Under the watchful eyes of men: theorising the implications of male surveillance practices for feminist activism on social media

Jessica Megarry

To cite this article: Jessica Megarry (2017): Under the watchful eyes of men: theorising the implications of male surveillance practices for feminist activism on social media, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2017.1387584

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1387584

Published online: 30 Oct 2017.
Under the watchful eyes of men: theorising the implications of male surveillance practices for feminist activism on social media

Jessica Megarry
School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT
While early internet research often explored social media’s potential for increasing political participation, scholars are now problematising the manifestations of state and corporate control over political activism in these spaces. Yet despite an increased academic focus on the shape and implications of online power relations, there is a noticeable lack of critical theory that considers how strategies of male dominance on social media platforms influence feminist activism. This article conceptualises individual men as monitorial actors invested in surveilling feminist speech online, and brings together literature from within feminist, social movement, and critical internet studies to address this research gap. Situating contemporary feminist activist tactics in relation to second-wave priorities, this article extends current conceptualisations of the dangers of social media surveillance practices for political action. It draws on recent examples of online feminist organising to elucidate the ways in which social media platforms provide men with increased opportunities to surveil feminist activity. The article calls for further research into the ways in which male surveillance practices on social media platforms are shaping women’s ability to organise for social change.

Introduction
In his foreword to the recent edited volume Feminist Surveillance Studies, Mark Andrejevic (2015, ix) notes that “in the areas of politics … and beyond, social practices are being transformed by dramatic developments in information collection, storage, and processing, as well as by various techniques of watching, broadly construed.” Informational surveillance of our online activities using search, locative, and analytics technologies can be more intensive, extensive, and of lower cost and visibility than offline monitoring, and “involves involuntary (often categorical) compliance of which the subject may be unaware” (Gary T. Marx 2015, 735). Yet one aspect of digital surveillance that has received little attention in critical internet studies and feminist scholarship is the opportunities that social media technologies provide men to monitor and disrupt feminist activity online. Alongside a consideration of male-dominated corporations and male-dominated governments, individual men are also able to...
shape the development of feminist activism. While the harassment of women online is receiving more critical attention, the implications of men’s surveillance of women’s political action is yet to be accounted for. Andrejevic (2015, x) defines surveillance as “the coupling of information collection and the use of power.” The harassment of women online is more frequent, and qualitatively different, to that which men receive—amounting to surveillance when theorised at the collective level. This article critically interrogates the claim that social media technologies have provided women with new opportunities to challenge male dominance, and instead asks how male “techniques of watching” (Andrejevic 2015, ix) are shaping the type of feminist activism which emerges from these platforms.

Much feminist organising now takes place on public, internationally accessible social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and YouTube. Academics and social commentators alike have suggested that women’s use of social media technologies for feminist activism denotes a fourth wave of the movement (Kira Cochrane 2013; Elizabeth Evans 2015; Ealasaid Munro 2013). According to Anita Gurumurthy, (2011, 466) “Tweet or perish!” is now “an inevitable [yet often unquestioned] axiom for feminist dialogue and organising.” Celebratory narratives suggest “we are witnessing seismic shifts around the uptake of feminism,” and position social media platforms as offering unique opportunities for women to challenge the dominant social and political order (Hanna Retallack, Jessica Ringrose, and Emilie Lawrence 2016, 86; Roopika Risam 2015; Alison Dahl Crossley 2015). As a recent report from the US-based Barnard Centre for Research on Women claims, social media has reanimated feminist activism, and enabled increasing numbers of women to “share their stories and analysis, raise awareness and organize collective actions, and discuss difficult issues” across cultural, geographical, and generational lines (Courtney Martin and Jessica Valenti 2012, 6).

