

Reshaping Public Memory through Hashtag Curation

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Abstract: Social media campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter have demonstrated Twitter as a powerful tool for anti-racist social activism. This article traces one local hashtag, #BeingMinorityatTCU, which has resurged on the TCU campus in the wake of a university lawsuit. Drawing from Critical Race Theory (Delgado, 1989; Martinez, 2014; Yosso, 2013), specifically counterstory, and public memory scholarship (Greer, 2017; Grobman, 2017; Crawford et al., 2020), this essay argues that digitally archiving tweets is one approach to amplifying marginalized voices that speak out against institutional racism. Curating hashtags is not just as an alternative to official university record keeping, but also an opportunity for both archivists and users to reflect, process, and move towards change together.

“Those who benefit from white privilege can use their fragility as a weapon to take down #BLM protest posters, close off city streets to protect confederate monuments, and threaten minority movements with violent over-policing, but **white fragility cannot stop hashtags.**”

—Stephanie Jones, “#BlackStudy the Past to Find Hope in the Future”

This is an institutional narrative:



On Purple Friday, we stand together to fight systemic racism. #BlackLivesMatter



9:12 AM · Jun 5, 2020 · Sprout Social

151 Retweets and comments 571 Likes

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Introduction

Texas Christian University (TCU), is a secular, private, predominantly white institution located in Fort Worth, Texas. Like many institutions across the country, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students on our campus have utilized rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009) by calling out institutional racism through the creation of Twitter campaigns. Most recently, the hashtag #WeAreWithJaneDoe became a part of national dialogue when a Black, female student filed a lawsuit against the university for abuse, neglect, and discrimination. The lawsuit traces TCU's long legacy of racism, from its founding by ex-Confederate soldiers Addison and Randolph Clark to present-day institutional racism which now includes the testimony of four additional plaintiffs, all Black women. Jane Doe No. 1 v. TCU1 sparked campus-wide outrage not only due to the events themselves, but also from the similar stories minority students were sharing online. This campaign, like others such as #BlackLivesMatter, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, and #SayHerName, has demonstrated Twitter as a powerful tool for counterstory and social activism (Lavan, 2015; Hill, 2018; Kuo, 2018). Hashtags in particular have been used in the past and on our campus as a tool for publicizing violence against Black women (Williams, 2015). As graduate students, these incidents and stories were not a part of our memory². But the hashtags led not only to an institutional response, but to a response from ourselves: how could we contribute to this movement?

Within this essay we look at one specific hashtag, #BeingMinorityAtTCU, to demonstrate why tweets are a form of social activism worth archiving. We believe this work is vital to revealing institutional power (Liu, 2017) and white supremacy. Further, we argue that an important component of building digital archives from hashtags involves “testifying and processing together,” by inviting users and archivists to reflect on events together (Diab et al., 2013). Digital archives constructed with these goals in mind allow us to bring the violent histories of institutional racism into public memory.

While our essay is limited to our local campus and a single hashtag, our university is not unique. #BeingBlackAtIllinois, #BeingBlackAtMizzou, #RacismAtTAMUFeelsLike, and #NotAgainSU are just a few hashtags which demonstrate the importance of tweets as a form of protest and digital activism. Documenting student activism is of increasing interest to both scholars and archivists as demonstrated by initiatives such as [Project STAND](#) (Student Activism Now Documented). Digital archives of student activism have the potential to not only preserve history, but to transform public memory *now*.

Within this essay, we discuss our process of curating these hashtags in order to demonstrate how digital archives can support and continue student-led activism by amplifying marginalized voices in our local institution and honoring them as legitimate records. We outline the affordances of digital archives³ which engage with public memory (Greer, 2017; Grobman, 2017; Crawford et al., 2020) and Critical Race counterstory (Delgado, 1989; Martinez, 2020). Lastly, we discuss our own reflections of engaging with our institution's history of racism. By tracing local hashtags, born out of institutional racism, we view digital archives as an opportunity for both archivists (ourselves) and users to reflect, process, and move towards change together.

