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Josiane Jouët

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## DIGITAL FEMINISM: QUESTIONING THE RENEWAL OF ACTIVISM

**JOSIANE JOUËT**

josiane.jouet@u-paris2.fr  
Institut Français de Presse/Carism;  
University Paris 2

**ABSTRACT.** This article questions the underlying social and political factors explaining the revival of feminism, and analyzes how feminists use digital media to promote their cause. It presents the results of a two-year research project on feminist activism in France; however, many results have broader implications for the evolution of feminism in Western countries. The survey is based on an ethnographic online observation of nine feminist collectives, on face-to-face interviews with activists, and on a qualitative survey of ordinary feminists. We examine the diversity of feminist collectives and how digital media have contributed to the rise of a new leadership and of new organizational practices. Young activists are experts in producing visual narratives (images, video, etc.), in using unconventional repertoires of action (humor, satire, etc.) and in networking. They make events and campaigns which are widely echoed in the public sphere and the mediation of digital media leads to a form of performative activism. Connectivity widens the audience and contributes to the building of virtual communities. However, the high visibility of digital feminism led to the rise of a virulent cyber-sexism. Finally, questions remain about the empowerment of feminists at a time when conservative forces are re-emerging in Western societies.

**Keywords:** feminism; digital practices; cultural content; performative activism; virtual communities; sociology

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## 1. Introduction

Digital media are commonly perceived as a new source of empowerment for feminist activism and are often considered as having largely contributed to its revival. However, did digital media really transform feminist militancy? Does feminism mean the same thing today as in the seventies? Are activists similar to those of previous generations? Has feminism mainly been reduced to digital visibility and connectivity? Is there a change in the foundations of feminist discourses? Do digital media foster the widening of the feminist community? To sum up, in the age of a widespread enthusiasm for digital technologies, we propose a critical perspective on the current evolution of feminism.

This article analyzes the forms and the strategies of online feminism in France. However, its results also have broader implications regarding the evolution of new forms feminism in other Western countries. Our study relies on a two-year research project based on an ethnographic online observation of 9 feminist groups, on 9 face-to-face interviews with activists and on a qualitative survey of 24 ordinary feminists. This study was conducted with two other colleagues and several results have been published in the French academic journal *Réseaux* in April 2017 (Jouët et al., 2017). It was an interdisciplinary project combining distinct theoretical approaches from three authors: semiotics (Katharina Niemeyer), feminist history (Bibia Pavard), and sociology (Josiane Jouët). This paper's scope focuses more on the sociological dimensions of digital feminism by adopting a pragmatic analytical approach and it tackles the question of the audience which was not covered in the *Réseaux* issue.<sup>1</sup>

The review of the French literature showed that, despite the large number of gender studies about male-female equality or LGBT issues (Bereni and Revillard, 2012), the recent vivid feminist digital activism just begins to be investigated (Pahud and Paveau, 2017). Moreover, French researchers have studied digital leftist and alternative activism (Blondeau and Allard, 2007; Granjon, 2001; Granjon and Cardon, 2011) but neglected digital feminism. Anglophone literature on digital feminism is more extensive but less voluminous than expected. Judy Wajcman noticed a decade ago: "Feminist theories of gender and technology have come a long way over the last two decades. While much early second-wave feminism generated a fatalism that emphasized the role of technology in reproducing patriarchy, during the 1990s cyberfeminist writers celebrated digital technologies as inherently liberatory for women" (Wajcman, 2007: 287). She mentioned the leading role played by Donna Haraway (1991) and Sadie Plant (1997) but, at this time, only few theoretical scholars were interested in digital technologies. In fact, despite a few studies on social uses of ICTs by women (Kramarae, 1988; Cockburn

and Fürst-Dilic 1994; Van Zoonen, 1994 and 2002; Jouët, 2003), research strived when social media exploded during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and empirical studies about the feminist uses of the web are recent (Horeck, 2014; Fotopoulou, 2015; Mendes, 2015; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015; Baer, 2016; Keller et al., 2016). Our reading of the literature shows that the emphasis is put on gender identity, women's bodies and rape culture (sexual harassment, cat-calling, etc.). For instance, Hester Baer (2016) studied the global movement of the #YesAllWomen and the personal testimonies of women victims of sexism. Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose investigated the wide circulation of women's testimonies in the global SlutWalk movement : "Feminist scholarship has mapped how girls and women are creating online cultures of support for victims of sexual assault and violence ..., generating and circulating feminist discourses that counter patriarchal ones ... and interrupt rape culture through a variety of creative interventions, such as the mobile phone app 'Not Your Baby' and the organization and participation in the global SlutWalk" (Keller et al., 2016: 3). Most of the Anglophone literature is based on a discursive textual analysis of digital contents and on a cultural and media studies theoretical framework; it is a valuable source of knowledge about the feminist movement but it does not explicitly cover all the sociological questions that we raise.

However, it is important to note that the huge wave of testimonials on the #metoo hashtag which took place in many countries, following the revelation of the Weinstein affair in October 2017, is now leading many feminist researchers to investigate digital feminism. This phenomenon is international; in France several hashtags are used #metoo, #moiaussi, #balancetonporc (*out your pig*) and several studies are presently being done.

## 2. The Revival of Feminism

The common use of the "waves" metaphor in feminism does not merely refer to generations since it also hints that a major change occurred not only in communicative practices but also in ideological and political agendas (Pavard, 2017). In their introduction of the special issue on intergenerational studies of *Feminist Media Studies* (2016), Alison Winch, Jo Littler and Jessalynn Keller provide a critical analysis of this metaphor: "It is regularly invoked to herald a 'new' kind of feminism that has broken with the old" (Winch et al., 2016: 559). They show that younger feminists share the same commitment to the feminist cause, like reproductive rights and gendered violence. However, they add: "Generation, used with nuance, is important because it helps to make sense of differences incurred by specific historical conditions, and which contribute to the formation of feminist and gendered sensibilities and their mediation" (Winch et al., 2016: 561). The results of our survey confirm this

analysis since we observed that feminists of today and of the seventies do not share the same media culture.

