Counterpublics in the age of social media

The case of #OscarsSoWhite

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Abstract

In 1965, civil rights activist Martin Luther King led a peaceful march to raise awareness of the nature of the treatment of African Americans in the society of the United States. He was shot. Almost half a century later, director Ava duVernay, made a movie about King. She called it Selma. The movie showcases “white ignorance:” white people who are blind or unaware of the struggles of their black fellow citizens, politician’s and police resistance to black voters. 2015 was, not coincidentally, the year in which the Twitter hashtag #OscarsSoWhite was thought up. In contrast to the world depicted in the movie, most western democracies cover societies which no longer deal with racism at the institutional level. Black people have the same rights as white people. However, with (often implicit) racism still fueling race riots all over the United States, finding some means to address this racism, at all levels of society including the movie sector, is a hugely important undertaking. #OscarsSoWhite represents a discourse that has managed to influence the Oscars and has affected media coverage on the Oscars and subsequent award shows. Its discourse comes from a minority perspective, and represents a counterpublic. Bringing counterpublic issues into the public eye is already quite a feat. To look at the way in which this happened, and the extent to which the counterpublic view was taken up by the media, the #OscarsSoWhite is studied using a critical discourse analysis.

Keywords: #OscarsSoWhite, social media, Twitter, counterpublics, hashtag activism
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Introduction

Using social media as a means of dissent is nothing new, and has been much researched and talked about, for instance in the context of the Arab Spring. In this period of political turmoil, Facebook served as a method of organization and gave political dissidents a platform. According to public service broadcaster, the BBC, Facebook changed the world (Husain). Twitter might—in its own way—be similarly powerful. Of these social media platforms, the focus here will be on Twitter. Twitter is just one of the social media platforms that has proven itself useful for activists trying to make their agenda part of the public sphere. Facebook, and the role the platform played in the Arab Spring, for instance, was another (Khondker, 2011).

Protest on social media does not always have to have an expressly revolutionary slant. Activist April Reign watched the Oscar nominations on her couch with her family when she noticed that the list of nominees was predominantly white (Variety staff) in the 87th edition of the Oscars. She coined #OscarsSoWhite with the Tweet shown in figure 1. In this tweet April Reign links a critique of the Oscars, namely that they are too white, to a racial stereotype/reference about hair to express her discomfort with the Oscars. This way, she places herself in a narrative of oppression, exclusion, and unhappiness with the status quo in which (implicit) racism is part of daily life. Reign’s tweet taps into a shared attitude about racism, exclusion and unhappiness which is evidenced by the number of times this tweet was liked and favorited, respectably 239 times and 362 times (see figure 3).

Figure 1: First #OscarsSoWhite tweet

The #OscarsSoWhite tweet of April Reign has sparked not only a protest on Twitter. Could it be so that the movement provided a template for addressing racism in cultural institutions? Even though the hashtag started trending in 2015, the format of the hashtag has been
used to address a lack of diversity in institutions after the Oscars as well. The nominations for the 2017 music awards, the BAFTAs, for instance, were greeted with the hashtag #BaftaSoWhite on social media (Shepherd, 2017). That signaled outrage on behalf of ‘the public,’ but also provided—in theory—an angle for the news media covering the BAFTA awards. Even in our media-saturated age, wherein Facebook is considered as a news source by nearly half of all Americans (Gottfried and Shearer), the news media do still play an important role in shaping and providing frameworks that are used in public discourse (Callaghan and Schnell, p. 183). The social media outrage might be amplified as soon as it is taken up by (mainstream) news media, which still has great reach and status (Barthel). This is why it is important to look at what newspapers produce and see whether and, if applicable, how they might shape discourse in the social media age.

In 2016, the Oscars were, admittedly, #StillSoWhite. However, lack of diversity in representation was put on the agenda as an issue that everyone even remotely interested in the Oscars, movies, or race, has heard about. The fact that there is indeed a problem with exclusion, so with the nonrepresentation of people who are not white in popular culture, has been brought to the attention and addressed by the institutions that (intentional or not) enforce this same exclusion. Twitter users used this hashtag to call attention to the Academy Awards voting process. This process, proponents of #OscarsSoWhite find, is part of a tendency to have only movies made by white people, starring white people, getting official recognition. In line with, and maybe because of, the underrepresentation of non-white actors in the movie industry, the Academy Awards have featured relatively few black people. There has been criticism on this for a long period of time but it never reached the momentum it has gained in 2015 and in 2016 (Cox). Since then, the hashtag has at least started a conversation that goes beyond the boundaries of online social media (The Economist, 2016).

The use of the hashtag which organizes discourse makes Twitter a valuable pool of data. Additionally, even though there is only a relatively small number of people using Twitter (according to the Pew Research Institute in 2014 23% of online adults use Twitter, to put this in context: 71% of adults use Facebook) it “has become the ‘real time’ of the digital media landscape because of the precipitous speed of its propagation of messages, information and ‘news’” (Sharma, p. 49). This has made Twitter relevant for news studies and also makes it a special place as a source of news for journalists (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Tremblay, 2010). This is the same in the case of #OscarsSoWhite: a hashtag that moved from being a way to
organize tweets about one topic to shorthand for racism in the Oscars coverage.

One reason this is even more interesting in the case of #OscarsSoWhite is that the
#OscarsSoWhite might be credited for its influence on the Oscars. The Oscars is an interesting
case, since it stands as an acknowledged measure of excellence within the movie industry. As a
result of the hashtag, there have been changes to the Academy Awards voting system.
Additionally, the hashtag’s popularity and the reporting on it by the media certainly influenced
the contents of the program of the 2015 broadcast. Chris Rock, the host, and a (black) comedian
(who had been hired before the controversy started) referenced the hashtag and its message many
times. Rock made this joke not even four lines into his opening monologue: “You realize if they
nominated hosts, I wouldn’t even get this job” (*The New York Times*, February 28, 2016),
alluding to the fact that no black people were nominated. This reflects the status quo, which has
more or less stayed the same, since the conception of film in the early twentieth century. White
people have had the majority of roles both in front of the camera and behind the scenes (Dawson,
p. 1208). Throughout the development of Hollywood and the film industry, black actors have of
course played their roles, but oftentimes they played derogatory (secondary) characters (Scott, p.
5).

Since the 1960s, the United States has seen institutional improvements in the field of race
relations; African-Americans are no longer barred from voting for instance. This political and
legal change did not directly change Hollywood’s attitudes about towards black people (as the
change left racial inequality in society intact as well). Even though progress has been made
towards a more inclusive movie industry, the majority of main characters are white. A study done
by USC Annenberg, which studied diversity in the output of entertainment studios in 2014-15,
showed that in all movies a little over 70% of actors were white (USC Annenberg, p. 7). The
study concludes succinctly that “[t]he film industry still functions as a straight, White, boy’s
club” (p. 16).

Even in 2017, movies that include people of color in the story, get “whitewashed”
meaning that white people play for instance Asian or black characters instead of hiring actual
Asian or black people to play the role (Ybarra, 1998). This type of erasure of black (or Asian, or
Latino) people in the American movie industry has long been seen as a problem only by a select
group of people. After all, on the institutional and political level, African-Americans had gained
access to all rights that were previously only held by white citizens—societal change should have
followed suit. It did not, but since officially racism was illegal, it became harder to even acknowledge that there was a problem in the first place. This makes some sense, given that the majority of society does not face racism, and does not share the experiences of minorities. However, initiatives like #OscarsSoWhite, that originate on social media, which is fairly equally accessible, do show their marginalized perspective to a larger audience. First the trending feature on Twitter gave them a larger audience, and then the fact that it was picked up by the media increased this audience again. Given that even the Academy itself acknowledged #OscarsSoWhite, social media might take away the most banal excuse for perpetrating and reinforcing racist or otherwise harmful behavior: of not being aware how the other side lives; the excuse of not knowing.

However, this is a claim that has been made since the advance of the internet and especially social media. There might be entirely different processes at work here. Those groups that have a discourse that is not addressed at all in the public discourse for this reason have their own sets of discourses and these do not necessarily mesh with the public discourse. Twitter especially is a fragmented source of information, and the way in which Twitter is reported on should be reviewed. After all, every news story has a frame and bringing #OscarsSoWhite to the attention of the public might come at the loss of #OscarsSoWhite’s original message. Could the #OscarsSoWhite discourse be an iteration of a politically and societally marginalized group utilizing a social media platform to share their view of the world in such a way that the rest of the world sits up and takes notice?

Social media as a platform gives potentially everyone a voice. One way in which societally marginalized people especially have strived for inclusion in contemporary society is through expressing themselves via online social media in the (online) public sphere (Brock, 2012; Clark, 2014). Social media in general is an interesting means to communicate and deliberate on political issues: the low threshold, easy accessibility and relative anonymous make it an interesting ‘extra’ feature for any democracy. These types of communicative media are freely accessible to most, and largely do not have principles of exclusion built into their framework as opposed to for instance traditional media or the movie industry, both of which came up in a time wherein institutionalized racism was common. The number of publics on Twitter is large and diverse. Not all these publics are counterpublics, even if some of these publics might use a discourse that suits them and that is not used in the public discourse at all (which is, perhaps,
comparable to inside-jokes at the office).

Some of these type of twitter movements have been categorized as being examples of counterpublics (Jackson & Welles, 2016) which is a public in society that contests exclusionary norms in society and so puts forward “alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). Counterpublics are those publics in society that fall outside the social norms and discourse and therefore they are forced, or they choose, to develop their own (counter)discourse (Fraser, 1990). However, counterpublics on Twitter have not been studied extensively before, and even if they have been studied (Vats, 2016) they were looked at mainly from “within,” without looking at the ways in which the counterpublic was perceived by the public it defined itself against. Since it is not always clear how twitter movements come up and affect change it is important to categorize them to better understand them. Moreover, by using counterpublic theory to analyze relatively new phenomena, such as social media and hashtag campaigns, the usefulness of theoretical concepts in their application in an age of modern communication practices will be evaluated.

The hashtag OscarsSoWhite is at heart an organizational tool; it organizes many different tweets, made by many different users, over an unlimited span of time. It could just as easily be used as a way to add to the online conversation on the Oscars, by critiquing the Oscars as a ‘regular’ movie watcher who follows the Oscars rather than a way to bring the point of view of exclusion into the Oscar debate. Therefore, this research aims to find out whether this organizational tool may in fact be representative of a counterpublic. Moreover, understanding the role social media plays in bringing counterdiscourses to the fore would aid to understand protest on social media, the way in which counterpublics are formed, and also give insight into the way in which the media might report on those who have no acknowledged ‘voice’ of their own. That is important, for if this is properly understood, better informed steps towards incorporating those counterdiscourses into the public discourse (if that is something that is aimed for) could be made.

The term counterpublics is used to understand the way in which the public sphere offers a means for deliberative democracy in highly stratified societies (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). These counterpublics have the ability to challenge the status quo, and in doing so eventually evolve from alternative and unaccepted discourse to accepted and legitimate discourse. So counterpublics might have the ability to structurally change the society which they originated from by pitting their discourse against it. This is an interesting form of resistance to study,
especially in the case of racism. By protesting at the level of discourse, the possibilities for peaceful, and above all effective, protest become possible.

Additionally, in order to fully understand the way in which counterpublics might work, investigating a counterpublic and its functioning both “internally” and externally might shed some new light on the ways in which counterpublics might serve as a tool of protest. This research aims to do this by analyzing both twitter output and newspaper output, which is a novel way to approach counterpublics on social media. Mainstream discourse found in newspapers has been used for analyzing counterpublics (Jackson et. al. 2004) before, however, it has not yet been combined into one coherent look at counterpublics in the case of a hashtag such as #OscarsSoWhite, the aim of this research is to do exactly this and by combining these sources (the tweets and the newspaper articles) add to the research done on counterpublics in the context of social media.

