



Research Articles

Poking the Bear: Feminist Online Activism Disrupting Conservative Power

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INTRODUCTION

This is the time for a critical digital pedagogy that simultaneously recognizes both the potential inherent in social media to challenge power and build movements and the dangers lurking in a fake news era that spreads hate, division, and distraction. This paper explores how Canadian digital feminist activists challenged conservative power over three federal elections with innovative creativity using critical pedagogical humour that resulted in an impromptu online social movement focused on ousting the Prime Minister.

CHALLENGING AUTHORITARIAN POWER WITH A SMILE

Before Trump, Canadian Conservative Party member Stephen Harper sat as Prime Minister from 2006-2015. Although Harper might appear a stark contrast to the bombastic Trump, while in power, he enacted policies that were nothing short of a slow erosion of Canadian democracy. He ruled by stealth through a steady and consistent attack on fundamental Canadian values. Harper refused to speak to the media, enacted policies that violated and eroded women's rights, and vowed to create a "barbaric cultural practices" (Andrew-Gee, 2015, para 1) snitch line targeting immigrants, amongst other inflammatory acts. His actions signalled a turn toward authoritarianism and a battle of competing ideologies.

Parallel to Harper's time in power, the emergence of Web 2.0 social media tools created the opportunity for all kinds of people to engage in online activism as content producers/educators. A good number of those people were women. Frustrated by the Harper agenda, they took to the web

becoming electoral online activists, more specifically - digital feminist activists who, through critical pedagogical humour, embodied a critical digital pedagogy to challenge Harper's policies specifically during the election campaigns of 2008, 2011 and 2015.

Giroux (2018) identifies what is happening in America right now as a form of civic illiteracy, in which illiteracy is now a political tool, "a willful practice and goal used to actively depoliticize people" (p. 77). He states that "ignorance has become weaponized, posturing as a refusal to know" (p. 75). Given this reality, is it possible that the very same social media that is perpetuating civic illiteracy through the spread of hate, fake news, and inane presidential tweets can also provide a counter-measure that can disrupt power and galvanize change? Through the example of digital feminist activists engaged in electoral online activism during the Harper reign and using a social-justice qualitative approach, this study informs online political practice and pedagogy discussing three key components: 1) how social media provides opportunities to respond to events in real-time while creating a historical record documenting government activity and resistance, 2) how social media makes activism possible for many by lifting barriers and encouraging risk-taking; and 3) how social media platforms enable a critical digital pedagogical approach based on truth-telling, rooted in values and deliberately using humour for its innocuous delivery that disarms and opens doors.

SOCIAL MEDIA: GOOD, BAD AND POSSIBLY UGLY?

Every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher.

-Gramsci

The emergence of internet-based participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2009) speak to new sites of possibilities for social justice work. Kahne et al. (2014) identify how the digital age has expanded possibilities for participating in politics online including, "how online non-political participatory cultures create new pathways to political activity; and how participatory politics are transforming the relationships among political, social, and cultural realms" (p. 12). Once created, the video or meme is shared, disseminated, commented upon, retweeted, mashed, re-mixed in a decentralized manner. One could argue that social media platforms are firmly grounded as non-formal educative spaces.

Despite these possibilities, extensive and ongoing debate on the merits of social media persists. When social media first emerged people assumed that these were decentralized democratic tools of the people yet from the beginning there was a revenue-generating component. The nature of social media was also debated with some seeing the potential in these tools for social mobilization and change (Shirky, 2011), while others saw online activism as falling flat in its potential to create actual change (Morozov, 2011), identifying it as a low-stakes activity (Gladwell 2010). The concept of hybrid activism – where both online and offline activism are seen as critical components of social movement building (McCaughey, 2014) resonates most with actual practice.

Recently, new concerns and critiques have emerged: the extent of commodification of data in a new surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), how social media use is in service of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2003), the troubling, racist, and sexist programming of bots that Noble (2018)

called, “algorithmic oppression” (p. 4), and of course, the rise of fake news and privacy breeches which are intent on influencing and mis-leading voters. This speaks to the need for critical debate, regulation and most importantly the urgent need for a critical digital pedagogy.

