

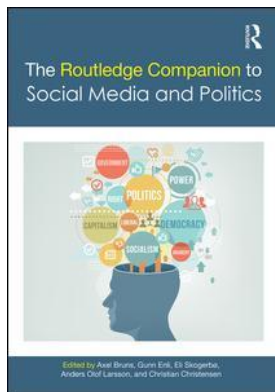
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### How to Speak the Truth on Social Media

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# HOW TO SPEAK THE TRUTH ON SOCIAL MEDIA

## An Inquiry into Post-Dialectical Information Environments

*Mercedes Bunz*

### Introduction

This chapter will look into the use of digital media in the context of political activism and will describe and analyse the oppositional use of media in regard to two different platforms: the global participatory platform Indymedia, created to cover political and social issues underreported by mainstream news; and the use of Twitter to report and oppose the brutal and fatal treatment of black people by U.S. police during the Ferguson unrest after the shooting of teenager Michael Brown, underreported by mainstream news.

The purpose of this chapter is thereby not to describe the organisational changes of oppositional activity due to media use, but to study conceptual changes in their ethical argument. Instead of looking at the hegemony of opinions, we will observe the establishment of “truths” following Foucault’s take of it: truth not as an “objectivity” but as a “regime” that emerges to penetrate preceding ones (Foucault 1995: 19). Focusing on truth instead of opinion allows one to study the role of digital media from the following perspective: What is the role of digital media in a public argument, and does it change?

How do counterpublics, as oppositional media, claim to speak a different truth? This is a question that has become important to ask, as there seems to be a recent shift within our discourse. If we zoom out of our contemporary media discourse to look at it from the perspective of discourse analysis—as if we were a drone flying curiously over our discursive landscape—we notice an interesting pattern. A range of traditional oppositions, like private/public, work/play, global/local, virtual/real, online/offline, and nature/culture, to name but a few, seem to have changed their interrelationships. Media researchers and public intellectuals have discussed the change. The complex conflation of ‘public/private’ has been shown by Zizi Papacharissi (2010), among many others, and explained to a broader public by Jeff Jarvis (2011). Wendy Chun (2008) has looked into ‘control/freedom’ and described how the praise of the Internet as a medium spreading democratic freedom goes along with the fact that it also accelerates the potential for control and global surveillance. The merger of ‘work/play’ has been studied in

management organisations by Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (2009), but the spreading of game mechanics to non-game contexts has also troubled game researchers, who have named this ‘gamification’ (Fuchs et al. 2014). Finally, yet importantly, the overcoming of the ‘nature/culture’ opposition has come into view, triggered by man-made climate change and discussed in the humanities as the rise of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, in which our human activity has become the most important impact to the earth’s ecosystem (Parikka 2014, but also Diederichsen & Franke 2013). All these examples share the same discursive pattern: a breakdown of oppositions. Once antithetical, the conceptual relation of the terms in each pair does not seem to be essentially oppositional anymore, although there are still differences and a dialectical tension remains. In the context of this chapter, this relation will therefore be described as ‘post-dialectical’ and can be defined as follows: post-dialectical is when an opposition has changed from antagonism to a relationship that could be described more as the flip side of the other: ‘/’ instead of ‘vs’. What effect does this shift have on a counterpublic?

On what grounds can an opposing political position now claim to speak a different truth, as there is no essential otherness in its base? And can a public truth be spoken on a personal account that is using a social media service such as Twitter? To answer those questions it is necessary to understand the role of a counterpublic first. So what is a counterpublic?

