From Hashtag Activism to Inclusion and Diversity in a Discipline

Introduction

Many science and engineering fields in Anglo-American countries have been pursuing aggressive diversity and inclusion programs to redress historical marginalization of underrepresented minorities. Though Communication has and continues to make important strides through various initiatives, the discipline has much more to do to achieve inclusivity. Examining tweets posted during the International Communication Association (ICA) 2019 annual conference using social network analysis and content analysis, this essay illustrates how the Twitter-based discussion around diversity was not heard enough outside the ghettoized spaces of the discipline. Therefore, I argue that we urgently need, as a discipline, to work more actively towards greater diversity and inclusivity. The future diversity of the Communication discipline depends on concerted efforts now.

Isn't Communication getting more diverse?

Though Communication has seen real improvements in diversity and inclusion (Rao, 2019), there is much more to be done. In the U.S., out of all Communication doctorates awarded and tracked nationally in 2017 to U.S. citizens and permanent residents, 71.27% were white, 5.62% were Hispanic or LatinX, 0.22% were American Indian/Alaska Native, 6.26% were Asian, 9.94% were Black or African American, 3.02% were more than one race, and 3.67% were not reported (National Science Foundation & National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics,

2018).

Indeed, the same survey finds that Communication is nearly as white as Math and the discipline is more white than computer science, engineering, and the social sciences overall (National Science Foundation & National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2018). This, of course, has the snowball effect of continuing racial stratification at the faculty level in the US. Moreover, such trenchant realities can hold back or even jettison diverse scholars out of graduate programs, and sets problematic baselines for faculty diversity efforts for decades to come.

#CommunicationSoWhite

This continued whiteness in Communication has led to activism amongst ICA and National Communication Association (NCA) members. The latter has documented its 2019 efforts in "initiating the push for diversity across NCA and within the Distinguished Scholars" and surrounding controversies (Anonymous, 2019). ICA members have begun addressing the issues by organizing events at the 2019 ICA conference. A chunk of the activism spurred by Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, and McIlwain's (2018) "#CommunicationSoWhite" article has also taken place on Twitter using the #CommunicationSoWhite and #commsowhite hashtags. In order to evaluate the broader Communication discipline's engagement with the movement, it is valuable to first understand who is part of this online dialogue.

344 tweets posted by 121 unique Twitter users that included the #CommunicationSoWhite hashtag were collected during the May 2019 ICA conference in Washington DC using Netlytic

(Gruzd, 2016) and a network was visualized using the software package Gephi (see Figure 1).[1] Community detection methods (specifically, Blondel, Guillaume, Lambiotte, & Lefebvre, 2008) were used to discern unique clusters of users. In Figure 1, the colored circles represent groups of users with the same colored circles representing similar types of users.
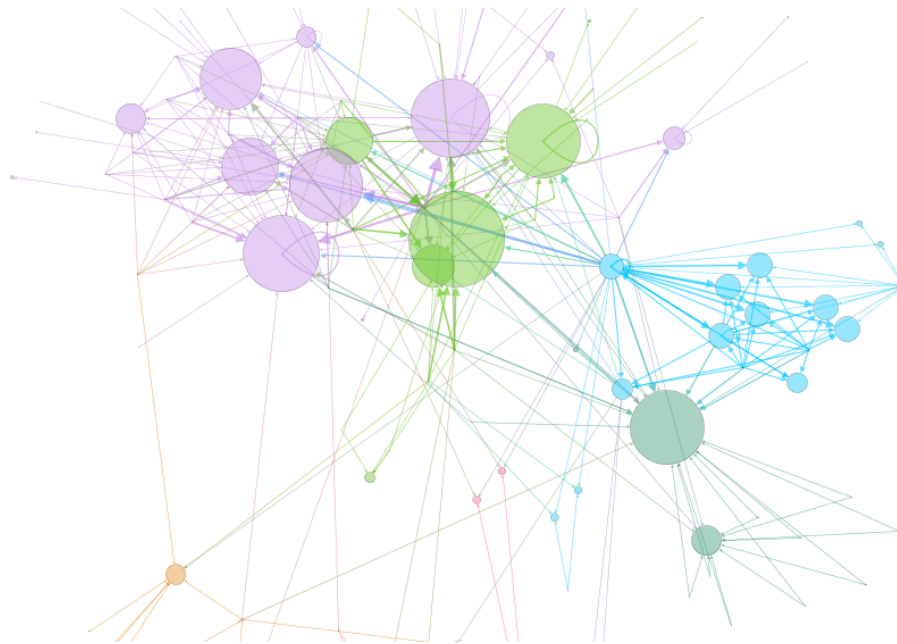

Figure 1: Twitter network of #CommunicationSoWhite in May 2019; larger circles indicate a user received more @-mentions

Specifically, the largest dark green circles represent the official ICA and NCA accounts respectively and, together with the remaining users in this dark green cluster tweeting at them, consist of ~8% of users in the network. The purple cluster represents ICA #CommunicationSoWhite pre-conference and conference panelists and consists of ~16% of users in the network. The light green cluster consists of ~29% of users in the hashtag network, with the two users receiving the most tweets being (diverse) senior administrators in Communication; other users in this cluster, which include two ICA divisions, are (from most to least) professors,

administrators, students and others. The blue cluster consists of ~13% of users in the hashtag network, who are (from most to least) professors, ICA divisions, and organizational/departmental accounts. Professors and ICA division accounts received the same average number of @-mentions. Usernames are redacted to protect privacy.