Like it or not social media is here to stay and as a non-formal learning site, it situates digital activists as educators or more specifically as Gramsci terms organic intellectuals (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971). The organic intellectual, Gramsci argues, should be understood through the function they play in society, such as the “active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer,

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‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (Gramsci in Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971, p. 10). In this reading, the organic intellectual is understood to be an activist, catalyst, facilitator or, for our purposes, a digital feminist activist. Much like the

newspaper was a critical activist tool in Gramsci’s day, the digital public sphere is where the virtual organic intellectual can engage in a philosophy of praxis that looks to disrupt hegemony and the ‘common sense’ of today which includes rising authoritarianism and “the polar opposite of critical thinking” (Crehan, 2018, p. 278). Virtual organic intellectuals promote good sense through a critical digital pedagogy that uses humour as a political tool and counters the nefarious elements of social media.

HUMOUR AS ACTIVISM

We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor. Every time we see the left or any group trying to move forward politically in a radical way, when they’re humorless, they fail.

-bell hooks as cited in Yancy

Pedagogically, humour disarms and opens doors to truths that could easily be ignored. Because humour is not perceived as threatening; people can be more responsive to humour as it promotes an “openness to new experiences (and)... makes people more adaptable to change,” while promoting “divergent or creative thinking” (Morreall, 2009, p. 112). At the same time, Morreall (2009) sees humour as a social experience, claiming it cannot be enjoyed alone, yet in the digital age, the experience of humour has shifted. Videos, memes, and gifs can now be created alone and even enjoyed alone by people sitting in front of their screens but there is still a social element – sharing and posting online, commenting and tweeting. In the case of humour-based activism, this social experience can be educational and encourage action.

In that way, critical thinking can be fostered through humour, “in looking for incongruity in society, we look for discrepancies between what people should do, what they say they do, and what they actually do” (Morreall, 2009, p. 113). This encourages people to think and reflect on what they are feeling through the laughter. As Dadlez (2011) notes, “humour can startle us into the adoption of perspectives that can sometimes present new notions of moral salience” (p. 15). Inspired by the work of Freire who recognized the connection between laughter and liberation

stating, “it’s necessary to laugh with the people” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 239), Lewis (2010) developed the idea of a laughing consciousness whereby: “critical laughter is transformative and revolutionary...(in which)...to laugh with the people (rather than at them) is to engage in a transformation of the relationship between self and other” (p. 640). Moreover, Lewis points to “critically transformative laughter (as) a *nonviolent weapon* of democracy” (p. 642).

In indigenous cultures, Retzlaff (2006) says Elders, as well as parents, use humour as a tool to teach. “Laughter and humour are essential.... a way for dealing with oppression and tragedy, with survival and healing, it serves as a way to keep one’s feet on the ground” (p. 42). Monk-Payton (2017) documents how Black women both use and produce on social media noting, “a Black feminist and Black queer critical imagination of truth telling animates social media humour” (p. 16), which can be seen as “a form of protest against systemic anti-Blackness in the United States” (p. 29).

Laughtivism denotes the political potential of humour, as Popovic and Miller (2015) note, “humour doesn’t just make you chuckle- it makes you think” (p. 100). In encouraging an activism using humour, they note that laughter is a way to “break fear and build confidence” (p. 110) to ultimately take action and challenge authority.

Thus “satirical comedy as a tool supports critical pedagogy in its ability to historicize, contextualize, deconstruct and (re)construct meaning

Humour opens resistant doors, making
people think twice.

by going beyond face value to uncover what is intentional, subversive, and contradictory” (Hayes, 2016, p. 257). Humour opens resistant doors, making people think twice. Thus, humour can be part of opening spaces for critical emotional reflexivity (Zembylas, 2013).