Counterpublic research has been useful as a tool for evaluating the way in which marginalized publics in contemporary western democracies do participate in society. However, in the context of social media the research is limited. Could a hashtag, which is ultimately just a tool for organization, have the power to be a counterpublic discourse? Throughout this research this question will be studied, by taking as main research question: in what ways do the #OscarsSoWhite tweets function as a counterpublic? To fully answer this, this question is further explored by looking at the definition of counterpublics, namely that they are organized independently from the state, that the style of address shares similarities that are characteristic of this specific counterpublic, that the discourse revolves around aspirations to change “the public,” and that they are perceived as a unified public (Warner, 2001; Fraser, 1990). To check whether the #OscarsSoWhite tweets indeed represent a counterpublic, the following questions will be asked: Is the #OscarsSoWhite public organized independently from the state, how is the style of #OscarsSoWhite on Twitter defined, and do the #OscarsSoWhite tweets revolve around aspirations to change “the public”?

Additionally, the definition used for counterpublics gives rise to the need to see how #OscarsSoWhite tweets are perceived by “others.” These others cannot be taken and researched as a whole, since these represent all of the American public—so everyone who is not part of the counterpublic but of the public should perceive the counterpublic as a unified whole. As a stand-in of a sort for the public, the three American newspapers with the largest (online) reach were
chosen for analysis. By looking at the way in which these newspapers report on the
OscarsSoWhite hashtag, some inference to the way in which the tweets are seen can be made.
Therefore there is another subquestion that will be answered, namely: Are the #OscarsSoWhite
tweets perceived as a unified public by The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and USA
Today?

Because the case study of the Oscars provides data for a (small scale) longitudinal study,
in which the development of the tweets and the way in which they are received by the afore-
mentioned (limited) “public” can be traced between 2015 and 2016, this will be looked at as well.
In order to say something about the way in which this possible counterpublic developed, the
following two questions will be answered as well, these are: how did the #OscarsSoWhite evolve
between 2015 and 2016 on Twitter, and how did the #OscarsSoWhite evolve between 2015 and
2016 in the reporting done by the The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and USA Today?

To provide an answer to these questions, first the way in which Twitter is used for
counterpublic discourse already is presented, which is supplemented with the way in which social
media in general has been used for a discourse of protest in the public sphere. This way the
conditions under which #OscarsSoWhite rose up will be presented to better understand how the
hashtag evolved. After this an overview of counterpublic theory will provide a background to
then understand this protest discourse on social media. Given that counterpublics essentially are
discourse, the means to analyze #OscarsSoWhite is a discourse analysis., a method especially
relevant for the investigation of principles of exclusion and power dynamics. Using this method
will give insight and provide a structure to analyze the tweets and newspaper articles about
#OscarsSoWhite. The subsequent sections will systematically use critical discourse analysis
address both the tweets themselves, by identifying relevant themes, and the newspaper articles.
To conclude, the way in which #OscarsSoWhite functioned and evolved in tweets and newspaper
discourse will be presented.
Chapter 1: Representation and counterpublics

#OscarsSoWhite has been said to be popularized by so-called “Black Twitter,” which provides a useful reference point to understand how the hashtag originated and became popular, even though black twitter is a fairly abstract and immeasurable concept. The issues that “Black Twitter” discourse might be concerned with, and the discourse #OscarsSoWhite is concerned with, clearly overlap. These issues mainly revolve around the treatment of black people in the (American) society. Therefore, in this section an explanation will be given of what “Black Twitter” is by first explaining the way Twitter is used and organized. After that the focus will be on Black Twitter and how it has been researched and understood, with the aim to provide a theoretical understanding of a phenomenon that has so much similarities to the #OscarsSoWhite tweets and so set up a framework for the research of #OscarsSoWhite.

To better understand the relevance of “Black Twitter” and instances of ‘black’ protest against instances of racism, a short overview of black dissent will be given. After that, thoughts and theorizing on “Black Twitter” will be connected to counterpublic theory. The focus will be on the way in which Black Twitter brings its “own” issues into the mainstream discourse on Twitter, for instance through the use of hashtags. This mainstream discourse might be considered part of the public sphere, which provides a means for citizens to engage in public (political) deliberations and so legitimize democratic processes. Theorizing on the public sphere started out with ‘one’ public and later came to encompass ideals of multiple publics. This will be elaborated on to give a background to the notion of counterpublics, which are a means to describe dissent within a public sphere originating from those people who are considered to not be part of the public sphere. Black Twitter might be considered an example of this, and by extension perhaps any other discourses Black Twitter might give rise to, #OscarsSoWhite, too.

1.1. Hashtags and the emergence of “Black Twitter”

Twitter is web-based, has user profiles, features lists of social connections, and offers user-generated content (Brock, p. 530). To organize the discourse on Twitter the “hashtag” feature has been added: a word or phrase which is prefaced by the ‘#’ symbol. In the case of Twitter and the
formation of counterpublics, hashtags have been shown to be a helpful tool as it organizes discourse in such a way that it can be researched (Jackson et. al, 2004). By adding the same hashtag users can organize Twitter content. Through the emergence of the trending topic, a twitter feature that shows the most used hashtags, Twitter can bring what is “trending” to the attention of the mainstream. Before that Twitter, similar to other social media platforms, worked with a version of a ‘newsfeed’ in which only stories by those who a user chooses to follow show up. The “trending” feature allows users to see what is going on on Twitter outside of their own chosen ‘bubble.’ In this way, hashtags make it relatively easy to identify issues that occupied the minds of Twitter users, whatever Twitter subset they hail from.

According to Brock, the evolution of the hashtag led to the discovery of the notion that there is a subset of Twitter users that might bear the designation “Black Twitter” (p. 534), which means a discourse is created with the issues concerning black people at its centre. Hashtags called attention to the fact that Black people use Twitter “disproportionally more than other demographic groups” (Brock, p. 530), since the hashtags that became trending showed that black people are prominent on Twitter. The issues raised by “Black Twitter” became prominent. Hashtags used for Black Twitter are sometimes referred to as “Blacktags” (Sharma, p. 46). “Blacktags as contagious digital objects play a role in constituting the ‘Black Twitter identities they articulate and interact with” (Sharma, p. 46). Examples, provided by Sharma (p. 51) are #onlyinthegetto, #ifsantawasblack, #atablackpersonfuneral. These examples refer to the everyday life of Black people and the ways in which a specifically Black experience of life exists.

Twitter’s style is characterized by “the use of culturally relevant hashtags, network participation, and viral spread to reach “trending topic” status” (Brock, p. 534). This discourse, in the context of Black activism, is called signifyin’ (Florini, p. 223). Signifying’ has historically been characterized as being used by black people to find a means to express their specific take on the world (Florini, p. 224), and that is the same on Twitter. “Tweet-as-signifying … can be understood as a discursive, public performance of Black identity” (Brock, p. 537). This signifyin’ has always been a way for Black communities to offer up social critique and this continues to be its purpose on Twitter (Florini, p. 227-228). This is relevant because in this way Black Twitter can be said to gain access to the public sphere that its proponents might otherwise not have.
1.2. The public sphere

The (Habermasian) public sphere has been likened to a coffee-place, ordinary people—separate from any official apparatus of state—come together to discuss (and so define) what it is that they find important. This public sphere is where public deliberation takes place: it is an arena for people to discuss issues that are important to the functioning of society (Habermas, 1974, p. 50). The notion of the public sphere has been developed by Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* published in 1974. Over forty years later, it is still an important concept in discussing democratic participation, to explain among other things the formation of public opinion. Participating in the public sphere gives citizens a way to engage in politics apart from the official state channels.

In an ideal democratic society, the public sphere involves access to political debate to *all* individuals in that society, providing them with a space to be directly represented in the political arena. However, much critique has been levered against the idea that the public sphere is indeed inclusive. There have always been marginalized groups, such as gay people, feminists, or black people, who have been excluded from taking part in *all* political levels, including the ’public sphere.’ After revision of the public sphere theory, among others by Habermas himself (1992), the conclusion is that the “public” of the public sphere implicitly excludes certain segments of society (Hauser, p. 21).

Phillips (1996) has made an overview and a critique of the basic tenants of the public sphere up till then. The main conclusion of this article that even though “conceptions of the public sphere presuppose openness, … open access is neither an historical fact, nor an especially realistic possibility” (Phillips, 1996, p. 237). Even in its ideal form, the public sphere is determined by one public (the “in-group”) and so it is exclusionary. Modern democracies are plural, stratified societies, and so one public can not represent their interests. The inclusion problem has plagued the public sphere theory from the start. This makes sense since Habermas work was based on the bourgeois public sphere (1974) which already limits the public sphere to the “in-group.” Therefore, in later theorizing on the public sphere, the notion of multiple publics was introduced (see, for instance, Dahlgren 2007). Whereas first the underlying assumption was
that there was one single (bourgeois) public sphere and that this was the desirable state of affairs (Habermas, 1974, p. 50; Asen, p. 424), the understanding of the public sphere changed to one wherein the public sphere encompasses multiple publics and so multiple public spheres (Fraser, 1992; Benhabib, 1997; Hauser, 1998; Dahlberg, 2007).

Perhaps in answer to the inclusion problem the notion of multiple publics has been introduced, but even then there are those publics that continue to be excluded from the deliberations that contribute to form public opinion. It is important to be able to occupy a space in the public sphere, not only from the perspective of the public, but also from the perspective of the democratic society. According to Iris Young, inclusion is a prerequisite for the legitimization of the political decisions made by using democratic processes (Young, p. 52). The public sphere as a space for discussion is important, and should according to normative theories about the public sphere, be open to all people in order to legitimize democratic decision-making processes (Kemmis and McTaggar, p. 294).

Any public opinion formed based on the deliberations of one public falls short of representing the multiple voices found in plural societies. This lack of representation “represents a deep denial of form, a deep form of oppression (Couldry, p. 9). This oppression has already been addressed for instance by “Black Twitter.” Since social movements, including those constituted by countercultures the ones constituted by Black Twitter “supplement the principle of representation with the principle of belonging” (Melucci and Avritzer, p. 509) there is potential for Black Twitter to naturally and more fully become a part of political deliberations.

### 1.2. Black Twitter and the public sphere

Meredith Clark, who interviewed participants who she identified as being part of “Black Twitter,” wrote that

*being a part of Black Twitter is more than being Black, having a Twitter account, and using it to interact with other Black users. As a phenomenon, Black Twitter is often purposefully active — made up of the ongoing, everyday cultural conversations of hundreds of thousands of networked users* (Clark, p. 61).
These cultural conversations are held in a singular style. Twitter has its own discursive style as identified by Wildon in his 2009 article (paraphrased in Brock, p. 534) which is especially useful to analyze Black Twitter.

Black Twitter has been invoked in newspaper articles and journal articles as an example of social activism concerned with a multitude of issues ranging from police violence (Jackson et. al., 2004) to racist cooking show hosts (Vats, 2015). According to Vats, “Black Twitter does not reference a monolithic black voice; rather, it refers to racialized content and practices, often marked by “ambiguous racialized humour,” which works to resist dominant narratives of race and disrupt Twitter’s usual whiteness” (p. 209-10). Because it works to “resist dominant narratives” Black Twitter might be said to function as a counterpublic.

Some examples of the way in which black people have gained their voice through online social media are the #BlackLivesMatter protests (see Couldry, 2010), #TheyGunnedMeDown criticism (see Sharma, 2013) or #Ferguson (see Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). These hashtags focused on racial injustice and gained some momentum through media attention and the sheer number of these tweets. Twitter has been researched extensively already, with a focus on the way people relate to each other and create new political discourse. The example, linked to the problem of unequal representation, that will be used for the purpose of this research, is that of #OscarsSoWhite.

