

11 r/ChokeABitch

Feminist Tactics Against Hate Speech in Capitalist Social Media Platforms*

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Abstract

This chapter discusses tactics on how to cope with online hate from an activist perspective, based on personal experiences of the author as a feminist in Germany. Violence and hate speech are part of online culture, its victims sharing very much the same demographic as offline victims, for example women and/or minorities. The first section focuses on online hate, and on how and why it affects us emotionally, followed by examples of effective campaigns against it. The second section discusses how the fight of online hate is inextricably linked to the question on what platforms it takes place and why. Fighting online hate is ultimately linked to the basic fight against the capitalist, sexist, racist, and classist roots of our Western society.

Keywords: activism, feminism, social media, capitalism, misogyny, patriarchy

When in 2012 *Forbes* asked Alexis Ohanian, one of the two founders of Reddit, what the Founding Fathers might have thought of his invention, he answered: 'A bastion of free speech on the World Wide Web? I would love to imagine that 'Common Sense' would have been a self-post on Reddit, by Thomas Paine, or actually a redditor named T_Paine.'¹

Reddit is an online platform founded by Steve Huffman and Ohania in 2005, when they were still roommates at the University of Virginia. It is infamous

* This essay is written in March/April 2018.

1 Marantz, 'Reddit and the Struggle', p. 61.

for its collection of weird topics, but also for the hate groups that it hosts. From sodomy, rape and torture threats, to anti-Semitic and racist content, Reddit is well known for its unregulated, extreme and often illegal content.

In 2011, when journalist Anderson Cooper mentioned the subreddit 'Jailbait' on CNN, it was possibly the first time some people even heard the term 'subreddit' at all. The channel 'Jailbait', which Cooper mentioned, in Reddit language spelled 'r/Jailbait', was a channel dedicated to sexualized pictures of young women. Although the channel claimed that everyone was at least 18, the pictures told a different story. The subreddit was banned, but the user u/Violentacrez, who had opened the channel, was not, just like any of his other hundreds of channels, among them subreddits called 'r/Jewmerica' or 'r/ChokeABitch'. 'Yes, it gets worse', as the journalist from the *New Yorker* pointed out. Unlike to what one might expect, Reddit's reaction to the case was not one of portraying shock or a form of disapproval regarding what was happening on its platform. On the contrary, Yishan Wong, the then CEO of Reddit, stated that r/Jailbait was only banned because it violated U.S. law, not because of any moral standards Reddit might have: 'We stand for free speech, [and] it would not do if, in our youth, we decide to censor things simply because they were distasteful.'²

This chapter primarily discusses tactics on how to cope with online hate from an activist perspective, based on my personal experiences as a feminist activist in Germany. Violence and hate speech are obviously part of our online culture, its victims sharing very much the same demographic as offline victims, for example women, children or minorities. The case of 'r/Jailbait' though, showcases how the discourse of tackling violence and online hate is not only inextricably linked to the question how to tackle the creators of this violent content. It is also raising the question on which platforms this hate speech and violence takes place.

A definition of online activism for this chapter will be followed by a brief introduction of my activist background, since this chapter is thought as a guideline from an activist's point of view.

The first section of this chapter focuses on online hate, and on how and why it affects us emotionally, followed by examples of effective campaigns against online hate. A first set of rules will focus on how to deal with online hate on these platforms. The second section discusses how the fight of online hate is inextricably linked to the question on what platforms it actually takes place. Current social media platforms belong to unregulated private companies, and while the technology to gather and sell information about

2 *The New Yorker*, 19 March 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/19>.

us is increasing, the networks seem simultaneously overwhelmed, or rather indifferent to the rise of violence and hate on their platforms.³ The second set of advice therefore concerns itself with aspects of our relationship to social media and self-care. As a German feminist activist and student of American history, I will mostly use examples from the German and American context. Since this chapter focuses on online violence and hate speech on social media networks, I chose to focus on Facebook, Twitter and Reddit as the primary examples, and the aspect of online hate speech and trolls on a verbal level.