### On Theories of Counterpublics and Indymedia

As explained above, a counterpublic tends to emerge when the public sphere, instead of being open to all, is suppressing a social or political conflict and thereby creating a motivation for a marginalised group to form their own public. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972/1993) coined the term in order to complement the theorisation of the public sphere by Jürgen Habermas (1962/1991, 1964) from a Marxist perspective. It was later adapted and developed further by Nancy Fraser (1990) and Seyla Benhabib (1992) from a feminist perspective, and discussed by Michael Warner from a queer perspective, whose book introduced categories useful in the age of social media. Habermas himself had already flagged the problem that manipulative corporate interests might endanger an open public conversation and with it, the public sphere. Negt and Kluge took his doubt further. They disputed that the public was a sphere, which (a) concerned the people as a whole and (b) was free of corporate interest at all (Negt & Kluge 1972/1993: 9). Habermas—in following Kant—they said, had made a conceptual mistake, which was evident to all Marxists: the public sphere rests on a material base. One cannot ignore that news organisations belong to an owner influencing the information. In an ideal world, the public sphere would be open to all. In the factual world, the public sphere is owned by a few: “the construction of the public sphere derives its entire substance from the existence of owners of private property” (Kluge & Negt 1972/1993: 10). The media are subordinate to ownership, a theme that I will return to throughout the chapter. Instead of critically controlling power, the media are manipulating the public according to the owners’ interest. Opposition within the public sphere seemed fundamentally flawed, as the media owners manipulate information according to their opinions. More than 25 years later, this theoretical critique is still relevant. With the rise of digital media it can be addressed with reference to a new form of media praxis: the open journalism introduced by Indymedia. The example of Indymedia sheds light on the ownership issue: when digital media entered the public sphere, at first the

participatory potential seemed to offer a solution to the problem of ownership; however, not for very long.

### Indymedia as Counterpublic

Indymedia, also referred to as Independent Media Center, or IMC, was founded in November 1999 in anticipation of the Seattle anti-World Trade Organization protests. During the WTO summit, grassroots journalists, anti-globalisation organisers, and international tech activists printed a daily newsletter called *The Blind Spot* and ran a website using an “open publishing system” for user-generated content (Platon & Deuze 2003: 338). For this they had set up two locations in which video-editing facilities, networked computers, faxes, and telephones were made available for around 400 volunteers (Downey & Fenton 2003: 197). The strategy of producing ‘alternative news’ was successful: the website received 1.5 million hits in the week of the summit. It had been widely linked to on the Web, and traditional mainstream media picked up its news. Spurred by this success, the idea of Independent Media Centers spread rapidly. Indymedia started to become a network that loosely connected regional activists’ struggles throughout the world. By 2002, there were 89 Indymedia websites covering 31 countries. By 2006, there were 150 local centres on six continents (Wolfson 2012: 149).

As a strong global counterpublic, however, Indymedia managed to stay in effect only for a limited period. On a technical level, the sites could not keep up with the pace in fast-developing commercial digital platforms (Giraud 2014). Digital technology, which in the beginning had allowed spontaneous freedom, began to become a problem. On a political level, the tension between democratic decision making and local autonomy reportedly weakened the network (Wolfson 2013). The number of active IMCs declined. By 2014, only 22 functioning centres were left (Giraud 2014: 435). After the peak of its influence, the project’s legacy lived on in movements such as ‘Occupy’.

This rise and fall of Indymedia has been extensively researched, and not all of the relevant studies can be named here. The following ones have been especially relevant in the course of this argument: Platon and Deuze’s (2003) discussion of Indymedia’s ‘open publishing’; Bruns’s (2005: 81–107) detailed analysis of the journalistic elements in its opinionated approach; Downey and Fenton’s (2003) take on its ‘counter publicity’ and Milioni’s (2009) analysis of online counterpublic space; Pickard’s (2006) and Wolfson’s (2014) specific focus on the technological means of Indymedia; Lovink and Rossiter’s (2009) short and Wolfson’s (2012) more extended critique on Indymedia’s lack of general impact as it failed to reach out beyond its own ‘radical ghetto’; and Giraud (2014) who gives an excellent overview over its current status and legacy.