Black Twitter has become a digital space for black activism. Activism and dissident voices have always existed alongside the voices that make up the public in the public sphere. These voices have been excluded from the public. Online spaces, however, have added a dimension of public (political) thought to the public sphere. The case of #OscarsSoWhite might be termed an example of public deliberation. During public deliberation, citizens had a chance to express their (political) views and discuss these with others, in a relatively equal level. This is said to be crucial for the proper functioning of democracy; the citizens’ approval is the basis for the legitimatization of political processes in ideal democracies (Young, 2002). This means that freedom in voicing disapproval is equally crucial for the functioning of democracy. This process, of voicing approval or disapproval of political processes, and the ensuing discussions, is called deliberation. Deliberation taking place in the public sphere leads to the formation of public opinion (Habermas, 1974, p. 50)

There is a huge potential for the public sphere, because of its supposedly low threshold
(one only has to be a citizen, e.g. live as a member of any group, to participate) to offer up a space for activism which can bring excluded voices into the deliberative process. However, often there are various processes of exclusion of certain publics at work within democracies (Young, p. 52; Tebble, p. 463). The public sphere is not open to everyone (Fraser, 1990, p. 57; Warner, p. 77) which brings tension to the ideals of the public sphere. Not all publics are treated equally in the public sphere of a stratified society, which most modern societies are, and so there is a need to come up with a way to include those who are excluded in order to legitimize democratic decision-making processes (Warner, p. 79; Couldry, p. 1; Asen, p. 425).

Nowadays these processes of exclusion might be more implicit than they were before; there will be few places where people are explicitly literally excluded from politics, women and black people have been before they gained the right to vote and to be elected for example. In general, in democratic societies mechanisms of indirect representation can be assumed to be in place – for instance voting in an election. However, not everyone has equal access to the public sphere. By creating an alternative space for political deliberation opinion can, independently, inform traditional politics. Social media, for instance Twitter, has the potential to play a great role in democratic processes. By providing a platform where everyone (with internet access) can sign up, free of charge, without any official affiliation to state or societal groups, people represent themselves; they are not only indirectly represented by also directly. As such, social media platforms like Twitter can be said to present an “alternative political space for direct presentation of plural identities and claims” (Melucci and Avritzer, 2000, p. 509).

1.3. Opening up the public sphere: social media’s potential

Public sphere theory has not only needed to contend with the realities of stratified societies. Another basic principle of the public sphere, communication, has undergone some changes as well. Therefore, since the 1960s, the definition of the public sphere has needed to be updated in order to reflect a changing model of society and our thinking about it. The public sphere is about the formation of public opinion (Dean, p. 95), which is formed through communication

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1 The official inclusion still had its limits.
(Habermas, 1974, p. 50) and communication practices have changed due to advancing technology (Pfister, 2011). The evolving of the online public sphere, which might in theory function as a platform that has as its condition the “veil of ignorance” posited by John Rawls. Without a notion of who is behind the keyboard on the other side of the discussion true equality in public debates might be close. However, bar some optimistic theorizing in the 1990s, when the internet in its current form was born, nobody would say the internet has lived up to this potential. Even so, the internet as a platform for the public sphere deliberations, have been the subject of research since its inception (Papacharissi, 2001; Dahlgren, 2013). That’s because the platform has added a range of options for citizens to engage with each other and so partake in public deliberations.

In particular, the advance of social media, like Twitter and Facebook, offer up new arenas for public deliberation which seem easily and equally accessible. Digital media technologies, among other things, provide people wanting to express themselves in the public sphere with ways to disseminate their views online and organize themselves more easily. Online activists can, theoretically, reach a global audience, provide a platform for organizing protests, and broadcast dissenting thought with relative freedom (Hara & Huang, p. 489). Moreover, the personal nature of social media makes any deliberation taking place on this platform seem highly independent from the mechanisms of the state. Since “[i]t is in the everyday use that democratic tendencies are practiced, surveillance subverted and global solidarities maintained” (Pickerill, p. 281) social media, which is used so often and on a daily basis by many, is useful to study the formation of counterpublics.

Palczewski points out that with the rise of online communication practices there is a change too in the way we (should) view political participation (p. 162-163). Political communication’s main feature is not the transmission of information, but its interactivity (Palczewski, p. 162). Therefore online social media tools, such as the networked public spheres of Twitter, are highly relevant to study the formation of counterpublics. Overall, political engagement has seen a shift away from the traditional engagement in politics (Ferwerda, 2014) which could be measured relatively easily through voting and polling for instance. In reaction to this, the online public sphere is either heralded as the potential new platform for true democratic deliberation (Papacharissi, 2001; Castells, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001, 2007) or as simply an extension of the already existing place flawed public sphere, including its principles of exclusion through unequal access (Dean, 2003).
The online public sphere therefore has potential to embody the democratic ideal: because the public sphere only gets close to its ideal of deliberative democracy when permitting “contestation among a plurality of competing publics [rather] than by a single, comprehensive public sphere” (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). Whether its potential is fully realized or, more likely, only partly realized, it is clear that the online spaces being provided by the internet, in the form of internet fora or social media platforms, in practice do offer up the potential for democratic deliberation (for examples, see: Graham, 2015; Witschge, 2007). Social media has already provided an arena for multiple publics and counterpublics (Jackson & Welles, 2016; Downey & Fenton, 2003).

1.4. Exclusion remains part of the public sphere.

Many groups are not explicitly prevented from taking part in public deliberations, nonetheless, some groups in society are still excluded. These publics have been called counterpublics by Nancy Fraser in her critique on Habermas public sphere, *Rethinking the Public Sphere* published in 1990. She argues that “[v]irtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). According to Warner, “the projection of a public is a new, creative, and distinctively modern mode of power” (Warner, p. 77). This includes those publics that are constituted by marginalized people. These publics that are not part of the general “public” seem powerless in society but who do have the “power” to organize themselves and create “counterdiscourses.” Through these counterdiscourses they can try to change the status quo of society and use their own discourse (Felski, 1992). Examples of counterpublics range from the Black press of the 20th century (Squires, 2001) to the feminist movement (Fraser 1990; Felski, 1992). To understand what counterpublics are, and how the concept came into being, first the notion of publics and what publics constitute will be further elaborated on.

1.4.1. What are “publics”?
Publics only exist “by virtue of being addressed” (Warner, p. 50). Therefore, publics only exist in discourse. Discourse is in this context understood simply as “language use in speech and writing” (Wodak, 2008, p. 5). Discursive practices, which can be anything from signaling the bus driver to stop to typing out a tweet on a smartphone, may be the shaping force of the (social) world we inhabit (ibid). For every social interaction that has been normalized and is part of the standard accepted behavior of any culture, a myriad of assumptions about what is normal and what is society has already been addressed. Wodak has written about the way in which discourse is understood in critical discourse analyses, for which publics (and counterpublics) lend themselves well as they are constituted through discourse alone. Discourse and power are connected:

\[ \text{Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people.} \]

(Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258, quoted in Wodak, 2008, p. 6).

The publics that citizens may be a part of are a way to classify the division of power in any given society. The way in which the society is structured can then be explained by looking at the discourse.

In being, and specifically in \text{feeling} addressed, so in understanding and connected to discourse which is aimed (either explicitly or implicitly) at them, people become members of a public. Members participate as part of a public through usage and understanding of the discourse of the public. Publics are a relatively modern invention, but they are now understood in public sphere theory to play a major role in “constructing our social world” (Warner, p. 50). A public is different from for instance a community wherein people are organized by a common identity, a nation or religion; instead, a public “unites strangers through participation alone” (Warner, p. 55-56). Before a public can become a public, so, before a discourse addressing a public can come into being, various mechanisms need to be in place already. This is because any public must have a way to first of all spread their discourse and, secondly, of being addressed in discourse (Warner, p. 51). These ways to understand a public are summarized in figure 1.

The use of the vernacular to create a public serves a double purpose. The discourse unites people and offers them a space, which is an internal mechanism. At the same time the discourse
defines people as being a separate people in the eyes of other, which is an external mechanism. (Warner, p. 77). Moreover, the way of organizing itself must be separate from the state, in order to keep the sovereignty necessary for a public function in the public sphere deliberative democracy calls for (Warner, p. 51). To sum up, there must be a means of distributing the discourse that serves to unite a public that is separate from the state. This separation from the state is for instance offered by certain types of social media.

**Figure 2**: How publics are defined

1.4.2. From public to counterpublic

Counterpublics are publics (Warner, p. 80) and so they largely operate using the same mechanisms publics use, which have been outlined above (see figure 1). Only, counterpublics are “explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants” (Asen, p. 425). This does mean that the framework for counterpublics is “provided by the in-group discourse” (Palczewski, p. 161) so there is never an instance wherein the counterpublic is not in some way relating to other publics. Publics and counterpublics are not directly juxtaposed in thinking about counterpublics, because thinking about counterpublics often originates from a conception of the public sphere as being a multiple public sphere (Asen, p. 426) which means that there is no one public to be measure what would be considered “counter”

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2 Based on Warner (2002).
Counterpublics are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Mainly, counterpublics serve to “illuminate the differential power relations among diverse publics of a multiple public sphere” (Asen, p. 425) and show that there is discord in society since people choose to set themselves apart from the mainstream discourse (Asen, p. 426). This means that counterpublics are mainly different from publics on the level of address (Warner, p. 87): they self-articulate as being counter. According to Asen, “the counter of counterpublics [is found] in participants’ recognition of exclusion from wider public spheres” (Asen, p. 426, p. 438). Recognition is a key term, since, for instance, not “all members of a historically excluded group may affiliate with counterpublics” (Asen, p. 439). With only a few additions to the theory, the definition of “public” can be seen to encompass “counterpublics” as well. For a summary, see Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3**: Defining counterpublics

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3 Based on Warner (2002), Fraser (1990) and Asen (2000).
Before delving deeper into the subject, it is important to review the difference between activist movements and counterpublics. Activists provide causes for people to rally around (Maddison & Scalmer, p. 207), and so, possibly, form a counterpublic. From this counterpublic, in which a safe space is created, separate from the mainstream, “an ethical revolution can hatch” (Maddison & Scalmer, p. 209). Counterpublics can be argued to be different from activists on two levels. Firstly, counterpublics “aim to transform the world” (Maddison & Scalmer, p. 206) rather than one part of it. Secondly, counterpublics are “spaces of ‘identity-formation’” (Fraser, 1997; Maddison & Scalmer, p. 207) rather than spaces wherein one specific issue is being addressed.

“Social movement and counterpublic sphere theories have recognized the importance of identity creation and self-expression to the disempowered” (Palczewski, p. 165). Online communication technologies have the potential to change the way in which we practice political engagement and engage with the public sphere and provide individuals with a way to express themselves. Through social media, and especially through a networked platform for instance Twitter, it has become possible to quite easily create an identity through networks and personal expressions and to project this into the mainstream. This leaves space for self-identification rather than identification by others, Palczewski suggests. Normally there is a monopoly on identity-creation, which is in the hands of “the public.” Social media can act as way to facilitate the formation of identity due to its personal nature: identities can be created on social media and are not dependent on definitions from spaces where they are usually excluded to some extent.

1.1.2. Black Twitter as a counterpublic

“Before the African and New World Black liberation movements of the post-Second World War era, few Western scholars of the African experience had any conception of the existence of an ideologically based or epistemologically coherent historical tradition of Black radicalism” (Robinson, p. 95). After the successes of the African American movement throughout the twentieth century, African Americans had equal access\textsuperscript{4} to the institutions of the state. What they did not have, was equal access to the public sphere (Squires, p. 131). Even though they have been

\textsuperscript{4} At least in theory.
included in the democratic process on the institutional level, through their right to vote for
instance, they have been excluded from the public sphere and so they formed social movements
to take collective action (Melucci, 1980), which have been studied previously (Sharma, 2013;
Vats, 2015). Black people have found a way to contest normative boundaries of public
deliberations. Twitter is one example of this. To better understand why this is so remarkable and
why this process, and the way in which counterpublics function, a short overview of the public
sphere and its relation to a proper functioning democratic society will be provided here. This way
the formation of the hashtag OscarsSoWhite can be understood more clearly.

