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Hashtag Re-Appropriation, Voices of Reason, and Strategic Silences: 'Soft' Feminist Resistance Practices on Swedish Social Media

Lisa Lindqvist

Abstract
This article challenges the perception of feminist activism on social media as impulsive, emotional, and necessarily underpinned by neoliberal substructures. Instead, it reveals deliberate and strategic approaches employed by interviewed Swedish feminist organizations and activists that navigate commercialized social media spaces while subverting online norms and platform constraints in subtle and ingenious ways. By operating within and going along with some logics of the economy of visibility that dominate online spaces, activists use "soft" feminist resistance practices to destabilize popularized versions of feminism and threats of online misogyny. Examples include reappropriating popular hashtags to gain reach, employing a voice of reason in heated online debates, and using silence to deter trolling. These practices represent creative forms of feminist resistance against oppressive online structures and polarized cultures. By employing "soft" feminist resistance, activists carve out spaces on social media where they can disseminate knowledge and envision feminist futures strategically and safely. In this way, the article suggests a hopeful approach to feminist possibilities granted by social media, while emphasizing the labor required by activists to challenge and resist threats of online violence, thus highlighting the need for platforms to enhance their safety measures.

Key words: Activism, Digital Feminism, Hashtags, Online Misogyny, Social Media

Introduction: Social Media Feminism and Soft Resistance

Feminist activism on social media is oftentimes conflated with the popularized iterations of "empowerment feminism" with neoliberal underpinnings that thrive online (Banet-Weiser 2018). It is frequently construed as an ad hoc, ill-thought-through, and emotional activity that sometimes results in unexpected moments of viral hashtags (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019). However, social media feminism is a vastly heterogeneous phenomenon, and

several scholars suggest it is principally strategic and deliberate when it comes to the framing of issues as well as the choice of platform, whether performed by organized groups or individual activists (Keller 2019; Hansson, Sveningson, and Ganetz 2021). Although social media platforms often algorithmically amplify content that is polarizing, emotionally triggering, easily digested, and risk supporting the sexist and neoliberal structures that help to reproduce an unjust society (see, for instance, Papacharissi 2015 and Noble 2018), users also utilize platforms in creative ways to disseminate content and build relationships that challenge these structures.

Social media feminism is situated within an "economy of visibility," where feminists can feel forced to implement norms and trends to reach their audience (Glatt and Banet-Weiser 2021). Still, there are a number of online feminist practices that work to challenge such norms and circumvent sexist online cultures and technical restrictions of social media platforms. Some radical examples are "feminist digilante" activities like naming and shaming perpetrators online (Jane 2017a) and feminist coding, which has resulted in alternative digital platforms like HarassMAP for mapping sexual assault (https://harassmap.org/en/). But there are a multitude of other feminist practices that might be less obvious, however, and no less important in the struggle to challenge hegemonic versions of popularized feminism.[1] I suggest using the term 'soft' feminist resistance practices[2] in order to describe online feminist actions that are employed within commercialized social media spaces and the economy of visibility but still find ingenious ways to challenge both social media cultures and neoliberal feminism. 'Soft' feminist resistance works to nuance polarized debates, to mobilize in non-public spaces of social media to avoid trolling attacks, and to disseminate knowledge to unexpected and potential allies. In this article, I suggest three such 'soft' feminist resistance practices, described in my interviews with six Swedish communications specialists for feminist organizations, one journalist, and one feminist activist group, all of whom use commercial social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok for feminist advocacy and knowledge dissemination. They appropriate popularized hashtags by adding them to unexpected feminist content, employ a voice of reason-strategy in heated online debates, and use silence as a tool to stop trolling attacks and conserve energy. In these ways, the participants perform feminist resistance against sexist and neoliberal social media infrastructures, popularized iterations of feminism, and online cultures of polarization.

