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Understanding Arguments and Reading Them Critically



LEFT TO RIGHT: Paul Archuleta/Getty Images; Daily Beast; Chelsea Guglielmino/Getty Images

On October 15, 2017, actor and activist Alyssa Milano took to Twitter to issue a call to action:



Milano was joining the conversation surrounding a spate of revelations about very high-profile and powerful men accused of sexual harassment: Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, Bill O'Reilly, and Harvey Weinstein. Milano's tweet argues for standing up and speaking out—in big numbers—and her message certainly hit a nerve: within 24 hours, 4.7 million people

around the world had joined the “me too” conversation, with over 12 million posts and comments. Some of these comments pointed out that the “me too” movement is actually more than ten years old: it began with activist Tarana Burke, who was directing a Girls for Gender Equity program in Brooklyn, aimed at giving voice to young women of color. As Burke told CNN after Milano’s tweet went viral: “It’s not about a viral campaign for me. It’s about a movement.”

Burke’s reaction to the 2017 meme makes an important point, one that was echoed in some of the responses Milano received and further elaborated by Jessi Hempel, the editorial director of Backchannel, in “The Problem with #metoo and Viral Outrage.” Hempel says that “on its surface,” #metoo has what looks to be the makings of an “earnest and effective social movement.” But like Burke, Hempel wonders whether #metoo will actually have the power and longevity of a true social movement. She’s concerned that while millions of people are weighing in, at last, on a long-ignored issue, the campaign may not culminate in real change:

In truth, however, #MeToo is a too-perfect meme. It harnesses social media’s mechanisms to drive users (that’s you and me) into escalating states of outrage while exhausting us to the point where we cannot meaningfully act.

Hempel cites extensive research by Yale professor Molly Crockett that suggests that “digital technologies may be transforming the way we experience outrage, and limiting how much we can actually change social realities.” In other words, expressing outrage online lets us talk the talk but not walk the walk of actual change.

In spite of these caveats, the work begun by Tarana Burke over a decade ago and given new urgency by Alyssa Milano has led to a series of high-profile firings, and some criminal convictions, in many sectors of society, from the Hollywood film industry (Weinstein’s company had to declare bankruptcy) to New York’s cultural scene (the Metropolitan Opera fired its conductor, James Levine) to Congress (Senator Al Franken was forced to resign his seat) to the world of sports (Olympics team doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced to 40 to 175 years in prison for assaulting as many as 160 women athletes). In short, it now looks as though #metoo does constitute a genuine movement that will continue to lead to actual, concrete changes in cultural attitudes and practices. Certainly, the argument over its effectiveness and reach will continue, much of it playing out on social media platforms.