

# HIT THEM WHERE IT HURTS

## *tackling Facebook's misogyny problem*

By Kayla Roux

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TRIGGER WARNING: MENTIONS OF RAPE, GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

**Whether you believe in the power of social networking for political participation or are cynical of the 'clicktivists' and their 'slacktivism', there's no denying it: social media politics have become an inescapable part of our digital lives. From online petitions and NGO fan pages to heated Twitter wars and politically-motivated hacking, the internet has opened up countless new avenues in which people can express their support for causes, lobby powerful interest groups, and register their dissent with a well-orchestrated hashtag or viral campaign. But what if one social network becomes the site of the struggle? What about when our digital lives become the subject of our politics?**

It makes sense when you consider the amount of time and energy many of us pour into our social media accounts: they are the digital equivalent of the ancient Greek agora or your favourite neighbourhood pub, and provide countless opportunities for self-expression and networking. It has become a place of work, play, communication and relaxation for millions of internet users. Importantly, it has also become one of the biggest and richest corporations in the world, their revenues based on auctioning personal information to advertisers for the highest price.

For this reason, many activists are not only using social media to network, increase exposure and exert influence – they are petitioning the way social media sites themselves are structured.

In 2013, a coalition of over 100 women's rights and social justice groups orchestrated a campaign aimed at forcing social media giant Facebook to review its content classification policy – and it

worked. For years, Facebook maintained a stony silence regarding requests from users to remove and condemn graphic content glorifying and trivialising domestic abuse, rape, and gender-based violence.

Making use of Facebook's bewildering and convoluted reporting system, users can provide feedback about what they would like to see and what they would rather not. Reported content is reviewed against Facebook's community policy, and, if found wanting, removed with a warning for the originator of the content.

This mechanism helps to keep Facebook free from graphic violence, pornography, hate speech, trade in controlled substances and the like – supposedly. Instead, what most users reporting drastically unfunny rape jokes and images of bloodied and bruised women found was that Facebook's community standards were inconsistently applied at best, and deeply misogynistic at worst.

In the maintenance of their community standards, Facebook made it clear whose side it was on (spoiler alert: it's not women). Countless reports about graphic depictions of gender-based violence and rape and joke pages glorifying the abuse of women were returned with a glib message: 'Thanks for your report. We reviewed the content you reported, but found it doesn't violate Facebook's Community Standard on hate speech'. I'm not talking about the odd offensive joke or sexist comment; most of the content on the Facebook pages in question was so graphic that they could not be reproduced or linked by mainstream news websites: graphic images of gore, beaten children, naked children, women bound and gagged, or thrown down stairs.

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Meanwhile, individual users and advertisers found their pictures and artistic representations of breastfeeding mothers and breast cancer survivors (you know, any situation in which the female form is not held up for sexual consumption) reported and removed faster than they could say “the patriarchy did it!”. Inflamed articles were written. Angry status updates abounded. Nothing changed.

When it became clear that Facebook and its management would not become the champion feminists around the world were hoping for, social justice organisations around the world turned to a tried-and-tested method of exerting social pressure for social change in capitalist societies: a good old-fashioned boycott.

It started with an open letter (or a stroke of genius) penned by three of the cleverest, social media-savvy feminists of our times: writer and activist Soraya Chemaly, founder of the Everyday Sexism Project Laura Bates, and Jaclyn Friedman from Women, Action and the Media. These three joined forces to launch the hashtag Twitter campaign #FBRape in May 2013. Their letter was not aimed at Facebook and its management: it had become abundantly clear that this road would not lead to redress.

Instead, they wrote to all Facebook users, urging them to think about the kind of digital world in which they wanted to live – and to tell Facebook’s advertisers that gender-based violence and misogyny had no place in it. They called on Facebook users to tweet and email the organisations who advertised on Facebook, showing them what their ads look like next to the graphically violent pages in question and created easy ways for users to contact advertisers in the form of a tweet, an email, or a Facebook message.

A few days into the campaign, 15 major companies including Nissan UK, Nationwide, Finnair and American Express had pulled their ads from Facebook. Those who failed to do so were subjected to some clever ‘brandalism’ in the form of fake adverts showing how these companies really feel about women. For example, the beauty industry giant Dove was subjected to a humiliating Photoshop campaign with fake ads that read “Dove: because advertising dollars are more important than the treatment of women.” Although some organisations held onto their valuable advertising spots and asked users to report individual pages instead, there was enough pressure for Facebook to react.

Facebook could feel the heat. It was directed straight at their pockets.

It only took one week, 5 000 emails and 60 000 tweets for Facebook to respond with an explicit commitment to refining their approach to hate speech. They promised to review and update their definitions of hate speech, update the training received by content reviewers, and hold creators of offensive content accountable. All of this happened, and it happened in consultation with legal experts as well as representatives from the women’s coalition and other interest groups.

As a microcosm of our society, social media sites offer up the best and worst that humanity has to offer, all in one place. They reflect the systemic violence and oppression of the society in which we live in the form of racism, sexism, and many more forms of discrimination. But they are also a conduit for change. When Facebook let women down, users took to Twitter as an alternative platform to protest #FBRape. From a critical perspective, Facebook also presents an interesting case study for political participation and democracy in the 21st century. On the one hand, it is a profit-driven, multinational

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corporation that packages user information and networks and sells this information to advertisers and developers, effectively exploiting users for hours of unpaid, immaterial digital labour. On the other hand, its profits rely on providing an open platform for the public to share their interests and beliefs.

As their mission statement reads, Facebook is committed to making the world “more open and connected”. They seek to provide “a platform where people can share and surface content, messages and ideas freely, while still respecting the rights of others”. This should not be read as a commitment to creating and sustaining communities or to improving information rights across the world. It is a business statement. But it does provide an interesting insight into the way Facebook necessarily functions: it needs the support and trust of its users to survive. This is what gives users the power to shape and inform the nature of the public spaces social media sites have become.

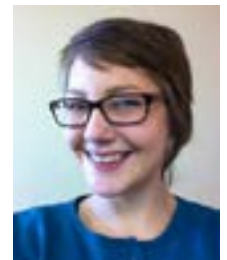
The #FBRape campaign is a great example of the power of global networked feminist participation in the 21st century, illustrating the emergence of subversive cultural and political movements and the creative reconstruction of ICT for social change. When the initial era of utopian cyber-optimism about digital democratisation that accompanied the late 90s and early 2000s explosion of new information-communication technologies had passed unfulfilled, critics started to investigate the other side of the coin.

Rather than democratise communication and foster robust public debate and free self-expression, internet spaces seem to have become enclaves for some of the worst aspects of society; here, racists and sexists find expression, governments and corporations can surveil and control their citizens, and cyber-bullies have taken over the playground.

Debates are polarised and fruitless as keyboard warriors fight it out from opposite sides of the screen. Critics also argue that the internet has had a depoliticising effect on citizens, fragmenting communities and fuelling rampant narcissism, flattening the intellectual landscape to a landfill of personalised news feeds and pictures of cats. While

we have more access to information and networking power than ever before, the overflow of information threatens to engulf our political sensibilities until all we are able to do is click Like and Share.

However, the feminist victory against Facebook misogyny that is the #FBRape campaign carries an important message for anyone working, playing, and living on the internet. The internet is a complex series of locations that dynamically embodies new models of citizenship and political activism. #FBRape is a great example of how people are interacting with new technologies as citizen-activists. By subverting the logic of capital and putting it to work towards social justice ends, thousands of citizens spoke back to corporate power and systemic misogyny, getting one step closer to creating the kind of internet we all want to live in.



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Soweto by Jodi Bieber