Tracking Social Justice Movements through Hashtags

Archiving tweets can help draw connections between institutional events (which are often recorded or presented as fact), student stories, and statements from the general public. Tweets alongside other available data like images, memes, and newspaper articles allowed us to construct a more complete narrative than institutional record alone. As Tracey M. Weis (2002) explains, digital tools help us “assemble what frequently seems...to be discrete and unrelated fragments into coherent narratives” (p. 156). Whereas universities have many tools at their disposal for disseminating coherent narratives, students often lack these resources. Hashtags combat this fragmentation by signaling to others that they are not alone, and by

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presenting these stories publicly rather than on campus, in a dorm, or as whispers among friends or trusted professors. Digital archives can support this activism by preserving these stories.

Our initial data collection involved mining tweets using three hashtags related to social activism on campus, #WeAreWithJaneDoe, #TellOnTCU, and #BeingMinorityAtTCU. We created a simple python script using the library, “Tweetscraper.” [Tweetscraper](#) allows users to collect tweets by setting specific parameters for date, language, hashtag usage, or account. We opted for mining tweets rather than using Twitter’s search function, so that we could collect all tweets related to a hashtag rather than those prioritized by Twitter’s search algorithms. #BeingMinorityAtTCU was an interesting dataset because of the large number of tweets (430, compared to TCU’s student population of ~10,000). When sorted chronologically, it appeared that while students today were using this hashtag to share their experiences or call out racist events on campus, the hashtag itself was part of a campaign led by the Students of Color Coalition four years prior. By telling new stories with the former hashtag, students utilized rhetorical velocity, connecting the past with the present strategically to bring together what the university was labeling as unique, circumstantial, or unusual stories.⁴ Whereas the university was attempting to artificially move past racial violence through a progressive narrative (for example, Figure 1, shown at the beginning of this essay), the tweets demonstrated otherwise. Students were and still are actively engaging in recovery work to show a wider public what life is truly like for BIPOC students on our campus. However, while Twitter is an ideal platform for housing these stories, their long-term preservation is not guaranteed.

While recovery work often looks to decades past, digital materials age differently. Collecting and curating online materials comes with challenges. Data in any form, especially social media posts, has a question of longevity and preservation. Ravinder Kaur (2015) discusses the instability of online data, explaining that, “if the digital form allows for more and more detailed information to be revealed, that information is also more difficult to hold on to. The deletion of websites, posts, tweets, blogs and the accompanying layers of data are all too frequent events in the digital world” (p. 248). Platforms become obsolete, accounts are deleted, and data can become lost. The nature of digital stories demonstrates a greater need to preserve their content. We faced this firsthand when tweets in our dataset referenced racist posts on a now defunct platform, *Yik Yak*. Though these events occurred only five years prior, the app and all its posts were no longer available. By searching news articles and student tweets, we were able to recover a screenshot of a now-deleted account documenting one incident (shown in Figure 2 below). And while digital archives can account for materials like screenshots or embedded links, we want to emphasize that solutions must be organized around local contexts and materials. We do not promote digital archives or hashtag curation as a “one size fits all” solution. Likewise, we agree with scholars such as Elias Muhanna (2018) who acknowledge that digital tools and methodologies do not “unlock the secret of archives” (p. 112), but rather utilize many of the questions and processes archivists face when working with traditional materials such as storage, organization, and access.

University Silence

As memory scholars such as Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian Ott (2010) point out, public memory is “partial, partisan, and thus often contested” (p. 6). Universities have a choice to recognize this partiality by transforming public memory through listening and enacting change, or they can perpetuate the partisan nature of memory by silencing minority voices and performing unity. Public memory which is transformative, rather than performative, is a long and difficult process, because it requires institutional accountability. Haivan V. Hoang (2015) argues that, “We need to develop a rigorous discourse that sheds light on the commonplace ways race works on campus” (p. 97). Research practices which recognize and highlight the experiences of marginalized communities on campuses are needed, because we, as scholar-teachers, cannot rely on institutions to hold themselves accountable. Many #BeingMinorityAtTCU stories mention attempts to gain justice through institutional channels (for instance Title IX, advisors, or discussions with administrators), only to have having complaints dismissed or diminished. Because these

processes are often invisible, they effectively silence student experiences and hide injustices. Consider for example, a tweet from user @LoveMelMarie, which states, “Wonder if anything is actually going to change #BeingMinorityatTCU” (2020). Despite the virality of #BeingMinorityatTCU, tweets in the corpus demonstrate a lack of faith in the university’s desire to enact real change. The silence of official university narratives is important not just because of the impact on current students, but because of the impact institutions have on shaping public memory.

