

Sara L. Puotinen (Opinion Paper):

Twitter Cares? Using Twitter to Care About, Care for and Care With Women Who Have Had Abortions

Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that Angie Jackson and her live-tweeting of her abortion and Steph Herold, and development of the #ihadanabortion hashtag, used twitter to practice empathy-as-care. Challenging the perception, fueled by newspaper reports, television news segments, popular accounts of scientific studies and academic articles, that twitter strips us of our empathy and makes us uncaring and apathetic, I explore how Angie Jackson's live-tweet and Steph Herold's hashtag enabled users to care about, care for and care with women who have had abortions. While the caring practices that these projects allowed for were tenuous, fleeting and not always successful, their presence on twitter indicates that social media like twitter have the potential to enable us to care and should be taken seriously as spaces with ethical value.

Agenda

Introduction.....	80
Twitter's Many Critics	80
Caring For, Caring About, Caring With	81
Caring About.....	82
Caring For.....	82
Caring With.....	83
Conclusion.....	83

Author(s):

Prof. Dr. Sara L. Puotinen:

- University of Minnesota, 425 Ford Hall, Minneapolis, MN 55455
- Email and personal homepage: ✉ puot0002@umn.edu, 🌐 <http://trouble.room34.com>

Introduction

In February 2010, after finding out she was in the very early stages of an unwanted and potentially dangerous pregnancy, Angie Jackson decided to have an abortion using RU-486 and live-tweet about it. Her intention, as she announced it on twitter, her blog and a YouTube video, was to “demystify” abortion. Over the course of several weeks, she tweeted frequent updates about the physical and emotional effects of RU-486 in real time.

In November 2010, Steph Herold created a twitter hashtag, #ihadanabortion, and encouraged people to use it in their tweets in order to make visible their abortion stories and to link those stories together. Within days, #ihadanabortion was a trending topic on twitter, with more than 2000 tweets using the hashtag, as people “came out” with their accounts of having abortions.

Overwhelmingly, the criticisms of these twitter projects focused on tweeting about abortion as either a political or moral issue. Critics discussed how Jackson’s and the #ihadanabortion tweets functioned and failed as political tools for the pro-choice movement, arguing that twitter could not be used to persuade people to rethink their stance on abortion and that pro-choice organizers, like Steph Herold, were doing more harm than good to the cause of abortion rights. Critics also discussed the impropriety of tweeting about such a private and controversial issue and claimed that tweeting about abortion, at best, displays “bad manners” and, at worst, demonstrates a shocking lack of moral beliefs and values.

What was missing from both political and moral critiques of tweeting about abortion was a discussion of ethics and ethical practices. What, if any, ethical practices did Angie Jackson and the twitter users who included Step Herold’s #ihadanabortion hashtag in their tweets engage in on twitter? And what ethical practices did they encourage in others?

In this paper, I argue that Jackson, Herold, and the individuals who marked their tweets with the #ihadanabortion hashtag, used twitter to practice empathy-as-care. Challenging the perception, fueled by newspaper reports, television news segments, popular accounts of scientific studies and academic articles, that twitter strips us of our empathy and makes us uncaring and apathetic, I explore how Angie Jackson’s live-tweet and Steph Herold’s hashtag enabled users to care about, care for and care with women who have had abortions. While the caring practices that these projects allowed for were tenuous, fleeting and not always successful, their presence on twitter indicates that social media like twitter have the potential to enable us to care and should be taken seriously as spaces with ethical value.

Twitter’s Many Critics

Reactions were mixed, but the popular reception to Angie Jackson’s live-tweet and Step Herold’s #ihadanabortion hashtag was negative as critics branded these two uses of twitter as inappropriate and unproductive. Some critics claimed that tweeting personal stories about having an abortion trivializes the issue because twitter is not a space for users to have serious and meaningful reflections about their lives. Instead, it is a space for pointless babble, where users tweet about everything that they are doing, thinking, and eating right at the moment that it is happening and without any reflection on its value or whether or not they should share it with others. This “cult of immediacy,” generates information and stories that are ephemeral and function primarily as distractions that “go in one ear and out the other” (Keller 2010, 2).

Other critics suggested that in using twitter to share their stories, users offer up too much private information about themselves to the public. For these critics, tweeting about how abortion feels or when you had one goes beyond oversharing unimportant details about everyday life; it’s “inappropriate,” “crass,” “too blunt,” “distasteful,” and displays “bad manners” (Jezebel 2010). These critiques reflected a more general dislike of twitter as a space that encourages people to blur the line between private and public and to reveal too much information about their lives, too often and too quickly.

And, some critics argued that twitter was the wrong venue for developing meaningful connections between those who tweeted about their abortions and those who read and shared the tweets with others. Online message boards, website forums specifically for women who have had abortions, pamphlets, and books were all discussed as spaces that were more appropriate than twitter for publicly sharing stories. Using twitter to tweet about abortion, many claimed, could indicate to others that one either has too cavalier of an attitude about a serious issue or is deliberately attempting to provoke and outrage, as a publicity stunt, to make a political point, or just for the fun of shocking others. In either case, these critics argued that using twitter to spread awareness about women's abortion stories does not change any perspectives about the issue and does not enable people to listen to, reflect on or connect over stories about women's experiences with abortion.