The way in which humour-based activism gets enacted and by whom becomes crucial. While “fake news is increasingly seen as a weapon of power” (Giroux, 2018, p. 209), humour-based activism, what Gramsci (as cited in Forgacs & Nowell-Smith, 2012) calls “a teasing smile” (p. 420) can be seen as a pedagogical activist tool. It is here where we see irony come to life to expose the hypocrisy of the day, as political satire is a form of moral criticism (Dadlez, 2011) that calls attention to injustice encouraging deeper reflection on the part of the audience.

Seemingly innocuous, non-threatening, on-line, humour-based activism actively informs, disseminates, educates and influences social change in a non-threatening manner that can be understood as critical. Critical pedagogical humour is necessarily fact-based, truth telling and hypocrisy exposing of the power-holders. Understanding the virtual organic intellectual as a humour-based activist grounds this research and offers a lens through which to interrogate activists’ own perceptions of their activities, the role humour-based political activism can play in the post-truth era, and how humour might be a gateway for change.

THE MAKING OF DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISTS

Welcome to the fourth wave of feminism... What's happening now feels like something new again. It's defined by technology: tools that are allowing women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online. Just how popular is sometimes slightly startling.

-Kira Cochrane

Women have been at the forefront of countless social justice struggles from the first wave of feminism – the suffragette movement - to using pre-social media internet to organize the 1997 Million Women March (Marwick, 2019) to founding Black Lives Matter in 2013 (Garza, 2014) and Idle No More in 2012 (Wood, 2015) through single tweets that eventually became critical contemporary social movements of our time.

Social media has radically enabled new feminisms and opened spaces for collective social movement building and widespread conscientization.

Boler and Nitsou (2014) demonstrate through studying the women in the Occupy movement, how second wave feminist practices of horizontalism and consciousness-raising (CR) readily adapt to online environments. As Maeckelbergh (2012) notes,

“horizontalism refers to the active creation of nonhierarchical relations through decision-making process. Horizontalism is both a value and a practice” (p. 211). Consciousness-raising at its basic form implies women getting together to discuss their unique social identities to “make women conscious of their own personal and private oppressions” (Gleeson, 2018, p. 2). CR or conscientization (Freire, 1970) also implies an immediate two-fold pedagogical component for digital feminist activists through their lived experience) and from interactions resulting from their online posts, tweets, and videos.

Social media has radically enabled new feminisms and opened spaces for collective social movement building and widespread conscientization so much so that the onset of social media and hashtag activism is seen as the 4th wave of feminism (Guillard, 2016), one that enables an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989), where marginalized voices occupy spaces and define their own forms of activism. Gleeson (2018) argues that #MeToo is “an example of contemporary consciousness-raising, and valuable affective labour” noting that the hashtag is “both powerful and important” (p. 5). Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer (2017) note that #YesAllWomen “functioned as a public protest or agenda-building event with impact on public discourse beyond Twitter” (p. 3) and, importantly, provided a “successful example of how feminists are developing new strategies to engage and utilize emergent communications platforms” (p. 7). And Rentschler and Thrift (2015) point to the importance of humour in online activism, “through networked laughter, ‘Binders Full of Women’ fuelled connective action and ad hoc community building based on individuals’ self-expression, sharing, and the interaction and dialogue that transpired through commenting, mock reviewing, ‘Liking’ and sharing” (pp. 340-341).

Feminist online activism is not without its perils. While social media has brought opportunities for strong organizing and push back online, online misogyny is prevalent, bringing new types of

harassment against women including trolling, doxing and harassment. Turley and Fisher (2018) note, “digital spaces are not a utopia for feminist campaigning” (p. 129) and they often “open participants to conflict and cruelty online” (Marwick, 2019, p. 3) pointing to “online harassment [as] both individual and systemic” (Marwick, 2019, p. 23).

Despite this, Canadian women chose to speak-out and respond to Harper’s agenda by utilizing social media platforms for collective activism, building consensus, and influencing voters. Social media is not only a tool of hybrid activism and organizing, but it can also perform a critical pedagogical function.

