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The inclusion of youth with lived experience of homelessness in emerging networked publics: Challenges in online storytelling and allyship

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Abstract

There has been considerable debate over the extent to which vulnerable and diverse populations are politically involved in decision-making. Specifically in Canada's homelessness sector, there is a macro-level push to include individuals with lived experience of homelessness in the policymaking process. This research paper will explore the ways in which youth with lived experience of homelessness and their allies are engaging in online forms of activism and storytelling, and ultimately examine this interaction under the idea that media is both a practice and an imaginary (boyd, 2010). This study situates this argument in the wide critique of Jürgen Habermas' (1989) exclusionary public sphere. Instead, this paper examines the emerging concepts of "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 2) and "networked publics" (boyd, 2010, p. 1) to understand how online marginalized voices are only empowered to the extent to which they perform in mediated spaces to gain visibility. By drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (2002) articulation of social capital, this study examines recent examples of Canadian organizations amplifying youth voices on Instagram to interrogate some of the implications that arise in online allyship and storytelling.

Keywords: affective publics, networked publics, youth homelessness, lived experience, storytelling, allyship, activism, social capital

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Background

The body of literature dealing with youth civic engagement has expanded and adapted over the past decade as scholars look to understand how youth engage in technology-enabled politics (Caron, Raby, Mitchell, Th ewissen-Leblanc & Prioletta, 2019). As such, some have suggested that the proliferation of online spaces have presented unlimited opportunities for young people to be actively engaged in social causes (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Specifically, one of the most prevalent ways to engage in online forms of activism is through hashtagging (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Simply put, the act of hashtagging is a practice that exists in an imaginative space. It is a practice insofar as diverse groups can indicate their solidarity to social movements through a simple, collective hashtag. However, it is also imaginative to the extent that it falsely assumes the emancipation and empowerment of marginalized voices who rely on those with social capital to gain visibility. This type of online activism, coupled with the social sector's broad adoption of lived experience voices in policymaking, prompts exploration into online storytelling and allyship. This research explores the ways in which Canadian organizations serving homeless youth engage in hashtag activism to share lived experience voices online.

While this paper does not aim to suggest that lived experience should be removed from policymaking spheres, it does look to examine some of the normative assumptions that these consultations are inherently empowering. This study takes a critical approach to examine some of the dilemmas of youth engagement online in arguing that the perceived empowerment of marginalized voices overlooks how online spaces reinforce class differences. Ultimately, the

timelines and intent of this research is two-fold. Firstly, it is intended to indicate a shift from typical bottom-up approaches to digital activism. Where much research has examined online forms of activism arising out of shared sentiments from individuals, less has been said about the top-down encouragement of activism from governmental bodies or institutions. Scholars such as Papacharissi (2015) highlight examples such as the #OccupyWallStreet movement to understand how individuals on a grassroots level felt connected through shared sentiments. In contrast, this research looks at youth voices that do not emerge in direct opposition to government per se, but rather from organizations that are following direction from national homelessness policies, which demands the consultation of diverse lived experience voices (Duclos, 2017). Therefore, the second intention behind this research is to provide a thoughtful discussion for how the social sector can understand social capital in online forms of engagement. Given that nearly 20% of all individuals experiencing homelessness in Canada are between the ages of 13-24 (Gaetz, Dej, Richter, & Redman, 2016), we can assume the ways in which we engage, understand and utilize youth lived experience will continue to develop.

In what follows, this paper describes how the inclusion of marginalized voices online has fetishized class differences between youths' allies – the 'Helper' – and marginalized youth – the 'Other.' It begins with a critical discussion of the Habermasian public sphere and goes on to explain how Web 2.0 platforms are emerging in networked publics (boyd, 2010). The discussion is situated in Pierre Bourdieu's (2002) theory of social capital to explain how online activism is only celebrated to the extent to which those with pre-existing social capital validate youths' individual stories. This study concludes with a discussion around the potential essentialization of this type of online allyship, and its implications for the policymaking process.

Literature Review

From the public sphere to networked publics

There is little doubt that today's convergent digital spaces demand more complex and dynamic understandings of how citizens deliberate (Lünenborg, 2019). Jürgen Habermas (1989) is one of the most cited scholars in his conceptualization of the "bourgeois public sphere" arising in the eighteenth century (p. 273). Under this framework, the public sphere is a mode of public deliberation which explains one's social life and how public opinion is formed (Lünenborg, 2019). In the simplest sense, it seeks to explain how interactions between the individual, class systems and the nation-state take place (Lünenborg, 2019). The public sphere then becomes both: (1) a physical and social construction, and (2) a means to foster public decision-making (Lünenborg, 2019). To this extent, the public sphere has inherent temporal and spatial capacities. Its separation of the private from the public means that public deliberation refrains from emotional influences. For Habermas (1989), emotions belong in the private sphere of family life. This leads to the public sphere becoming a space for those who are educated, skilled in rhetoric or have social influence.