While these criticisms tended to focus on the political and moral impact of tweeting about abortions, we can also link their charges against twitter as too trivial, too concerned with inappropriate oversharing and not meaningful enough, with some more general critiques of twitter and its (lack of) ethical value.

Many critics are skeptical of twitter's ethical potential. Peggy Orenstein worries that "when every thought is externalized" and "when we reflexively post each feeling," we lose insight, reflection and, possibly empathy (2010, 2). Bill Keller echoes Orenstein's concerns, writing that new technologies like twitter "may be eroding characteristics that are essentially human: our ability to reflect, our pursuit of meaning, a genuine empathy, a sense of community connected by something deeper than snark or political affinity" (Keller 2010, 2). Central to their concerns is the fate of empathy within the twitter age. Both believe that empathy is essential for being engaged, reflective and ethical citizens. And both caution that twitter is contributing to its erosion because it encourages people to be self-centered, superficial and apathetic to the experiences or wants and needs of others.

To support her case against twitter, Orenstein draws upon the findings of a recent study by the University of Michigan. In this study, researchers evaluated college students on seventy-two different campuses between 1979 and 2009 and determined that a sharp decline in empathy, particularly in terms of concern for others and the ability to take on others' perspectives, has occurred since 2000. In evaluating the causes of this decline, the authors propose that the students' increased time online, particularly in social media spaces like facebook or twitter, has possibly been a factor. As students spend more time online, the authors argue, their offline engagements and relationships have suffered; students are less able to effectively interact with others offline, they spend less time in offline activities, and they have less close friends offline with which to share their private feelings. Additionally, social media's overemphasis on self-expression and individual wants and needs coupled with its overabundance of personal accounts of pain and violence, could be fueling the narcissism of "Generation Me" and desensitizing them to the suffering of others (Konrath/O'Brian/Tsing 2011, 189).

Caring For, Caring About, Caring With

Both Orenstein and Konrath/O'Brian/Tsing speculate that a decline in empathy is at least partly the result of social media. However, this conclusion, which is based only on anecdotal evidence, does not account for the ways in which using social media like twitter may actually allow for users to be more, as opposed to less, empathetic. In *Share This! How You Will Change the World with Social Networking*, Deanna Zandt argues that using social media to share information and find community provides opportunities for not only paying attention to others, but also sharing in their stories. In contrast to Orenstein and Konrath et al, Zandt claims that social media provides us with new ways in which to share our stories with each other, to build up trust and understanding, to individually and collectively become aware of other ways of living and thinking, and to expand our networks of connections. As a result, "we're becoming more connected, and thus have the capacity to be more empathetic." This empathy, she continues, "will lead us away from the isolation and resulting apathy that we've experienced as a culture" (Zandt 2010, 40).

Zandt's suggestion that social media could increase our capacity for empathy is evidenced in Jackson's and Herold's twitter projects. Both Jackson and Herold used twitter to spread awareness about women's experiences with abortion and to provide twitter users with access to stories to which they may not have previ-

ously been exposed. Angie Jackson aimed to demystify the physical process of having an abortion for others and to let them know that it is not nearly as scary as she had imagined. And Steph Herold wanted to destigmatize abortion and create a space where women could share their stories and make visible how abortion is not the “sin of a few bad woman,” but “a regular part of women’s lives” (Baker/Herold 2010).

In both cases, tweeting about abortion was about spreading awareness and making those experiences visible that have been rendered invisible by mainstream media. It was about initiating a conversation on a difficult and painful topic and enabling twitter users to have access to ideas, feelings, experiences and stories that they might not find in other online or offline spaces. It was about cultivating an awareness and a caring for these women and their experiences and providing a wide range of folks—those who have had abortions, those who haven’t, those who are opposed to abortion, those who only want to hear “certain” stories about having an abortion—a space to develop empathy and to share in the stories of women whose abortion experiences usually do not get heard and are devalued, dismissed and/or ignored. And, it was about providing a means for women who have had or were contemplating having an abortion to connect with, care for and provide support for each other. For all of these reasons, Jackson’s live-tweet and Herold’s #hashtag project made possible multiple expressions of empathy in caring about, caring for and caring with other twitter users.

Caring About

According to Joan Tronto, caring about “involves noting the existence of a need and...assuming the position of another person or a group to recognize that need” (1994, 106). Both Jackson’s and Herold’s twitter projects encourage users to pay attention to the stories of women having abortions. The short, 140-character limit of tweets and the common practice on twitter of frequently sharing moments of everyday life, allowed Jackson to repeatedly share her ongoing and ever-changing experiences of the physical effects of RU-486. Through twitter, she was able to document what it physically and emotionally felt like to use RU-486 in real time and without filtering or shaping those feelings to fit into a polished or appropriate narrative that would make her story more palatable but less authentic and less reflective of the messy process of actually experiencing an abortion. And she was able to do so in a way that enabled those following her to read about her experiences as they were happening. While reading her live-tweets did not lead to expanded empathy and caring about her or other women having abortions for everyone, for some it provided a space for gaining awareness and bearing witness to a new perspective.

