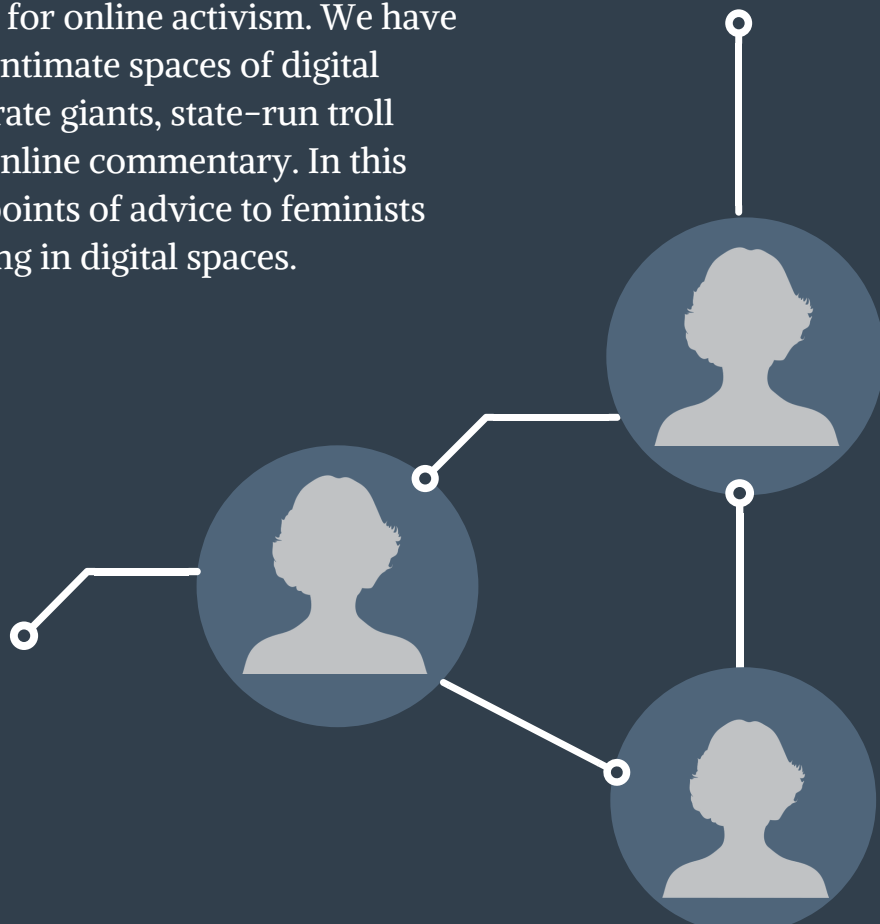


IT FOR CHANGE

Opinion Piece I: Everybody, Offline. We Need to Talk.

It's the end of an era for online activism. We have lost our safe, small, intimate spaces of digital publishing to corporate giants, state-run troll armies, and idiotic online commentary. In this piece, I will offer 8 points of advice to feminists and queers organizing in digital spaces.

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Online Freedom for All = No Unfreedom for Women

It's the end of an era for online activism. We have lost our safe, small, intimate spaces of digital publishing to corporate giants, state-run troll armies, and idiotic online commentary. We must recognize that the politics and policing of this space have shifted under our fingertips and that we must re-strategize how we are going to play the hand we have to win the war against patriarchy - both online and offline. In this article, I will offer 8 points of advice to feminists and queers organizing in digital spaces.

One: Resist Liberalism

Firstly, a general rule of thumb: if your sexual liberation project is the same as Lady Gaga's, you're doing something wrong. The English-speaking Western world dominates the Internet through its imperial cultural hegemony but also - more practically - through Silicon Valley. And some queer activists seem to believe that Western sexual rights campaigns will somehow trickle down into our post-colonial communities and have a positive impact. They take hope in young millennials, digital natives, who have grown up more liberal-minded, speaking a 'universal' Internet coolness language that has transgressed boundaries. But remember: our project for queer liberation is bound with a resistance of colonialism and capitalism. Theirs is not. The liberal agenda will have us believe that global corporations are on our side in protecting rights for LGBTs and diverse groups, like when Facebook initiated a rainbow profile photo filter (Matias 2015) or when Google created a rainbow doodle ("Rainbow Google doodle," 2014) for the Sochi Olympics. This is an electronic continuation of the offline trend of banks and credit card sponsoring gay pride parades.

We are not interested in a corporate sponsorship of our struggle. Sometimes I think that it's impossible in all cases for radical politics to make it into the mainstream - whether it's state legislature or corporate media. And, therefore, any liberation discourse that has made it into the mainstream must have been so watered down that it has become palatable for lawmakers and corporations. Liberalism is very good at this: coopting radical demands into advertising for exploitative capital and discourse for self-serving politicians. And perhaps this funneling is inevitable. But, at least, let us not succumb to this trap and give up our righteous struggles for a piece of the Internet's fleeting fame. We must keep our activism radical (i.e. addressing the roots causes of the problem) and our discourse intersectional (i.e. without leaving out groups of people concerned with our liberation project because of other differentiating factors). In doing so, we are better positioned to hold our ground against politicians and corporations who want to water down or co-opt or pick and choose elements of our activism.

