

A Blog of One's Own

British Feminism and Social Media in the 21st Century

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Feminism seems omnipresent these days. At the 2014 Music Video Awards, Beyoncé performed her song “***Flawless” against the backdrop of the word FEMINIST on a huge screen; actress Emma Watson started a feminist book club on Instagram and publicly promotes HeforShe, a UN solidarity campaign for gender equality; the #MeToo Movement, originally started by Tarana Burke in 2006 but popularized in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse scandal of 2017, sparked a public debate about sexual harassment; in March 2017, up to five million people worldwide joined the Women’s March for equal rights; and most recently, the Time’s Up Movement campaigned for more gender equality in the workplace. It seems like a new kind of feminist activism has entered the scene largely outside academia, using pop culture and grassroots movements to create platforms for debates about equality. Women all over the world use social media

technologies such as blogs, podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Youtube or Instagram to promote their ideas and causes. In fact, online-based feminist activism has increased to such an extent that some of its proponents speak of a “fourth wave” of feminism (Cochrane 2013a). But what differentiates the ‘fourth wave’ from its predecessors? And who are its most influential advocates in Great Britain today?



Laura Bates © Conway Hall

Feminists in the British Blogosphere

The central idea behind the ‘fourth wave’ is to make feminism accessible to the masses via technology. In Britain, one of the first campaigns using these tactics was Laura Bates’ *Everyday Sexism Project*. Founded in April 2012, this website encourages women to recount incidents of sexism in their everyday lives, ranging from workplace discrimination to assault and rape. Bates aimed at demonstrating that sexism is not a niche phenomenon but a harrowing reality for many women. The website was a huge success with more than 60,000 people giving testimony of their experiences with gendered discrimination. While many have praised the campaign for triggering a public debate about sexism (Kallaway, Klassen), others, like Germaine Greer (2014), for instance, have criticized its methods: “[u]npacking your heart with bitter words to an anonymous blog is no substitute for action”. It is true that the entries on the website are in no way moderated; they are simply left to speak for themselves. As a result, the blog leaves responsibility entirely with the authors and thus unintentionally presents them as victims of a system that they cannot change. Later projects, especially the #MeToo Movement begun in 2017 with its worldwide repercussions, by contrast, have been much more active in forcing perpetrators of sexualised violence into taking responsibility. Yet, the *Everyday*

Sexism Project has more than served its purpose in pointing out the extent to which society is still pervaded by patterns of gender inequality. Due to its success, the project was exported into 25 countries and published in book form with additional editorial comments. It therefore seems not quite fair to claim, as Germaine Greer has done, that words don’t translate into action. Because of its extensive press coverage, the blog succeeded in de-stigmatizing conversations about sexual violence.

Campaigns like the *Everyday Sexism Project* are an admirable way to engage people who might otherwise not consider questions of gender equality. The internet provides a veritable host of podcasts and blogs with a similar goal – that is, to re-locate feminism from the ivory tower of academia onto people’s phones. Holly Baxter’s and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett’s *The Vagenda*, a pop culture blog and self-proclaimed “media watchdog with a feminist angle” (Baxter/Cosslett), comedian Deborah Frances-White’s tongue-in-cheek online podcast *The Guilty Feminist* (turned into a face-to-face experience on a live tour in 2019) or Caitlin Moran’s website offer down-to-earth feminism for the masses. These British bloggers proudly call themselves feminists and do not shy away from covering controversial topics like rape culture, media stereotypes of women or the gender pay gap. Interestingly,



Deborah Frances-White, The Guilty Feminist
Tour Poster

Courtesy of Hannah Allan

many of these authors even stress their decidedly non-academic approach to feminism. Their articles work primarily on an emotional level and frequently approach relevant issues in a humorous way, satirizing the style of glossy women's magazines. As Kira Cochrane, author of *All the Rebel Women* (2013) and key player in coining the term 'fourth wave', points out, humour can be used quite effectively as "a 'gateway drug' to get young women involved, a vehicle for political ideas and campaigning, as well as for rage" (Cochrane 2013b).

Whatever Happened to Intersectionality?

