Feminist Movement and Media

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ABSTRACT

Locating the issue of feminism in the institutional context of the print media, we discover two popular versions of feminism that the media promote, a feminism of choice' and a 'traditional feminism'. At the same time, they express hostility, both covert and not-so-covert, to organised women's movements. This simultaneous cooptation and backlash is seemingly a sign of a con sensus over some of feminism's demands, such as equality, while it also perverts the agenda of feminism itself—in the interests of a newly liberalised economy and a resurgent majoritarian religious political party movement.

KEYWORDS: Women's Rights, Suffrage, Feminism

INTRODUCTION

According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Feminism is "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state".

The feminist movement has progressed through several stages, three to be precise. Each stage, or "wave" as it is known in academia, had its own history and distinguishing characteristics. In the past, and also now, the media had a part in the movement. The media took attention as women's issues became a common topic in society and politics. The movements' rebellion drew media attention, as well as a shift in the media's corporate model. Women became writers and editors, which gave them a platform to speak out about feminism and why women's rights mattered to them.

Those wishing to combat sexism in public had few options just a decade ago. The word "feminist" was derided by Rush Limbaugh, and many celebrities, including Katy Perry, Shailene Woodley, and Kaley Cuocco, refused to use it. Participating in protests was confined to individuals who were in those cities, or those who could afford to take time off work and travel, before Twitter and Facebook exploded as news platforms; letter-writing was only viewed by the recipient of the letter.

Mass Media and Feminism

Though most journalists aim to create an objective view of their subjects, feminism has long been portrayed in a negative light. Feminism's portrayal is fueled by the idea that the media seems to lean toward opposition; pinning women again men creates the mostly negative roles women become portrayed by. A study by Lind and Saio (2006) revealed that feminists rarely appear in the media and are often demonized. They are often portrayed as different from "regular" women, and are not associated with day-to-day activities, but rather, public activities and events. Feminists are also not often portrayed as victims and are more frequently associated with the women's movement and their goals compared to regular women (meaning if a woman isn't a labeled "feminist" she often isn't associated with the movement, despite being female). Creedon (1993) wrote, "feminists are constantly framed as deviant sexually, a bunch of man-haters out to destroy 'family values.'" In the media, the term "feminism" is often

opposed to the term "family", leading to the idea that feminists can't be family women. This negative portrayal over the decades has led many young women rejecting the idea of feminism, in part due to feminists being labeled as "man bashers". Other labels associated with feminism include: "bubblehead", "Amazons", "angries", "radical", and "hairy". Most media decision-makers are male, although women are beginning to enter the field of journalism. The contemporary women's movement has predominantly been ignored through mainstream media, leaving only room for a few high-profile exceptions. The Miss America pageant of 1968 was one of the first high-profile cases to be publicized. Although to the feminist movement's dismay, the coverage was both distorted and sensationalized. During the occurrence of the event, the term "bra-burner" label for women unearthed itself. The practice of labeling feminists with derogatory terms has been a method to silence its supporters and promote fear of speaking out.

Feminist activism became more accessible because to social media, which allowed anyone with a Twitter account and a desire to combat patriarchy to join in. Sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram have made activism simpler than ever before by removing barriers of distance and geography, promoting public debates and providing a platform for awareness and change.

When a group of women wanted to protest an abortion bill in Texas in 2013, local women rallied together at the Texas State Capitol, but those who couldn't attend protested online with #StandWithWendy, supporting State Rep. Wendy Davis through her 13-hour filibuster. When women wanted to protest sexist t-shirts by a children's clothing company, they flooded their Fac Local women marched together at the Texas State Capitol in 2013 to protest an abortion law, but many who couldn't come protested online with #StandWithWendy, supporting State Rep. Wendy Davis through her 13-hour filibuster. When women swarmed a children's apparel company's Facebook page to condemn sexist t-shirts, the company couldn't ignore them andhad to pull the product.ebook page until the company couldn't ignore them and had to yank the product.

When thousands of women flocked to a children's apparel manufacturer's Facebook page to protest sexist t-shirts, the company couldn't ignore them and had to pull the merchandise. till the corporation couldn't ignore them any longer and had to pull the product.