Clicktivism vs. effective online activism

With regard to the Arab Spring, WikiLeaks or the Black Lives Matter movement, it becomes quite clear that online activism has a wide scope, ranging from hacking to organizing people online on a greater scale. The form of online activism discussed in this chapter, which primarily takes place on platforms like Facebook or Twitter, has often been criticized as clicktivism or slacktivism. These terms describe the often aimless political gestures online, such as 'likes' on Facebook or futile online petitions, which only aim to gather email addresses rather than effecting actual change. Critics regard them as pointless or meaningless moves, which I fully agree with. Supporting statements, petitions, or movements online, or liking a sharepic with a political message does not make one an activist.

However, effective activism on social media is, since we are concerned with communication platforms, mainly based around spreading and sharing information. Meredith Clark is a professor at the Mayborn School of Journalism at the University of North Texas; her research includes the establishment of a theoretical framework for exploring Black Twitter. 'Black Twitter' is a widely used term in the US for the black community on Twitter. The #Ferguson #MikeBrown campaign was largely responsible for raising awareness to the killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on 9 August 2014. She defines three levels of connection on Black Twitter, a concept which I find useful for defining fields of activism on social media in general: personal community, thematic notes and conversations about the networks themselves:

I break Black Twitter down into three levels of connection: personal community, and that reflects the people that you are connected with in some other dimension other than Twitter. And I take that personal community from Barry Wellman's work. The second level I find is thematic notes, and

3 Denkena, 'Überwachungskapitalismus'.

that's where individuals specifically tweet together about certain topics, so they keep returning to this subject matter. And those thematic notes could be anything from television shows, to ideologies, topics of religion. They might be centric to where these individuals are in a certain part of the country. It just kind of all depends on what topic we're interested in. And then that third level of connection, where we see a lot of conversation about these networks and how they're linked, is when those personal communities and the thematic notes kind of intersect around a specific topic. And generally you see that, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, #AskRKelly, those sort of things. That's where you see the meta-network at work.⁴

The effectiveness of social media activism can be made visible by evaluating how popular the topic is online, which Clarke defines as 'affirmation'. A discussion which enters offline spaces like private conversations or panels, or other media like newspapers or talk shows, is a step further, 're-affirmation': #metoo has found its way into our everyday language and culture. Clarke identifies 'vindication' as another step in this scenario, which is the process of 'looking for some kind of change in the physical world.' Examples here are people who lose their jobs or have to publicly apologize as a direct effect of a Twitter topic. In this way, social media activism can break its limitations insofar as it can reach out to communities and groups who do not have access to, or the media literacy to engage in, these online discussions.

From a feminist perspective, speaking out is an activist element in itself. Feminist history is basically a history of speaking out one's own truth. Women's realities were mostly seen as second to men's stories. History is literally history, written by and for white privileged men. Hashtags like #WhyIStayed or years later #metoo let women share realities, while pushing forward experiences that otherwise were kept hidden from mainstream society. Social Media can, with some restrictions, function as a connection for marginalized groups and can thus be a cathartic, liberating experience. In this case it becomes important how we are emotionally connected to our digital environment.

Affect and the power of massive-scale emotional contagion on Facebook

What happens online affects us offline: people are wired to feel the emotions of others. This effect, called emotional contagion, means that we copy the

4 Ramsey, 'The Truth about Black Twitter'.

emotions that we see in others, and it happens regardless of whether we want it to. Nicolas A. Christakis, a physician and social scientist, and James H. Fowler, a social scientist and researcher in the field of social networks, discuss online emotional contagion in the context of hyperconnectivity in *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. They state that the mirror neuron system in our brains lets us copy the mood of another person, through first mimicking expressions, and then feeling them:

Emotions spread from person to person because of two features of human interaction: we are biologically hardwired to mimic others outwardly, and in mimicking their outward displays, we come to adopt their inward states. If your friend feels happy, she smiles, you smile, and in the act of smiling you also become happy.⁵