According to Jackson and Welles, “information [in mainstream media] can, and often
does, come from members of counterpublics” (p. 398). This information, that makes its way to
traditional media, might come from counterpublics. An example is the case of #Ferguson, a race
riot in which initially the information about events came from Twitter users (Bonilla and Rosa, p.
9) and is accepted by the “regular” publics. Black Twitter as a subset of Twitter has indeed been
studied and categorized as a counterpublic in various instances. (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015; Florini,
2014; Sharma, 2013; Vats, 2015). “Black” hashtags reveal alternate Twitter discourses to the
mainstream and encourages a formulation of Black Twitter as a “social public”; a community
constructed through their use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike” (Brock, p. 530).
However, this might not be enough to label Black Twitter as a counterpublic; this definition
focuses on the style of Black Twitter rather than its content.

After all, according to Dahlberg, “the aim of supporting counter-publics and contestation
should not be to simply bring excluded voices into the mainstream public sphere(s). Rather, the
aim must be to contest the discursively defined boundaries of mainstream public sphere
deliberations” (Dahlberg, p. 60). Counterpublic discourse can grow beyond use within one
specific community and s it might have an effect on the way public discourse works. On one
level, Black Twitter holds the mainstream public sphere accountable through documenting their
take on the world and distributing this in traditional media (Jackson and Welles, p. 400). On
another level, Black Twitter could, as a counterpublic, create a discourse that contests the
“mainstream public sphere deliberations” (Dahlberg, p. 60).

The literature on hashtags and Twitter’s organization will be used for the data gathering
section, because it provided insight into the conditions under which tweets are written. The
research done on Black Twitter contextualizes any findings, and provided a more specific
framework to understand the popularity of #OscarsSoWhite. Moreover, it showed that fragmented Twitter can indeed be seen as fertile ground for counterpublics. To underscore the relevance of counterpublic theory, the public sphere theorizes helps to provide references for the way in which social media might be used to challenge existing attitudes and contribute to healthy democratic deliberations. The exclusionary nature of the public sphere, and the notion of multiple publics set up the base for counterpublic research. The literature suggests that counterpublics only exist in discourse, and that they are defined both from the ‘inside’ and from the ‘outside’ (so in the context of this research, the counterpublic would exist both because of mechanisms in place within the tweets, and because these tweets are understood to be one unified public by “others” –by newspapers, which might be construed as emissaries of “the public, in this case. This provides a method, because counterpublics exist in discourse the method that is most useful for studying this is a discourse analysis, which will be further explained in the next chapter. Additionally, the way in which counterpublics are defined shapes the nature of the analysis: the focus will be on organization of the tweets, the manner in which the tweets address their (imagined) audience, and the topic choice: it is interesting to see if the tweets indeed aim to contest the status quo.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Critical discourse analysis is in this context the best way to address #OscarsSoWhite and how this discourse functions. To provide context for this, the way in which critical discourse analysis is understood will be explained after which further explanations will be provided for the usefulness of critical discourse analysis, specifically for this research. After this the theorizing on critical discourse theory, by Fairclough, will be connected to the theorizing on counterpublic by Asen, Warner, and Fraser – which has been explained in the previous chapter and presented in figure 2. This will provide the structure for the analysis, which will be conducted by looking at both newspapers and tweets containing the hashtag OscarsSoWhite. The newspaper articles and tweets will be analyzed according to Warner’s whole model, since even if newspaper articles might be part of the ‘outside’ in counterpublics, it has not previously been established that #OscarsSoWhite is a counterpublic and therefore the hypothesis that the #OscarsSoWhite tweets function as one will be tested this way. To explain how the analysis is conducted, the way in which newspaper and twitter data was gathered. To conclude this chapter, the limitations of the critical discourse method as well as the practical limitations presented by gathering the data in a certain way will be addressed.

2.1. Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, which will be used throughout this research, is not the most straightforward method there is. It is a method of analysis that has at its heart “a certain perspective on the asking and answering of study questions, on treating language and other types of text as ‘data; on representing language and semiotic material, and on interacting with people treated as ‘social actors’” (Jaworski & Coupland, p. 125). In order to make the critical discourse used here as concrete and replicable as possible, an already existing scheme developed by Fairclough will be used in conjunction with Warner’s theories on counterpublics.

Fairclough developed a model in which discourse is analyzed taking into account its context. The notion that text can only be understood as part of its context, and the subsequent
development of analyses which take into account the way text is produced and consumed has been continued in discourse analyses and proven especially useful in studies of technological means of communication, such as social media (See for instance Brock’s technocultural discourse analysis (2009)). However, for the purpose of this research Fairclough’s original model will be used since this still gives the most complete overview of the discourse, taking into account the method of production, consumption, and the text itself. To reiterate, in this model the discourse analysis takes place on three levels: the level of the text, the level of discursive practice, and the level of social practice (Fairclough, p. 80).

This analysis will be guided by research questions derived from Warner’s model of (counter)publics, which has been explained in the previous chapter (see also figure 2). In this model it was explained that counterpublics have to be defined both internally and externally. For the purpose of this research these sections of the model can be constructed as corresponding to Fairclough’s model. In figure 3 it is explained how the internal definition of counterpublics corresponds to the levels of Fairclough’s model of a critical discourse analysis. Since counterpublics are both internally and externally defined in Warner’s theory on counterpublic, a similar treatment works well for the external definition of counterpublics, as explained in figure 4.

2.2. Critical discourse analysis’s usefulness in studying counterpublics

In order to determine to what extent the #OscarsSoWhite movement functioned as a counterpublic action, both newspapers and Tweets will be analyzed. There are two ways to study texts: content analysis and discourse analysis. To study Black counterpublics, doing a discourse analysis is useful, since much of Black (cultural) resistance is tied into discourse: jokes and different language patterns (Florini, p. 203) are used to express their identity. An example is April Reign’s first tweet (in Figure 3) mentioning #OscarsSoWhite. In this tweet the reference she makes to hair is meaningless without being placed into context. This context might be missed if a coding scheme is used. Moreover, in studying counterpublics narratives of resistance are found in small references, meaningless without context. This context in this case is white ignorance and implicit racism. Discourse analysis can aid in understanding and identifying the
narratives behind this since it makes use of close reading. This type of analysis is a critical discourse analysis.

More importantly for the context of this research, publics, and therefore counterpublics too, only come into being when they are being addressed in discourse (Warner, 2000). A discourse analysis is most useful in studying any kind of public precisely for this reason. It has been employed successfully in the past (see: Jackson et. al., 2004; Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Critical discourse analysis is often employed in the study of inequality (van Dijk, p. 353). Power relations are at the heart of inequality, and discourse is assumed to play a large role in the “enactment and reproduction of ethnic and “racial” inequality” (van Dijk, p. 361). Therefore a critical discourse analysis is useful to study counterpublics, which are often created in the face of inequality (Fraser, 1990).

*Figure 4: Internal definition of counterpublics levels corresponds to Fairclough’s model*

*Figure 5: Counterpublics external definition corresponds to Fairclough’s levels of analysis*
2.3. Choosing both tweets and newspapers to analyze #OscarsSoWhite

In figure 2 (p. 23), based on Warner (2000), Fraser (1990) and Asen (2000), counterpublics were defined as located in discourse. In that scheme counterpublics could be defined, and so studied, “externally” and “internally” since counterpublics (or the discourse that makes counterpublics) are constituted both through the words of “others” – those outside a counterpublic — and through the words of those considered part of the counterpublic. For the purpose of this research “inside” will refer to tweets, since people placing their tweets in the context of #OscarsSoWhite do this within the frame of being the insider. The “outside” refers to the selected newspapers, which are seen as part of the mainstream and may so be part of the “other”: they may use #OscarsSoWhite, but they use it as a descriptive way to transfer news, rather than as an advocate. So the discourse found there is part of “the outside.”

2.4. Tracing the development of the counterpublic

In order to study the development of the #OscarsSoWhite the choice was made to make an analysis of both 2015 (the year in which the hashtag started) and 2016 (the year in which the hashtag continued to be popular and was even addressed by the Academy Awards itself). This way the way in which the movement developed can be reviewed. In order to see how and whether the tweets and the newspaper reporting on #OscarsSoWhite changes the choice was made to look at both 2015 and 2016. This gives a larger dataset, but will provide some insight into the ways in which the tweets themselves developed, but also into the nature of the reporting. This is especially relevant given that it takes some time for counterpublic notions to even be
picked up on by ‘the mainstream.’ There is a far larger number of articles in 2016 as compared to 2015, for instance.

2.4. Applying the Fairclough model to counterpublic theory

The level of discursive practice will be analyzed by looking at the way tweets and Twitter are organized (independently from the state), as well as by giving an overview of the newspapers used and their status as “mainstream.” The way in which newspaper discourse might have the functioning of “othering” will be reviewed in this section.

The level of social practice will be reviewed by looking at the ideologies and motivations behind the tweets and newspaper articles. Given that this is a textual analysis and not, for instance an analysis of interviews, questions of direct motives cannot be addressed here. Instead, there will be a focus on the larger historical context in which the tweets and newspaper articles place themselves, with special emphasis on any ideologies that may be referenced or reiterated. The level of social practice is found in the way in which people communicate with each other. For instance, all social media usage is a form of social practice, and inferences can be made about context based on what kind of social media they use: the way people use the (relatively anonymous social media platform) Reddit might differ from the way people use Facebook, which is a much more public platform.

Since the models of Warner and Fairclough intersect a little bit, even if they can be said to ‘simply’ correspond (see figures 3 and 4, p. 27) it is crucial here to not only look at the way in which people use media, but especially to look at the text and have a separate section on the way in which people place themselves in relation to the receiver of the text. For instance, even if newspaper articles might be written from a similar perspective (that of “the mainstream” as established previously—even if this is newspaper and newspaper section dependent) tweets might be written from various perspectives, having differing audiences in mind. So, people might address #OscarsSoWhite from ‘outside’ or from the ‘inside’ perspective (taken from the model base on Warner’s text). This is found in the text, but will be categorized under the header of ‘social practice’.

The text, in this case the tweets using organized by the hashtag OscarsSoWhite and the
collected newspaper articles referencing #OscarsSoWhite, will be analyzed. Hereby special attention will be paid in the analysis of the tweets to any use of the vernacular and the use of shared narratives. In the analysis of the newspaper articles, more attention will be paid to the way in which #OscarsSoWhite is described, and whether it can be said to be perceived as a unified public. In line with Fairclough’s level of text, the way in which this analysis is done is by describing the text. In the case of the tweets and the newspaper articles, this means that either buzzwords, certain sections of sentences or even whole sentences will be highlighted.

For the newspaper articles a ‘regular’ discourse analysis is feasible, and so this will be used. The themes that emerge from the reading of the articles will be analyzed by describing them and giving examples. For the tweets, however, the way in which the results will be presented is slightly different. Because of the large dataset (see the next section) and the fragmented nature of Twitter, the findings will be organized using a quantitative method—by looking at the percentages of tweets that deal with a certain theme. This does not inform the actual analysis (which is based on the contents of the tweets) but does aim to provide more insight into the way in which tweets are structured overall—without this type of analysis it would be difficult to give a coherent narrative about the findings in the tweets, given their fragmented nature.