Social Media as Spaces for Political Deliberation

Social media platforms are peculiar spaces in which to operate when trying to do feminism. They are often described, not least by the companies who made them, as facilitators of democracy—a statement that has been extensively scrutinized by scholars and activists. As the largest social media platforms make their money off advertisers, their automatic algorithmic sorting and dissemination of content will amplify messages that prompt users to engage and thus stay on the platform (Gillespie 2018). For a message to become viral on social media, it needs to follow traditional media logic, such as urgency, emotional

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attachment, and novel or surprising information (Gil de Zúñiga, Koc Michalska, and Römmele 2020). Further, social media will amplify emotional content even more, as they aim to always retain and engage audiences to capitalize on them by offering efficient ad space to advertisers. This means increased visibility for polarizing, shocking, seemingly unfiltered, and emotionally engaging content (Papacharissi 2015; Gil de Zúñiga, Koc Michalska, and Römmele 2020). Such activities also allow misinformation, online hate, and trolling activities to thrive in these spaces. Moreover, it is obvious that the companies behind some of the largest commercial social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, and X—have not done enough to counter-act online harassment and violence, which mostly affects women, girls, and other marginalized groups (Jane 2017b).

The ways in which social media platforms sort, amplify, and downplay content and other technical specificities of the platforms are often referred to by digital scholars as affordances. In relation to social media, affordances are what the platforms enable users to do (Bucher and Helmond 2018). This means that the concept has a technical component, an individual information-processing component, as well as a social component. Users build on each other's online practices and continuously develop and expand online cultures. However, the infrastructures and techniques behind the platforms inevitably delimit what can be done and said online. Thus, how social media users understand technical specificities and features of platforms, such as algorithms, will shape their behaviour online. Amplification of emotionally engaging content might lead to framing practices that utilize this feature, or that try to resist it, as I will discuss in the results section of this article. At least the "imagined algorithms" in the minds of social media users will, in one way or another, shape what they do online.

I focus on the mainstream platforms with the largest user bases in Sweden (and in extensive regions of the world): Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok (globally, there are 3 billion monthly active users on Facebook, 1.21 billion on Instagram, 368 million on X, and 656 million on TikTok according to Statista.com). Given their size, they provide important opportunities for feminists to disseminate knowledge and entice action. Scholars looking into early social media platforms of the 2010s emphasized the potential to reach large audiences and how these "imagined audiences" might have affected content producers (see, for instance, Marwick and boyd 2011). However, as audiences and the amount of content online have grown vastly, platform affordances like sorting algorithms have become a considerable force affecting the dissemination potential in these spaces (Gillespie 2018; Zuboff 2019; Gayo-Avello 2015). It is important to note that it is not only the technical affordances of social media platforms—how they afford particular shapes to content by way of technical specificities and moderation rules and practices as well as particular sorting and disseminating through engagement-based algorithms—that shape content, but also how users imagine these affordances and interpret them.

Both "imagined audiences" and "imagined algorithms" thus affect how feminist content producers strategize to disseminate knowledge and mobilize resistance. The technical specificities of platforms that tell them the maximum

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length of a text or the format of an image, and their knowledge of successful framing of issues for maximum potential reach and chance for virality, are important aspects of what makes up feminist discourse in the social media sphere.

Digital Feminist Activism in an Economy of Visibility

Social media platforms provide opportunities for feminist organizing, networking, and knowledge dissemination (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018). In an article from 2019, media scholar Jessalynn Keller suggests that social media gives feminists a platform where they can express their frustration from encounters with sexist structures in everyday life, find likeminded individuals, and organize in feminist networks. At the same time, popular renderings of feminism on social media oftentimes emphasize individual rather than structural change. As feminism seems to be experiencing a viral moment in contemporary culture, the version that is making the rounds is underpinned by messages of self-confidence, personal empowerment, and how to reach your full potential (Banet-Weiser 2018; Gill and Orgad 2015). These versions of feminism fail to critique either "the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms that are co-constitutive with capitalism)" (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020, 4).

Internal critique within the feminist community, for instance, pointing out neoliberal underpinnings of self-empowerment and improvement discourse (see, for instance, Banet-Weiser 2018; Worthington 2020) and of feminist iterations based on personal responsibility as I have written about elsewhere (Lindqvist and Ganetz 2020), is immensely important if we want to create meaningful visions for a just future. Social media does support a particular political infrastructure where visibility is conflated with capitalism, inviting iterations of feminism that can be churned out and sold as t-shirts or manifestos in the style of Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In (Banet-Weiser 2018). However, viral feminist online moments and hashtags might spark interest with women, girls, and non-binary people, leading them to further engage with feminist ideas and organizations (Clark-Parsons 2021; Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018). As feminists strategize to get their message across, they might choose to go along with some traits of popular/capitalist iterations of feminism, such as utilizing media logics of visibility and emotion (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020). Social media platforms house a vast variety of ideas that share space and feed off of each other, making it all the more important to look into how feminists maneuver these complex spaces and what opportunities and challenges they come across.