Examining these categories reveals some important findings in terms of how the discipline is responding to #CommunicationSoWhite. Specifically, within the blue cluster, there are three sections outside of Ethnicity and Race and Communication (ERIC) engaging with the hashtag. However, none of these are quantitative/computational. In the purple cluster, there are virtually no quantitative/computational scholars tweeting. Many of the journals Chakravartty et al. (2018) surveyed in their article disproportionately publish quantitative versus qualitative work, a longstanding trend. Specifically, Kamhawi and Weaver (2003), indicate that from 1980-1999, "qualitative research methods continued to be much less common than quantitative methods throughout the period" (p. 7) in major mass communication journals. Notwithstanding this problematic situation, the project of inclusivity in top Communication journals partially depends on diversifying quantitative/computational subfields.

	#CommunicationSoWhite	#ICA19
White	28.00%	77.33%
Black	26.67%	1.33%
LatinX or Hispanic	8.00%	1.33%
Asian	6.67%	9.33%

Middle East/Arabic	2.67%	1.33%
Unknown/Other	2.67%	0.00%
N/A or **Organization**	25.33%	9.33%

Table 1: Users tweeting during the ICA 2019 annual conference by race and ethnicity

To better understand the representation of the #CommunicationSoWhite hashtag in relation to the broader #ICA19 hashtag, I sampled all Twitter IDs belonging to the 6 colored clusters illustrated in Figure 1 (purple, light green, blue, dark green, red, and orange; n=75) along with the first 75 Twitter IDs returned by Twitter's historical Web search for #ICA19 on 05/27/2019 in order to have an equal sample for both. I then coded each Twitter ID under the intentionally broad categories listed in Table 1, using profile picture, profile information, and images/material on the Internet to complete coding. As Table 1 indicates, #CommunicationSoWhite has a roughly equal representation of white and black users and some representation by LatinX/Hispanic and Asian, whereas for #ICA19, the overwhelming majority of users sampled are white, with black and LatinX/Hispanic users virtually invisible. This indicates that us birds of a feather arguing for diversity and communication are flocking together, mostly tweeting amongst ourselves or collectively @-mentioning ICA and NCA. It is also critical for white students, junior faculty, fellows/senior scholars, administrators, and journal editors to be involved in this and future online discussions, as these virtual components are important to moving diversity and inclusion efforts forward.

But isn't this a white problem?

In a tweet in June 2019, Nancy Baym writes, "To be 100% clear: #CommunicationSoWhite is a white people problem and it is on us to solve it because it will make our discipline better […]"[2] To Baym's point, diversifying scholarship results in stronger research in the field, steering us away from Eurocentric perspectives (Allen, 1995). Though there is engagement with #CommunicationSoWhite by white users as noted in Table 1, we need more established, senior voices like Baym's entering this dialogue. When the NCA controversy mentioned above emerged several weeks after ICA, a flow of white Communication faculty did join both hashtags and this is a welcome development.

The next part of this broader project requires recruiting, retaining, and mentoring diverse graduate students, which will lead to improved faculty diversity in the long-term. However, this is not a ghettoized project for faculty of color, who already disproportionately research issues of race and ethnicity in Communication as well as mentor students and faculty of color. Rather, as Baym succinctly argues, white scholars need to be actively involved in these efforts to address a structural and systemic 'white people problem'.

What can Communication scholars of color do?

"Communication cannot calmly converse

Demographics delegated dissoluted diverse"

- *2Mex*, 'Audible Angels' (2MEX, 2003)

Though a 'white people problem', many scholars of color have been the ones calling these issues out, and we should continue doing so, whatever the antecedent causes. After all, at stake for us is, literally, skin in the game. Therefore, I suggest we employ what bell hooks (2003) conceives of as an "oppositional gaze," an argument that there is "power in looking," and stare at the dominant whiteness (again, 71.27% in the case of recent U.S. Communication PhDs and 77.33% of #ICA19) that pervades journals and the discipline more broadly. This oppositional gaze "that 'looks' to document" cultivates awareness of the structural inequalities that have led to the broader diversity issues empirically studied by others (e.g., Chakravartty et al., 2018). #CommunicationSoWhite has started the gaze and we must not let the hashtag die. Rather, it and other related hashtags should continue to be mobilized, keeping the gaze strong and the action fomented in the summer of 2019 vital.

Conclusion

In the context of the U.S., Communication is very white. This commentary comes from a U.S. faculty member's experience, and more global voices, particularly from the global South, are urgently needed to provide more representative perspectives of the state of the discipline. Nevertheless, this essay underscored the statistical whiteness of the discipline through content analysis, visualized the #CommunicationSoWhite hashtag on Twitter through network analysis, and found that, unlike #ICA19, #CommunicationSoWhite was well represented with students and faculty of color. However, quantitative/computational sections/divisions, students, and faculty are all but absent in it. Another key takeaway is that in efforts to tackle the continued diversity and inclusion issues of Communication, the white majority needs to be part of online fora and established, elite, white scholars should actively seek to mentor diverse students, rather

than leaving the bulk of this work to diverse faculty.

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[1] Tweets with #commsowhite were not collected as just one tweet was posted within this hashtag during ICA and a total of 29 unique tweets were posted between May 26, 2019 - October 26, 2019.

[2] https://www.twitter.com/nancybaym/status/1139538253084839937