Article

Instagram and Gendered Surveillance: Ways of Seeing the Hashtag

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Abstract

This research examines gendered surveillance on Instagram. The hashtag serves as an affordance across platforms, and this work expands on the literature of the rhetorical functions of hashtags. Rather than focusing on the hashtag itself as the problem, I instead use it as a lens to examine an extant social issue that is beginning to receive attention from the growing body of feminist surveillance research. When Instagram allows certain terms and hashtags to flourish for weeks, months, and even years without removal, this type of rhetoric and image combination functions to socially isolate a particular group in a heteronormative and nonconsensual way that reproduces existing inequalities. Instagram (and also Facebook who owns it) has the opportunity to promote whatever content it chooses and to put forth whatever narrative or rhetorical formation of the world it wants to see. What world does Instagram want?

Introduction

Captions, often in the form of searchable talk (Zappavigna 2011) or hashtags, have become an essential component of the image (Benjamin 2015) on platforms like Instagram, the picture sharing social media service owned by Facebook. A hashtag is basically a caption that takes the form of metacommunication as well as a system for sorting and organization (Daer, Hoffman, and Goodman 2014). It is an affordance (Pearce and Vitak 2016) that is now available across platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where the # key is followed by an uninterrupted line of text to form a hashtag (Pandell 2017). It is a way to comment on the contents of a still or moving image, and it's also a way to cultivate a particular way of seeing the world (Berger 1972). Rather than focusing on the hashtag itself as the problem, I instead use it as a lens to examine gendered surveillance to add to the growing body of feminist surveillance research. When Instagram allows certain terms and hashtags to flourish for weeks, months, and even years without removal, this type of rhetoric and image combination functions to socially isolate a particular group in a heteronormative and nonconsensual way that reproduces existing inequalities (Sebastian 2016). Instagram (and also Facebook who owns it) has the opportunity to promote whatever content it chooses and to put forth whatever narrative or rhetorical formation of the world it wants to see. What world does Instagram want?

Research I conducted in 2016 focused on variations of the hashtag #upskirt that explicitly violated Instagram's stated community guidelines yet remained on the platform (Sebastian 2016). Upskirting is a form of nonconsensual image capture and voyeurism that has taken many forms in many places and that through language and practice works to construct a very narrow and binary expectation of gender (Chan

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2018; Calvert and Brown 2000; Thompson and Wood 2018; Zeronda 2010). My findings demonstrated that the term and the metaphoric use of upskirt in both legal language and “everyday talk” (Markham 2015) represents a reduction of personhood (Burke 1969) that positions women and girls into a particular way of being “seen” or watched. It also actively creates discursive limitations (Butler 2011) both in legal systems of language and colloquial use about who the expected victim and perpetrator can be. In general, the term and the behavior represent a downright Victorian mindset about gender that sets real limits in the name of social control for anyone who falls outside the expected binary scope of male perpetrator and female victim (Jorgensen-Earp 1990).

Since my data collection period was a few years ago, I wanted to take another look now to see what had changed about this once thriving form of gendered surveillance. Abu-Laban (2015) recently highlighted the need to gender the study of surveillance and incorporate feminist methodology and epistemology in new research. Dubrofsky and Magnet (2015) make a similar argument in their recent book by explaining that surveillance operates on gendered bodies in different ways and that it can create “othered forms of racialized, gendered, classed, abled, and disabled bodies, as well as sexualized identities” (9).

As of 2015 when my Instagram data were collected, it was possible to capture all existing data on a hashtag, not just for a particular time period. This means that as of May 2015 when these were collected, the nearly 2,000 comments on each post included all the data available using Instagram’s API (Application Programming Interface) for those particular tags. At that time, #upskirt was often accompanied by at least one other hashtag, which Daer, Hoffman, and Goodman (2014) argue marks a change in the “rhetorical function” of hashtags. The function of additional meta hashtags is often to offer a qualifying opinion on the item being shared, and unfortunately there were a number of these types of opinions in my dataset. Semantic tags for finding and organization are often commonly used with meta tags about the organized material (ibid.). The #upskirt data qualified as a semantic tag because it was used as a place to organize pictures of upskirt images.

Instagram also changed the community guidelines in the spring of 2015 to allow breastfeeding pictures, shortly after its parent company Facebook made the same move (Alba 2015). However, that did not stop the service from banning a popular photographer for sharing her breastfeeding photos just months later (Van de Wall 2015). This is not to suggest that Instagram routinely bans all artwork or that breastfeeding photo sharers are always banned from the service. Nevertheless, what gets banned, and what does not, is certainly of interest, particularly if the service makes value claims that are then challenged by their actual practices (Shilton 2018).

As of November 2018, over 20 hashtag variations containing “upskirt” are still flourishing on the platform. Instagram may be doing something to remove these kinds of posts, but content moderation in general is difficult and typically relies on a blend of human moderators and automated responses to “curate site content and guard against serious infractions contained in user-generated content” (Roberts 2016: 148). Roberts coined the term *commercial content moderation*, which highlights the role of the human being in moderation (ibid.). These moderators are ultimately the ones who decide what content stays or goes, and as the platform grows, that becomes more difficult to do well. The recent documentary film *The Cleaners* provides an in-depth look at the lives of those in this profession (Block and Riesewieck 2018). The hours are usually long and the pay is usually low, for what seems like incredibly mentally upsetting and demanding work. A typical worker may look at thousands of images per day as the sheer scale of these platforms continues to increase.

