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## **Framing Slutwalk London: how does the privilege of feminist activism in social media travel into the mass media?**

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-TITLE PAGE-

Feminist Activism and Privilege Online: Commentary and Criticism

Feminist Media Studies 14.3

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*Framing SlutWalk London: How does the privilege of feminist activism in social media travel  
into the mass media?*

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In the penultimate week of January 2014, two news items caught my attention: The sentencing to jail time of two people convicted of abusing and threatening feminists online and the findings of a report by Democratic Audit UK, the London School of Economics' independent research organisation, that "too few women [were] called to give evidence to parliamentary select committees" (LSE 2014).

Upon examination, the connection between these two pieces of information becomes clear. Caroline Criado-Perez is one of the feminists subjected to the Twitter abuse for which the two accused have been convicted and sentenced. She came to their attention as a result of her campaign calling "for a female figure to appear on a Bank of England note" (*The Guardian*, January 24, 2014). Criado-Perez is also behind the Women's Room, an online platform set up in 2012 to provide the mass media with a database of female experts, in a bid to address the lack of women discussing current affairs on the airwaves (The Women's Room 2014). The report from Democratic Audit UK, alerts us to the fact that it is not just in the mediated space that the voices of expert women are "too few" (LSE 2014) but also within the British parliament. It is possible that parliamentary select committees could attempt to rectify the lack of female evidence givers by utilising the information available on databases such as Criado-Perez's Women's Room, which has more than 2500 women already signed up as experts, when considering "what steps they can take to address this [under representation of women as evidence givers]" (LSE 2014). However the solution to issues of female representation in the media and the public sphere goes beyond such measures.

The two news items discussed above vividly highlight one of the ways in which feminism continues to struggle with issues of privilege in online spaces, namely the struggle

for visibility and recognition of women and feminist ideas in the mediated public sphere on their own terms. Online feminist spaces, such as Criado-Perez's Women's Room, seek to redress the gender imbalance in the perception and representation of female expertise. At the same time its founder is exposed to threats and torrential abuse on Twitter for campaigning online, in person and in the mainstream media to maintain women's visibility within the establishment, namely on bank notes. It is this tension between online feminist articulations and their representation and repercussions both on- and offline that this paper seeks to address. More specifically, how do feminist messages created in online spaces, travel into the mediated public sphere via the mass media and what happens to them on this journey? This question is at the core of my PhD research in the department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

I use SlutWalk London as a case study to examine the relationship between social media, mass media and protest. The SlutWalk movement started in Toronto in 2011 when a police officer, in a routine talk to the female student body at a large university, advised his audience to not dress like sluts in order to not be victimised (SlutWalk Toronto 2011). Using Facebook, Twitter and emails, the students organised a protest against slut shaming and victim blaming. Following the successful protest in Toronto, similar SlutWalks took place in cities across the globe, including London, the focus of my study.

Manuel Castells claims that "the new social practices of communication" are bringing down "the powers that be...everyday" (2007, 258). But can the changes depicted by Castells be equally and unproblematically applied to all types of communicators and communication practices and to all types of "powers that be?" In particular, my concern here is whether feminist messages can travel intact from the online spaces in which they are formed and articulated to mass media spaces, where they are reported and if not, why not? I suggest that any discrepancy between the articulation of protestors' online messages and their coverage in

the mass media tells us something important about feminist privilege or lack thereof. Specifically, I argue that the privileges that online spaces potentially offer feminist activists for self-representation are not necessarily carried into other spaces, namely the mass media: in the latter they are often represented by others through a postfeminist-tinted lens.

In order to demonstrate this thesis, I analyse a blog entry and four newspaper texts, which all focus on the idea of reclaiming the word 'slut.' The analysis examines 1) how a SlutWalk protestor blogged about reclaiming the word 'slut' and about her perception of the value of the SlutWalk protest and 2) how these two notions were reported in four newspaper articles (two in the *Guardian* and two in the *Telegraph*). I show how the messages' journey from their original, online medium – a blog – to mass media (newspapers) involves a reframing from feminist to 'postfeminist', as outlined by Gill's (2007) tropes of postfeminist sensibility. These are: femininity as a bodily property; individualism, choice and empowerment (including self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline); resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; irony and knowingness; and feminism and anti feminism.

When the blogger writes that "the key for me is to assert as clearly (hence my concern over the name) and forcefully as possible that what I (or anyone else) wear(s) or how we act has absolutely fuck all to do with being raped," she is being feminist as opposed to postfeminist. That is to say that by addressing the key theme of the protest in this way, she removes blame from the victims and places it with the system, she refers to victims' bodies, outfits and behaviour only to repudiate the blame laid at their feet. On the other hand, when Bryony Gordon in the *Telegraph* responds to her own concerns about the name of the protest and her refusal to participate, she states that she "will not be marching...in a bra and knickers" and will not "be waving a placard above my head that proclaims 'I'm a slut and proud', because...well, because I'm not", she completely strips away the political element of the

protest, leaving behind a very stark postfeminist take on the protest, its name and its value – by focusing on the protestors’ attire and her own, personal relationship with the word ‘slut.’