A common criticism directed at this 'fourth wave' is that for all its talk of liberation, its technology focus perpetuates socio-economic inequalities within the movement, as only people with proper access to technology can participate. Moreover, women of colour, disabled women and LGBTQ+ women who promote issues that are not necessarily in line with dominant white, able, straight, cisgender feminist narratives are excluded. Initiatives that tackle Hollywood sexism or demand more women in CEO positions are laudable efforts to end gender-based discrimination, but they might not necessarily be the main concerns of, say, disabled women or women in the low-income sector of society. It is quite true that the social media activism that receives wide press coverage is usually that of white, middle class women who promote their own concerns, thus marginalizing issues such as racialized sexism, better social support programs for low-income single mothers or the discrimination of trans women in the debate. In short, intersectionality – the key term of 'third-wave' feminism – needs to be put back on the table. As Nagarajan and Okolosie (2012) suggest, we need to "move away from dissension into recognition of the diversity of our realities and voices. Feminism should not be an individualised

movement [...] we need to adopt a ‘no woman gets left behind’ policy. No woman is free until we are all free”.

In fact, there are already a great number of British online sources that tackle these concerns. *Gal Dem Magazine*, for instance, was founded by Liv Little as a response to the lack of media diversity and offers thoughtful articles about politics, art and lifestyle of (non-binary) women of colour. Blogs like *Racialicious* and *Media Diversified* investigate the intersections of gender, race and pop culture in modern Britain. Chidera Eggerue, blogger and author of *What a Time to Be Alone* (2018), comments critically on racialized beauty standards, body shaming and media representations of black women in her podcast *The Slumflower* and on her Instagram account. One of the most influential non-academic feminists of recent years, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, achieved internet fame with her TEDx talk “We Should All Be Feminists” (2013) which has more than five million hits on Youtube. The talk was subsequently published in book form and was followed by Adichie’s *Dear Ijeawele* (2017), which is designed to help parents in raising their children as feminists. The British LGBTQ+ community also contributes to debates online through outlets such as *Trans Media Watch*, which monitors media representations of trans and intersex

issues, *META*, an online magazine concerned with trans and gender queer entertainment, or *Transadvocate UK*, a twitter account providing commentaries on trans concerns.

Commercialising Feminism

So far, so good. However, the content and quality of these online publications varies considerably. While some offer profound feminist critiques, others operate with a rather shallow understanding of feminist theory. *The Vagenda*, for instance, nonchalantly balances columns on domestic abuse with Kim Kardashian’s corset diet. And there’s the rub. This free-for-all feminism has no control mechanisms, anyone can publish anything on any given subject. This is liberating, yes, but it can also lead to a bastardization of the term ‘feminism’. Since many of the websites are geared to be easily consumable rather than theoretical think-pieces, thorough analysis is sometimes bound to be neglected in favour of clickbait. Feminism, of course, is not – and never has been – a homogeneous movement. Nor should it be. Many different kinds of feminism coexist. Nonetheless, the issue of clickbait hints at a slightly more problematic aspect of this kind of online feminism: the question of financial interests. Ultimately, all online content must generate financial revenue, whether through product placement, advertisements, or book deals. Caitlin

Moran's book *How to Be a Woman* (2011) sold more than a million copies; Eggerue promotes make-up and fashion brands on her blog; Cosslett and Baxter signed a six-figure book deal for *The Vagenda* (2014). Profits are vital for these writers, which is why this commercialised kind of feminism is bound to be less independent than comparable academic work. After all, it is much harder to deliver a convincing critique of patriarchal capitalism if you have to be careful not to antagonise sponsors.