These studies agreed that Indymedia was more than an organisation of anti-globalist activists: it was a counterpublic that evolved through *participatory journalism*. Indymedia was “welcoming people to publish more than just the facts” and “to tell their tale as they witnessed it” (Indymedia 2003: 228). As such, it followed two tracks: as much as publishing the activists’ information, its strategy was to be open to everyone. ‘Don’t Hate the Media. Be the Media! We are everywhere’ was the claim stated on @indymedia’s Twitter profile. Instead of telling the whole story, corporate media focused on statistics and numbers. The mainstream media’s technical truth—‘the facts’—concealed what was really going on. Thus, Indymedia was set up *against* the “corporate media’s monopoly on information” (Indymedia 2003: 228) and its power.

In their organisation, corporate hierarchies should be replaced by direct democracy and consensus-based decision making. This is what made Indymedia essentially different: it was *open to all*.

In line with the argument of Kluge and Negt, Indymedia understood the close relation between ownership and production of the news as a problem. However, the rise of digital media seemed to offer a way to escape the subjection to ownership: free, open source software enabled Indymedia to produce news differently, based on code that could be freely used, changed, and shared.

Open source is based on the notion that ideas should be shared without copyright (also known as ‘copyleft’), so that all interested parties can work with it and cooperatively improve the product, preferably without commercial interests. Open-source journalism, made possible by online communities, applies these principles to news stories. (Platon & Deuze 2003: 341)

Early on, Indymedia discovered the significance of free software, analysed in detail by Christopher Kelty (2008). In fact, for Indymedia free software would be so important that it became part of Indymedia’s so-called Principles of Unity, 10 rules that guide the self-organised, autonomous IMCs across the globe:

9. All IMC’s [sic] shall be committed to the use of free source code, whenever possible, in order to develop the digital infrastructure, and to increase the independence of the network by not relying on proprietary software. (Indymedia 2015a)

Using open-source technology, Indymedia started to build an ‘open publishing platform’ (Bruns 2005: 65), with two important outcomes: instead of being subject to ownership, the reporting was owned by the citizen journalists and it was open for everyone to contribute, at least in theory.

However, let us take a step back. If we analyse Indymedia as a counterpublic with regard to its production of its different public truth, there is a range of noticeable aspects. First, Indymedia claims an ‘essential otherness’ for its media production that is based on digital technology. Its material base—its media—is made of open source technology and not defined by corporate ownership. Its internal organisation is bound to consensus-based decision-making processes and not defined by corporate hierarchies, and this coordination is made possible by using email mailing lists, such as IMC Communication. Finally, its readers are invited to participate directly using its digital open-publishing platform instead of passive reception. In short, its essential otherness is facilitated by a new technological situation, which supports Indymedia’s claim to speak the truth, a truth that had been concealed before by the ‘fact-focused’ reporting of corporate journalism. Here, digital media is not levelling oppositions, on the contrary. Only because of its usage can Indymedia claim to be in possession of a bigger truth. Owing to digital media, Indymedia functioned as an open and thus essentially different media space. However, it would not last long before digital media introduced the flip side of this openness.

Indymedia did not find itself in an exclusive role of crashing the gates of the information hegemony for long. The participatory power potential was also observable in social

media (Gillmor 2006). Despite being essentially different from mainstream media in terms of participatory potentials, social media cannot claim the position of essential otherness. While Twitter and other social media platforms have certainly been used to create ‘counterpublic moments’ (and this chapter will turn to concrete examples further below), their platforms are not. The next section describes social media in general and Twitter in particular against the backdrop of Indymedia in order to make the different ethical logics of both platforms apparent.

### **On the Post-Dialectical Concept of Parrhesia and the Ambience of Social Media Services**

Social media have been the focus of many academic studies. Apparently not very different from Indymedia, their roles as social phenomena have been discussed in great depths: their contribution to political activism, from ‘clicktivism’ to ‘Twitter revolutions’, has been both acknowledged and criticised (e.g. Morozov 2009; Fuchs 2012, 2013). Their complex positions as media introducing opportunities for more free speech, but also more surveillance, have been critically analysed (e.g. Chun 2008; Trotter 2012; Tunick 2014). Their effect on journalism and the public sphere has been both hailed and problematised (e.g. Gillmor 2006; Dean 2010).

