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Editorial

Social media platforms as complex and contradictory spaces for feminisms:

Visibility, opportunity, power, resistance and activism

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This special issue on feminisms and social media is published at a unique point in time, namely when social media platforms are routinely utilised for communication from the mundane to the extraordinary, to offer support and solidarity, and to blame and victimise. Collectively, social media are online technologies that provide the ability for community building and interaction (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), allowing people to interact, share, create and consume online content (Lyons et al., 2017). They include such

platforms as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Tinder, and Snapchat among others. These technologies have been conceptually described as social, participatory, locative, algorithmic, interactive, affective, and entangled with bodies (Carah, 2017). Social media platforms have proliferated in recent years, alongside technological advances that have seen the development and affordability of mobile devices that allow almost ubiquitous online connection for many people in global North societies, and growing online connection in the global South. However, there remains a 'digital divide' in terms of uneven access to the Internet, and also importantly in terms of uneven ways in which the Internet is used by different groups of people (see Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). As Baer (2016) has noted, these digital platforms have been viewed as offering great potential for advancing feminist agendas, as they are able to disseminate feminist ideas, shape new discourses, connect different and diverse groups, and allow new and creative forms of protest and activism.

In this special issue, we bring together a collective of thought provoking articles that cover a range of social media and feminisms, and speak to various binaries such as online/offline, public/private, and objective/subjective. We have selected empirical articles as well as commentaries, from scholars as well as community workers, but all provide challenges to hegemonic understandings and gendered power structures. These papers help to contribute to the diverse, critical and contemporary body of scholarship in this area. We present here the background of the special issue and an introduction to the array of contributions therein.

This issue originated from an event on Feminism and Social Media run by two sections of the British Psychological Society, namely the Psychology of Women Section

(POWS) and the Social Psychology Section (SPS). The event was conceived after a number of high profile social media cases where women had spoken out on particular issues, for example, Emma Watson's 'He for She' Campaign for gender equality. When this campaign was launched in September 2014, at the United Nations in New York, threats were made to leak nude photos of Watson online. Similarly, when women have used social media to raise consciousness on particular issues, such as the campaign to put women (other than the queen) on banknotes in the UK, or stopping the daily objectification of topless women in daily newspapers, they have faced a barrage of abuse, and rape and death threats on social media platforms. We held the day on International Women's day, March 8th 2015 at Media City in Salford, UK, and speakers covered issues from Beyoncé, feminism and faith, and online bullying. The interest and enthusiasm generated by the day led to the proposal of a special issue for *Feminism and Psychology* (thanks to Rose Capdevila's encouragement).

The key question in which we were interested was: what is the relationship between feminisms, psychologies and social media? As feminists become more visible, present and active on social media, we wonder about the ability of these platforms to generate and mobilise particular constructions and resist others. The extent to which this occurs and is actually possible is a key area of debate for scholars and users of these technologies.

Whilst the focus of this special issue is on social media, as Stubbs-Richardson, Rader and Cosby (2018, this issue) point out, there is a 'matrix of sexism' online and offline. Indeed, cyberspace is a gendered space, although in different ways to the offline. When gender issues do appear on social media, they are often trolled or pathologised.

The papers in the special issue encompass this very complexity, the entanglements of people and technology, embedded in contexts of power, the market and ideology. As readers and scholars, we may argue that this space provides a 4th way for feminist practice (Turley and Fisher, 2018, this issue), creating a feminist counter publics. Alternatively, we may envisage the online space as a potential utopian postfeminist one in which we share, queer and make radically different interpretations. Irrespective of this, social media is generating content that is of interest to a wide range of people, including avid users, commentators, journalists and researchers. However, as technologies change and social media platforms are increasingly accessed on mobile devices and thus embedded within everyday lives, the distinction between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ is increasingly blurred. Baer (2016) notes the potential to redo feminisms using the interface of digital platforms and activism within neoliberal societies. She claims that “Digital platforms offer great potential for broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge” (Baer, 2016, p.18). That said, Gill (2016) suggests that the current postfeminist analytic lens is still highly relevant in this time of youth feminism through social media. “to capture a distinctive contradictory-but-patterned sensibility intimately connected to neoliberalism (Gill, 2016, p. 610) where the focus is on “individualism, choice and agency” (Gill, 2016, p.613). For Gill, we are not yet post-postfeminist as she argues that many of the new feminist activities occurring on social media draw on postfeminist notions. Whether we are still postfeminist, as Gill claims, or moving away from this concept due to a potential fourth wave social-media based activism as suggested by Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence (2016) is a matter for

debate. The topics in this special issue demonstrate the universal creep of social media into areas including education, sport and relationships, and highlight their implications for activism as well as for individual subjectivities and identities. Overall the papers invite both a sense of optimism about the future potential of social media to enable and activate, but also demonstrate the difficulties involved in social media use, their liminality, and the concerning way in which morality is sometimes enacted on these platforms.

