Listen to Black Women: Newsgathering in Digital Third Spaces

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Listen to Black Women: Newsgathering in Digital Third Spaces

Introduction and Rationale

From the start of their journalism education, journalists are taught news happens outside of the newsroom. To find it, they must leave the comfort of their desks and make their rounds to engage with various people, places, and documents. Community hubs, or third places as they are also known, make for great venues to connect with people and acquire newsworthy content.

Urban sociologist Oldenburg (1999) coined the term “third place” (p. xviii). He described these spaces as “informal public gathering places” outside of work and home that are “inclusive and local” (p. xvii). These places serve as sites of community unification, political discussion, intellectual growth, socialization, and community building (Oldenburg, 1999). From a journalism perspective, third places are simply “locations where people gather and often talk about things that are important to them” (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d., para. 8). Examples of traditional third places include churches, barbershops, beauty salons, bingo halls, basketball courts, community centers, restaurants, coffeehouses, bars, parks, cookouts, school quads, bus stops, and sidewalk benches.

German sociologist Habermas’ (1974) research supported the public sphere as essential to idea generation and public opinion formation. He also recognized news media’s power to help spread and influence the information generated in these public spaces. The Internet extended this concept of public sphere to the web. Digital third spaces, like their physical counterparts, provide central locations wherein visitors can meaningfully interact with one another online and discuss matters of importance to them.

The rise of digital technology and the transition to more innovative approaches for information gathering during the pandemic accelerated journalists’ already growing adoption of digital spaces such as forums, chatrooms, social media groups, livestreams, and even hashtags as newsgathering sites. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) advises that by visiting third places, “journalists with listening skills and a healthy curiosity can join the conversation and tap the thinking of ordinary people (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d., para. 5). In doing so, they can learn about “community concerns, interests and flashpoints” (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d., para. 8).

In the same way reader advisory groups offer a collaborative opportunity for community members and journalists to work together to transform and progress news coverage (Fort Worth Report, 2023; Independent Press Standards Organisation, 2020; Lauter, 1996; Lecker, 2023), third places allow journalists to go directly to the source—in this case Black women—for ideas on how to improve the quantity and quality of underreported or misreported community members. Historically, Black women have been stereotyped or ignored by mainstream news (Jackson, 2013; Meyers, 2013; Neely, 2015).

Several scholars have looked at why and where Black women seek communal spaces, many citing a sense of sisterhood and refuge from systemic racism and feelings of isolation as key factors (Animashaun & Bell, 2023; Brock et al., 2010; Pinckney, 2018). Black Feminist scholar Collins (1990) posited these spaces also provide Black women with the opportunity to discuss matters of importance openly and honestly. For Black women, third places serve as a tool of resistance along with offering space for authenticity, empowerment and positive impact on “health, healing, and wellness” (Collins, 2022, p. 356).
Digital spaces allow Black women to “engage in global community dreaming and building” (Smith et al., 2021, p. 6). These spaces have helped cultivate discourses surrounding Black womanhood such as natural haircare (Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2019), travel (Dillette, 2018), yoga (Jones-Cameron, 2019), employment in academia (Williams & Collier, 2022), and uplifting motivation (Erigha & Crooks-Allen, 2020). In summer 2019, rapper Megan Thee Stallion used her music and social media to push women’s empowerment messaging including the importance of unapologetic self-confidence, freedom of choice, and Black joy (Townsend, 2019). Her #HotGirlSummer hashtag galvanized countless Black women online, aka “Hotties,” to stand in solidarity with Megan and to promote female liberation (Kendall, 2019; Wortham, 2020).

This teaching activity emphasizes the value of these information resources. In a nutshell, students will identify and visit publicly accessible digital third spaces—in this case hashtag threads—where Black women congregate to A) better understand Black women’s “concerns, interests, needs and flashpoints” (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d., para. 8); and B) identify potential ideas for news coverage for and about Black women. This assignment focuses on hashtags because they are easy to find and readily accessible across social media platforms.

Ethical engagement is a requirement for this assignment. Some third spaces are sacred spaces and understandably have gatekeepers. According to Collins (1990), “By definition, [spaces for Black women] become less ‘safe’ if shared with those who were not Black and female” (p. 110). This assignment seeks to avoid invasions of privacy or unwanted voyeurism by analyzing hashtag conversations taking place in public sight. To reiterate, the use of publicly available hashtags allows students to gain insight into discourses surrounding Black women while just as importantly avoiding the need to ask for access permissions from private group administrators and potentially violating the trust and sanctity of spaces designed for Black women.

This teaching activity exposes student journalists to the skill of using social media for news gathering (Arjomand & Ghazinejad, 2021; Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022; Wilding et al., 2018; Zubiaga, 2019). X, the app formerly known as Twitter, provides a platform for news sharing and news gathering by news consumers, news makers, and news reporters alike. Thus, X is a hub for several digital third places. In 2018, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation commissioned research examining the complicated relationship between journalists and three demographics, or subcultures, of X users—Black Twitter, Feminist Twitter, and Asian-American Twitter.