To many, this concept indicated a watershed moment in understanding how Western democracies had manifested the ideals of enlightenment (Lünenborg, 2019). In the context of the eighteenth century, the Habermasian public sphere offers some insight into the rising capitalist system. In a time where European nation-states were democratizing, the public sphere itself became the formative understanding of public deliberation (Habermas, 1989). Yet, there is little question that this theoretical concept of the public sphere is limiting, and in many ways, still undefined. Many scholars have suggested that the Habermasian public sphere is an idealized

concept that has never been fully realized (Barassi, 2015; Lünenborg, 2019). The idea that public debate should remain rational and impartial raises questions around who is included – or perhaps more realistically, excluded – from this space. In the same way capitalistic markets led to the development of private institutions, the public sphere led to the media’s role in public communication (Habermas, 1989). As the media played a central role in the dissemination of information, it simultaneously re-enforced the bourgeois message in the formation of public opinion (Iosifidis, 2011). Immediately, there are some pernicious consequences that come with this type of communications system. The restrictions of who can contribute to this public sphere lends itself to the exclusion of particular actors on grounds of ethnicity, gender and class. Instead, it becomes a space for privileged professionals and experts. Acknowledging that the bourgeois public sphere shapes public opinion, Habermas (1989) supposed that the bourgeois opinion is more valuable than other mainstream or marginalized groups.

Notwithstanding the problematic assumptions embedded in this concept, Habermas (1989) in essence set the stage for how we currently think about the interplay between individuals, civil society actors, the nation-state and the media. While there is a large body of scholarship interrogating the tensions that arise in the Habermasian public sphere, there is less said about the broader way it shapes our understanding of communication. For example, Habermas’ (1989) stark divide of the private and public presupposes that a more equal public sphere ought to include emotional appeals. However, as this paper will go on to explain, while the emerging expansions of the Habermasian public sphere provide a more useful starting point to understanding online participation, they do not dissolve the existing class tensions that exist in the online and offline world.

Affective and networked publics

The advent of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies certainly reinvigorated the debate around the Habermasian public sphere (Barassi, 2015). The lack of emotion in the Habermasian public sphere appears to be addressed in new online publics, as Web 2.0 technologies go against all the tenants of the public sphere. They provide amateurs a democratic opportunity to share their stories and counter messages to challenge dominant ideologies (Barassi, 2015). With these considerations, specific terms like “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 2) and “networked publics” (boyd, 2010, p. 2) attempt to restructure a public sphere that accounts for the networked nature of communication technologies. Papacharissi (2015) defined affective publics as “publics that actualize by feeling their way into politics through media” (p. 115). In particular, she outlined five characteristics of affective publics: (1) they leave distinct digital footprints, (2) they support connective but not necessarily collective action, (3) they are powered by statements of opinion and the plurality of voices, (4) they produce disruptions to dominant political narratives, and (5) their impact is symbolic and agency is claimed through semantics. The practices of these publics, in essence, depart from the deliberative protocols of the public sphere. Instead, they create online forms of civic engagement that are contingent on what Raymond Williams (1977) called “structures of feeling” (as cited in Barassi, 2015, p. 134).

Structures of feeling account for the sentiment-driven forms of civic engagement that typically sustain discursive spaces where individual stories are told (Papacharissi, 2015). At first blush, these structures of feeling seemingly indicate a newer, softer version of public engagement. However, as Papacharissi (2015) pointed out, these structures of feeling have historical roots in capitalism and class differences. Particularly, Williams (1977), in his

discussion on Marxism, underscored the industrial age of the 1840s as one example of a structure of feeling that emerged out of industrial capitalism. Here, the sentiments from the middle-class consciousness organized to understand unequal class differences (Williams, 1977). Papacharissi (2015) rightfully summarized this by explaining that these structures of feeling are “organized enough to facilitate sharing, yet open enough to permit differentiated classes of people to locate meaning in them and further infuse them with meaning” (p. 116). Perhaps the infusing of emotional sentiments brought people together, however the overall ambiguity of its purpose allowed for individuals to loosely define its meaning in their own terms.

