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BILL COSBY ON TWITTER AND BEYOND

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When a video of comedian Hannibal Buress calling entertainer Bill Cosby a rapist went viral in October 2014, journalists were quick to explain why they had not pursued these rape allegations much earlier. “The absence of social media in 2005” was one of the reasons they gave for dropping the story when Cosby was first charged. This paper examines features and participants of the 2014 discourse on social media about Bill Cosby following the Hannibal Buress video. What was it about this discourse that made this topic newsworthy to mainstream media?

Who determines what is newsworthy remains a core question as the role of gatekeepers is undergoing significant shifts in a news media landscape that has been opened up to user and audience participation. Since Galtung und Ruge’s work on news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), their criteria have been updated (Brighton & Foy, 2007; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001) and adjusted to include new forms of news delivery (Meissner, 2015). Audiences are members of more than one network and can form powerful communities. On Twitter these are networks of bloggers or micro-bloggers who produce and use news, or “*producers*” (Bruns, 2009, 2011). News items on social media and mainstream media sites do not differ significantly (Bastos, 2014) and so it follows that “*producers*” in both spaces work with similar criteria for newsworthiness (Braun, 2009). Yet in the Cosby case, “*producers*” of social media content led the way and initiated, perhaps even sanctioned mainstream news media coverage. What accounts for this?

Twitter users understand that they influence what becomes news and use the power of social media to galvanize support, unify communities and create movements (Jurgenson, 2012; Veenstra, Iyer, Park, & Alajmi, 2014). Staying informed and engaging in social contact has been found to motivate participation on social media, with the desire for information leading among Twitter users (Johnson & Yang, 2009). This goes beyond the argument that weak ties bind members of a social media platform who follow in order to belong (Granovetter, 1983), but suggests the emergence of a subculture of powerful agenda-setters, potentially dictating the direction of news coverage for mainstream media platforms. Some research indicates that the propagation of Twitter discourse more closely resembles the behavior of a news propagation vehicle (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010), without any of the apparent constraints or controls of a newsroom.

Research questions discussed in this paper center around the nature and effect of the Twitter discourse about Bill Cosby: Who are the influencers on Twitter in the discourse

about Bill Cosby and how did their tweets propagate within and outside of their networks? What was the effect of images on the Twitter discourse about Bill Cosby? What sentiments were associated with tweets about Bill Cosby that included an image? Were these retweeted more often than those containing other content, such as URLs or just text?

An advanced search was conducted on Twitter of the hashtags: #BillCosby and #CosbyMeme using the operators: #NAME lang:en since:2014-10-17 until:2014-11-17. Results were imported into MaxQDA for qualitative content analysis. The day with the most tweets in #BillCosby scraped with this operator was identified (Nov 17, 2014) and coded for source (mainstream media, online, aggregator, mixed and emerging), content (image, url, vine, text only), sentiment (positive, negative, neutral, sarcasm and anger) and mention of specific terms. Key players and their roles were identified (for example the originator of the most retweeted tweet in #CosbyMeme) and their 1.5 follower networks were downloaded through NodeXL and network visualizations were made with Gephi.

The network around 200 followers of Dan McQuade (@dhm), the author of the original 2014 post on *philly.com* about comedian Hannibal Buress calling Bill Cosby a rapist, and 500 followers in the network of Philadelphia Magazine (@phillymag) as well as Elon James White (@elonjames) after identifying him as the person whose #CosbyMeme tweet on November 10, 2014 was the most retweeted on the first day of the use of the hashtag, were downloaded, visualized and analyzed. A content analysis of members of the mainstream media's explanations for their silence in covering the Bill Cosby rape allegations after 2005 until 2014 when the Hannibal Buress video surfaced was done in a previous project (unpublished).

Visualizations of Twitter activity and of the follower networks of influencers in the Twitter discourse about Bill Cosby offered an insightful overview of the network structure of social media audiences in general and BlackTwitter audiences in particular, as well as of their reach into mainstream media outlets. An analysis of the networks of the most outspoken Twitter participants showed that communities of opinion- and sense-makers, were both fulfilling roles of traditional news media on BlackTwitter and have ties to traditional news media, serving as sources into the community. In this case, one tweet from a main influencer, Elon James, literally granted a community permission to criticize Bill Cosby, opening the story up to mainstream media.