As the example above demonstrates, a key difference between feminist and postfeminist approaches to the notions of reclaiming the word ‘slut’ and the value of the SlutWalk protest, is their position on a political–personal axis. The protestor-blogger took a very political stance to the two notions, whereas the *Telegraph* columnist wrote about it in strictly personal terms. This is important, for as Gill (2007) states: “One aspect of this postfeminist sensibility in media culture is the almost total evacuation of notions of politics” (p.260), so much so “that even experiences of...domestic violence are framed in exclusively personal terms in a way that turns the idea of the personal as political on its head” (p.259).

According to this analysis, the most political and also most feminist texts were the online text by the protestor-blogger and a piece in the *Guardian*’s Comment is Free online section by two academic activists, Gail Dines and Wendy J Murphy. The least political and also most postfeminist text was written by the columnist Bryony Gordon in the *Telegraph*. In between, from political/feminist to less political/more postfeminist were Tanya Gold in the *Guardian* and Germaine Greer in the *Telegraph*.

While it might not be surprising that the writers on the feminist/political end of the axis are the blogger-protestor, the academic activists and the *Guardian* journalist, nor that those on the postfeminist/personal end of the axis appear in the *Telegraph*, it is nonetheless interesting, especially when we consider Castells’ (2007) claim about the affordances of the network society to make changes in the offline world. The blogger has the privilege to make claims about the value of the protest online, for example when explaining that she participated in SlutWalk London because “having a public conversation about the perpetual systemic, structural, social and institutional blaming of victims of sexual assault can only be a

good thing,” despite her reservations about the name of the protest. However, when the value of participating in SlutWalk travels into the mass media it is reframed as: “taking part in what looks like an endless ‘vicars and tarts’ street party” (Greer 2011) and “the ‘slut walk’ movement...has created a mountain out of a molehill” (Gordon 2011). This brief illustration of what happens when claims made online by feminist activists travel into the mass media raises questions about the privilege that online spaces can really offer, if they lose (at least some of) their political and feminist edge and become both more personal and postfeminist on this journey into the mediated public sphere via the mass media.

Much has been made of the relationship between protest and social media and between feminism and social media (Cochrane 2013). And while it is argued (e.g. Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993) that the risk of misrepresentation of a protest’s cause is an evil but necessary price to pay in return for much needed media coverage, I ask how far have we really come when a feminist protest against slut shaming and rape-victim blaming, is still mainly reported and remembered as a protest by (an actual minority of) scantily clad women? And what does this tell us about the state of feminism, media practices and potential protest outcomes? It is this aspect of feminist privilege or lack thereof that I am interested in. How can feminist activists successfully use online platforms to bring about changes in opinion, practice and policy when they are misrepresented beyond their own self representation, despite “the new social practices of communication” (Castells 2007, 258)?

I follow the view expressed by Judy Wajcman (2000), that while “the Internet can be a site for the creation of new feminist communities, and a new tool for political organizing...there is a risk that concentration on the Internet as the site of transformative feminist politics may exaggerate its significance” (460). Key questions that need to be addressed are thus: have social media really advanced the feminist cause? Do they really offer feminist activists previously unavailable privileges, and if so, in what ways?

The role of the technologies that make up the “new” media-ecology (Darmon 2013:1) is an important issue in assessing feminist privilege online because if, as Cochrane (2013) claims, the current, “fourth wave of feminism” is “defined by technology: tools that are allowing women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online” (2), it is necessary to assess not only how feminism is being articulated in online spaces, but also how it is being reported in the mainstream mass media and what, if any, the discrepancy between the two might be. I argue that it is in that discrepancy that we can begin to gain a clearer understanding of the progress that has been made and the privilege that has been gained: the smaller the discrepancy, the greater the progress and privilege and vice versa.

The SlutWalk protest movement uses both on- and offline activism to speak out and protest against the realities of slut shaming and rape-victim blaming in the physical world. The realities of threat, rape and blame are all too often replicated in the online world in the form of harassment, abuse and the online threat of offline physical violence, as seen in the case of Caroline Criado-Perez. In both instances, it is necessary to examine the mass media coverage to further our understanding of how the privilege of self-representation of feminism and feminist activism online contributes to what it can achieve in the mediated and non-mediated public sphere.

We need a model for assessing the relationship between feminist online protest and the postfeminist mass media, to further our understanding of the extent to which online platforms create and sustain the privilege of feminist spaces and how these spaces can in turn promote feminist causes both on- and offline.

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