If We Save It—What Will Come?

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LAW & ETHICS

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One Friday evening, while scrolling through Twitter, I saw an unusually long thread from a Black blogger/influencer I had been following for years. This person had been experiencing weeks of harassment and trolling across multiple platforms from the fans of another influencer. For someone unfamiliar with the events leading up to this thread, this influencer's trauma and pain as captured in the thread may have appeared to be the result of a harmless back and forth. The hashtags they used would likely be *scraped* by someone looking for innovative signifying practices, digital brand strategies, or as a good example of online resistance. However, a few tweets into the thread, I became fairly sure that what I was witnessing was a part of a crisis. Because I saw their content daily and understood the context, it was clear to me that documenting and preserving this event for my research was out of bounds.

I study the rhetorical patterns, communicative cultural communities, resistance strategies, and public instantiations of the joy of Black women, a group maligned on and offline. When giving lectures about digital Black feminism, social media analysis, and the blogosphere, I am frequently asked about my method. How exactly do I collect the data that informs my analysis of Black feminist praxis online? Where do I save what must be the thousands of Instagram stories, tweets, comments, and TikToks? And how and when will I make the archive of these posts public? When asked these questions about method, I tend to provide a wholly dissatisfying answer: you just had to be there.

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Watching an Instagram story or TikTok when it is posted requires me to consider it alongside the other posts in my feed and the tweets of the day. It requires context. We live in a time when we have the technological capacity to collect, sort, and analyze millions of tweets in a matter of minutes, yet I choose to write about events I witness in real-time online. This is largely because I write about people who look like me and who have the kind of messy life I do, wherein, even with a public Twitter account, there are deeply personal things that find their way into my online world. This is the case for many folks online. Our personal and professional words are collapsed within the content of one app, and life in a digital world carries the persistent worry about our content being taken out of context. However, for Black women and other marginalized groups surveillance and misappropriation have a long and treacherous history and a presence enhanced by access to digital tools. Black women's language and looks are extremely profitable for individuals and corporations but are still used as tools used to further ostracize and cause us harm. Further, the platforms where we live, work, and play are built on the kind of engagement achieved through harassment and hate speech. Therefore I must always consider how collecting and archiving the words and content of Black women online could make their lives and my own much more complicated if the wrong people came looking for them.

