

ISSUE NO. 15

Online Activism: Centering Marginalized Voices in Activist Work

Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed

Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed

Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications

The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

This article contextualizes feminist activism within Northern Ghana, highlighting the complexities of activism in this society. I argue that although social media provides space for the articulation of marginalized voices, it is imperative to examine how cultural capital and an intimate knowledge of power dynamics within a socio-cultural context shapes successful activist work. Therefore, online activism when complemented by activist work offline, can be used to address injustices towards marginalized people. I contextualize the case within a religiously conservative society, emphasizing the role that an activist's positionality can play in facilitating activist work. Throughout the article, I deconstruct activism, shedding light on the evolution and malleability of activism depending on whether or not activist work leads to concrete results. Therefore, I draw on critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to contextualize activist work that I engaged in, together with non-activist identifying people and feminist allies to seek justice for a woman who was front and center in our quest to address sexism publicly directed at her.

Keywords: allyship, feminism, Ghana, online activism, social media, technological determinism, digital public shaming

Social movements have been widely discussed in feminist research and within the context of Africa: they have been utilized to propel political revolutions (Olorunnisola

and Martin 2013), challenge educational access (Pillay 2016), examine the effects of terrorism on female education (Rashid and Muhammad 2015) and challenge imperialism. The success of many of these movements has been attributed to the mobilization of the power of social media and to access to a digital public sphere. While there has been extensive discussion on the complementary role that social media activism has played in activist organizing (Brock 2018, Pillay 2016), it is important to study the ways in which individuals utilize social media to complement activist work that addresses injustices targeted at them (Srinivasan 2013). It is against this background that I contextualize activist work that I engaged in, together with non-activist identifying people and feminist allies, to seek justice for a woman who was front and center in our quest to address sexism publicly directed at her.

I argue in this article that although social media may provide space for the articulation of marginalized voices, it is imperative to examine how cultural capital and an intimate knowledge of power dynamics within a socio-cultural context shapes successful activist work.

Conceptual and Analytical Framework

The rapid growth of new media invokes an examination of the ways in which culture, identity and representation unfold on new media platforms. While it is imperative to acknowledge the affordances of new media technology, it is equally important to examine the manifestation of culture on new media platforms and how they have shaped online and offline activism (Barassi 2013, Srinivasan 2013, Pillay 2016). I draw on André Brock's (2012) critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) framework to examine the intricacies of social movements in the digital public sphere. CTDA "formulates technology as cultural representations and social structures in order to simultaneously interrogate culture and technology as intertwined concepts" (Brock 2018, 1012). Through methods including participant observation (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) and CTDA, the relationship between context, culture, identity politics, cultural capital and how they interact with one another in the digital and physical worlds is highlighted (Srinivasan 2013). In an attempt to avoid a technological determinism that views technology as external to our social realm, I deconstruct digital activism through a CTDA approach by highlighting my positionality as an activist-scholar. Thus, the goal is to demonstrate the simultaneity of activism in the public sphere based on the experiences of a survivor of verbal abuse and slut-shaming and the ways in which this activism unfolded. The CTDA framework opens ways to parse out online activism through a critical deconstruction of the activities of the interlocutors

and actors involved in this issue because it “provides a holistic analysis of the interactions between technology, cultural ideology, and technology practice” (Brock 2018, 1013).

Within this framework, it is imperative to examine the intricacies of technology use by taking into consideration the actors involved, the cultural capital they possess (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017), their technological literacy skills, and the relationships between old and new media (Srinivasan 2013). It is also important to note that new media use disrupts notions of binaries between old and new technology—online and offline affordances among others—as these binaries do not reflect the complexities of the relationships between digital technology and social movements in the physical world (Brock 2012, Srinivasan 2013, Pillay 2016).

