

Book Review

Slutwalk, Feminism, Activism and Media

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“Women should avoid dressing like sluts”. This sentence, spoken by a Canadian security officer during a speech at York University in 2011, introduced the motto for the online discussion about rape myths perpetuation. The constant emphasis on women who dress in a provocative way, consume alcohol or show interest in sex usually results in blaming them for the sexual crimes which they are victims of. This notion, coupled with the (false) social imagery that rape occurs in dark alleys and is perpetrated by some ‘bad apples’ unable to control their libido, has opened space for discussing sexual violence leading to SlutWalk (SW) protest marches around the world, under the slogan ‘Because We've Had Enough’. But how does getting out on the streets with the word ‘slut’ written on their own bodies, and/or in posters alerts to rape culture? How does it avoid victim-blaming and slut-shaming? How were these groups created, and what was the media coverage in several countries throughout the world? These are the topics that, framed by media and communication studies, Mendes analyses throughout this book.

Structured into eight chapters, the book addresses i) introduction to SlutWalk; ii) contextualising this social movement; iii) its implementation in different geographic and temporal spaces; iv) how it has challenged rape culture; v) controversies and oppositions it suffered; vi) hierarchies and roles of participating organisations; (vii) linking SlutWalk communities to cyberactivism; and viii) final systematisation.

In chapter 1 (*Introduction*) Mendes questions and rejects the premise that sexual violence is a genetic/biological act, presenting sets of data that reveal the global discrepancy regarding the numbers of reported rape cases. These variations, alongside the various ways they occur, makes this practice a social phenomenon and validate SlutWalk's emergence as a movement to end rape culture, aimed at women's (self) determination about their own bodies and their free participation in public space.

Mendes dedicated Chapter 2 (*Contextualizing the issues*) to literature review and conceptual frameworks, where we are presented with an analysis centred on a triad of (post) feminism(s), representations, and social media. Here, Mendes focuses upon the pervasive methodological aspects that guide the book's research: qualitative complementary techniques (i.e. content analysis, framing analysis and critical discourse analysis), including international press clippings, and semi-structured interviews. However, the book's innovative nature consists of netnography (i.e. ethnography on the internet) made possible by following the many debates generated within SlutWalk's groups in social network sites, complemented by traditional ethnography participation in protest marches which were later reported in an ethnographic record format.

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In Chapter 3 (*Situating SlutWalk*) Mendes locates SlutWalk territorially, spatially and ideologically, and explores several regional, national, and international differences in news coverage follow-up published by both mainstream media and feminist media on SlutWalk from 7th February 2011 to 31st December 2013. With a strong media presence in 2011, SlutWalk's following two years of coverage registered a drastic reduction, revealing a thematic fatigue and the end of its spectacle/novelty effect, which did not, however, prevent the movement's global expansion and consequent regional adaptations. However, other feminist organisations have argued that SlutWalk represents a setback in the advances made by feminist movements in recent decades and a mere adaptation of Canada's and USA social realities worldwide. In countries such as Australia, New Zealand and mainly India, the SlutWalk movement has been accused of appeasing the West and of not taking into account differentiated feminism paths in these contexts. Also, SlutWalk was accused of relegating these countries' specificities, in which sexual violence is a systemic problem and is connected to class/caste system. In Singapore, due to state and police control alongside the public protests ban, a traditional SlutWalk march did not take place, and other diffusion strategies arose, namely workshops and slutscreens. In Canada and USA, another pertinent question focused on 'reclaiming', or not, the word 'slut'. Several black movements criticised its use, accusing it of being a word used only against white women. These discourses sparked a broad discussion within the SlutWalk and feminist movements and in black women groups (who did not reject the word slut, preferring the expression ho), requiring re-branding and re-labelling. The SlutWalk-organised platforms of Toronto and Winnipeg rejected this proposal; SlutWalk Vancouver hosted an open online meeting to discuss this subject matter and decided to keep the name; in other groups, such as SlutWalk Chicago and Philadelphia, the expression 'SlutWalk' eventually fell. In Johannesburg, which maintained the slut expression, it was decided that individuals did not need to identify with the word to be part of the movement.