When comparing Indymedia and social media from an ethical perspective, however, one should notice first that both ground their existence on the same technology. Both can be described using the digital media concept of the ‘platform’, even though digital platforms are quite individual, as Tarleton Gillespie (2010) has pointed out. All platforms have their specific computational, architectural, and political notions; answer differently to users, advertisers, clients, and shareholders; follow a policy, and have ‘edges’ from which you can fall off when their algorithms have been programmed to make your content not appear (Gillespie 2010: 59). The counterpublic of Indymedia and the public spaces of social media are certainly very different, even though both platforms are part of the public sphere. Indymedia grounds its otherness on a participatory openness brought about by digital media. As we see below, with social media this openness seems to have a very different effect. So what is their difference in detail?

The first noticeable difference between social media and Indymedia regards the question of ownership. Indymedia builds its claim to speak a different truth on the fact that it is not owned by anyone and therefore has no hidden agenda. Surely, this cannot be claimed in the same way for social media. From Facebook to Google+ to Twitter and others, all successful current social media platforms are owned by thriving new media companies with economic interests, not very different from traditional media. But is its content as controlled as traditional media? The following three aspects show that the answer needs to be a complex, post-dialectical one:

1. Platform ownership: In social media, the link between the platform owner and the content is rather weak. The owners of social media companies do not identify with their content; one could even speak of disinterest. Their approach towards content is purely from a conceptual perspective. In traditional media, this role is somewhat different; Rupert Murdoch is not the only owner known to have strongly influenced his editorial managers (Evans 2009).

2. Labour ownership: On the other hand, no wage ties the producers of content to the platform owner. Here, the aspect of “free labour” that has been problematised elsewhere (and rightly so; see Terranova 2004; Scholz 2012) has the interesting effect of ensuring the freedom of the writer/publisher—a social media contributor does not care if he writes against the interests of a platform owner.
3. Content ownership: Social media users are not responsible for other content on the platform. By contrast, within news organisations, advocated positions can be furiously debated in editorial meetings, as journalists very much care about the content published by their institution. Interestingly, this was also the case with Indymedia (Wolfson 2013).

Compared to traditional media, one can conclude that social media users are somewhat freer in what they publish on a platform, although they remain dependent on the benevolence of platform owners. The platforms’ terms of service set the rules, the companies can decide to delete material, redirect information and news feeds to make certain publications less visible, or completely cease to exist. However, their publishing is not as dependent as the traditional journalists is of their employer (Osborne 2015). Here we encounter a post-dialectical condition that seems to confront us frequently in our digital realities. Social media are not an independent platform that marks an essentially different position to the mainstream media; however, that does not mean it can be of no use to promote an oppositional public truth. Being partly independent is a substantial change for its ethical position; however, there is another one: the role their platforms have in creating a public.

Indymedia was created as a platform to actively take part in the public discourse, “a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate telling of truth,” as the website states (Indymedia 2015b). Twitter defines itself as a tool to ‘to connect with people, express yourself and discover what’s happening’ (Twitter 2015), not as a tool to address the public sphere. Public speech works in a different way: as Michael Warner (2005: 76) notices, its address needs to be both personal and impersonal. That something is relevant to all of us and of common concern is indeed an essential aspect. Hannah Arendt points out,

the term “public” signifies two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena: It means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody. [ . . . ] Second, the term “public” signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us. (Arendt 1958/1998: 50–52)