As feminists, whether researchers, practitioners, or community members, we need to remain mindful of the connections between the individual and macro structural systems. The urgent task of deconstructing the ‘master’s house’ with a range of feminisms is evident in this special issue. The papers cover work originating in the UK, Aotearoa/ New Zealand, Canada, Iceland, and the US – the global North predictably.¹ They show engagement with the mundane and the out of the ordinary, from the self-preservative sharing of tinder posts to the bleakness of rape culture, from education to digital activism. The range of data and what constitutes data in this online environment presents a dazzling array of possibility: e-zines, memes, crowdsourced posts, Facebook and Instagram posts, twitter and vlogging.

The work described within this collection may be distressing and may invoke humour, anger and solidarity; thus, be prepared to feel as well as read. Whether women generate content themselves or become the unwilling subjects of it, the papers capture the power of social media to mobilise and educate broad audiences. They also raise many and substantial ethical and legal questions about online information, who owns it, who can use it, in what ways and for what purposes.

Our special issue begins with Toffeletti and Thorpe's (2018, this issue) investigation of visibility and gendered economies of sport, in which they analyse female athletes' exploration of their own self representation in social media. These researchers demonstrate the ways in which the women have to 'do it for themselves', promoting self-love, self-disclosure and self-empowerment, to position themselves as ideal neoliberal citizens. In constructing and using personalised social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram), the female athletes engaged directly with the logics of the commercialised social media market, thus blurring the lines between the athlete, the woman and the brand. The authors question the transformational capacity of user-generated digital communication to provide alternative cultural narratives of the feminine. Indeed, structural gender inequity is a theme across the papers.

Jackson's (2018, this issue) paper outlines a study in which she talks to teenage girls, who identify as feminist about their use of digital feminism media, including what this use means for them, the implications of social media activity, and how it connects to their everyday worlds. The results of this study highlight the ways in which digital and social media provide 'safe' spaces for girls exploring feminism and learning about feminist activism, and crucially allow teenage girls to connect with feminist ideas and notions, as well as with other feminists both locally and internationally.

Uhl, Rhyner, Terrance and Lugo's (2018, this issue) work on non-consensual pornography contextualises the ways in which digital sexual assault is understood within legal frameworks. Social media are commercial platforms which ultimately aim to generate revenue through sharing of content. This market-led motivation is apparent on websites in which users share pornographic content that they obtained from former

relationships. Such sharing functions (unsurprisingly) to re-victimise the predominantly female victims of these practices. Whilst perpetrator identities remain hidden, these precarious sites allow users to display, rank and censure women who become objectified as content. The research confirms the predominance of women victims in a way that further reinforces patriarchal power relations.

The idea of the patriarchal marketplace is further explored in Thompson's (2018, this issue) research on Tinder. This work demonstrates how heterosexist and gendered discourses serve to harass women on online dating sites. This hostile space positions women under more surveillance than ever before, while simultaneously offering the potential for women to express and signify their availability for a relationship. Using sites such as Bye Felipe and Tinder Nightmare, accounts are set up by users to shed light on the hidden harassment and misogyny that is occurring in online dating services. Screenshots of abuse and unwanted pics are shared, showing the complexity of the ways in which a marketised patriarchal logic play out. The author identifies two discourses, one around women who refuse to be seen as 'not hot enough' FUGLY (fat and ugly), and a second around a missing discourse of consent. Whilst sharing and laughing at such sinister commentary can help, the need to politicise this form of harassment is forefronted.

Stubbs-Richardson, et al. (2018, this issue) focus their attention on Twitter and rape culture, examining content around three high profile rape cases in North America. Digital activism on Twitter is both powerful and unique in its reach because of the ways in which twitter space is configured (and can be anonymised). In exploring the dark side of social media, this study demonstrates the way in which rape culture can be exacerbated

by tweets and retweets, and also how it can be questioned and resisted. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the researchers discern the pattern of tweets, retweets and followers of particular hashtags which blame the victim. Findings suggest that tweets in which the victim is blamed for her rape have more followers (and retweets) than those tweets that support the victim, thus enabling and reinforcing rape culture discussions. Furthermore, slut shaming tweets were more likely to get retweeted than tweets which were supportive of the victim. The creation of news through twitter, especially in these public accounts, does little to debunk myths. A single victim blaming tweet can reach thousands, therefore there is an urgent need to examine what influence this has both online and offline within a wider matrix of sexism.

Drakett, Rickett, Day and Milne's (2018, this issue) paper on memes highlights the blurring of online and offline worlds. Focusing on an under-researched media form, that of an internet meme, this paper explores online sexism targeting women in the world of technology, a space where feminism is more absent than present. Focusing on a meme, the researchers identify themes of technological privilege where the masculine elite dominates the archetypal passive sexualised woman. Memes use humour to engage users, and this paper asks us to ponder whether memes can work as feminist "digilantism" (combining vigilantism and activism).

