

# Feminism 2.0

Jo Middleton explores what the internet means for feminist activism

There is no escaping the fact that we are living in a cyber world – we shop online, chat online, bank online – we can even have cybersex should we want to – and similarly the internet provides us with a new medium for feminist activism. But how has activism benefited from this new wave of ‘cyberfeminism’? Does this global communication network actually enable real action or are the chat rooms just that – all talk?

Connectivity has always been at the very heart of feminism – women connecting with women in local groups, the personal connecting to the political. Previously however women’s connections have been restricted, not just by geographical barriers but also by the invisible barriers of race, religion, sexuality, class – all the things that can make it more difficult to make that first contact with somebody.

In this era of cyberfeminism however, we are talking connectivity on a whole new scale. The internet has given women access to channels of communication the breadth and speed of which we could scarcely have imagined thirty years ago. With this has come the opportunity for connecting

and engaging with people in a way that would not otherwise be possible. People meet online as minds first, thus enabling non-judgemental communication across cultures between people of very diverse social groups. Women can choose to connect with others on the basis of shared interests and experiences rather than just a shared postcode, or groups thrown together by social convention.

Along with this vast communication network comes the opportunity to share information on previously unheard of scales, bringing global resources to local communities. The internet makes it possible to promote campaigns at all levels, from your local town to large international communities. The speed at which projects and conversations can evolve online gives an immediacy and excitement to projects that is not often possible through more traditional media. A sense of urgency and spontaneity can be produced, snowballing action in a very short space of time.

For example, recently a thread was posted on Mumsnet.com with a link to the Baby Milk Action website asking people to

support the charity. Baby Milk Action is part of the International Baby Food Action Network and campaigns to protect women’s rights to informed choices about infant feeding. Within a week, nearly 200 people had replied to the original message, having visited the site and signed an on line petition to help protect mothers and infants in the Philippines from the unethical marketing of baby milks. This kind of immediate and mass response would simply not be possible without the internet.

This example also demonstrates an important point about target audiences. Some people question the use of the internet as a feminist tool on the grounds that only existing activists would be likely to visit a feminist website. Mumsnet however, principally a parenting forum, is accessed by thousands of women everyday who would not necessarily call themselves feminists, yet through their

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discussions with other mums they become inspired to take action about an essentially feminist issue.

Another benefit of online feminism is that it engages traditionally hard-to-reach groups. It is dominated by young women – a demographic that has traditionally been assumed to be less interested in feminism and taking action. The internet challenges the negative stereotyping often associated with the f-word – today’s online feminists are feisty, powerful grrrls who certainly don’t mince their words and who are inspiring role models for the emerging

generations of young feminists.

So what about blogging and social networking sites like Myspace, Facebook and Bebo? Although blogging may have a limited usefulness in terms of influencing policy or bringing about changes in legislation, it does serve a purpose by initiating debate and challenging people’s ideas about gender. Even just getting people to think more deeply about an issue is an important part of activism. Finn Mackay, the woman behind the London Feminist Network, believes that activism does not always have to mean direct on-the-streets action: “No-one should be made to feel less of a feminist or less of a radical because of their type of resistance. You’re an activist if you change people’s minds. That’s what politics is, it’s our everyday lives” (from *The F Word*).

Forums, blogs and webzines are all great tools for enabling personal creativity. Think back to the early part of the twentieth century and the *Woman’s Dreadnought*, Sylvia Pankhurst’s newspaper. Now forward all the way through to the zine culture of the 1990s – we can see that feminism has always inspired lively debate and creative, original writing. The difference then was that publications stayed mainly local – the internet provides the ideal

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medium for creative activism, but with the added benefit that it can be read by thousands of people worldwide.

Of course any cyberculture is only as effective as the people that contribute to it. At its best it enables direct action and interaction, bypassing the traditional male-dominated





media and its associated gatekeepers. At its worst, it can sometimes feel like electronic carpet bombing. There is so much knowledge and opinion out there that we can often find ourselves victims of information overload. It is very easy to become swamped in information, to the point where it is almost impossible to focus on any one particular issue. When this happens, you can find yourself in a situation where nothing ever gets done, as there is simply too much vying for attention. Being choosy about the sites you visit and the emails you sign up for can go some way to combating this. Being a regular and active visitor of a site you trust is much more effective than darting between hundreds of different Myspace pages.