However, feminist social media action has produced tangible results in addition to raising awareness. As a result of the social media reaction caused by ordinary people armed with tweet ammunition, organisations have reversed course. After receiving backlash on Twitter and in a Change.org petition, Victoria's Secret changed the "perfect body" slogan in its new advertising campaign last fall, after thousands of users complained that the campaign – which featured ultra-thin and mostly white models – was promoting negative body images.

The term was first coined by the prominent writer, activist and lecturer Jennifer Baumgardner, who argued her case in her book "F'em: Goo Goo, Gaga and Some Thoughts on Balls." In a chapter entitled, "Is There a Fourth Wave? Does It Matter?" Baumgardener argued that Generation Y has taken the prime tenets of Third Wave Feminism (intersectionality, greater focus on the role of trans people and people of colour, solidarity with the LGBT+ movement and a focus on abortion and body positivity) and co-opted them using more modern forms of media for the spread and proliferation of revolutionary ideas.

"In place of zines and songs, young feminists created blogs, Twitter campaigns, and online media," Baumgardner wrote. "They commented on the news, posted their most stylish plus-size fashion photos with info about where to shop, and tweeted that they, too, had had an abortion. 'Reproductive justice,' coined by women of colour in the 1990s, became the term of choice for young feminists. Transgenderism, male feminists, sex work, and complex relationships within the media characterised their feminism."

We can plainly see that the way we talk about social justice has changed, and that there are vastly more feminist resources online now than were ever available in the 1990s and early 2000s. A lot of this is down to social perception. Feminism, more than it is a political instrument, has become more fashionable and cool than ever.

Blogging has made feminism less a formal academic topic, less the purview of lecturers and published authors alone, and more quotidian. Before it was far harder to find feminist media - it was something available mostly to a privileged, educated few. Now it's only a Google search away, and in fact, the minute you log on Facebook, it's actually likely that someone you know will have shared it themselves.

Just look at sites like Jezebel, or Feminist Frequency, or Everyday Feminism. Not only do these sites discuss mundane issues as much as global news, but they also have active social media presences and

build engagement among viewers and readers. Social media has also empowered users to blog and discuss on an equal footing with more mainstream publications. Suddenly, bloggers like Anita Sarkeesian and Jessica Valenti are bigger celebrities than scholars in peer reviewed journals. The fact that the alt-right movement, by far the biggest and loudest opponent of Fourth Wave feminism, has also arisen out of conservative social media, is very telling.

Social media has also made it easier for the feminist movement to change the way we think and to challenge sexism. If someone abuses a woman in public, or subjects a Tumblr-user to a microaggression, then a video or blog post of the offence will soon be uploaded and be viewed by potentially millions of people and shared by those with a stake in the incident. Just look at how well hashtags have taken off in the last eight years, and how they've projected feminist ideas into mainstream consciousness.

In an article for TIME magazine entitled "Behold The Power of #Hashtag Feminism" journalist Jessica Bennett wrote: "*It's no huge surprise that, according to data from Twitter, conversation about 'feminism' has increased by 300 percent on the platform over the past three years. Women's issues are everywhere, relentlessly spread by the women they impact. For the mainstream media, tracking the feminist hashtag of the moment has become a virtual sport.*"[1]

Some of the more famous feminist hashtags we've seen recently include "#AskHerMore", "#WhyIStayed", "#NotBuyingIt", "#YesAllWomen", "#ChangeTheRatio" - and of course, who can forget the #FreeTheNipple campaign, which saw thousands of women baring their bodies in a protest against the shaming and sexualisation of female breasts.

There's also a concern that feminist-based social media will water down the impact and revolutionary power feminism holds; turning what should be a social justice movement into a commodity for news, magazines and bloggers to make money from ad revenue. Is the sudden surge in media really an expression of changing awareness, of a societal commitment to tackling sexism and combating gender disparity? Or is it the result of opportunists chasing profit by addressing issues that are in vogue - here today and gone tomorrow when the next political fad becomes popular.

