

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A FEMINIST TOOL

BY CONNIE JESKE CRANE

It's January 2011, and the scene is a safety forum at Toronto's Osgoode Hall Law School. "I've been told I'm not supposed to say this," a Toronto police officer tells a group of female law students. But he says it anyway. Police constable Michael Sanguinetti's next bit of safety advice to the group was, "Women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized."

The blame-the-victim riff, from a police representative, no less, touches off a firestorm that would have been hard to imagine before social media. Heather Jarvis, a co-founder of what became SlutWalk Toronto, heard about Sanguinetti's comment on Facebook.

"I was livid when I heard about it," she recalls, "and unfortunately not very surprised."

Together with Sonya Barnett, Jarvis conceived a protest walk to—yet again—raise the issue of blaming victims for rape. A Facebook page came first, then Twitter action. The movement attracted "a lot of people who have never engaged in activism and protests," recalls Jarvis. SlutWalk Toronto took place in May 2011 and drew about 1,000 participants. May 2012 saw a second annual event, and to-date, according to Jarvis, "over 200 cities around the world and counting have had SlutWalks, or SlutWalk-associated events—all different languages, cultures, contexts. It's astounding."

In 2012, Americans saw a similar "slut" comment and storm. After Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke advocated for the inclusion of birth control in health insurance at religious institutions (like Georgetown), conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh railed at Fluke on air, calling her a "slut" and "whore." But a Twitter campaign (#FlushRushNow) mobilized quickly and led to a huge exodus of advertisers from Limbaugh's show.

In these social media triumphs, there is a strong feminist message. Slate.com sees a "recharging feminism," and the *New*

York Times talks of Fluke and "feminist superstardom." Is it any wonder, then, that feminists (alongside gamers and shoppers) are embracing social media?


Women, as we know, are especially active online. According to statistics compiled by Cisco's Ayelet Baron, "women spend about eight percent more time online [than men]. In 2010, 76 percent of women visited a social networking site, compared to 70 percent of men. Specifically in North America, the social networking reach is 91 percent of women and 87.5 percent of males."

But here's a statistic that adds more context: Boston Consulting Group reports that women "control \$12 trillion of the overall \$18.4 trillion in global consumer spending." With projections like this, you can see why women are bombarded with pop-up ads for shoes, spa Groupons and the chance to join a gout study. Looked at another way, given the revenues at stake, you can also see why feminists banding together online could get an advertiser's attention.

Jarrah Hodge, editor of the Canadian feminist blog Gender Focus, sees social media as revolutionary. "I think social media has a lot of potential to connect feminists and to mobilize feminists and other progressive activists to resist things in popular culture really quickly and effectively."

For feminism, social media is doing two things. First it's allowing broader access to feminist debates. Julia Horel, blog and community manager for the youth-driven *Shameless* magazine ([shamelessmag.com](#)), says, "I guess some of the big conversations in feminism have traditionally happened in the academy, and women's studies courses and that kind of thing. But having conversations, and questions, and arguments on all kinds of things on social media brings it to people who might not otherwise have an opportunity to be engaged."

Or, as Hodge says, "When I was in junior high school and we didn't really have social media, we were still reading teen magazines, but we had no way to connect with other people and challenge those ideas. Whereas we saw recently, with Julia Bluhm—a teen who challenged *Seventeen* magazine to use models that weren't Photoshopped—even though they haven't succeeded yet in that campaign, it's raised a lot of awareness." Social media's relative affordability, ubiquity and simplicity, adds Hodge, build inclusiveness. "You don't necessarily have to be a writer; you just have to be able to communicate honestly."

Social Media 

so·cial me·di·a

forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (such as videos).

—Merriam-Webster

YOUNG FEMINISTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Secondly, Hodge says, social media can empower younger feminists. “They tend to have more of a voice online than in some mainstream feminist organizations” and are carving out more space for themselves online.

