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Episode 2: The Pop Culture Status of 'RBG'

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Lauren:

Hi, thanks for joining me for episode two of You Can Agree Without Being Disagreeable. A rhetorical study of twitter discourse about Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett. In the previous episode, we established the timeline of events leading to Amy Coney Barrett's Supreme Court seat. We also established the foundation of the study in which I use qualitative coding to analyze tweets to better understand the ways in which the two women are connected through twitter discourse.

Lauren:

The fact that you're still here is a great sign. We'll now dive into the findings and what it all means. In this episode will look into the life and iconic status of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In many ways, her public image was shaped by others' attachment to the 87-year-old woman more than it had anything to do with her as an actual real person. RBG became an American icon. Using the findings from the tweet study in the project, we'll look at the ways her presence and simultaneous absence shaped how people first reacted to nominee Amy Coney Barrett, and even after death, RBG lives on.

Lauren:

Hi there. I'm Lauren and lately I've been reading tweets. Profound, I know, for a 22 year old to pay attention to social media, I'm aware. And it's true, most everyone reads tweets from time to time. But lately I've been reading tweets a little differently. I've combined some of my passions: writing, following current events and using social media to study the discourse around two of the most talked about and perhaps influential women of the past year and a half. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett. The two women, different fundamental ways, share a common thread, the Supreme Court.

Lauren:

After the passing of Ginsburg on September 18th, 2020, Amy Coney Barrett became her replacement in a record six weeks. The time period was filled with anxiety, fear and uncertainty as the United States battled a raging pandemic and a violently polarized election scene. Some mourned the loss of Ginsburg while others awaited her younger, more conservative replacement. The tensions were high. And what did people do about it? They tweeted. In this podcast, I'll break down my study of tweets from the six-week time period between Ginsburg's death and Barrett's nomination. Together, we will examine in factual ways in which the two women are connected through the examination of thousands of tweets. Let's go.

Lauren:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg was born on March 15th, 1933. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York and was raised in a Jewish family. Ginsburg attended Cornell University from 1950 to 1954 and married her husband Marty shortly after. Her daughter, Jane was born in 1955, just a year before the Ginsburg's enrolled in Harvard Law School, where Ruth was one of nine women in a class of about 500. Marty was diagnosed with testicular cancer, so Ruth learned his material on her own while taking care of their young daughter and working on her own schoolwork.

Lauren:

After Marty graduated from Harvard, Ruth was forced to leave because her husband would no longer be at that school anymore and Harvard wouldn't let her stay. She transferred, graduating top of her class

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from Columbia Law School. The beginning of RBG's career was greatly influenced by her experiences as a professor. In 1963, she became the second woman to teach full-time at Rutgers Law School. While a professor, she advocated for her female colleagues and supported her students regarding issues of sex, discrimination and equality. She also began to quietly work on sex discrimination cases alongside the ACLU. In 1980, Ginsburg was then nominated by President Jimmy Carter to the US court of appeals for the District of Columbia circuit. She was then, of course, nominated by President Bill Clinton to be an associate justice of the Supreme Court in 1993.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg:

It's a decision that she must make for herself. And when the government controls that decision for her, she's being treated as less than a fully adult human responsible for her own choices.

Lauren:

Her time on the bench consisted of an enduring persistence in her professional and personal life. Some of her most notable dissenting opinions came from *Bush v. Gore*, the sex discrimination case of Lily Ledbetter, the abortion case of *Gonzales v. Carhart*, and the voting rights act decision in 2015. In her personal life, she fought cancer on and off for decades and lost Marty to metastatic cancer in 2010, but she never missed a day on the bench. According to a family friend, Marty once said, "I think the most important thing I have done is enable Ruth to do what she has done. As we know, Ginsburg was well aware of what her death would mean for the Supreme Court and the fragile fabric of our country at the most current moment. So she communicated to her granddaughter, "My most fervent wish is that I will not be replaced until a new president is installed."

