

A Feminist Approach to Social Media Alexandra Hidalgo and Katie Grimes

Kristine Blair argues that "[t]echnofeminist theory must translate into technofeminist practice." She invites us "to make online spaces hospitable to women's social, professional, and political goals." In this video essay, we aim to answer that call by developing social media guidelines rooted in feminism. We believe feminism provides key insight on how to create online communication styles that foster positive and productive interactions. The six guidelines we discuss here were created as a result of our yearlong collaboration developing a social media presence for *agnès films*, a website that supports the work of women and feminist filmmakers through reviews, interviews, essays, and filmmaking narratives.

I am a Michigan State University assistant professor in Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures, and I cofounded *agnès films* with Caitlan Spronk while we were both graduate students at Purdue University for a digital archives course taught by our mentors Patricia Sullivan and Jennifer Bay. Through a Michigan State research grant, I was able to hire Katie, an undergraduate student in my department, to help grow *agnès films*'s social media presence. As we did so, we realized that the principles of collaboration and support that shape the content we publish translate to social media in ways that have not only helped us grow our number of followers but also resulted in our creating deep connections with filmmakers, activists, and scholars. As we crafted our feminist social media presence, we were mindful of the fact that feminism is a multifaceted term that encompasses a complex set of varying—even contradictory—ideologies that sometimes result in feminists arguing with feminists over social media. We wanted to avoid such conflicts. As Julia Schuster explains, every wave of feminism has different goals, and while the first and second wave didn't coexist, the second and the third have now coexisted for decades. Moreover, as Kira Cochrane argues, there may be significant enough differences between third-wave feminists and young feminists emerging today to call for the arrival of a fourth wave of feminism, defined in part by the use of online spaces for much of its activism. Whether we have two or three waves coexisting, the fact remains that we have different generations of feminists with different aims and experiences working toward gender equality today.

While there is much richness to be gained from these interactions, conflict also arises. One of these conflicts, as Schuster and Cochrane point out, is the sense that younger feminists who often focus on online activism are not doing the kind of work that second-wave feminists consider to be real work, such as participating in physical protests. However, as Schuster shows, that binary is often false with young feminists utilizing "social media to organize events outside the internet." Moreover, some second-wave feminists are very well versed in social media, such as *agnès films* featured member Marian Evans, who is extremely active and influential on Twitter, Pinterest, and her blog *Wellywood Woman*.

Divisions between feminists aren't only generational but also caused by race, sexuality, social class, ability, and so on. In her *Nation* article, Michelle Goldberg states, "[A]s online feminism has proved itself a real force for change, many of the most avid digital feminists will tell you that it's become toxic." Goldberg critiques the aggression and "slashing righteousness of other feminists" by targeting mostly black feminists, an accusation to which four feminists also published by *The Nation* responded. Andrea Smith and Mariame Kaba wrote, "[T]he complaint that social media has *become* 'toxic' and is therefore no longer a 'safe space' strikes us as ahistorical and strange. How can social media exist independently of the dynamics and forces of oppression that structure the world at large? The answer is simple: it does not and cannot."

We agree with Smith and Kaba that it is not possible for social media interactions to exist outside the sexist, racist reality we all inhabit. Still, we believe that a feminist approach to social media can help reduce these injustices in the system at large. When we first started cultivating *agnès films*'s social media presence, we had grand, abstract notions about approach—equality, justice, collaboration—but little idea how to translate these concepts into concrete actions.

For our Twitter account, we followed the example of other feminist organizations like Bluestocking Films and Directed by Women, retweeting content from women filmmakers and their supporters, sharing articles that women filmmakers cared about, and interacting with other accounts in the filmmaking community. The *agnès films* Facebook group was a more established space when I began my social media role, and it is one of constant collaboration. While I post notifications of original *agnès films* content, other members like experimental and fringe film editor Denah Johnston and Directed by Women's Barbara Ann O'Leary post links to articles and grants that they think will benefit the group and its 441 members. Filmmakers post about their own projects as well. Though the approach is slightly different, our Facebook and Twitter accounts have a fluidity of content: often a post from a member on Facebook inspires a tweet, or a link from a tweet lends itself to a Facebook post.

