

#MeToo Word of the Year

Cheyenne Chontos, Hannah Norem, Sophie Geister-Jones, and Taylor Olson on behalf of the Augustana Writing Center

Twitter is a bit of a trash can fire and it can be a huge waste of time. However, it is one of the places where the philosophy of the marketplace of ideas is the strongest. Anyone can have a Twitter account and, despite the current misuse of it to discuss foreign policy, it has been a way for vulnerable and marginalized populations to speak out. It was the voice of the Arab Spring, and throughout the last decade has been a way for protesters to spread information and mobilize. This past year, with the hashtag #MeToo, Twitter has provided a platform and a voice for people affected by sexual harassment and sexual assault.

The most important contribution that #MeToo has made to the fabric of American society is that it was a spark to a larger conversation about the problems plaguing society. It gives a voice to the “disquieting malaise of frustration and repression” that has plagued the experience of so many since the beginning of time.¹ When people began to share their stories using the #MeToo hashtag, many more were able to see the snowballing of story upon story of harassment and add their own. In fact, it seemed like social media feeds were populated with stories of people around the world sharing their stories of sexual harassment. No matter how mundane or appalling the stories shared may be, people’s eyes were opened to the breadth and the magnitude of sexual harassment. If nothing else, many people, especially men, saw for the first time how disgustingly pervasive sexual harassment is.

#MeToo is not a word plucked from the dictionary or taught on a spelling list. It’s an unconventional colloquialism that provided momentum for a protest and firmly cemented itself as a word of the year, in part because of the hashtag. Using a hashtag for the #MeToo movement allowed an online community to see just how commonplace sexual misconduct is. By clicking on any #MeToo post, readers could see millions of other stories and experiences. It allowed a population of people that often feel alone or at fault to speak, and in doing so, it highlighted a widespread societal issue and gave them a community. Twitter is a place that is used by people to target and harass others, but with #MeToo, the victims took back the platform. Other social media sites also have used hashtags, and so the movement was able to extend to Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram. By doing this, #MeToo has done what other words or phrases cannot.

The #MeToo movement, however, has rightly been criticized for its appropriation of the work of women of color. The origin of #MeToo began with Tarana Burke, an African-American woman, who started the movement in 2007 as a way to show women of color sexual abuse survivors that they were not alone. Unfortunately, the movement did not receive recognition until 10 years later when white women began using the hashtag as a form of protest. Burke was credited only after the hashtag was made viral by actress Alyssa Milano. In an interview with *Ebony*, Burke said, “I think that women of color use social media to make our voices heard with or without the amplification of White women [...] I also think that many times when White women want our support, they use an umbrella of ‘women supporting women’ and forget that they didn’t lend the

¹ <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>

same kind of support.”² Perhaps this is another way that #MeToo embodies current American society; like so many other movements, it is built off of the work of people of color and is only able to gain power when white Americans are able to use it for themselves.

The Augustana Writing Center staff chose #MeToo as our WOTY because we, as a staff, genuinely believe that it was the most important word this year; that is not to say, however, that there are not other words that we believe deserve some attention. And as much as we wanted to choose the light-hearted “doggo” as our WOTY, we felt there were too many deeply important topics to address. Words like “resist” and “complicit” made the list, and “covfefe” was our runner-up; although we believe a conversation about the importance of political discourse based in fact is important, ultimately we decided that covfefe was not taken as seriously as #MeToo. We believe that while covfefe points out a problem in our federal administration, #MeToo helped bring to light the systemic patriarchal issues prevalent throughout our society. #MeToo is broad. It’s broad in a way that shows the variety of ways women face sexual harassment. It is broad in a way that challenges people to think about their actions and the actions of those around them. It’s broad in a way that makes people feel uncomfortable. It’s broad in a way that gives every single person who has been sexually harassed or abused a voice.

²www.ebony.com/news-views/black-woman-me-too-movement-tarana-burke-alyssa-milano#axzz4vjZwLmqd