Further possibilities of creative political action are tackled in a commentary by Turley and Fisher (2018, this issue), who advocate that digital spaces work as a 4th way for feminist practice. Whilst digital labour is often unpaid and the digital space crowded, there is still the potential to 'shout back' against misogyny, hegemony and sexism. Here, the authors see feminist social media campaigns as political actions contributing to social

movements. Using micro and macro examples of tweeting and shouting, the paper explores the impact of campaigns such as #everydaysexism and #AskThicke within wider feminist movements.

The #FreetheNipple campaign in Iceland is explored by Rudolfsdottir & Jóhannsdóttir (2018, this issue) through an analysis of digital public media. The revolution against patriarchy here takes the form of ‘freeing’ the nipple from its pornographic associations and women posting photos of their own breasts (mainly by younger feminists). These researchers ask whether digital connections can move beyond feminist affective solidarity. The journey of this ‘revolution’ engages with solidarity, other feminist reaction and patriarchy striking back (pornographic re-appropriation of the images), but leads to questions around whether signifiers of shame re –attach themselves to activist bodies in both offline and online spaces. Through activism on social media platforms, #Freethenipple and the wider sexualisation of women can be defied and played withⁱⁱ.

The radical possibilities for social media in sex education are neatly demonstrated through critical pedagogy by Manduley, Mertens, Plante & Sultana.(2018, this issue). Accounts by activists are important to see how social media might function within health literacy. Informed by intersectionality, this commentary demonstrates how education and programming that is initiated and amplified through queer, trans and racialized communities is itself a radical practice. Whilst few states in the USA require culturally relevant sexual education or orientation, Web 2.0 allows the content creation in digital spaces to queer this, providing an alternative curriculum. Underrepresentation in the digital sphere can connect people, educators, researchers around self-identified

communities – here LGBTQIA+, POC and QTPOCⁱⁱⁱ. Thinking differently and using participation, also destabilizes ideas of ownership and authorship. Using radical research, the authors here note the need for a more ‘communal citation’ power that runs counter to traditional citation practices. Social media use here is more than ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’; as the authors argue, it may open up participation to broader audiences. Power asymmetries in the academy often downgrade work outside of the academy although as these authors argue, it is important to be mindful who is at the table, how the conversation unfolds and who is in the audience.

Whilst social media is neither utopian nor dystopian in form, much of the misogynist online content merely re-inscribes gender in a particular way and reinforces gendered, classed and racialized power relations. There is currently little systematic documentation and research on the impacts of repeated ritualistic retweeting and trolling actions on the receiver and viewers of such messages. Vera-Gray (2017) offers a brave and personal account of the difficulties she experienced after conducting a feminist research project in the public social media domain and points to the need to consider feminist work online in terms of ‘safety’ and ‘emotional’ work. As editors, we ask what will be the natural upshot of this virtual yet real world? If online behaviours and protests translate into real world activities, social media with its digilantism and misogyny requires engagement by the wider community.

The advances in platforms are not simply increasingly allowing access 24/7 to an enmeshed online and offline world, but also have implications for temporality. Snapchat for example is a mobile app which allows users to capture videos and pictures that self-destruct after a few seconds. The ephemeral nature of the posts, together with the

adolescent uptake of the product, poses questions around bullying. Handyside and Ringrose (2017) note how Snapchat memory works around intimacy, slut shaming and friendship. This messaging platform and social network is necessarily hard to research but yields insights into ways in which millennials use technology. Indeed, as technology changes, so too will the way in which we can use the platform to engage in activism, resist dominant structures and disseminate/educate. There is an imperative for research, commentary and discussion to document and understand what is taking place on various social media platforms, and to theorise their implications for both feminisms and psychologies. Whether we are old feminists, new to feminist ideas, postfeminist or other, it is essential that we examine activity and content on evolving social media platforms. This will ensure important and robust debate, as well as considerations around the possibilities and opportunities such platforms provide. This issue offers a slice of the vitality of this debate but we also aware that not all voices are evident in this special issue and that larger intersectional concerns may not have come to the fore in this set of papers. Therefore, we would agree with the suggestions of Brown, Ray, Summers & Fraistat (2017) that research on social media activism needs to incorporate an analytic lens of intersectionality in order to develop a deeper understanding of the social action potential of social media.

Notes

i There is an imbalance of research and publishing resources, both in the formal sense as well as in social media. This is less ubiquitous in the global south compared to the global north but worth noting.

ii A similar phenomenon was viewed in the #slutwalk campaign (<http://www.slutwalktoronto.com/>). Thus these spaces can function to mobilise, educate and agitate. However, we also note how intersectional concerns may be at play in these campaigns.

iii LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, asexual, and other identities that are not heterosexual and/or cisgender) POC People of colour QTPOC Queer trans people of colour

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ⁱⁱ A similar phenomenon was viewed in the #slutwalk campaign (<http://www.slutwalktoronto.com/>). Thus these spaces can function to mobilise, educate and agitate. However, we also note how intersectional concerns may be at play in these campaigns.

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