Did the media take into account these emerging concerns in internal discussions? Chapter 4 (*SlutWalk challenges rape culture*), explores the frameworks imposed upon SlutWalk's actions both by mainstream and feminist media. The main focus highlighted by both types of media was on how SlutWalk challenged and alerted to sexual violence practices. However, not only do we find differences in the messages, but also in the contents that various SW groups intended to see transmitted. This recurrent lag/discrepancy between what is intended to be transmitted and what is effectively transmitted has allowed for Mendes' theoretical critique of both types of media. First, the book explores the discourses for blaming the rapist, and then the discursive strategies used to blame the victim, especially by mainstream media, are also analysed. The book even ironies with discursive strategies that focus on such provocative pieces of clothing that make people rape victims. The hegemonic discourse on rape in both popular and political culture understands it as a crime of passion and sex, carried out by 'deviant' strangers, rather than by the average father/brother/friend/husband/boyfriend/acquaintance. In this understanding of rape, men become so overcome by their sexual urges that they (often unwittingly) commit rape as a result. By deconstructing and withdrawing discursive values of these types of records, anchored by an approach that rejects the victim's 'personalization', and by rejecting individualised characteristics (i.e. what she wears, if she drinks alcohol, goes out at night), Mendes focuses on the structural aspects of this problem: rape as a form of violence, power and control that occurs in periods of war (regardless of victim's clothing); as a form of punishment and revenge (revenge rape); and as a form of sexual gratification in which the rapist's desires and fantasies surpass the victim's body autonomy and self-determination (date rape).

Despite chiming with the public's concerns about sexual violence public concerns, SlutWalk was not exempt from criticism and opposition. Chapter 5 (*SlutWalk is misguided or opposed*) captures controversies and objections directed at SlutWalk's tactics and goals, namely those that address body uses. It would be wrong to think that criticism came solely from conservative sectors of these societies or from corporative media. Feminist criticisms focused on supporting the issue, without supporting its implementation. Incorporating into SlutWalk's protests contents such as images of young, slim and sensual women has given the movement an appealing lens to the male gaze, transforming a sexual violence awareness-raising action in spectacularisation act, transforming the body into commodity fetishism, hence the interest of mainstream media. This focus on the body, shock and spectacularisation that the mainstream media attributed to the protest raised widespread criticism from organisations involved in SlutWalk, accusing them of misrepresenting the protest marches. Mendes departs from the duality between good and evil and does not consider that SlutWalk has been misrepresented by mainstream media, since they only presented an interpretive framework based on a neoliberal ideological framework. Even feminist movements addressed criticisms to Slutwalks postfeminist approach, namely not giving enough emphasis to the structural aspects of rape culture:

It is worrying that we live in an age in which women are told equality and liberation have been already achieved and that empowerment is best achieved through the sexualized displays of one's body rather than collective political action. It is worrying that under neoliberalism and postfeminism, structural inequalities are reframed as individual problems, which can be overcome if individuals simply try harder. (p.119)

The emphasis given to spectacularisation via images/photos/videos attempted, from the perspective of organisations and participants, to distort the sex-positive banner of the movement. This redirected feminist movements to a more creative performance and to another set of narratives that did not imply neoliberal ideology. Feminists' focus was not merely on grievances or complaints against mainstream media, but rather on intervening directly by providing another interpretive framework to understand, represent and remember the movement. These collectives therefore attempted to generate counter-memories through videos, photos and text that could counteract hegemonic mainstream media voices. However, SlutWalk presented a set of internal inconsistencies: it appeared linked to neoliberal principles through the defence of individualisation in the control of the body; and promoted an apolitical and non-structural stand. Feminist criticisms of the movement itself, focused on spectacularism and *raunch culture*, has led to a greater media visibility of the movement yet the lack of a central argument, a clear opponent, and a motto, differentiates it from new *grassroot* movements such as *Indignados* or *Occupy*.

Knowing the themes addressed by mainstream and feminist media, it was still necessary to question how these SlutWalk groups had been created. Chapter 6 (*SlutWalk hierarchies and organizer's roles*) reveals the importance of recruiting leaders and individuals with a desire to support and diffuse the core idea through social media. A distinctive feature ('horizontalism') appeared within groups focused on a pluralistic strategy with no central or hierarchical leadership, and with room for debate among members. Nonetheless, not all SW groups opted for collective and shared management strategies, as others chose to establish hierarchies and delegate specialised tasks to specific members. In addition, the content promotion strategy revealed different levels of (in)experience, in models as different as 'learning by doing' heuristic or by using each member's specialised knowledge. Also, who were they talking to?