While many social media postings are openly accessible, they are not “common to all of us” but feature content only interesting for a “personal public” of friends (Schmidt 2014). This form of usage can be described as ‘ambient’, a term introduced by Alfred Hermida (2014) to indicate how easily available the service is. His notion of ambient also helps us to understand the different potentials: Indymedia is a media outlet with a very specific aim, the ‘passionate telling of truth’. Compared to this, one can say that social media are open publishing for their users because what is to be published does not need to be specific or relevant for all: ambient usage. Nevertheless, this ambient usage has a flip side. In the continuous stream of open information, important facts, or voices becomes hard to spot. As equal access causes an erosion of differences, the

rise of information abundance creates the danger that reports that are relevant to all of us could be overlooked. Or can the ambient noise be disturbed? How can something appear as ‘essentially other’ in a post-dialectical environment such as Twitter? To answer this question, we will take a short detour to the research of the late Foucault before turning to the two practical examples that mark the last part of this chapter.

Foucault’s interest in the Greek concept of parrhesia evolved from his rereading of ancient philosophy. This means, of course, that his important texts (Foucault 2001, 2010, 2011) were written before social media came into existence. However, Foucault did not study Greek philosophy to explore Greek history. As he states himself, he was not interested in “past people’s behavior,” “nor ideas” (Foucault 2001: 171). Foucault’s interest in parrhesia should be read as a continuation of his analysis of the relation of power and truth to which parrhesia was introducing a new perspective (Ross 2008; see also Bech Dyrberg 2015). Seen from this angle, his research inspires the answer to the main question of this chapter: “How to speak the truth on social media?” Foucault’s research on parrhesia has also found its entry into media studies earlier, in the foreword of “Censored 2014” (Huff & Roth 2013). So what does parrhesia stand for?

In the ancient world, parrhesia meant, literally, “to say everything” or “to speak freely” (Foucault 2001: 12). Foucault distinguished between two types of free speech; one seems to be the flip side of the other. Most of the time, “to say everything” had the positive meaning of “to tell the truth” (Foucault 2001: 13) in a specific way. Foucault explains it as follows: A grammar teacher who tells the truth to the children he teaches would not be a “parrhesiastes” (Foucault 2001: 16). But if he or she would tell a friend to act wrongly, thereby risking the friendship, or if he or she would take part in a political debate and risk becoming unpopular because his or her opinions were contrary to the one of the majority, he or she would use parrhesia: “It demands courage to speak the truth in spite of danger. And in its extreme form, telling the truth takes place in the ‘game’ of life and death” (Foucault 2001: 16). In short, parrhesia in its positive meaning denotes a form of truth gained from speaking out boldly (Foucault 2011: 26). In this case, not very different from today’s counterpublics, parrhesia is likely to “provoke negative reactions, irritation, and anger,” and might expose its speakers “to vengeance or punishment” (Foucault 2001: 37). I will return to Foucault’s interest in the connection between taking a risk and speaking the truth later in the chapter. For now, Foucault describes parrhesia in a way fitting the post-dialectical conditions: next to its positive meaning, there is also a pejorative sense of the word. Here, “to say everything” needs to be read in a very different direction: as the opposite of truth, to speak freely in a way not very far from “chatting” but “saying anything or everything one has in mind without qualifications” (Foucault 2001: 13). Similar to the openness discussed above for social media and Twitter, the parrhesiastic freedom that could be found in Greek democracies gives scope for everyone to express their opinions and say what is

in this parrhesiastic freedom, understood as freedom of speech given to everybody and anybody (to both good and bad orators, to those pursuing their own interest as well as those devoted to the city), true and false discourses, useful as well as bad or harmful opinions, all become mixed up and intermingled in the fame of democracy. (Foucault 2001: 36)



As this quote shows, Foucault's take on parrhesia is two-sided: parrhesia allows for speaking the truth, but it has a flip side. The concept is not simply useful or dangerous; it is useful and can be dangerous at the same time—which is precisely the case with Twitter's openness. However, if the term 'parrhesia' and the openness of Twitter share a conceptual similarity, can the truth be spoken on Twitter in a way that parrhesia addresses it?

