Book review

Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller, *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 216pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780190697853

The past decade has seen increased attention to rape culture and feminism in Western mainstream media. The #MeToo movement is perhaps the most prominent example of digital feminism which challenges rape culture, both in terms of its scope and substance. However, #MeToo is often treated as a singular media event, and this narrative of exceptionalism contributes to its depoliticisation. The focus on individual stories, often high-profile White women, obfuscates the structures of power that normalise sexist and sexual violence. As Heather Savigny argues, ‘publicity [is] not politics’ (2020:14). *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, a recent book co-authored by Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller, constitutes an in-depth analysis of online feminist campaigns tackling rape culture that predate #MeToo, thus providing crucial insights to contextualise the movement within a broader legacy of online feminist activism. In doing so, the book offers a counterpoint narrative to singular celebrity #MeToo stories. It documents the experiences of feminist activists whose everyday challenges to rape culture are too often eclipsed by more spectacular media stories. Using a range of case studies from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, the authors argue that doing digital feminism is a complex yet transformative practice.

The book is organised into six core chapters, supplemented by an introduction and a conclusion. The first core chapter details the theoretical interventions in feminist and media studies scholarship and provides the rationale for their innovative methodological framework. Their research design combines textual analysis of 800 media artefacts (including blog posts, tweets and selfies) and ethnographic methods (including semi-structured interviews with 82 participants; focus groups with 16 girls in a London-based school; and participant observation of online spaces such as Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr). This unique assemblage of research methods allows for a rich analysis of digital activism attuned to the intricacies and nuances of each case study. The remaining five chapters explore different facets of doing anti-rape activism online by focusing on distinct case studies. The authors continuously draw links between each of the case studies through their rigorous analysis, thus highlighting continuities between different digital feminist campaigns, as well online and offline experiences.
The second core chapter documents experiences shared on the websites Hollaback! and Everyday Sexism, the Tumblr account Who Needs Feminism?, and Twitter posts featuring the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported. The case studies selected for this qualitative content analysis shed light on the multiple manifestations of rape culture. Hollaback! maps stories of sexual harassment in public spaces using GPS-based technology. It was launched in New York in 2005 and, at the time of the book’s analysis, was active in 84 cities and 31 countries. Everyday Sexism is a website founded in 2012 by British feminist Laura Bates. It enables participants to anonymously share their experience of sexism to challenge dominant postfeminist discourses. Similarly, Who Needs Feminism? is a campaign launched in 2012 at Duke University that invites participants to share posters explaining why feminism is still relevant. Over 60 universities have since started their own campaigns. Finally, #BeenRapedNeverReported is in many ways a precursor to #MeToo. It emerged on Twitter in 2014, following sexual assault allegations against Jian Ghomeshi, a high-profile Canadian radio host. The hashtag aims to challenge rape myths by recording reasons why victims of sexual violence do not report it to the police. What emerges from this selection of case studies is a constellation of digital feminist activism that highlights a multitude of creative responses to the pervasiveness of rape culture.

The following chapter builds on the same case studies to interrogate the experiences of the feminist activists organising and running these campaigns. Mendes, Ringrose and Keller argue that doing feminism online constitutes ‘digitally mediated consciousness raising’ (2018: 5). As rewarding as this feminist awakening is for the organisers of these digital spaces, it is also highly affective, time-consuming, precarious, and entails risks such as trolling and burnout. While this chapter focuses on the experiences of high-profile digital activists, the next chapter looks at the everyday experience of challenging rape culture for self-defined feminist Twitter users. In spite the risk of mediated abuse, which is particularly prevalent when sharing personal stories, Twitter was seen by participants as a safer space to learn about and engage with feminism than offline spaces. These considerations are further developed in the subsequent chapter, which proceeds through an analysis of tweets indexed with #BeenRapedButNeverReported, in conjunction with interviews with eight women who contributed to the hashtag. The researchers show how the reading and sharing of online testimonies produce forms of affective solidarities and opportunities for feminist identification. Similarly, the last chapter explores the uses of social media by teen girls to challenge sexism and rape culture, showcasing a diverse range of digital practices and acts of micro-resistance that do not often make the news.