Although the use of images, i.e. memes, was a given in #CosbyMeme, the analysis of the content used in the most impactful tweets, particularly for #BillCosby, does not support the idea that the use of images accelerates the propagation of tweets. In fact, this study shows that not the content alone, but the deliverer of the content, makes the difference. If an influencer shares an opinion and not just a neutral URL or a meme, the impact is multiplied. In this case, it significantly contributed to news media outlets reporting on Bill Cosby and the rape allegations.

The emergence of audiences as agenda setters in a media environment in which social and traditional media intersect requires further study, as do the hierarchies of influence within social media venues and how they influence news selection in traditional news media venues. This paper shows what type of content played a role in influencing

mainstream media in its decision to pursue a story that not the editors but the "producers" (Bruns, 2009) deemed newsworthy. Content that contains an opinion, positive or negative sentiment, particularly among communities that have strong ties on a social media platform, in this case Twitter, can meaningfully influence what news media considers newsworthy and how they report about a previously ignored event. Although images can help an issue gain traction and generate traffic, the mobilization of opinion requires trusted influencers within a social media network, in short, a new kind of news media that is more personalized and self-selected.

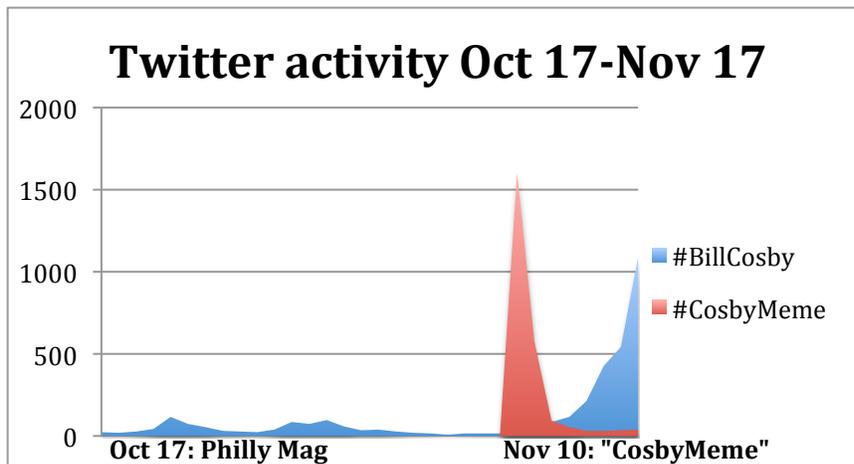
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Appendix



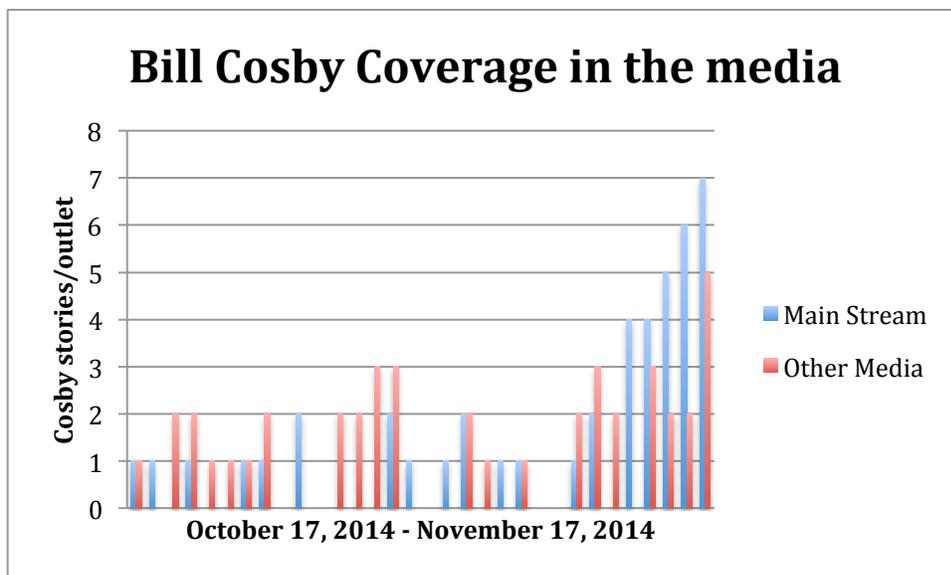
Elon James
White @elonjames Nov 10:

I think Bill Cosby still thinks he's America's Dad and not America's creepy Uncle who's not allowed to visit anymore... #CosbyMeme