Lauren:

There's more to the story than Ginsburg's biography, however. According to *Notorious RBG, The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, by Erin Carmen and Shauna Knizhnik, Ginsburg became a cultural phenomenon of a different level after her dissenting opinion regarding the voting rights act in 2015. Suddenly she is the subject of memes, Tumblr art and skits. Girl boss. Queen. Notorious RBG. The nicknames go on. All refer to the fiery five-foot-one late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Lauren:

One of her most iconic images, the book cover of *Notorious RBG*, depicts Ginsburg wearing a sideways crown mimicking the Notorious BIG. Somehow an elderly scholar and legal expert transformed into a figure with a certain amount of street cred. This depiction of Ginsburg has received criticism specifically by Theresa Donofrio and Alyssa Samek in their article, *Jeopardized Bodies, Representations of Race, Gender and Mortality in the Notorious RBG*. They state ...

Speaker 3:

We argue that NRBG utilizes symbolic markers of Black masculinity and Black rage to promote Ginsburg as a progressive hero. However, NRBG utilizes these markers in ways that perpetuate racist images of blackness and heightened anxiety over the mortality of the white aging female Supreme Court Justice. RBG thus distorts conditions of mortal risk for Black men and White women, obscures the precarity of Black lives and the possibilities for intersectional progressive politics.

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Lauren:

Nevertheless, this depiction elevated Ginsburg's status and made her relevant to generations who may not have noticed her otherwise. Kate McKinnon from SNL is famous for playing Ginsburg multiple times on the show. Again, seemingly adding to a character that became larger than the person herself.

[crosstalk 00:07:20]

Speaker 4:

Here to comment is liberal justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

McKinnon:

I'm never going to step down. You can't get rid of me.

Speaker 4:

But Justice Ginsburg, I think everyone expected you to retire soon. I mean, you're 83.

McKinnon:

Yeah, you're damn right I was going to retire. Clinton was going to win, I was going straight to the Dominican Republic. Even the last time I was there, they thought I was a Zika mosquito. But not now. Now I got to stay alive and healthy. Damn it. Give me my thing. Excuse me, got to take my vitamin.

Speaker 4:

Yeah.

Lauren:

In the documentary titled, RBG, Ginsburg watches Kate McKinnon's portrayal of her and laughs noting that she's nothing like that version McKinnon depicts. Regardless of the accuracy, much of the world sees Ginsburg in this way – powerful, fiery, and now a great loss to the country. Both elements of Ginsburg's being, her resume and career and her iconic status were found in the tweets analyzed within this project.

Lauren:

Just a quick note before we jump into the weeds of the tweets. It's important to note that the rhetorical framework of intertextuality will help us understand the connections we will see. The social nature of twitter lends itself to the analysis of the direct and indirect ways in which intertextuality plays a part in Twitter discourse regarding Ginsburg and Barrett. According to Marieeelana Bartesghi, intertextuality looks at how texts depend on other texts and how social members display their knowledge and find connections between the two observed texts.

Lauren:

The process of linking texts is social and dynamic, leaving room for personal interpretations and applications. As previously mentioned the design elements of Twitter, including but not limited to retweets, comments, hashtags and sharing of links, allows for the mapping and overlapping of discourse.

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In other words, intertextuality is built into the platform. This is what allows us to see prominent trends and rhetoric related to Ginsburg and Barrett to emerge.

Speaker 5:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg saw each of us for our humanity. She championed our worth. She fought for what was right and she spoke truth to power, #restinpower and #ourgratitude.

Speaker 3:

A reminder #RuthBaderGinsburg was Jewish. She died on Rosh Hashanah, a high holy day. Please do not disrespect her memory or her legacy or her faith by talking about her being in heaven. May her memory be a blessing is the traditional phrase.

Speaker 5:

Fearless principled and brilliantly clever Ruth Bader Ginsburg lit the way for others to follow. She remains an inspiration to me and to millions around the world. Rest in power, #RBG.

Lauren:

It probably comes as no surprise that most of the memorializing tweets occurred on September 18th through 19. The days that immediately follow Ginsburg's death. There's also little to no mention of Barrett in this category, which makes sense, given that memorializing would focus on the deceased, rather than trying to push any major political agenda. The memorializing tweets allow for a participation in the current event of the chime, to build upon our intersectionality framework. The ways people grieved and remembered Ginsburg creates linkages. Nothing particularly new or remarkable is being added to the discourse about Ginsburg's death. But the breadth of tweets honoring her life are most significant. Shared phrases and common expressions are ways to express both individual loss that her tweet, but also the collective loss through the use of common utterances in the tweets.