The proliferation of digital feminist groups in France is a recent phenomenon which took place in the last ten years. On one hand, this rise is rooted in the resurgence of feminism due to political events and, on the other hand, it is linked to the advent of a new generation of digitally skilled women.

Despite the advancement made by feminists in the 1960s–1970s, French society like all societies remains patriarchal and sexism still shapes men's behavior. Second wave feminists have been very active in France and they fought in order to gain many rights like the right of abortion which was legalized in 1975 (Pavard, 2012). During the following decades, activists were still promoting women's rights but their actions were not much publicized as there was a common belief that women had already achieved equality. The resurgence of the cause as a public issue took place at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the emergence of public events. The presidential elections of 2007 were a source of many misogynous attacks against Ségolène Royal who was the first female candidate to compete for Head of State. This strengthened the movement for male-female parity in political institutions which got attention in the media and a law was finally passed in 2010. A year later, the Dominique Strauss Khan affair came as a shock and men's assaults on women became a matter of public outcry encouraging women to express their indignation online and to speak up about rape. At the same time, the LGBT movement was very active in claiming the right for gay marriage which entailed lots of public debate about sex, gender, transgender, but also led to the rise of reactionary factions which organized huge street demonstrations to oppose this reform. The law recognizing gay marriage was finally passed in 2013. In sum, the social issue of gender equality has been on the forefront of the French political scene and it became a major public controversy which favored the revival of feminism as a new wave. In fact, there was a “political opportunity structure” which, as Bart Cammaerts explains, met “the mediation opportunity structure” with the growth of digital media (Cammaerts, 2012).

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, third wave feminism thrived with the emergence of a new generation of feminist digital natives. However, some feminist groups which emerged during the second wave are still active, like the Movement for Family Planning which promotes contraception and the right for abortion, the National Collective for Women's Rights which is a coordination of associations, trade unions and political parties struggling for equality, or Solidary Women<sup>2</sup> which is linked to the communist party. These well-known associations do field work and offer many resources to women. They are also present on the web but their sites are conceived on a top-down model and use the traditional format of militant releases while the iconography is minimal. In some ways, their communicative practices are similar to the

Fawcett society in London. However, their recent Facebook or Twitter accounts are more interactive and alive due to the participation of a few younger members. Aristea Fotopoulou who studied several women's organizations in London also stressed the heterogeneity of the groups and the gap existing between younger digital feminists and older feminists who prefer face-to-face meetings but are anxious to catch up with technology due to the dominant "social imaginary of networked feminism" (Fotopoulou, 2014).

### **2.1. A heterogeneous feminist digital space**

The denomination of groups as "collectives" is common within the French feminist movement. This label was already adopted by feminists of the second wave who wanted to distinguish themselves from highly structured and hierarchical political organizations.<sup>3</sup> In our survey, we selected feminist groups which were very engaged in their digital practices, had a rather large number of followers, and which represented different trends of the feminist movement.<sup>4</sup> We observed that all active groups emerged at the time of the digital inclusion. These collectives were created between 2008 and 2014 and they launched, almost simultaneously, their website, Facebook and Twitter accounts. Female Watchdogs (Les Chiennes de Garde) which was created in 1999 is an exception and this second wave association set right away a web site and, a decade later, social media accounts.

It is uneasy to establish a typology since collectives are very diverse and it is interesting to note that the existing feminist literature does not attempt to differentiate feminist groups alongside categories like, for instance, agendas, leadership or modes of organization. However, in a sociological approach, it is appropriate to draw lines of similarities and differences between activist groups in order to analyze divergences in their political stands and how they tackle feminism in the broader societal context. In France, distinctions can be made between formal groups, which have officially registered as an "association" entitling them to get subsidies and to launch civil actions in court, and informal groups which are less structured. Furthermore, collectives differ in their agendas even though they may back some common causes like they did for gay marriage and they share a common cause in fighting sexual harassment.

We identified three types of feminist collectives: general-interest groups which struggle for almost all women's causes (parity, equal pay, right to dress as one wishes, etc.), specialized groups which focus on specific issues (like banning sexist ads, or parity), and identity-grounded groups like LGBT or intersectional collectives. We illustrate below these agendas by focusing on the most prominent collectives.

Dare to Be a Feminist (*Osez le féminisme*) is the largest feminist association which gathers around 1500 members and has 20 officers. This collective organizes many campaigns and is heavily engaged on social media as well as

in lobbying in political circles. It is criticized by some feminists for promoting a form of institutional feminism. The Impertinent (*Les Effrontées*) also embrace all feminist causes that activists link to wider political issues. It is a formal association, with around 150 members and an office of 8 women. It is a leftist group which is very active on the web in order to denounce injustice done to women and other sorts of discrimination. The editorial line shows that The Impertinent is kind of a mixture of second wave struggles and of third wave computational feminism.

Specialized feminist collectives focus on a restricted agenda. Female Watchdogs only deals with the representation of women in the media (sexist comments, advertisements). This formal association gathers around 150 members who mostly belong to the second wave. It is rather conventional in its communication strategy. The President sends a monthly newsletter to members and feeds the website and social media accounts with press releases denouncing sexism in advertisements, and with information about the appeals made to the professional agency of advertisement ethics (*Jury de Déontologie Publicitaire*). In contrast, The Beard (*La Barbe*), which fights for the establishment of parity in the political and professional sphere, fully masters the codes of digital media. It is a small informal group of women (15–20) which is action-oriented. These activists check on Twitter public meetings where speakers are all men, they attend and they suddenly rise and go on stage, put on a fake beard and congratulate the men for having resisted parity. They are experts in making the buzz since one activist shoots the action with a mobile phone and disseminates it on Twitter.