SOCIAL JUSTICE METHODS

Social justice methodologies centre the experience of oppression and marginalization and expose societal inequities disrupting power and directly challenging the status quo (Mertens, 2007). Fassinger and Morrow (2013) state, “We view a social justice perspective, by its very focus on marginalized cultural groups and its explicit goal of social change,” (p. 70). Critical to social justice research is an in-depth understanding of power both in how it operates to maintain unjust structures, divide people, and advantage a small percentage (power-over) and also how it can be a tool to push back against power (power-with). This understanding creates the potential for activism and ultimately social change based on social justice principles. Methodologically, Lyons et al. (2013) remind us that social justice research can carry with it unique characteristics such as “the generous use of participant quotes” (p. 18). In this way, marginalized voices are given the space to speak for themselves.

This is a social-justice qualitative research study employing a critical qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions with cross-country female identified participants and topical network analysis of their and others’ digital activity across three social media sites (YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter). The majority of participants were recruited based on their social media activity and contacted through direct messaging, while a small number were referred through snowballing. The subset of data presented includes 13 participants and one focus group, all of whom identified as women (including indigenous, queer and racialized women) and who were in some way responding to Harper’s conservative agenda. They are professionals, artists, students, activists, and singers. They come from across the country, include indigenous and racialized immigrant populations and span all age groups.

Data was collected during three federal elections: 2008, 2011, and 2015 to allow for a specific timeframe for analysis. Focusing on election campaigns during Harper’s reign provides a limited framework with good parameters to conduct analysis as it is generally a time of awakened and active civic engagement and secondly, the short time period (usually 6 weeks) makes it easier to capture specific data connected to the goal of ousting Harper from office. A topical network (Highfield, 2012) analysis was used to narrow down the conversations and activities (Facebook conversations, #hashtags, and YouTube videos) studied which helped develop a deeper understanding of the who, what, where, when and how of digital activism (Tierney 2013). While

internet activism by its very nature allows for a good level of anonymity, this can prove challenging when trying to identify and recruit digital activists based on their online activity.

RESULTS

During his time in office (2006-2015), while as far from a bombastic populist as one could be – Stephen Harper was not only steeped in conservative ideology, he adopted extreme views putting into play - through stealth - a rising authoritarianism in Canada. Women endured the brunt of conservative policies up to and including the 2015 election campaign, where Harper stepped up a legal challenge to stop women from wearing niqabs during citizenship ceremonies and alluded to looking into legislation to ban niqabs in the public-sector (Barber, 2015).

The record of Harper’s attacks on women’s rights is long. Harper shut down 12 Status of Women offices, defunded equality advocacy programs, and the Court Challenges Program. He defunded Sisters in Spirit – an indigenous initiative focused on investigating the systematic murder and disappearance of indigenous women and children in Canada and later in 2014 when he was asked about a possible public inquiry into missing aboriginal women, he responded, “Um it, it isn’t really high on our radar, to be honest” (CBC News, 2014, para. 110). He also cut funding for Quebec Native Women’s Association and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society. He passed legislation preventing female bureaucrats from pursuing pay-equity challenges while eliminating the universal child-care program before it was fully launched, and cutting some child advocacy organizations. In total over 60 non-governmental, non-profit agencies were attacked through defunding of which 18 were directly women-centred, and two key feminist activists were targeted with surveillance (Eliadis, 2015). Additionally, democracy came under threat. On more than one occasion Harper prorogued (suspended) Parliament when feeling threatened, circumvented elections rules and created new ones to make it harder for civil society to engage in advocacy campaigning. Advocacy groups were scrutinized and many underwent grueling audit processes, attempts were made to control the media and immigrants were alternatively used as props in campaign photos or ostracized for engaging in so-called “barbaric cultural practices” (Andrew-Gee, 2015, para. 1).