Two: It's networks, not social networks, we need

The Internet has become more of many things: a publishing platform, a communication tool, an entertainment hub. But do not forget that the core power of the Internet was always that it was a network. And it is networks that we must re-focus on. Not the big, vague, privatized, disorganized social networks like Facebook. I often feel like social networking online has done more to alienate us from each other than bring us closer together. The news we share is shallow and one-size-fits-all for everyone we know. Our communication is mediated by a feeling of being always surveilled online - even by our friends and family. We are constantly performing (and we know that we eventually become what we perform) within the regulations of the corporations. They regulate - via algorithms - how our stories are narrated, shared, with whom, and for how long.

And so, forget social networking. Build real networks: manageable, tight-knit, community-run people networks with a purpose. Indeed, the only thing that protects us from online VAW is the power of our networks. Consider, for example, what you would do if you came under harsh and voluminous attacks on the Internet for speaking out against misogyny. It would be harder for you to deal with this alone, or with a few friends, than it would be if you have a strong, organized network supporting you. The response to online misogyny is multi-pronged! You need folks to document, to screenshot, to report on the platform, to call experts, maybe lawyers, maybe police (eek but maybe), to comfort you, to cook for you, to make you tea, to unleash harsh responses in return, to publish or re-share in support, to mobilize larger networks, to host you for a couple of days, to deal with this issue while you take a break and re-energize and recuperate. What else, other than real people networks, offers us solidarity in times of need? Build your networks outside of corporate run social networks. Get inspired by the work of networks like Kéfir (<https://kefir.red/indexEN.html>) in Latin America who "help build safe and free (as in freedom) spaces in internet (...) to create together digital neighborhoods where we can trust each other, express and operate/trigger without fear."

Three: Forget discussing anything online

If you ever wanted to hold a constructive discussion on anything - let alone contentious feminist topics - would you walk onto the street and speak randomly to folks in your neighborhood? No, you probably wouldn't. Or if you did, you would expect harsh backlash and unpleasant confrontation. Pause, therefore, for a moment and consider what you would actually do before having a conversation about feminist issues on the street with random folks. You'd probably recruit some comrades to help you think through how to approach the topic.

You'd probably rehearse. You'd probably gear up for the discussion and set a contingency plan. You'd probably try and understand the power plays in the neighborhood first. You probably wouldn't hit the streets without two, three, four of your friends for back-up. And, really, if you think about it, you would probably opt for the better route of organizing a more controlled space, like a closed event or a theater production or a training, or something more structured where you can set the parameters for a safer and more productive meeting. You know better than to think that you can actually debate constructively in the street.

The Internet, dear friend, is the same as a public street. There is no good discussion to be had randomly on it and no winning any debates on it. Don't waste your time on strangers who want to antagonize you. Sometimes you set up an exciting Facebook event and one random stranger goes in to throw some random sexist cliché, demanding and funneling your attention to these comments. And that WhatsApp group you set up for the organizers lights up with folks sharing screenshots of his comment to discuss how to respond. Don't waste your time. Block and delete. You lay claim to this tiny space of interwebs and you get to moderate it. Don't be fooled by those who will say: what about his freedom of speech? Not in your house will you allow freedom to spew sexist crap. Somehow we are bullied into thinking that all folks are entitled to their opinions. No, they aren't. One time I saw a meme that intelligently stated: you are entitled to your informed opinion. How about public streets like Twitter, you ask? Approach your Twitter campaigns as you would a stroll out into the neighborhood to present your feminist views. Gear up, recruit others, prepare, ignore the sexist haters and push out your content with confidence.

Four: We are in a propaganda war

And it's difficult to make subtle points in a propaganda war. You will notice that online rhetoric has become more simplified, tucked away into 140 (now 280?) characters. Editors tell you to make your blog posts shorter. A friend suggests making infographics or videos out of your long think-pieces because people don't read long pieces. Don't waste time lamenting this. Recognize that we have a propaganda task at hand versus the fundamentalists and fascists and misogynists. The volume of our feminist liberation content matters. The frequency matters. The sheer number of those on our side matters. We often hear about state-run "troll armies" out to do the state's bidding online. Why do you think they do this? Because they recognize the power of numbers. The Guardian reports (Benedictus 2016) that "governments all over the world are manipulating social media for their own ends. That's where the digital foot soldiers come in - smearing opponents, spreading disinformation and posting fake texts for 'pocket money'."

We need to fight back with our own armies of feminist elves. They put out one article, we put out two. They play the meme game, we play it better. They make their videos, we make ours. Of course they are better staffed, better resourced, but we are smarter and more genuine. We must not relent in the battle to influence people and to move them closer to the left, a little, with every post, every article, every meme, every photo, and every account.