Feminist groups who fight for the recognition of their identity and for gaining rights as minorities are diverse. For instance, the collective *Oui Oui Oui* has been very outspoken during the campaign for gay marriage and is still fighting for medically assisted procreation and gestational surrogacy. *Bitches* (*Garces*) is an intellectual group of lesbians, mainly composed of students in political science, even though it is opened to anybody. If French feminist LGBT groups have grown in the last decades, intersectional feminism is less represented in France which is a country defending universalism and resisting the recognition of any difference between citizens on a religious or ethnic ground. In fact, many feminists belonging to these minorities are not at ease in white women dominated groups. The afro-feminist collective *Mwasi* (meaning “Women” in Congolese) was set up in 2014 and it pleads, on digital platforms, for the end of racial and sexist discriminations. Activists use pictures and videos to promote the body and the aesthetics of Black women as a political discourse (Bruneel and Gomes Silva, 2017). French intersectional feminists are especially interested in the fights of cultural minorities in America and European countries, and *Mwasi* organized the first European

Blackfeminist festival in Paris which gathered, in July 2017, several black foreign activists.

Political agendas of the groups are, as we saw, diverse. Fatima Benomar, a Moroccan who is a cofounder of The Impertinent, considers that: “There is a form of competition among activists but each collective is specific and it is positive that the movement is decentralized since each woman can find the best group for herself.” There are few overt conflicts between groups. If French feminists have been divided about prostitution, most groups fought to ban it and the law to abolish it was passed in 2016. The main controversy lies on the wearing of the veil and the headscarf since secularism is a strong principle of the French State. Many feminist collectives perceive the Muslim dressing as a sign of women’s oppression and are overtly in favor of the current law preventing its wearing at work or in public institutions; only a few do not express an opinion or are in favor of a less rigid law.

If collectives take different political stands, it seems that digital media have nevertheless contributed to the pacification of the feminist community at large. On the Net, there is space for all trends and new collectives emerge at any time. Furthermore, digital media imply a physical distance between groups and leave room for autonomy. This might partly explain that, despite diverse agendas, feminist groups undergo less confrontations than in the past when theoretical lines were a source of fracture. Another explanation for the rather smooth relationships between collectives is probably due to a change in feminist leadership; many activists are no longer intellectuals but professionals who are less interested in the intricacies of ideological debates than in the achievement of their struggle.

## **2.2. The emergence of a new leadership and organizational practices**

The activists are mainly young, in their late twenty or thirties for the leaders, belong to the middle or upper-low classes, and many have reached at least the first level of higher education. In our interviews, they stressed the need for self-reliance in communication and digital skills in order not to depend on male technicians. The President of Female Watchdogs, a former press officer who is 63, told us: “Today digital media have become a must for feminist activism and I had to learn everything by myself.” The appropriation of digital skills is easier for younger women who have seized the tools of self-publication that have given rise to DIY (Do It Yourself) practices and to amateur productions of texts and images (Flichy, 2010). Moreover, the large number of young digital natives explains the flowering of feminist sites. If a few activists learn computational activism on the spot, our study reveals the rise, in the hierarchy of feminist groups, of communication professionals who are in charge of the digital strategies. These leaders often belong to the media sphere (they are or have been journalists, press officers, video makers,



etc.) or to the communication digital sector. Some digital experts have adopted the entrepreneurial neo-liberal management of start-ups and digital firms. For instance, within The Georgette Sand informal collective, specific “digital projects” are delegated to only one or two members who fully carry them out; this fluid sharing of tasks allows activists to get engaged on an irregular basis. Furthermore, collectives take over advertising strategies and, in some respects, display a “brand” identity.

Organizational rules vary according to the size of the groups and to whether the editorial line is strictly defined or less specified. The organization is looser in informal groups as one member of the Bitches lesbian collective (Garces) states: “We are about 80 but only 15 form the active hard core. There is no hierarchy, no specific roles. All the members can write on our site and this is why there is a diversity of views.” In contrast, formal collectives wish to have control over their publications and only leaders have access to the codes of websites while community management on social media is also operated by designated members. Fatima Benomar, a leader of The Impertinent, who is a graphic designer and video maker, explains: “We are mainly women in our twenties or thirties; many are artists and have precarious jobs. All the members of the bureau have the codes of the WordPress and we are three community managers for our Facebook account. We meet weekly and, when we plan specific actions on the streets, we communicate by using Telegram.”

All feminist collectives rely on the engagement of a small number of activists (rarely more than a dozen) who are fully involved in the managerial tasks. Occasional power conflicts may emerge within this hierarchy and they are usually discussed face-to-face or in the Google group shared by the leaders. There is a big turnover in the leadership which can be due to political divergences, but more often to the wish to withdraw from the time-consuming work of activism. The engagement in active feminism is often sporadic and circumscribed to a limited period of time like in many other social movements (Cardon and Granjon, 2010). In fact, if the feminist movement is specific, it presents similarities with other activist groups. All collectives self-organize and activists engage in specific actions on an ad-hoc voluntary basis (Neveu, 1996; Kaufmann and Trom, 2010). Members of social movements rely on digital communication tools to coordinate and they use the web as an alternative media to promote their cause (Granjon, 2001; Cardon and Granjon, 2010). In all social movements, activism has become an intermittent engagement linked to specific actions as Nick Couldry points out: “Without doubt digital media faster political mobilization, accelerated cycles of action, and some new forms of collectivity... the resulting acceleration of action encourages short-term loyalties and less stability in political socialization” (Couldry, 2014: 608).

Furthermore, with the rise of individualism and the quest for self-recognition in neo-liberal society, political engagement has become more individualistic. This might be a source of tension in collectives since activists have to follow the editorial line and, moreover, no first or family names appear on the digital publications of militant groups. This is why feminist activists who wish to express themselves at the individual level, in a more intimate way or on other issues, do so on a personal blog or on their own social media accounts. This allows them to use their own name or a pseudonym and thus to recover their identity. The availability of various publishing spaces demonstrates how digital media can lift group pressure and accommodate on one hand, the respect of collective affiliation and, on the other hand, individual empowerment.