By conducting computational analyses of large-scale Twitter data and interviews of community participants and journalists, the researchers found Twitter provided a platform for subcultures to share news relevant to their communities that may have received little attention from traditional media outlets while simultaneously controlling their own narratives (Freelon et al., 2018). Of particular importance to this teaching activity, the Knight Foundation study also found journalists view information gained from tweets from Twitter subcultures as a “highly productive tool for gathering story ideas and insights” (Freelon et al., 2018, p.9).

Despite numerous confirmations about social media’s value as an information-gathering site, professional and student journalists alike should remember their professional and personal positionalities when utilizing this approach. “White people don’t tend to venture into Black salons, but anyone can click on a trending Black hashtag and observe Black communities at close proximity,” wrote Washington Post reporter Jeff Guo. (Guo, 2015, para. 20). While hashtags stemming from the Black community inherently offer teaching opportunities for outsiders, it should be emphasized that, with exceptions, these discourses do not exist with a primary goal of
teaching or entertaining outsiders. “As much as it has educated outsiders about Black culture, as much as it has afforded Black voices a political platform, online spaces can also sometimes feel like a zoo,” (Guo, 2015, para. 24).

These public-facing social media conversations are a starting point for crowdsourcing potential ideas, source documents, and interviews. However, students should use consult their newsroom guidelines and/or professor’s instruction on protocols for including hashtagged posts in subsequent news stories and directives for requesting usage permissions from posters. According to the Knight Foundation study, active subculture participants dislike journalists including their tweets in news stories for fear of “lack of control over intellectual property and the potential for online harassment” (Freelon, 2018, p. 10).

This teaching activity embraces Shrewsbury’s (1987) definition of feminist pedagogy by emphasizing an “engaged teaching/learning process” in which students will also reflect upon the material gathered from the hashtags in relation to themselves, find stories that hold a mirror up the societal isms that plague Black women and broadly increase their knowledge of what life looks like for Black women (p.6). Likewise, this learning activity promotes a feminist teaching ideal by empowering students to use this learning space to become more ethical, responsible, factual, and comprehensive storytellers for diverse community members. Thus, students are taking information learned in the classroom and “apply[ing] that learning to social action. (Shrewsbury, 1987, p.6).

This assignment does not seek to argue the use of digital third spaces in lieu of physical third spaces. It is still important to pound the pavement. However, visiting digital third spaces can serve as a complementary approach to traditional newsgathering strategies. For Black women, in particular, there is considerable value in learning more about their likes, dislikes, hopes, desires, opinions and dreams by visiting the public-facing spaces where these women congregate.

Learning Objectives

The assignment aims to help students become better storytellers for Black women. At completion of this assignment, students should be equipped to:

- Describe the concepts of physical and digital third places and be able to locate them.
- Demonstrate ethical and proficient newsgathering skills.
- Critically reflect on systems of power and your identities/commitments/stances in relation to these systems and any implications these may have on your coverage of Black women.
- Identify topics and themes of importance to Black women.
- Develop improved news coverage of and for Black women.

Activity

1) Students will identify a publicly accessible hashtag thread heavily used by Black women. This activity can be completed in pairs or individually. A hashtag thread refers to a series of social media posts connected in conversation or discussion by a shared hashtag, a word or phrase preceded by a hash symbol (#). Hashtags are metadata that organize content in a way that makes it more easily discoverable by content creators and consumers.
Hashtags are used across social media platforms. This assignment does not limit students to any one specific platform (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, X, Tik Tok, etc.).

Avoid hashtagged conversations posted exclusively in chatrooms or groups, regardless of access permissions. For the best results, the thread should be recently active and popular—more than 50 posts—and posted to public forums such as timelines. This makes finding a thread easier and helps with providing more timely news ideas. While it is impossible to determine the identities of all contributors to a hashtag thread, use context clues and available visuals to best determine whether this thread may count as a third place for Black women. There are countless threads already available and new ones forming all the time. Here are some of the more popular ones: #HotGirlSemester; #BlackGirlMagic; #CiteBlackWomen; #BlackGirlLawyer; #SayHerName; #YouOkSis; #HotGirlSummer; #BlackGirlsRock; #BlackWomenInBusiness; #BlackWomenWorkout; #BlackWomenMatter; #BlackWomenLead; and #BlackGirlsTravelToo.

2) Once students have identified a hashtagged thread of interest meeting the assignment requirements, determine how many posts they will analyze. Conversation threads widely vary in length. Instructors should work with students to determine how many posts work for a fair representative sample of the whole. Once their sample size is determined, students will read/watch/listen to the content of the posts.

