Posting Racism and Sexism: Authenticity, Agency and Self-Reflexivity in Social Media

Rachel E. Dubrofsky & Megan M. Wood

Keywords: Surveillance; Postracism; Postfeminism; Cyrus; Authenticity; Gaze; Race; Gender

Our work engages a critical feminist perspective on the study of surveillance by bringing work on newer forms of media into conversation with the rich tradition of feminist media scholarship on the gaze and practices of looking,¹ asking about the implications of the privileging of self-reflexivity and seemingly authentic displays in a context marked by postracism (i.e. racism no longer exists; we can ignore race altogether) and postfeminism (i.e. gender equality has been reached; there is no need for feminist activism). As Laura Portwood-Stacer emphasizes in her contribution to this issue, scholars of newer forms of media need to recognize existing “theoretical resources” for making sense of seemingly new phenomena as a way of seeing both continuities and the “new.” Adrienne Shaw highlights in this issue that unfortunately work on technology and newer forms of media overlook “decades of feminist scholarship,” and Portwood-Stacer notes that feminist media studies in particular has much to offer the study of newer media. We heed their call to action.

We begin by touching on work from a larger project² on female celebrities’ use of Twitter, where we look at instances when women celebrities voluntarily post photographs of themselves and how these photos and posts are used in tabloid stories to frame the women as authentic and empowered. By “authentic,” we mean that they are presented as behaving in ways that are not pre-meditated (we focus on constructions of authenticity, not on intention or essentialized ideas of authenticity): unconstrained and natural-seeming, expressing themselves in spontaneous showings of feeling. This research explores the implications of this set-up when it comes to questions of race and gender, asking how newer media practices (Twitter) as a self-
surveillance technology operationalize and reproduce a masculine gaze— one that inscribes troubling racialized conceptions of women’s sexuality, particularly through the visual. Larisa Mann (this issue) highlights that the contingencies of visibility for women are important, and feminists “are well positioned to point out that being visible or accessible to others is not necessarily liberating.” From Mulvey’s foundational work on the “male gaze” examining how the camera invites the gaze of the audience to scrutinize female bodies, to bell hooks’s analysis of the hypervisibility of black female bodies, feminist media studies scholarship has long been concerned with the gendered and racialized implications of visual surveillance practices, though the term “surveillance” is not usually explicitly used.

Twitter is a useful focus, because it is immensely popular and allows users to communicate directly with other users and with followers, enabling tabloids to frame the Twitter activities of celebrities as willful and voluntary. The ability to post information directly on Twitter means Twitter can be seen as providing unmediated access to the intimate details of the day-to-day lives of celebrities. Twitter activity as the basis for a tabloid story is different than, for instance, a paparazzi photograph of a celebrity: With Twitter, the star expressly and actively fashions the information about herself—she can be seen as having agency. Of course, celebrity activity on Twitter is often managed by a public relations team, but our interest is in how the celebrity activity is presented in the gossip articles, not what may have actually occurred.

Mann articulates in her piece for this issue that newer forms of media require that “we refocus our attention on ideas about performance of the self.” Looking at how selves are performed, our work finds that tabloid stories discussing the Twitter activities of female celebrities position the women as empowered in posting pictures of themselves, consequently making them complicit in invitations to the male gaze: they created the photo that invites the male gaze so they are responsible for this gaze and desirous of the gaze. Not surprisingly, women of color are shown as complicit in their own objectification, but unlike the white women who are presented as working hard to attract this gaze (mainly through diet and exercise) and therefore empowered in attracting this gaze, women of color are not framed as agentic or empowered. Rather, women of color are shown always already-there-to-be-gazed-at: they need not do any work to attract the gaze since they attract it naturally, unwittingly, without effort. This falls in line with observations in Radhika Gajjala’s contribution to this issue about how white women of the global north are characterized as self-empowered in contrast to women from the global south and women of color in western nations.

Scholarship on postfeminism is useful to help elaborate how notions of authenticity come into play. Briefly, postfeminism is a discourse as well as a popular cultural context characterized by the assumption that gender inequality has been resolved, and thus the need for continued feminist action is a thing of the past. Postfeminism implies that women self-representing online is empowering and gives them agency over their identity-making. Within a postfeminist framework, Twitter can be used to forefront hyper-sexualized femininity as a form of agentic empowerment through what Wood terms the “call to authenticity”: the more one is seen as disclosing via
surveillance technologies like Twitter, the more one is constructed as being supposedly real. Similar to what occurs on reality TV, people who appear authentic despite surveillance are valorized as the most authentic. For instance, when a tweeting celebrity gets in trouble because of what she tweets, she is seen as more authentic because, despite the context of surveillance, she is presented as being completely herself as if not under surveillance; or as overcome by real, strong emotion—feelings so real they could not be suppressed no matter the context. The “call to authenticity” animates the idea that one participates successfully by disclosing on Twitter, so women are both lauded for being empowered through expressing themselves and criticized for the consequences of this display, enabling representations of women as enterprising individuals who willingly subject themselves to the gaze as a form of agency.