My own research deals with the fraught visibility of celebrity sexual assault testimonies. I find Mendes, Ringrose and Keller’s analysis compelling for it highlights the material conditions that produce visibility. Each case study reflects the multiplicity of digital experiences. Throughout the book, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller outline the complex, and at times unexpected, engagement with these platforms. They show the ways in which digital architectures and vernacular conventions not only shape the kinds of stories shared online, but also how feminist activists might resist these norms. The authors argue that digital infrastructures impact the way feminist activists articulate their experiences and understandings of sexism and rape culture. At the same time, these technological
affordances are also imbricated within broader social dynamics which exclude certain testimonies of sexual violence from these digital feminist spaces. Their nuanced analysis challenges in important ways the myth of digital democracy in a #MeToo era: while everyone can share their experience of sexual violence online, not everyone will be heard in the same way. As I have argued in my own work (Moro, 2022), believability is suffused by heterosexism, racism, classism, and ableism.

Another way in which this book has been influential for my own research is through its critical discussion of postfeminism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) and popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The wide range of experiences of doing feminist activism online documented by Mendes, Ringrose and Keller provides a crucial counterpoint to feminist scholarship focused on (hyper)visible instances of feminism in popular culture. For instance, their discussion of the pedagogical affordances of Twitter for feminist consciousness-raising and organising across the globe challenges the notion that the mainstreaming of feminism inevitably leads to its depoliticisation. This is further evidenced through their analysis of the lived experiences of feminist activists, which shows that affect is a political resource for it produces solidarities. Once again, the authors resist an utopian take on digital technologies. Their nuanced discussion highlights the potential of digital media for social change, but also its inherent limitations in challenging the status quo. For example, they reflect on the ways in which hashtagged stories are an affective currency generative of solidarities, but also an economic currency for commercial platforms like Twitter which profit from clicks and likes. These considerations could be further expanded to analyse how these transactional logics, which are embedded within social media architectures, turn the feminist organisers analysed in chapter 4 into micro-celebrities. A productive avenue to pursue might be to consider how fame enables but also constrains their political work.

The authors conclude the monograph on a hopeful note, reminding the readers that social change takes time and presents itself in multiple forms. Indeed, their analysis of digital feminism through intricately connected case studies shows how cumulative, mass disclosure of sexual violence constitutes a meaningful challenge to the patriarchy. According to Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, the increased visibility of sexual assault survivors in the public sphere ‘may be the greatest potential social shift where the connectivity and support online spreads out a mass of experience in a form of public pedagogy that becomes difficult to discount and silence’ (2018: 187). I would be more cautious, as it remains unclear how these ephemeral collective activities will translate into institutional change and impact broader power structures over time. Furthermore, the same digital tools that generate feminist solidarities can also be used to undo them. For instance, the recent Johnny Depp v. Amber Heard trial is notable for the ways in which hashtags, videos, tweets and memes have been used to dehumanise Heard. The ‘memeification’ of Heard (Valenti, 2022) contributes to a new form of backlash feminism, ones that acknowledges the cultural and political significance of #MeToo yet upholds the same rape myths that were previously criticised. This example highlights the need for more research into the double entanglement of feminism and misogyny online.

Overall Digital Feminist Activism is a timely book that will be of particular interest to feminist scholars interested in the mediatisation of rape culture. Mendes, Ringrose and Keller successfully weave complex theoretical interventions with compassionate
accounts of online feminist activists’ lived experiences. Their innovative methodological framework responds to the practical and ethical challenges of researching such a difficult topic. The book will also be useful to media scholars interested in digital activism tackling other forms of oppression like racism, transphobia, or ableism. The multi-sited virtual ethnography can be easily adapted to examine how different online communities of activists come together to produce experiential knowledge. Their analysis of community organisers and everyday users can equally inform research into how digital activists negotiate their presence online and promote online safety. Despite the everchanging digital world, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller provide a methodological and theoretical model to the study of online social justice movements that will outlast the fast-paced transformations of social media.

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