
Digital Feminism: Feminism Activity In The Twenty First Century

Feminism in the twenty-first century has come to be the redefinition of politics. It challenges the assumption of an easy distinction between the public and private sphere, specifically on how “women seek equality in all spheres of life and use a broad array of strategies to achieve that goal” (Fiss, 1994). With today’s society being marked as a generation that conducts most of the activism online, along the side of offline components, the strategies used are often reinforced through the development of the internet and communication technologies. Such an example may be seen when US feminists contributed to the #YesAllWomen campaign on Twitter in May 2014. Within four days, the hashtag quickly gained global recognition and have sparked a large narrative of feminist discussions. In this essay, I argue that digital platforms can help feminist activism, by identifying and analyzing how online platforms shape and disseminate new modes of discourse about feminism through hashtag activism, as well as how it can connect women of different constituencies, allowing physical acts of resistance to emerge on a global scale.

The social constructivist view believed that the stereotypical role for a woman is to rely on men for both sustenance and status (Cook 1993, 59). However, considering the fact that feminism comes in different waves involving different commitments, challenging those longstanding sexist assumptions can essentially come as a struggle. The first wave was the women’s suffrage movement, where women fought for the right to vote, education, and property equality. The second wave was the women’s liberation movement from the domestic sphere, striving to achieve and gain equality in all aspects of life. The third wave was the politics of difference with a focus on enhancing women’s individual agency. Lastly, the fourth wave is where the society of today is now at. It mainly focuses on the interconnectedness of diverse identifications of women via the internet, and how it creates new alternative forms of activism. This is where the #YesAllWomen feminist campaign emerged into the digital world, surfacing as “a key moment in the genealogy of feminism that underscores the old-in-the-new and suggests an urgent course of action for feminist media scholars.” (Rodino-Colocino 2014, 1).

Firstly, digital platforms of today are able to help shape and disseminate new modes of discourse about feminism through hashtag activism. Hashtag activism comes as an example of how online platforms are able to influence and shape the twenty-first century way of activism “by giving rise to changing modes of communication, different kinds of conversations, and new configurations of activism across the globe, both online and offline” (Baer 2016, 18). #YesAllWomen was created as a response in light of the Isla Vista shooting rampage where six undergraduate female students were murdered. Prior to the incident, the shooter, Elliot Rodger, posted a youtube video in which he expressed his idea to punish women for rejecting and leaving him an outcast, claiming “If I can’t have you, girls, I will destroy you.”. The misogyny and victim-blaming of the incident became the motives behind the Twitter trend #YesAllWomen, where the movement was meant to empower and encourage women to share similar experiences.

Not only does the #YesAllWomen campaign re-discuss the old feminist debate of human rights, but they also renegotiate the feminist political theory into a more neoliberal dimension by

diverting attention towards a more gender-specific violation. According to feminist scholars, today's exposure to digital feminist activism acts as "a departure from conventional modes of doing feminist politics" (Baer 2016, 18), arguing that it represents a turning point in the feminist movement. As feminists today are more "primarily concerned with hierarchy, not discrimination" (Fiss 1994, 416), the new millennium approaches feminism attempts to divert the "liberal feminism" into a much more ambitious goal of ending the subordination of women as a social group. For instance, the #YesAllWomen campaign aims to inhibit the universality of misogyny by acknowledging and sharing all kinds of post-sexual harassment or violence due to women's oppression. They question previous longstanding debates of both male privilege and white privilege (Baer 2016, 29) as the campaign ought to contend a "counter-narrative to exceptionalist discourses by insisting that these spectacular tragedies are logical manifestations of a system of gender oppression which condones and facilitates male domination by normalizing gender violence and sexual entitlement." (Thrift 2014, 1). Many young feminists are also responding to the fourth wave of feminism through online protests, hoping to re-signify pop culture and reframe the orthodox media representations of feminism.