Contextualizing Sadia’s Experience of Slut-shaming

I come to this activist work as a Ghanaian-born, class-straddling, Tamale native with tons of cultural capital on my social media due to my intricate knowledge of social media dynamics. In this article, my use of cultural capital refers to the ways in which a person’s education, social network, social media persona, self-concept and self-presentation equip them with power and elevate them in the digital media hierarchy (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). In this context, cultural capital does not necessarily lead to class mobility but positions the individual as an opinion leader on specific topics (Brock 2012).

In September 2017, I stumbled onto a post by Sadia, a Facebook friend in Ghana, complaining about being slut-shamed by a male radio presenter for refusing his romantic advances. I sent her a private message to sympathize with her and to offer my help. I quickly learned that Sadia (a nurse) was interested in pursuing the issue further to salvage her reputation. Sadia was deeply offended because DJ Tell (a popular DJ in Tamale, the Northern Region’s capital) had called her “a local sex worker” on Facebook and threatened her with revenge porn for refusing his romantic advances.

In a highly religious Muslim society like the Northern Region where the highest number of Ghanaian Muslims are concentrated (Ghana Statistical Service 2012), values on sexual morality are drawn from religious mandates. These sexual morality values that disproportionately focus on the female body dictate that a woman’s morality heavily hinges on her body, and calling a woman “a local sex worker” and threatening her with

revenge porn is one of the most offensive forms of psychological abuse toward women. Sadia's decision to pursue justice challenges the tendency of white feminism to essentialize the lived experience and agency of women in the Global South. Here, white feminism usually freezes marginalized women in the Global South within a framework that views them as perpetual victims who need a (white) western savior (Mohanty 2003). While feminist thinkers like Mohanty (2003) have critiqued scholarly work which de-contextualizes the lived experiences of marginalized women, Sadia's position complicates the issue of voice and agency in this socio-cultural context. Sadia understands the implications of this verbal abuse and then proceeds to reclaim her worth by denying DJ Tell the opportunity to threaten her.

Sadia took the first step to assert her agency by making a Facebook post to call DJ Tell out for his verbal abuse towards her. She publicly shamed her abuser by sharing on her Facebook page screenshots of her WhatsApp conversations with him that showed that he had been unsuccessfully pursuing a romantic relationship with her. Although some Facebook friends (usually men) entreated Sadia to ignore the abuse from DJ Tell, be the bigger person and proceed as if nothing had happened, Sadia refused and instead invited the support of allies to secure justice for herself. Sadia's refusal to be silent was an affront on the patriarchy and went against all the prescribed codes of conduct of a Muslim woman in this largely patriarchal community.

Online Activist Strategies Employed

Together with friends, sympathizers and feminist allies, we drew attention to DJ Tell's targeted misogynistic abuse of Sadia while drawing on a variety of contextualized strategies to amplify Sadia's voice. We endeavored to write with her by tagging her in the numerous Facebook posts we published while checking in with her about the progress made so far. Sadia also tagged us with updates on the issue that we made available on our Facebook timelines.

By writing with Sadia, we utilized a variety of strategies which included sharing her own words through her tagging of us on her Facebook posts, amplifying her voice by using our own to raise awareness about the issue while tagging opinion leaders to help spread the reach of the issue, and sharing with our networks updates which Sadia had shared with us in private conversations and had given us permission to share on our Facebook timelines.

One of the many strategies we employed to draw attention to the issue was through publicly shaming DJ Tell. We discussed the DJ's history of using inflammatory language on his live programs and presented evidence to support why he needed to be stopped. In many African societies, songs have been composed to publicly shame social deviants into conformity (Agozino 2017, Gabrosky 2013). Although this strategy has waned in efficacy with changing times, we found it to be a useful tool for drawing attention to DJ Tell's behavior. Interestingly, digital public shaming, which has been utilized to shame non-conforming marginalized people into conforming to societal norms, has proved useful for individuals to shame corporations into addressing the negative experiences of consumers or clients of these corporations (Gallardo 2017). We used digital public shaming in this context to rebuke DJ Tell for his abusive behavior, create awareness about the issue and make the DJ face the consequences of his actions.

