Communities without borders: Feminism fuelled by social media

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Abstract

Social media has changed feminist communication and activism strategies from local movements to vast, global campaigns. The use of filters on social media has allowed communities of strangers to form so they may carry out global and multilingual feminist campaigns. The use of social media by such campaigns has the added effect of empowering young women and girls while giving them online safe spaces to practice speaking out.

Introduction

The widespread adoption of social media has changed the way young women and girls participate in communities and develop their identity through experimentation. In this paper I will argue that the collaborative nature of social media has accelerated feminist movements among young women and girls. The emergence of 'call-out culture' on social media platforms –Twitter in particular – has shown girls that it is acceptable to call out misogyny (either external or internal) as they no longer have to strive for male acceptance. The days of girls proudly announcing that they are "not like the other girls," seem to have come to an end, no longer making femininity something to be ashamed of. The #MeToo movement on Twitter has emboldened women and girls across the world as the platform has provided a public space for women to discuss their bodily autonomy and that misbehaviour will no longer be accepted with a cringe or a shy smile.

History of feminist communication

When it comes to feminist communities through the ages I will be describing the history of feminism in the United States of America (USA) as the majority of English speaking internet users are based in the USA (Internet world stats, 2019).

Early American feminism began in the 1840s (National Parks Service, 2015) with discussion and demonstration by women who wished for the right to vote. The methods of communication were public speeches and demonstrations, what was considered 'un-ladylike' behaviour at the time. The feminist community was limited to one group of white, cis-gendered, middle-class women who would have to meet in person, so numbers were limited based on location. Despite low numbers and geographic limitations this movement was able to achieve the right to vote for women in the USA by 1920 (National Archives USA, 2019).

In the 1960s the message changed from the struggle of women as a 'class' to become about individual rights or "identity politics". The demonstrations began at a 1968 Miss America event comparing them to cattle displays (Gay, 2018). The communication strategy of this 'second wave' of feminism was demonstrated through mock beauty pageants where a sheep

was crowned Miss America and by discarding – sometimes burning – objects seen as symbols of patriarchal control over women. The style of demonstration was mostly by protest marches and sit-ins (Jackson, 2018) and news of these demonstrations were reported in national newspapers (Gay, 2018). This wave of feminism was seen as quite radical with some members of the movement stating that they hated men and women are superior to men – essentially becoming the very thing they were fighting against. These women lead to the caricature of the feminist who is a "man-hating, lesbian, with bad hair". The notion of female superiority could also explain the ingrained hatred of the word feminism by some men even today (Rúdólfsdóttir & Jolliffe, 2008), particularly 'trolls' who attack female activists online.

In the 90s feminism changed slightly from the second wave with how it was presented. The lipstick feminist (Jackson, 2018) was born, where the feminists of the 60s refused to wear bras, high heels or other restrictive clothing that they considered created by men, 90s feminists wore excessively feminist clothing and bright lipstick as if to reclaim femininity for women. This wave continued reclamation of their identity from men by appropriating the use of words like "slut" or "bitch" to take power away from such insults in a similar way to how African Americans use the "n-word" (Rahman, 2011).

Call out culture has emboldened a generation of women

Call out culture – a culture of publicly calling out inappropriate behaviour – has become the norm on social media (H., 2017). This has changed how young women develop their identities as, on social media, there is no expectation for women to simply accept poor behaviour from men. In the physical world there is the fear of physical violence if a man is challenged for offensive behaviour, but online the assumption is that the worst to come would be a nasty comment back. Young women are learning through social media that they do not have to tolerate offensive comments and seem to be bringing this lesson to the real world.

Social media can be seen as a 'safe' space for young women to discuss feminism as they are able to participate in communities with likeminded users. There is always the risk of trolls infiltrating a group but call-out culture has lessened the effect of their toxic comments. The majority of women who participate on social media have received toxic comments, many with threats of bodily harm or rape. These toxic comments showcase how threatening it is for some men to encounter women who are willing to speak their minds and break from the status quo demonstrating the dramatic change that social media has enabled.

Digital feminism

The global adoption of social media gave rise to digital feminism, sometimes referred to as 'fourth wave feminism' (Gay, 2018), where most – if not all – of the activism and discourse occurs online. Campaigns can spread rapidly all over the globe through social media as information can be shared with thousands of followers with one post.

One notable campaign was the #MeToo movement on Twitter (Denomme, 2019). "Me Too" was a phrase coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 (Garcia, 2017) as part of a campaign to provide survivors of sexual assault support. In 2017 actress Alyssa Milano Tweeted, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" to show the extent of sexual harassment in society.

Fig. Tweet by Alyssa Milano 15 October 2017

The actress made the tweet in reaction to a public accusation of a well-known movie producer of sexually assaulting numerous women throughout his career. Within one day the post was followed by 500,000 tweets (Respers France, 2017) and 4.7 million Facebook posts (Santiago & Criss, 2017) were made with the hashtag.

Since the original post there have been versions in other languages – #BalanceTonPorc, #YoTambien, #QuellaVoltaChe, #RiceBunny (米兔) (Caro, 2017) – showing the reach of social media beyond the limitations of language. This mass translation has formed separate campaigns within each country that has shared similar stories to the English speaking movement.

