

#FreeBritney movement is proof social media can help shift the narrative, research finds

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Brooke Foucault Welles. Credit: Ruby Wallau/Northeastern University

When Britney Spears entered the public eye in the late 1990s, the media hailed her as a pop phenomenon. She signed her first record deal at the age of 15 and soon after released her first No. 1 hit, "Baby One More

Time."

Fast forward to 2007 and the "Princess of Pop" was thrust into the public spotlight for very different reasons. The tabloids were now obsessed with her failed marriages, custody battles and her questionable decisions.

After a public mental breakdown, Spears was placed under a conservatorship in 2008 in which her father was put in charge of her personal life and finances. Jamie Spears even went so far as refusing to allow Britney to remove her contraceptive intrauterine device when she wanted to have another child.

But the narrative around Britney Spears shifted again in 2019 when she checked into a mental health facility. The [social media](#) community began to question if this was her choice and started #FreeBritney in an attempt sway public opinion, and release her from her father's control.

Spears' conservatorship ended in 2021 with the pop star saying the #FreeBritney movement "saved her life."

More than this, it prompted deeper conversations about conservatorships and what rights people under a conservatorship should have, especially if they have a disability.

But how can something like #FreeBritney—a counternarrative to the way the [media](#) previously portrayed Spears—take off?

That's what a group of researchers from Northeastern University tried to find out.

Brooke Foucault Welles, a professor of communication studies, and two network science Ph.D. students, Alyssa Smith and Adina Gitomer, recently [published a research paper](#) examining how hegemonic and

subversive stories are born and spread online.

The researchers tracked Spears' Wikipedia page, her mentions in the tabloids, and activity surrounding her on X (then known as Twitter).

"This is a serious topic," Welles says. "Britney Spears is a human who had certain rights that were being violated. It also is a serious topic beyond her celebrity to talk about what is a conservatorship. When should we be OK with it and when should we push back. What rights do people with mental health challenges or disabilities have when they're under conservatorship?"

What the researchers found is that social media is often where counternarratives like #FreeBriney can emerge and grow at the hands of the average person, while Wikipedia and tabloids like TMZ take longer to adopt subversive discourse and often fail to sustain them.

"We found that it's hard to tell subversive stories on different platforms to different degrees," says Smith, a third-year Ph.D. student. "It's hard to get those into the mainstream with some of the priorities and structures for credibility that we have on various websites, especially on Wikipedia and the priorities that (tabloids like) TMZ has which is scandal, not history-making or societal revolution. That means hegemonic tales such as 'Britney's out of control' end up being promoted more."

While Spears recently announced that she won't make any more music and published her memoir, "The Woman in Me," the study focuses on the online discourse surrounding Spears between her entry to the pop scene in the late 1990s to 2021 when she was released from her conservatorship.

The paper pays special attention to the #FreeBritney movement, an online campaign to get Spears out of her conservatorship.

To complete this research, Smith says the team obtained the entire history of Spears' article on Wikipedia and pulled as much TMZ coverage and Twitter data as they could find.

From there, the team examined the prevalence of the discourse surrounding Spears as an artist, spectacle and movement figurehead through keyword usage. Smith says different patterns and "bursts of activity" appeared, allowing the team to track shifts in the discourse around Spears.

Since there was a wealth of data, Gitomer says they had to divide the information. To do so, the team looked at the Twitter data to see when there were spikes around the use of the #FreeBritney hashtag. This included when the hashtag emerged around April 2019, when there was an initial hearing about the conservatorship in 2020, and in February when the New York Times released a documentary about it.

What they found was discussions about Spears often ended up being a jumping off point for larger conversations. The #FreeBritney movement not only prompted discourse about her conservatorship, but about conservatorship in general, as well as disability, and disability rights. There's also been shifting discussions on reproductive rights over the course of Spears' journey from oversexualized pop star to mother of two who could not try to conceive another child as she planned due to her conservator's insistence on her having an IUD.

However, it was harder for some of these counternarratives to take off. The researchers concluded that social media provides a starting point for these narratives while tabloids like TMZ help elevate them. But more traditional media outlets and sources like Wikipedia are even slower to adopt a counternarrative, meaning it's often difficult for different voices and discourse to gain traction.

"A truly inclusive media environment might contain authors who seek out the sources of counter-hegemonic narratives and elevate their voices, but we are not there yet," the paper concludes. "Instead, what we have is an ecosystem with limited flow of ideas and a taste for narratives that fail to challenge the status quo. While there is hope in the form of generative platforms like Twitter, work—in the form of institutionalizing a process of discovering and amplifying diverse narratives—remains to be done."

Gitomer, a fourth-year Ph.D. student, added that while the paper found social media has limited reach when it comes to challenging the status quo, it still plays a critical role when it comes to online discourse.

"It's really important to show these examples of how social media provides this (platform) for counter narratives," she says. "Even if they don't fully permeate mainstream news media, they still rise to prominence."

Welles, who studies how social movements get introduced to the mainstream, said the pop star made a compelling case study because unlike other online movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, the #FreeBritney movement to get Spears out of her conservatorship began online and can be easily tracked from beginning to its ends when Spears was released from her conservatorship.

"We are all Britney fans and so we've all been Britney consumers over the years," Gitomer says. "We all have some sort of knowledge of the Britney coverage. ... What was really compelling about the Free Britney movement is how it took off and then reached a resolution relatively quickly. Suddenly, everybody was talking about it. It really permeated mainstream news cycles and then she got out of the conservatorship. It was a really cool example of the way social media can make these movements visible."

More information: You want a piece of me: Britney Spears as a case study on the prominence of hegemonic tales and subversive stories in online media: [firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/ ... cle/view/13314/11378](https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/...cle/view/13314/11378)

Provided by Northeastern University

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