Online Misogyny and Feminist Practices of Resistance

Doing feminism online also means being susceptible to online hate. Although trolling behaviours, hateful comments, and serious threats are a part of being online, media and gender studies scholar Emma Jane (2017c) quotes a 2015 United Nations report that suggests that women are 27 times more likely to be exposed to online abuse than men, and emphasizes that gendered online violence poses a threat to opportunities to speak and be heard online for women

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and girls. Media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) has pointed out the connections between the rise of popular feminism and the widespread prevalence of "popular misogyny," a networked version of misogyny that utilizes the visibility and language of online culture to spread anti-feminist messages. Further, several analyses of the online discourse in the so-called "manosphere"—"a set of blogs, podcasts, and forums comprised of pickup artists, men's rights activists, anti-feminists, and fringe groups" (Marwick and Caplan 2018, 543)—suggest that prevalent themes include verbal abuse against women and a perceived victimization of men that is reinforced by feminists who are deemed to be man-haters (Dickel and Evolvi 2022; Marwick and Caplan 2018).

However, when it comes to digital feminist activism, activists resist such structures by creating strategies for carving out space and reappropriating platform affordances (Clark-Parsons 2021). Jane points out that women and girls fight back against cyber violence by "fight responses," like naming and shaming and calling out perpetrators, as well as "flight responses," like moderating their tone and opting out of particular conversations (2017b, 51). While Jane uses the concept of "flight responses" to describe practices such as sidestepping contentious debates, hiding or blocking, and seeking refuge in non-public online spaces, I suggest they are instead examples of 'soft' feminist resistance practices in response to online misogyny and platform affordances that amplify harmful content. Further, I suggest that feminists oftentimes mix observable and hidden resistance practices to ensure both visibility and safety.

To summarize, I suggest that social media feminism is shaped by and needs to respond to social media platform affordances, popularized neoliberal iterations of feminism, and the threat of online misogyny and gendered violence. In the following, I explore feminist social media strategies by discussing three 'soft' feminist resistance practices that feminists employ in the Swedish social media landscape.

The Current Feminist Moment in Sweden

Sweden is a Northern European country of 10 million inhabitants with high self-esteem and international regard when it comes to gender equality and institutionalized feminism. For instance, the former government decided on a "feminist politics for a gender equal future" in 2016, introducing, among other things, the new governmental Swedish Gender Equality Agency. Sweden has long been regarded, nationally and internationally, as a gender equal society. However, in recent years, the gendered pay gap has increased, and women still take longer parental leave than men (Swedish Gender Equality Agency 2021). Women are also more exposed to domestic violence than men by 40% (The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention 2023). Additionally, the current liberal-conservative government governs with the support of the far-right party Sweden Democrats and now puts their efforts into restricting immigration, introducing harsher punishment for gross crimes, and restricting access to welfare benefits rather than combating gender inequality. However, in their statement of government policy from 2023 (Government Offices of Sweden 2023), they claim that "Sweden will remain a strong voice for gender equality,"

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citing the importance of equal health care and combating honour-based violence, but little more.

#MeToo had a vast dispersion in Sweden in the fall of 2017, which gave rise to widespread feminist organizing around almost 80 industry-specific petitions for change to end sexism in the workplace (Hansson 2020). These organizations emerged from hidden Facebook groups, shared Google docs, and other technical tools for collecting and sharing testimonials of experiences of sexual abuse and assault in the workplace (Hansson, Sveningson, and Ganetz 2021). In relation to these organizing initiatives, offline events such as manifestations, street protests, and debate forums took place in the following years (Pollack 2019). Since then, several other feminist hashtags have been prevalent and offline events have taken place in their wake. For instance, the hashtag *#kvinnostrejk* ("women's strike") started appearing on Swedish social media in March 2021, calling on women to go on strike every Friday at 3PM and gather in local squares, protesting sexist societal structure (Rådne 2021). Since then, groups of feminists have come together to perform local manifestations in a number of cities around Sweden under the *#kvinnostrejk* flag. Local *#kvinnostrejk* groups run Instagram accounts for performing online feminist advocacy. While I am writing this, the hashtag has 17,232 posts on Instagram.

