

The influence of slacktivism on feminist movements

Social technology has led to the establishment of post-modern and sociological communities online, allowing a group of diverse individuals to share interests and perspectives on social standings. Through the continuous innovation of social technology, users online are now able to participate in online activity from anywhere at any time through platforms such as Twitter. This encourages individuals to take part in and advocate in social and political affairs without having to leave their homes.

Traditionally, activism took the form of organised mass demonstrations expressing a passionate interest or opinion on a political, social or economic issue, often demanding for change. However, the majority of the 21st century networks and communities now form online as users find a third place to show their compassion. Through the innovation of the new technologies and established 'third places' they can be used by communities as a means for quickly and easily drawing international attention to a movement or issue that would have otherwise been local news (McCafferty, 2011). The 'third place' engages with a wider audience, capturing public attention and awareness of social movements and publicising 'private' issues such as violence, in particularly violence against women (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2017). Although female activists (also commonly known as feminists) have existed for decades, the rapid expansion of networks have made them a stronger figure in society. However, like any social movement, along with activists, slacktivists have also emerged through the creation of 'third places' for user generated content, which has made it easier than ever to become involved in a cause, simply by just passing the word on: The online word of mouth. Slacktivists who constantly seek the "feel good" avocation in order to be considered as aware and understanding toward the particular cause in the community (McCafferty, 2011). Feminist movements such as #metoo and #TIMESUP have brought to light more intimate issues, using the platforms to call for online justice as well as focusing on a framework for prevention challenging violence against women including the provision of psychological, and rehabilitation services for those effected (Fairbairn, 2020). Both movements grew awareness and social change whilst they were trending, however, it is debatable whether or not slacktivism helped the cause succeed or dilute. ***While Twitter has become a third place for connecting feminists and supporting their movements through hashtags such as #MeToo and #TIMESUP, they have also highlighted the failure of slacktivism within the online communities.***

Originally inspired by the sexual assault allegations made against Harvey Weinstein – a Hollywood producer who was the centre of many sexual assault allegations in 2018 – the hashtag '#metoo' was reborn, giving women across the globe a voice to share similar experiences with sexual assault and harassment. This soon highlighted the fact that many women had not only been victims of oppression but also the large population that had were silent/silenced, feeling uncomfortable or ashamed to speak out against men in power. It called for justice on behalf of all the women who had suffered abuse at the force of their perpetrators - women in power created a voice for those who lacked the authority to speak out, and those who could not were given a network for support. The movement rapidly gained traction worldwide, quickly leading to a paradigm shift in workplace mentality in regards to male positions and preferences. Many men who had occupied positions of power in a variety of industries stepped down, such as news reporters, actors, journalists and politicians, the majority of the men having had roles in the media or film industry. The '#metoo' movement was quickly seen as a victory for women as it was viewed as a fight against perpetrators and placed in the spotlight those that had been inflicting reoccurring

incidents for years, and sexual assault soon became a conversation in households (Bischof, 2018).

Slacktivism assisted the movement's success as the hashtag went viral, engaging millions of different social media users to show their support by using #metoo either in comments or images (Ayres, 2018). Within 48 hours, the first tweet by actress Alyssa Milano advocating for sexual assault survivors to share the hashtag, #metoo had gone viral, reaching around 200'000 responses. With a French version emerging with #Balancetonporc – translating to 'outyourpig' – encouraging French women to expose the name of their abusers (Ayres, 2018). In August 2018, the online and offline exposure of the cause in France led to fines being established/extended upon for cyberstalking, sex crimes and street harassment, e.g. "upskirting" - taking unwanted photos underneath female's skirts or dresses (Stone & Vogelstein 2019). It was quickly evident that the hashtag had also gained international attention. #TIMESUP also made Time Magazine for 'Person of the Year' in 2017, acclaiming the women who had stood up through the title of 'The Silent Breakers' as the #metoo movement continued to grow (Ayres, 2018). The spread of Time's 'The Silent Breakers' cover page - featuring Susan Fowler, Adama Iwu, Ashley Judd and Taylor Swift encouraged more women to speak out against Harvey Weinstein, helping surface lawsuits and seek further legal action. The leaderless movement held Weinstein accountable and soon had him removed from the film industry's authorial positions, stepping down from director and producer (Redden, 2017).

Without slacktivism, the movement could not have reached as wide an audience as it did and would have resulted in those with powerful positions silencing the call to change, disregarding the tweets to position the women as once again vulnerable and the tweets as 'insignificant'.