As Foucault points out, truth speaking necessarily involves "an essential position of otherness" (Foucault 2011: 340). Indymedia could claim this otherness: its authentic voice, uncompromised by economic interests, allowed it to reinstate a truth that had been concealed by corporate media. As discussed above, the ownership of social media platforms is different and complex, but surely current social media cannot be understood as independent media. Owned by corporations, their counter-conceptual moment cannot rise from their media base. Thus, their otherness need to work in a different way. Voices on social media cannot claim an essential otherness just because of the media they use, and reinstating a truth that had been concealed before must therefore necessarily feed on something else. How can truth be spoken on social media? Moreover, can it work in a similar way as the speaking freely of parrhesia? In the last part of this chapter, this question will be explored by analysing the Twitter feed of Antonio French and the use of Twitter to cover and comment the events after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

### **Counterpublics on Social Media: #Ferguson and @AntonioFrench**

Antonio French had been tweeting regularly about crime rates and the social issues at stake in the St. Louis, Missouri, suburb of Ferguson, USA, although not a lot. A typical day for the Democratic alderman, re-elected in 2013, would mean five to eight tweets. This would change with the death of Michael Brown, who was killed unarmed by the police in Ferguson on 9 August 2014. Darren Wilson, 28, a white police officer, fatally shot the 18-year-old black teenager. The circumstances of the shooting and the way the incident was handled by the police resulted in protests and civil unrest.

From the start, French covered the vigils and their subsequent escalation on Twitter. His tweets included pictures and videos, he reported what was happening, and right from the start, he covered the investigations and reactions of the police after the killing in real time. While the crime scene was still roped off, he sent a picture of a bulletproof, blast-resistant 'Bearcat' vehicle for armoured rescue with the text "Police have brought out the large gear in #Ferguson" (French 2014, Aug 9, 6:25 p.m.). Shortly after, one could see a picture showing a group of about 60 men and women, some of them with their kids, gathering peacefully on a street: "People marching to the #Ferguson Police Dept headquarters following the killing of a 17-year-old boy" (French 2014, Aug 9, 7:18 p.m.). Then, he reported that the highly charged atmosphere would not calm down: "Ferguson Police have dogs and shotguns. The unarmed crowd is raising their hands. <https://vine.co/v/MVTjXW5tXwa>" (French 2014, Aug 9, 8:48 p.m.). Later, he would comment on the use of police dogs as "at the very least, culturally and historically insensitive" (French 2014, Aug 9, 10:32 p.m.). In the evening, the police finally left the crime scene, a black neighbourhood: "People are angry, frustrated but peaceful tonight in #Ferguson. The police department's heavy handed approach made things worse. Leaving [of the police] was good" (French 2014, Aug 9, 9:34 p.m.). However, as his Twitter feed documented later on, it would end with the police dispersing the angry but mostly peaceful crowd with tear gas. The protests would turn violent.

Over the next days and weeks, French continued to tweet material about the protests, covering the aggressive actions of the police but also of protestors on Twitter, always filming and calming down people on both sides but also sharing anecdotes of people travelling to St. Louis to join demonstrations. As much as writing his own tweets, he retweeted and distributed the opinions, experiences, and insights of others, the coverage of news organisations, and the appeal of politicians or the police. French made very specific use of social media: he did not publish his account of things, but reported. This one aspect made @AntonioFrench stand out from the Twitter crowd. He followed a journalistic ethic of accuracy, supported his claims with images and videos, and republished a plurality of opinions. At the height of the crisis between 12 and 18 August, he would produce more than 300 tweets each day (Mandaró 2014).