That's not to say that the people who seek this media are insincere in their beliefs. But it could be that these

outlets are taking advantage of the very people they claim to be fighting for. Yet, there's also a concern that social media will lead to complacency, and that those who claim to be feminist activist are actually just ineffectual virtue signallers, who consider signing an online petition just as empowering as taking to the streets with placards.

But this is hardly surprising when one considers the sheer number of people who have become feminists thanks to social media. Of course there'll be difficulties unifying so many millions into a cohesive whole. Maybe social media hasn't managed to dismantle the patriarchy, or unseat everyone who oppresses women, and all the other things bloggers and activists so passionately claim it can do.

But social media is here to stay: it can't be uninvented now, and although there are some problems with the way the feminist movement mobilises on social media, ultimately the technology has given a voice to the voiceless and provided the dispossessed with genuine political agency, and that is something worth striving to keep.

The 18th century is typically referred to as the Age of Enlightenment, although black women like Sojourner Truth (an African-American abolitionist and women's rights campaigner) were active towards the conclusion of the period, in the early 19th century. There were also the Suffragettes by the end of the century, who were causing the necessary friction to establish the world we live in today.

There are so many people responsible for what our world looks like. You're able to read this sentence right now because someone decided that you deserve to exist. Today, we have the work of Munroe Bergdorf – trans model and activist; Tarana Burke – founder of #MeToo; and Alok Vaid-Menon – non binary performance artist. These, and so many more activists, including myself, are the voices that have risen through the internet.

Since the late 19th century, there has been a parallel emergence of mass press and media and the proliferation of rights and identity-based movements. The women's movements in North America and Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s not only drew heavily on mediated discussions and campaigns for women's equality, but the #MeToo Movement has shown how women and feminist activists have drawn upon the media as a way of mobilizing people against gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

In other situations, there is evidence of the media's critical influence on the development of feminism and women's empowerment. In South America and Africa, for example, telenovelas and radio

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[1] https://time.com/3319081/whyistayed-hashtag-feminism-activism/

programmes have been connected to an increase in divorce rates, increased use of family planning, and a greater awareness of domestic violence.

As women's issues were becoming a familiar topic in society and politics, the media took notice. The uprising of the movements led to media coverage, as well as a change in the business of media as well. Women became writers and editors, which allowed them to have a voice of their own and tell about feminism and why women's rights were important to them.

How it all started.

Actions taken years previously have motivated the campaigners at the time. Stanton produced the Seneca Falls Declaration, which asserted women's innate equality and proposed a political strategy of equal access and opportunity for all. Many trailblazers in the fight for women's right to vote were in attendance at the convention. On the other hand, people who were opposed to women's suffrage and political action were present.

"Colton of Connecticut" admired women, but believed they should spend their time "at home, rather than joining in the strife and contention of the political realm." The activists were ready to fight for their right to vote now that they had practised and had experience shutting down resistance. A media breakthrough for women occurred as a result of this gathering. Amelia Bloomer founded Lily in 1849, making it the first woman-owned, edited, and published newspaper in the United States.

Temperance, women's rights, and fashion reform were among topics covered in the publication. Women began to wear pants instead of skirts or dresses as a result of dress reform. Even back then, this demonstrated the influence of the media on society. In 1870, the American Women Suffrage Association began publishing the Woman's Journal, which was another media breakthrough.

Lucy Stone started it as a weekly publication. "America's most prominent and long-lived suffrage newspaper," according to Woman's Journal. The journal was a tool for the AWSA to demonstrate the public what they agreed on and what steps they were taking together to achieve women's suffrage. Publications like Lily and Woman's Journal demonstrated how movements and the media collaborated.

The number of activists would not have been as large if it hadn't been for this. Following in the footsteps of the women who came before them, many activists made a serious push and fight for women's right to vote. Since Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho

were among the first states to guarantee women's right to vote, they have shown to be successful. The protests and political events received increased media coverage around the country.

In 1996, researchers looked at ten Wisconsin newspapers from 1911 to 1919 to see how they covered suffrage events. If a publication had a pro-suffrage editor, events were portrayed in a favourable light, and vice versa. These activities can still be observed in the mainstream media today. There were a number of concerns at hand, including the notion that a woman's physical look was more important than her personal achievements in life.