However, Swedish feminist scholars and activists have noted a backlash against feminist issues since the #MeToo wave of 2017, citing a lack of attention to issues of sexism and harassment in the 2018 election (Pollack 2019), and an experienced increase in the public sphere of far-right narratives of sexism as an "imported" problem following a rise in popularity for nationalist party Sweden Democrats.

Methods and Participants

During the spring of 2023, I talked to seven Swedish feminists and one anonymous activist group about their experiences of and strategies for doing feminist work on social media platforms. Five of the participants work as communications specialists for feminist advocacy/women's rights organizations, one is a journalist and cultural worker, one is an administrator for the social media accounts of a feminist organization on a voluntary basis, and the activist group runs a radical feminist X account. The participants and I attempt to describe feminist practices of 'soft' resistance against underlying sexist structures of social media platform affordances, and strategies for getting meaningful feminist messages across in the highly commercialized online spaces of Instagram, Facebook, X, and TikTok, as these were the most important platforms for the participants.

The interviews lasted between one and two hours. I spoke to the participants individually, except for two women working for the same organization, whom I met at the same time. I also had a conversation through X direct messages with the anonymous admin group of a radical feminist account. I did three of the interviews online on Zoom, and the others in various offline settings chosen by the participants. They took place between February and May of 2023, except for the direct message-interview, which stretched out between

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November of 2022 until January 2023 with a number of exchanges and follow-up questions. I used a semi-structured interview guide with topics and questions around social media platform affordances, online cultures, discourses, and the #MeToo movement. The latter topic was included because of the way in which I had identified the participants: from a large dataset of around 200,000 tweets containing "metoo," collected for an article on Swedish hashtagging practices around #MeToo (Lindqvist and Lindgren 2022). However, this article does not directly address that part of the interviews. I performed thematic coding of the interviews, an iterative process that I initiated with the concepts "platform affordances," "online cultures," and "versions of feminism" in mind (Fugard and Potts 2019). For the purpose of this article, I used the concept of "feminist resistance" in the second phase of coding, which resulted in the three 'soft' feminist resistance practices that I present in this article.

Feminist Practices of Soft Resistance on Swedish Social Media: Reappropriation, Voice of Reason, and Silence

Scholars have rightly pointed out that we might be living in a postfeminist sensibility wherein commercial and feminist messages are conflated and dispersed in social media economies of visibility (Gill and Orgad 2015; Banet-Weiser 2018). At the same time, many feminists use ingenious strategies to simultaneously utilize and challenge online norms in order to make sure their message actually comes across and reaches their intended audience instead of drowning in the vast and algorithmically-sorted social media landscapes of Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok.

By going along a little bit in order to then go against it, feminists carve out (sub)spaces for meaningful networking and knowledge dispersion within the highly marketized spaces of commercial social media platforms. Such strategies should be documented, as they can benefit others who perform feminist work on social media. In this section, I map out some 'soft' feminist resistance practices that challenge commercialized "empowerment feminism" while simultaneously attempting to reach new audiences through social media platforms by utilizing their infrastructure in creative ways. These acts of feminist resistance derive from the interviews described above. All interview quotes are translated from Swedish and pseudonyms are used. The interview participants are:

- Hannah, a communications specialist for a women's rights organization that focuses on gendered violence.
- Siri, a communications specialist for a women's rights organization that focuses on gendered violence.
- Emma and Charlotte, communications specialists for a feminist organization focusing on sexual and reproductive rights.
- Anna, a communications specialist for a feminist organization focusing on gender equality.
- Felicia, a cultural worker, and journalist.
- Caroline, a non-paid social media admin for a feminist sub-organization to a professional association.

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- "FemGroup," the anonymous admin group behind a radical feminist X account.

Feminist Reappropriation of Hashtags and Trending Topics

According to the recent report "The Swedes and the Internet 2023" (The Swedish Internet Foundation), 91% of Swedes that are on the Internet use social media weekly: 59% were on Facebook, 53% were on Instagram, 11% on X, and 18% on TikTok. The participants agree that Instagram is where the feminist community is nowadays, while X is dominated by journalists, politicians, and anti-feminist far-right groups. Facebook is deemed helpful when organizations need resources like money or volunteers, but otherwise considered a bit "dead." Only Charlotte and Emma used TikTok in their daily work.