Another important aspect of his usage of social media: @AntonioFrench was a Twitter account one could follow to be *up to date* with the crisis of Ferguson *in real time*. As I have shown elsewhere (Bunz 2014: 90–92), it is important that Twitter embeds temporal and (optionally) spatial specificity in a tweet. This meta-information provides an account of the exact moment a tweet was sent and, sometimes, also about the location it was sent from. A tweet has fixed coordinates in time and space, emphasising the immediacy of information: real time. Real-time coverage, however, creates an interesting aspect of truthfulness: authenticity. An aspect that Wendy Chun has described in more detail:

If before visual indexicality guaranteed authenticity (a photograph was real because it indexed something out there), now real time does so, for real time points elsewhere—to “real world” events, to the user’s captured actions. That is, real time introduces indexicality (. . .), an indexicality felt most acutely in moments of crisis, which enable connection and demand response. (Chun 2011: 96–97)

Antonio French’s real-time usage added an original voice that gave first accounts from the ground, and this made him a real alternative to the media crowd that by now had gathered. But it did not make him a voice of ‘essential otherness’, at least not yet—not until the night of Wednesday, 13 August. On this day, something interesting happened: At 23:57 his wife @senka reported on her Twitter feed that Antonio was arrested for ‘unlawful assembly’, a tweet reposted 973 times. French was imprisoned while reporting on Twitter what was going on. He was released the day after, but his imprisonment had triggered an interesting development. Overnight, about 30,000 people subscribed to his feed, doubling his follower numbers to more than 60,000 (Hunn 2014). This steep rise in followers cannot be fully explained by the news coverage of his arrest alone, which was reported on local television’s *Fox2Now St. Louis* as well as on the webpages of national newspapers like *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*. However, Antonio French had given interviews to *The New York Times* and other media outlets before. The steep growth of his Twitter followers on that specific day while he was in custody indicates that in the moment of this arrest something else was happening. The arrest had turned the alderman from an authentic voice in the suburb into a public persona who practiced parrhesia. It was the moment of his arrest, in which he became a parrhesiastes.

Here, we encounter the side of parrhesia discussed above: free speech “provoke(s) negative reactions, irritation, and anger,” and exposes a speaker “to vengeance or

punishment” (Foucault 2011: 37). As we have heard, to qualify as parrhesia, opposition must be voiced in the face of danger for the individual, “who, for noble reasons, wishes to oppose the will of the others” (Foucault 2011: 37). In French’s case, this danger manifests itself in the moment of his arrest. Of course, Antonio French had been speaking up before in the name of all. Moreover, he was speaking both personally and impersonally as it is essential for addressing a public (Warner 2005: 79). However, the arrest changed his public speaking into a parrhesiatic moment of truth speaking and triggered the rise of an *ad hoc* counterpublic.

### Counterpublics on Social Media: #Ferguson and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown

Counterpublic moments on social media, however, are not only reduced to individuals. Much as newspapers, which produce a crowd that “does not have to assemble” (Canetti 1960/2000: 52), hashtags assist users who wish to take part in a wider communicative process. The use of keywords preceded by the hash symbol ‘#’ are commonly used on Twitter to mark a specific topic and make it discoverable to other users. Axel Bruns and Hallvard Moe describe this as an *ad hoc* ‘hashtag public’, which forms as rapidly as it dissolves (Bruns & Moe 2014). In the context of Ferguson, such an *ad hoc* hashtag public was formed. On 10 August 2014, the day after Michael Brown was killed, the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown appeared on Twitter. Within 24 hours, over 100,000 people had used it, and for the next days this figure would rise further. Portraits of African Americans using the hashtag started to fill social media channels, and a Tumblr blog aggregating those pictures was created. The double portraits showed different stereotypes of one and the same person side-by-side, one time as a role model and the other time as a criminal, accompanied by the question, “Which photo does the media use if the police shot me down?”