Gather views and opinions on what topics and themes Black women in that space deem relevant and important. As students conduct their analysis, they should consider the following questions:

- How did you find this thread?
- Approximately how many people have contributed to the thread?
- Use the 5 Ws of journalism—who, what, when, why, where—to describe this thread. For example, who are the people posting/featured? As best as you can determine, when did this thread start? Where is this thread most popular?
- What issues, topics or messaging are most important to thread contributors?
- What recurring themes can you identify from the posts?
- Is there large agreement or consensus on issues among posters and commenters?
- Using the seven news values—timeliness, currency, human interest, bizarre/unusual, proximity, prominence, and conflict—what potential untold or underreported story ideas come to mind?
- From the threads, identify a few potential interviewees on the subjects discussed.
- How do your identities, ideologies and interests compare to the people and content associated with the thread?
- What impact, if any, does racism, sexism and/or classism have on the hashtagged experiences shared by the Black women engaging in these threads?
- What are your major takeaways about Black women?
- What are you most surprised to learn from your visit to this space?
Students are not required to actively contribute to the threads by commenting or posting. However, if they feel compelled to ask follow-up questions or add to the conversation through comments or posts, you may encourage them to do so. If they plan to use any of the specific posts or comments in future news coverage students should consult their instructor. Advise students to be transparent about their reasons for engagement and plans to use any information acquired.

While this assignment shares similarities to the qualitative research method digital ethnography, this activity is deeply rooted in journalism practice. Therefore, prior permission to observe is not required and passive observation is OK.

Debriefing

Each student, individually or as a pair, should submit one three–six page summary report detailing their experience finding and following their chosen hashtag thread. Drawing from Ash & Clayton (2009), students will also detail what they have learned from the experience. Students will use their answers to the previously provided guiding questions to complete their reports. Reports should follow the outline suggested below.

I. Describe the thread, including its origins, purpose, participants, etc.

II. What content themes emerged from your time in these spaces? What impact, if any, did racism, sexism and/or classism seemingly have on the hashtagged experiences shared by posters?

III. Critically reflect on your own positionality in relation to the thread. What assumptions or expectations did you bring to the situation? How did they affect what you thought? To what extent did they prove true or untrue?

How did this situation challenge or reinforce your values, beliefs, convictions (e.g., your sense of right and wrong, your priorities, your judgments) or your sense of personal identity? Has your positionality allowed you to represent your thread findings in such a way that the person who holds it would agree with your characterization?

IV. How did you avoid any ethical missteps during this assignment?

V. Pitch three potential news stories originating from your selected digital third space. Each pitch should clearly articulate the following information—What is the story? Why should we care? What sources will you need? What multimedia storytelling tools will you use? What has been done on this subject? To which specific news outlets could you pitch this story and why?

VI. What other takeaways would you like to share?
Instructors, consider offering students extra credit if they follow through with submitting one of their pitches to a news outlet for publication consideration.

Assessment

Drawing from the overall mission of the companion #HotGirlSemester Syllabus, this activity uses the concept of a digital third place to teach students ethical newsgathering and news reporting skills. It aims to accomplish these goals by requiring intentional education on Black women’s lives and experiences and by encouraging deeper analysis of posts and self-reflection to understand how their own positionality could potentially impact their understanding and their reporting on Black women. Instructors can use the provided rubric (see Appendix A) to assess students’ accomplishment of the stated learning objectives.

References


## Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unacceptable/Missing (0-1)</th>
<th>Developing (2)</th>
<th>Exemplary (3)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanation of Content Themes from your Digital Third Space</strong></td>
<td>Summary ignores this requirement or provides a lackluster recap.</td>
<td>While the summary offers some insight into emerging themes from the digital third space, descriptions are sparse and examples are few.</td>
<td>The summary effectively presents emerging themes from the conversations within the digital third place. This is done by providing appropriate supporting examples.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Depth of Story Pitches Reporting</strong></td>
<td>Story pitches are non-existent or offer no news values or have been previously heavily reported.</td>
<td>Story pitches lack strong ties to news values, have already been heavily reported or lack the information detail needed to convince editors to run the story.</td>
<td>Story pitches embody appropriate news values and dig beyond surface-level ideas to present new and newsworthy story ideas for or about Black women that are typically underreported or ignored.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effective Reflection</strong></td>
<td>Summary offers little to no reflection.</td>
<td>Summary presents a weak reflection of your time spent in the digital third space and could benefit from more examples and introspective thought.</td>
<td>Summary presents a compelling and meaningful reflection of your time spent in the digital third space complete with detailed examples.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical Thinking - Integration</strong></td>
<td>Student fails to show any connection between their experience and their learning</td>
<td>Student spends little attention to showing any connection between their experience and their learning</td>
<td>Student clearly shows the connection between their experience and their learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical Thinking -</strong></td>
<td>Student fails to explain how this activity</td>
<td>Student provides a moderately</td>
<td>Student articulately explains how this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth</td>
<td>challenged or reinforced their values, beliefs, convictions.</td>
<td>informative explanation of how this activity challenged or reinforced their values, beliefs, convictions but there is room for improvement.</td>
<td>activity challenged or reinforced their values, beliefs, convictions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Standards</td>
<td>Submission mostly disregards proper writing mechanics, factual reporting, proper sources, proper citations, etc.</td>
<td>Submission has a few issues with proper writing mechanics, factual reporting, proper sources, proper citations, etc.</td>
<td>Submission mostly demonstrates proper writing mechanics, factual reporting, proper sources, proper citations, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix A: Suggested Digital Third Space Rubric