Feminist Electoral Activism: Rapid Response, Rapid Resistance

Feminist digital organizing against Harper took on a delightfully feminist-not feminist expression. Just to be clear. There was and is nothing sexy about Stephen Harper. He was often taunted for his robotic, stiff, and uncomfortable nature. He was not personable. There was no charm. Yet, as satirical humour does, feminist digital activists widely sexualized Harper putting him (and themselves) into stereotypical gender roles of days long past.

In 2008 social media tools were still fairly new and their participatory potential as cultural producers was not yet fully materialized, but the activity was beginning. One initiative was created by 11 artists (10 by women) in which each artist explained to Harper why their date did not go well using conservative policies enacted by Harper. This initiative, called *Bad Dates*, was created

by artists in response to Harper slashing arts-based funding, declaring that “ordinary Canadians don’t care about the arts” (Benzi et al., 2008, para. 1), and implying that grant money went to subsidize artists’ galas (Benzi et al., 2008).

By 2011, social media user-created electoral activism had taken off considerably, causing the Canadian media to dub it, ‘Election 2.0’ (Misener, 2011). Widespread online activism was mostly decentralized and sporadic as people across the country expressed their political viewpoints online in bold and creative ways. Given the nature of the relationship between Harper and Canadian women, a multitude of online feminist actions were happening. A clear moment of collective activism emerged as a series of videos called *Breaking up with Steve* in which women from across the country shared their reasons for not voting for Harper in the election under the guise of breaking up with a bad boyfriend. While the intention was not necessarily to create a collective action to challenge Harper, the result was just that. In total over 26 women or women collectives from across the country decided to join in and create their own ‘break-up’ video using critical pedagogical humour and aligning under the *Breaking up with Steve* nomenclature. These videos garnered media attention and were extensively shared across the country.

The 2011 election campaign also gave rise to shitharperdid.com, a collective of young people who created a series of videos based on Harper’s record which were parody videos about 1 minute each, done in the style of a public service announcement. *Canadian Women’s Favourite Pick-Up Line* (SHD, 2011) consisted of a number of different women listing the ways in which Harper had negatively impacted women’s rights with the joke being that a women’s favourite pick-up line - as sung by a male activist – was “I’m not voting for Stephen Harper” (SHD, 2011).

Other women engaged in different types of critical pedagogical humour including creating a parody twitter account for Harper’s cat Cheddar (https://twitter.com/cheddar_harper, 2009), or participating in the Colour of Poverty (2011) parody video of Michael Jackson’s ‘Beat It’ with ‘Eat It’ in response to conservatives targeting certain ethnic groups and posing for photos to garner the so-called ‘ethnic vote’. Called, *Go Ethnic Go*, the Colour of Poverty used a variety of culturally-specific foods in the video to get their point across – we are not an ethnic vote! - gaining considerable mainstream media attention. The Ottawa Raging Grannies took their activism online starting in 2009 posting several Harper-themed videos including *Raging Grannies: Harper’s Agenda* (2011) in which they all wore soft blue sweaters and cradled stuffed cats – replicating a classic Harper photo while espousing a variety of reasons why Harper should be kicked out of power. Amongst other solo operators, Operation Maple (Operation Maple, 2011) created several videos, featuring ‘feisty senior Joy’ such as *Ultimate Showdown: FEISTY JOY vs STEPHEN HARPER* (2011) who always had a few choice words for Stephen Harper.

When the 2015 election came around, there were no signs of slowing down. It was the year of the protest song where both activist and prominent Canadian musicians started posting Harper protest songs. The Council of Canadians Winnipeg Chapter created a playlist on YouTube entitled, “Top ALL TIME Stephen Harper protest songs,” that boasts 107 songs including, *Stephen Harper Hates Me* (Cook, 2015) by an indigenous woman. Feminist activists once again responded to ethnic vote-chasing, conservatives with the YouTube video, *Currying Favour*” (2015) which aimed to add depth, reality, and multidimensional layers to cultures and people. It was the year that indigenous online activism came to fruition building on the #IdleNoMore movement and the year of the

#hashtag journey with people widely engaging in real-time events in Harper's campaign from #HarperANetflixShow to #CanadianHorrorStory to #AngryTory and #HarperBlamesAlbertans and many more, enabling Canadians to join in the conversation, poke fun, mock and document every conservative mis-step while encouraging people to vote him out.

