#AskThicke: “Blurred Lines,” Rape Culture, and the Feminist Hashtag Takeover

Tanya Horeck

Anglia Ruskin University

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Finally, hashtagging is only one action available to Twitter users. As forms of activism, re-tweeting and favouriting may be equally important and worth consideration. We feel that greater attention to the class and literacy dimensions of hashtagging (and social network sites in general) is called for, as well as deeper awareness of other forms of activism that can take place alongside or in place of hashtagging, both on and off digital platforms.

REFERENCES

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Tanya Horeck, Anglia Ruskin University

@LaurenHarsh1: #AskThicke If one of your songs played in a forest and no one was around to hear it would it still be sexist and gross?¹

@JoLiptrott: #AskThicke When you’re not busy objectifying women, making light of rape and justifying sexual violence, how do you like to relax?²

There could scarcely be a celebrity less associated with feminism than Robin Thicke, the American singer who, with Pharrell Williams, co-wrote “Blurred Lines,” the hit 2013 song that
has been castigated as a “rape anthem” and banned from several university campuses in the UK. Nonetheless, it is one of the quirks of the internet age that Thicke’s name became the hashtag for a very public—and feminist—calling out of misogyny and sexism. In the summer of 2014, the American cable music and popular culture network vh1, set up a Twitter Q&A with Thicke, #askthicke, which invited the general public to chat with the singer. Critics commandeered the hashtag (see above) and used the opportunity to ridicule the singer for the misogynist lyrics and video of “Blurred Lines” (Jenn Selby, 2014). The incident appears to prove Ariel Levy’s point that “the Internet is uniquely qualified as a venue for public shaming” (2013).

This example of a hashtag feminist takeover is part of a vociferous discussion and debate about rape culture that is currently spreading online. Since writing my book, Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film in 2004, I am struck by the extent to which the concept of “public rape” has taken on a new form and urgency in the digital age. Indeed, my original use of the term “public rape” to refer to how controversies over rape are central to the body politic and to the very conception of the “public” is considerably heightened—and complicated—in an online world where the boundaries between the private and the public are less certain than ever before. As with the above example of #askthicke, the proliferation of social media sites such as Twitter has opened up important opportunities for feminists to talk back to cultural depictions of rape and to interrogate rape culture. There is an immediacy of response that has shifted the political terrain considerably, raising new questions about our personal and affective relationship to representations of sexualized violence. The current culture of heightened awareness and accountability means that, as journalist and feminist activist Laurie Penny—herself no stranger to Twitter controversy—has put it, “comedians now think twice before making rape jokes” (Marina Galperina 2013).

But before getting carried away with the radical potential of digital media, it is vital not to forget that social networks also promulgate sexually violent discourse and expand the opportunities to shame and humiliate women. This was recently evidenced when a sixteen-year-old American girl in Texas, named Jada, was drugged and raped and photos of her assaulted body went viral. This ultimately resulted in further humiliation when (unbelievably) individuals began posting pictures of themselves on social media mocking the pose of Jada’s naked, unconscious body at the hashtag #jadapose. What is striking, though, is how an online countermovement instantly sprung up, with supporters rallying around the teenager’s cause at hashtags including #standupforjada, #justiceforjada and #jadacounterpose (Kate Dailey 2014).

It is undeniable that digital culture has reconfigured the ways in which we experience, and respond to, images of sexual violence. While some proclaim the liberatory force of hashtag activism and others argue that it is ultimately an empty and self-congratulatory display of righteousness, I am more interested in how the digital technology that enables the hashtag is itself recasting the socio-dynamics of discourse on rape. There is now an unprecedented speed and immediacy to affective responses to rape and its hyper visible circulation online; it is the radical potentialities and limitations of this new temporal regime—epitomized by the hashtag—that we as feminists must consider when strategizing how to actively re-shape the cultural consensus on questions of gender, violence and power.

NOTES
1. https://twitter.com/LaurenHarsh1/statuses/483792268692688896
2. https://twitter.com/JoLiptrott/statuses/48376838025701376
In journalism, the headline reigns supreme. From the age-old adage “if it bleeds, it leads” to contemporary twenty-four-hour news cycles, headlines function as both attention seeking and attention directing. As a result of various mantras in the industry, journalists often rely on prescriptive tropes to construct headlines—they should be “short, clear, unambiguous and easy to read,” “interesting and new” (Daniel Dor 2003, 716). Sex and gender are intricately linked to these tropes. Deborah L. Rhode (1995) observes that headlines directly reference culturally preferred ideologies about sex and gender. She offers the example, “Widow, 70, Dies after Beating by Intruder,” which reflects the significance of the woman’s marital status even after death (690). The use of cultural “short cuts” to craft headlines is precisely why “readers’ previous knowledge and sophisticated reading strategies are claimed to be critical” in understanding how headlines culturally function (Elly Infantidou 2009, 700).

Frustrated by sexism in contemporary media, the editors at Vagenda, an online UK-based magazine addressing media sexism, issued a challenge to its Twitter followers: take a tabloid headline you think is sexist and reword it without sexism. Trending under the hashtag #thevagenda, results poured in during the spring of 2014. A few of the more prominent examples included altering “George Clooney Reportedly Engaged to Hot, Successful Lawyer” to “Accomplished Human Rights Lawyer Might Be Engaged to Greying Actor, 52”; “Make-up Free Amy Adams is Anything but Glamorous as She Goes Wild in the Aisles in Los Angeles Supermarket” to “Woman Buys Groceries, Remains 5-Time Academy Award Nominee”; and “Katie Holmes Steps Out in See-Through Shirt During NYC Stroll with...