2.5. Gathering Twitter Data

Twitter is renowned for its networking function, but at the same time many tweets do not get a direct response. There is the conversational angle of Twitter: people can use mentions (with the “@”-symbol) to directly speak to each other while also publicly tweeting, but Twitter users can also interact by liking other people’s tweets, thereby commenting or endorsing the sympathy expressed in the tweet. Another way of interacting with tweets is by “favoriting” them. One’s favorite tweets are also publicly displayed. However, for the purpose of a discourse analysis on tweets it is useful to look at the plain text, without taking into account any information on the part of the user or their networks, since this is in this case not part of the discourse and the discourse—which is what a counterpublic essentially is—is what is being investigated.

Tweets contain only up to 140 characters, but that does not mean tweets cannot contain a lot of information in themselves. This information can be conveyed through plain text, but also
through the use of emoticons, pictures or memes. These types of communication on Twitter are part of the tweet and since the tweet as a whole is analyzed, these are also factored in. All tweets used in this analysis are English, even if they might not be composed by non-native English speakers. Because of the networked nature of Twitter, which has a global reach, the tweets will not be sorted on a geographical basis. The Oscars are US-based and broadcasted to an American audience but since the show includes non-American movies and actors and aims to be an international institution an international audience base exists for the Oscars.

A reason for Twitter’s usefulness in the case of this research, and perhaps this is also the reason tweets are so easily picked up as sources in for instance news media, is the way Twitter is organized. The use of hashtags,\(^5\) which were built into the system in 2007 (roughly a year after Twitter started), means that Twitter’s database is easily searched and that relevant information clusters together. In the online space represented by Twitter, for instance, there are multiple publics created (Bonilla and Rosa, p. 11). These publics “emerge from the hashtag’s capacity to serve not just as an indexing system but also as a filter that allows social media users to reduce the noise of Twitter by cutting it into one small slice” (Bonilla and Rose, p. 11). For these reasons the hashtag OscarsSoWhite is used to make a selection of tweets for the purpose of this research.

The 2015 Oscars were held on evening of February 23d, and the nominations on January 15. The timeframe used is January 15 – February 24, which gives 43 days. The 2016 Oscars were held on the evening of February 28 2016 and the nominations on January 15. Since the nomination gave impetus for #OscarsSoWhite campaigners and since the Oscars themselves gave rise to #OscarsSoWhite comments again (not in the least because references to the hashtag were made in the show itself) the day before the nomination\(^6\) and the day after the Oscars broadcast were also included. This means for 2016 the time frame is 47 days. In total there are 90 days from which tweets can be used in this analysis.

Given Twitter’s sheer volume of tweets carrying the #OscarsSoWhite, the selection has to be narrowed down in order to make a discourse analysis a feasible method. Therefore, the choice was made to select ten tweets of each day within the timeframes specified for 2015 and 2016. By

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\(^5\) Which according to Chris Messina, Twitter-founder and hashtag-creator, came about because he was interested in “simply having a better eavesdropping experience on Twitter” (Messina).

\(^6\) Even though this was only relevant for the 2016 selection, since in 2015 the #OscarsSoWhite tweets only came in use on the day of the nominations itself.
taking the first ten tweets that can be found, using Twitter’s own search engine tool, this method is replicable while remaining random. The tweets were gathered by manually selecting the first ten tweets that appeared for each day within the specified timeframe. The search query used was a variation on “OscarsSoWhite since:[intended date] until:[date after intended date]” to get for instance the result for January 14 2016, the following query was used “OscarsSoWhite since:2016-01-14 until:2016-01-15.” For each new day the search query has to be adjusted. Then the “latest” tweets section was selected. This insures that the search yields the same results every time. Even though it is possible to select for location, as well, in collecting this data the choice was made to keep the sample as representative as possible. This means that some non-English tweets will be included in the sample, but these will be filtered out during the analysis.

2.6. Gathering newspaper data

For the selected newspaper articles, the analysis will be conducted on those articles that contain a mention of #OscarsSoWhite. Twitter has users from all countries and is renowned for its network features which can theoretically go global. The Academy Awards physically take place in the United States, however, which is why the hashtag-campaign is likely to have a US-bias. The show is broadcasted via the ABC network which targets an American audience. Because of this, the newspapers used in this analysis are US-based as well. In order to have a comprehensive overview of articles and so a complete set of discourses, the three largest national newspapers (based on its average digital circulation) will be analyzed. These numbers are taking from the Pew Research Center report.

Table 1: Three largest U.S. national newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper Name</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total Average Digital Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>Washington D.C.</td>
<td>1,438,827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New York Times</td>
<td>New York State</td>
<td>1,379,806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>916,462</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Wall Street Journal, which is the third largest national newspaper in the U.S., was not fully accessible through LexisNexis. Therefore the 4th largest daily was chosen, The Los Angeles Times. This means that articles from the USA Today, The New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times were used. These newspapers are accessed through the newspaper database LexisNexis. In order to keep the data as equal as possible, the same timeframe will be used as was used in selecting the Twitter data, so for 2015 newspaper articles published between January 15 and February 24 were included in the sample. Within the articles published in this timeframe, articles using the following keywords were selected: #OscarsSoWhite OR #OscarsSoWhite OR OscarsSoWhite. In the case of the New York Times the national edition is used as a source, since this addresses a more general public, and is so more relevant to the research. For The Los Angeles Times 2015 articles, a different approach had to be taken. The Los Angeles Times only allows LexisNexis to use the previous three months of articles. On its own site, however, the Los Angeles Times does present an archive and a way to search it (to be found here: http://www.latimes.com/la-archives-news-archives-front-htmlstory.html). To find out what articles in 2015 talked about #OscarsSoWhite, the datrange was specified (15.01.2015 – 23.02.2015) as well as the keywords (#OscarsSoWhite OR #OscarsSoWhite OR OscarsSoWhite). Exactly the same search as performed in LexisNexis for the other newspapers.

2.6. How the data will be analyzed

Not every word or phrase uttered in articles or tweets concerning #OscarsSoWhite may be directly related to the #OscarsSoWhite ‘movement’. Therefore, the text will first be ‘condensed’ by picking out those phrases that directly correspond to #OscarsSoWhite. This is especially relevant for the newspaper articles: articles mentioning #OscarsSoWhite, which are used for the analysis, may only spend a short section actually reflecting or referring to #OscarsSoWhite. Therefore this step of the analysis is highly necessary. For the tweets, in themselves very short, there will not be so much text filtered out. This step of condensing the text means in the end there is a discourse found that gives information about #OscarsSoWhite. For both the newspapers and the tweets the text which has been found will be described. First of all, they will be described per article/tweet if it’s relevant, then it will be described per newspaper and per year. To answer the
research questions descriptions of the text will be analyzed to see whether the #OscarsSoWhite tweets indeed reveals a counterpublic.

2.7. Limitations of the research strategy

Counterpublics are determined to be a specific, and internally defined public, with its own rules, own narratives, own shared understandings of certain words and phrases. However, this counterpublic somehow finds a way to influence “the public” from which they are excluded. The public comes to understand the shared meanings and narratives of the counterpublic, if the counterpublic is successful, and so the counterpublic negates its own existence. The way in which counterpublics are made up makes researching them, specifically through a discourse analysis, an interesting task as well. To understand the ways in which counterpublic discourse works, the discourse has to be fully understood by the researcher, including those shared narratives and understandings that might not necessarily be part of the researcher’s own discourse. A balance has to be found between understanding the research subject and remaining objective enough to conduct an investigation. In the case of #OscarsSoWhite this researcher cannot be considered part of its discourse, but because the discourse surrounding it is understood, or researchable and so understandable, it is possible to understand the discourse sufficiently and so make a discourse analysis feasible. In order to keep the research as replicable as possible, a full explanation of the ways in which the discourse is understood by the researcher will be provided whenever necessary.

Some other possible limitations to the study are the ways in which Twitter might be used. Because of the individualistic nature of Twitter it is possible that Twitter users address their perceived audience in a certain way, which might have more to day with the nature of Twitter as a platform than with the ways in which counterpublics function. For instance, Twitter is used for promotion of products and people, and as such the tone of address is influenced by the way in which this platform functions. A possible limitation to the use of newspapers as a ‘stand-in’ for the ‘public’ in counterpublic theory is that using three newspapers is too limiting. The public, after all, refers to the whole of the accepted parts of the mainstream, not specifically to newspapers, and not specifically to the newspapers used for this analysis. This issue has been
addressed by choosing those newspapers with the largest reach in the United States, and by giving an explanation for why newspapers have been theoretically used as a measure for the ways in which certain groups are “othered” before.

Of course, there is also the limitation of the number of data. The number of tweets that contain #OscarsSoWhite is so large that in this research they cannot even be counted fully. In order to keep the study feasible, the number of tweets has been limited to ten tweets per day. Because this gives almost a thousand tweets, and because of the longitudinal nature of the study, this is considered to be ‘enough’ for the purpose of this research, but any conclusions drawn remain at the level of inferences. However, the collected data provides a dataset which is large enough for a comprehensive critical discourse analysis. The timeframe itself, consisting of two periods in two separate years, has been nicely delineated by the Oscar nominations and the Oscar broadcast. Since the Oscars are, rather specifically, what the #OscarsSoWhite is about, this is sufficient for the use in this study. However, it is conceivable that a study in which all dates after the nominations in 2015, on which day the first #OscarsSoWhite tweet was written and sent out, might yield a better result for understanding the development of the hashtag discourse. In the interest of keeping the data feasible and because of time constraints the choice has been made to restrict the data to the two particular time frames in 2015 and 2016. By looking at two separate points in (recent) history the way in which the hashtag has developed will also come to light.

Overall, the study is so designed that the possible drawbacks have been negated as much as possible. By looking at both Twitter and newspaper data the ways in which the #OscarsSoWhite tweets might provide the function of a counterpublic will be addressed as coherently and cohesively as possible. This will be done by first looking at the ways in which the twitter discourse surrounding #OscarsSoWhite is organized, and by identifying the themes, level of address, and method of organization for the content in the tweets selected for this research. To this analysis a newspaper analysis will be added, which will look at the same constructs for the contents of the newspapers, but with a focus on the way the newspaper articles present #OscarsSoWhite. These separate analyses will be combined, and the way in which the discourse might have changed between 2015 and 2016 will be addressed. After that, these analyses and their conclusions will be put together to form a cohesive answer to the main research question, to reiterate:
In what ways does the #OscarsSoWhite tweets function as a counterpublic?
Chapter 3: The ways in which #OscarsSoWhite Twitter functions as a counterpublic

This analysis will start by looking at the collected tweets. After that the newspaper articles will be discussed. This chapter is organized according to the levels of analysis which have been developed by Fairclough. These were explained in more detail in the previous chapter but here they will be quickly summarized again. These levels are the level of discursive practice, the level of text, and the level of social practice. As explained before, these levels correspond to the different levels found in counterpublic research, (see figure 2 and 3 in chapter 2, p. 22-23). This means that the way in which counterpublics are internally organized can be discussed by looking at the level of discursive practice.

To achieve this, the first section of this chapter will focus on answering the question: How do Twitter users, who add the #OscarsSoWhite to their tweets, use the platform of Twitter in the case of #OscarsSoWhite? The second section addresses the level of social practice. Here the question What do people talk about when they use #OscarsSoWhite? will be answered. The third section looks at the level of text. This means that the way in which people who have added the hashtag OscarsSoWhite to their tweets use language in these tweets will be analyzed. In this section the following question will be answered: How do people use language in their tweets in the case of #OscarsSoWhite. After the tweets, a fourth section will deal with the newspaper analysis, in which the question How do newspapers describe the #OscarsSoWhite tweets will be answered, again using Fairclough’s levels of analysis. To describe how the hashtag has evolved, a comparison of the 2015 and 2016 tweets and newspaper articles will be the fifth section.