In this digital public shaming, we identified the importance of male allyship and used it to support our cause. This strategy proved effective since we were able to draw the attention of a nationally known media figure, Abdul Hayi Moomen, who had contacts at the National Media Commission (Ghana's media regulatory body) to add his voice to our digital protest. As soon as he began to post about the issue, we began to get some added traction as our cause was legitimized by a known male figure. His allyship together with Umar Mohammed's (a male scholar) work on a blog post (Mohammed 2017) about the issue, which I published on a regional blog I run, propelled our digital activist work. Indeed, male allyship in this digital protest was a critical tool for legitimizing our cause in a deeply patriarchal society because feminist movements run by women have been reduced in the public sphere to man-hating projects. Therefore, male allies are perceived to bring legitimacy to feminist activism because mainstream audiences generally perceive men as "reasonable" voices whereas female activists are not. With the knowledge that social media norms and conventions are shaped by the socio-cultural context in which they are used (Brock 2018, Pillay 2016, Srinivasan 2013), we courted male allyship to support our activism on social media.

In contemporary society, social media is intricately connected with social movements; therefore, social media is a part of activism rather than just a tool (Barassi 2013, Brock 2012, Meuleman and Boushel 2014). We learned quickly that our online activist work would have been just "talk" if it had not been complemented simultaneously by action offline. Sadia ultimately filed a complaint at the police station which led to the arrest of DJ Tell on the charges of possession of nude photos and threatening revenge porn. Indeed, the charges and arrest were the highlight of the activist work since they

demonstrated the results of the work we had been doing online. This action taken offline was possible because Sadia, who was relentless in her pursuit of justice, was an agentive Muslim female professional who utilized her cultural capital and her knowledge of patriarchal power dynamics to seek justice for herself. Sadia's willingness to file a complaint with the police-for what many would describe as a trivial matter, knowing the consequences of what that would have on her social life and image-was refreshingly non-conforming and anti-patriarchal.

Resistance to Our Online Activism

When we drew attention to the verbal abuse DJ Tell directed at Sadia, many anti-feminists tagged the issue as a feminist man-hating project intended to destroy DJ Tell's career. Most of the resistance came from male friends and associates of DJ Tell, many of whom did not think that his behavior was improper. These anti-feminists believed that we engaged in activism to serve our individual personal (feminist) agendas rather than support Sadia. Even though Sadia published several posts on her Facebook timeline calling attention to DJ Tell's behavior and asking for justice, these anti-feminists framed her as a passive victim whose unfortunate situation was being exploited by feminists like me and others to support their anti-patriarchal agendas.

While we got a lot of resistance from mostly men in Tamale's media industry who thought we were trying to "bring a good man down," our intimate knowledge of the social media scene; our knowledge of which media industry allies would amplify Sadia's voice and what localized public shaming strategies to employ; and the importance of male allyship in a society where cisgender, heterosexual men enjoy tremendous social status and their voices carry heavier weight than all others were extremely useful to the success of this digital protest.

The Results of Our Activist Work

Our activist work eventually led to our gaining support from a professional organization of health workers (of which Sadia was a member), who released a press statement demanding an apology and a retraction from DJ Tell for insulting Sadia and the profession. All this online work was instrumental and complementary to subsequent actions that Sadia took to file an official complaint at the police station. In this case, the online support Sadia got from me and others facilitated her decision on what next steps to take to secure justice for herself. With the support of the online

community, she weighed the options available to her and made a series of decisions following the abuse.