Yet feminists’ use of public social media channels renders their activism highly visible, traceable, and open to communicative resistance. Building connections via social media platforms often requires the performance of stereotypical gender roles, as well as the public declaration of social relations and preferences (friend lists, favourites, likes). While the use of social media platforms for feminist activism has increased feminism’s visibility, it has also facilitated increased access to movement ideas and individual women by feminist adversaries. In contrast to the women-only spaces of resistance sought by the second wave, social media platforms render feminist activists vulnerable to dismissive male interjections (Jessica Megarry 2014) and often violent strategies of harassment (Danielle Citron 2014). Such was the experience of feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez, who successfully used social media to lobby the Bank of England to feature a woman on a UK banknote. In response to her campaign, she was subject to an onslaught of rape and death threats (Criado-Perez 2013). Criado-Perez shut down her Twitter account for a period of time as a result, and has suffered “life-changing psychological effects from the abuse which she received” (BBC 2014). Although international concern about online misogyny has forced Twitter and Facebook to take regulatory action, the sexual harassment of women online remains a major social problem, as evidenced in several recent large-scale studies (Stine Eckert 2017; Emma Jane 2017).

In this article, I move beyond the celebratory rhetorics of online (or so-called fourth-wave) feminism, and seek to bring insights from feminist surveillance literature into conversation with the fields of social movement and critical internet studies. Firstly, I analyse the limits of these studies in recognising the structural constraints that shape feminist activism on social media platforms and the problems of visibility for feminist organisers. I then suggest that
recent research on the dangers of surveillance technologies and practices for political activism needs to be expanded in order to recognise their uses in monitoring, controlling, and inflicting violence on feminist activists. Finally, I draw on two recent examples of feminist activism to explore how the public visibility of feminist organising on social media technologies offers individual men increased opportunities to locate, watch, debate, and harass particular activists—suggesting further analysis is needed of the type of feminism able to flourish on social media platforms under the watchful gaze and active resistance of men.

**Social media feminism and the politics of visibility**

Over the last two decades both feminist studies and social science research into women’s political activism online have tended to promote liberatory notions of digital communications and technocultures, which underwrite current narratives of the fourth wave. While early feminist critiques of information communications technologies strongly evidenced sex-based imbalances in ICT accessibility and use, Liesbet van Zoonen (2001, 67) notes that “models of male dominance” were rapidly usurped by cyberfeminist accounts that privileged the radical, utopian possibilities of the internet and cybernetics for women. Sadie Plant (1998) and Donna Haraway (2000) were influential in promoting understandings of women and technology as symbiotically bound hybrid machine organisms. In an attempt to both destabilise and transcend oppressive gender roles, Haraway claimed that understanding women as cyborgs, comprised of various parts, offers an “imaginative leap” (Zoë Sofoulis 2002, 88) out of the need to analyse their shared experiences of oppression. Indeed, from post-feminist perspectives, in which women are assumed to have already achieved equality (Angela McRobbie 2008) and are autonomous, self-realising, entrepreneurial actors (Rosalind Gill 2007), female self-representation on social media can be positioned as inherently empowering, because women’s choices and behaviours are seen as unrelated to the continuing subordination of women to men.

In the wake of Haraway’s influence, recent social science approaches to studying feminist politics online have often focused on the scope of women’s achievements—plotting the connections in their social media networks, highlighting individual examples of female agency and expression, and celebrating the visibility of feminist activists in online spaces (Frances Shaw 2012, 2013; Jessalynn Marie Keller 2012; Anita Harris 2008). What remains unclear from these narratives, however, is how the uses and structure of social media technologies might rather facilitate the reproduction of hierarchical gender relations or the extension of male dominance online. Broader scholarly debates surrounding the democratic potential of social media platforms have certainly taken a pessimistic turn, with scholars now casting a more critical eye over the notion of political participation online (Nathalie Casemajor, Stéphane Couture, Mauricio Delfín, Matthew Goerzen, and Alessandro Delfanti 2015; Larisa Kingston Mann 2014; Marina Levina 2014; Amy Hasinoff 2014; Laura Portwood-Stacer 2014). Studies now show that fear of surveillance has resulted in general social media users (Elizabeth Stoycheff 2016) and political activists (Rodrigo Gomez Garcia and Emiliano Treré 2014, 505) feeling hesitant to openly resist the status quo or express dissenting opinions online. As Christian C. Sandvig (2015, 2) suggests, studies conceptualising social media in terms of democratic potential may have used “the wrong metaphor.” Instead of being emancipative and transformative, perhaps social media technologies are more accurately understood as “powerful tools of social and political control” (Ganaele Langlois 2015, 1).
Some feminist communications scholars have begun to interrogate women’s role in the (unpaid) digital media economy (Kylie Jarrett 2016), while others call for a return to understandings of feminism as a political movement fighting for women’s liberation from patriarchal socio-economic structures. Jessie Daniels (2012, 43), for example, reframes the act of female blogging as a “third shift” of domestic work, where the maintenance of familial records for posterity is “another way in which women’s emotional labour has been grafted onto new technologies.” Daniels (2012, 54) highlights the limitations of blogging as a form of liberatory politics, drawing attention to the way that corporate advertisers’ positioning of women bloggers as “prosumer advocates for their products” influences the types of popular feminism that emerge from these platforms.

Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh (2012, 1) also raise questions about what it means to be a cyberfeminist today, nearly 20 years after feminists “burst forth on the Internet scene to demand material access and social intervention both online and offline.” In particular, they problematise the increased visibility of women on the internet as a political achievement, noting that women act largely as consumers, or as labourers for large digital corporations. Cyberfeminism, they conclude, is hardly the embodiment of feminist politics when it is used as a “buzzword to celebrate women’s mere presence and self expression online” (Gajjala and Oh 2012, 2).

Within feminist new media studies, scholars have also begun to discuss the politics of online visibility for women (Hasinoff 2014; Kingston Mann 2014; Portwood-Stacer 2014; Levina 2014). Larisa Kingston Mann (2014, 293), for example, notes that participation in online debates can expose women to unwanted scrutiny “voluntarily and involuntarily” and that experiences of digital oppression can assist marginalised groups to develop an analysis of the dangers of public exposure. She argues that:

feminists … are well positioned to point out that being visible or accessible to others is not necessarily liberating and that having the ability to say “no” and deny others access to one’s image, words, or creative output can be a requirement for liberation. I ask: Who does visibility benefit, and on what terms is it offered? For whose purposes, and under whose control, do media artifacts circulate? (Kingston Mann 2014, 293)

While some social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn do allow users the option to form private groups, it would be difficult to claim that these represent autonomous spaces free from male interference. Few women occupy positions of power in relation to technological design (Judy Wajcman 2000, 452). Men have founded, own, and control the most successful social media companies, and women continue to play a limited role in their daily operation. In the US, where only 26% of computing professionals are women (Christanne Corbett and Catherine Hill 2015), men continue to drive software design and development, network engineering, and operation. Insider testimonies about the growth of the social media industry and Silicon Valley suggest that discrimination against women, sexual harassment, and a masculinist competitive culture have deterred women from establishing ICT careers, businesses, and platforms (Jodi Kantor 2014; Elissa Shevinsky 2015). As journalist Doree Shafrir (2017) has recently noted:

for some women, the whole sector feels so stacked against them and so saturated in sexism that they just want to have nothing to do with it; even women who say they didn’t regret [entering the field] joked about having PTSD.

Even if women and other minorities do gain employment, many leave because of the sexist workplace culture (Allison Scott, Freada Kapor Klein, and Uriri Diakoghene Onovakpuri 2017).
The common assumption that social media platforms provide marginalised groups with more power to bypass and challenge cultural gatekeepers than traditional media is being challenged by digital cultures research. Social media platforms are imbued with “explicit and implicit norms [with built in] cultural presumptions about taste and etiquette” (Tarleton Gillespie 2015, 1). According to Tarleton Gillespie, it is critical to acknowledge that in their technical, economic, and political design platforms “pick and choose” what ideas are accessible and socially appropriate. Facebook and Twitter moderation teams then decide which contentious content is allowed to circulate, and what is deleted, often refusing to remove what women report as misogynistic posts and categorising content promoting violence against women as “controversial humour” (Catherine Buni and Soraya Chemaly 2014) rather than hate speech. Male-designed algorithms and bots are also playing an increasing role in which content is displayed to whom, and when. Regarding the visibility of Facebook posts, “algorithmic ‘editing’ is now dynamic, all but invisible, and individually tailored” (Zeynep Tufekci 2015, 208). Algorithms and bots pose a unique problem for feminist activists and movement building, because women cannot ensure movement materials reach their target audiences. Thus, social media platforms actively, but not always transparently, perpetuate patriarchal values. The encoding of male bias in platforms and practices should be of greater concern to feminist scholarship, particularly as a range of studies now suggest that violence against women, including exposure to sexual harassment and violent pornography, is an inescapable part of the female digital experience (Barbara Ritter 2009; Citron 2014, 2009; Mary Anne Franks 2012; Megarry 2014; Jane 2012; Corinne Mason and Shoshana Magnet 2012; Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell 2015).

