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Observation & Commentary

Tweeting back while shouting back: Social media and feminist activism

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Abstract

Social networks are increasingly significant to the success of feminist activism, campaigning and consciousness raising. Digital spaces including Twitter, YouTube, blogs and Facebook provide a platform for feminists and others to share and address experiences and raise awareness of misogyny, sexism and violence against women. This paper provides a commentary on use of social media for feminists, and explores the role of social media engagement with the wider social movement of feminism, through a consideration of the process of 'shouting back' with a focus on Twitter and hashtags. We will consider why social media can be useful to feminists with reference to existing research, before discussing the impact of two social media based feminist campaigns (#everydaysexism and #AskThicke) and the implications of these for the feminist movement.

Key Words

Twitter, social media, shouting back, campaigns, feminist, sexism

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‘Shouting back’ or responding using a hashtag in digital spaces is a way of exposing the prejudice faced by people on a daily basis, while sharing and reacting to it, and provoking responses; social networking sites (SNS) provide a visible platform for feminists to address experiences relating to sexism and misogyny. Guillard (2016:1) argues that digital spaces are central to defining ‘a fourth wave of feminist practice’ and allow for global engagement, yet the use of digital media can be tokenistic (Kristofferson, White & Peloza, 2014) and use of the internet is insufficient to demarcate a new wave of practice. As feminist academics (Braun, 2011) writing from the United Kingdom, who have engaged with social media for a number of years, we seek to explore some of the issues related to social media based feminist campaigns and examine the process of ‘shouting back’ against hegemony, misogyny and sexism. Digital spaces are a powerful influence on social movements (Earl & Kimport, 2011), and we consider some of the ways in which social media has contributed to the feminist movement. We will first briefly reflect on why social media and social networking sites are useful to feminists, before discussing the impact of two social media based feminist campaigns and the implications of this for the feminist movement. Following

Kitzinger (2000), we consider the feminist movement to be a social movement to challenge the patriarchal and societal systems that service to oppress women, to advocate for social justice and issues that affect women around the world. Further, we use the terms feminist groups and feminist individuals in recognition that there is both collective action and individual protest.

Since 2010, there has been a global digital explosion of feminists using SNSs and blogs to raise consciousness and expand awareness about a myriad of issues related to patriarchy, sexism, misogyny, gendered violence and inequality (Baer, 2016). Baer (2016:30) argues that due to neoliberalism, with its emphasis on the individual and the shift from public to private politics, feminist social media campaigns are political actions that are reframing feminism and 'deploy the precarious female body to make visible contradictions of contemporary social reality.' Taking advantage of digital platforms can facilitate the broadening of feminist space(s), thus enabling a wider reach and more open engagement with and promotion of feminism and feminist ideas (Crossley, 2015). Further, for Schuster (2013), social media can connect people beyond their locality, and involve those who may not be able to connect face to face. National, transnational and global academic literature is increasingly focused on the connections between feminism and social media, and much of the literature is transdisciplinary (see for example, Baer, 2016; Gillard, 2016); Hutton et al., 2016; Manago, 2013).

We note here that digital spaces are not a utopia for feminist campaigning. Women are frequently attacked online (to the extent of rape or death threats) or 'trolled' for airing their views and experiences relating to inequality and sexism. As Boynton (2012: 539) stated, [t]he mobilizing power social media creates also enables mobbing, bullying and harassment'

for feminists. Social media can expand the means to proliferate misogynistic and sexist narratives, and shame women and maintain power inequalities in the offline world. Digital spaces have potential to exclude people for their gender, ethnicity, social class and other structural inequalities (Hutton et al., 2016), and their levels of digital literacy or disabilities. Further, the digital stage is crowded and so various feminist organisations (and individuals) compete for publicity, recognition and resources (Fotopoulou, 2016). Digital labour (often unpaid) is essential for establishing and maintaining an online presence. In addition, the use of social media by feminists takes place alongside off-line action, and as Baer (2016:22) argues, '[t]he interface between online and offline spaces appears to be crucial for establishing modes of feminist protest.' Social media can be further used for reach and scope through celebrity endorsement such as actor Emma Watson's #heforshe, which encourages men to become feminists and strive for equality. These enable rapid dissemination of feminist information and news, that is then often picked up and covered by the mainstream media because of celebrity involvement. The use of a hashtag makes the campaigns accessible to a larger audience, immediate and easy to track, and using social media can be less intimidating than actually confronting a misogynist in the real, offline world (Eagle, 2015), as well as encouraging a collective sense of support and empathy.