Social media 100% facilitated the possibility of the work of these digital feminist activists who were responding to a conservative agenda which was eroding a multitude of women's rights and programs. Repeatedly participants spoke of their concerns regarding what was happening to women's rights and "how awful Harper was." Several specifically targeted women as their audience to encourage them to go out and vote as one participant notes:

We wanted women to start to really think about what the issues were, and encourage them to get out and vote, and vote him out (laughs) – yeah, we wanted to vote him out (laughs).

A key aspect emerging out of the data, is the sense that most participants (except one) felt like they were part of a large collective action to get Stephen Harper out of power.

We definitely felt like we were part of a broader movement. We felt like we were one corner of the movement who were using comedy, and specifically aiming towards millennials, but I would say that the community across Canada of people who we were working with at the time were amazing, and it definitely felt like there was a lot of momentum. It felt like a broad coalition of different groups coming together for a unified goal

As one participant noted when being interviewed, "It's [video] still getting views, right? It lives on, right? It's like [how]film immortalizes. The whole idea of it immortalizes, and so things live on." Thinking of social media as an historical archive is another key upside, particularly in the area of electoral activism.

Indeed, Stephen Harper's entire record *was* and still is immortalized online through digital feminist activists and many others, making it virtually impossible to hide from the truth.

Social Media Activism: Lifting Barriers and Encouraging Risk-Taking

All of the participants were drawn to using social media by the ease with which you could create and post your messages and also the possibility of widespread reach and dissemination. These digital feminist activists influence, in this case, was specifically geared towards encouraging people both young and old not to vote for Harper.

We just did what we thought can be easily done and something that could provide a counter-narrative and potentially reach a number of people. It doesn't matter who these people are, you just need to get it out there.

Their pursuits were to impact voting behaviours. Participants noted feelings of frustration due to a sense of only speaking to the ‘converted’ rather than reaching a broader target audience.

Well it’s one of the problems you have because so often you are only getting to the already converted. That’s one reason we do videos too, hoping to reach a little beyond that but it’s hard.

It should be noted that during this time period (2008-2015) Facebook was not extensively pre-selecting newsfeed posts and algorithms were not as embedded. Participants noted several other downsides to using social media such as calling out, trolls, echo chambers, limitations to action, silo effects, slacktivism and fatigue.

One participant noted the limits of online activism compared to face-to-face advocacy stating:

I do think there are limitations to such online forms of activism. If your ultimate goal is to shift policies, sure you know you can tweet at policy-makers and tweet at Ministers...you can send them petitions...But there’s no real substitute to face-to-face meetings, to actual lobbying, to picking up the phone and trying to get them to see the light of day?

Another participant noted the challenges in trying to be ‘seen’:

I really find that there is so much actual volume of content, which is so great, but it’s not very easy to rise out of the dust pile...

Participants were well aware of the perils of taking their activism online. While none of the participants experienced any extensive harassment, some of them took precautions to either remain safe (becoming a citizen beforehand) or remaining confidential (posting anonymously). Trolling, harassment and doxing of women is quite prevalent in the online world. While participants – particularly professionals – expressed concern of possible personal and professional attacks, other participants seemed more concerned about government surveillance and government created obstacles that, as an attempt to induce a ‘chilling effect’ on anti-Harper activism, had targeted some organizations for extensive, gruelling audits. Yet, participants did not back-down from their intended activities:

I will continue (making videos) because I do think it’s important, as long as we have free speech (laughs), and I hope that continues. I’ve never doubted that that would be a right before, and now I do. Now I’m like, that could go, and that’s the weirdest thought in the world is to think that you could be, like, hauled up into jail because you did a funny video.

And:

I should not have to be scared. I’m doing everything within my rights (laughs), according to our charter.

And:

You have to be willing to have haters (laughs); you have to have a thick skin...