It is in this context that we need to examine claims that feminist uses of social media signal a fourth wave of the movement. While often used to signal temporal or generational divides, Finn Mackay (2015, 155) proposes that the wave metaphor is more accurately understood as a marker of political ideology. While second-wave feminism focussed on challenging oppressive power structures based on the collective experiences of women under patriarchy, many scholars argue that third-wave feminism represents a more individualistic, identity-based politics (see Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford 2004). Third-wave feminism can be understood as a type of “feminism-lite,” underpinned by a belief that “the pursuit of opportunity lies solely in women’s hands,” and is no longer impacted by structural inequality (Miranda Kiraly and Meagan Tyler 2015, xi). Discussions of fourth-wave feminism remain conceptually undeveloped (Evans 2015), centring on the opportunities provided by the internet for feminist activism and political participation, rather than suggesting any marked departure from third-wave politics.

Indeed, the current use of public social media channels for feminist organising continues to represent a marked shift from second-wave 1970s practices and values. During the second wave women fought for female-only meeting and social spaces, because they saw these as integral to their ability to authentically generate critical ideas free from the influences of men and patriarchal structures (Sarah Browne 2014, 46–47, Susan Brownmiller 1999; Mackay 2015). It was in consciousness-raising groups, for example, that women conceived the scope of men’s control over their personal lives as a political concern (Brownmiller 1999; Catharine Mackinnon 1989). By talking in small groups, women began to theorise their experiences of violence, discrimination, and suffering as politically relevant, moving towards a structural analysis of male dominance.1 Through consciousness-raising rape, battery, child abuse, and domestic violence came to be understood as political crimes. Women-only
consciousness-raising was a key organising tactic of second-wave feminism, and Catharine Mackinnon (1989, 83) argues that the process allowed women to work towards a “collective critical reconstitution” of social reality, and to redefine the hegemonic male perspective to align with their experiences of everyday life.

In comparison, recent claims that the feminist use of social media represent the 21st-century’s version of consciousness-raising (Rosemary Clark 2014; Shaw 2012; Keller 2012; Crossley 2015) are surprising given that women are now attempting to discuss social change and build theory in largely public, mixed sex, proprietary environments. The Barnard Centre report exemplifies the conflation, acknowledging that small consciousness-raising groups of 8–10 women were the “backbone” of second-wave feminism, but nonetheless proposing that the politically equivalent process is occurring on social media with a “network of thousands” (Martin and Valenti 2012). Clearly these are qualitatively different interactions in different spaces, with social media communications limiting the possibility for feminists to organise in closed or secure forums free from male influence.

Feminist scholar Julia Long (2015, 149) has recently noted the lack of value attached to women-only activism in digital feminism, and questioned how women can examine and reject patriarchal ideologies when they are busy “involving, engaging and ‘educating’ men” about feminist issues. This mixed-sex talk can hinder feminist organising online, as both sexes are socialised to accept the male right to “decree reality” and monopolise discussions with their own concerns (Dale Spender 1980, 48). Studies of early online discussion forums revealed that even when women do manage to gain control of conversations, “their meanings may be coopted and reinterpreted to conform to male discursive agendas” (Susan Herring 1999, 152; Susan Herring, Deborah Johnson, and Tamra DiBenedetto 1995). This phenomenon was observable during a recent Twitter campaign highlighting the online harassment of women, organised using the hashtag #mencallmethings. While women were conceptualising their experiences of harassment as a structural problem characteristic of patriarchal societies, interjections about the appropriateness of the hashtag occupied significant space in the discussion. Calls for the conversation to adopt a more “gender friendly” title ultimately redirected its focus, demanding that women first justify their rationale for, and right to, participate (Megarry 2014, 51).

Social media technologies bring women’s politics into public spaces which are structured by male-owned and male-controlled global corporations. In such a context, the process of feminist consciousness-raising becomes increasingly complex because women are required to respond to men’s demands rather than developing their own political reflections. While social media platforms provide another avenue for women to access feminist discussions and mobilisations, their connectedness and visibility is contingent, and circumscribed by institutionalised forms of male power.