Occasionally, this alliance of 'fourth-wave' feminism with corporate capitalism goes even further. In 2013, fashion magazine *Elle* started a campaign to "re-brand" feminism as "a term that many feel has become burdened with complications and negativity" into something more consumable (Swerling). (Incidentally, *The Vagenda* founders Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett were among the "feminist groups" and "award-winning advertising agencies" asked to participate in *Elle's* re-branding endeavors.) Marketplace feminism – defined by Andi Zeisler (2017, xiii) as a feel-good, "decontextualized" and "depoliticized" call for superficial gender equality that never truly challenges patriarchal and neoliberal capitalist systems – is suddenly *en vogue*. L'Oréal sells an eye shadow palette that is called *The Feminist*; beauty blogs incite 'woke' feminist consumers to buy certain

products; Chanel's 2015 summer/spring collection transformed the catwalk into a pseudo-feminist demonstration complete with placards proclaiming 'Be Your Own Stylist.' Ironically, the trendy feminist can even buy 'The Future is Female' t-shirts sewn by women in the global south under inhumane sweatshop conditions. Feminism's 'fourth wave' has hit the mainstream, which is a good thing because more people are made aware of gender inequality. But if it is not backed by a critical assessment of the harmful effects of patriarchal and neoliberal structures on women's lives, feminism runs the risk of being reduced to a meaningless t-shirt slogan.

Laurie Penny's *Bitch Doctrine*

One of Britain's most essential contemporary feminist voices to point out this dangerous liaison is blogger and journalist Laurie Penny. Her latest non-fiction book *Bitch Doctrine: Essays for Dissenting Adults* (2nd edition, 2018) is an eclectic collection of articles as well as a manifesto of "straight-up pinko right-on lefty feminist rage" (Penny 2018, 4). On well over 400 pages, Penny takes a sweeping look at the ills of modern society: she eloquently discusses feminist marketing, domestic violence, cyberbullying, Donald Trump, the discrimination of sex workers, James Bond, body politics, the alt-right movement, trans rights, millennial anxiety, emotional labour,

toxic masculinity, the BREXIT and rape culture, to name but a few topics. Penny explores these diverse issues with great panache, sometimes with caustic wit, sometimes with empathy, sometimes with burning rage. Even though the author tends to overgeneralize and contradict herself at times, she manages to clearly delineate her position. What unites all of her writing – and separates her from the legions of more commercial feminist bloggers – are Penny’s fervent socialist politics. She combines applied feminist theory with a decided critique of neoliberal economic practices and an appeal for more solidarity. It is of course slightly contradictory to eschew neoliberal market practices while trying to sell books at the same time. Nonetheless, social equality is a genuine central concern of Penny’s work. To

put it more bluntly, even Marxists have to make a living, and it might as well be with articles denouncing capitalist patriarchy as the root of social inequality.

Penny’s essays, which are an unapologetically angry call to arms, are always political and demonstrate that she is first and foremost an activist: “Feminism is active. It’s not something you are; it’s something that you do” (Penny 2018, 20). Therefore, her outspoken support of the LGBTQ+ community is a welcome addition to contemporary feminist debates. Penny, who identifies as genderqueer, does not shy away from criticising established feminists for their queer- and transphobic tendencies: “taking a stand against violence and gender essentialism is what feminism is all about, and that’s precisely why solidarity with trans people should be the radical heart of the modern women’s movement.” (Penny 2018, 243)

This makes her an essential part of 21st-century feminism: she tries to steer the movement beyond the interests of middle-class cisgender women. However, Penny herself falls a bit short when it comes to including women of colour or women from a low-income background. As a white, middle-class, college-educated woman, she knows herself to be quite privileged. While she acknowledges this privilege in many of her essays, she rarely deliberates in depth what that specifically means for



The English journalist and writer Laurie Penny at Leipzig Bookfair 2016

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her. She mentions issues that feminists of colour might voice, but in doing so, she occasionally sounds patroni-zing.