Turning to 'shouting back' social media campaigns, that have challenged hegemony, misogyny and inequalities, there are a number of examples of hashtags. Acknowledging that spaces here is limited for a wide consideration of hashtags, we selected two that we are familiar with, and have made an impact beyond feminist circles and in the offline world: #everydaysexism and #AskThicke. We chose #everydaysexism as this is part of an online active feminist campaign by British feminist writer, Laura Bates, that aims to collate

examples of everyday experiences of sexism in one space. #AskThicke is an example of a hashtag that has been appropriated by feminists to raise awareness about a particular issue. Both campaigns have been widely cited in the mainstream U.K. press including the Guardian, the Independent, the Telegraph and the Daily Mail newspapers, and discussed on television shows ranging from political programmes to talk shows. This illustrates that these campaigns have had a broader influence through reaching a mainstream, not actively feminist, audience.

Founded by Laura Bates in 2012 in the U.K., in reaction to the explicit and implicit sexism she encountered frequently heard about from other women, the global Everyday Sexism Project's #everydaysexism and linked Twitter account, has acted as a platform for feminists to share lived experiences of harassment, misogyny and sexism in public and private spheres, raise consciousness and challenge dominant hegemonic discourses. The website's Twitter account uses two main hashtags, #everydaysexism and #shoutingback, aims to document macro and micro examples to expose implicit patriarchal culture and the unequal treatment of women and the collection of women's stories includes over 85000 examples. Indeed, as a result of the accessibility of Twitter hashtags, interaction with the project has been wide ranging and covered significantly by the mainstream press in the U.K, and by television programmes, including the BBC news. The project has been documented in a book 'Everyday Sexism' cited by Feminist Press as essential reading for young people. Laura Bates writes weekly for the Guardian and has recently covered the ways in which the media portrays female politicians and sportswomen.

Turning to #AskThicke, a controversial number one hit song 'Blurred Lines' written by Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams, was called out as a 'rape anthem' and banned from some university campuses. This provided feminists with an opportunity to raise awareness of rape culture. In 2014, the VH1 music channel used the #AskThicke hashtag on Twitter, originally intended as an online Q&A session for fans to interact with Robin Thicke. The hashtag was quickly appropriated by feminists to challenge Thicke about his misogynistic lyrics and music video, and to speak out against the prevalence of rape culture more broadly. Two examples of tweets are:

@kittyknits: #AskThicke It might seem like some of the questions on this hashtag are cruel and abusive but Robin, I know you want it

@MariaJPrice: #AskThicke Did you really write a rape anthem as a love song for your wife and are you still wondering why she left you?

For Thicke and his record label, Star Trak Recordings, the social media engagement mobilised by feminists was a public relations disaster, as the story was picked up by the media in both the U.K. and the United States, (telegraph, 2014; Time, 2014) and highlighted the issue of rape culture more widely. Discussion of the #AskThicke hashtag was unconfined to online spaces; the media produced articles mentioning misogyny and sexism as a central feature, referring to Thicke as 'the poster boy for misogyny' (Independent, 2014: online), and 'creepy and manipulative' (Time, 2014: online), and sexism within the music industry and more widely in society was given prominent coverage. In the U.K., some students' associations successfully lobbied for the song to be banned at a number of universities, including Leeds University and the University of Edinburgh. Other prominent men within the music industry have recently been accused of sexual harassment and assault. Heathcliff

Berru, founder of a music public relations company, has been accused by seven women of a range of sexual offences, and the American singer Kesha has filed a lawsuit against her manager for sexual assault and rape. Once again, Twitter was used by the singers to document and share their experiences, and also by supporters to show solidarity with the women, using the hashtag #FreeKesha. The media reported on these allegations (Guardian, 2016; New York Times, 2016) opening up debate regarding sexual harassment at work and more broadly.

Here, we have considered the use of two hashtags on Twitter relating to feminist campaigns. We are aware that there are limitations in the use of hashtags and indeed social media. However, digital media has radical potential for shouting back and highlighting sexism, equality misogyny and rape culture, along with generating a space for discussions of other everyday issues. We recognise that social media is not the only modality of feminism and the importance and value of offline feminist movements should not be overlooked.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the authorship and or/ publication of this article.

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