These structures of feeling begin to demonstrate the fluidity in how meaning is perceived and created online. There is certainly an argument that hashtags serve as “structures of feeling” as they reflect current mood (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 5). Along this line of thinking, boyd’s (2010) articulation of ‘networked publics’ is helpful in understanding media as both an imaginative space and a practice. It is imaginative in the false sense of agency it gives users, and a practice in the specific ways individuals engage with different platforms. One of the key scholars drawing attention to hashtagging is Paul Dawson (2020). Dawson (2020) described this practice as “emergent storytelling” (p. 968), to explain the aspects of behaviour that arise out of the collective versus the individual. In this form of online emergent storytelling, the practice of using hashtags allows users to connect their individual story to a larger collective. While this practice may highlight the agency of individuals to share their experiential truth, there are some implications for this practice. On one hand, it can promote feelings of empowerment, but on the other hand, be potentially exploitative to the extent that policies and practices can arrive out of these stories (Dawson, 2020). Similarly, Papacharissi (2015) suggested that hashtagging is more symbolic than actionable. The necessity of hashtags to piece together a macro story begins to set larger narratives and policy agendas at the expense of fragmenting and essentializing individual stories. This becomes particularly problematic for homeless youth who have limited social capital on their own, and therefore rely on those with greater influence to share their story.

In theory, people have greater access to engage online in ways that were historically constrained in the traditional public sphere. Yet at the same time, the social behaviours that emerge in online spaces are under constant negotiation. As boyd (2010) explained, individuals are forced to perform to their perceived audience to handle the invisible nature of online spaces. This is particularly notable in the context of lived experience. Where issues of homelessness, mental health and substance use have traditionally been taboo topics in the public sphere, the Global North is witnessing a shift in celebrating the sharing of those individualized stories (McIntosh & Wright, 2019). In other words, as cultural norms change, so do behaviours online, whether knowingly or not. Where it might be typical to think of online spaces as “uncontested terrain[s] of imagination and practice” (Barassi, 2015, p. 63), we instead begin to see the performativity of individuals and organizations online to gain visibility and meaning.

The question then remains – if the plurality of civically engaged voices online are bonded together by structures of feeling, who has the power to shift cultural norms and make meaning of these marginalized voices? To answer this question, this paper specifically utilizes boyd’s (2010) terminology of networked publics to account for the role of technology in tandem with the structures of feeling that arise in affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Nevertheless, networked publics are not impervious to the limitations of the Habermasian public sphere. Instead, they introduce new affordances that shape the way people interact with them (boyd, 2010). This paper ultimately aims to suggest that the mere visibility alone of marginalized publics in online spaces

is not inherently equal or empowering. Instead, it draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (2002) concept of social capital to understand how the visibility of marginalized voices online are reliant on pre-existing capitalistic class differences. The theory of social capital lends itself well to explaining how those in privileged positions utilize their social capital to empower marginalized voices, ultimately leading to the exacerbated class differences between those with power and those with social deficits.

The theory of social capital

The concept of social capital can be traced back to James Coleman, Robert Putman and Pierre Bourdieu (O'Brien & O'Fathaigh, 2005). Underpinning the concept of social capital is the idea that social relationships, often built up over time, benefit individuals in achieving their interests (O'Brien & O'Fathaigh, 2005). For Coleman and Putman, social capital boasts primarily functionalist properties in its ability to facilitate social relationships and promote civic engagement (O'Brien & O'Fathaigh, 2005). The productive and mutual beneficiary qualities of such a relationship suggest that social capital constitutes positive social control (O'Brien & O'Fathaigh, 2005). Together, Coleman and Putman narrowed in on the idea that social capital is equated to positive social authority. However, there are a few core challenges with these assumptions. Firstly, they suggested that social capital can be gained and maintained from any individual so long as there is cross-coordination and mutuality between actors. By assuming this, it secondly suggested that individuals have equal and accessible access to engage in this process. If social capital is hinged on the plurality of an individual's network, the assumption here is that there is an infinite potential for individuals to build up their social capital potential.

This line of thinking glosses over fundamental questions around how an individual obtains resources. This is why this study has chosen to look at Bourdieu's (2002) articulation of social capital in his belief that individuals are engaging in mediated spaces. In essence, Bourdieu's theory stressed the idea that some communities or networks have more or less social capital than others (Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014). His exploration into the complex relationship between spaces and individuals offers valuable insight in how marginalized groups necessarily rely on those with existing social capital to gain visibility in online networked publics. It is here that we begin to see how the top-down co-opting of lived experience narratives is primarily assigned value by those with social capital. While some have suggested that online networked connectivity creates a new space to increase social capital (Hofer & Aubert, 2013), less has been said about how those with greater social capital influence those with less social capital in online spaces.

Situating lived experience in Canada's homelessness policies

The inclusion of lived experience in social policy analysis and development is not necessarily new but has been popularized over the past decade. James Charlton (1998) authored a book titled *Nothing About Us Without Us* in the late 1990s to express how people with disabilities know what is best for them. His underlying argument was that decisions should not be made without the consultation of individuals who would be affected by those policies. The slogan 'Nothing About Us Without Us' popularized and became a mantra at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Charlton, 1998). Today, the mantra extends past disability rights and is colloquially used across different sectors to dismantle the historically elitist policy-making process. At its core, it represents the commitment from politicians and leaders to include all voices in the decision-making process.