They were presented to the public in a way that encouraged women to conform to gender standards, such as staying at home or performing other menial tasks that did not progress their careers. The second wave was dominated by upper-class white females and did not allow women of colour or other disadvantaged groups much of a say, which is why it came to a standstill. Money was a key factor in how information and ideas travelled in the early waves, thus only the wealthy and those with easy access to money were able to make the biggest differences.

Social Media and Feminism

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact period when online spaces began to be used for feminist activism in India, Nisha Susan's use of Facebook for the Pink Chaddi campaign can be seen as a turning point. It recognised the importance of social media as a tool for activism. The Pink Chaddi campaign was launched in 2009 as a protest against Hindu right-wing group Sri Ram Sene's attack on women in a pub in Mangalore. A group of women who called themselves "Consortium of Pub-going, Loose, and Forward Women" launched a Facebook group, which saw close to 30,000 members in a week. The members of the group then campaigned to send 3,000 pink panties to the head of Sri Ram Sene. The campaign became popular not only for its innovative mode of protest that challenged traditional notions of activism, but also for the way it effectively used social media to garner widespread attention to its cause. Since then, digital technology has been explored and appropriated by Indian feminists in various ways to draw attention to a number of feminist issues.

While leftist political methods, including protest marches, rallies, and dharnas, continue to dominate the popular imagination of activism, it is interesting to explore whether digital technology has contributed to transforming the very definition of activism. While the role of digital technology as a tool for political change has been widely studied, my interest lies in its

particular contribution to feminist politics and activism. Does feminist activism have the potential to alter the nature of digital technology and its associations with masculinity? Do issues of access allow social media to become a democratic public sphere?

Social Media and Politics of Pleasure

While questions of violence inform most of the conversations that happen in online feminist spaces, the politics of pleasure is also an integral part. Discussions of sexual pleasure and the creation of safe erotic spaces are facilitated by certain aspects of digital technology, most significantly, the possibility of anonymity. "What social media has achieved is giving women the space to discuss things that concern them, especially in the sphere of sexuality," says Anu.

Through the use of anonymity, women have been able to voice very private discussions which haven't formed part of the mainstream. An example would be the phenomenon known as 'female ejaculation,' written off in medical science and even by mainstream feminists, but which has found a voice in online forums as something real and not relegated to pornographic 'squirting.'

Initiating conversations around sexual pleasure, especially those that broaden the very definitions of erotic acts and bodies, is a subversive political act in a context where sex gets associated with risk and violence, and women's bodies are policed and regulated.

As Aristarkhova (1999) points out, the arena of pleasure is not just restricted to issues of sex and sexual acts. She states, *Probably, cyber feminists were the first openly political communities in cyberspace to play out their differences into new forms of cyber-organisations without programmes and restrictions, which invite other people for collective pleasure ... In doing it, we move beyond our cultures of sexualisation, we 'desexualise' pleasure, being fully aware that it is necessarily (though not exclusively) a political gesture.*

A number of feminist campaigns have focused on a politics of pleasure that challenge the limited subject positions afforded to them. The #whyloiter campaign, conceptualised in reaction to instances of moral policing and increasing restrictions on women's mobility, emphasises the idea of "fun" and argues for the right of women to "hang out in the city, to make use of its public spaces, to loiter aimlessly." Spearheaded by Sameera Khan, Shilpa Phadke, and Shilpa Ranade, authors of the book Why Loiter, the online campaign uses the hashtag #whyloiter on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Foursquare to highlight women's efforts to reclaim public spaces. The online campaign has seen women sharing pictures, poems, and anecdotes that foreground their forging a relationship of pleasure with their cities, rather than one of fear and restriction.

The conversations on a number of Facebook pages and blogs also extend to topics such as body image or romantic relationships. An example of a feminist site dedicated to body positivity is the Facebook group titled "Women Against Non-essential Grooming," a closed group whose description reads, "WANG is not just for those who have relinquished the razor, lost the lipstick, and ditched the deodorant but for anyone who believes that conventional beauty techniques are not the only route to attractive and socially worthwhile people." An important feature of the group is the photographs women share of themselves, often accompanied by discussions that celebrate appearances that do not conform to conventional standards of beauty, affirming a space free of shame or stigma. The existence of such an online group is not premised on the promise of disembodiment; instead the body becomes a site for the formulations of multiple female subjectivities, and a space for forging relationships with other women.