Emotional contagion has also been proven to work without two people having to face each other. In a sound experiment, subjects had to listen to recordings of nonverbal vocal reactions. The subject's reactions were monitored via a magnetic resonance (MRI) machine. There were two positive emotions and two negative ones to listen to, and the people were told not to react to them. Still the MRI detected that although the subjects did not react as told, it stimulated the parts of their brains that are connected to commanding the corresponding facial expressions.⁶

Emotional contagion is possible solely through online communication, and one of the most striking findings may still be a study conducted by Facebook itself. Facebook tested emotional contagion on 689,003 of its users, notably without their consent. The results were published as an article, 'Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks', in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, on 18 June 2014. While initially stating that automated testing 'was consistent with Facebook's Data Use Policy, to which all users agree prior to creating an account on Facebook, constituting informed consent for this research,' a *Forbes* article published in 28 June 2014, states that 'Facebook conducted their research four months before adding "research" to their data use policy'.⁷

5 Christakis and Fowler, *Connected*, p. 37.

6 Ibid., p. 39-40.

7 McNeal, 'Facebook Manipulated'.

Facebook's aim in this research was discovering whether users did have an influence on their connected users' emotions. The procedure was simple: a programme identified positive and negative words in the users feeds; in some cases they then reduced the positive, in some the negative content. The people who had a reduced negative content in their feed, started posting more positive status updates themselves, and vice versa. The scientists concluded that

[t]hese results suggest that the emotions expressed by friends, via online social networks, influence our own moods, constituting, to our knowledge, the first experimental evidence for massive-scale emotional contagion via social networks and providing support for previously contested claims that emotions spread via contagion through a network.⁸

Greta Olson elaborates in her chapter 'Love and Hate Online' how affect, described as 'pre-verbal experiences of feeling rather than emotions' are a predecessor to emotions, which are 'experiences that have already been translated into and thus already explained through words.' Affective experiences include for example bodily reactions to feelings that are 'deeply embodied and have little to do with rational arguments', like getting goosebumps when feeling scared or aroused, reactions which can also result from reading tweets or messages online.⁹ The fight against online hate takes place on two levels, and although often neglected, the fight against the negative emotional effects are just as relevant as the fight against misinformation, when it comes to fighting hate speech and trolls. Olson concludes that ultimately, we will have to say goodbye to our belief that rational arguments are the answer to online hate.¹⁰

A redditior named T_Paine – free speech and online hate

When it comes to defending violent or hateful content, as an activist I often encounter the argument that we all have the right to state our opinion. Online social media communication often blurs the line between political and personal statements, we rather engage in conversations when it affects us personally. When we talk about online vitriol or online hate, we primarily

8 Ibid.

9 Olson, 'Love and Hate', p. 153.

10 Olson, 'Love and Hate', p. 174.

mean toxic or otherwise socially harmful speech acts. The definition of hate speech agreed upon for this publication is (online) speech that intentionally or effectively harms, diminishes, or upsets others (usually on categorical grounds). I would additionally define attacks in private messages, per email or per phone as cyber-harassment, which should be dealt with in another way than publicly posted hate speech. The question when we defend our rules as a society, and when we are silencing voices, is often the main argument when we are talking about regulating hate speech online. Since social media platforms are unable or unwilling to make this distinction, and as hate speech has become more organized online, various initiatives have formed to combat online vitriol collectively.

