

# Feminism: A Fourth Wave?

The internet has emerged as an increasingly important space for feminist activists. Are we witnessing a shift from third- to fourth-wave feminism? **Ealasaid Munro** examines the history of feminism and looks at what contemporary developments might mean for feminist politics.

**E**arlier this year, commentator Suzanne Moore found herself at the centre of a media storm. The reason: she had written a piece in *the New Statesman* arguing that women feel guilty if they do not conform to a socially sanctioned, ideal body shape. So far, so uncontroversial, but unfortunately, Moore's choice of imagery was, at best, careless: she likened this perfect body to that of a 'Brazilian transsexual'. The remark was considered offensive for a number of reasons: it suggested that trans women could not be considered women, whilst callously mocking the trans community as a whole. (In this article, I use the term 'trans' to refer to those who feel excluded by traditional, binary understandings of gender.) Even the reference to Brazil was misguided – Brazil has one of the worst records on transphobic hate crime in the world.

**Contemporary feminism is characterised by its diversity of purpose, but the reliance on the internet is a constant**

A few days later, her friend Julie Burchill penned a piece in *The Observer* in which she claimed that Moore had been forced to quit the social networking site Twitter by a 'gaggle of transsexuals'. Burchill's piece was deeply offensive and transphobic – in one particularly callous aside, she says 'they're lucky I'm not calling them shemales. Or shims'. Lynne Featherstone, MP for Hornsey and Wood Green, called publicly for her to be sacked. *The Guardian*, sister paper of *the Observer*, quickly removed Burchill's article from their website.

On one hand, this looks like just another media spat; yet on the other it offers a window onto a whole range of issues that are central to contemporary feminism. At the core of the Moore/Burchill Twitter-storm was a sense that these prominent feminists were out of touch with contemporary feminism. Many online

commentators castigated Moore and Burchill for calling themselves feminists and writing in support of feminist issues while embracing such exclusionary language. Moore later rejoined Twitter, and issued a nuanced and well-researched apology – informed, she said, by exchanges with her critics – but Burchill did not. Contemporary feminism is characterised by its diversity of purpose, and amid the cacophony of voices it is easy to overlook one of the main constants within the movement as it currently stands – its reliance on the internet.

## Feminist Waves

As the contemporary feminist movement becomes both more visible and more fragmented, there has been a resurgence of interest in earlier waves of feminism. The Channel 4 documentary *Secrets of a Suffragette* aired earlier this year to mark the centenary of Emily Wilding Davidson's fatal trespass onto the racecourse at Epsom in 1913. The documentary analysed historical footage of the collision between Davidson and the King's horse, and concluded that Davidson was an accidental martyr. However, it brought home to a wider audience the injustices visited upon women well into the 20th century as regards property ownership and suffrage. This was feminism's 'first wave'.

With the vote won for all women over 21 in 1928, the feminist movement gradually turned its attention to women's inequality in wider society. Second-wave feminists coined the phrase 'the personal is political' as a means of highlighting the impact of sexism and patriarchy on every aspect of women's private lives.



Lynne Featherstone MP called for Julie Burchill to be sacked after her transphobic comments.

Reuters



American author and activist Betty Friedan was one of the most famous second-wave feminists.

Prominent feminists such as Betty Friedan (see 'Betty Friedan – Hero or Villain?') also made clear that feminism in its second wave was about breaking down gender stereotypes, thus emphasising that feminism was of importance to men as well as to women.

Yet second-wave feminists treated women as a homogenous group, without paying attention to the many axes of difference that cleave apart the singular category of 'women'. bell hooks' seminal *Ain't I a Woman* noted the devaluation of black femininity, and the sidelining of women of colour within the feminist movement. This, she argued, reinforced racism and classism within the movement, and the only ones who suffered were women themselves. hooks' book was pivotal in the development of the third wave of feminism, as it drew attention to the need for multiple feminisms.