While Jackson used live-tweeting to honestly communicate and make people aware of her individual story, Step Herold used another key feature of twitter to spread awareness about the many different experiences of women having abortions; she created the #iahdanabortion hashtag. In marking their tweets with this hashtag, twitter users connected their stories together in one continuous, ever-expanding feed. When anyone using twitter clicked on the hashtag, they were able to read a wide range of stories and experiences, many of which were not usually visible to a broader audience, especially outside of the prochoice movement. Reaching a broader audience did lead to flame wars, with anti-choice users marking their critiques against abortion with the #ihadanabortion hashtag, but it also enabled more people to access these abortion stories and to not only gain a better understanding and awareness of women’s physical and emotional experiences with abortion, but to connect with the stories, either by recognizing similarities with their own experiences or the experiences of loved ones or by being moved by the powerfully and sometimes painfully and brutally honest accounts in the tweets.

Caring For

Both Jackson’s and Herold’s twitter projects did not only encourage others to have empathy by becoming aware and learning to care about women and their stories of abortion, however. These twitter projects also enabled the creators and participants to engage in their own practices of caring for and caring with.

Caring for combines two key features of Tronto’s ethics of care framework: 1. Taking care of, or “assuming some responsibility for the identified need and determining how to respond to it” (1994, 106) and 2. Care-giving, or meeting the identified need through specific practices (1994, 107). In live-tweeting her abortion,

Angie Jackson cared for others. She wanted to demystify abortion for other women not only so people would pay attention to or care about women having abortions, but in order to let women know that using RU-486 was not as scary or painful as they might imagine and that there are non-surgical options available, if women want or need them. Through her detailed and frequent tweets about the process—the varying levels of pain she was experiencing, the physical effects of RU-486, her ongoing feelings of relief, discomfort, annoyance, and frustration—Jackson was able to educate women on how the process feels, providing them with information that they would not otherwise have access to, either because it wasn't available or because they felt uncomfortable asking medical professionals or friends and family about it.

Through this live-tweeting process, Jackson cared for others (both real and imagined); she identified a need—the need for women to have access to unbiased and non-judgmental information about non-surgical abortion procedures—and took responsibility for meeting that need by using twitter to provide that information in a straightforward and honest way. Using twitter was crucial in enabling her to provide this information. Because twitter is public and accessible in many different ways, her tweets reached more people. And, because tweets are short, frequent, unfiltered and often focused on everyday experiences, she was able to document the details of the process as it was happening and easily and effectively share them with others.

Caring With

While Jackson used her twitter project to care for, Herold used the #ihadanabortion hashtag to allow others to care with. Caring with speaks to Tronto's broader definition of care as an ongoing collective process of reaching out to and working with others and to Zandt's understanding of empathy as sharing stories to build up trust and solidarity.

The participants in Steph Herold's #ihadanabortion project, cared with others. In tweeting about their stories of abortion and then marking those stories with the #ihadanabortion hashtag, these women helped to create a public, open space that while not entirely safe and free of risk was supportive and enabled a diverse group of people to come together and care about and care for each other. In reading and replying to each other's tweets, users created an environment that encouraged an ever-expanding amount of people to share their stories and to feel supported in their frequently painful and difficult decisions to have abortions. This space was not entirely depoliticized, but because the emphasis was on enabling women to "connect with one another," "hear each other's stories," and "understand one another," it became more of a place for caring with each other than fighting for a specific political agenda (Baker/Herold 2010).

Again, using twitter, particularly the hashtag feature, was crucial in allowing for this form of care. It enabled a wide range of users with very different stories about abortion to connect with each other and, in contrast to other online spaces where stories were private and open to a select few or made to conform to the specific policies of a site, it allowed women to share "all kinds of abortion stories" (Herold in the Nation), thereby creating a powerful and public timeline of people supporting all (not just a select few) or each other's reproductive choices.

Conclusion

Critics of twitter frequently ignore and/or dismiss its ethical potential. While it is important to take these critiques seriously, it is also important to challenge them and to explore the various ways in which twitter users are engaging in ethical practices. Moreover, it is essential that we attend to the specific features of twitter, as opposed to other forms of social media, that might encourage us to be ethical, particularly in the form of expressing empathy-as-care. Angie Jackson's live-tweets during her abortion and Step Herold's #ihadanabortion hashtag, are two valuable examples of using the specific features of twitter to generate empathy and care for, about and with others. While these twitter projects were not entirely successful, they serve as important starting points for critical and meaningful discussions about ethical practices on twitter.

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