Facebook and now Instagram are enormous. Scholars like Tufekci (2018) argue that these companies “have attained a scale unlike anything the world has ever seen” (n.p.). Tufekci also emphasizes that as long as the business model of social media companies like this are built around selling ads, successful content moderation might be impossible. When Instagram began, it was fairly small and, although imperfect, was better able to suit the needs of a smaller community within a platform designed around user-generated content (Postigo 2016). Additionally, many who worked for Instagram before Facebook’s acquisition have left, expressed displeasure, and/or outright quit the service (Dwoskin 2018). Considering that Instagram is

also now apparently a space where users have been making posts about the recent devastating fires in California to “sell products and posts nudes,” it doesn’t exactly sound much like the world building contained on their community guidelines page (Lytvynenko 2018). The service might just be too big to successfully moderate in its current model.

#Hashtags, Language, and Rhetoric

Language and its symbolic use and power are often “taken for granted” (Gee 2011; Wolcher 2006). Markham (2015) argues that “everyday talk” is also taken for granted and that care should be paid to the way words can socially construct a particular reality—eventually not only the usage becomes taken for granted but the thinking that underlies the talking also begins to “shape the way the world works” (n.p.). Markham also talks about the power of rhetoric to be “world-making,” echoing Gee’s (2011) concept of *figured world* building. Markham investigates the social construction of everyday talk and the way that talk can “construct, feed, or resist larger discourses” (2015: n.p.). Instagram’s community guidelines still state very clearly: “We have zero tolerance when it comes to sharing sexual content involving minors or threatening to post intimate images of others” (Instagram 2018: n.p.). And yet.

We use language to carry out actions. We also use language to determine what is significant or what has value. As Gee (2011) explains, “language-in-use is a tool, not just for saying and doing things, but also, used alongside other non-verbal tools, to build things in the world” (102). Language is not only symbolic, but it also *does* things and performs actions.

A number of studies have recently looked at what people are doing with the language used in hashtags across platforms, especially in the areas of activism nationally and internationally (Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Tufekci 2017; Stevenson 2014; Stache 2014; Giglietto and Lee 2017). Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark’s (2016) report on the history and use of #BlacklivesMatter on Twitter showed how useful that form of organization and rhetoric was in reframing a media narrative, and many other groups successfully use it for organization. The little hash sign can certainly be used for good, and as Tufekci’s (2017) work has demonstrated, it can be extremely useful for activist and revolutionary organization internationally.

Zappavigna’s (2011) conception of searchable talk refers specifically to “online discourse where the primary function appears to be affiliation via ‘findability’” (789). Zappavigna also explored the ways that individuals used language to “build community” and noted that a “cultural shift toward a more interpersonal function for search has emerged” (ibid.: 789). This is related to the work of Chancellor et al. (2016) who found that members of the pro-eating disorder community created “non-standard lexical variations” to get around the community guidelines. In their dataset from 2011 to 2014, these types of communities were “active and thriving.”

Gendered Surveillance

Monahan (2009) asked what the “gender implications of modern surveillance technologies” (286) were nearly ten years ago, and the question has only gotten more complicated. Conrad (2009) also focused nearly ten years ago on the need for more attention to gender in surveillance studies. Gender and other categories of interest to intersectional feminists (Crenshaw 1991) and queer theorists (Moran 2016; Conrad 2016) have become ever more essential to the study of surveillance. Feminist surveillance studies as a field continues to grow, especially as our technologies become ever more ubiquitous and personal and social surveillance becomes more normalized (Marwick 2012).

Dubrofsky and Wood (2015) emphasize that “visual-media technologies” are embedded with pre-existing ideologies. They mean that both social media and technology that were created specifically for surveillance are “always already part of an objectifying process that has particular implications for gendered bodies” (ibid.: 93). Coronas and Hardy (2009) emphasize the same point by arguing that gender constructions and notions of sexuality and surveillance must not be studied or viewed independently of one another. They

write that social constructions of both gender and sexuality “are key shapers of social contexts in general” (ibid.: 389). They explain that social contexts are not neutral spaces free of gender constructs.

Jakubowska (2014) discusses the athlete’s body as an object of surveillance that operates in a similarly restrictive and binary manner to the upskirting photographs that proliferate on Instagram. Jakubowska writes that the principle of “fair play” in sports has become a surveillance practice when the bodies of the athletes are under scrutiny. In this way, this surveillance practice “can also be perceived as a tool for reproducing gender order through processes of inclusion and exclusion” (ibid.: 454). The practice of gender verification is, again, eerily reminiscent of the way some of the comments play out on the upskirt hashtags. Seeking a heteronormative, biological binary distinction between men and women is extremely limiting, hurtful, and shortsighted in both spaces. This practice of “policing of sexual bodies” also occurs interpersonally and can therefore reinforce heteronormativity (Manning and Stern 2018).

Other recent work has highlighted similar creepy places and practices around creepshots online (Thompson and Wood 2018). Creepshots are in essentially the same genre as upskirting images with a less explicitly gendered name, although the practice itself appears to be often extremely misogynistic and gendered in action. However, not all gendered surveillance is captured covertly. Whoever runs Calvin Klein’s marketing department, for example, decided it would be a good idea to create an advertisement that features a posed upskirt model with the caption, “I flash in #mycalvins” (Chan 2018). I am very concerned about the world that particular advertising campaign designer and/or team of designers wants.

I’m still pretty concerned about the world Instagram wants too. Things do not appear to have improved much, and gendered surveillance is still able to exist and even thrive. I do not pretend to know what a direct solution to this issue is; however, it would appear that those researching content moderation are closer to an answer than Instagram is. Declaring that the problem is simply “too big” should not be an allowable excuse anymore. When Instagram allows certain terms and hashtags to exist without any real change, that sends a message—a message that this type of rhetoric and image combination is allowed, is perhaps even OK, and that even though this rhetoric functions to socially sort and surveil their users in a nonconsensual way that reproduces existing inequalities, that’s not going to change. Not until Instagram does.

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