Making male power visible on social media platforms

How then might we better theorise the operation of male power in social media networks? According to Christian Fuchs (2014, 8), a critical analysis of social media can expose the economic power relations that operate in digital communications environments, helping us to understand “who benefits and who is disadvantaged.” Fuchs, however, pays limited attention to feminism, as does other critical internet research (José van Dijck 2012; Fuchs 2014; Geert Lovink 2008, 2011). This is primarily because it focuses on class and economic
inequality as the fundamental, unifying factors in social struggles, ignoring the specific social experience of women. I take up Nancy Fraser’s (1985, 97) proposition that a critical social theory should explore all forms of control and exploitation at play in feminist struggles, and the implications of women’s subordinate status in patriarchal societies for their capacity to mobilise resistance or social change. An explicitly feminist approach also necessitates that the behaviour of men remains central to the analysis, as it is through “exposing male domination as domination that feminism poses its major challenge” (Denise Thompson 2001, 8).

Critical analyses of social media activism and the “structuring effects of state and corporate control” (Aswin Punathambekar et al. 2014, 10) have done much to flag and conceptualise the troubling implications of global corporate and government surveillance for user privacy and security, and for political activism (Fuchs 2013; Morozov 2011; Trottier and Fuchs 2014). Their failure to probe the dangers of online surveillance from a female perspective, however, reveals the continued privileging of a male user as the neutral research subject. Fuchs’ Social Media: A Critical Introduction claims in its blurb to “lay bare the structures and power relations at the heart of our media landscape,” but his index contains no entry for women, and the one reference to feminism explains only its critique of the Habermasian public sphere. Yet Fuchs, a leading critical theorist, invites us to consider how women are advantaged and disadvantaged by digital surveillance when he argues that:

…surveillance is based on the logic of competition. It tries to bring about or prevent certain behaviours of groups or individuals by gathering ... data about humans so that potential or actual physical, ideological or structural violence can be directed against humans in order to influence their behaviour. (2014, 158)

Broadening the risks of social media surveillance beyond physical and economic abuse to include the ways in which patriarchal culture also enacts symbolic violence against women allows for a more robust conceptualisation of feminists’ experience of male dominance online. Framing male intervention in feminist activism as a form of surveillance also facilitates a more robust understanding of which social groups benefit from increased visibility and the social media culture of “publicness” (Nancy K. Baym and danah boyd 2012). Fuch’s framework recognises that the ability to search for, watch, and intervene in feminist discussions on social media represents a significant advantage for men to oppress women and influence the kind of feminism that is able to thrive in this environment. Identifying “what ought to be counted as surveillance” (Andrejevic 2015, xi) on social media platforms is then crucial to developing a critical feminist theory of social networking practices.

As Corinne Mason and Shoshana Magnet (2012) argue “the state is not the only actor capable of violently surveying women’s bodies and behaviours.” They demonstrate that corporate techniques used by Google and Apple to monitor consumer behaviour are the same as those used by individual men to monitor the activities of their partners. Sociological studies then further inform us how surveillance operates as, for example, psychological violence in intimate partner stalking, where men track the daily movements of their partners to exert control over their social activities and relationships (Delanie Woodlock 2016). Geopositioning system (GPS) functions on social media applications, which provide real-time physical locations for photos and events, can be used to track a woman’s whereabouts. Apple’s Find My Friends app, which is bundled with its operating system and was intended to extend the real-time scope and scale of digital connections, has also been used to stalk women fleeing domestic violence (Woodlock 2016). Yet despite the “obvious overlap between strategies of consumer surveillance and stalking” Mason and Magnet (2012, 106) argue that
internet privacy scholarship leaves “volumes left unsaid” about the use of these technologies to abuse women. Expanding surveillance frameworks to include individual men as dominant actors able to watch, intervene in, and harass feminist activity will allow scholars to more robustly account for the experiences of feminist activists online.

It is also necessary to extend research into the dangers of digital surveillance for feminist activists because surveillance itself has been theorised as a highly gendered phenomenon (Torin Monahan 2008). According to Mary Manjikian (2014, 60) “technologies of surveillance have more often been used against women and provide a greater threat to bodily autonomy for them.” She suggests developments in technology have historically allowed men access to women in increasingly intimate ways. Landline telephones provided a means for men to anonymously intrude upon and sexually harass women via obscene phone calls (Carole Sheffield 1989; James Katz 1994). CCTV cameras allowed men to zoom in on women’s bodies and track their movements in public spaces, while mobile phone cameras enabled more discrete, specific, and forensic observation.