Lauren:

People mourn the loss of Ginsburg by themselves and with others, the participation of tweeting while grieving. The rhetorical action of quoting serves a similar purpose. To be in this category, the tweets need to be direct quote. The quotes were all mostly the same. 13 quotes from Ginsburg, eight and five of the same, two quotes, and two quotes from others. So nothing particularly groundbreaking was added to the discourse at the time. Rather people who posted, likely felt that active participation outweighed what they themselves had to say. The quotes from Ginsburg were...

Ruth Bader Ginsburg:

Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.

Speaker 6:

Days before her death Ginsburg dictated this message to her granddaughter Clara Spera, "My most fervent wish is that I will not be replaced until a new president is installed."

Lauren:

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Although these are well known quotes of Ginsburg, they are popular representations of RBG from popular sources, such as new interviews or documentaries, publicly accessible sources, well known sources and even memes. These common quotes reinforce the powerful even hyperbolic images of a badass granny. But, just as important as what we don't see in quotations that traverse the twitter sphere. Notably there aren't quotes that draw directly from her work, rather the focus is on her public image. Thus her pop culture image continues on and solidifies her as a figure through repetition of her own words that are already recognizable. A third category of tweets that can help us understand Ginsburg iconic status is reporting. Out of the tweets collected that fall into this category, Ginsburg's obituary was most shared on twitter through news sources like NPR and CNN. In order to be considered at all, there needed to be accompanying text from the twitter user with the article link. The most original content was put into the category of memorializing content when a segment is out.

Lauren:

As the timeline progresses, other articles discussed the Republican controlled Congress and Barrett's career slash odds. But the articles about Ginsburg alone help us further understand her iconic status because of their wide circulation and their repetitive use of images of Ginsburg, in her chair wearing one of her decorative collars. In other words, the news article shared information about Ginsburg accompanied with images and even quotes that point to the idle pop culture icon that has come to be known by all. And lastly, tweets discussing Ginsburg's empowerment for women and legacy overall also helps us understand the solidification of her image and iconic status to be deemed empowering women. Tweets need to reference women's rights or contributions to gender equality. This was its own type of rhetorical action because of Ginsburg's biographical information and career. Regardless of people's opinions of Ginsburg history tells us that she contributed greatly to women's rights. There were many mentions of what Ginsburg did for women.

Speaker 7:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg. You were a force. You set the path for so many women.

Speaker 8:

Tonight the flags are flying at half staff over the Capitol to honor the peak truism of justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Every woman and girl, and therefore every family in America has benefited from her brilliance.

Lauren:

Additionally, there was discussion of her legacy in general, that passing down legacy category required that the tweet mentioned something about Ginsburg's career legacy or impact. But it didn't have to be gender related.

Speaker 7:

Because of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, my niece was able to attend DMI.

Speaker 8:

RIP Ruth Bader Ginsburg. A solid strong woman who held it down on the Supreme court.

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Lauren:

We'll discuss passing down legacy more later in the podcast because many of the references to these tweets have to do with bear or Ginsburg's legacy, being in danger because of what was coming next. Memorializing reporting, quoting and passing down legacy. These rhetorical actions and the tweets indicate that Ginsburg was already notable because of a simple #RIPRBG, or rest in peace queen, can speak for itself. The discourse was about solidifying her figure whether intentional or not. While some elaborated about her accomplishments or impact, most knew that the general audience can recognize the figure and know what she stood for. Repetition and participation were most important here. The visible, active ways people engaged in the discourse around Ginsburg's death linked together to reinforce her iconic status. She had expressions of grief through quotes, obituaries, iconic images, and simple #RIPRBG tweets allowed for active participation while establishing a shared sense of remembrance.

Lauren:

In the next episode, we'll look at the ways in which Barrett and Ginsburg are both present in the twitter discourse. Perhaps it's not a surprise, but they are presented as more opposites into how they're compared to better understand that everyone loves drama. And I can promise that there was some.