Aesthetic choices around self-representation have been another way in which feminists have expressed themselves in online spaces and reclaimed their embodiment from the male gaze. An example of this has been the act of taking selfies, or self-portraits, which can be read as women assuming control over technology to mark a subjective performance of the self. The act of taking a selfie challenges the authority of the male gaze by collapsing the boundaries of actor and spectator. The use of editing software and tools such as Photoshop also allow the possibility of multiple, constructed selves as opposed to an unmediated, natural body. While selfies have been labelled as an indication of narcissism in mainstream media spaces, a number of feminists have used the text of the selfie to point to the constructed nature of femininity. The Ladies Finger, an Indian feminist e-zine, is another attempt at politicising online spaces by foregrounding relationships of pleasure.[2] The blog describes itself as, "A new women's zine. Pop Culture. Health. Sex. Fun. Music. Books. Cinema. We do vaanthi. We like kranti. We write what we want to read." Rather than solely focusing on issues of violence afflicting women, the site contains discussions on a number of diverse issues, right from Malala Yousafzai's clothes to the songs of Begum Akhtar. The e-zine thus becomes a space for the celebration of diverse subjectivities and experiences of women. The creation of multiple female

subjectivities and expression of pleasure have, however, been a source of anxiety to patriarchal and right-wing forces. The next section demonstrates how such feminist activists occupying online spaces have negotiated controls over their expression and contested the notion of Indian culture articulated by these forces.

Feminist Engagement with 'Indian Culture'

An allegation that is routinely levelled against Indian feminist activists, including queer activists, is that they are "westernised" in thought and action. Within such a discourse, feminists get constructed as not just being alienated from the reality of Indian culture, but also as disrupting superior "Indian culture" with ideas from the "degenerate west." It is important to note that the idea of culture, as articulated in the nationalist discourse, is a gendered one. This conception of "Indianness" has been appropriated by those advocating the ideology of Hindutva, which sees India as a Hindu nation threatened by the Muslim and Christian other. Part of the wider Hindu right-wing discourse, Hindutva ideology conflates women's right over their sexuality with notions of purity and virtue. Banerjee points out that under Hindutva the female body becomes a site of cultural conflicts and women's entry to the public sphere is seen as a threat.

Such an understanding of nationalism and Indian culture has been questioned by Indian feminists through various modes of protest carried out in online spaces. A recent example has been the Kiss of Love campaign, which was conceptualised as a non-violent protest against increasing instances of moral policing in Kerala. The Facebook page of the campaign was instrumental in mobilising youth from different parts of Kerala for the event held in Kochi on 2 November 2014. More significantly, the page, which had 1,54,249 likes as of January 2015, has become a site for celebrating public expression of love, and challenging Hindutva's heterosexual and patriarchal control over women's sexuality. By sharing narratives of young people from across the country, as well as by highlighting expressions of solidarity from prominent public figures, the page has argued for a politicisation and redefinition of the concepts of love, sex, and morality. Other feminist pages, such as Feminist India, constantly engage with questions of nationalism, seen in updates such as "Happy Republic Day to the upper caste, heterosexual men of this country" and "Radical Hindu logic: Valentine's day is against Indian culture. However, marital rape, child marriage, dowry, etc, are our traditions and thus must not be questioned." A critique of the popular understanding of Indian culture can also be seen in Facebook pages that have come up as part of the

protest against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises consensual homosexual acts. Since one of the bases for the judgment has been that homosexuality is against Indian values, queer and feminist activists have sought to challenge the Hindutva notion of Indian culture and its conception of homosexuality as a threat.