In 2017, a German group began to fight online vitriol on Facebook through counter speech. Facebook had failed to act quickly and effectively to the racist comments that started to add up under German news concerning what commenters called the ‘refugee-crisis’. Organized hate groups and trolls had started to comment under news articles which were connected to refugees, and news about crimes was linked to refugees or immigrants without any proof or clue. *#ichbinhier*, translated as ‘I am here’, started to organize people in a Facebook group, where they started posting links to posts that were attacked by trolls, or contained hate speech. The group members simply have to follow the link to the original article, and either react by writing comments that correct the misinformation, or simply directly react to troll comments, telling them they are lying. The *#ichbinhier* responses are then linked back to the news post in the group channel, where a bigger amount of members can simply like the posts. The idea is simple, but effective. In 2017 the group received the *Online Grimme Award*, a German award for journalistic quality online. At this time, the group had over 35,000 active members.¹¹

Hass hilft, ‘hate helps’, is an ‘involuntary fundraising campaign’, and another creative strategy against online hate. The project turns every hate speech comment into a one-euro donation for the refugee programmes of ‘Aktion Deutschland Hilft’ and ‘EXIT-Deutschland’, an initiative against the far right. The concept originated in the ‘Rechts gegen Rechts’ [right-wing against right-wing] campaign, which was founded by the Zentrum Demokratische Kultur (ZDK) gGmbH, against neo-Nazi marches. Without the consent or knowledge of the neo-Nazis that attended a march on 15 November 2014, sponsors donated 10 euros for every walked metre. In this way they collected 10,000 Euros to fight right-wing extremism. With the support of Facebook, ‘Hass Hilft’ started in

11 ‘Grimme Online Award 2017’; Schade, ‘*#ichbinhier*’.

2015 and is still active today. In this initiative, people call attention to certain hate posts or comment. 'Hass Hilft' then responds to the according post with a congratulation message, if the post fits the criteria: the post was chosen as an example of hate speech, and will therefore be used to donate one Euro to the group, the post attacked. For the moment the hate expressed on social media networks is very real, and I would not argue against the importance of systems and groups who are trying to fight, or at least contain it. From a feminist perspective, cyberspace has often been disputed as a second battleground, where the fights of our social realities are just extended to another platform. If we take a look at current events, this theory is hard to dismiss.

My personal advice is mainly shaped by the context of feminist activism in Germany. I began with campaigns against 'date coaches' or 'pick up artists' like Julian Blanc, who make a fortune with publishing videos, books, or giving seminars to men who would nowadays be called 'involuntary celibates' (incels). Men like Julien Blanc and his group Real Social Dynamics or Roosh V, give misogynist advice on how to intimidate women to make them submissive, or treat them badly to crush their self-esteem. During his tour in 2014, Blanc was forced to leave Australia, after his visa had been revoked due to his misogynist content, which could also be plainly called advice for rape.¹² His tour in Germany had not been cancelled, since, oddly enough, the German government, unlike the Australian government, did not see a way to intervene in this matter. Social Media helped us to organize protest very quickly, and was our main connection to our supporters. During the demonstration, some guys started filming us, and after a while my picture could be found online on incel websites in the 'rape' section, together with some basic information such as my email address, Facebook name and residential area. After that, I continued my work in the campaign *StopBildSexism*, which was founded by Kristina Lunz and started off as a sister campaign of *NoMorePage3*. *StopBildSexism* is a campaign against the daily sexism of Germany's (still) biggest selling tabloid newspaper, the *Bild Zeitung*. The campaign became larger, and in October 2015 Kristina Lunz, Sophia Becker, and I founded *Gender Equality Media e.V.*, our own organization against media sexism in Germany. *GEM* is currently working on studies on media sexism, creating feminist media, organizing feminist events and targeting sexism in German media on a daily basis, by contacting the journalists and responsible decision makers directly.¹³

12 Davey, 'US 'pick-up artist'.

13 Politicians and media personalities who directly support the patriarchy in Germany, and/or are unwilling to change sexist behavior, are collected on our page unfollowpatriarchy.com to make patriarchy visible and thus combatable.

During this time, my team and me experienced various forms of personal harassment as feminists online, since our work at *SBS/GEM* is mainly based online. We learned a great deal about online hate speech and trolls, but also about the role social media platforms themselves play in this scenario. These five rules are our basic procedure to counteract online hate.