In fact, digital feminism is in the vein of contemporary neoliberalism. The explosion of collectives and blogs is, in a sense, inspired by the model of small start-ups in the digital world. The promotion of feminist activism is infiltrated by the logic of marketing and the values of entrepreneurship of “the new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Online, feminism is experienced as a form of self-realization and of collective empowerment. Digital practices and feminist engagement are, in some ways, constituted through assemblages bound up with global liberalism even though feminists criticize the principles of neoliberalism and the social inequalities it leads to.

### **3. A Performative Activism**

Feminist digital activism is molded by the neo-liberal society in which it emerged and all collectives are fully part of the economy of visibility (Voirol, 2005) which contributes to the reconfiguration of the women’s movement. The activists are keen to be visible and they develop strategies to ensure that their posts are seen, read and shared. They do so by having a continuous editorial production on their website and on social media, and by appropriating the codes of the digital culture. Younger feminists are experts in using the technical and narrative frames of digital media and in developing innovative discourses. Furthermore, on the web, there is no limit for editorial content. The enormous number of feminist materials provided, daily and on an immediate and free access in the cyberspace, appears to be one of the major changes between activism in the seventies and in early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **3.1. An intense techno-cultural production**

Many collectives have a regular techno-cultural production and make an original editing of narratives based on an assembly of texts, drawings, photos, videos which attract young women. While forty years ago, only a few

feminist film or video makers could develop this type of craft, today many young feminists have seized the availability of DIY tools and have become digital experts. Digital native feminists use new creative cultural formats (like mash-ups, video snippets). Some groups like Dare to Be a Feminist or Femen have a YouTube channel. However, Facebook is the most popular platform for French activists, while Twitter is more used as an information mean to reach journalists and several groups have an Instagram and Tumblr accounts. In some ways, feminist activism has become a flow of texts and visuals which are multi-distributed on different platforms.

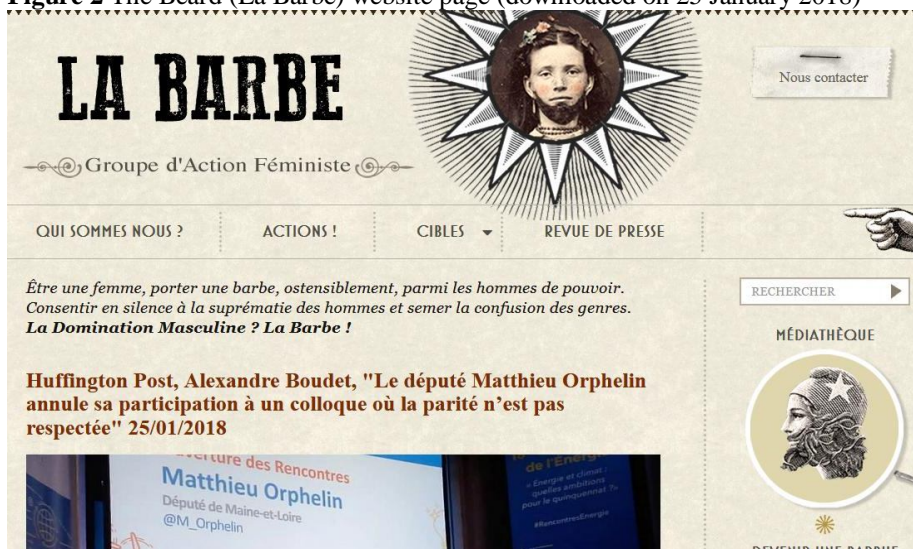
Activists also devote a lot attention to the aesthetics of their websites. In this sense, digital feminism can be seen as a form of collaborative and aesthetic creation. Many activist contents are beautiful artistic performances. Some groups adopt the references of pop culture, others adopt the vintage fashionable trend (Niemeyer, 2015), as does the Georgette Sand collective.

**Figure 1** Georgette Sand Facebook public page (downloaded on 24 February 2017)



The nostalgia for past feminism (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015) is featured in the iconography of a few websites which often make brief references to the history of feminism. Some collectives, like The Beard, display designs, in sepia colors, featuring photographs of the past on which are pasted symbolic objects of the collective as shown in the screen capture below.

**Figure 2** The Beard (La Barbe) website page (downloaded on 25 January 2018)



The majority of posts fit into the 21st century cultural codes of communication and resort to a witty tone. “Online feminists deploy social media tactics as powerful tools of community building and political mobilisation in ways that take from the content and style of other satirical practices of Internet culture...” (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015: 2). Young feminists have appropriated internet culture, however these authors do not mention that humor and satire was a mode of communication of the youth revolt in the late 1960s and that feminists of the seventies used it a lot. This continuity, over decades, in the cultural and political forms of feminism which appeal to humor, caricature and transgression of patriarchal norms is worth underlining.

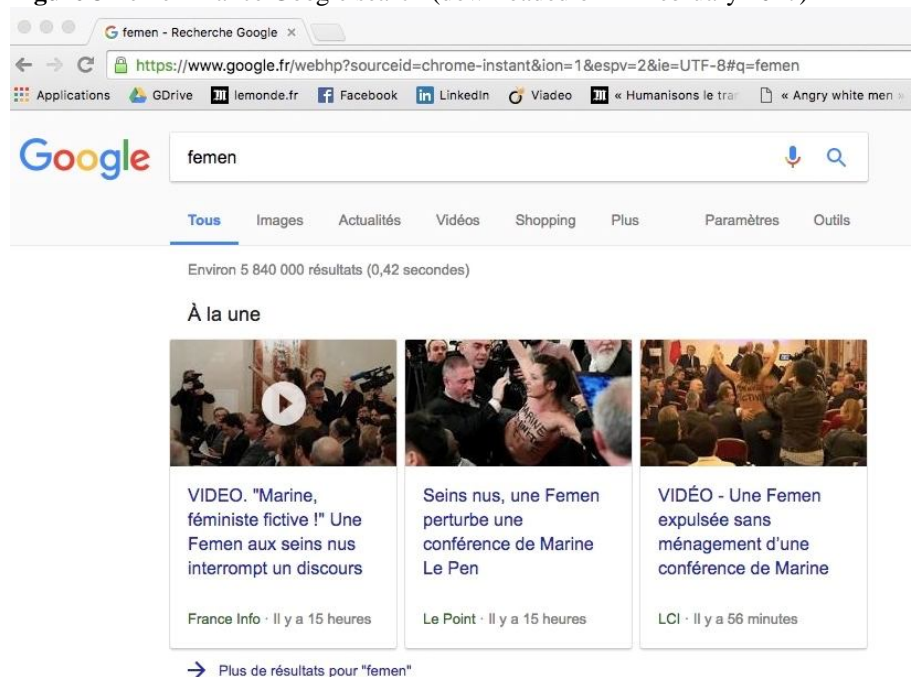
### 3.2. The making of events and campaigns