Although we made calls for DJ Tell to be suspended and subsequently fired, getting him arrested and having him issue a public apology on Facebook and on TV was a victory many onlookers were sure we would not win given that many people including public officials constantly get away with sexist and homophobic remarks with their jobs intact. Here, the media ecology demonstrates the relationships and interactions between old and new media (Srinivasan 2013) although most of the discussions about the issue happened on new media (Facebook). This outcome demonstrates that in a deeply conservative, patriarchal society, some women are willing to risk damaging their social reputations to fight sexism publicly regardless of the consequences. Deviating from social norms in such an open and uncompromising manner usually comes with material consequences like being shunned by the mainstream or being labelled as a difficult woman, which does not augur well for an unmarried woman. To avoid being punished by society based on these conventions, women are encouraged to leave all injustices done to them unquestioned so as to fit into society's notions of a "good woman" who "knows her place." We held the outcome of this activist work up as a warning to all that although many people got away with everyday sexism, there could be consequences which could include getting arrested and charged for the crimes committed.

This article therefore acknowledges that although social media presents activists with affordances to simultaneously mobilize online to supplement work offline (Brock 2012, Srinivasan 2013, Pillay 2016), individuals who experience injustice can utilize their cultural capital and contextualized knowledge to identify allies who are willing to support them in their fight for justice. In this society where there is the consensus that talk alone does not produce results, activism becomes activism when there are results to show for it; in this case, an arrest of and a public apology from the perpetrator. In a society where the news cycle is ephemeral, when online activism is not complemented by offline work, it dies in the news cycle and becomes "just talk." Also, for online activism to gain traction, it cannot be just a one-woman job: it requires several heads to work relentlessly and post meaningfully but excessively to get the attention needed from the relevant power players (Srinivasan 2013).

By centering Sadia in the narratives surrounding our online activism, our cause for justice was legitimate because we were not activists trapped in an echo chamber

forcing a victimized woman to fight for justice, but we were working closely with a survivor of slut-shaming who would stop at nothing until she got justice for being verbally and psychologically abused. Radical dissent-deviating from social norms that reinscribe dominant ideology-is needed in activism to challenge the status quo and bring change to society (Pillay 2016). Sadia's exercise of radical dissent by going against mainstream notions of how she should conduct herself, her resistance to dominant ideology and her assertiveness, demonstrates the complexities surrounding many Ghanaian women's negotiation and navigation of a sexist heteropatriarchy.

Ultimately, our collective efforts led to the most desirable results we could get under the circumstances even though the case was later settled out of court by the families of both parties. Sadia's knowledge of which supporters and allies to recruit, what shaming strategies to use and how to frame her narrative demonstrates that she was very much aware of the cultural capital she wielded online and knew how to use it to address the abuse directed at her.

This article demonstrates that although social media can be a space for amplifying marginalized voices, it is important to take a look at the ways in which cultural capital and an extensive knowledge of power politics in a particular context can impact successful activist work. This way, contextualizing media technology within the society that it is used (Barassi 2013, Brock 2018, Brock 2012, Meuleman and Boushel 2014) means that the most effective strategies are employed in online activism.

Conclusion

Although it is imperative to take note of technological determinism (the naïve assumption that social and new media dramatically bring about social change without considering contextual factors and grunt work done in the physical world); within discussions on social movements in online spaces, it is equally important to take note of the physical, psychological and emotional labor that goes into online activism as digital protests, like protests in the physical world, can stretch on for days and sometimes weeks. Beyond trying to amplify marginalized voices and seek justice for the oppressed, the level of resistance and trolling that activists may face online calls for critical attention to radical self-care and psychological (re)adjustments before, during and after online activist work.

In this study, Sadia and her supporters used online tools in activism, paying attention to the ways in which the strategies they employed could produce fruitful results while

being cognizant of the socio-cultural context within which they were operating. Future research may build on this study by examining the ways in which African activists consciously use online tools to support their activist work by strategically recruiting opinion leaders who are allies and drawing on the cultural capital available to them in the digital public sphere.

Acknowledgment

I am thankful to Sadia for her voice and courage to pursue justice for herself. I'm also thankful to Ewurama Attoh, Sassygurl Jaylo and all the supporters and allies for the work they put into facilitating justice for Sadia.