Online communities, public discussions

Children raised during the 90s were taught to be wary of strangers on the internet, not to share identifying information and not to meet them in person. Now we use the internet to have in-depth discussions with strangers and even use apps to meet strangers so that we can get in their cars so they can take us to a second location – also strongly advised against in the 90s. Social media has changed how we view strangers, it has allowed people to find people with similar interests regardless of how obscure so we can make friends without ever meeting them in person (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011).

Social media platforms use tags to organise discussions, Twitter uses hashtags – denoted by the symbol '#' – so users can search a hashtag to join discussions with like-minded strangers. These tags allow users to join any public discussion and make friends to have private conversations with later. Tags allow users to customise their consumption of information on social media platforms – where a lot of people get their news (David, 2019). Tags also allow the platform to make suggestions for other tags or users to engage with that they may like. This can lead to people developing a form of tunnel vision of world events as their primary source of news has been filtered to suit their world view.

Social media platforms have allowed feminist discussions and campaign organisation to occur without needing to consider physical barriers (Martin & Valenti, 2012). They can take the form of public threads on Twitter, semi-public forums on Reddit or even in private groups created on Facebook. Women and girls are also able to remain relatively anonymous so they do not feel self-conscious of how they look or sound when making comments online. Due to the personas created for social media, the platforms provide a safe space for younger women and girls to take part in discussions and express themselves freely (Stern, 1999).

Public collaborations – such as the #MeToo movement on Twitter – have brought young women and girls to the feminist movement. Women shared so many stories of their struggle in a sexist world that every woman and girl was able to find a story they could relate to or sympathise with. This gave the feminist movement cohesiveness as women and girls were seeing that they are a group with similar experiences from across the world.

Women and social media

Young people (18-24) are the most prolific users of social media and women are more likely to use social media than men (Pew Research Centre, 2017). The number of women using social media platforms is constantly increasing even in countries where women are less likely to have a public voice (Martin & Valenti, 2012) providing some with a space with more

freedom than in their own country. Social media enlarges the recruitment base for feminists by doing away with physical barriers like distance and isolation as well as language barriers as more platforms automatically translate posts (Facebook, 2020).

Social media platforms are a place where young women can learn and be empowered through discussion as well as through recognition that is quantified by 'likes' and 'shares' of a post. This model of public statements with instantaneous reactions has allowed young women to develop their identity in a safe space and rapidly experiment with communities without needing to leave their bedrooms (Boyd, 2007). This is particularly empowering for young women in societies that are not very nurturing towards women who wish to develop their identity as it is harder for the morality police to find someone with a fake social media account (Agarwal, Lim, & and Wigand, 2011).

While social media can provide safe places where anything can be discussed at length it is still not safe from attack. A lot of women (young women in particular) are wary of making a post about feminism on a public forum because of the risk of attracting misogynistic trolls (Jackson, 2018). Some trolls will also engage in coordinated attacks on activists – or game creators as was the case in the notable "Gamergate" campaign (Ryan Vickery & Everbach, 2018) – meaning women could risk becoming a target both on and offline if they make a post deemed too controversial.

Privacy through obscurity

Teenage girls will often use social media platforms as their main method of communicating with friends they know in real life through group chats or pages. These private groups are where discussions with people who have the same interests and come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds can take place. Due to the specific conversation topics and assumed participants there is an expected level of privacy even though the conversation is taking place in on a public space. Some girls will use pseudonyms and removing all identifying information so that their parents are unable to monitor what they are discussing online (Boyd, 2007). Another method of protecting privacy among teens is to create two accounts: one with their real name and school; the second with fake names and information. Fake social media accounts – also called a finsta (Varma-White, 2017) – are another way for girls to navigate social media in privacy away from other social media users as a fake identity removes the risk of being harassed in real life by users offended by a feminist tweet.

Social media platforms allow users to filter their experience by choosing a list of topics they wish to see through tags. This has provided some groups' a perceived privacy through obscurity as you would need to know the name of the group or tag to engage in their discussion. If the group remains small enough it will not attract attention from the general

pool of platform users and can exist in a public space with a level of privacy through obscurity (Russel, 2015). The general fear of misogynistic attack online that women have can be abated when there are small feminist communities that are able to thrive. Women are able to refer each other to these groups and feel free to discuss feminist issues without agonising over each word in their comments online.

Conclusion

Feminism over the last century has been a constantly changing movement, but social media has launched the movement to the mainstream. Female celebrities – once seen simply as decoration – are now at the forefront of campaigns like the #MeToo movement. Digital feminism has allowed movements and campaigns to move at breakneck speed and give the movement strength in numbers in many different countries at once. The public nature of social media has provided young women a space to join public discussion as well as experiment with different communities in a safe space. While there are risks of engaging in public discourse there are ways that young women are protecting themselves from online trolls – and their snooping parents – further allowing young women to develop their online identities with complete freedom to choose their life story. Misogynist users on social media have also served as a useful tool for young women as they are learning to call-out poor behaviour rather than simply tolerating it and hoping they will go away. The collaborative nature of social media has accelerated feminist movements among young women and girls and given them a safe space to form communities for support and empowerment.

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