Hoaxing is another area of deceptive surveillance on social media. Men have impersonated lesbians online in order to infiltrate and undermine women-centric spaces (Cochrane 2011). Men have also used social media platforms to gain access to women who are trying to escape them by tracking her whereabouts using the profiles of family and friends (Woodlock 2016). Furthermore, police have reported the recent phenomenon of men creating digital footprints of consent after raping a woman (Owen Bowcott 2015). By posting benign thank you messages after an assault, and framing the circumstances in their favour, perpetrators hope that in event of a complaint or trial, they can draw on these “false narratives” to make a case against the credibility of the victim.

A feminist approach to surveillance studies reveals how social media technologies can function as new weapons in men’s age-old war to control women. Given the continuing social and economic power of men, and their historical use of new technologies to coerce, frighten, violate, and ultimately control women as a social group, it follows that feminist activists who directly challenge male social power are also vulnerable to these tactics in social media spaces. This is particularly apparent in the so-called Gamergate debacle, which was sparked by the public shaming of games developer, Zöe Quinn, by her then partner Eron Gjoni. Quinn, along with women critics of misogyny in the games industry, then experienced a cascade of anonymous online abuse from self-styled defenders of gaming culture (Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw 2015), including death threats that forced them into hiding for a time.

The visibility of feminist activism on social media then offers men new opportunities to watch, intervene in, and derail women’s attempts at digitally mediated consciousness-raising. Two examples serve to illustrate how male surveillance is influencing the conduct and focus of feminist action on social media platforms: feminist commentator Anita Sarkeesian’s treatment by so-called Gamergaters, and the male-friendly promotional strategies of Free the Nipple, a Twitter-based anti-censorship campaign.

**Theorising the impact of male surveillance on feminist activism**

A year before Gamergate, feminist writer Anita Sarkeesian (2014) problematised sexism in the digital gaming industry via her YouTube channel *Tropes V Women in Video Games*. Her commentaries focus on a structural analysis of the stereotypical roles, masculinist plot
devices, visual references and gameplay mechanics most often associated with female characters in video games “from a systemic, big picture perspective.” Arguing that female characters in games function as “a decorative virtual sex class who exist to serve a straight male desire,” Sarkeesian’s videos demonstrate why employing more women in the gaming industry will not be enough to alleviate its structural misogyny, as the wider cultural problem involves the representation of a dominant, violent male sexuality as normal. Her cultural critique of the portrayal of women in video games deconstructs hierarchical gender representations, and issues a direct challenge to those reproducing and accepting these social norms.

As a result of her videos, Sarkeesian has been subject to a barrage of misogynistic abuse (Lisa Nakamura 2015; Shepherd, Alison Harvey, Tim Jordan, Sam Srauy, and Kate Miltner 2015). She was sent rape and death threats, her personal social media pages were hacked, her private information was distributed, her Wikipedia page was amended to include sexual images, and an interactive game was created in which players could click on her face to beat her up. In 2014, she received multiple bomb threats, and cancelled a speaking engagement at Utah State University (Jessamy Gleeson 2014). Comments on her YouTube channel remain disabled.

Drawing on Sarkeesian’s experiences, Lisa Nakamura (2015, 224) argues that “social media have become a space of intense surveillance and punishment of feminist activism and activity.” While Sarkeesian continues to critique the gaming industry (her Feminist Frequency blog, Twitter account, and Facebook page are still active), her abuse serves to illuminate how men’s strategic and cooperative monitoring, reviewing, and hacking of digital property shapes the terms of engagement between women and men online. Michel Salter (2017, 1) has recently demonstrated how the behaviour of individual men in Gamergate can collectively be understood as an “orchestrated abuse campaign” facilitated by the architecture of social media platforms, and generating commercial “profit and professional advantage” (8–9) for individual men and male-dominated corporations. Twitter, and the use of the hashtag #Gamergate, provided a platform for individual men to surveil and shape the outcomes of the public discussion. Men “closely policed” the Gamergate hashtag, and women who used it were bombarded with threatening tweets that functioned to disrupt feminist dialogue (Salter 2017, 14).