Participants also noted a lot of positive aspects of taking their activism online. Social media facilitated activist work, raised awareness, allowed free expression, did not cost money, allowed for immediate responses as issues emerged and helped build online camaraderie, and online movements. As participants noted, “people were just generating their ‘Anyone but Harper’ things” and sharing. Several participants spoke to the ability to have a wider reach thanks to social media despite algorithms and filtering. One participant in particular noted the social identity implications of social media advocacy:

Online has wider access, wider reach. That is definitely one of the benefits. I think it’s also in a lot of ways a little bit more egalitarian in the sense of if you’re a single-mom taking care of children you can’t go to rallies, right? If you have like multiple jobs you can’t go to rallies – that would be impossible. In that sense doing stuff online can be a democratic space, a more democratic space because it facilitates greater access.

And another observed:

I find Canadians – and especially indigenous Canadians – are very tied in to social media and the whole internet phenomena, and that, possibly even more than CBC or commercial news networks, people were formulating their opinions and passing them around on social media. I think it definitely had a strong impact.

Poking the Bear: Humour in Activism

In discussing humour in activism, participants noted the importance of being able to express laughter which provides relief in difficult political times. The importance of laughter and hope, sustained activists in their struggle. One participant notes:

I think it was pretty humorous, and I think that was good, because you’ve got to get people to laugh and to get in that better frame, so that they can do things, otherwise people feel hopeless and helpless, and that’s not a good place to make changes from.

A key component arising out of the data is the importance of solidarity-building amongst activists themselves. While all participants wanted to have the deepest impact possible, humour also brought people together as a way to “rally the troops” – those working to oust Harper:

But one of the good things about sites like [ours] or different hashtags that have emerged that use humour to highlight the point, is that humour can be cathartic and it can also lead people to bond with each other and it can also highlight the absurdity of what’s going on and thus kind of propel political momentum for people to do something about it.

As a political tool, laughter helped to open people up to hear what others were saying:

Laughter allows us to listen to each other; it allows us to express ourselves safely. If you want to say something but you're afraid of how it will be received, if you can make somebody laugh, you feel a bit safer. It buoys our spirit; it unites us, 100%, and also it can be aggressive. It can allow you to be aggressive in a socially acceptable way.

And:

Laughter. I think it's probably the one way that you can break through people's already held opinions because it doesn't put them on the defensive. If you get them laughing, then they don't feel attacked and so they don't feel like they have to defend their ridiculous, outdated (laughs) mean opinions (laughs). If you can get them to laugh, then you have some chance of breaking through some of the rigid ideas.

In the tradition of the court jester, humour was also seen creating opportunities to be a thorn in the side of the conservatives and Stephen Harper. Poking the bear – being a nuisance, engaging in ridicule, making Harper look ridiculous and provoking responses were common tactics used amongst participants. It can also visibilize opposition and generate opportunities for laughtivism:

Stephen Harper seemed – and I'm sure was – so stiff, and literally conservative, and people like that, you just want to shake them up a bit, and I knew that that's what this was trying to do.

And:

Harper said that he didn't want to support an inquest into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women because he doesn't do sociology. There were a lot of funny hashtags. It kind of highlighted how ridiculous his statements were.

And:

I think anything that helped make him look ridiculous – I'm not sure it helped take him down but it couldn't have hurt. I mean people were making him look ridiculous. Like, that guy was in power for so long.

And from a Focus Group Participant:

...He (Harper) was so completely opposite of what most of us believe, so right away we were wanting to speak about ...and make ridicule of him ...which wasn't that hard, was it?

Critical Pedagogical Humour—Long Live the Truth-Tellers

Critical pedagogical humour is expressly political and intentionally educational. Facilitated by the tools of social media to inform, disseminate, and influence social change, it is seemingly innocuous yet through laughter and truth-telling it exposes the contradictions and hypocrisy of power-holders. Most of the participants in this data subset made a point to mention the importance of fact-checking in their preparation for creating their videos. This demonstrates how truth and facts are valued as core elements of democracy:

We wanted to have factual information that could educate people. We didn't want it to just be, yeah, 'screw Harper; get rid of him'. We wanted to have those facts... so that people did learn about some things... that was important to us.