At first blush, extending the consultation process to include all voices seems like an obvious step forward in the right direction towards equality. The inclusion of all voices and experiences reflects a departure from the separation between the private and public in the traditional Habermasian public sphere. However, the experiential act of storytelling and including marginalized voices comes with its own myriad of challenges. On the one hand, some scholars have pointed out the ambiguity on what the term ‘lived experience’ means or implies (McIntosh & Wright, 2019). On the other hand, there are challenges with the Euro-centric formation of the term itself, and exactly who qualifies as someone with ‘lived experience’ (McIntosh & Wright, 2019). Under that notion lies the assumption that the parameters for defining and including the voices of lived experience is in the hands of policymakers. These challenges are further exacerbated when considering the intersections of lived experience with gender, race, age and nationality.

In Canada, many interest groups have fought to have lived experience included in the work to end homelessness. Even recently, the Canadian Lived Experience Leadership Network (CLELN) promulgated a call to action in support of the Recovery for All campaign in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (McGraw & Wiebe, 2020). The CLELN authored an open letter encouraging the federal government to ensure lived experience voices are present at the decision-making table for housing and homeless policy, with the subsequent call to action: “TELL YOUR MP: Stand with Canadians with lived experience in the fight to end homelessness!” (McGraw & Wiebe, 2020, para. 2). Not only does this call to action suggest that individuals with lived experience hold a certain level of expertise on the matter, but also suggests that every Canadian has a role to play in ensuring that lived experience is embedded in policymaking processes.

These efforts are palpable alongside the staggering rates of poverty and homelessness in Canada (Duclos, 2017). In response to these rising rates, the federal government released *Canada’s National Housing Strategy* (NHS) in 2017 (Duclos, 2017). This ten-year housing strategy is an ambitious \$40-billion plan targeting housing affordability and homelessness in Canada (Duclos, 2017). In addition to this strategy, the federal government also announced *Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy* (Reaching Home) in 2019 to work in tandem with the NHS (Government of Canada, 2020). Both of these national strategies identified the need to incorporate lived experience voices in program planning and implementation. For example, the NHS purported a dedication to cross-sector collaboration and a commitment to tackling the diverse needs of vulnerable populations, including young adults. In outlining the path forward for the NHS’ implementation, the government committed to ongoing consultations with vulnerable groups and stakeholders in saying that:

The Government of Canada is committed to involving vulnerable and under-represented people with lived experience in decision-making processes regarding housing. Their experience, knowledge and contribution are key to improving housing, strengthening communities and enhancing quality of life (Duclos, 2017, p. 28).

Beyond the NHS and Reaching Home, there have been concerted efforts from non-governmental organizations and civil society actors to see under-represented subpopulations of individuals experiencing homelessness reflected in the policymaking process. The push to include the voice of lived experience has seemingly presented an equitable chance for marginalized groups to influence policymaking in new and unfound ways. Among these groups

are young people, and many researchers and practitioners in this field have wrestled to find appropriate ways to engage with diverse groups. Many researchers have positioned youth as agents of change and sought youth-friendly engagement methods through fan activism, media, art and storytelling (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). On the one hand, these are positive strides towards dismantling middle-class, able-bodied and adult-ways of engagement (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). On the other hand, it implies that youths' allies play a role in amplifying these voices, and by extension, also play a role in constructing a youth's identity. This means that youth voices online are not necessarily arising in isolation, but rather through the complex relationships between those with social capital who reinforce their meaning and importance. This complex relationship suggests that online spaces are mediated by the social capital of allies.

To highlight one example, David Farrugia (2011) offered a critical exploration into the experiences of homeless youth, and how these subjectivities arise under distinct structures which form identity. This socially constructed identity, as Farrugia (2011) explained, is also compounded by the historical tendency to look at youth as social degenerates who pose a threat to otherwise orderly social relations. Specifically, he interviewed young people with some type of past or present experience of homelessness to understand their own subjective experiences. What he found was that homelessness served as an identifier which carried a symbolic burden for young people (Farrugia, 2011). More interestingly, however, Farrugia (2011) found that not only did homelessness carry a symbolic cultural trope, but also young people were also aware of this identity-marker, and therefore oriented their social action in line with pre-existing power relations. More simply put, youth knew that they had to perform in a certain way to get attention from those with social capital. This supports Bourdieu's (2002) explanation that the power of social capital is contingent on subjects who recognize these symbols and position their practices accordingly.