I am thankful to nbieli, Anima Adjepong, for their guidance on this project.

References

Agozino, Biko. 2017. "Editorial: Critical perspectives on deviance and social control in rural Africa." *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies: AJCJS*, 10, no. 1: 1

Barassi, Veronica. 2013. "Ethnographic Cartographies: Social Movements, Alternative Media and the Spaces of Networks." *Social Movement Studies* 12, no. 1: 48-62.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.65095>

Brock, André. 2018. "Critical technocultural discourse analysis." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3: 1012-1030. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1177/146144481667753>

Brock, André. 2012. "From the blackhand side: Twitter as a cultural conversation." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4: 529-549.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.73214>

Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2011. "Autoethnography: An overview." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (138): 273-290

Gallardo, Kristine L. 2017. "Taming the internet pitchfork mob: Online public shaming, the viral media age, and the communications decency act." *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law* 19, no. 3: 721

- Ghana Statistical Service. 2012. "2010 Population and Housing Census: Summary Report of Final Results." Accessed on June 8, 2018.
http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/docfiles/2010phc/Census2010_Summary_report_of_finalresults.pdf
- Grabosky, Peter. 2016. "Regulation by ridicule: Humorous denigration as a regulatory instrument." *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 12, no. 2: 373-400.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/174387211349307>
- Meuleman, Bram and Corra Boushel. 2014. "Hashtags, ruling relations and the everyday: Institutional ethnography insights on social movements." *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences* 9, no. 1: 49-62.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2013.85141>
- Mohammed, Umar. 2017. "Why ZAA RADIO Must Fire Halik Musah aka DJ Tell." *Savannah Lifestyle*, September 16, 2017. <http://savannahlifestyle.org/2017/09/16/why-zaa-radio-must-fire-halik-musah-aka-dj-tell>
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Nissenbaum, Asaf and Limor Shifman. "Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan's /b/ board." *New Media & Society* 19, no. 4: 483.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/146144481560931>
- Olorunnisola, Anthony A. and Brandie L. Martin. 2013. "Influences of media on social movements: Problematizing hyperbolic inferences about impacts." *Telematics and Informatics* 30, no. 3 (2013): 275-288. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2012.02.00>
- Pillay, Suntosh R. 2016. "Silence is violence: (critical) psychology in an era of Rhodes must fall and fees must fall." *South African Journal of Psychology* 46, no. 2: 155-159.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/008124631663676>
- Rashid, Hussein and Precious Rasheeda Muhammad. 2015. "American Muslim (un)exceptionalism: BlackLivesMatter and #BringBackOurGirls." *Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no. 4: 478-495. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jafireli.3.4.047>
- Srinivasan, Ramesh. "Bridges between cultural and digital worlds in revolutionary Egypt." *Information Society* 29, no. 1 (2013): 49-60.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2012.739594>



(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Online Activism: Centering Marginalized Voices in ActivistWork by **Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed** (https://twitter.com/wunpini_fm) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial4.0 International License

—CITATION—

Mohammed, Wunpini Fatimata. (2019). “Online Activism: Centering Marginalized Voices in Activist Work” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No. 15. 10.5399/uo/ada.2019.15.2

◀ ALLYSHIP ◀ DIGITAL PUBLIC SHAMING ◀ FEMINISM ◀ GHANA ◀ ONLINE ACTIVISM
 ◀ PEER REVIEWED ◀ SOCIAL MEDIA ◀ TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed ([https://adanewmedia.org/author/Wunpini Mohammed](https://adanewmedia.org/author/WunpiniMohammed))

Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed is a Ph.D. candidate at the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on feminisms, development communication, and film.



Copyright © 2012-2021. All work on this website is distributed under a Creative Commons license. The default license for the content on *Ada* is a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Unported License**. Individual article copyright terms may differ. Please refer to each article for its license.

Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology
 ISSN 2325-0496