Feminist collectives self-represent themselves and activists are experts in organizing happenings and live events. “This ties the discursive back to action as ICT’s increasingly sustain movements, coordinate direct action and have become instruments of direct action in their own right” (Cammaerts, 2012: 122). The Beard and Femen are especially famous for setting-up provocative actions which they record on video and post rapidly on the web. Digital media contract the time between the production and the representation of events which can be quasi-simultaneous. This live dissemination leads to a vast echo in cyber feminism and digital links circulate among multiple sites.

Femen, a movement initially founded in 2008 in Ukraine and now relocated in France, is well known for having its members use their topless bodies as a tool of resistance and liberation and for calling the press when

they show up in different spaces (institutions, churches, street demonstrations, etc.) as seen below.

**Figure 3** Femen France Google search (downloaded on 24 February 2017)



One member of Femen France, Sofia, explained her action: “I am not an intellectual. I am an artist and I express myself with my body. This is why I joined Femen. I try to deliver a feminist message with a performance and strong visuals.” If the provocative strategy of Femen France has been initially controversial among French activists, this collective is today recognized as part of the feminist movement. In fact, as far back as the seventies, subverting the norms of public places, contesting the patriarchal domination on women’s body has been a common protest of feminists.

Campaigns are times of an intense mobilization. Major campaigns have been organized, for equal pay, male-female parity, gay marriage, and against rape, prostitution, sexism in the public space. These long-term protests are similar to campaigns in other Western countries but contemporary feminists also deal with daily-life issues which were not tackled by previous generations of feminists. For instance, the hashtag #WomenTax which denounces that ordinary consumer goods, like razors, are more expensive for women than for men, was launched in Anglophone countries and was taken over by the informal collective Georgette Sand. Moreover, this collective undertook a

specific digital campaign about the heavy tax on women's hygienic pads which was re-disseminated by some other collectives, and the hundreds of "love" and "comments" on social networks raised the attention of the press. Due to this campaign, the tax was much reduced by Parliament in December 2015.

Collectives try to rally ordinary women around catchy hashtags and to encourage clicks and sharing. As an example, in April 2016, Dare to Be a Feminist launched a campaign, #I am a feminist, asking followers to send their selfies with a short message. Many protests rely on using hashtags, like the campaigns against street harassment, rape or cyber-sexism. The potential to rouse instant communities around causes has been shown in many countries. In Germany, for instance, the hashtag #Aufschrei collected 57,000 postings in 3 days in reaction to the sexist comments and behavior of prominent male politicians during the federal elections 2013. "The example of hashtag feminism makes clear how the increased use of digital media has altered, influenced, and shaped feminism in the twenty-first century by giving rise to changed modes of communication, different kinds of conversations, and new configurations of activism across the globe, both online and offline" (Baer, 2016: 18).

Contemporary feminists carry on this struggle and they claim, for instance, the right to dress as they want and not to be victims of harassment. These claims have seen a great upswing since the surge of tweeting on the hashtag #moiaussi (metoo) and #balancetonporc (outyourpig) which continued for months. The importance of this outcry and the denunciation on Twitter of French political or artistic personalities was highly covered by mainstream media. This wave of indignation spread to several professional sectors and led the government to pass a law against any form of sexual harassment in any public or private place, and to set a fine against sexist outrage.

Feminist collectives master the buzz and the viral potential of social media. This strategy may sometimes prove to be efficient. For instance, the degrading image of women on Yves Saint-Laurent street billboards, in March 2017, was denounced by several collectives and it gathered a large number of online protests which led to the official indignation of the State secretary for Women's rights and the billboards were removed in a week time. The Facebook page of The Impertinent below celebrates the victory of the indignation of activists.

**Figure 4** The Impertinent (Les Effrontées) public Facebook page  
(downloaded on 10 March 2017)



The organization of events and campaigns represent the achievements of activist groups and the materials of their struggles (posters, texts, photos, videos, press coverage) are put, for collective memory, in the archives section of their websites.

### 3.3. The inter-twinning of online and offline activism

Contemporary feminism is often criticized for being mainly focused on visibility and connectivity which, as such, cannot lead to much social change. In fact, digital activism is not only expressive; it is performative. It federates individuals and generates action frames leading to engagement. It allows “a new infrastructure of association” (Couldry and Van Dijck, 2015: 3) which backs up physical mobilization in the public sphere. The online mode of protest is a way to rally ordinary followers and to rely on user agency. Digital media are not only sociotechnical devices requiring to obey protocols, instructions, rules, they are also “techno-cultural constructs.” “Technology, user agency and content are three fibres that platforms weave together in order to create the fabric of online sociality” (Van Dijck, 2013: 36).



