

## Numérique, Féminisme et Societé [*Digital, Feminism and Society*]

by Josiane Jouët (2022) Paris, Presses des Mines, 270 pp.

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In the past decade, there has been an increase in reports of sexual and moral harassment against women in the media, largely attributed to the visibility and accessibility provided by social media.

Analyzing these changes, Josiane Jouët, a French sociologist with extensive experience in researching communication and information technologies and practices, discusses the visibility of gender relations and the use of communication technologies. In her latest book, *Numérique, Féminisme et Societé*, Jouët examines how social media influences feminist movements in France. Data collection was based on an “artisanal” method of observation (p. 13), focusing on publications from various collectives across different platforms – Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube – from 2017 to 2021.

In the first part of her book, the author analyzes the #MeToo movement in France. #MeToo is a social movement that emerged in the context of digital feminist activism in the country, notably since 2010, due to the digital engagement of the younger generation, the “digital natives”. According to the author, this movement has gained worldwide notoriety through social media, conferring visibility to issues such as sexual harassment, incest, femicide, and consent. In France, the movement has led to the spread of many hashtags since 2017. For instance, journalist Sandra Muller used the hashtag #balancetonporc in her Twitter account. Inspired by the accusations against Harvey Weinstein, she exposed a case of harassment she had suffered and invited other women to do the same.

Accusations of harassment in the media are not new. However, according to Jouët, the novelty of the #MeToo movement was its reach: the myriad of posts from women who exposed cases of harassment on social media and the amount of information they generated. As a consequence, traditional media also embraced the movement: several Hollywood actresses shared their stories, attracting the attention of newspapers and magazines worldwide. On one hand, when the media started covering court cases, these accusations became more visible, revealing the impunity of aggressors. On the other hand, they also demonstrated the vulnerability of women in all professions, including traditional media.

According to Jouët, these accusations have highlighted the obstacles women face throughout their careers. Even in professions where the majority of workers are women, women are

still a minority in leadership positions. The media is partially responsible for perpetuating gender stereotypes through images and representations in cultural products and information pieces. Therefore, achieving gender equality in the professional media sector relies on the broader issue of women's emancipation. When women hold leadership positions in the media, they can challenge these norms by introducing and promoting different points of view, reshaping both the media and culture.

In this regard, in the second part of her book, Jouët explores what is particular to digital activism. She discusses the crucial role of technology in the digital world, as well as its possibilities and limitations to bring about social justice. The author uses the "thread" as a metaphor for the embroidering, knitting, spinning, and weaving that women have done over the centuries. According to her, in these practices, which can be either artistic or domestic, women "deploy their ingenuity to make material objects. In a sense, they are continuing this technology on the web" (p. 15, book reviewers' translation). She then emphasizes the materialistic nature of feminist publications that do not form a homogeneous web: "they are a patchwork of varied causes, like pieces of fabric, dissimilar in color and texture, which nevertheless assemble the same feminist canvas" (p. 15, book reviewers' translation).

Both women collectives and individual women are integral to this digital universe. There are larger online spaces built by well-structured feminist organizations, such as the French collective #NousToutes. Since 2018, it has assembled individuals as well as civil and political organizations fighting against sexual and sexist violence against women. In addition, smaller communities are often grouped by identities, such as ethnic-racial origins, religion, and sexuality, or are related to a specific demand or territory. In a fluid movement, they either attract or repel each other; they aggregate, dissipate, and recompose, knitting the web.

To Wajcman (2010), this idea aligns closely with the perspectives of cyberfeminists such as Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant, among others. For them, this technology connects the boundaries between humans and machines, as well as between genders, allowing users to choose their disguises and adopt alternative identities.

According to Jouët, the influence of these collectives and individuals stems from their capacity to engage with trending topics and their communication strategies. Most of these feminist collectives consist of small groups of volunteers who share the tasks of digital activism through social media platforms, from producing content to communicating. The combination of being a small group, multitasking, and assuming new responsibilities leads many of these feminists to suffer from mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion. Nevertheless, they persevere, since their convictions are strong.