The silence of universities and the formation of collective memory is inextricably tied to privilege and identity. As Claire Whitlinger (2015) explains, “Those occupying dominant social positions are able to advance a particular ‘official’ version of the past by controlling access to information, the means of dissemination, and the very terms of discussion” (p. 650). Those in power at universities are more likely to be white, male, heterosexual, middle to upper-class, and cisgender. Additionally, those who speak out who are privileged are more likely to be listened to by the public and by the university. This combination means that marginalized people on campus—students, staff, and faculty—are more likely to fall victim to perpetual silencing. The narratives presented by universities are more likely to be registered as “official,” whereas the stories of marginalized people are more likely to be dismissed or ignored altogether. This silence is dangerous. Lauren E. Obermark (2017) reflects on that danger as she recounts teaching on her campus in the wake of Ferguson. She explains, “There is power deployed by the university in its silence... This silence wages a subtle war against the neighboring community, against marginalized people, against the very students the university serves” (para. 7). On our own campus, we found this war less subtle. Our university fell silent when the police murdered Atatiana Jefferson mere miles from campus. Our university fell silent while being sued for the abuse and discrimination of Black female students. Our own department fell silent when two Black female graduate students joined the lawsuit. The question then is not whether universities ignore issues of discrimination and racial violence—they do. The question is how do we, as scholars—as humans—address this silencing?

Counterstory as Institutional Critique

One way of addressing the erasure of institutional violence is through counterstory. Aja Y. Martinez (2014; 2020) calls for the use of critical race theory (CRT) counterstory as a methodology for “actively challenging the status quo with regard to institutionalized prejudices against racial minorities that proliferate in United States institutions of higher education” (p. 37). Drawing from Tarra J. Yosso’s definition (2013), “Critical race counterstorytelling is a method of recounting the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people” (p. 10). Counterstorying is a particularly useful methodology for scholars interested in institutional silence because it centers marginalized voices while recognizing the ways in which institutions are “deeply and irrevocably structured by racial and other forms of marginalization” (Woodson, 2017, p. 326). To understand and transform collective memories, we must recognize how institutions and their official narratives discriminate, as we honor those who have spoken out. While students on our campus have utilized counterstory effectively through Twitter campaigns, one challenge we see is how to ensure these counterstories remain visible and become part of our institution’s collective memory moving forward. Transforming collective memory requires not just preservation of counterstories, but reflection on what types of knowledge the archive values.

What is Worth Archiving: Student Counterstory as Legitimate Knowledge

One result of our archival process has been a deep reflection on what types of knowledge are considered legitimate. As Yosso points out (2013), “the legacy of racism and White privilege determine whose stories are recounted as historical and whose experiences are dismissed as merely anecdotal” (p. 9). Collected tweets reveal a pattern in our institution’s history of ignoring the experiences of marginalized students and blaming racist events as accidental or outliers. BIPOC students who do speak out are likely to be marked as

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messy, loud, troublemakers, or in the case of our corpus, “cry babies and victims.” User @amazing_nell’s tweet states “I don’t understand why the majority thinks the minorities are cry babies and victims... #BeingMinorityatTCU” (2016), effectively demonstrating this pattern. As archivists, do we consider this type of communication knowledge or hearsay?

