FEMINIST SOCIAL MEDIA PRAXIS

Jodi Nelson is a filmmaker, actor and musician. She is currently completing a PhD inCreative and Critical Practice at the University of Sussex. This week, we interviewed Jodi about her research project that explores contemporary feminism through digital networks.

re_activism:What do you think the 21st century feminist looks likes?

This is a very provocative question, because no one answer would be sufficient. It was exactly why I posed this question to my film subjects, both live and online. I thought with the pervasiveness of the online and social community crossing boarders, it would be an interesting topic to tackle. As we are a global society now, and social media allows us to communicate around the world 24/7, where those gender gaps, social morals and cultural biases would most definitely be at odds depending on who you asked and in which part of the world they hailed. This question allowed me to open up a broader topic surrounding feminism today, and specifically speak to those who are using online media as a means to express, share, comment and spread feminist agendas. Online activism is an endemic subject within itself with both pros and cons in this respect. But with the ideology of feminism being subject of a 21ˢᵗ century movement, I thought it was a very necessary subject given our past movements in the first, second and third wave. I was curious as to what, if any, 'wave' we would be considered in now – or if we were in a wave at all? Specifically, I wanted to know what perceptions there were of a feminist today – and whether they [subjects] were one or not and how ideas were shaped?

Most all the subjects were very aware of the suffragettes and the third wave feminists. They knew who some of its champions were and what they stood for. But most of the subjects were keen to point out that a 21ˢᵗ century feminist could be anybody. That feminists are no longer defined by race, gender or beliefs. Of course this is utopian thinking. But it was evident of a new generation of feminists being subjected to other points of views and different cultural and social agendas outside their own communities because of their connections within social media.

re_activism:Tell us a bit about your latest film and the production process.

'What does a 21st Century Feminist Look Like?' was an online film project, whereby I empowered my online communities in Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube to contribute to the narrative thread of the film. The fact that I was a 'single girl in a virtual world' designated the power of a single voice amongst a vast thread of people known and unknown who would contribute to a topic of my choosing.

The process was very interesting, difficult, insightful, frustrating and abundant all at the same time. Meaning, there was a giant learning curve in producing a project in this way and many unforeseen obstacles, but also celebratory moments. I had no budget, no crew and shot the film entirely using my Flip Camera and my mobile camera phone. Additionally, I re-framed recycled content found through

sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook and Google to enable me to piece together a narrative from many collected sources.

When I began the project, I didn't have a narrative. To the point, I had an idea, a focus, and a topic. But I had no roadmap for what those chapters were going to be. So instead, I decided I would start with questions posed to my live subjects and online community. Questions I myself had as a feminist. Curious beyond my own general knowledge, I didn't want to weigh it down with academic rhetoric, so I sought out expert subjects at a local University in Tennessee, live subjects and online collaborators. I decided to create a sort of 'road movie' both in reality and online while I travelled across the United States. I wanted to vary my experience through place and time, while staying connected to my online communities as I travelled. Within each new city/state, question posed, call to action or online submission, a new idea was thrust forward – and before long I had over ten hours of footage and multiple angles in which I could explore in the postproduction process. What evolved was an expansive narrative that would eventually be the finished film.

Along with the film, I also kept a blog where I posted podcasts, as well as created a Facebook group and Twitter feed specifically for the film project. The podcasts evolved as the process moved forward. In this platform, I not only created content I felt might end up within the film itself, but would also be interesting to those who may be following the film's journey as well. Then if they wanted to contribute, they would be able to do that by following, sharing, liking and commenting within the online community.

What was really interesting about the project, was that out of a chaotic, non-linear process, came a cohesive narrative that really captured what I wanted to say. I drove the narrative by posing questions and framing the discussion, but it was the community, which provided insight and direction. It was a creative process that at times was exhilarating, but at the same time could be quite frustrating, because I wasn't in control of the process the entire time.

re_activism:How do you think digital media and social media praxis is shaping relationships within the feminist movement?