In her podcast series *Tweeting Feminists*, journalist Ronak Ghorbani interviewed well-known Canadian feminist Judy Rebick who observed, “Very few people my age really understand social media.” And yet we see fantastic exceptions. Author Margaret Atwood, a passionate Twitter user, speaks proudly of getting Torontonians railing against library closures. Rebick herself told Ghorbani regarding social media: “I enjoy it. It’s really fun, and I also use it politically—it’s very useful politically.”

Usually, in discussing social media activism, we hype this brave new world—Grrrl slays corporate dragon. But dig deeper and there’s a more nuanced truth—social media with its dizzying upsides, but also a labyrinth-like underbelly. As Jarvis says, yes, SlutWalk co-founders added to a global conversation about violence against women. But they also received “a lot of harassment and threatening and bullying” and “horrible rape threats.” So much, says Jarvis, that the group halted commenting on its YouTube site.

Then add sniping criticism from journalists. The *Globe and Mail’s* Margaret Wentz wrote: “SlutWalks are what you get when graduate students in feminist studies run out of things to do.” Feminists also dissed the newbie activists, especially around the use of the word slut. In *The Guardian*, feminists Gail Dines and Wendy J. Murphy wrote, “Trying to change [the term’s] meaning is a waste of precious feminist resources.” Jarvis feels the media often misrepresent SlutWalks. While participants dressed in all sorts of ways, she says, “Somehow the media kept putting out ... images of two women in bras.”

It’s also stressful when, as an activist and blogger, you’re unpaid but also have a day job. With social media activism, financial challenges are the unsung back story. SlutWalk Toronto is run by volunteers. While Jarvis’s detractors tend to be well-paid (think tenured professors and established journalists), activists like her tend to do their advocacy work (blogging, media appearances, organizing) as volunteers. “The last year was one of the most overwhelming and challenging of my life,” she says.

Deanna Zandt, a New York-based media technologist and author, is the first to acknowledge that a lack of pay is common for social media activists. “No one has an answer for this,” she

says, but “there are people who are studying it.”

Right about here is where the power and challenges of social media intersect. Anyone who’s been involved in social media for a while will be recognize the trajectory—an initial high where possibilities blow your mind, followed by a drift back down to earth.

So can social media be revolutionary? Or, as I sometimes fear, are we about to drown in a tsunami of cat videos, grinning vacation snaps and foaming vitriol? Exploring social media for this article, I’m gaining a renewed appreciation. The caveat? Success online, like offline, requires ingenuity, hard work and some lightsaber dueling against the dark side.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMERISM

One of the biggest challenges is rampant, ad-riddled consumerism. On the one hand, you have weary activists (not to mention venerable institutions such as the *New York Times*, with its new paywall scheme) trying to make enough money online to survive. Alongside, we’re witnessing rising corporate investment. Microblogging platform Pinterest, for example, recently made a \$1-billion venture capital announcement.

For some, viability means advertising. The big danger here is losing authenticity via product placement. As one satirical bit from *The Onion* (“Women Now Empowered By Everything A Woman Does”) reads: “Unlike traditional, phallogocentric energy bars, whose chocolate, soy protein, nuts and granola ignored the special health and nutritional needs of women, their new, female-oriented counterparts like Luna are ideally balanced with a more

suitable amount of chocolate, soy protein, nuts and granola....”

Of course, feminists are challenging the woman-as-consumer meme, notes Linn Baran, community outreach and promotions coordinator at the Motherhood Institute for Research and Community Involvement and a blogger at motheroutlaws.blogspot.ca. Baran says feminist blogging carnivals, radical mommy blogs and online petitions are all ways we can challenge the dominant narrative.

If you’re skeptical about the power of blogging, talk to Sady Doyle. Today a prominent U.S. feminist writer and activist, Doyle writes about blogs politicizing her. “I suddenly saw more than just dating problems and wardrobe issues: I saw double standards, beauty standards, sexual policing and gender roles. And I began to understand, too, how small those concerns were, and how my obsessive focus on them was intrinsically tied to my privilege.”



Jarrah Hodge of *Gendre Focus* believes social media connects and mobilizes feminists.