Toni Morrison (2019) explains that marginalized voices are discredited and their information is often “dismissed as ‘lore’ or ‘gossip’ or ‘magic’ or ‘sentiment’” (p.267). This negative perception of speaking out from personal experience as gossip or too emotional is one weapon used against marginalized students to discount them and render invisible them and the issues they raise. When students’ experiences are continually dismissed, they are gaslighted into believing their experiences are exceptions, exaggerated, or figments of their imagination. Consider for example, one counterstory from the #BeingMinorityatTCU dataset, in which students screenshot a racist snapchat containing images of Black male students dancing at an undergraduate event.⁵ A student attending recorded them with a response calling them “African tribal.”



When students shared the screenshots with university officials, TCU’s chancellor responded, “I also like to remind everybody that it’s just one person doing this, and the person who did this actually was very, very remorseful about it and felt very, very bad about it after it was pointed out to her. It doesn’t excuse what she did, but it does help a little bit in my opinion” (Podell, 2018, para. 8). In the context of other #BeingMinorityatTCU counterstories, it is clear that these incidents are not “one person.” Another tweet from our corpus recounts a similar event in which a TCU student recorded Black sorority members on campus with the caption “is this stomp the yard or what” (@EgusiFiend, 2016). While the chancellor’s statements privilege white student racism as “accidental” or singular, this tweet demonstrates that Black TCU students are regularly recorded and racially stereotyped online. One issue that the hashtag illustrates is that platforms like *Yik Yak* and *Snapchat* act as a space of racial violence for students on campus, yet they are designed to be temporary, anonymous, and quickly erased. Digital archives can challenge university responses and circumvent the instability of data by providing evidence of past trauma.

Archival work can, as Hoang points out (2015), “[complicate] dominant histories” (p. 114) by amplifying current student stories. Researchers taking up this work must ask themselves “What memories have been suppressed? Which memories are legitimated and why?” (Hoang, 2015, p. 114). Tweets complicate the dominant history and the archival process by recognizing forms of memory not often considered official or legitimate. Furthermore, as Kathryn B. Comer and Michael Harker (2015) state, “researchers and teachers must work to complicate long held assumptions about what counts as evidence in archival research, who carries out archival inquiry, and to what ends” (p. 77). Reducing tweets to mere opinions does not do justice to the labor of users and participates in a biased, racist archival system that privileges certain types of communication.

Student tweets make possible a digital archive that remembers racial history on student terms, through their counterstory rather than a sanitized institutional record. Hashtags enable students to reclaim their status within the university and, as Rema Reynolds and Darquillius Mayweather (2017) argue within their own

study of a hashtag on their local campus, “reaffirm their humanity in person and on social media through hashtag activism” (p. 283). Thus, student activism through hashtags symbolically reminds the university of who it serves. Honoring these counterstories enables the archive to become what Ellen Cushman (2013) calls “a place-based learning center where knowledge unfolds through stories told in and on the people’s terms” (p. 132). We see this archival work as a process of remembering, processing, and testifying (Diab et al., 2013) *with students* as a way of reducing distance in the archive.

Distance in the Archive

We believe temporality plays a part in the archive. Time creates a distance between archivists, materials, and visitors that allows us to pretend that long-ago events are past us. As Stacy Nall (2014) points out in the case of her class, “One reason students might have been less resistant to the contents of this archive, despite its lack of neutrality and occasionally overt politicality, was the temporal separation between their own lives and the archive’s voices” (p. 80). While Nall considers this distance productive, we see this as potentially another way the university uses students of color to advance their agenda while privately enacting racial structural violence. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2012) contends, “An institution knows how to preserve itself and it knows that Black feminists are a trouble more useful as dead invocation than as live troublemakers... And those institutions continue to make money and garner prestige off of their once affiliated now dead faculty members” (para. 11). Gumbs’s (2012) words are a powerful demonstration of how universities participate in erasure and violence while claiming to value “bright brown bodies” (para. 12). Consider the tweet in Figure 3, in which user meeshpls calls out the university’s contradictory behavior to the broader public.