More recently, research from Shelley Cook and Rachele Hole (2020) similarly applied a Bourdieusian framework to understand how homeless individuals play up particular vulnerabilities in order to receive social services. Their findings indicated that access to services is largely based on the individual's ability to interpret social cues and perform accordingly (Cook & Hole, 2020). In this study, the dependence from homeless individuals on service providers to meet their essential needs meant their performance needed to be adaptable to the different gatekeepers (Cook & Hole, 2020). In the simplest sense, this study underscored the importance of social capital interactions between different classes. For those in need of basic human necessities such as shelter, food and security, it is reasonable to understand why homeless individuals would leverage their identity to secure resources. Nevertheless, these performances have broader implications. On a micro-level, it highlights how individuals rely on social capital interactions to construct individual identity. On a macro-level, the performativity of homeless identity has the potential to be produced and reinforced by institutions.

Farrugia's (2011) and Cook and Hole's (2020) findings are instrumental in understanding the performative nature of young people with the identifier of lived experience. One of the growing problems is that young people are aware of their disempowerment, and subsequently negotiate online spaces to position themselves within this embodied subjectivity. In doing so, it seems as though the actual experience of homelessness is shifting to be an identity-marker for young people. Young people are aware of this shift, and constantly have to reinvent their identities in online spaces to gain visibility. The macro-level shift to privilege lived experience narratives prompts questions around how social identity and differences are articulated and

understood online. This again demonstrates how the imaginative nature of online networked publics only gives the illusion of user agency and emancipation, while failing to take into consideration the classist separation of those with social capital who play an important role in constructing youth identity.

Lived experience and the case for hashtag activism

Despite the lack of literature around the use and influence of social media use among homeless youth, there is a corresponding body of literature to suggest that youth engage politically online as a mechanism to disrupt inequalities (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Often, these practices emerge to act as a counter narrative to dominant discourse. In line with the features of affective publics, this often materializes in the form of hashtagging as a way to show solidarity to social movements. In their research, Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2017) critically looked at youth digital activism at what they call ‘restorying.’ In particular, they described how:

Issues of representation – how we represent others and how people represent themselves – are at the heart of youth digital activism. In the recent past, young people had few opportunities to represent themselves on a wide scale, instead relying on mass media and established institutions (e.g., education, publishing, mass media) to craft the stories that dominated our understandings of each other and ourselves (p. 351).

The underlying assumption here is that new online media technologies provide unconstrained opportunities for youth to ‘restory’ their voices and redefine online modalities of youth activism. However, this appears to look at young people online in isolation from institutions who are also engaging online. Here, the relationship between youth with lived experience and institutions is incredibly important in light of the proliferation of online social activism movements. The social capital interactions that exist offline have the potential to extend online and is highlighted through hashtag activism. For example, emerging hashtags such as #EndYouthHomelessness have mobilized on digital media platforms. In what follows, this paper discusses three examples from Canadian organizations to understand hashtag activism and the construction of youth identity. Specifically, it highlights how hashtagging is a practice that is defined by pre-existing class structures that are determined by differing levels of social capital.

It is important to note that the following examples are only a sampling of posts from organizations on Instagram that highlight lived experience voices. These specific examples come from three Canadian organizations that support youth homelessness initiatives writ large. However, in understanding the formation of identities, stories and interpretation, this paper would be remiss not to acknowledge the researcher’s own biases and positionality in selecting the following content for discussion. This study seeks to acknowledge the researchers’s own accumulated social capital in this research as a way to monitor the tensions that can arise from subscribing meaning to these posts. Additionally, further analysis could better explain the algorithmic infrastructures that may affect the virality of these posts. Although the ages of the users in the following Figures cannot be confirmed, this paper draws on posts where there is an alignment to the broader issue of youth homelessness.