The other danger of the internet is that the more connected you become to the virtual world – websites, chat rooms and forums – the easier it is to become disconnected from the ‘real’ world, from face-to-face communication and from active participation in the local



community. Cyberfeminism should not be an excuse for not taking real-world action – it is only a part of a whole range of approaches, including magazines, books and of course local face-to-face contact and action. US feminist electronica band Le Tigre have even recorded a song called “Get off the internet (I’ll meet you in the street)”.

Gill Court is Editor of Subtext, a UK feminism, politics and culture magazine. I asked Gill how she saw the role of the internet in promoting activism and why she chose to go offline with Subtext. “I think the internet is really effective in spreading the word as so many people nowadays turn to the net as their first port of call, as a starting point for getting involved in activism. Blogs and webzines are a great way to find out about news that would go unreported elsewhere, and personal blogs that are also feminist are a great way of making feminism real and personal rather than the stereotype of man haters. I decided to go for a traditional printed format” Gill explained “so Subtext would be something you could hold in your hand, read on the train or in the bath or give to a friend. I think in print it is possibly more accessible to an audience that might not otherwise search for feminist blog sites.”

The internet is undeniably a useful tool for feminist activism. It offers a platform for communication and information-sharing on a global scale between women who

## Websites to visit

Visit the Fawcett website for a list of some of our favourite e-campaigning resources, and browse our links section.

### UK sites

[www.thefword.org.uk](http://www.thefword.org.uk) – The F Word is a webzine for contemporary feminists. It “exists to help encourage a new sense of community among UK feminists and to show the doubters that feminism still exists here, today, now.” It is full of features, news and reviews and particularly welcomes contributions from younger women and girls.

[www.uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/london3rdwave/](http://www.uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/london3rdwave/) – London3rdWave is an email group that grew out of the F Word website. The email list is used for news and discussion but the group also meet regularly.

[www.uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/londonfeministnetwork/](http://www.uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/londonfeministnetwork/) – The London Feminist Network is a women only discussion and activism group that organises many of its own campaigns including the annual Reclaim the Night march through London.

[www.bushtelegraph.uk.com](http://www.bushtelegraph.uk.com) – The Bush Telegraph is an online feminist activist resource. It includes an action page with plenty of ideas for when you know you want to do something, but you’re just not sure what!

[www.any-body.org](http://www.any-body.org) – International site with ideas and resources for challenging the pressure of body image on women.

[www.object.org.uk](http://www.object.org.uk) – Object challenges the sex object culture and campaigns against the objectification of women, particularly with regards to lad’s mags. The site includes a campaigns page with lots of opportunities to engage in some direct action.

[www.mumsnet.com](http://www.mumsnet.com) – Large and varied forum for parents to share information, advice and support.

### US sites

[www.girlistic.com](http://www.girlistic.com) – describes itself as “the ultimate feminist resource” the site includes a downloadable magazine, loads of resources, a shop and a large forum.

[www.feministing.com](http://www.feministing.com) – a platform for comment and analyse. Aimed at giving young women “the opportunity to speak in their own behalf on issues that effect their lives and futures”.

[www.feminist.com](http://www.feminist.com) – A well established, long running activist community and information portal. Set up to encourage and enable grassroots activism, Feminist.com’s motto is “Awareness, Education, Activism and Empowerment”.

would otherwise never get to meet and engages groups of women who might not normally identify themselves as feminists or see women’s issues as something of relevance to them.

It is important however that we do not allow ourselves to become immersed in technology at the expense of

direct local action. The whole essence of activism is to encourage engagement in the world around us, not a detachment from it. As long as we recognise online communication and activism as just a part of a package then the internet is likely to play an important role in the promotion of feminist activism for many years to come. **Stop**