Outside of viral hashtag phenomena like #MeToo, Swedish feminists work to increase visibility and disseminate knowledge regarding key issues. Working within capitalized spaces like Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok, they have developed strategies to utilize viral moments and trends to reach these goals by reappropriation and 'soft' hashtag hijacking. Siri, who works for an organization that fights against gender-based violence, explains that she struggles to reach outside of her organization's filter bubble, especially on Instagram. Although the support of other similar organizations and women who are passionate about the same issues as them helps the work that Siri tries to do online, there is also a need to reach new audiences. So, she does something that is usually framed as either hostile or marketized: hashtag hijacking, a practice where actors attempt to capitalize on viral hashtags by connecting them to their brand or where political opponents fill activist hashtags with opposing content. In this way, Siri disseminates feminist knowledge through "ordinary" and everyday hashtags like #DayAtTheBeach. Siri says:

> We have many challenges, and filter bubbles may be the most important one. We have our little group that we can easily reach, like 89% women, so it feels a lot like preaching to the choir. … I try to, like, hijack hashtags, ordinary things like "#Mother" or "#FamilyInXXX" [the city where the organization operates], to reach more people, because if we only use for instance "#WomensRights," we will always just reach the same people … So, I always try to think of other topics that we touch on, like the city where we operate, or because we support children and do family-oriented activities, we can talk about parent-and-children-stuff, maybe "#Playground" or "#DayAtTheBeach." And that usually increases the reach for our content, more people see what we do and share our content as well. We get more viewings if we are creative with tagging.

FemGroup also utilizes popular hashtags to increase their reach. But while Siri wants to reach outside of her filter bubble, FemGroup works to realign political hashtags and gear them toward feminist issues. As they work exclusively on X, they take care to use the fact that the Swedish X audience consists largely of journalists and politicians. The hashtag #svpol is widely used on X to tag content about Swedish politics, and FemGroup noted that this oftentimes means content about financial politics:

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> We often use #svpol in order to show that issues concerning women's rights and women's lives should make an impression on Swedish politics because they are political issues at their core. Safety of women and children, legal certainty, the right to a life free from discrimination, these issues affect more than half of the population, a majority. … An enormous amount of attention is paid to financial issues, one-sided criminal politics, and energy. It's difficult to make an impact with issues related to women's rights. Using #svpol is a statement that part of politics is missing in Sweden.

Thus, reappropriating hashtags is a soft feminist resistance practice that utilizes virality to put feminist issues on the political agenda and in the public's minds. In the same vein, the participants talked about how they make use of trending topics on social media to diseminate feminist knowlege. For instance, Emma explains how they use trending and viral phenomena to increase their visibility and efficiently disseminate feminist knowledge:

> So now we're getting into like, jumping onboard when things go viral, especially now that we are living in the TikTok-reality, using Tiktok has a lot to do with going along with trends, and you have to find ways to connect the trend to an issue that we want to talk about, and the trends can be like a sound you know, so it's the opposite of, like, okay everyone is talking about this so we have to do that too. On Tiktok we can take a trending sound and we decide what we want it to be about.

Similarly, feminists go along with trending topics in order to discuss, add nuance, and even critique them. Anna describes her approach to work with popularized and commercialized versions of feminism that are present and often viral on social media, which aims to utilize and problematize them simultaneously:

> Some days I feel a bit tired at the thought of how feminism gets watered down and commercialized and all these things, but on the other hand, I'm thinking I'd rather have that than not seeing feminism online at all. And if you try to be tactical and use it—there's a big difference between just thinking that so long as everyone calls themselves feminists or everyone wears a t-shirt with a feminist message everything will be solved, and not being satisfied there but seeing it as a start. … Not work against it, but see it as an opportunity—at least in public, and then in feminist spaces we can be critical and discuss … but it might be counter productive if we do that in public because then we will undermine something that actually could be productive. … You can start out being simple and then bring more nuance and critical perspectives.

As commercial social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok use algorithmic sorting based on historical data, particular types of content will be amplified, and this produces both filter bubbles and popularized versions of politics. Reappropriating hashtags and trending topics can be a way to circumvent this harsh sorting and reach new audiences, redirect political

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hashtags, or critique popular feminism. Thus, I suggest it is a 'soft' feminist resistance practice.