Though despite this the #metoo movement was not overly successful. Due to the nature of the hashtag and rapid spread, it was extremely easy for users to contribute to the movement. The oversimplified hashtag (of two words) made it too easy for a user on the 'third place' to accuse another of a very serious incident without understanding fully or providing sufficient evidence, creating a very easy shift in reputations and generating concerns for false accusations online. The amount and brevity of tweets somewhat shadowed the severity of the allegations, eventually reducing the significance of the hashtag's meaning in the tweets ("The #MeToo campaign and why it fails" 2017). Over time, slacktivists became more populated and the hashtag became nothing but just an entangled tweet, dying out gradually. Although today the #metoo is still used amongst social media platforms, it is no longer trending, viewed as a phase in the past by the public.

Shortly after #metoo a new hashtag #TIMESUP surfaced, immediately receiving the same global attention – if not more – as #metoo, smothering social media outlets. Formed by 300 actresses and women in powerful positions (involving high profiles such as Reese Witherspoon), #TIMESUP was also Hollywood associated and inspired by the Harvey Weinstein scandal, once again defending the more vulnerable (e.g. those who were afraid to lose their jobs if they were to speak up). This time also including Kevin Spacey, the hashtag shared abhorrent emotions of perpetrators committing sex crimes and disregarding the consequences. Unlike the #metoo movement, #TIMESUP was ranked more successful as it called for more action, even using capital letters in the hashtag to generate more urgency. It raised around \$13 million in donations which was later used towards the education and prevention of sexual misconduct in workplaces as well as providing further encouragement for women to report cases – to not stay silent (Callahan, 2018). In result, the reports of sexual

assault sky rocketed in 2018 with 7'609 new; 6'399 by women and 1'210 by men seeking support and justice. The new academic attention received by the movement motivated improvements to the psychological and physical treatment of the victims both online and offline, working to prevent even subtle unwanted sexual behaviour.

In addition, #TIMESUP also focused attention on the urgency of noticing these subtle behaviours such as gender harassment, traditional gender-based stereotypes, sexist comments, non-verbal and verbal domestic abuse, and taking advantage of one's sexuality for workplace benefits, in order to recognise that harassment is a gender-based issue and needs a call to change (Chawla et al., 2020). Nevertheless, to this day most celebrities still claim to advocate for the cause yet fail to consciously contribute to its efforts. This has become problematic as some celebrities have become the dominant face of the movement without fully understanding what the cause was actually for, creating a shift in meaning for the average person viewing the movement on their social media pages. For example, James Franco received Best Actor at the Golden Globes wearing a #TIMESUP badge despite being one of the accused within the movement and others accused sharing the hashtag online, leading to the view that alleged perpetrators were using the tag to almost mock the movement which raised questions such as whether or not the movement actually meant something (Callahan, 2018). The hypocrisy of the event made it obvious that Twitter had indeed become a 'third place' and was not a satisfactory substitute for the offline world as it soon became evident that others had their own perceptions of the hashtag movement. Since Twitter encourages the freedom of speech, there were many opinions on the movement, including biased 'for' as well as those that thought the movement had gotten out of control, some claiming that people are using the hashtag as an excuse to be heard.

The movement became controversial as social ties were segregated, some viewers expressing their opinion that feminists were unreasonable and dramatising as they swarmed social media platforms with constant information urging sympathy towards women. Considering that the majority of participants in the movement were female, creating a division between male correspondents. Although most men agreed with the cause and agreed that abusers needed to experience the repercussions of their actions, they admitted that some feminists took it too far and felt as though they were attacking the male gender as a whole. The lack of activism and offline activist agendas, once again gradually pushed the movements aside as it became obvious that the hashtags weren't going to be effective and their desired change was not going to be put into place. Successful activism requires structure, organisation and a strong connection between the strongest and weakest connections– either between individuals within the online community or ones directly involved in the cause (McCafferty 2011; Kent 2021).

Regardless of the movement, online bystander intervention continues to exist, some becoming more involved than others, acting as 'activist wannabes' by observing these movements, and yet little action to communicate it further between these communities and networks. Through the examples of #metoo and #TIMESUP the disadvantages and benefits that slacktivism can offer to movements are evident. With a satisfactory framework, the movement may receive a sufficient amount of momentum to keep the awareness of the cause in order to encourage change, but due to the nature of social media and online networks, the movement will gradually lose focus and dilute the meaning to just an echo of the original cause.

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