Third-wave feminism has been heavily influenced by academic investigations

of queer theory. Queer theory posits that gender and sexuality are fluid categories, and do not easily map onto binary understandings of 'male' and 'female'. Increased understanding of bisexual and trans identities characterise the third wave – although as the Moore/Burchill furore shows, this is an ongoing process, with the increasingly visibility of trans people within feminist activism prompting a concurrent rise in discrimination, most notably from within the radical feminist movement. In a more general sense, third-wave feminism has been critiqued for its focus on individual emancipation, in contrast to the 'personal is political' debates of the second wave. While the third wave's focus on micropolitics is in keeping with a well-documented shift towards individualism in the latter years of the 20th century, some argue that this can be depoliticising, shifting the onus for change onto the individual – thus making

wide-reaching change more difficult to effect.

## Fourth-wave Feminism?

Many commentators argue that the internet itself has enabled a shift from 'third-wave' to 'fourth-wave' feminism. What is certain is that the internet has created a 'call-out' culture, in which sexism or misogyny can be 'called out' and challenged. This culture is indicative of the continuing influence of the third wave, with its focus on micropolitics and challenging sexism and misogyny insofar as they appear in everyday rhetoric, advertising, film, television and literature, the media, and so on.

The existence of a feminist 'fourth wave' has been challenged by those who maintain that increased usage of the internet is not enough to delineate a new era. But it is increasingly clear that the internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism.

## **The internet has created a culture in which sexism or misogyny can be 'called out' and challenged**

According to *#FemFuture: Online Feminism*, a report recently published by Columbia University's Barnard Center for Research on Women, females aged between 18 and 29 are the 'power users of social networking'. According to this research, the number of women using digital spaces is increasing. There is evidence, too, that the uptake of new technologies such as Twitter is growing in geographical areas where women still face social injustices – in Turkey, for example, women make up 72 per cent of social media users.

Several large corporations have fallen foul of the speed with which feminist campaigns can garner support on the internet. Earlier this year, Facebook was forced to confront the issue of gender-based hate

### Betty Friedan – Hero or Villain?

American author and activist Betty Friedan (1921–2006) was one of the most famous second-wave feminists. She was the author of a series of books, including *The Feminine Mystique*. Widely credited with kick-starting the second wave of feminism, this book was an examination of 'the problem that has no name', or, the increasing alienation and unhappiness felt by American housewives in the post-war boom years. In 1966, Friedan formed the National Organization for Women – a women's rights organisation that sought to narrow the equality gap between the sexes.

Friedan was undoubtedly a passionate advocate for women's rights, and drew in large numbers of male 'allies' via her elaboration of the ways in which traditional gender roles restrict men as well as women. Yet she was also deeply transphobic and – certainly in the early years of her activism – homophobic as well. As a white, middle-class suburban housewife, Friedan also epitomised the (often unwitting) racism and classism of the second wave, yet her popularity arguably acted as a catalyst for the development of those diverse feminisms that constitute the third wave.



A petition calling for a reversal of a decision to remove women from bank notes was signed by 30,000 people. In July, new Bank of England Governor Mark Carney announced that Jane Austen would feature on a new series of £10 notes. Press Association

speech on its webpages after initially suggesting that images of women being abused did not violate their terms of service. In the UK, websites such as The F Word and The Women's Room, and online campaigns such as The Everyday Sexism Project and No More Page 3, have attracted thousands of supporters who find that the internet works both as a forum for discussion and as a route for activism.

Whether or not internet campaigning actually enables change is a contested issue. There is concern that online discussion and activism is increasingly divorced from real-world conflicts. 'Slacktivism' is a term used to describe 'feel-good' campaigns that garner plenty of public support – such as a petition circulated via Facebook – but that do not necessarily address pressing issues. So while research points to the fact that feminism is being reinvigorated by the internet, whether or not this is leading to transformative political action is hotly debated.

Julia Schuster's work on women's feminist engagement in New Zealand notes that online activism is often the preserve of the

young, and that due to the closed nature of some social networks, feminist discussion is often 'hidden' from those who are not sufficiently networked. For Schuster, this may create a divide between young feminists and older activists, as the new wave of feminists unwittingly hide their politics from their older peers. Many of those academics in a position to research and publish on feminism belong to this older age group, hence academic feminism is arguably guilty of failing to properly examine the shape that the fourth wave is currently taking.

