Kyle Humphreys

Research Project Title: Self-Advocacy, Activism, and Transgender Microcelebrities

Abstract

The internet is presently the most effective form of broadcasting one’s voice and presence. This can be especially valuable for minority groups, whose voices are often not heard and lack major representation in media. It has allowed minority groups to start social movements, for instance #blacklivesmatter and #metoo.

Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are highly stigmatized, so having a platform to self-advocate to compensate for not having prominent, positive advocates in media and politics allows them to reach a wider audience in hopes of destigmatizing their existence.

Two prolific transgender individuals, Blaire White and Natalie Wynn, have utilized YouTube and Twitter to share their thoughts and ideas and serve as ambassadors for the transgender community, even if they did not intend to be. Through similar microcelebrity techniques, Natalie and Blaire have advocated for the transgender community from different perspectives.

Reflection Essay

In conducting my study, I heavily depended on the library’s online catalog. Being that my study was centered around transgender issues and activism through online platforms, it is difficult to find print literature regarding the intersection between these topics. Literature on digital activism alone does not go into enough depth regarding minority groups and digital activism either. Despite sparse print media, transgender individuals are only gaining more news media attention as of late and the idea that the internet can be utilized as a platform for activism is as new as the internet despite activism being an old practice. Interesting yet is the idea of microcelebrities, individuals who do not garner the glamor of celebrities, yet draw a lot of attention and adoration from communities online in which they influence.

To demonstrate what impressions microcelebrities make when they become activists, I conducted a case study of transgender individuals with microcelebrity status. The individuals I observed for this study were Natalie Wynn and Blaire White, two transgender YouTube content creators who use YouTube to share their ideas and speak on issues pertaining to the transgender community. I used microcelebrity theory and digital activist theory to demonstrate my thesis. As microcelebrities in a marginalized community, Wynn and White can speak out on issues pertaining to their community. Their positions on these issues and the ways in which they communicate with their audience differ, which my professor Jin Kim felt was important when discussing the intersectionality of these fields, as this was an assignment for his class.

When preparing for my study, I made good use of the All Knight Search and Communication and Mass Media Complete database. I had used this service in the past and was familiar with library catalog services from high school, so I did not call upon the assistance of any employees at the library. However, I knew if I was ever having issues or needed to consult a librarian, I could call or stop by the library and they would be happy to help. In deciding what
articles to use, the first thing I did was make sure articles referenced in my study were of scholarly nature and peer reviewed by checking the box to the left in the search engine. This allowed me to narrow my results. Search terms like “Microcelebrity”, “Transgender”, and “Digital Activism” were enough to procure articles that were relevant to my topics. I saved numerous articles to my computer and titled them based on the titles of the article and the key points. This allowed me to be organized and access the information I needed faster.

As aforementioned, not having much on the intersectionality of these topics was a challenge I faced. In a specific case, I found an article detailing theory that strongly paralleled with the connection I was seeking to make and was able to interpret it to support my case. I referenced a study on digital rights activism by Effrat Daskal. The focus of that study was how organizations got their audience involved in their cause, and I noticed the methods could be applied to how Wynn and White engaged their viewers in their cause. This was how I compensated for the challenge of few articles being published that covered a topic as niche as I had been studying.

Using knowledge from these articles, I was able to begin my case study. I examined tweets from Wynn and White between October 1, 2018 and February 28, 2019. and picked several videos from their YouTube channels discussing transgender issues. When looking at this content, I tried to look for key microcelebrity strategies and methods outlined in the articles I selected. I also looked at how they discussed transgender issues and related that to digital activism.

I believe my work contributes to the existing bodies of scholarship on intersectional feminism, digital activism, and microcelebrity theory. I often struggled to find work that was as refined as this that I could use for my study, and digital activism in minority populations is a fascinating topic. I intend to have the full study published to an academic journal following it’s completion this summer.