Secondly, the digital platforms of today are able to create portals that connect women of different constituencies across global terrains, thereby promoting those feminist ideas. As today's generation is mediated in the digital era, feminisms are able to flourish via the enhanced connectivity. Women of today are likely to gain more access to the narrative agency through hashtag activism, allowing them to share personal stories of sexual harassment and violence through intersectional conversations:

"The Internet provides a space where feminists can learn from each other about why things some feminists see as harmless can be hurtful and offensive to others. Most feminists know about intersectionality, but far from all of us know every way in which intersectional oppression works." (Fredrika Thelandersson 2014, 529).

As the barriers to access feminist conversations are much lower, feminist ideas are naturally much more collective and accessible on a global scale. Four days later to when #YesAllWomen was first used, the campaign had received a huge media cover worldwide as there were over 1.7 million tweets with personal stories and demands for a more 'just' society. Thus, it may be seen how as being one of the most popular digital platforms, Twitter is a crucial platform in building networks within trans-local and transnational boundaries. As stated by Clark, "by linking together numerous individual voices without relying on organizations, hashtag activism enabled a more intersectional movement against domestic violence than that of previous generations." (Clark 2016, 10). One does not need to be in a women's studies class or go to a consciousness-raising group as they can just simply go on a computer to learn and speak out to be a part of the movement. Subsequently, this allows younger generations to be more politically engaged as the digital world is known to be perfectly natural for the young.

The individual and the collective interplays through the demonstration of how women of today are able to share stories of oppression under #YesAllwomen, which enables "active audience participation as opposed to passive consumption" (Kreiss, Meadows, and Remensperger 2014). Alongside the shift in the general society's attitude towards women, the commitment to collective activism via necessity increases the potential of the awareness to transform into a real impact for women issues legislation transnationally. Blogs are also an example of today's generation's form of the consciousness-raising group where such medium is inclusive of all the social justice needs. The increase in collectivity and connectivity of feminist activists had also

allowed acts of resistance to emerge on a global scale. In June 2014, the American Revolutionary Communist Party had organized a series of demonstrations supporting the #YesAllWomen trend in several states of the US such as New York, Philadelphia, Portland, and San Francisco, where the street protest aimed to turn the digital protest into a physical offline act of activism. Feminists in Germany had also contributed to #YesAllWomen by sharing their experiences and stories on Twitter, which included the hashtag #Aufschrei or 'outcry', creating "a transnational digital connection between two locally founded protest actions" (Baer 2016, 17).

However, one should also consider the negatives of online activism. Aside from the digital culture being able to facilitate feminist aims, women are still prone to be radicalized in those online feminist spaces. Later in the year 2014, Twitter became a battleground for transnational activists when the #NotAllMen campaign emerged as an objection to #YesAllWomen as many are starting to believe that the idea of feminism has too often become synonymous with man-hating. Secondly, the success and effectiveness of raising awareness in social media are often dependent on public figures being involved in the online protest: "celebrity and popular culture have figured as key sites in the mediated resurgence of feminism, producing competing and contested articulations of feminism as a 'popular' phenomenon" (Kanai 2019, 1). The #YesAllWomen campaign was able to travel far and fast due to a retweet by author, J.K. Rowling, mentioning the hashtag to her 3.2 million followers. Lastly, there is also an overarching neoliberal sentiment of self-surveillance from digital feminism, as the idea of feminism itself is increasingly seen as an identity and not just a politic.

In conclusion, it may be seen how digital platforms have the potential to help feminist activism. The digital culture of today comes as a site of collective consciousness and identity building for women around the world by enabling women to speak against the systematic struggles women face. Hashtags have a narrative logic by connecting individual personal stories to fuel for a greater political change making it the ideal launchpad for modern feminism. Regardless of the factors that limit the empowerment potential through online spaces, many of today's digital platform is able to help increase feminist activism. #YesAllWomen is an example of how feminist Twitter campaigns are able to provide women with a platform to discuss critical gender-related issues through the power of narrative form. This had lead to the formation of offline protests which can transform online awareness into a real impact for women issues legislation transnationally.