Because of her radical views and divisive rhetoric, Penny has become somewhat of a millennial feminist poster girl. Many media outlets concur with *Bitch Doctrine's* dust cover blurb that she is “one of the most urgent and vibrant feminist voices of our time”. For this, Penny is equally idolized and reviled by critics, bloggers and online communities. The author candidly addresses these criticisms in her writing, but in doing so, she demonstrates a great deal of ambivalence. Her writings are frequently personal, she writes about her anorexia as a teen, her anxiety disorder, as well as her personal experiences of rape and online harassment (Penny 2017). Some critics call her narcissistic because of that, and it is true that her personal fame silences less privileged feminists. Penny herself, however, views her style as a weapon against faux-objectivity inherent to much academic writing. She argues convincingly that the personal is always political, particularly when it comes to gender and identity politics. To the claim of being overly provocative, she responds that “[a]nything any woman ever writes about politics is considered provocative, an invitation to dismissal and disgust and abuse”. (Penny 2018, 10) Interestingly, Penny writes extensively about the ways in which

patriarchy forces women, especially female professionals, to compete with each other: “Feminist activists are pitted against one another, often against their will, as male-led outlets ask us to determine who's the best, as if women's liberation were just another axis on which to judge one another and fight for prizes, as if feminism were not a movement that needed all of us” (Penny 2018, 291).

In this regard, her status as the media's favourite controversial feminist is a particularly vexing example of patriarchal structures at work: few women are allowed to be ‘feminist authorities’ and if they are, they are made to compete with each other and criticised for silencing other women – which is a shame because Penny definitely has substantial things to say about feminism today.

A Fourth Wave?

So what is the *status quo* of British feminisms in the early 21st century? At present, we still face a lack of inclusivity and diversity that must be overcome in the long run. A movement striving for true equality cannot simply focus on the liberation of affluent white women. Instead, it must take into consideration the complex concerns at the intersections of race, class, gender or disability. In this respect, the increasing digitalization of feminist debates can arguably help to level the field by creating bigger platforms for diverse feminist

concerns. Young people growing up with the internet have a vast amount of freely accessible feminist content at their disposal. Since anyone can publish their ideas in the blogosphere, we experience the liberation of knowledge. This free-for-all debate culture admittedly has its drawbacks, but on the upside one no longer needs to be able to afford college education to be part of contemporary gender debates. If we disregard the blatantly commercial contributions of marketplace feminism that only focus on individual consumption, we are still left with numerous thoughtful contributions – though it may take some effort to disentangle the two in our daily media usage. Feminism thus has the chance to thrive, particularly by including more diverse voices. To some extent, this diversification also includes the role of men within the movement. More traditional women’s liberation advocates might criticise this notion, but influential 21st century feminists like Penny or Adichie see patriarchy as a problematic social system that inflicts structural violence on both women *and* men. To be clear, women at present experience inequality and discrimination to a greater extent than men, which is why female concerns are still at the heart of ‘fourth-wave’ feminism. Still, many contemporary feminists encourage men to not only come forward as allies in the struggle for gender equality, but also to address how

toxic masculinity affects their own lives.

In the face of such heterogeneous feminist movements, can we speak of a ‘fourth wave’? The unprecedented use of social media and technology definitely sets many of the aforementioned writers and activists apart from previous feminists. Their distinctly non-academic approach succeeds in making the F-word acceptable to a whole new generation of women (and men). Despite their different tactics, ‘fourth wavers’ are still concerned with many issues central to previous waves. In the end, what unites all of the different waves is their shared concern for gender equality. Feminism, then, should perhaps not be seen as a set of successive waves. To quote Penny, it is rather “a great grumbling tsunami, moving slow, sweeping across a blighted landscape of received assumptions, washing away old certainties” (Penny 2018, 19). It is only when diverse strands of feminism come together in empathic support of each other that they can succeed at the sea change that is true equality.

A Short Guide to Online Feminism

Chamamanda Ngozi Adichie: We Should All Be Feminists <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXUqWc>

Chidera Eggerue <https://soundcloud.com/theslumflower>

<https://www.instagram.com/theslumflower/>

The F-Word <https://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/>

Gal Dem Magazine <http://gal-dem.com/>

The Guilty Feminist <http://guiltyfeminist.com/>

Media Diversified <https://mediadiversified.org/about-us/>

Caitlin Moran <https://www.caitlinmoran.co.uk/>

Laurie Penny <http://laurie-penny.com/>

Racialicious <https://twitter.com/racialicious>

Trans Media Watch <https://twitter.com/TransMediaWatch>

UK Transadvocate <https://twitter.com/UKTransadvocate>

The Vagenda <http://vagamagazine.com/>

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