Our rules for counteracting violence and trolls online

Always take screenshots

Either for further investigation or to show it to other people: Always take screenshots of the harassing messages or pictures you received in private or public threads, ideally before answering to them. Never delete anything, as embarrassing as the content might be. Just because you do not see it, does not mean that its existence is erased, after all.

Know your rights

For serious cases of cyber harassment, doxing and bullying, check the law in your country. Screenshot incidents, and report the perpetrator's behaviour to legal authorities. Taking things into your own hands is seldom a good idea when it comes to personal threats. Seeking revenge or fighting back in form of posting personal information of the harasser online, is a crime in itself almost in every country. If you want to do that as a political statement though, seek legal advice first.

Make your fights visible

Trolls seldom make the smartest decisions. More often than not, it suffices to look back into their accounts and just offer to send their (publicly posted) comments to their friends, family or workplace. I once experienced a case in which I sent the screenshot back to the troll, who had a real picture and his workplace listed. I told him that his boss would surely be very happy to see what he was up to at the weekend. The post was very quickly erased.

Seek allies – and the media

If it is not personal harassment but online vitriol you want to fight, it is smart to form alliances. To combat hate in the long run, I would recommend joining

an existing group, rather than to fight isolated on your own. If someone attacks you in a greater political context, seek public support. When you think it is newsworthy, contact the according groups or organizations who are active on this matter in the social media platforms. Journalists are the final option, when what happened is really outstanding and/or newsworthy.

If nothing helps: block, mute, report, repeat

Ultimately, if you cannot use the online hate for a political debate, or if the troll simply will not let go, the smartest move might just be to delete this account from your timeline. Blocking or muting certain accounts is sometimes the healthiest and most sustainable way to react to online hate. The only reason I would not block a harassing account, would be needing more evidence or screenshots for my case.

This set of rules is vital if you want to engage in social media activism, and function similarly to concepts like #ichbinhier, mainly through counter speech and forming alliances, which can sometimes even be fun. Concepts like Hass Hilft are also very popular, since it gives those involved a sense of control and empowerment. From a quick glance we seem to win the fight against trolls, ridiculing them and feeling good in our formed alliances. What we often fail to address is that projects like Hass Hilft are dependent on potent sponsors, and thus, ultimately, are playing into the hands of the system they so desperately are trying to change, as will be explained in the following section.¹⁴ If we do not address the issue where these forms of online hate take place, we will always stay defensive, which will ultimately change nothing at all.

Facebook is not your friend – online hate and capitalist interests

In 2012, Ohanian was sure that the Founding Fathers would see Reddit as the defendant of free speech in America. However, in a post from 2015, co-founder Huffman saw things quite differently. He stated, contrary to Ohanian, that ‘neither Ohanian nor he had created Reddit to be a bastion of free speech.’¹⁵ When the CEOs of Reddit announced, in August 2017, close to the date that the University of Virginia was overrun by white nationalists, that Reddit would expand its rules concerning the definition of hate speech,

¹⁴ hasshilft.de/rechts-gegen-rechts.de/.

¹⁵ Marantz, ‘Reddit and the Struggle’, p.65.

the outcry was enormous. Reddit had erased channels before, when they violated American law, or when the media attention became too big. Whereas before most channels operated in an undefined grey area concerning morals, for some the newly set rules declared the official death of free speech on Reddit. The opinion regarding free speech had changed; disenchantment seemed to set in for both the users and the founders. *The New Yorker* quotes a user, who argued that the only reason for the new bans was to attract advertisers: 'They don't actually want to change anything. It was, in fact, never about free speech, it was about money.'¹⁶ Social media networks seem to be quite inconsistent when it comes to speaking out for free speech or simply deleting unwanted content on their own terms.