Online, the trick is to keep your eyes wide open. Baran shares a favourite analogy from Jen Lawrence, whom *Toronto Life* magazine called one of “Toronto’s pioneer mommy bloggers.” In an essay for the book *Mothering and Blogging: The Radical Act of the MommyBlog*, Lawrence writes, “I think that blogging can be an incredibly powerful tool when it comes to building community, even if there are blog ads running down the sidebar.

“But I don’t want blogging to become just another guerilla-marketing technique.” She offers this analogy: “I don’t want to be invited to a friend’s home, only to discover I was really invited to a Tupperware party.”

THE DOWNSIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Of course, if you’re being skewered online by nasty trolls, a Tupperware party could be tempting. Anyone who makes even mildly controversial statements online knows how much venom you can draw, and feminist statements remain lightening rods. The negativity, says Hodge, “can be really demoralizing, especially if you’re someone who’s new to social media.”

Doyle, who launched a Twitter campaign called #MooreandMe after hearing filmmaker Michael Moore call sexual assault charges against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange “a bunch of hooy,” received rape threats for her action. Eventually her campaign wrung an apology from Moore. As she explained in her blog: “I’m being harassed, I’m being threatened, I’m scared for my physical safety to the point that I’m looking up dudes and seeing exactly what stalking consists of in case I have to press charges.”

Jarrah Hodge at Gender Focus says bloggers can’t rely on hosts to help if contributors receive threats. “Oftentimes, the companies that run the [larger] sites aren’t very responsive,” she says. Hodge aims to create a safer space for feminist dialogue on her blog by including a comments policy. “I cite reasons why I might remove your post. And I will never let hate speech or really disrespectful personal attacks stand un-counteracted.”

For *Shameless’s* Julia Horel, it’s all about “deciding what’s worth your energy and what’s not.” Adds Jarvis, “It’s sometimes blocking people from pages, removing comments,” while accepting that feminist comments will see personal attacks. “You need support around and you need to realize your skin is going to get thicker.”

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Haters, advertisers, your 200 Facebook friends and the 50 blogs you’re following—it’s a lot to manage. While we see social media’s value, there’s a growing realization that it can be overwhelming and even addictive. Individuals and organizations are experimenting with boundaries: daily Facebook limits, Internet fasts and device-free weekends. We’re just beginning to study what social media have done to us.

Information overload is a huge issue, agrees Joey Jakob, a Ph.D. candidate in communication and culture at Ryerson and York universities. “Social media allow us to have a kind of access we haven’t been able to have,” says Jakob, who addressed a 2012 conference in Waterloo, Ontario, alongside such luminaries as Margaret Atwood and Jane Urquhart. “Do we even have the time and energy to think about [social responsibility] when we’re just continuously overstimulated

by continuous knowledge filtering in through social media?” asked Jakob.

“What we don’t talk about enough is the actual amount of responsibility” our social media use involves, says Jakob. Consuming social media, Jakob thinks, requires us “to contextualize everything. It can be very tiring, I will admit it, to put everything in context, but I think if nothing else, that’s our responsibility.”

THE FUTURE

But how do we do this? How do we filter out junk and venom and develop a mindful, positive social media habit? As her recent book

title, *Share This! How You Will Change the World with Social Networking*, suggests, Deanna Zandt is optimistic.

We will, says Zandt, learn to better handle the flood of information, and even the haters. “Some women are sort of turning it on their head and creating Tumblr blogs of the hate mail that they receive.... We don’t have to be silenced.”

Looking ahead, Zandt envisions social media activists continually informing and influencing traditional power hierarchies. In her book, she writes that “the freely available nature of the tools reduces some of the complexity of organizing. We no longer have to rely on the old ways of top-down, or even organization-based, grassroots organizing.” She concludes with clear-eyed confidence: “Technology isn’t a magic bullet for solving the world’s problems, but it’s certainly a spark to the fastest fuse to explode our notions of power that the world has seen in a thousand years.” ❁



Media technologist Deanna Zandt says the freely available nature of social media can make organizing easier.