We acknowledge that temporal distance is a comfort and a privilege. #BeingMinorityAtTCU disturbs that comfort and privilege, calling attention to the erasure of student trauma and the recency of events. In the original tweet, TCU attempts to create a legacy of valuing Black lives, yet they do not acknowledge or take action based on the very experiences of Black students on campus. Beyond noting the contradiction, meeshpls is demanding a transformation of public memory. The user calls out TCU for performative virtue signaling by pretending to value Black lives while erasing trauma. She tags the counterstories presented through #DearTCU and #BeingMinorityAtTCU as legitimate records of that trauma while indirectly addressing the public, a participatory audience crucial to this conversation. By calling out TCU publicly, and tagging the previous campaigns, she is invoking a witness and asking that a true “we” process these events together. meeshpls’s tweet demonstrates the importance of these counterstories for accountability. If we hope to truly transform public memory, we must envision the digital archive as a place in which we testify and process together.



Conclusion: Moving Forward Together

Within this essay, we trace the local hashtag, #BeingMinorityatTCU, to demonstrate how social activist tweets are counterstories worth archiving. In doing so, we argue that digital archives, which support and continue student-led activism, have the potential to amplify marginalized voices and reshape public memory of violent institutional racism. We begin this essay with a tweet from our university to demonstrate how institutional narratives perform racial unity and progress while ignoring BIPOC student experiences. We envision digital archives as spaces which not only preserve student experiences but acknowledge tweets as legitimate knowledge. By recognizing student counterstories as legitimate knowledge, digital archives have the potential to transform public memory: to begin a conversation, to process events, and to testify *together*. We would like to end our essay with an acknowledgement:

Archival work is labor. It is emotional, scholarly labor and it is often rendered invisible. So is activism. Our archival work could not be possible without the labor of students on our campus. Their work is intellectual. Their work is emotional. Their words are fearless. Their resistance is historical. All progress on our campus is because of their vulnerability, and that deserves to be remembered. No institutional history that erases their stories is complete.

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Notes

- ¹ The complete court case can be read here: <https://interactive.wfaa.com/pdfs/JaneDoe.pdf>.
- ² As graduate students we were aware of racial tension at both our university and in our department, but as new students these events were not part of our own memory. These stories were told not as part of an institutional narrative but were generally shared to us by other students or trusted professors. While some stories are familiar, those experienced by undergraduates are not, simply because graduate students are often trained to view themselves as more aligned with faculty than with the general student population. However, this lawsuit shifted this dynamic, in which we found ourselves more aligned with student activists, especially after two graduate students from our department joined the plaintiffs. It became clearer throughout this lawsuit that the dynamic is not administration versus students, undergraduates versus graduates, or faculty versus students, but rather those willing to speak out versus those who would prefer to keep these stories hidden. In the initial phases of this project, we met with student activists who were members of the Coalition for University Justice and Equity (CUJE). While neither of us are Black, CUJE was made up of Black, Brown, and other marginalized students who welcomed our desire to amplify and contribute. Our goal is not to speak on behalf of the students whose stories are archived, but rather to center the counterstories they present.
- ³ We are currently in the early process of digitally archiving student activism on our campus. This work involves framing digital artifacts such as tweets, posts, and other student narratives within a larger historical context of racism on our campus. Within this article we describe one process of this archival project, hashtag curation, in order to question the affordances of what an archive can do. Though our digital archive is still in progress, we argue here that engaging with these materials is part of "testifying" and witnessing which legitimizes student stories as knowledge. Essentially, tracing hashtags is part of the research process of archiving that is not often visible in the finished "product."
- ⁴ While we provide an example of these types of statements, we would like to note one of the "rules of whiteness in the academy" as outlined by Carmen Kynard: "It will always be unwritten." Rarely does our university outline these claims in written documentation. To do so would put them at risk of accountability. Yet their actions (or lack of) signal to students that white stories are believable and worthy of investigation, whereas racial violence is unusual or unintended.
- ⁵ We have intentionally included the screenshot from the event to demonstrate the instability of online data. Several tweets in our #BeingMinorityAtTCU corpus reference this event, but we were unable to find the original tweet which is shown in Figure 2. Instead, we relied on a *TCU 360* article that included a screenshot of a tweet commenting on the original Snapchat post. The screenshot illustrates why archives should be invested in preserving materials such as tweets, which may not always be available online.

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