Feminist Voices of Reason

To be the voice of reason is often construed to be rational, devoid of emotions, and based in facts. To be a feminist voice of reason on social media might be a bit like that, but also somewhat different. The participants describe that they do feel angry and frustrated by both the issues they work with and with the polarized climate online. Even though expressing these feelings online could amplify them algorithmically, they take care to channel their anger into producing factual, constructive, and research-based content. This feminist voice of reason is used as a way to circumvent threats of online hate that circulate in the manosphere by resisting the common anti-feminist trope that feminists are irrational, overly-sensitive man-haters (Marwick and Caplan 2018). The feminist voice of reason is also used as a strategy for being heard outside of feminist spaces. It is less about pretending there are no emotions at play and more about being clear and producing meaningful content that describes attainable goals and visions for a feminist future.

Hannah, who works to spread knowledge about gender-based violence, explains the desire to maintain a sensible level of online conversations to counteract attacks from anti-feminists:

> Sometimes, I have to admit, sometimes I want to write "are you a complete and utter idiot, old man," but I don't, of course, because we want to maintain a sensible conversation and a respectful way to interact. At times we've had to say to someone that, no, that tone that you're using is not okay for us.

Hannah thus suggests that although she feels frustrated, it is important for her organization to express themselves in a levelheaded way. Social media spaces arguably amplify polarizing content, which makes it difficult to maintain a feminist voice of reason, especially in the face of online misogyny. Siri describes that her main strategy for getting their message across is to be factual and balanced. However, at times, this is undermined by anti-feminists and social media affordances:

> My experience is that they [anti-feminists] are difficult to argue with, but sometimes I feel like I need to protest what they are saying, so I will go in with a short and factual statement. But to face these people, it can be a bit scary to see that there are people with these opinions in the world … it's a bit crazy that there is so much misogyny. … And to nuance is not always popular online, we try to not choose sides … but social media are not built with this in mind, it's more "I really believe this" or "I really don't like that." Those that have strong opinions, they are more visible.

Additionally, Siri feels that her organization is responsible for delivering their message in a way that circumvents anti-feminist critique and goes against online polarization:

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> There is so much written online that is not true … I feel like we have a responsibility to deliver facts, because we are often criticized for exaggerating things and you know "this is not a real issue," so it's really important that we can actually back our statements with facts.

This felt responsibility for keeping online conversations sensible is echoed in my conversation with Charlotte and Emma. They work for a Swedish organization working for equal sexual and reproductive rights. For them, it's important that their content presents facts and research-based claims, which means they knowingly work counter to social media logics of affect and polarization, as Emma explains:

> It's often in relation to polarized issues that we feel it's extra important to be a factual and calm actor … that we don't contribute to the heated discussions … but we've still been attacked for things that we haven't even said … and so our strategy has sort of been that "when they go low, we go high," and sometimes we feel like we might lose rhetorical points because of that.

Notably, the participants take responsibility for calming down heated debates online and take particular care to craft content that bypasses classic antifeminist rhetoric. However, they do feel strongly that diverse feminist action needs to happen simultaneously on social media. Although they want to be feminist voices of reason, they suggest that we need to hold space for more emotional expressions, too. For instance, Caroline, who works for a feminist organization tied to a professional association, describes how angry content should appear alongside the feminist voice of reason:

> We try to use the type of language that is common in academia, dry and boring, like in a research article, because we don't want it to be polarizing … so there is a difference in how you speak, we don't really say that 'this is insane!' or something like that, but I think that … all the people who scream loud or use expressions like 'f*** pig!', we need them too.

In my conversation with Anna, she expressed similar thoughts. Anger has its place in feminist struggle and digital feminism too, but it's important to also present factual solutions. She suggests:

> Sometimes you might need to take some time at first and allow yourself to be upset, and to try and analyze and understand the problem you're dealing with, before you can present ideas for solutions. And that is where we place ourselves, that our role is to find those ideas. Everyone else can be upset, but when we get into it, we want to suggest ways forward. We don't want to just fire people up.

In all interviews, I got a sense of the way feminists work to channel their anger and frustration into factual and visionary online action. This is contrary to both anti-feminist accusations of irrational man-hating, polarizing social me-

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dia spaces and claims that social media feminism is ill-thought-through, impulsive, and meaningless (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019). In this way, these feminists bypass critical voices in their (imagined and very real) audiences while utilizing the power of affective force. Felicia explained her reasoning when she was active in the social media debate around #MeToo in 2017:

> I was never interested in, I mean, it was more about being very clear, in order to make clear what needed to change … and I wasn't interested in being the millionth person to say that 'that guy is a pig' you know, it's not really productive. But emotions are what we all use to think and to contemplate, so it's not against emotions at all. It's more trying to be very clear and specific … because I mean bitterness is often not very productive, but anger can be a very productive emotion.