Free speech and existence: Nontransparent algorithms

In January 2018 Twitter banned the then Green politician Jörg Rupp, after a tweet that – taken out of context – seemed racist. It was clear that this ban was a mistake, likely executed by a machine, since the tweet was followed by an explanation, and Rupp's account was in itself proof that the tweet was meant as a joke. Although he tried contacting Twitter repeatedly, nothing happened. He was astonished at how impossible it was to contact Twitter, he stated in an article on *netzpolitik.org*.¹⁷ While Rupp's account was never restored, it seems that the same rules do not apply to everyone. When Trump threatened North Korea in a tweet in September 2017, Twitter did not react at all. The algorithms of social media platforms are not transparent: Why a user is banned or deleted, why a tweet is erased or why a post is blocked, is sometimes hard to trace back. Julia Krüger, social scientist and journalist at *netzpolitik.org*, suggests that we need an extension of fundamental rights regarding social media platforms. She argues that if it is private companies that provide public spaces in which we exchange political views, they also have to be taken into accountability when it comes to who they let in. However, most people are already using these networks, and private companies will always be more likely to create more attractive platforms and apps for the user. We rely on platforms of private companies to communicate, leaving the power of who can speak, and when, in the hands of private investors.¹⁸

16 *The New Yorker*, 19 March 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/19>.

17 Reuter, 'Moderation nach Gutsherrenart'.

18 *Ibid.*; Krüger, 'Das Recht'.

Boys clubs/the value of hate

Social media networks are mainly media platforms which do not generate media, but use peoples' content for profit. Social Media networks are thus mainly looking for traffic, which equals profit. What is trending is good, initially regardless of its content. That is why sexist or racist comments or groups on Facebook, when kept at a (for Facebook) moderate level, spread as easily as fake news, and why Twitter's algorithm is apparently having such a hard time to detect and erase misogynist slurs,¹⁹ or anti-Muslim videos retweeted by Trump,²⁰ while deliberately erasing accounts of less famous people. Sexism and racism do indeed sell, not only to people, but to advertisers as well.

In the case of Facebook, a *New York Times* article states that 'a report from ProPublica, a non-profit news site, revealed that Facebook enabled advertisers to seek out self-described 'Jew haters' and other anti-Semitic topics.'²¹ Facebook is not only making money off hate from users, but is also helping advertisers to make profit from the active hate community. To gain more profit, Facebook is promoting hateful content, or helping advertisers to find the right hate group.

However, material that is too extreme has still to be taken out of the mainstream feed. Facebook and Twitter are interested in our well-being insofar as this means making us spending more time on their platforms. The reason extreme rape or violence are sometimes erased from these platforms is not out of goodwill, but because it would repel most people to stay online longer. For the task of erasing this content, Facebook, like many others, uses low wage workers. In 2014 Facebook outsourced a lot of its moderators to the Philippines who often quit after some months, due to the traumatizing material they have to deal with. After some time, the workers exhibited symptoms of PTSD, as a *Wired* article mentions.²² In 2017 Facebook opened its first content moderation office in Berlin, from where most of the moderation of the European traffic takes place. The location might have changed, the problem remains the same; one woman stated: 'I personally did not have much faith in humankind beforehand, and now I virtually do not have any.'²³

19 Lomas, 'UK Study'.

20 Larson, 'Twitter'.

21 Maheshwari and Stevenson, 'Google'.

22 Ibid.; Chen, 'The Laborers'; Kemp, 'Facebook'.

23 Sokolow, 'No More Faith in Humanity'.

Apart from the financial aspect mentioned above, the origins of social media platforms need to be discussed as well. The online sexism and racism minority groups and women face today, has a lot to do with the corporations within which the harassment takes place. Facebook's now infamous origin cannot be repeated enough: it was a frat boys' rating system of female students on campus, not a campus page to connect with one's friends. Reddit had subreddit channels named r/ChokeABitch, and Twitter favoured far right tweets on many occasions, bending the rules for Trump, while deleting politically critical voices. Ultimately, social media platforms are from their origin, to the way they function, a culmination of our white, patriarchal, racist and sexist elite, which dominates the online market.