If some online petitions mainly appeal to emotion and create ephemeral communities, campaigns lead to elaborate political strategies in the public sphere. Activists make the buzz online, but they also send press releases to mainstream media and they call out journalists who are in favor of the feminist cause. Furthermore, they lobby in political circles by contacting members of Parliament who share their opinions and they make appointments with members of government. This form of “institutional activism” is performed by the leaders of formal associations. For instance, the Inter LGBT association which fights for the right to medically assisted procreation, asked right away for a formal encounter with Marlène Schiappa, the State secretary for women’s rights in the new Macron government, in order to get her support for the passing of a law in Parliament. This group is also very outspoken in street demonstrations. It is important to underline that all major campaigns are not only backed by strategies for visibility in the press and in the public space, but by fieldwork and lobbying, meaning that political strategies and repertoires of action have not changed so much since the beginning of feminism.

Our survey shows that if digital media are communicative devices they are also tools for action in order to stay connected and to recruit new members. The Beard, for instance, sells kits of beards on its website for women who wish to join and to adopt the same satirical “congratulations” in official meetings composed of males only. Many collectives send online appeals to join as shown in the screen capture of Dare to Be a Feminist.

**Figure 5** Dare to Be a Feminist (Osez le Féminisme) Appeal to join  
(website page downloaded on 12 March 2018)



Activists welcome the coming of sympathizers to their face-to-face meetings with no need to become an official member. Dare to Be a Feminist, for instance, organizes regular assemblies which gather, as we observed, young women who do not know much about feminism but are searching for infor-



mation; it also recruits volunteers for training camps in order to teach them how to become an activist. Other groups, like Georgette Sand and The Impertinent, organize happy hours or picnics to attract sympathizers. For all collectives, unmediated communication is still considered as important for sensitizing women to the cause.

As we saw, digital networks build up various feminist communities which gather around plural, multifaceted feminist spaces and it is revealing that today the plural “feminisms” is more and more used in the literature.

#### **4. Small Communities and a Large Scattered Audience**

Does digital activism help first, to expand the audience of feminist materials and second, to build up feminist communities? This question remains not easy to answer. If activists boast about the number of their followers, the actual readership of feminist contents remains unknown and it is surprising that very few studies about digital feminism raise the matter of the audience. Researchers generally analyze discourses on feminist blogs, websites or social media, and mainly focus on the contribution of active members of the community. The cultural theoretical framework is the most common although the sociological approach can also be found in a few studies like the ethnographic work conducted by Aristeia Fotopoulou (2014) in London-based women’s organizations and the interviews of four girl bloggers by Jessalynn Keller (2012). Furthermore, Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose studied the development of the Hollaback movement which was launched by two Toronto and Montreal reporters in 2005 and had spread to 32 countries and 92 cities ten years later. The authors did a textual analysis of a random sample of 159 posts of the main website and interviewed 12 Hollaback organizers and 48 Twitter teenage users of the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported. They showed how adults but also “... teens often acknowledged social media, specifically Twitter and Tumblr as key to actually ‘discovering’ feminism, gaining a feminist consciousness, and making feminist contacts online” (Keller et al., 2016: 8).

The dissemination of feminist materials in the digital space is not linear as texts circulate through different platforms. The analysis of metrics of social media is the most common method in order to evaluate the audience. In our study, the metrics showed that, on 10 March 2017, the number of “followers” of feminist groups was not that high, except for Dare to Be a Feminist which gathered over 100,000 fans on Facebook and nearly 30,000 followers on Twitter. The other third wave groups reached between 10,000 to 15,000 fans on Facebook and between 2,700 to 1,000 on Twitter, The Beard reaching almost 9,500 followers on Twitter since it is their main mean of communication. Second wave groups are less popular; Female Watchdogs and Solidary

Women had a smaller audience of less than 8,000 on Facebook and Twitter. However, these data do not strictly reflect the audience. On one hand, many persons might have registered as followers while they don't regularly look at the content of feminist collectives which is intertwined with many other messages in their news feed. On the other hand, there is a hidden audience since many followers share content in their personal networks and thus favor a wider dissemination of feminist postings. But, due to their privacy, it remains impossible to measure how dissemination circulates among personal networks.

#### **4.1 Audience circles**

In our research, the audience of digital feminism appears as very scattered and it spreads along concentric circles depending on the level of engagement of participants. In fact, each collective attracts its own "public" which designates followers who identify with the goals and sensitivity of a specific group. As Sonia Livingstone (2005) argues, the theoretical distinction between the notions of "audience" and "public" is nowadays blurring since new media may favor participation and engagement in public issues. Such is the case on feminist mediated platforms even though only a minor part of the diffused audience can be considered as forming an active public.

The first circle of the audience is composed of the small core of activists who, besides being engaged in their own collective, pay a lot of attention to other groups. On the web, militants have a daily watch at the whole feminist community and this entails a form of competition for launching initiatives and producing continuous materials. Activists may recognize the digital creativity of other militants and, for instance, they occasionally share links to other collectives on their own websites which is a sign of mutual appraisal. This behavior is very similar to what we observed in the press community since, on Twitter, journalists spend a great deal of time reading the tweets of peers belonging to rival media, and may salute their publications online (Jouët and Rieffel, 2015).

In our research, we did a qualitative survey of non-activists based on 24 face-to-face interviews of women in their early twenties, most of them being students or young professionals. These young feminists do not want to become a member of a militant group since they are reluctant to follow a "political agenda," to attend regular meetings, and they wish to engage in feminism on a strictly individual basis

The second circle of the audience is composed of determined feminists who follow one or more online feminist collectives as well as individual feminist bloggers. Nearly half of the interviewees fit into this non-activist profile. These young women are rather knowledgeable about the history of the feminist movement. They occasionally make comments, express their

opinions or give a testimony about sexist discrimination in their personal life. For instance, Margot, 20 years old, mentions: “I follow several feminist groups even though I don’t always agree with their political stands. On Twitter, I regularly get into discussions but talking is not as effective as concrete actions, like street demonstrations which show a real mobilization of feminists.” The sites of Dare to Be Feminist and The Beard, are the most popular in this circle.

