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POLITICS *IN* AND THE POLITICS *OF* REPRESENTATION

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the hashtag #MeToo began to explode across social media. #MeToo had originally been used by the black American activist Tarana Burke in 2006, to draw attention to women's shared experience of sexual assault and harassment by men. In the wake of multiple sexual assault accusations against the powerful Hollywood film producer, Harvey Weinstein, Tarana Burke's hashtag went viral – including translating from the US to multiple other countries and contexts. #MeToo is an excellent example for thinking through the politics *in* and the politics *of* representation in contemporary digital cultures.

Politics *in* representation can be understood as how politics – both those connected to political parties and policies, and more everyday politics – reaches citizens through media. The politics *of* representations is a broader area of concern wherein all representations are seen as political because they are always telling a story about people in particular ways and not others – including excluding people altogether – and so a focus on the politics of representation is concerned with who has the power to represent and to what end.

#MeToo insists on the public interest of the private experience of women's sexual assault and harassment by men. The power of what became a viral movement was in terms of the intimacy of the experiences shared and the sense of community across women that was expressed, but also in the sheer overwhelming numbers that were exposed. The scale of the problem was made entirely public in a way not previously seen. The ways in which #MeToo played out highlight some continuities in and changes to the politics *in* representation and the politics *of* representation, which we will look at in this chapter.

Digital culture has reconfigured politics *in* representation: there are more platforms for communicating politics and wider access to media tools. But the politics *of* representation remain complex: the power to represent is not distributed equally or fairly. In terms of #MeToo, there continue to be difficult disparities that reflect longstanding debates about the politics *of* representation. How is the subject represented and covered? Whose experience of assault and harassment counts and whose appears to be less important? (The experiences of women of colour, for example, have been represented through a different lens from those of white women.) We must look not only at the hashtags, but also where the story of #MeToo travels across myriad mediated spaces and how it is told, who is given a voice, who is not and how the women are represented. In this way, digital culture adds new concerns and aspects to important continuing debates about both the politics *in* and the politics *of* representation.

In this chapter I will develop three key ideas about the politics *in* and the politics *of* representation in contemporary digital culture:

1   There is easier participation in media spaces for both members of the public and elites, such as politicians, than ever before, but it comes with constraints and challenges.
2   Representation continues to be a site of struggle. *Now* it is a site of struggle for attention (in a sea of voices, whose is heard?) and legitimacy (in a sea of voices, whose story is treated as important and how are stories received?).
3   There are some key new politics *in* and *of* representation due to what digital technology makes possible, combined with lived social, cultural and economic realities.

6.2 BACKGROUND

6.2.1 Politics *in* Representation

Before turning to look at politics *in* and the politics *of* representation in digital culture, let's first look at pre-digital trends and tendencies. How was politics represented before digital culture in general and social media in particular?

Politics *in* representation *was* long characterized by clearly demarcated roles for politicians, media gatekeepers and publics. In this way, politicians typically only appeared and spoke to the public when they were invited as guests on particular TV or radio shows. In the UK, one such example is the BBC programme *Question Time*, with its studio audience comprising members of the public who could put questions to a panel of politicians if they were chosen from the audience to do so. The programme started in 1979 and continues to be broadcast from different UK locations each week. Or politicians would appear on TV to be interviewed by political journalists and editors, such as on the BBC's nightly current affairs programme *Newsnight*, often as a polarized interview presenting two political figures representing opposing views. Alternatively, politicians