While face-to-face, women-only consciousness-raising groups were key sites of political resistance during second-wave feminism, publicly visible social media organising provides men with the tools to implement what Patricia McFadden (2016, 313) calls the “surveillance of women’s political consciousness.” Claims that social media features, such as hashtags, facilitate “community-driven options” (Nakamura 2015, 225) for women are further complicated when we consider the possibilities social media provides men to extend male dominance. The dangers of digital surveillance for feminist activism is not simply that every like, retweet, and Facebook post can be sold to advertisers, but that these digital footprints also provide individual men with the means to remotely access and immediately interfere in sites of feminist speech. As Salter (2017, 16) articulates, Gamergate has instilled a “legacy of fear” within women who use social media and participate in gaming cultures. More broadly, the harassment and shaming of Sarkeesian serves as a warning to all feminist activists, and is representative of a phenomenon which Carole Sheffield (1989) has termed “sexual terrorism”; the system through which men frighten, and are thus able to control, women as a social group. Sarkeesian’s experiences of feminist organising on social media clearly highlight the dangers to women who challenge structural male dominance online, and serve lessons to all women about what ideas constitute acceptable feminist speech.
Sarkeesian’s experience and the Gamergate phenomenon exists in marked contrast to the positive reception claimed by the *Free the Nipple* campaign. *Free the Nipple* is indicative of the type of social media-enabled feminist campaigning that is often celebrated as an activist success story. Inspired by the making of a film about the 1990s fight by New York women to go topless in public (see Reena Glazer 1993), and filmmaker Lina Esco’s questions about the gendered nature of visual and body censorship, *Free the Nipple* actions have garnered widespread public support in Western liberal democracies and the backing of celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Lena Dunham. A verified Twitter feed originally associated with the film had, as of February 2016, 169,000 followers, and included posts about documenting mastectomies, sexual consent, civil rights history, public breastfeeding, and complaints about social media censorship of images depicting women’s bare breasts. Positioning themselves generally as a gender equality movement, Esco and fellow *Free the Nipple* campaigners call for a “more balanced system of censorship and legal rights for all women to breastfeed in public” (*Free the Nipple* 2014).

Yet the *Free the Nipple* campaign displays little awareness of the links between its apparently radical symbolic tactics and the violence of the global sex industry, which trades on the exploitation of women for male sexual pleasure (Kathleen Barry 1995; Sheila Jeffreys 1997). The campaign slogan actively draws on the language of pornography (“how far will you go for equality?”), and encourages women to demonstrate support by posting a topless photo exposing their breasts on their social media channels. The #freethenipple hashtag is also used by companies to promote live-stream sex shows via Twitter: “#Sandy’s show starts in 7 minutes hurry up! #Freethenipple…” (*xcamgirls* 2015). In this sense, the *Free the Nipple* campaign plays into, rather than challenges, patriarchal ideology and is reminiscent of the late 1990s *Girls Gone Wild* franchise. *Girls Gone Wild* was a “wildly popular” US cable television program “composed entirely of footage of young women flashing their breasts … at the camera,” captured when the crew would enter nightclubs and parties, encouraging young women to sexually perform (Ariel Levy 2005, 7–8). The founder of *Girls Gone Wild*, Joe Francis, claimed that his product was “sexy for men, liberating for women, good for the goose, and good for the gander” (Levy 2005, 12). According to Ariel Levy, *Girls Gone Wild* is emblematic of a culture that positions women as sexual objects to be consumed by men. Furthermore, she argues that the popularity of the program is ensured because the “baseline expectation that women will be constantly exploding in little blasts of exhibitionism runs throughout our culture” (Levy 2005, 17).