Overall, our increased social media engagement has helped enormously in promoting the original content published on *agnès films* and has led to a significant boost in our readership and an even more pronounced increase in content as more filmmakers, festivals, and organizations contact us asking us to feature their projects. Based on these experiences, we would like to propose six guidelines rooted in feminism to help create safe, productive online spaces. Although we're basing our approaches to social media on that of an organization, we believe our suggestions also work for individuals.

One: Collaboration. In her foreword to Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, Patricia Bizzell states that "collaborative projects became normative, first perhaps in feminist work and soon in the field of rhetoric, composition, and literacy." From Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe, to Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, to Kristine Blair and Christine Tulley, feminist collaborations and the theorizing of such

collaborations are key to intersections of rhetoric and feminism. Following that tradition, we propose a collaborative approach to social media at various levels. The first level is to, whenever possible, have more than one person involved in social media so that one can bounce off ideas and evaluate choices. Particularly in moments of potential conflict, it is important to discuss possible responses with others to avoid impulsive, angry reactions. The second level of collaboration is with organizations and individuals we are acquainted with who are working toward similar goals. For example, we were invited to participate in a Twitter chat by *Raising Films*, a site for filmmaking parents. We were joined by five others representing different areas of the industry from Pakistani filmmaker Afia Nathaniel to actor Romola Garai. Together we were able to provide an in-depth and complex discussion of mothers behind the camera that *agnès films* alone could not have done. The third level is collaborating with those we have no previous contact with but who are working on similar aims. Although director Ava DuVernay may not know who we are, we participated in her "Rebel-a-thon" Twitter campaign for diversity in film. Even though our role wasn't as key in this campaign as it was in the *Raising Films* chat, joining DuVernay helped forward our ultimate goal of placing more women behind the camera.

Two: Reciprocity. Royster and Kirsch call for reciprocity in the way feminist scholars relate to participants and to each other. We believe reciprocity is also vital to social media practices, a key component of which is to develop relationships with others, known and unknown to us. The simplest application of reciprocity on Twitter is the act of following those who follow you. Writer and director Danielle Winston has created a list of 374 female-centric film Twitter accounts that include women filmmakers and organizations that support them. This excellent resource provided us with a plethora of accounts to follow. In response, we received over 30 new followers over the course of a week. This exchange of followers benefits all parties. We connect to our target audience, grow our ethos with an increase in followers, and gain opportunities to learn about female-centric film work. The filmmakers who follow us are able to view our content, which is crafted to serve their needs, and gain more visibility for their work in the event that we retweet their content or feature them on *agnès films*. This creates a social environment in which both accounts benefit, and our mutual goal of supporting women filmmakers is realized. For example, Marian Evans runs her blog about women filmmakers and has over 3,200 followers on Twitter. Marian was an *agnès films* featured filmmaker, and in reciprocity, she has consistently promoted our website and Twitter content, as well as mentioning *agnès films* in her blog posts.

Three: Non-Competitiveness. Henry Jenkins explains that media consumption has changed from traditional media outlets like television wanting to keep viewers loyal to them in a concept he calls "stickiness" to the current need for content to be shared in many platforms, which he calls "spreadability." He explains, "Spreadability as a concept describes how the properties of the media environment, texts, audiences, and business models work together to enable easy and widespread circulation of mutually meaningful content within a networked culture." In our case, we are interested in increasing the

number of women behind the camera. The "mutually meaningful content" we want shared is the one that helps achieve that goal whether or not it was produced by us. Under the old model, Directed by Women and Bluestocking Films might have been our competitors, but under the spreadability model, they are our allies. We are all working toward the same goals, and it doesn't matter whose content is used to achieve those goals. For example, legendary filmmaker Agnès Varda, after whom *agnès films* is named, spoke at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival. We covered the event and shared our piece on Twitter and Facebook, but we also shared *Variety's* coverage. Our goal was for Varda to get as much exposure as possible regardless of who wrote the piece we were sharing. Moreover, following the non-competitiveness model results in greater reach for our own articles, because other organizations and individuals whose content we've shared return the favor by sharing ours, resulting in more exposure for our content as a whole.