3.1. Tweets

The sheer number of tweets, at the very least a hundred per day\(^7\), using the hashtag OscarsSoWhite means that it would be impossible within the scope of this research to use all the

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\(^7\) The first hundred tweets a day were downloaded so this can be said with certainty. To give a further impression of the popularity of the #OscarsSoWhite tweet, the Google search engine was accessed. Using the search term “#OscarsSoWhite in site:twitter.com” showed about 31.500 results on Google (the search was done on February 12, 2017).
tweets containing #OscarsSoWhite. For the purpose of this research a selection was made, which yielded 430 tweets for 2015 and 490 tweets for 2016 meaning that in total 920 tweets were used in this analysis (see also table 2).

Table 2: Selected number of tweets containing #OscarsSoWhite

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015 (January 15 – February 24)</td>
<td>430 tweets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 (January 14 – February 29)</td>
<td>490 tweets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.1. Organization of #OscarsSoWhite Twitter

Twitter as a platform is independent from the state, however, since Twitter users are relatively anonymous, in there is no way to assess with absolute certainty that all discourse categorized by the use of the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite can in fact be categorized as independent discourse. After all, anyone can use Twitter, therefore it can also be utilized by companies or political parties with promotional means as an end. However, #OscarsSoWhite was started by an identifiable individual who has appeared in interviews to discuss the hashtag and so at least the start of the hashtag was not related to any state or company efforts. Twitter users are asked to respond to the query “what’s happening?” and so the tweets reflect many differing viewpoints. The Twitter discourse surrounding #OscarsSoWhite is self-organised. It is organized by the hashtag, and the tweets that make up this discourse are largely made by individual twitter users—rather than, say, promoted tweets, which are created by companies. Even though the discourse is a fragmented one, because of the nature of social media and especially Twitter, given its 140-word limit, the discourse is organized independently from the state and so provides a platform that is suitable for hosting a counterpublic discourse such as #OscarsSoWhite.

3.1.2. What does #OscarsSoWhite Twitter talk about

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8 Ten tweets were selected for every day, except for the days in which there were less than hundred tweets written, presumably because the hashtag was lesser known.
The #OscarsSoWhite tweets address a lack of awareness of racial injustice on various levels. The Oscar criticism might have revolved around artistic merit, criticism of the award choices or be confined to for instance one movie. However, instead of remaining confined, the scope of the criticism broadened: not only were the Oscars of 2015 insufficiently representative of people who were not white, the 2015 Oscars turned out to be a jump off point for more criticism which expanded to include society itself.

Twitter can be used as a tool for expressing criticisms. The hashtag originated from black activist, April Reign, and referred to a black stereotype. The tweets used in this analysis, whether they express support of the #OscarsSoWhite movement or oppose it, almost all harbor some point of criticism. An example is: “This year’s Oscars definitely lacked some diversity in their nominations,” wrote @neonology on the second of February, 2015. This tweet calls out the lack of representation of black people directly, is indicative of other criticisms expressed and organized using the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite.

Although there is never an explicit call specifically directed at black people, asking them to use the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, the focus is, in the majority of tweets, on black people, rather than for instance Asian- or Latin-Americans. Aside from the “black” versus “white” division, some other common themes emerged in the tweets. These can be divided into three main themes: black people get no recognition, white people are ignorant (of this) and suggestions to change the status quo. These themes can further be subdivided, (also see figure 6, p. 38) into seven main themes: start of a (separate (black) movie industry, stop the Oscars by boycotting, white people are ignorant, and the most prevalent theme: black people do not get the recognition they deserve. This last theme can again be divided into four separate themes: black people do not get recognition on the level of society, black people do not get recognition on the level of the movie industry, black people do not get recognition on the level of the Oscars in general, and black people do not get recognition on the level of the Oscars that year. The choice was made to showcase the theme division of the tweets in figures to make the fragmented nature of tweets into a more coherent whole for presentation.

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9 #OscarsSoWhite was possibly made popular (or became trending, in Twitter terminology) by so-called Black Twitter. The prevalence of African Americans using Twitter in general is well-documented, however, based on this collection of data no further inferences about the ethnicity of people using the hashtag OscarsSoWhite can be made.
The most common theme, which is about black people getting no recognition, is by far the largest with a percentage of 80% in total. Although the nature of the criticism (which revolves around the open acknowledgment of racism) is very similar in the majority of tweets, the focus of the criticism differed. Out of 140 tweets, 112 tweets refer to the lack of recognition for black people, whether this is on the level of the Oscars of that year, the Oscars in general, the movie industry, or society.

Figure 6: The number of tweets that occurred per theme

#OscarsSoWhite twitter discourse organized by theme

- Start of separate (black) movie industry
- Stop the Oscars by making a boycott
- White people are ignorant
- Black people do not get recognition of the level of society
- Black people do not get recognition on the level of the movie industry
- Black people do not get recognition on the level of the Oscars in general
- Black people do not get recognition on the level of the Oscars that year
3.1.3. #OscarsSoWhite Twitter’s style of address

#OscarsSoWhite could be said to be a discourse that is created based on a shared need to remind the general public that black and white people are treated on an unequal basis in society. The goal is to address and call out racism. Hereby the act of calling out signifies there is a change that needs to be made in the Oscars: black people should be acknowledged more. That implies already that the people reminding the public are outside this public. This is why the most important division that can be found in the discourse used in the tweets carrying the #OscarsSoWhite is the “us” versus “them” division that comes back regularly in the language used in the tweets. This has some overlap with the “black” versus “white” division that was addressed in the previous section, however, the “us” does not exclude white people in this case and so functions as a separate way of organizing through language rather than topic. That there is a people that feel this need means that “they” do feel excluded and more importantly that this exclusion is being taken as an accepted part of the way society works.

The notion is that exclusion based on race is commonplace, and the tweets are a way to denormalize this type of exclusion. The perspective used is taken from the outside of “the public”. This is exemplified by the following phrases found in tweets: @TheRoot wrote “Why #OscarsSoWhite won’t be fixed until we get a better variety of movies about “us”, meaning that there is something wrong with the current system and that the only way to rectify is to include more people of color (which the “us” in the tweet refers to). In a similar vein, @Alllwttopic wrote #OscarsSoWhite ---> #HowWeDisappear. This refers again to the normalization of the exclusion of people of color (the “we” of this tweet). To give one last example, @AfroStateOfMind wrote “An appropriate reminder of our reality” referring to #OscarsSoWhite tweets. “Our” reality, meaning the daily life that people of color face, refers to one wherein exclusion based on race is a fact of life. The use of “we” here indicates that there is a group that is not accepted, that is outside of what can be considered the general public. This group is not only defined by being outside this public, but also by using language that unites them in their ‘outsider-status.’

Aside from a shared sense of being outside the public, there were also shared symbols and narratives that came to define the #OscarsSoWhite discourse. The movie Selma (2014), for
instance, became a symbol that came back regularly in the tweets discourse about the Oscars of the year 2015. This movie about Martin Luther King did not receive any award during the Oscars. The critique issued on this, expressed on twitter, claims that Selma was not chosen because of biased Oscars voting. This movie became part of the shared narrative underneath #OscarsSoWhite discourse. For instance, David Oyelowo, the lead actor in Selma— he portrays Martin Luther King—functions as a ‘household name’ in the #OscarsSoWhite discourse. He is mentioned without any qualifiers to indicate who he is, for instance here, when @millygribben writes: “I am absolutely baffled that David Oyelowo was not even nominated for his excellent performance #OscarsSoWhite.” That indicates that the audience of this particular discourse would be familiar with his name. There is a shared narrative about the Selma movie: no one involved in the making of Selma was acknowledged because of a systemic racial bias. Moreover, the name of the director (Ava duVernay) and actors in Selma are assumed to be familiar to the audience.

Other criticisms on the Oscars make use of a shared (historical) lens. For instance, the decision of the Academy Awards to hire black performers and presenters for the show is evaluated in light of the history of slavery. In this case there is the notion that the decision of the 2015 Oscars—to hire black presenters—functions as a callback to slavery. For instance, @dwnthalane wrote, “They’re letting blacks serve Whites #Oscars.” The history of (black) slavery and servitude is shared by everyone, but in the case of #OscarsSoWhite this history is actively used to interpret and explain current decisions. The critique on the Oscars comes in this case from the perspective of those who have been marginalized historically. To give another example, @BZBwoy writes: #AfricanAmericansPresenting #AfricanAmericans singing but not #AwardsWorthy just good for the #ShuckAndJive.10

Aside from the view that the Academy reflects an unequal society, whether intentional or not, there is also a strain of twitter thought that actively accuses the Academy. The decisions made by the Academy Awards are evaluated as being not only negligent to black people, but to be actively suppressing them. “Recruiting Black actors as presenters is an attempt at a cover up,” @TheLadyfrom_ writes. The notion of a ‘cover up’ implies the sinister thought that black people

10 “Shuck and jive” references behavior adopted in order to avoid criticism. Although it is more generally used at this time, in the early twentieth century the phrase specifically referred to (black) slaves/servants acting in a certain way to avoid punishment from their (white) oppressors.
are actively banned from getting recognition and that all choices the Academy made in answer to #OscarsSoWhite increased this. There is not only a sense of unity in the calling out of the public, and shared symbols and narratives, but there is also a shared, joke-like, tone. Many tweets about the #OscarsSoWhite came in the form of a joke, following the following format: OscarsSoWhite that …. For example, @MeritNotParty wrote “#OscarsSoWhite that I may be able to get in if I wear a white sheet w/ a pointy top.” Another example is #OscarsSoWhite that Beck won an Oscar written by @SunnyAliii. These jokes can be said to be part of black twitter’s “signature style.” These jokes revolve around a political and societal criticism and expose these in a way that is easily recognizable.

3.2. Newspaper articles

In total 101 newspaper articles were analyzed. The number of articles is by itself an interesting finding, since it means that #OscarsSoWhite was indeed addressed (and taken seriously) by three major quality newspapers. These newspapers can be considered part of the establishment, and so reflect the views of “the public.” This was established in the previous chapter, these newspapers are the ones with the largest reach within the United States (see table 1, p. 31). These newspapers can therefore be used to analyze how #OscarsSoWhite is perceived from the “outside.”

Table 3: Number of articles using #OscarsSoWhite, organized per newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>USA Today</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The New York Times</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Los Angeles Times</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11 Reference to the Ku Klux Klan.  
12 Beck is a white musician.
3.2.1. How #OscarsSoWhite Twitter is described by newspapers

The newspapers used a variety of different angles to cover the OscarsSoWhite hashtag, depending on the article, the article’s author, and the time of publishing. Overall, some common themes emerged: #OscarsSoWhite as a natural disaster, #OscarsSoWhite framed in terms of the reaction of Hollywood, appreciation for #OscarsSoWhite, using #OscarsSoWhite for context and #OscarsSoWhite as unimportant. These themes were all used to describe #OscarsSoWhite.

3.2.1.1. #OscarsSoWhite as an unfocused form of disruptiveness

One of the most prominent themes consistently describes #OscarsSoWhite as a force of nature. In so doing the tweets are linked to a powerful, but maybe undirected force, which has come to define the discourse surrounding the Oscars. The discourse used in the Los Angeles Times, for instance, in reporting on the OscarsSoWhite hashtag, depicted the conversation that #OscarsSoWhite started as “a wild furor, an outrage.” Many of these types of words were used, which signify (perhaps mindless) anger. Verbs associated with the OscarsSoWhite discourse are “ignited” (Alexander, 2016) or “plagued” (Truitt, Ryan, Mandell, Alexander, 2016), in the USA Today. The OscarsSoWhite discourse is so described as an uncontrollable force, which has a disruptive effect.