Perhaps the shift to internet activism reflects the continuing lack of political representation in western democracies – at Westminster, for example, of the 23 seats around the coalition government's Cabinet table, only four are held by women. Research conducted by the University of Liverpool in the run-up to the 2010 general election in the UK found that female politicians were far less likely to be featured in major news outlets than their male counterparts, and that discussion of female politicians' physical attributes often overshadowed discussion of their politics.

## Understanding Difference

One of the key issues for contemporary feminism is intersectionality – the idea that different axes of oppression intersect, producing complex and often contradictory results. As bell hooks showed, the experiences of working-class black and white women in the US are insurmountably different – yet each belongs to the category 'woman'. Academic feminists have been comfortable with the idea of intersectionality since at least the 1980s, when prominent third-wave feminists such as hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lord spoke out about women of colour being sidelined within feminism. These feminists undermined the idea that gender alone was a sound basis for identification.

In an effort to draw attention to these axes of difference, contemporary feminists advocate several tactics, including the much-maligned practice of 'privilege-checking'. As a tactic, privilege-checking is about reminding someone that they cannot and should not speak for others. Of course, individuals speak from a very specific

viewpoint – what Donna Haraway calls ‘the view from somewhere’. The phrase ‘check your privilege’ was born on the internet, and young activists who grew up communicating via internet chat rooms appear to have considerably less trouble with the phrase than older feminists. As Sadie Smith has noted in the *New Statesman*, however, ‘check your privilege’ is often abused as a phrase – used as a means of deflection rather than with any hope of understanding or rapprochement.

The emergence of ‘privilege-checking’, however, reflects the reality that mainstream feminism remains dominated by the straight white middle-classes. Parvan Amara interviewed self-identified working class feminists for a piece published on internet magazine *The F Word* and noted that many of the women she spoke to found themselves excluded from mainstream feminism both on the internet and ‘in real life’. Amara notes that many women tend to encounter feminism at university. Women who do not go on to further education face a barrier when attempting to engage with those academic debates that drive feminism.

## New Languages

The realisation that women are not a homogenous group has brought with it a set of new terminologies that attempt to ensure that those who hold a given identity are not spoken for, or carelessly pigeonholed. For newcomers, the vocabulary can be dizzying, from ‘cis’ (a neologism referring to those individuals whose gender and sexual identities map cleanly on to one another) to ‘WoC’ (‘women of colour’) and ‘TERF’ (‘trans-exclusionary radical feminists’). On the internet, you may have your privilege checked, or in extreme cases you might be ‘doxed’ (have your personal files hacked, and distributed – the term ‘dox’ is derived from the .docx file format that much virtual data is stored in). ‘Doxing’ has been used predominantly by anti-trans activists to release information about the identities of trans people.

The proliferation of these new technologies – most notably the internet – points to how central they



The funeral procession of Emily Wilding Davison, after she was killed by throwing herself under King George V’s horse at the Epsom Derby.

Press Association

are to contemporary feminist debate and activism. Terms such as WoC, cis and TERF are invaluable given the 140-character limit imposed by Twitter, and lend themselves to the practice of hashtagging, an online practice that allows information to be quickly retrieved and linked.

## Conclusions

Barely a year goes by without the death-knell being sounded for feminism, but such widespread negativity is unwarranted. Whether or not we are living through a ‘fourth wave’ of feminism, it is clear that women’s understanding of their position in the world and their political struggles is changing. With more and more young feminists turning to the internet, it is imperative that academics consider the effects that new technologies are having on feminist debate and activism.

While controversy abounds concerning the delineation between second-, third- and fourth-wave feminism, it is clear that several key issues animate contemporary feminism. Intersectionality and the exclusionary nature of mainstream

feminism remain a real concern. The political potential of the fourth wave centres around giving voice to those women still marginalised by the mainstream.

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