And:

We were still very operating on the idea that, as long as we put the facts out there, and that was really our intention was to put these facts, wrapped in comedy, into the world, that truth would prevail.

And:

You need to have just enough humour mixed in with some hard-hitting information, in order to be taken seriously, but the humour is what will draw in someone who is generally not into activism in any sense, or maybe just afraid of it.

The importance of truth-telling was clearly connected to peoples' values and a strong sense that the conservatives were engaging an erosion of 'Canadian' values through their attacks on marginalized groups such as women and immigrants and a broader assault on democracy.

The audience was anybody who would listen, really, including conservatives. In fact, probably I wanted conservatives to listen to it more than anybody else.

And:

You can just only hope that you'll at least get a fair amount of views, people will watch it and will respond positively, and also maybe be inspired to do something similar – to either make videos or engage their friends...

And:

Yeah, to get people to realize what damage he was doing to what we all love about Canada, right?

And:

I was definitely motivated by the incredibly demeaning, insulting and disgusting commentary that was coming out of Stephen Harper's mouth, himself, but also from the right, you know, in Canada – from the Conservative party and... specifically the incredible cuts to women's organizations across Canada, making abortion inaccessible to smaller non-urban communities... And his disdain for queer people, his disdain for the LGBT community... just this constant dog whistling to his supporters.

DISCUSSION

These contemporary digital feminist activists introduced an interesting way of thinking about feminist activism – the combination of online activism that is not pre-mediated but responsive, combined with utilizing conservative gender stereotypes to ridicule and push back against Harper. Advocating that people vote him out of office has, as a backdrop, been rooted in educative practices through a reflective use of humour and a commitment to truth-telling.

Social media expanded the possibility for women frustrated by the Harper agenda to engage in responsive activism, lifting most barriers and encouraging a new level of risk-taking. This responsive activism is also a temporal activism where people can engage, withdraw and come back. While it may require a commitment to social justice values, it does not require an onerous time commitment, which can be hard if not impossible to maintain in today's economic reality. This idea of temporalism also speaks to the notion of fatigue – particularly for those using more intensive tools such as twitter. The ability to document the 2015 election in a #hashtag journey visibilizing critique, and amplifying mis-steps drew substantial media coverage but required a greater amount of energy. It also created a sense of a collective movement united in purpose.

These feminist activists were the mosquitos persistently poking the bear- Harper - using truth-telling and jokes to define a critical pedagogical humour that opens doors to truths readily ignored. The strong commitment to truth stands in the face of politicians who are throwing truth to the wayside to pursue personal agendas.

Can history repeat itself? In the case of Stephen Harper, activists were able to use social media quickly, broadly and anonymously to challenge his rising authoritarian agenda and they were able to indeed repeat this form of activism over three election periods through temporal activism. Whether this could be replicated in other political contexts where the leaders ridicule themselves on a daily basis would warrant further exploration.

The new Canadian government is responding to the fake news era – identified as propaganda tools (Reilly, 2018) – by creating a Digital Democracy Charter and pouring funds into ensuring that fake news is tracked and blocked. It is unclear what implications this sort of regulation might have on squashing dissent such as critical

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pedagogical humour which is rooted in truth yet may be seen as fake by some. Time will tell whether this greyish area of humour activism will feel any consequences. The urgent need for critical digital literacy tools to equip citizens with the ability to discern differences and nuances and appreciate the subversive yet innocuous nature of critical pedagogical humour remains.

At the end of the day, Harper was indeed ousted in the 2015 election, which witnessed the highest voter turnout in twenty years. Elections Canada (2016) reports increased voter turnout amongst indigenous (14%), immigrant (14%) and youth (11%) voters. Through the use critical pedagogical humour, digital feminist activists were able to contribute to his defeat as some of the many different mosquitos poking the bear.

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