The expressions on Twitter that use #OscarsSoWhite are called for instance “the uproar” (Collins, 2015), “the latest clamor” (Fleishman, 2016), the “media furor” (Keegan, 2016), “the furor” (Braxton, 2016). In the Los Angeles Times descriptions the criticism of the Academy Awards put forward on social media is described as a natural disaster, “a storm” (Rottenberg, 2016), or a disease: #OscarsSoWhite “plagued” the Oscars. (Braxton, 2016). Language describing the social media output refers to fire and eruptions on multiple occasions. For instance “[e]ver since the #OscarsSoWhite controversy erupted.” The words “plague” or “plagued” suggest that the OscarsSoWhite discourse is framed as a negative type of force: OscarsSoWhite is upsetting the Oscars (which are overall characterized as a joyous event). The main emphasis here is on the wild and unfocused “behavior” of the OscarsSoWhite discourse.

Other ways in which this theme came to the fore was by addressing #OscarsSoWhite a nothing more than a problem: The phrase “the #OscarsSoWhite controversy” or “the
"OscarsSoWhite debate" is used repeatedly in the *USA Today*. The *USA Today* refers to specific people associated to OscarsSoWhite (Truitt, 2016). Another signifier for the #OscarsSoWhite movement is “the elephant in the room”. This term was used by president of the Academy Awards Cheryl Boons in a luncheon addressing nominees. She had, reportedly, said she “asked the elephant to leave” (Fleishman, 2016). This turn of phrase was taken up by reporters.

3.2.1.2. #OscarsSoWhite explained by the reaction it inspires, not its own merit

In 2015 *The Los Angeles Times* mentioned #OscarsSoWhite without explaining it, simply mentioning it as “a trending Twitter hashtag” (Keegan, 2015). The focus of these articles is on the reaction of established Hollywood, rather than what #OscarsSoWhite itself is about. The articles take its topic choice not from the hashtag and the conversation around it, but rather discusses the way in which reactions against the hashtag take place, and loosely connect this to the issue of race. #OscarsSoWhite is used as a symbol to set the scene in the mind of the newspaper reader.

The people behind #OscarsSoWhite, so the people actually typing up and sending out tweets using the hashtag OscarsSoWhite are explicitly mentioned on just one occasion in *The Los Angeles Times*, (Keegan, 2016). After this the reports focus more on the commentary that #OscarsSoWhite inspired, giving voice to Academy members, Hollywood insiders, and actors rather than the people participating in #OscarsSoWhite. In addressing the hashtag, the focus was not on the motives or thoughts and ideas of the people behind the #OscarsSoWhite, but on the reaction of the established powerhouses in the film world. By diverting attention away from what is being said on Twitter and giving space and lines to people who are part of the establishment, the newspaper could be said to deny #OscarsSoWhite’s voice.13

The reporting of *The Los Angeles Times* on the #OscarsSoWhite was unfocused; the

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13 Reporting on social media has challenges, there is for instance no official press release or spokesperson who can be said to speak for all. However, social media does present—in this case through tweets—a body of text that can and has been used as source for newspaper reporting (REFERENCE) so the exclusion of tweets (only once a tweet was included in an article), which might have given #OscarsSoWhite depth and painted a picture of the movement beyond the hashtag, was unnecessary.
hashtag was invoked to set up the background for the articles without actually reporting on the movement itself. In the *USA Today* one article mentioned #OscarsSoWhite in 2015 (within the specified period of time). This one article does specifically mention one regional FOX network film critic, Shawn Edwards, as a specific “voice” speaking out against a lack of diversity. Specifically about #OscarsSoWhite, however, this article only mentioned that “On Twitter, the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite took flight” (Ryan, 2015).

### 3.2.1.3. #OscarsSoWhite is not crucial

Real people are mentioned as part of the protest and even interviewed (Atkindon, 2016). By naming #OscarsSoWhite as only one small part of the problem of inclusion in the media of people who are not white, the movement is not described as a crucial one (Galanes, 2016). The power to change is not ascribed to Twitter’s users. This is noticeable in the placement of verbs. The actor in these articles is not #OscarsSoWhite or its members. The cause for change lies within the conversation #OscarsSoWhite engendered. Some examples are “the controversy that has divided its [the Academy’s] membership and damaged its image” (Rottenberg, 2016).

The one instance in which something explicitly from the #OscarsSoWhite tweets is reiterated in the newspaper is a joke about Neil Patrick Harris’ underwear. Not reiterating some of the heavier criticism or clever jokes that are also part of the #OscarsSoWhite tweets can be seen as a way to subtly divert the power of cleverness and smarts (important if the topic is implied racism) back to those in power (the Hollywood insiders). There is one occasion in which a tweet using the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite is used (Baxton, 2016), in which the user @GoingNakedTV utters criticism of Chris Rock’s opening monologue for the Oscar. The point of criticism is taken up in the article, but the username might give the average reader of the *Los Angeles Times* pause: by choosing a user with a name that is not professional or that does not bestow authority on the person adding to a discussion, this contribution might be considered unimportant. The hashtag’s creator, April Reign, was interviewed in the very beginning of the reporting cycle of 2016. She is credited by the newspaper in two articles. After that she is only invoked occasionally by interviewees of the *Los Angeles Times*. 
3.3. The #OscarsSoWhite development

Because data is available from two separate years, dealing with the separately staged events, here the way in which the discourse changed in these years will be analyzed. First a separate overview will be given for the tweets, and then for the newspapers.

3.3.1. #OscarsSoWhite development on Twitter

Between 2015 and 2016 the following themes remained constant in the number of time these came forward in the tweets: “start of separate (black) movie industry” and “stop the Oscars by making a boycott.” Those were the themes that were less often used. There was some change in the way in which the following themes were addressed over 2015 and 2016: “white people are ignorant”, “black people do not get recognition on the level of society,” “black people do not get recognition on the level of the movie industry” or “black people do not get recognition on the level of the Oscars in general.” The only theme that showed a remarkable change in the tweets, over the course of the discourse found in 2015 and then 2016, was the theme “black people do not get recognition on the level of the Oscars of that year.”

Even though the diversity quota in the 2016 Oscars was not necessarily better than the one in 2015, the tweets reflected that the #OscarsSoWhite discourse was moving beyond the 2015 Oscars to address a larger societal issue. In 2015 the Oscars were the direct cause and context for the #OscarsSoWhite tweets. Many of the tweets used the movie Selma as an example, for instance, which was considered to be “snubbed” by the Academy Awards. In contrast, the criticism in 2016 was not about the specific choices made in 2015 by the Academy Awards Committee, but they used the hashtag to call out other choices that are constructed as part of a racist system in the #OscarsSoWhite system. This gives a depth to a discourse which has proven to have a life beyond the 2015 Oscars. The difference between 2015 and 2016 and the number of times the theme occurred in each year can be found in figure 7, p. 49.

In 2016, the theme that played on ignorance by white people and the theme what black people do not get recognition on the level of the movie industry was more commonly used than in
2015. In 2016 there was a decrease in the occurrence of the themes “black people do not get recognition on the level of society” and “black people do not get recognition on the level of the Oscars in general.” This indicates, again, a widening of the perspectives of the #OscarsSoWhite discourse. Rather than being about a specific occurrence -the Oscars-, the tweets focus on a more widespread occurrence of racism.

3.3.2. #OscarsSoWhite development in newspapers

In 2015 in the Los Angeles Times it seems that there is not much to be said about #OscarsSoWhite. By giving the hashtag the position of instigator, and focusing on the reaction of Hollywood insiders, the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag can be seen as a counterpublic. However, the manner in which the #OscarsSoWhite is invoked does not suggest one unified public. By taking the agency away from twitter users, and reporting on them by reporting on the response to them, #OscarsSoWhite can be seen as a counterpublic in the discourse of the 2016 Los Angeles Times reporting on the Oscars. In The Los Angeles Times, during the course of reporting on #OscarsSoWhite, the tone shifts. There is a shift away from #OscarsSoWhite as a movement, or more neutral qualifiers like “the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag” and in the direction of the reaction by the establishment (meaning the Academy Awards members and various actors). To this end, #OscarsSoWhite is referred to as “a strong backlash” (Article: Oscar nominations; where’s the diversity?) or for instance, in the majority of articles, as the “#OscarsSoWhite controversy”. The reporting in the Los Angeles Times made a quite radical shift away from reporting on a ‘movement’ to reporting on a conversation—one which implies hearing from more than one side, but in practice means hearing only from members of the Hollywood establishment. In the one article that the USA Today devoted to #OscarsSoWhite in 2015, the hashtag is criticized as focusing on the wrong angle: the lack of diversity is the fault of the Academy, according to the tweet used. However, the article does seem sympathetic to the cause behind #OscarsSoWhite, by placing a comment by Academy president Cheryl Boone Isaacs saying that there was no diversity problem in an incongruous place, making it seem she is denying any and all problems.

In The New York Times the #OscarsSoWhite discourse is defined, in 2015, as counter the
Academy (from the Academy Awards) but not necessarily counter to the newspaper. In 2016 the reporting seems more ambivalent. The discourse surrounding #OscarsSoWhite is described as addressing a different audience than the intended newspaper audience. The movement is mentioned in terms of protest, furor and uproar. These are directed against movie executives which in itself is already another (not counter) public.

*Figure 7 Tweets per theme per year*
Chapter 4: Conclusion

#OscarsSoWhite functions, at least in part, as a counterpublic, especially in the tweets found in 2015, because it works to resist the dominant narrative (in which the exclusion of black people in popular culture is not necessarily seen as a problem). In reaching the status of being taken up by newspapers, in 2016, as a legitimate voice, the counterpublic has—in some ways—reached the status of public. To put the answer to the original research question in perspective, to reiterate: In what ways does the #OscarsSoWhite discourse function as a counterpublic? first a small summary of the results will be given, which already provided some answers to the subquestions and the nature of the functioning of the #OscarsSoWhite discourse, then the results will be further contextualized.

4.1. In what ways do #OscarsSoWhite tweets function as a counterpublic?

To analyze the #OscarsSoWhite tweets as a counterpublic, first the research focused on the tweets themselves, and if it was clear from the tweets themselves that they constitute a counterpublic. The questions that were used to investigate this are the following: is the #OscarsSoWhite public organized independently from the state, do the #OscarsSoWhite tweets revolve around aspirations to change “the public,” and how is the style of address of the #OscarsSoWhite tweets characterized? To answer these questions, the definition given in chapter 1, figure 2 (p. 23), based on Warner (2000), Fraser (1990), and Asen (2000), was used. This only makes up one part of the overall question of #OscarsSoWhite’s functioning as a counterpublic. To further clarify, the #OscarsSoWhite reporting done by mainstream newspapers was taken under consideration, and so the fourth subquestion, are the #OscarsSoWhite tweets perceived as a unified public by The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and USA Today? will be answered below. To finalize the analysis, the development of the #OscarsSoWhite and the reporting done on it will be traced by comparing the 2015 and 2016 findings. So the last subquestion will be answered to give a full and clear picture of the way in which #OscarsSoWhite functions as a counterpublic and how this came to be.

The #OscarsSoWhite public is self-organized, meaning the discourse is organized by
individual twitter users attaching the hashtag tool to their tweets. By doing this they organize separately from state or corporate efforts. Even though the hashtag tool is created by the Twitter company, and so the #OscarsSoWhite tweets are in this manner dependent on the platform for organization, the way in which the hashtag tool is used has not been dictated from above. Although this discourse is dependent on the way in which Twitter functions, the approach to actually using the hashtag comes from Twitter users, and not Twitter management, or any other form of management. Because of this, the answer to the first subquestion, namely, is the #OscarsSoWhite public self-organized? is yes, but with the caveat that in this case the discourse is dependent on the inventions of a company.