Four: Respect. Roxane Gay argues that in the feminist community, "We need to listen as much as we speak up. We need to talk to each other instead of over each other. We need to be able to disagree without completely dismissing the ideas with which we disagree." Gay is calling for an environment of respect, one that can be hard to find in the social media universe. A feminist online space, however, seeks to be as constructive and inclusive as possible. In *agnès films's* content, we actively work to avoid insulting or degrading filmmakers or their work, demonstrated most prominently in our film reviews, a genre that often humiliates artists. When our reviewers offer criticism, they do it with a constructive, never mocking or pejorative tone. The same extends to our social media: our tweets and Facebook comments display enthusiasm when supporting and restraint when critiquing, so that conversations can be productive and allow participants to feel safe to contribute.

Five: Community Building. Royster explains, "Having a community of people who are expert in what you're expert in gives you a thinking platform, gives you a way of saying, 'Let's see how this flies. Let's get some feedback on this idea or that idea.'" Like Royster, we see community building as a way to enrich our ability to create strong, nuanced content. While Royster is discussing her work with the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition, which has opportunities for face-to-face interaction at yearly conferences, we often work with women we have never met and who live on different continents. One of our approaches to creating a relationship with another organization is asking them to write an article for *agnès films* about what they do, as we have done with *Films for the Feminist Classroom* and *Raising Films*. Once we post the article, both organizations promote it on social media together and separately. These articles not only create a public relationship between us and that particular organization but they lead to future collaborations. I have published reviews in *Films for the Feminist Classroom* and I was interviewed by *Raising Films* about being a filmmaking mother. The articles, reviews, and interviews allow us to have in-depth explorations of women in film while our social media interactions about them create an ethos of unity behind a goal.

Six: Patience. We won't see the results of some of the techniques we are implementing on social media for years to come. Social media community building, especially on Twitter, is about maintenance, the benefits of which may be far in the future. Understanding that it takes time to reach our goals is a foundational skill for any feminist. Some of the key aims of the second wave, such as equal pay and universal child care, have not been met, but that doesn't mean we should get discouraged. It takes time to change the world, and it takes time to build an ethos and a community around a cause. When I joined *agnès films* 12 months ago, we had 70 Twitter followers. In 7 months, our number of followers doubled to 160. Then, over the next 5 months, our followers more than doubled again to 375. So what happened? 90 new followers in 7 months, then 215 in 5? These numbers can partly be attributed to us finding our niche within the larger social media community: figuring out what content our followers like, building a profile with a professional ethos, and perfecting our playful yet professional tone. However, it will probably take years to have the reach Marian Evans or Directed by Women have. With patience, we'll build our social media presence little by little and create long-lasting connections as we do so.

As Blair argues, "feminist theory and method call for a materialist approach that questions how political, social, and economic conditions impact women as a class of individuals." Blair does fantastic work teaching middle-school girls how to create digital content in her Digital Mirror Computer Camp through her materialist approach to feminism. We feel that our work through *agnès films* and its social media is also materialist even if it happens entirely online. By using a feminist approach to social media, we are helping build a community out of a number of organizations and individuals who share our goal of supporting women behind the camera. By creating a feminist social media space, we can have the kinds of interactions that are productive instead of agonistic and can also promote the kind of content that fosters equality and justice. Everybody wins, or as Ruth Fowler put it after our *Raising Films* Twitter chat: "@jessicalevick @FFFilmmaking @Raine_Dropz @media parents @agnesfilms have never spent an hour on twitter and not been called a cunt b4 today!"