A feminist voice of reason is thus not devoid of emotions but channels affective flows in productive ways. As a soft feminist resistance practice, it counteracts online polarization, circumvents anti-feminist critique and attacks, and presents solutions to problems with societal sexism.

Feminist Silences to Thwart and Sidestep Online Hate

In the face of online hate and misogyny, feminists perform two types of active silences: refusing to refute anti-feminist comments and attacks and avoiding particular discussions and platforms. Platform affordances and platform-specific audience constitution are both important features of these feminist silences. And yet, it's clear that if you do feminism on social media, you run the risk of being exposed to hate, trolling, and assaults against your person. FemGroups explains that as long as they have been online, they have encountered these attempts to silence them. They respond by not responding:

> We have done this for so long, we know attacks like that are just a part of everyday life as a feminist. You can't provoke us or make us back down by attacking us online. We don't waste time on refuting it, especially because we feel that these attacks are employed as a strategy to get us to waste time on endless conversations with them instead of publishing feminist content.

Thus, not going into battle but rather remaining silent in response to trolls, hateful comments, and misogynistic attacks is a strategy for energy conservation that enables feminists to turn to more meaningful actions rather than Jane's notion of a "flight response" (2017b). At the same time, especially for those who work full-time with feminist communications, subjection to hate and threats against your person can be intense. Anna explains how her organization constantly keeps up to date with and uses technical tools available to counter hate on social media platforms:

> We have always had some hate directed towards us and at times it's been threatening and we had to take action … we found constructive ways to deal with it and there are a lot of technical tools like blocking, hiding, all those things,

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> and we report threats to the police. We always keep up with the tools available on the platforms, and we make sure we're quick to hide hateful comments, because if we leave them there, things spiral and they start dominating the comment fields … and we don't hide constructive critique of course. But the hide-function is great, they still see their comment but others can't see it. Because if they notice, they might start e-mailing or calling . . .

Although some of the participants developed strategies to maintain their activity on social media platforms in the face of online hate, others don't have the same resources for it and rightly point out that the effect can be silencing. Hannah, who is the only person in her organization who works with communications, says that she also uses the strategy of silence, though not always voluntarily:

> Sometimes it's easier to not do anything, because if you do something you might get a ball rolling that you never intended to roll. When you stick your neck out and you get these hateful comments and threats, it's just words, but still they create fear and unsafety, it censors people and we lose the democratic conversation online … they scare people to silence by using threats, hate, stalking, or mobilizing their troll army. They have a lot of power.

Several participants specifically point out X as a space dominated by far-right groups and anti-feminists, which leads them to avoid it entirely. In Sweden, X is not a very popular platform; only around 20% of internet users are on it at all, and many are journalists and politicians. Although Hannah feels X is a great tool for getting the attention of these powerful actors, her organization is not active there anymore. She says they don't have the time and energy and, for them, it's more important to be able to ensure the safety of people within the organization:

> We chose to keep a low profile on [X] because we don't have the time or energy to fight against trolls. I am affected by what I see, how women are treated online. … I use [X] personally so I know how it works, and I don't want to expose us to that. I've seen people get threats and they don't have the energy anymore. We are a small organization and we need to think of our safety.

Speaking to Charlotte and Emma, such imagined attacks are clearly the reality for feminist organizations. Charlotte recalls an incident where an initiative by the organization was picked up and intentionally misinterpreted by anti-feminists:

> And this just turned into a Twitterstorm, every time we posted something there were 20 accounts that jumped on us with hate. It was right-wing extremists. Like, we just got these racist, transphobic comments, and also threats like 'someone should burn down [name of organization].'

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For this reason, similarly to Hannah, Charlotte and Emma are careful to use X only occasionally when they need to reach the media and politicians. Emma explains how it just doesn't feel productive for them to post on X:

> [X] is just a space that we avoid because the tone is just so … difficult. It's like, a large part of Swedish X users are far-right groups and other extreme people, it just feels sometimes like it's not worth the effort, we will get stuck with a lot of crap to handle. So, at times we just don't use it. … But then something gets lost too, because people who might not follow us on Instagram or Facebook, but follow us on Twitter, they will not see it. … But I don't know, Twitter has not done enough to get rid of the most hateful accounts, the worst parts like the Nazis, they've been allowed to thrive there . . .