I feel the process of making this film project and case study puts its stamp on the shaping of these relationships between the subject of social media and feminism. In the past feminists had to be on the streets to make their voices heard. Now feminists can use social media to express, share and be heard. Who is listening? Well, that is another discussion altogether. But digital media does do its best to be a proponent and a voice for the unknown. Meaning, feminists no longer have to have large amounts of money, community, place or time to be able to express their views, or petition, or champion a cause. Social media praxis gives the subject and its new champions a venue or a vehicle, if you will, for feminists and non-feminists to be exposed to daily discourse of the rights and wrongs within their own locale, or around the world. People can choose to turn it on or turn it off, but one thing that is different than before, is that we are getting our information from our peers. Organizations can skew ideology for personal agenda and favor. In a system of distrust, social media allows communities

to surround themselves with people they like and trust. Therefore, when news is shared, it is perhaps more valid, then listening to it on the radio or on the news because of where it came from.

I also think that social media is a perfect vehicle for women, who can be held back in public places. Specifically what comes to mind are the women in the Middle East whose social and religious culture might perhaps prohibit them from expressing ideas not held in public favor. There have been many blogs from that region where women are expressing ideas of feminism in the basic sense – just having access to school, jobs, and careers outside of their narrow social roles. This is a huge movement and these platforms have been an expansive agent for change. I think it will continue to grow and expand as more and more people take advantage of the social media platform and utilize it in creative ways.

re_activism:Is a plurality of voices on feminism now being heard online?

To a certain degree yes. I think for the countries where Internet is being monitored, or prohibited, then of course these feminists are not allowed to express their ideas in a public forum. That doesn't mean they aren't sharing it amongst their own communities. But in the public sphere so far as the social media is concerned, yes I do believe there are a plurality of voices being expressed and heard. I have found a tremendous variety of women and men who are feminists expressing their voices through a multitude of social media platforms. And while they don't all agree to the specifics of what feminism is they do agree mostly in that it is about equality. It's that measure of equality, however, that is a bit fuzzy. The traditional framework of feminism has been established through its earlier movements. But those images of the burning bras and anti-men movements unfortunately still shade the truth of what the feminist movement is about. Dr. Cajka, who speaks in my film, states that in the beginning women didn't want to be chattel, they wanted to own property. Then they wanted control over their bodies, and birth control. Then it was equality amongst the sexes, job equality and equal pay. Today, we are still fighting for these same rights. And while some of these may be easier to accept and be obtained, there is still great inequality today in every place in the world. Sometimes it feels as if we have achieved everything feminism set out to conquer, but the truth is there will always be work for us to do. Social media provides a platform for the plurality of voices to express themselves and continue the feminist agenda. New ideologies, as well as, the trusted establishment are there side by side for everyone to see. It's now about choice. And those choices are something that can be identified within a shared online community or influenced by a celebrity or even an everyday person posting on YouTube.

re_activism:What's next for you, the project and digital feminism?

My research and case study in this sense are completed. But I want to move the film and its content into a more transmedia sphere. Meaning, there are many other media platforms that my film can exist upon. Such as a coloring book for youth, a feminist traveling e-book, a CD of feminist road songs, etc. The film is now out online for viewers to see. But I want to take that content and put it on a new platform, StoryPlanet, which will allow for a variety of narrative structures for the content to be housed. There is a lot of footage remaining that didn't make it into the final cut of the film and I would like it to

see the light of day. These clips can be further utilized to expand the discussion and be housed on media outside of its completed form and make new connections within the social media sphere.

I think beyond this initial film, the entire experience has given me the opportunity to see it is possible to create outside the traditional box. It has opened up possibilities within those cheap technologies available, online platform creation and collaboration with subjects outside of the realm of traditional documentary folds. The reflective aspect of the film and research has provided a much denser context of the subject than I had envisioned at the beginning of its conception. Knowing this has enabled me to expand my creative process and utilize other tools that are now available to me and to the online publics for further creative projects. And this is very exciting.

It is my hope that in a way, my film project not only inspires those who collaborated in its making, but that it becomes part of the collective discourse of online feminism, which continues to evolve and expand.