The first section of advice concerned itself with the defence; how to cope with hate speech and violence when we are using these platforms. The second section is not so much advice on how to cope with hate as it discusses how we at Gender Equality Media view our relation to social media networks. Ultimately, the question is not whether to pick a fight as a private person or as an activist online, but in which relation you view yourself and your activist work in this context. What we try, although we are primarily an online based campaign, is to not let social media networks become too dominant in our everyday lives.

Self-care and perspective

Pick your fights wisely

Be aware of what you want to achieve: The most you will obtain from a public fight is informing other people who will read the thread. It will seldom be the case that you will convince a troll. We are not saying that it is not important or not worth it to express your opinion. However, consider in which context it happens, and if it is worth it to fight on your own, or if you can outsource it to programmes fighting hate speech. As we have seen, online emotions affect you whether you want them to or not, and you should learn to save your energy when a fight is not necessary.

Tell your own story

Studies show that lies spread fast and that it is almost impossible to correct them. Most political trolls know that, and far right extremists don't care if you correct fake news afterwards. It has been proven to circulate

uninhibited in their bubble, and that is all what they wanted to achieve in the first place.²⁴ Instead of spending all our energy on trying to correct this misinformation, we would rather focus on creating content and campaigns which tell our own story, and inform the public on the things we consider to be important, rather than staying the commentators on the narrative the enemy has chosen to tell.

Have a squad!

Even if it seems hard because of the (assumed) humiliating content, or the hurtful words, always confide in someone when a bad feeling won't let go. In cases where you are being threatened, I have already mentioned that you should tell another person and go together to the police. When it comes to hate speech and criticism though, people still feel hesitant to confide in others. Acknowledge your feelings, regardless of what caused them. We often screenshot the situation and share it in our group chats. We assure you that in many cases this takes half the weight of it.

Some anti-capitalist feminist perspectives

Facebook and Twitter are a necessary (though often fun) evil for online activism. Even so, you should distance yourself from these platforms as much as possible. These platforms are based on capitalist, white patriarchal, sexist, and racist ideas. In the end there is no way to 'correct' them, other than by supporting fair alternatives. As a group, but also regarding our interaction with followers, we try to outsource our communication to alternatives like Signal or Threema and not feed these platforms with more content than necessary.

Define your own value

Whether as an individual or as a group – we rely way too much on self-assurance through acknowledgment on forms of likes or retweets in these networks. In activism we have seen people losing track of what is important: yes, your speech was not that popular online, your riot did not resonate as expected. So what? If you do not free yourself of this social media evaluation system, emotionally and strategically, your work and relevance will suffer.

24 Vosoughi et al., 'The Spread'.

Be critical of criticism

In our experience, most hate and unconstructive criticism we encountered came from people who did not have any alternative to offer themselves. Your ideas, your actions, your position will never be enough for some. Constructive criticism, on the other hand, always contributes something to the movement or the idea, instead of just boycotting and hurting what is already there. Someone who wants change as well, will not want to break you. Most unconstructive criticism or hate speech however, does not offer any better solution, and is mostly trying to discourage already existing initiatives. People feel better when they can say that something is not (good) enough, because in their minds it shifts the conversation away from them, and their guilt of doing nothing at all. There are people who want to change something, and people who want to be always right. If you belong to the first, accept that making mistakes is part of the deal. Always being right is reserved to the ones who do nothing at all.

As a final note, if we want to fight online hate, we will not only need to reconsider how we evaluate emotions in comparison to facts. If we do not address the root of the problem, that we are talking about racist and sexist platforms, based in a white patriarchal, capitalist tech industry, we will always stay on the defence, rather than actually changing the narrative. Fighting online hate is ultimately linked to the basic fight against the capitalist, sexist, racist, and classist roots of our Western society. In the long run we will have to talk about strategies to free our online communication from the influence of private companies, while focusing on the issue of surveillance capitalism. Until then, we should definitely not lose sight of effective strategies to combat online hate strategically.

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