The creation of this hashtag needs to be understood in the context of a series of public violence against African Americans, some of them with fatal outcomes. As a quick look at the early summer of 2014 makes apparent, several encounters of black men with police or security had ended deadly. Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner were killed in encounters with police or security, and soon after Brown’s shooting, 12-year-old Tamir Rice would be shot by a police officer while playing with a gun replica in a park. Other forms of police violence against black people had also been reported (Parham 2014). On 20 May 2014, Ersula Ore was stopped when crossing a road and questioned by an Arizona State University police officer, who arrested the professor of the English Department without explanations; the arrest ended in physical conflict. On 23 July, Jahmil-El Cuffee was stopped in Brooklyn by the NYPD for smoking a joint and subdued on suspicion of marijuana possession, after which an officer stomped on the black man’s head while he was lying on the ground. On 1 July, a California Highway Patrol officer kneeled on Marlene Pinnock, a 51-year-old black homeless woman, and, as shown in a video, punched her repeatedly in the head. On 26 July, NYPD used what looked like a chokehold on a seven-months-pregnant black woman who had cooked a barbecue on the sidewalk in front of her home; just a few days earlier, Eric Garner had died under similar circumstances, when a police officer put him in a grappling hold. On 27 July, Minneapolis police officers punched black community activist Al Flowers 30 to 40 times during an arrest at his home. Media reported those incidents, but failed to start a public campaign fighting this racist pattern. To negotiate a black public space (Brown

Barkley 1994; Black Public Sphere 1995), African Americans turned to Twitter to create a series of counterpublic moments—#iftheygunnedmedown, #blacklivesmatter, #sobu (state of the black union).

These campaigns started out as a response to the way that mainstream media had portrayed the teenager. While a few media outlets had used a picture of Brown that showed him graduating from high school in cap and gown, the portrait more widely used showed him in sportswear with the fingers of his right hand extended in what some considered a gang sign and others a peace sign. It was from his Facebook page, where it was his profile but not the only picture to be found: on the same page was a photo he took of himself when looking after a younger child. Most news organisations, however, chose to depict the young black man stereotypically as a rapper and bad boy, perpetuating the underlying suggestion that black people in conflict with the police had asked for it. How Brown was depicted in the news, however, illustrates that not only the police tended to view black people with suspicion, but also the media. Troubled by this development in the public sphere, defence lawyer C. J. Lawrence turned to Twitter to express his concern and posted: “Yes let’s do that: Which photo does the media use if the police shot me down? #IfTheyGunnedMeDown” (Lawrence 2014, Aug 10, 12.34 p.m.). In the tweet, he embedded two pictures of himself. One shows the lawyer alongside guest speaker Bill Clinton at his university graduation, the other from Halloween, where he wore the costume of a rapper. Posting those pictures, he started a campaign that brought an *ad hoc* ‘hashtag public’ together to show a suppressed public truth.

In comparison with the Antonio French’s case, the danger and courage necessary to bring forth the parrhesiatic moment of creating a different public truth functions slightly different. While the courage of Antonio French was brought forth when he was threatened individually, the collective courage that is asked from every black person in the U.S. became apparent in those flip-side-pictures. In the public sphere of the U.S., being black was stereotyped in a dangerous and even fatal way. The stereotype raised suspicion against blacks, and this suspicion had an effect: it perversely turned attacking a black person into self-defence. It turned the victim into an attacker and the police attacker into a victim. Here, the violence a post-dialectical concept can unfold becomes apparent, which shows that one needs to be aware of its perfidious logic.

### Conclusion

Social media have often been suspected of depoliticisation. By analysing two cases in which social media has been used to create a counterpublic moment that interfered in the public discourse, however, this inquiry has found that they have political potential. Surely, they are not political, *per se*. However, their ambient usage creates a broad public. Moreover, the access to this social media public is an essential part for a counterpublic claiming a different truth. In other words, when parrhesia happens and a different truth is told, social media helps to establish and broaden its force. While social media are not *per se* counterpublic, they are essentially assisting in creating a counterpublic moment and thus are of political usage. If that is the case, however, one needs to think about the following: As our discursive conditions, show up differently in the context of digital media—post-dialectical—suspecting social media of depoliticisation might itself depoliticise them.

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