However, feminists belonging to minorities favor specific sites which better fit their centers of interests. Lesbian women prefer LGBT sites. For instance, Timé, 24, follows the lesbian site Barbi(e)turix, and an American site AfterEllen, which she says “is well known and is linked to the pop culture in the United States.” Women of ethnic minorities follow diverse feminist sites but they prefer to participate in sites gathering women of their ethnic or racial group. Oueannassa, a history student of an African origin, looks occasionally at different feminist sites, but she is a regular fan of the afro-feminist site Mwasi. She explains: “I prefer Mwasi and I also follow Anglophone bloggers on Twitter and Tumblr because they are more advanced on intersectionality issues like @FeministaJones, @AkilahObviously, @ElsaRay\_CCIF.” Leïla, a French woman of Algerian descent, fights the oppression of women in Islam and she debates about the discrimination of Muslim women in the forum of the collective “Neither Whores, nor Indoctrinated” (*Ni Putes, ni Soumises*). She is also engaged on other sites and is very outspoken to defend her identity if need be: “I can react to posts when I feel that my identity is offended and then I send comments. If I have experienced something which touched me, I will write about it. I will mention my feelings on the web.” Some interviewees also put their names on petitions and participate in street demonstrations like on March 8<sup>th</sup>. Many discuss feminist issues with “friends” in their Facebook private networks. In some ways, young feminists have revived the women’s consciousness groups that took place in the sixties and seventies. While feminists of these decades met in small groups in order to discuss sexism and to talk about their personal experiences, it now takes place on a much larger scale in the digital space. Subjective narratives as well as conversations about personal experiences contribute to the self-assertion of being a feminist. Digital media allow the young feminists that we interviewed to express themselves, to exchange and to build-up their identity. This agency is a form of empowerment at the individual level.

The third circle of the audience is made of young women who say they are feminists, but are not keen about militant postings. Several find that feminist groups are too radical and they consider that feminism depends on individual acts in daily life, like stressing women’s rights in their relationships to men, to friends, to family, to colleagues. However, a few read *Causette*, a feminist monthly magazine which is not linked to any activist group, and

provides a combination of serious information about women's issues and of joyful and satirical articles about beauty, fashion, ordinary sexism. Young women of the third circle get most feminist news on women's magazines like *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Biba*, *Madmoizelle*, and they appreciate the few articles which deal with the women's cause like on pay equality, harassment, rape. They occasionally share links of feminist articles in their personal networks. They have a positive view about the role that digital media can play in promoting feminist issues. However, online they never get into discussions about feminism but they do so during face-to-face encounters with their friends.

#### **4.2 The culture of sharing**

Most followers of feminist collectives just read news and share content. Sharing is the major practice done by all non-militant women and, according to Estelle: "Sharing is an important form of engagement since it means informing people in order to make them discover and understand the feminist cause." Clara does the same: "I share lots of information and I sign many feminist petitions online, but I don't write comments." A look at the data of sharing on collective sites shows that it is not so widespread, as it usually ranges for each post between 10 to 50 "shares" on Facebook and Twitter. However, when the issue at stake is crucial, there is a large mobilization of the audience, as it took place when the government decided, in July 2017, to curtail by 25% the budget of the Secretariat for women's rights which was already the lowest. The Facebook site of Dare to Be a Feminist garnered 852 "shares" on 29 July 2017 and 997 "comments." Appeals to protest were also disseminated on the digital spaces of all feminist collectives.

The architecture of social networks matches the principles of horizontal communication; sharing is embedded in the design of social network and, according to a big quantitative analysis of social media (Bastard et al., 2017), it is the main use of Facebook. As W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg point out, social networks favor "connective action" by enabling "personal engagement through easy-to-share images and personal action frames" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 758). Some interviewees are sceptical about this distant engagement that Evgeny Morozov (2011) calls "slacktivism," and Romaric, a young male feminist of 23, points out: "Activism is a daily commitment and a strenuous work. Internet is not bad for activism but there is a danger. Today by the number of voices which are heard on the internet, one may think that there is no longer any frontier between being a militant or just giving your opinion." If sharing is not activism but a sign of loose engagement and of distant support, it disseminates issues of the women's cause, knits connections and contributes to identity building and to the feeling of belonging to a community.

Our interviewees share different types of material: posts of activists but also links to videos, songs and TV series with a feminist sensitivity. José Van Dijck stresses in her book *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013) how social media, which she prefers to name as connective media, conform with a young generation's lifestyle as the youth is fond of microblogging and sharing. This is the case of all our interviewees who love Facebook but also – depending on individual cases – Twitter, Flickr, Tumblr and YouTube. Our interviewees might know some collectives but few can cite the name of contemporary activists. Most of them are attracted to feminist contents with a pop culture style. Hélène, for instance, appreciates the iconography and iconoclastic provocation of Femen and the Pussy Riot and says “I am keen on feminist Tumblr.” Young feminists are involved in watching TV series, in listening to pop singers and they send links of images and videos to their friends. They have been raised in the entertainment formats of neo-liberal society and they share the codes of the media star system. They are looking for new models of feminism as Estelle, a student of 22 years old, states: “Of course there is Simone de Beauvoir, but more recently many stars claim to be a feminist like Pink, Beyoncé, Patricia Arquette of the TV series *Medium*. Personally I love Emma Watson. It is another vision of feminism which makes the cause more attractive.” In our face-to-face interviews, Emma Watson was the most quoted figure of feminism. Pop culture has reframed the style and the expression of feminism in a cool and sexy version which appeals to young women. In that regard, digital media as well as mainstream media may contribute to the sensitization of ordinary women and to the raising of a feminist consciousness.

In our survey, the young activists, as well as the ordinary feminists that we interviewed, tend to share a techno-utopian representation of online feminism. Many subscribe to the myth of digital media as a major source of progress and this confirms the critical analysis of Aristeia Fotopoulou: “The social imaginary of ‘networked feminism’ as an ideological construct of legitimate political engagement in the ‘open’ and ‘shared’ space of Web 2.0 technologies is cultivated by widely circulating narratives, including those of digital inclusion...” (Fotopoulou, 2014: 14). When, forty years ago, activists could only rely on militant magazines with a small readership, digital media magnifies the dissemination of feminist voices.