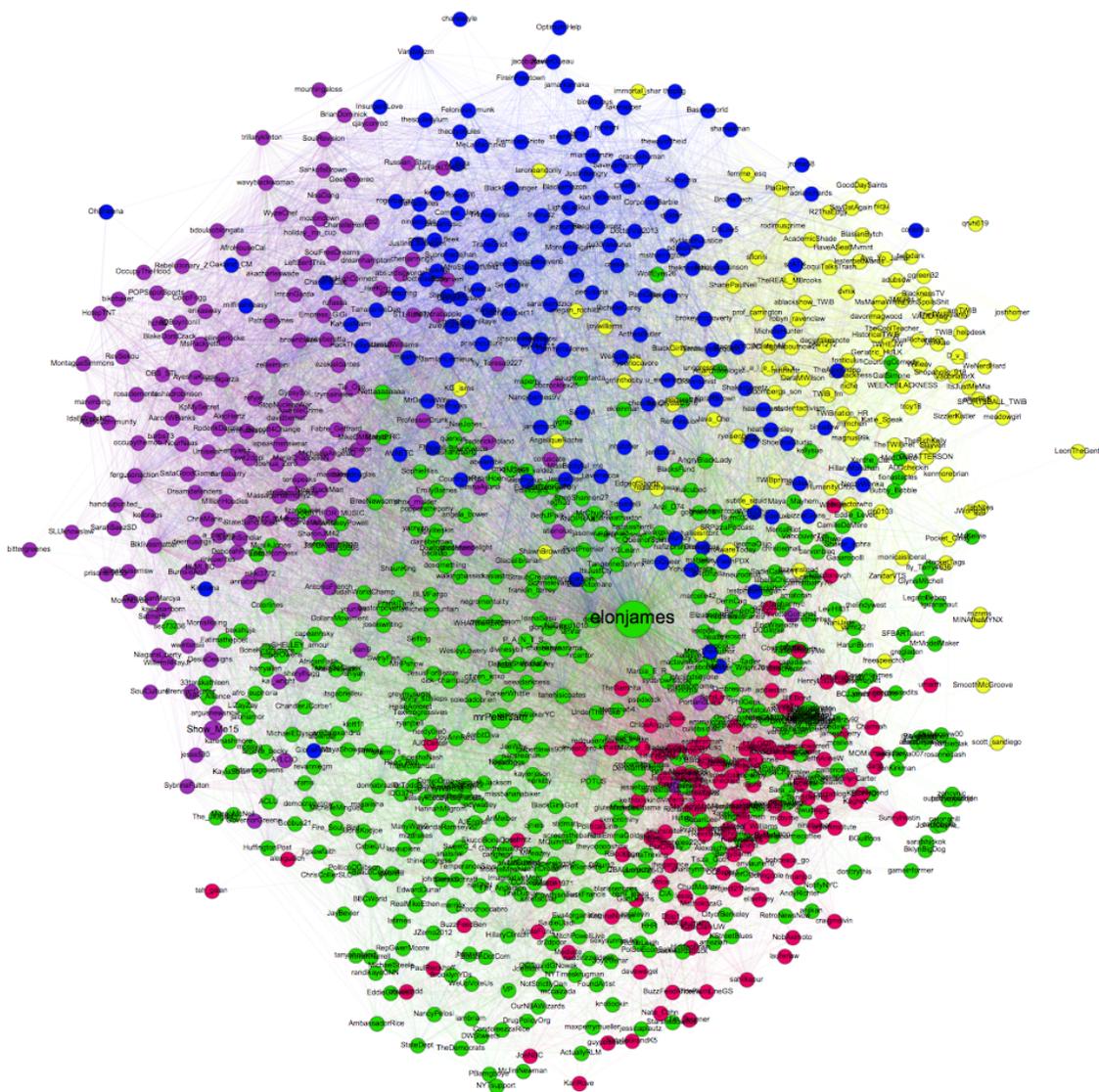
1,228 retweets 1,181 favorites

Philly Mag @phillymag · Oct 17
Hannibal Buress on Bill Cosby: 'You're a Rapist' - goo.gl/Z9Tvk3

← ↻ 2 ★ 3 + 👤 ⋮



@elonjames 500 follower network



Nodes: 1000
Node size: Betweenness Centrality
Color: Modularity Class
Edges: 18401
5 communities