The French feminist digital environment stimulates the proliferation of spokespersons for a cause rather than individualities. Although feminists in these groups may sometimes be identified, they often remain anonymous behind the collective digital identity, advocating for a cause. They might gain visibility by participating in podcasts and producing audiovisual content. Therefore, according to the author, the internet allows a plurality of voices and connections by enabling the sharing of links towards common causes, especially during specific mobilizations against violence and public protests. This means that digital technologies have clearly magnified women's voices and made them more visible and accessible to all who have access to the internet. However, traditional media still features

renowned primary authors and researchers who discuss these issues, perpetuating traditional legitimacy mechanisms.

The digital feminist interface relies on the physical distance between activists, which might escalate the conflicts. Furthermore, the distance imposed by social relations on the internet tends to intensify violence for everyone, but it acquires sexual characteristics when directed at women. Techniques used to punish and intimidate women into leaving cyberspace include “revenge porn”, the unauthorized sharing of intimate photos, and, more recently, AI-generated pornography. From a young age, girls are exposed to pornographic pictures and messages. Additionally, the internet introduces new ways of surveillance, allowing individuals to monitor text messages, emails, and browse histories.

The author argues that although this scenario existed ten years ago, it gained visibility and legitimacy after the #MeToo movement shattered the male-dominated traditional media barriers. Cybernetic violence has become a public concern in France, prompting the development of legal mechanisms to address it.

Furthermore, the author discusses cybernetic violence as a matter of platform regulation. The platforms attempt to recognize and classify online content based on the actions of moderators and the use of algorithms that may automatically suppress certain posts and accounts. Nonetheless, feminists often claim that their accounts are suppressed when discussing gender and the female body, while violent comments against them are overlooked. Sometimes the algorithms reduce the visibility of their accounts. In addition, feminists are often victims of hacker attacks aimed at disabling their accounts.

According to the Social Studies of Science, technologies are not neutral and must be studied considering their context. More importantly for the topic of this study, technologies are not gender-neutral, as Jouët recalls in the third and final part of her book. While women make significant contributions to content creation, men are the primary developers of information technologies and culturally dominate the sector. The consequences of this disparity include the discharge of women in the field and the predominant use of female voices for assistants, reinforcing gender stereotypes of feminine passivity and subservience.

Among the many social mechanisms that explain the male dominance in technology, the author emphasizes the bi-gendered differentiation in the socialization and education of young people that still associate girls with care work and boys with science and technology. For Jouët, the relationship between the inclusion of women in technology development and innovation and the change in its design is not tangible at the moment, as there are no signs of an increase in women’s participation in technology fields – despite current efforts to attract girls to technology careers.

According to Faulkner (2001), feminist scholarship that has emerged within the field of technology studies, or feminist technology studies, provides a helpful framework for analyzing the relationship between technology and gender, which could be usefully generalized. Most commonly, the matter of the inclusion of women in technology fields is related to the sexual division of labor and a set of cultural practices and symbolic meanings. For her, Cockburn (1983) and Wajcman (1991) “assumed a two-way mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology in which technology is both a source and consequence of gender relations and vice versa” (Faulkner 2001).

According to Wajcman (2010), there is a tension between an essentially feminine vision of cyberspace and a potential definition of it as a privileged space. The metaphor of cyberfeminism is articulated as an alternative to the construction of a feminine identity. She also eloquently highlights the theme of male power and male appropriation of technology, which is seen as the origin of the unequal relationship to technology based on gender. For instance, Cockburn (1983) emphasizes that, in many workplaces, men's appropriation of technology is related to the social construction of femininity as technically incompetent.

By shifting the focus from technology development to technology appropriation, in the final chapters of her book, Jouët demonstrates that although women have increasingly been consuming technology, the usage patterns have remained predominantly marked by gender. A notable example is the case of video games, which women now play more often on smartphones. However, more sophisticated games are still male-dominated, especially those in online communities. Communities for sharing knowledge are commonly developed by women, usually addressing professions or health-related matters. Artists and digital influencers use the internet to promote their work. Therefore, according to the author, the internet is not merely a space for reproducing gendered practices; women use it according to their needs and interests.

Finally, the book elucidates the profound transformations social media has generated, emphasizing its deeply rooted connections to power dynamics. Focusing on France and feminist movements, the book reflects on broader questions regarding the intertwining of technology and society, highlighting the material nature of digital activism and its connections to social movements beyond the digital space.

## References

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