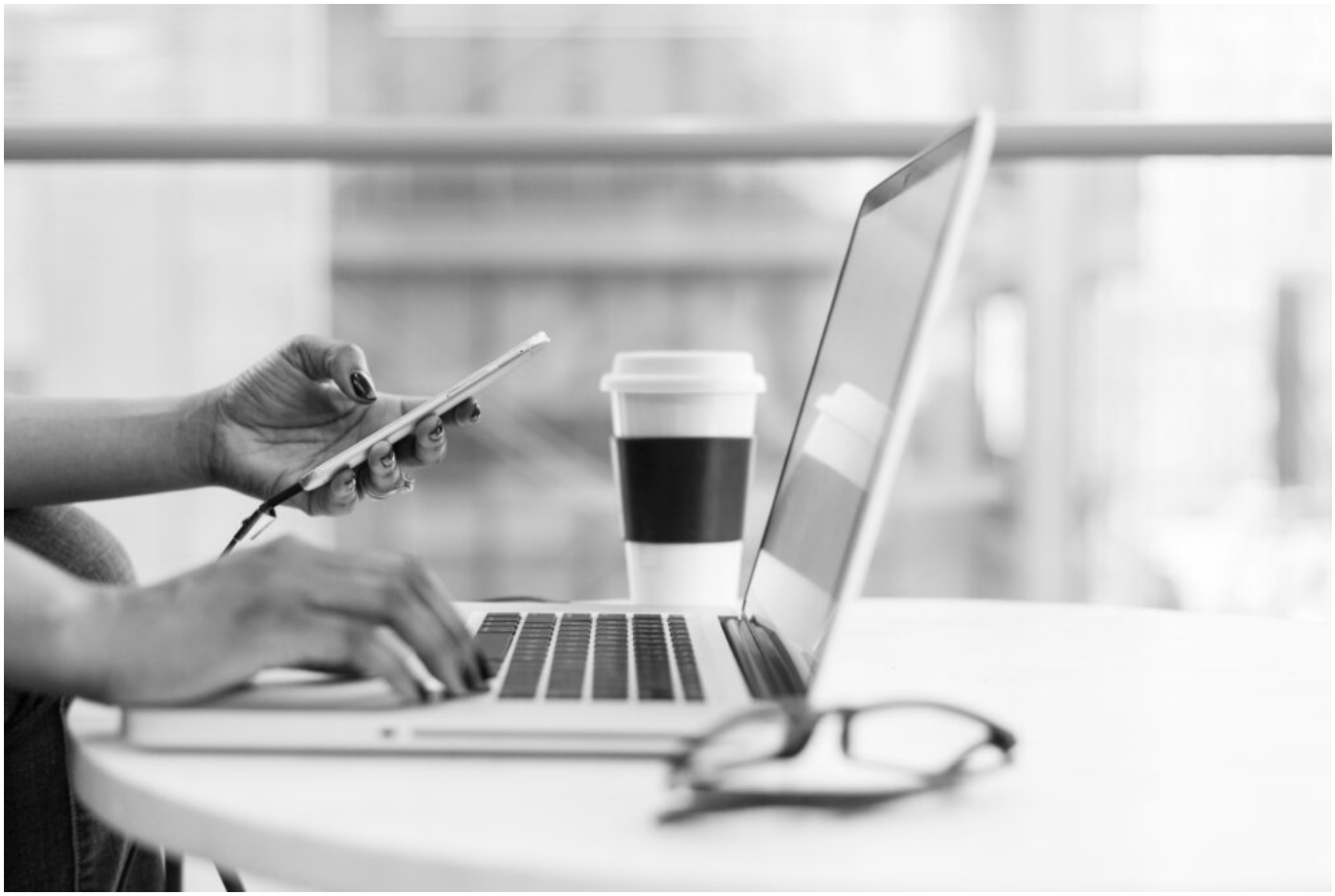

Photo by Women of Color in Tech

We can increasingly archive and preserve large volumes of online material. However, whether we believe it is ethical to do so depends in large part on how we see online discourse. Is social media simply late-stage mass media— meant to entertain and inform, and readily accessible for critics and public scrutiny? Should social media posts be considered public utterances, akin to speeches or lectures given with complete anticipation of an audience's approval or criticism? Or do the conversations we engage in

online more closely mirror interpersonal dialogue, with those participating having some notion that their words are meant only for those present during the utterance? Our approach to collecting and analyzing social media discourse emerges primarily from our answers to the questions above and our training as journalists, social scientists, rhetoricians, or social critics.

Ultimately, whatever our method or system to collect data/artifacts, we are choosing to *capture* other people's words, ideas, and lives. Anytime we capture, we must consider how power is instantiated in that capture. Many would argue that capturing more of what happens online is our ethical responsibility to ensure accessibility, transparency, and justice. Indeed as Jarrett Drake argues, "The unbearable whiteness and patriarchy of traditional archives demand that new archives for Black lives emerge and sustain themselves as spaces and sites for trauma, transcendence, and transformation" (Drake 2016). Tonia Sutherland explains that digital archives, when conceived collaboratively with communities and archivists can "create an historical record, eliminating the possibility of erasure and enabling the possibility of justice" (Sutherland 2017, 17). However, capturing without context does a disservice to the projects and people at the center of the work. We must consider both what posts we have access to and who can post, what their understanding of privacy may be, whether the direct citation of these posts is necessary for our work, and countless other questions we too often leave to institutional review boards instead of tackling before the design of our research or product. Our tools of capture grant us the power to control a future narrative of who was here and what they left behind. So we are obligated to consider those who do not wish to leave things behind. Activists, journalists, and researchers must respect the lives, well-being, cultural expression, and history we set out to capture and what our insistence that it be captured means for the people most deeply connected to these artifacts.

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To collect, preserve and make visible the online work of Black women is to be consistently confronted by how my work could contribute to their marginalization. As a Black-woman-feminist scholar, I emphasize the slow work and the invisible labor of knowing my communities of study through the everyday praxis of just being there. But as Sarah Florini explains, "good intentions are all but useless in the face of white supremacy" (Florini 2019, 211). We require rigor and a sustained conversation about ethics, archiving, and capture in critical digital studies. I challenge us to pursue a dialogue about how access to more data and less context can impede the work of justice. Ultimately, there is value in a commitment to just being there.

References

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