Five: Build your online media powerhouses

Our impulse online these days is to be snarky. Smart, snarky, often passive-aggressive commentary gets huge traction online. Places like Twitter are designed to make us think in one-liner responses to huge political events. And sometimes, yes, a single word or image is powerful. But it is never all the power we need. Because our opponents (the misogynists, the racists, the supremacists, the fascists) lose when you drag them into the details. Their one-liners are always more powerful slogans than ours. But their arguments always fail any test of morality, usefulness, or even logic. So do not get caught up in snarky response but do the long-term laborious work of documentation, thinking, and analysis. Build your online media powerhouses on servers you own and not on Facebook's servers. Write your articles and your listicles and publish your documentaries and photo galleries. Build news agencies and magazines and journals. Build them to compete with the largest media corporations out there.

Six: Forget corporate allies, but hold them accountable

Twitter Inc., Facebook Inc., Google Inc., Apple Inc., Samsung Inc., Amazon Inc., these will never be our allies. We are engaged in completely opposing projects. But, you will say, if we share a common interest of promoting positive images of strong women, can we not celebrate their efforts? No, my friend, we cannot. They are in the business of exploiting feminism and we are in the struggle of ending capitalism. We do not turn to them for solutions. If their primary interest is harvesting more personal data to create new surveillance capitalism and fuel their Artificial Intelligence bots with better knowledge of markets, then we are in complete opposite motivations. In 2014, the Association for Progressive Communications release a report (Dewey 2016) that found "a total lack of transparency around how much abuse actually goes down on social media — particularly abuse directed at women — and how social media companies deal with it."

Let us never have a confused relationship with corporations. We must, indeed, hold them responsible for double standards and violating rights like privacy and promoting hate speech and refusing to take down videos of rape or gender-based violence or transphobia.

But we do not join their advisory councils to offer them free labor in figuring out safer policies. They are the ones with billions of dollars in resources. They know what needs to be done and how to program it. Our efforts must focus on advocating for embedding consent, justice, and protection into the design of their algorithms and holding them accountable until they do. One does not offer excuses to the wealthy when they operate in complete disregard for those they exploit. One confronts them on their hypocrisy and refuses to buy the products they sell to distract us.

Seven: Digital self-defense is not enough

In 2015, Tactical Tech published the results of an in-depth study of a decade of digital security trainings (Kazansky 2015). The trainers interviewed in the research mostly agreed that 10 years' worth of digital security training rarely resulted in "security [as] a robust practice when everyone within the network is communicating securely using the same tools and practices." The study makes excellent recommendations like shifting focus from individuals to networks and overcoming linguistic barriers to learning. But the InfoSec community's focus on tools is, itself, a core problem.

Imagine if, over all those decades, our response to violence against women was mostly training women on self-defense without addressing the political, legal, and cultural frameworks that allow this violence to thrive. Imagine we never lobbied for domestic violence laws, challenged toxic masculinity, or set up hotline services and shelters. Why then do we focus our online VAW work mostly on digital security? Why do we seek technical solutions to social problems? We cannot change the cultures and politics and legal frameworks that enable online VAW if we are not aggressively involved in the debates around policy, infrastructure, and design of the Internet. We cannot pretend this is a new problem. Indeed, it is a very familiar problem. We understand, for example, surveillance as a tool of the patriarchy. Women have dealt with surveillance all their lives for generations. Just because this is a new medium of surveillance doesn't mean we don't have the politics and analysis to break it down and understand how to resist it. It seems to me that organizations are constantly skipping steps towards technical solutions: develop an app, build a website, start a hashtag, train women to use certain tools. All of this is only useful when women are also involved in Internet governance, in Internet design, in infrastructure debates, in developing policies that foster safe and secure spaces for women's freedom of expression online.

Eight: Do not be distracted

Remember always what Toni Morrison said: “The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being.” The same can be said for misogyny. How many times have you felt exhausted by misogynistic tweets you see on your timeline? How many friendships are ruined because of public fights in comment sections? How many times has the discussion at meetings shifted towards debating the same old issues like the validity of women-only spaces? How many times are we made to doubt our own abilities, the power of our own movements, the righteousness of our demands? Do not allow misogyny to distract you. You have a colossal task ahead. Put on blinders like a horse and get to it.

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Nadine Moawad is a feminist organizer based in Beirut, Lebanon and one of the founders of Nasawiya, a feminist collective. She had started 'Take Back the Tech!', a collaborative campaign to reclaim information and communication technology to end violence against women.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

IT for Change and the Women's Rights Online network of the WWW Foundation initiated 'Online freedom for all = No unfreedom for women', a project that intends to trigger national-level policy dialogues on balancing the right to free speech online with women's right to freedom from technology-mediated violence, in India and Bangladesh. The project, launched in January 2017, seeks to address key gaps in existing legal-institutional frameworks on technology-mediated violence against women in the two countries.

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