*Free the Nipple*’s promotional imagery, together with its participatory call, aligns with dominant, objectifying visual codes and contributes to the “significant pressure” placed on women to “actively invite a sexualized gaze” in self-representational environments (Nakamura 2015, 223). The *Free the Nipple* campaign suggests that women are profiled and engineered to behave in a male-friendly manner on social media platforms, even when they are attempting to challenge male power. Feminist scholars have theorised the female internalisation of the male gaze on digital platforms as a new form of surveillance of female behaviour (Rachel Dubrofsky and Shoshana Wood 2014; Akane Kanai 2015). This research indicates that calls for women to perform authentic feminine power on social media platforms have led to paradoxical forms of personal disclosure and hyper-sexualised femininity where women like Miley Cyrus “are lauded for … expressing themselves, and criticised for the consequences of this display” (Dubrofsky and Wood 2014, 284). As Rachel Recuero (2015, 2) argues, sharing content which encourages women to aspire to stereotypical beauty or femininity reinforces
“a discourse of thousands of years of the patriarchy,” and acts as a form of symbolic violence.

While the focus of this article is on men as dominant actors invested in surveilling feminist activity, the impact of anti-feminist women on the development of feminist activism online is a connected issue. Anti-feminist women also intervene in and misdirect feminist activism online, because the mixed-sex and public nature of the platforms creates an environment in which they are likely to seek male approval. Women abuse other women online, and they also enact strategies of survival in male-dominated societies which are individually advantageous to them. Dee Graham explains this as Societal Stockholm Syndrome, the phenomenon by which women bond with men to protect themselves from male violence. According to Graham (1994, 150):

because we women fear male violence, we not only deny the violence but also do not express our anger at men, for to express anger might well make us the targets of male aggression. The more women fear retaliation, the less we are likely to express our anger. Rather, survival demands that women disguise our anger, even from ourselves.

Having internalised patriarchal ideology, women learn that getting ahead in the patriarchal system requires complicity with male demands. Free the Nipple not only reminds women that one of their key duties in patriarchal societies is to be ornamental, it also exhorts them to render their naked bodies visible for use by an infinite number of men, while simultaneously positioning such behaviour as empowering. Rather than galvanising women to develop a critical or structural analysis of patriarchal ideology, its popularity derives from its appeal to the male gaze, the norms of sexual commodification, and the rhetoric of post-feminist, neoliberal freedom. It is necessary then to question how Free the Nipple campaigning has been shaped by male surveillance and on whose terms it is a successful example of social media feminist activism.

Conclusion

In the scholarly move to theorising participative power relations on social media technologies, the issue of male social dominance needs more critical attention. The notion that social media technologies might provide men increased opportunities for violence against women is becoming more widely discussed, but the everyday forms, operation, and implications of male surveillance of feminist activism online deserve further study. In this article, I call for a widening of the concept of surveillance to recognise gendered forms of social and cultural control and the scope of strategies designed to locate, monitor, coerce, and persecute feminist activists on social media. It is also important to recognise that so-called fourth-wave feminism is built on an underlying apparatus of communicative commodification and surveillance, which encodes male dominance, and presents multiple risks of unwanted identification, tracking, assault, and misdirection for women who wish to contest male power.

Understanding feminism as a political intention to liberate women from male control necessitates that scholars consider not only how state repression and corporate co-option of political dissent is playing out on social media platforms, but also how male power plays are shaping women’s political organising online. Conceptualising men as monitorial actors, invested in surveilling feminist speech, may allow researchers to better think through the implications of the feminist use of social media platforms for political activism. Social media provides so many new ways for men to police dissenting feminist speech, that it appears
necessary to revisit the arguments of second-wave feminism to consider the limitations of the use of public platforms for feminist activism. There is urgent research needed into the capacity of social movements to effectively develop and discuss ideas online whilst bombarded by derogatory, oppositional, and disruptive messages. Importantly, feminists need to be alert to the possibilities of surveillance as political intervention, and the most effective strategies of resistance to male violence.

Notes

1. Another way feminist theory was developed during the second wave was through the circulation of short conference papers at women-only conferences, and via newsletters. These publications often explicitly stated that they were to be read only by women (Browne 2014; Brownmiller 1999; Jeska Rees 2007).

2. A recent example is the jailing of 23-year-old British woman Isabella Sorley for sending misogynistic tweets to feminist campaigner Caroline Criado Perez (The Guardian 2014).

Acknowledgments

A version of this article was first presented at the University of Sydney at the GTFO: Empowered Users, Objective Violence and the Governance of Social Media symposium in 2015. The author would like to thank those in attendance, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jessica Megarry is a PhD candidate in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral research investigates the benefits and limitations of the use of social media as a tool for feminist organising. Email: jmegarry@student.unimelb.edu.au

References