Figure 1

360kids' 'Welcome to the Spotlight' Instagram series

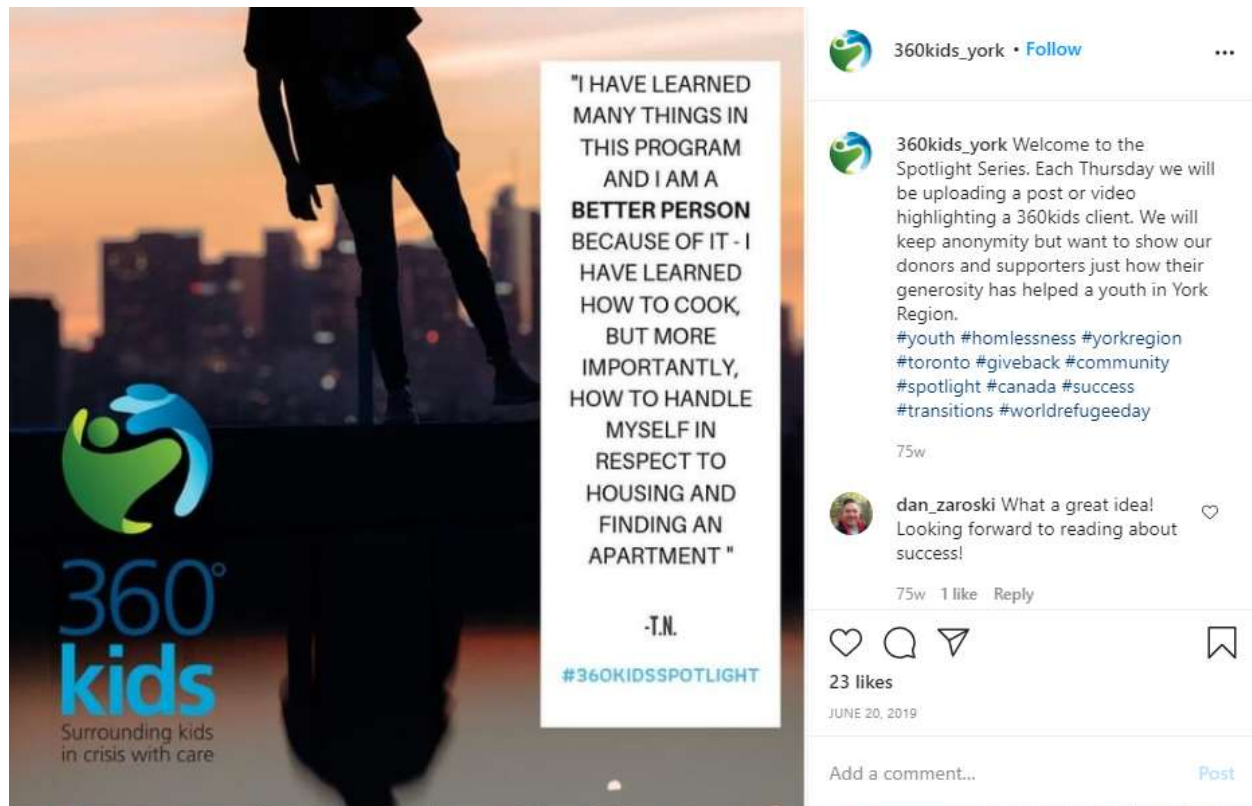


Figure 1 comes from 360°kids, a Canadian organization based in Ontario. Their organizational mission is “to help youth overcome crisis and transition to a state of safety and stability” (360kids, n.d., para. 4). The organization’s Instagram page deploy different hashtags such as #HomelessLivesMatter, #EndYouthHomelessness and #Giveback to complement their posts (360kids, 2019). In what is called their ‘Spotlight Series,’ the assigned Instagram caption explains how “each Thursday we will be uploading a post or video highlighting a 360kids client” (360kids, 2019, para. 1). Figure 1 shows a posted image with the text from a young person with the initials T.N., describing: “I have learned many things in this program and I am a better person because of it – I have learned how to cook, but more importantly, how to handle myself in respect to housing and finding an apartment” (360kids, 2019, para.1).

Figure 2

Homeless Hub's 'Haven's Way' Instagram series



In a similar fashion, Figure 2 comes from Homeless Hub, the largest homelessness research library that brings together research, stories and best practices to the sector (Homeless Hub, n.d.). The post highlights the story of Ange, who describes:

Haven's Way is more than a program that used to help me. It's more than a house I used to live in... Haven's Way is a lifeline in the darkness; it's a raft that comes in the middle of the storm and doesn't stop fighting for your life no matter how bad you flounder (Homeless Hub, 2016, para 1).

This post is accompanied by hashtags, including #EndYouthHomelessness. Lastly, Figure 3 comes from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). They share Kirsten's story, who explains:

I know how to connect with the youth participating in the lab and I can relate to their stories. Like them, I once made my way to this shelter, and now I'm working in Eva's Head Office. I have a job to do and it gives me purpose (CMHC | SCHL, 2019, para. 1).

Figure 3

Kirsten's story featured on CMHC's Instagram



The aforementioned examples provide just a few samples of lived experience stories that are being promoted at a macro-level. Interestingly, where Cook and Hole (2020) examined performativity with those experiencing homelessness, these given examples share stories of those who previously experienced homelessness. These specific organizations engaging in various forms of online activism deploy hashtags such as #WorldRefugeeDay (Figure 1), #EndYouthHomelessness (Figure 2) and #NationalHousingStrategy (Figure 3) to align with a social movement. Here, Dawson's (2020) description of emergent narratives helps explain how the collection of micro-level tweets in Figures 1-3 coalesce together to form a movement. However, despite using hashtags to align with a social cause around youth homelessness, the overall call to action remains unclear, and thus the active use of hashtags are more symbolic than tangible. In the organizations' attempt to position themselves as change-makers, there is a lack of awareness around the negotiated presentation of the self in relation to the audience. For young people who do not have social capital on their own, they necessarily need to take steps to mitigate risk, and appeal to those with social capital to tell their story (Caron et al., 2019). In this Canadian context, the political top-down view of youth with lived experience as experts invites young people to share more openly online. The hashtag becomes the movement, while the individualized stories personalize it through narrative.