To answer the second subquestion and draw a conclusion on whether the #OscarsSoWhite tweets revolves around aspirations to change “the public”, overall, the focus of the discourse does indeed revolve around addressing injustice and so changing the public, by pointing out that there is indeed a discrepancy in the way black and white people are treated. Only a small part of the discourse advocates taking a form of action directly, by for instance not watching the Oscars or focusing efforts on making a separate black movie industry. Even so, the other tweets that centered around expressing a thought rather than a call to action do add up to a discourse which expresses the desire to see the current situation changed. It could be said that the #OscarsSoWhite tweets, with its most prominent themes revolving around the calling out of injustice, has two functions: the shared social practice of expressing criticism serves to unite people and gives a platform wherein thoughts can be easily organized and shared. The second function is to raise awareness for (implicit) bias or racism. This effort would not be made if there was not the goal to change the discourse/public’s perception about race, and so change the situation.

To answer the third subquestion, there is a clear use language to define the author and audience of the tweets as being part of a class of outsiders of society; they write from the perspective of exclusion. Overall it appears that the discourse of #OscarsSoWhite makes use of shared narratives, using the history of slavery to explain current events. In the tweets in the form of jokes a recurring format is used, which suggests a common language use for this counterpublic. In addition, common names and symbols, Selma or its actors came to symbolize implicit racism in the context of this discourse. The style of address is one that addresses the public, in an effort to change the status quo. The public is addressed from the “outside,” so the people who use #OscarsSoWhite as part of their discourse pit themselves against the general
public.

There are two main viewpoints about the way in which #OscarsSoWhite functions (or does not function) as a public that were found in the reporting done by the Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and the USA Today. The first one is one in which #OscarsSoWhite is presented as being part of a discourse that is highly fragmented: there is not one unified public but rather a collection of voices. The other one is the one in which #OscarsSoWhite discourse is pitted against the discourse used in the newspapers, in this sense the #OscarsSoWhite is unified by its outsider status. In some cases, however, there is a clear public visualized in the coverage of the #OscarsSoWhite discourse; in these cases the discourse is referred to as a movement.

For the most part, however #OscarsSoWhite is not seen as a unified public. In the Los Angeles Times #OscarsSoWhite is mentioned for context, but it is not perceived as a unified public. It is a hashtag that is said to “pop up” and seems fragmented. In the USA Today #OscarsSoWhite is not seen as a public so much as a collection of voices: some people are seen as part of the movement but throughout the articles the focus is on the effect of #OscarsSoWhite. The people behind it are not discussed apart from the mention of April Reign on one occasion. In the New York Times, #OscarsSoWhite discourse is defined as being a product of a public, though not necessarily a unified one, (literally: “the public seems to think so, at least those living on Twitter”). The reporting in The New York Times focused more on the use of the #OscarsSoWhite as a result of a social movement, and so they reported on #OscarsSoWhite as if it were a unified public.

In the New York Times discourse, for instance, people behind the #OscarsSoWhite do not seem part of the intended audience. By arguing from the point of view of authority, by explaining how the author understands the awards and the #OscarsSoWhite people do not, again the author pits one discourse (him and the article readers), against the other (@Awkard_Duck) in such a way that he is reasonable and #OscarsSoWhite is not. People behind the #OscarsSoWhite are actually not part of the intended audience. #OscarsSoWhite is seen as “a social media movement” in various instances in the coverage of the Los Angeles Times. The use of the word ‘movement’ implies many people united behind one cause. Although this is the case, overall the emphasis lies on the fragmented nature of the discourse surrounding #OscarsSoWhite; people who are quoted are not necessarily part of any unified public, they are presented as shedding some light on the topic of #OscarsSoWhite but not as part of this topic.
This shift in discourse on Twitter between 2015 and 2016—from an Oscars 2015 problem to a societal problem—opened up the possibilities for the longevity of this discourse. The hashtag became a signifier that could be used for protest beyond the limits of the Oscars. In figure 7 it is clear that in 2015 the discourse was much more focused on one theme (which was the Oscars 2015 choices) and in 2016 the discourse was used to cover more themes. Additionally, there was a change in the way in which the discourse addresses its audience. Even though in 2015 there was a much more specific audience, namely Oscar watchers, in 2016 the audience seemed to have shifted overall: from Oscar watchers to an even more general public. In doing so the solidification of the #OscarsSoWhite discourse as being used by a public united by the discourse that concerns itself with the lack of representation of black people in general culture, rather than a collection of Oscar watchers who were united by one specific concern about the 2015 Oscars, began.

In the newspapers analyzed there was quite a shift in reporting between 2015 and 2016. In 2015 there were in total 7 articles devoted to #OscarsSoWhite, and in 2016 this number increased tenfold: in 2016 the number of articles that contained mention of #OscarsSoWhite is 94. This indicates a radical shift in the way the #OscarsSoWhite discourse is received by “the public.”

4.2. #OscarsSoWhite is a counterpublic

The main theme to come forward in the tweets was that black people are, systematically, and in some cases purposefully, not represented in popular culture. The shared understanding is that being represented in popular culture matters. Another shared understanding is that black people are actively being denied this representation, and that this is something that needs to be changed. This means that the #OscarsSoWhite discourse revolves around aspirations to change “the public.” In this manner the #OscarsSoWhite discourse functions as a counterpublic. Twitter is used to bring the plight of black people to a broad audience. This means that these Twitter users have found a low threshold means of communicating their specific experience of the world and so be a large part of the public sphere. By working as a counterpublic, the #OscarsSoWhite tweets have informed the public sphere and, in so doing, demonstrated that Twitter can indeed be used as a tool of dissent that could be successful in its aim (to change the status quo).
In the newspapers, the discourse that makes up #OscarsSoWhite is described as being counter, is put away as insignificant, at least at first. This indicates that #OscarsSoWhite is seen as a counterpublic. There is, however, a shift in the number of articles: in 2016 the number of articles that mention #OscarsSoWhite increases, and the reporting on #OscarsSoWhite assumes the newspaper reader knows and understands the basic tenants of #OscarsSoWhite. This suggests that the counterpublic discourse has been ‘successful’: it has entered into mainstream discourse. Overall, the fragmented nature of the #OscarsSoWhite discourse on Twitter means that the #OscarsSoWhite is reported on as a fragmented discourse, and so not necessarily the discourse of a unified public. This may be due to the nature of social media and especially Twitter: a disorganized, fragmented, range of tweets makes up the #OscarsSoWhite discourse.

Even though #OscarsSoWhite was said to be popularized by “black Twitter,” in this research there was no indication that this was the case in the beginning. The Twitter users drawn to the hashtag were united in a love of movies and a respect for the power of culture as a force of change. However, the discourse changed over the course of a year and in 2016 the emerging themes were more concerned with unequal representation of black people, and less concerned with movies specifically.

4.1. Limitations of the analysis used

#OscarsSoWhite only relies on the hashtag function of Twitter to organize the discourse. Sporadically attempts are made to come together physically and protest, but largely the discourse was confined to Twitter. There is a shared understanding that popular culture is important, and that representation indeed matters, and should matter, on a societal level. There was one clearly identified instigator, April Reign, who started the #OscarsSoWhite discourse by tweeting “#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair…” She was identified as instigator of #OscarsSoWhite, in the newspapers she was interviewed various times, but she was not considered the leader or organizing force behind the proliferation of tweets containing #OscarsSoWhite. The discourse seemed fragmented and lacking structure, even though there were indeed some common themes identified, these themes occurred in a relatively small number of tweets.
The story being told through this random sampling of tweets is one that reflects the attitudes of a multitude of relatively anonymous Twitter users. These users are of various backgrounds, various educational level, and various skin tones. What they say on Twitter might not be part of a shared experience, but rather that of their individual experiences and interpretations of what the hashtag means. That does not mean that there was not one public “OscarsSoWhite” discourse that emerged in the tweets. Out of the 940 tweets only 140 tweets could be characterized as being part of one of the main themes identified in the discourse, or as relevant in the context of counterpublic theory.

Users employ a medium such as Twitter, that is used in part for branding oneself, for self-promotion. This means that they might not add anything to the conversation, but add the #OscarsSoWhite as a means to reach more people. These tweets may not be relevant content wise (for example “I made a YouTube video check it out”) but they do indicate a certain change in the way #OscarsSoWhite is used. As #OscarsSoWhite became a trending topic, but they do indicate a certain change. As #OscarsSoWhite became a trending topic and as Twitter users continued to engage with the hashtag it became something to reach a wider audience that is simply interested in culture. This way of using the hashtag might indicate acceptance by a larger audience.

By solely looking at text, it has been possible to distill various themes, which is relevant to look at the functioning of counterpublics and so do this specific research. However, in order to make inferences about what is important within this discourse, it might also be interesting to look at the ways in which Twitter users interact with each other, what tweets are popular, or indeed—by conducting interviews—finding the reasons and motivations of Twitter users using the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite. This way a more conclusive answer might be provided to the way in which “publics” form and how they function on social media platforms such as Twitter. This would give structure to the fragmented discourse that is found on these platforms.

The newspapers used were chosen because of their reach and because they are newspapers that have a certain level of journalistic standard. They also cover a various range of political views. However, the reach could have been much broader in order to distill a discourse that reflects the views of more ‘mainstream publics.’ This is something that could be done in a larger study towards counterpublics or the #OscarsSoWhite counterpublic in general.
4.2. Suggestions for further research

Since social media and digital means of engaging in political debate, and taking part in the public sphere discourse, constantly evolve with advancing technology, it is important to remain studying the effects of social media use on discourse. Overall, the way in which social media might serve to open up deliberations and provide more legitimacy for democratic processes has been studied quite extensively. However, the precise role of counterpublics, which does not take place in the public, but rather outside of it, could be researched more and across a diverse set of social media platforms. Since social media is—a relatively new phenomenon, with new social codes and new ways of being used, it is important to keep researching the means in which social media is utilized. Black Twitter and its effects on Twitter discourse, and by extension also on mainstream discourse, have not been fully researched yet. #OscarsSoWhite lends itself for this study because it is a recurring event, meaning the development of the hashtag discourse and the way it is being reported on in mainstream discourse can be traced over several years.

Additionally, on the level of society, representation is an interesting concept: non-representation is not a violent manner of exclusion, but exclusion from the public sphere is a form of oppression. Attempts to call out and change the way in which popular media, like the Oscars broadcast, addresses race are a way to equalize the public. This is especially true in the case of constructs like counterpublics. These counterpublics are in theory easily formed on digital social media, since there are generally very little technical or institutional barriers to engaging with fellow citizens, or dissidents, on social media. However, there might be other barriers and mechanisms in place which might mean that the formation of publics or counterpublics in the digital media sphere follow different rules, therefore it is important to keep testing the counterpublic hypotheses and the ways in which marginalized people might find a way to break into mainstream discourse.

Societies are stratified, democratic politics do not represent everyone, and the bridges between groups in societies seem fewer and farther between than ever. In contemporary western democracies, however, institutional barriers—voting rights, right to stand for election, and access to public spaces—have been taken down for all groups within society. Barring someone access to anything based on their ethnic background, religion, sex or sexual preference is illegal. These institutional gains do not mean that a society is any less stratified than it was before, even
though there is hope and the ideal of a more unified society which is used in thinking about democracy. Social media, and especially the formation of counterpublics on these platforms, might be part of the way in which society (slowly) evolves to become more inclusive and move closer to the ideals of democratic thinking.
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### Appendices

- Appendice I: Newspaper articles
- Appendice II: Tweets

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15 Contents: all newspaper articles used and all tweets used for the analysis. In digital version: see attachments called “Appendice I” and “Appendice II.” In paper version, see DVD at the back of this thesis.