In these ways, feminist silences online are both about action and deliberate non-action. These measures are necessary tools for feminists to employ in the face of threats of online misogyny, hateful comments, and trolling attacks. Used both to maintain constructive online conversations and to conserve energy and care for the personal safety of employees, practices of silence do not mean backing down or pulling back from social media.

On top of the public activity that the participants perform on platforms, some also talked to me about feminist conversations, resource-sharing, and networking activities that they do in the non-public social media spaces. Like the many petitions for change that were initiated in Sweden in relation to #MeToo that made use of non-public features of social media (Hansson, Sveningsson, and Ganetz 2021), activists and organizations take to direct messages to mobilize and strategize. FemGroup puts a lot of effort into networking with other feminists to keep updated and share resources. In these ways, they find X extremely valuable:

> We might have followed the account for a while, and we trust it, before we contact them with a direct message. They might have posted an interesting tweet that raises questions that are not appropriate to ask on public Twitter, or that we could have posted publicly but we want to create a personal relationship with that organization, and they can answer in a more elaborate way in a DM.

These feminist undercurrents that run through the non-public spaces of social media thus play a part in feminist organizing. Additionally, they might fulfill some parts of the techno-optimistic democratic promises of social media. In the same vein as FemGroup, Felicia tells me about her private Messenger group that she has with female friends, which has been a source of many feminist conversations:

> I still think, although in some ways I hate social media and I think it's healthy to do that, that I had so many genuine conversations there. They've maybe taken place more in Messenger-groups … I would say they are sort of feminist groups because we talk about the difficulties of our personal lives and, they've been extremely valuable … they fill this role that salons once had, for democ-

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> racy, for consciousness-raising, because when you speak on something, you make it clearer for yourself too.

Feminist 'soft' practices of silence thus constitute ways to resist harmful online violence while still doing feminist work in public and non-public spaces online.

Conclusion

By performing soft feminist resistance online, activists carve out spaces within commercialized social media infrastructures where they can disseminate knowledge and visualize feminist futures. They go along with some characteristics of social media economies, like viral moments and hashtags, while resisting polarization and online misogynistic hate. By reappropriating hashtags, being a voice of reason, and using silence to counteract anti-feminist attacks, the participants in this study perform feminist resistance online in creative and ingenious ways. I argue that these soft feminist resistance practices are just as important as more obvious digital resistance like "feminist digilante" or alternative platform-building when introducing feminist ideas to new publics or producing safe online environments for feminist organizing, strategizing, and mobilizing. They are productive ways of doing feminism in a marketized economy of visibility where social media platforms automatically sort and structure online discourse.

Finally, it is important to note that some participants did feel silenced by the threat of online violence, which indicates that there is still much work for platforms to do to ensure their users' safety. Most of my interviewees work professionally with feminist advocacy online. Although their organizations vary in size and resources, they do have the opportunity and means to strategize, and they have the support of their employers. Individual activists, especially those who are marginalized, might have much fewer opportunities to strategize and significantly fewer resources to counteract and protect themselves from online violence. As the participants in this study still feel they need to avoid a particular platform due to threats of online hate, that risk is probably much higher for members of marginalized groups.

Biography

Lisa Lindqvist is a fourth-year PhD Candidate in Sociology, specializing in Gender Studies, at Karlstad University, Sweden. With a decade-long professional background in digital communications, where she noticed the inequitable access to meaningful online speaking opportunities, her research is now motivated by a critical examination of this disparity. Her research interests include digital politics, protest, and culture, with a specific focus on Swedish social media feminism.

Notes

1. Rosalind Gill and other scholars suggest that we might be living in a postfeminist moment, structured by neoliberal feminist iterations gain-

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ing visibility online (see Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020 for discussion).

2. The term "soft resistance" has been used by scholars to describe covert practices of, for instance, developers or user experience designers that aim to improve tech products or company cultures in subtle ways in accordance with justice or equality values (see for example Wong 2021). This is how I use the term here. However, it is important to point out that in recent years, the phrase has been used by the Hong Kong government to describe acts of resistance by citizens and media outlets, which are said to belong to the "ideological realm" (Global Voices 2023).

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