Nevertheless, while each of these anecdotes provide a heartwarming success story, it is difficult to discern how these voices are truly empowered. T.N., Ange and Kirsten's stories

appear to be less about the individual and more about what the organization did to help, thereby signifying the dynamic relationship between micro-level storytelling and macro-level narratives. It is here that we see the interplay of digital networked publics as both an imaginary and a practice. The networked digitality promises a space for marginalized voices, as we see with T.N., Ange and Kirsten's stories, but is positioned through dominant actors who gatekeep the framing through emergent storytelling. This demonstrates the ongoing shift towards privileging allies who use their social capital to make meaning of these stories. This presents challenges in policy-making processes that appear to include marginalized voices, but only to the extent to which institutions who act as youth allies can reinforce and produce the messaging.

Performative allyship

The level of civic potential in networked publics is difficult to measure and define. While policymakers may participate in online spaces to listen to lived experience voices, it should be noted that networked publics and social capital is hinged on dynamic relationships. Therefore, subsuming youths' engagement online as the primary driver of lived experience engagement in isolation is problematic. Research indicates that while online spaces pluralize new voices into the conversation, they do not necessarily engender new democratic developments (Papacharissi, 2015). Public discourse, both online and offline, is just one part of the larger policy-making process. However, as youth continue to define political participation within informal and creative structures, it is plausible that online spaces will continue to celebrate the homogenization of the private and public, and the emotionality that comes with personal storytelling.

The performance of the self in online spaces bears some similarities of the performance of the self in everyday space and time. De Kosnik and Feldman (2019), for example, explored how identity is under constant negotiation and affords new experiences online. Specifically, they explore the ways in which users act as the producer and consumer – “prosumer” – of media, which in turn affords them greater leverage on digital social networks (p. 264). On one hand, while De Kosnik and Feldman (2019) rightfully challenged some of the techno-deterministic assumptions of online media, their discussion focuses on the user-centric nature of media. For them, power is accumulated through participation. They suggest that “people become both well-informed and influential through their participation in social media and could use their heightened ‘power’ on social networks to make impactful political interventions” (De Kosnik & Feldman, 2019, p. 32). However, Figures 1-3 suggest that online participation alone is not enough. The co-opting of lived experience voices from larger organizations implies that youth have limited social capital and power on their own. In addition, they become the prosumers of producing content, and then consuming the macro-level narrative it creates. Quite simply, youth inform these macro-level narratives, which in turn informs how they perform online.

This all points to the pluralization of multiple actors online, and how marginalized voices rely on those with social capital to mediate spaces and make meaning. In their book, *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender*, Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey and Brooke Foucault Welles (2020) defined ‘allyship’ as the practice of individuals with some type of social privilege who unify in political and public spaces with marginalized groups in solidarity. In social justice spaces, particularly online, this practice has been debated (Jackson et al., 2020). Some use the term “performative allyship” to draw attention to those who “perform” for an audience, and where this performance itself becomes a coveted identity (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 154). This type of allyship risks re-centring the power on privileged individuals to create

meaning in online spaces, thereby subjugating non-privileged groups. This in essence can further reinforce an ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ narrative. Within this framework, the privileged ally becomes the benevolent ‘Helper’ who seeks to aid the ‘Other.’ The likely by-product of this interaction is an accelerated source of social capital for the Helper. Figures 1-3 demonstrate this by lacing the youth’s stories with notions of emancipation and empowerment, thereby overlooking the organization’s macro-level impediment to include lived experience voices.

Essentializing youth voices online

One particularly dangerous aspect of including youth with lived experience in policymaking is that it risks essentializing the experiences of young people and further reinforcing class binaries. Papacharissi (2015) described how:

These personal performances of the self, which take on the form of statements, presentations, or representations... potentially traverse political elements as they make visible, conceal, or mask cultural processes. In those cases, performativity of cultural identities is crucial to the visibility and survival of identities frequently marginalized (p. 95).