While some satellite groups made a concerted effort to target national or local media, others were more interested in community outreach. (...) I do not wish to argue that the mainstream media does not matter, it is clear that organizers are divided in their opinions, and that many would be happy to bypass the mainstream media completely. (p.158)

These very different strategies result in one of two outcomes: i) by rejecting mainstream media, SW tries to strengthen the impact of its message; ii) however, it risks something similar to having a talk amongst its members with no real outreach.

What distinguishes these online mobilisations from more traditional ones? How do they leave the online sphere and reach the streets? How do different collectives cooperate? And do common individuals participate in established networks? In Chapter 7 (*SlutWalk, Community and Cyberactivism*), Mendes addresses the innovations that mobilisations have registered during the twenty-first century, and the novelty of cyberactivisms and counter-publics networks. Fostering the creation of new SlutWalk groups around the central Toronto group has resulted in the formation of satellite groups which use Slutwalk's symbols, logos, colours, flags, posts and hashtags - a general branding action that conferred an overall identification and coherence to the movement. This protest counter-sphere allowed for various SlutWalk groups to promote other initiatives and to incorporate different cyberactivism strategies that reinforced the links between groups, by disseminating posts, hashtags, images and videos, and marches in other cities and even articulation intensification with other feminist organisations/collectives: "While not all groups contributed to this 'enhancement' of posts, it was a common practice among some Facebook pages" (p.166).

Regrettably, new strategies convey new problems, and this discussion openness has generated new consequences made possible by online social networks, such as cybersexism and trolling. Public arenas allow the entry of dissonant voices and some of those only aim to destabilise, to provoke and to discredit these new online communities. Different organisations dealt with these problems quite differently: while some erased troll comments, others elucidated them, or even allowed for the community as a whole to answer such topics.

SlutWalk was an innovative idea regarding equality and social justice. However, like most technological innovations it was not without flaws. As a final observation, covering eight different territorial spaces allowed the reader to note the differences in the ways SlutWalks organised themselves and to empirically demonstrate the slogan 'think global and act local'. This oscillation between how SlutWalk has become global and how it has adapted to local realities in a glocal strategy was reflected in a plural set of organisations, meanings, and mediations. Nonetheless, globalisation and glocalisation are neoliberal strategies. The use of bodies and connections to the word 'slut' contributed to capitalist media usage through image transmission, fostering a desired soft shock. On the other hand, it allowed these movements a broad media coverage, visibility and notoriety. The information reached the general public, with another of SlutWalk's latent effects being that it was left out of hard news space and relegated to soft news. Feminist media largely protested against these dominant views by adding information to journalistic *raunch culture* of visual and dramatic effect that removed the protest essence, which also appealed to the male gaze. Although feminist media addressed numerous criticisms to SW, they have provided a generic

supportive position, discussing political investments in feminism, their priorities, tactics and strategies in order to achieve the desired social change. They did so by using the same formats as corporate media (text, images and video) to demonstrate the diversity of protest agents, thus creating their counter-memories and to (re)signify the movement. Even in the face of global mainstream media's support for SlutWalk protests (which Mendes found surprising), countries such as India, South Africa and Australia have demonstrated more critical positions by questioning the real need and function of this movement, and the ways it acted, while in Singapore they redefined SlutWalk's street actions. Therefore, hegemony does not cease to be hegemonic, even in social protests. By just adapting to local realities, glocalisms are not, in themselves, forms of social protest.

The theoretical diversity presented demonstrates that this is not an apology book, but a critical argument about SlutWalk, which addresses and sustains its relevance. Yet, one of the book's many strengths, its methodology, has also been one of its weaknesses. Combining systems of complementary and integrated methodologies has sometimes generated epistemological noise: mentioning several examples, coming from different variables, obtained through different techniques did not result in a complete clarification of the elements. Also, the constant focus on *social media* (are there media that are not social?) deserved a greater discussion considering its plurality. After all, SlutWalk organised its online coverage in a way very similar to any company or organisation: it used its network of followers/participants to promote its idea.

In short, SlutWalk was not always consistent. If it was global, it was also glocal. If it emancipated groups of women, it appealed to male gaze. If it was innovative, it was also static. If it criticised neoliberal positions, it was also ideologically connoted to this stance. If it helped revitalise feminism, it also watered it down. If it existed online, it also marked its presence on the streets. If it was horizontal, it was also hierarchical. Still, SlutWalk made a difference by alerting to sexual violence, capturing one individual at a time, in different parts of the globe, simply: 'Because We've Had Enough'.

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