Self-Reflexivity, Authenticity, and Participation

The context of Twitter invites users to present aspects of their selves publicly in ways that privilege participation in the form of self-reflexivity and active fashioning of the self. For instance, when we presented our work on Miley Cyrus (the white celebrity who is the focus of our work on Twitter), discussion quickly turned to questions of intentionality: Does Cyrus fashion her own tweets? Why does she Tweet the stuff she does? Why does she behave as she does? These are questions we did not consider in our research but that touch upon important issues. Underlying this line of thinking is the question of whether or not Cyrus is self-aware, a query that aligns intentionality with self-reflexivity and authenticity. For example, one person commented that in the recently released documentary about Cyrus, Cyrus says her Twitter activities are integral in shaping her image the way she wants. The documentary presents Cyrus as aware of the performative nature of her brand of celebrity, while also (paradoxically) centering her “authentic self” as the foundation of that brand. Cyrus states:

I’m a freak. I want to come out of a teddy bear for Christ’s sake—with a hand—I’m just a freak. I don’t think it’s that I’m smarter than anyone else, it’s not that I think, “Oh, you don’t get it.” It’s just who I am and if I’m gonna perform, I want things around me that I like.

Here, Cyrus asserts she is simply being herself; she owns her public behavior and claims these activities are planned, thought out, and purposeful. Looking at Cyrus’s public confession in the documentary that her activities are a performance where she lets the audience know she knows exactly what she is doing, that there is a purpose to her actions, and that she is in control, alongside how her actions on Twitter are framed in the tabloid articles we examined, and taking into account the “call to
authenticity,” crucial tensions emerge. On the one hand, Cyrus expressly and self-admittedly performs to shape her public image—working to fashion her image suggests the actions are not authentic and spontaneous expressions of her feelings, but are instead pre-meditated—on the other hand, Twitter activities as presented by the tabloids, as well as her public statements (for instance, about how she is “just a freak”), are framed as authentic. An interesting paradox emerges where Cyrus admittedly performs to fashion a public image, at the same time as her self-awareness of her own performance authenticates her actions as real and truthful. Authenticity is here a slippery proposition: Self-reflexivity in the form of Cyrus commenting explicitly on what she does and why makes her actions authentic, even if Cyrus is confessing that her presentation of self is a performance and therefore inauthentic.

As feminist scholars interested in popular media and the intersection of race and gender, we wonder about the critical implications of the affiliation between surveillance, authenticity, and self-reflexivity, and how newer forms of media frame this affiliation. Marina Levina comments in her contribution to this forum that we need to consider the “materiality of participation as a moral and ethical enterprise of citizenship”; in particular, she calls for a “non-ironic engagement” with the effects of participation in newer forms of media. The stakes are salient when we consider that Cyrus—and many other celebrities—have been taken to task for issues related to race and gender. In Cyrus’s case, her use of black culture in her videos has been widely criticized. In particular, she is reprimanded for using black dancers as props,14 requesting songs (from her songwriters) that “feel black,”15 “twerking” as a way of expressing what “feels black,” and loving “hood” music.16 When confronted about these things, Cyrus reacts:

I don’t keep my producers or dancers around “cause it makes me look cool”. . .
I’m from one of the wealthiest counties in America. I know what I am. But I also know what I like to listen to. Look at any 20-year-old white girl right now—that’s what they’re listening to at the club. It’s 2013. The gays are getting married, we’re all collaborating. I would never think about the color of my dancers, like, “Ooh, that might be controversial.”17

In this age of hipster racism (too hip and self-aware to actually mean the racist stuff one expresses),18 postracism, and postfeminism, we wonder how being self-reflexive (and often ironic) about one’s racism or sexism might work to obfuscate systematic racism and sexism—what are the material consequences? Or how being self-reflexive, self-aware, and seemingly authentic, and the use of surveillance for these ends, can take precedence over everything else, including racism and sexism by placing oneself above racism or sexism (the idea that because I am intimate with the other I must not mean harm to the other when I make racist statements). In the age of social media, how might the affiliation between active participation under surveillance, confessing the self, self-awareness, and self-reflexivity, enable the posting of racism and sexism? As well, who gets to be self-reflexive? And how is self-reflexivity an elitist privilege only certain identities can access?19 How might this privilege be aligned with racialized notions of authenticity?
Notes


[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.


[17] Lewis, “Miley Cyrus on ‘Racist’ VMA Criticism.”

[19] The idea that self-reflexivity is a privilege was noted by Radhika Gajjala during the “Critical Feminist Interventions in New Media Studies” panel (National Communication Association, Washington, DC, November 23, 2013).