The positioning of the empowered Other alongside privileged allies implies a cohesion in accessibility of resources and visibility for both parties involved. Yet, within this positioning, not all involved are equally implicated. For the newly empowered Other, the consequences of political involvement in mediated spaces can be detrimental. In T.N., Ange and Kirsten’s story, it is difficult to determine whether or not these stories would be celebrated if not for the social capital of their organizations to subscribe it meaning and importance. This is in line with Farrugia’s (2011) findings, where young people admitted to partaking in the research for its potential opportunities for social capital and influence. While none of this is to suggest that online storytelling practices and activism are inherently malevolent, this paper does aim to draw attention to the ways performative allyship reinforces the Othering of marginalized youth.

In considering how policies and programs are formed, it is difficult to contemplate how the stories and sentiments shared in Figures 1-3 would be appropriately applied to macro-level policies. This fetishization of marginalized voices carries several risks within the context of youth with lived experience of homelessness. Since the inclusion of lived experience voices seeks to benefit macro-level policies, it risks essentializing the real-life experiences of individuals. In simple terms, essentialism is the practices that seeks to find natural state of things by using either/or distinctions (Fuchs, 2001). The contrary to this is what Fuchs (2001) described as relationalism, which understands experiences in relation to location and context. In a similar pattern to boyd’s (2010) notion of “invisible audiences” (p. 10), Fuchs (2001) explained how a key cause of essentialism comes from the failure to account for the observer.

For these Canadian organizations engaging in hashtag activism relating to youth homelessness, one has to consider the invisible audiences they are imagining, and how that alters their performance. As social media artefacts have a spatial and temporal dimension, they are not distinct on their own; rather, they are up for the interpretation of the observer (Fuchs, 2001). Yet, these distinctions and interpretations are neither intuitive nor static. In evolving networked publics where marginalized voices are celebrated, it is important that youth are aware of the need to perform in a certain way to gain visibility. If a youth’s identity online can be recognized, affirmed, celebrated, reconstructed or rejected entirely (Farrugia, 2011), then youth need to

constantly re-align their stories for their allies. This is supported from recent Canadian research around youth homelessness and self-identity, which examined self-reported data from young people from various youth homelessness services across Canada (O'Grady, Kidd & Gaetz, 2020). Emerging from this research is the idea that the identity of youth homelessness may be a social construction that is of greater importance to service providers, rather than youth themselves (O'Grady et al., 2020). Ultimately this recognizes that identities do not exist in a vacuum, but rather emerge in networks that involve the self, allies, the audience and neoliberal constructions of lived experience.

The fluidity of networked publics suggests that the negotiation process online is ever-evolving and up for contestation. The most obvious example is in the shift in the social sector's acceptance of lived experience. Where lived experience was arguably more stigmatizing in previous contexts, it is now celebrated, encouraged and mandated, as reflected in Canada's NHS and Reaching Home. Again, this is not to argue that the plurality of voices in digital spaces is negative, but rather to interrogate the normative assumptions about the inclusion of the Other in parallel to the allyship of the Helper.

Discussion

Overall, the inclusion and adoption of lived experience voices in policy-making indicates an important step away from the Habermasian public sphere into online, networked publics (boyd, 2010). By examining the usage of youth stories by institutional actors with accumulated social capital, this study has drawn attention to the potentially essentializing tendencies of online lived experience voices. On the one hand, allies who amplify youth lived experience voices share similar characteristics of Williams (1977) structures of feeling in their emotional connectedness, as there appears to be social norms guiding online interactions. On the other hand, they exhibit some stark differences in that they are not formed in sole opposition to dominant culture. In fact, they appear to be aligning more with the emergent dominant framing which celebrates and encourages lived experience voices.

There needs to be greater contemplation on how we can meaningfully engage disenfranchised voices in a way that honours lived experience without reinforcing notions of the Other and the Helper. This ultimately raises issues for social policy development and decision-making regarding the ways in which those with social capital understand and apply micro-level stories to macro-level policies. Specifically, Farrugia's (2011) findings suggest that young people are aware of the embodied subjectivity that comes with the identity-marker of lived experience. Thus, further empirical research with young people on their perceptions of Canada's NHS and Reaching Home could better explain how youth interpret the sharing of their stories online. As these practices continue to materialize, there is an opportunity to understand how emerging forms of hashtag activism recreate neoliberal conditions of class differences. The blatant disempowerment that exists in the traditional Habermasian public sphere still prevails in new formations of networked publics, however their disempowering implications are often insidiously smoke screened under notions of storytelling, allyship and activism.

Unless digital forms of activism can be understood in the context of the corporate and capitalistic structures which shape its effectiveness, the fetishism of simply including new voices will overlook the essentialization and Othering of youth voices that depend on those with social capital. That being said, when it comes to online forms of activism in networked publics, the path forward is certainly contentious, messy and unclear. This research provides a starting point

for the social sector to consider what meaningful lived experience inclusion means in networked publics – and hopefully augments the potential for lived experience to inform inclusive online spaces that diminishes, rather than reinforces, social inequalities.

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