distributing public resources to underserved people. Such campaigns included demands for maternity leave, childcare, equal opportunity in the workplace, shelters for women subjected to domestic violence, and legal recourse. Employment stability when sexually harassed in the workplace is part of this campaign. Fraser argues our society's failure to effectively address these issues is an act of *misrecognition* or being denied access to political parity because of the (sexist, racist, classist, ableist, xenophobic) cultural values of institutions, like Twitter. She sees misrecognition by institutions as a serious violation of justice.

The #metoo campaign can therefore be seen as an attempt to address this misrecognition by calling out injustice on social media. In Fraser's definition of the public sphere and reminiscent of [Mills' famous quote](#), the hashtag has worked to make a private trouble public. However, Fraser might argue that while the problem is recognised as being widespread, without genuine structural and political change and efforts to distribute resources and represent the needs of the misrecognised beyond social media, this recognition alone is insufficient action for parity.

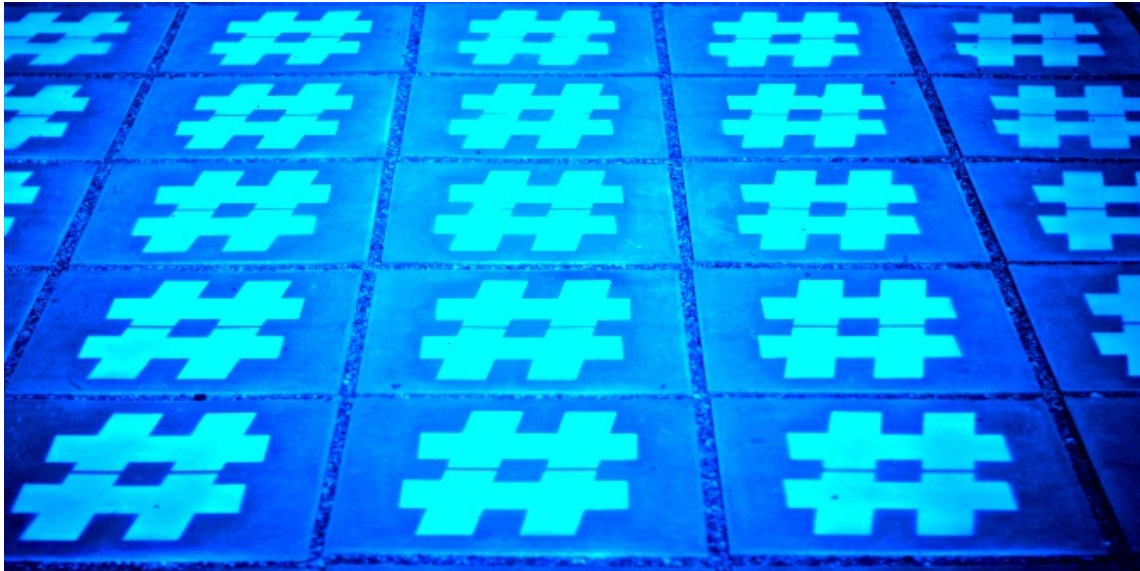


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Bourdieu offers a different definition of misrecognition. He calls it a [failure to recognise how normatively defined social environments may be working against our interests](#). Twitter is a form of capitalism that seeks to harvest data at a scale and complexity that is useful to advertisers: the more tweeters who are tweeting the more valuable Twitter becomes. Platforms are hungry for words and [have written algorithms](#) that encourage us to continuously feed them by looping news and media that personally resonates.

More broadly, [platform capitalism](#)'s business model has mobilised the gig economy, which valorises casual and temporary contract work. One of the advantages of the gig economy to business owners is that it limits dissent. Therefore, if victims of sexual harassment and assault working in casual and temporary contracts speak out, there is a very real chance they could lose their job. Women who are living in precarity and poverty lack representation and resources to bring the issue into the public sphere in a way that will change the inequitable social structures that allowed sexual harassment to go unchecked for so long. There are further complexities of culture and access which we do not have room for in this post but need concerted attention.

Like similar campaign such as [#everydaysexism](#) the [#metoo](#) hashtag has offered hope and validation to millions of women. Digital mediation also [“enables new connections previously unavailable to girls and women](#), allowing them to redraw the boundaries between themselves and others”. However, what James refers to as [trying to act ethically in an unethical space](#) can compound a problem. We must remember it is in the best interests of the platforms to keep people feeding the hashtag, but not moving the issue into the public sphere where policy solutions can be implemented that will affect the platform capitalists' [working conditions](#). However, if the campaign is not translated into meaningful change there is a danger that we have misrecognised Twitter's social emancipatory potential by ignoring the [distinctly unjust environment](#) of the platforms.

Way forward

The democratic illusion that social media has performed needs further transnational and intersectional interrogation. The nature of social action has changed to both include and be impeded by platforms. Every blog, tweet, or post that attracts a lot of attention and discussion needs questioning as to whether it is misrecognising change. Without concrete public action, words online remain in the privately owned domain of the platforms whose assets are our words. Maybe change *begins* with a hashtag, but it has to be followed by an expanded intersectional critique of social media and the public sphere. In our plans of action we need to address what it means to be [a politically active digital citizen](#) and how political, cultural, and economic parity can be achieved in a world mediated by platforms.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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