## **5. Conclusion**

This overview of a few representative collectives epitomizes the recent evolution of feminism. Many Anglophone studies stress the weight of the cultural and emotional dynamics of feminist mobilization on the web and this analysis is confirmed in our survey. However, feminist activism is also

grounded in the cultural and political context in which it develops. “The ecosystem of connective media ... is not simply the sum of individual micro systems, but is rather a dynamic infrastructure that shape and is shaped by culture at large” (Van Dijck, 2013: 44). As we saw, France is a country where ideological and cultural debates are at the centre of the public sphere and gender issues are a main source of controversies. Furthermore, French feminism is confronted to the vivid public debates about secularism and universalism which are considered as the pillars of the Republic. Collectives take different stands about the Muslim veil and the self-organization of ethnic minorities, nevertheless there is a mutual acceptance of the diversity of feminist voices and all collectives support parity, equal pay, lesbian’s rights and the fight against rape and sexual harassment.

If digital media help to raise awareness of causes and to get support of sympathizers, communicative practices alone cannot achieve political change and, like for other online social movements (Peyers, 2013), feminist activism requires the backing of street demonstrations, a large coverage in the press and the support of convinced MPs to obtain new legal rights. These strategies are embedded in the context of each country and language, especially in Europe, plays a major role in keeping actions within the national borders. Nevertheless, French activists are part of the international feminist movement and they follow foreign groups online. The rising number of French young women speaking English helps occasional international coordination. Due to a feeling of marginalization, intersectional feminists, like the afro-feminist collective Mwasi, develop strong links with similar cultural minorities abroad. French feminists demonstrated when the right for abortion was threatened in Spain and Poland. Common mobilizations and hashtags, like #womenstrike, disseminate at a global level and are displayed on French digital sites. In October 2017, the international outcry against sexual assault, following the Hollywood Harvey Weinstein affair, led hundreds of French women to testify about sexist harassment or rape. This issue was very much debated in mainstream media and the hashtag #MeToo was very popular and got thousands of French followers on Twitter and Facebook.

The vast of echo of campaigns and feminist protests in the public space is a source of violent counter-attacks. In the last decade, the high visibility of feminists on the web led to a huge rise of virulent cyber-sexism. This global phenomenon is studied and denounced by several Anglophone feminist researchers (Gill, 2015; Shepherd et al., 2015), who report national or international mobilizations to counter these aggressions (Mendes, 2015; Keller et al., 2016). In France, some feminist websites have been hacked by extreme right-wing trolls and leaders of Dare to Be a Feminist and Femen received death threats. Femen decided to communicate through an encrypted messaging service, to close their offices and to relocate every day. The expansion of insults

and sexist attacks against activists, lesbians, and women at large, particularly young women, was mentioned in a report of the National Assembly, and led to the launching in October 2016 of a State campaign #Stopcybersexisme.

In France, like in many countries, digital media contributed to a reconfiguration of feminism. The lively, young and satirical digital narratives made the women's cause gain in visibility and in audience. Connective networks, as socio-technical devices, play a role of mediation which contributes to renew the forms of engagement. If feminists of the first and the second waves have been shrewd in knitting networks, which is a basic strategy of all types of activism, contemporary feminists benefit from more powerful tools and resources in order to spread their ideas and to mobilize. Digital activism online is performative; it federates individuals and generates action frames that foster personal and collective actions both online and offline. In that sense, digital communities are not only virtual but also real. Despite the "instability" and the "vagueness" of the term "community" (Couldry, 2014), our study shows that feminist communities do exist on the web, they are tools for consciousness raising and for producing strong or light modes of engagement.

Another change taking place in women's activism is that French third wave feminism is no longer linked to strong theoretical frameworks, except in the circle of feminist scholars and among activists who fight for gender identity issues. It has emancipated from Marxism and leftist theories and it is less revolutionary than in the past for becoming more pragmatic. Only a few collectives, like The Impertinent and Solidary Women, still call for a global social change. The embrace of popular culture suggests a more conventional form of feminism that can appear less critical of the establishment than the activism of past generations. Icons in the past were writers, philosophers, scholars; today icons are pop-media stars who defend women's rights with simple messages. "Digital feminisms are in a sense redoing feminism for a neoliberal age" (Baer, 2016: 19) "... feminism in the twentieth century developed in tandem with Leftist and rights-based movements invested in the fundamental transformation of social relations.... However, in the absence of alternatives to global capitalism ... rather than participating in narratives of social progress or emancipation, these actions emphasize the process of searching for new political paradigms, languages, and symbols..." (Baer, 2016: 30).

If there is a proliferation of collectives and postings on the web, this does not mean that feminists are fully empowered. We stressed that due to online and offline hard campaigns, French third wave feminism has contributed to major advancements on key issues like parity, gay marriage, prostitution, rape and sexual harassment. However, many struggles for equality remain to be carried out. Furthermore, little change has occurred in the representations and roles of gender in society and patriarchy remains dominant. Digital media helped to regenerate feminism, to attract young women and to bring gender

issues in the public sphere but, in all Western countries, feminists are facing the re-emergence of reactionary forces. Today the women's cause still shakes the foundations of patriarchy and this is why, as in the past, contemporary feminist activism is still perceived as a threat to the established order.

## NOTES

1. I wish to thank my colleagues of the Department of Media and Communications for their thoughtful comments on this research during my two stays at the London School of Economics in 2016 and 2017.

2. Mouvement pour le Planning familial, Collectif national pour les droits des femmes, Femmes solidaires.

3. Feminist personal blogs are also numerous in France and there are some prominent feminist YouTubers, but this is not the scope of this paper which focuses on militant groups.

4. La Barbe, Chiennes de garde, Les Effrontées, Osez le féminisme, Femen France, Garces, Georgette Sand, Mwasi, Oui Oui Oui.

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