These debates on Indian culture, expressions of sexuality, and feminist contestations of them have important implications on how we understand online spaces as counterpublics. Papacharissi (2002) states, "The virtual sphere allows the expression and development of such movements that further democratic expressions, by not necessarily focusing on traditional political issues, but by shifting the cultural ground." Extending Fraser's arguments, the counter-publics created by feminist activists in online spaces have served to strengthen democracy by critiquing the oppressive and exclusionary ideas of Indian culture. As seen, feminist activists occupying online spaces have critiqued mainstream media discourses and provided an alternative discourse to political events. The discursive communities created in the process give rise to political debates that highlight the systemic injustice that has been perpetrated by both state and non-state actors.

Gendered and Sexualised Violence in Online Spaces

One of the ways in which digital technology has been theorised has been to see it as freeing women from the constraints of their bodies and sexuality. However, as this section demonstrates, women have not actually been able to achieve this freedom, with digital technology reproducing the sexist and misogynist environment that they have to contend with in their offline lives. The Internet Democracy Project's report titled "Keeping Women Safe? Gender, Online Harassment and Indian Law" found that women who articulate strong opinions about national politics, feminism, and sexuality are most susceptible to being targeted with gendered and sexualised violence in online spaces. The violence itself can be understood using Liz Kelly's framework of a "continuum of violence" against women. This broadens the definition of violence to include threats to safety, limits on space for action and agency, and dishonour, shame, and disgrace.

In online spaces, gendered violence has often taken the form of silencing feminist activists. Some of the respondents spoke about how their Facebook "friends" would mock them for the feminist content they shared and participate in calling them names such as "militant feminist" or "feminazi." There have also been instances where activists have been

threatened with violence, rape, and death. The respondents spoke about how the violence could often be "triggering" and very distressing, so much so that they are often forced to withdraw from online environments and refrain from engaging in any online feminist debates or political commentary. A respondent narrates an incident where she decided to share her personal experience of being assaulted and tweet about it to initiate a conversation on the different courses of action a rape survivor could take. She says that while this did manage to bring about meaningful conversations on rape in certain spaces, she was also harshly criticised and told by many that she "deserved to be raped."

Instances of gendered violence and backlash to feminist activism have prompted feminists and feminist organisations to work towards creating safe environments for women participating in online spaces. In 2013, as part of the "16 Days Campaign Against Gender Violence," Prajnya organised a colloquium that brought together concerns of gender violence. It brought together organisations such as Empowering Women in IT (eWIT), Feminist Approach to Technology, and the Centre for Cyber Victim Counselling, among others, to discuss issues of gender violence, such as cyberbullying and cyber stalking and various strategies to combat them, including legal options and online solidarity networks. Similarly, the global campaign "Take Back the Tech," initiated in 2006, has been highlighting the violence against women that is perpetrated in online spaces, and defines itself as a campaign that calls for "taking control of technology in both online and offline platforms to end violence against women."

Some respondents stated that seeking legal recourse is necessary when the violence spills over to physical environments. However, based on her personal experience of filing a first information report (FIR) against online violence, Malini explains that law enforcement agencies are often hostile to such complaints by young women and actively discourage them. The "Keeping Women Safe? Gender, Online Harassment and Indian Law" report says that the strategies women develop to deal with online abuse "very rarely include the law ... resulting in a silence around questions of legal effectiveness and recourse for online verbal abuse." The limited definition of criminal behaviour under the Information Technology Act 2000 makes it difficult to identify the wide range of gendered violence that takes place in online spaces and is, therefore, ineffective in addressing it.

Online violence and harassment serve to limit women's participation in online spaces and drive women offline. Thus, effective legal and juridical provisions need to be in place to address instances of online violence and ensure the participation of women without risk of violence. Till this is achieved, women's participation in online spaces will continue to be limited.

Looking Ahead

As social media grows, new points of view will be available to everyone. This will allow for new ideas and new ways of tackling oppression and political changes for women. In turn, the media will continue to report on events relating to women's issues.

The definition of feminist politics and online activism put forward by this paper remains limited to social media. Definitions of feminist activism must be broadened to include interventions that seek to interrogate and redefine the relationship between gender and technology, especially in a context where technology continues to be associated with masculinity. Initiatives that address the exclusion of women from technology need to be studied.

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