



Media and Activist Discourses on Feminism in Quebec: Between Issues of Women's Representativeness and the Mobilization of a Solidarity Network

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Abstract. The research has two objectives: (1) to document the mediatization of feminism by the Quebec media and (2) to identify the uses of social-digital media by Quebec feminist interest groups to make their demands heard in the traditional media. It is in line with the work on digital advocacy and the mediatization of feminism. The analysis is based on the media discourses produced by three Quebec newspapers in the context of International Women's Day (March 8) between 2017 and 2021 and the Facebook and Twitter publications of the *Collectif 8 mars* in 2020 and 2021. The results show that the Quebec media pay more attention to issues of women's under-representation in the public space and sexism than to the political dimensions behind the inequalities. For its part, the feminist group uses social and digital media more to cultivate and promote a feminist solidarity network than to disseminate information about its demands and women's equality issues.

Keywords: Feminism · Political information · Socio-digital media · Media discourse · March 8 · Interest groups · Digital advocacy

1 Introduction

Over the past decade, the feminist cause has been brought to the media agenda, particularly due to widespread online mobilizations against rape culture. Journalistic interest in these issues has helped to broaden the scope of movements, notably in the case of the #MeToo movement, and may in some cases have helped to implement policy changes [1–3]. Studies in the Anglo-Saxon environment show that media coverage differs from the narrative carried by the feminist movement: it is articulated according to a conflict-oriented media logic and presents an often depoliticized and de-racialized portrait of the feminist movement [1, 4]. Studies of online feminist mobilizations have demonstrated the potential for mobilization and dissemination of digital demands, but these mobilizations, which emanate from grassroots social movements, do not necessarily reflect the

discourses and strategies of interest groups that operate over a longer period and address a diversity of issues [5].

This research focuses on the media coverage of Quebec feminism and the online influence strategies of Quebec feminist interest groups. It is in line with two areas of research, namely those dealing with media coverage of feminism [1, 6, 7] and those dealing with digital advocacy strategies [8], including research on interest groups and women's groups [2, 9].

More specifically, the study focuses on the analysis of the discursive framing of three Quebec newspapers and the Collectif 8 mars in the context of International Women's Day. After presenting the state of knowledge on the media coverage of feminist issues, the text provides an overview of what is known about online feminist mobilizations, the media coverage of these issues and the strategies for using the Web by social movements. Then, issues specific to the period under study, March 8, and the associated data collection and analysis are presented. Our results illustrate the themes addressed by the traditional media and the Collectif 8 mars, and then focus on the latter's use of social networks.

The analysis contributes to documenting the media framing of feminist issues in Quebec and the resulting representations of women's equality issues. In addition, it helps to shed light on the uses of the Web by women's groups, which are more focused on consolidating and highlighting a feminist mobilization network than on political information strategies [10].

2 Status of the Issue

2.1 Feminism in the Digital Age

The Quebec women's movement has a network of large, established organizations and interest groups that emerged at the turn of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1980s. This wave was marked by demands for reproductive rights, equality in employment (pay equity) and representation in public spheres [11, 12]. Despite a significant loss of funding since the 2000s, the Quebec feminist movement remains organized and among the best funded in Canada and remains an important source of influence in the political sphere [13].

Digital tools have contributed to the transformation of the feminist movement. It has become more technologically democratized and organized in a networked structure in which women and girls are also involved [14, 15]. These digital possibilities have enabled the emergence of online social movements focusing on violence against women, including sexual violence and rape culture (e.g., #MeToo, #StopCultureDuViol) or violence against indigenous women (e.g., #IdleNoMore). This feminist movement, described as fourth wave feminism, which aims to "combat oppression like racism and sexism by mobilizing an intersectional feminist angle that (1) sees social media (e.g., Twitter), as an indispensable tool and (2) strongly resists the separation between what is offline and what is online" [16, p. 55].

If generational changes help explain changes in the demands and structure of the feminist movement [17], we believe that the study of advocacy strategies following the distinction between grassroots social movements in which recent feminist online mobilizations (#MeToo, #OnVousCroit, #StopCultureDuViol) are embedded and organized

interest groups can also explain differences in advocacy and political action strategies [5].

2.2 Media Coverage of Feminism

The media coverage of feminism shows disparities with the claims of the feminist movement. It is portrayed more as a ‘popular’ movement, embodied by public figures [18] or a so-called ‘neoliberal’ feminism¹ [21]. These tendencies lead to a rather depoliticized portrait in which “structural critiques of gender inequalities tend to be obscured” [1, p. 720]. Thus, discourses that criticize patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence have less visibility than celebrity and corporate feminisms [6, 7, 21]. Moreover, in the case of the #MeToo movement, celebrities and white women tend to get more media attention and more favorable media treatment [18, 22].

To our knowledge, however, there are no Canadian studies on media coverage of feminism in Canada or Quebec. The studies that have been identified focus mainly on media coverage in the American [23, 24] and/or English [1, 6, 7] context. A few studies have sought to provide a comparative portrait, notably in Japan, India and Australia, demonstrating the importance of social and cultural norms in the construction of media frames [4].

3 Digital Advocacy

The disparities between the demands and structure of the feminist movement and the media framing echo, more broadly, the challenges for social movements to get their discourse onto the media agenda [25, 26]. In this sense, digital social media are particularly useful for organizations and interest groups seeking to shape the public debate around specific issues [27], a situation that is explained in particular by their broad potential for dissemination to places of power [28]. Indeed, they help to facilitate access to the political class [29], journalists [30, 31] and the public [28].

According to the theoretical framework proposed by Johansson and Scaramuzzino [8], the logics of digital advocacy - that is, the strategies deployed by groups for strategic purposes - can be articulated around three main spheres: (1) access to the political class; (2) strategies to promote information for political purposes; (3) protest. In the case of this research, it will be examined to what extent feminist organizations use the digital sphere for political information. This tactic, which refers to strategic information sharing in the public sphere [10], has become an important strategy for interest groups in the digital sphere [8, 27].

According to Chalmers and Shotton [27], ‘social media are not only well-suited to news media lobbying strategies, but are also powerful tools for attracting media attention, shaping the news construction process and lobbying for influence through the news media’ (p. 377). However, it remains difficult to stand out on these platforms

¹ This political ideology assumes the existence of a meritocratic social structure and believes that people’s welfare is in their own hands [19]. It questions the existence of systemic barriers to explain social inequalities and manifests itself in a disinvestment of the state in social policy issues based on the idea of meritocracy [20].

because of the strong competition for attention from traditional media [29] or to become sources of information [30]. This paper will therefore examine the political information strategies put forward by the Quebec feminist community and the efforts made to be heard by the media.

4 March 8: International Women's Day

March 8 has been recognized worldwide as Women's Day since 1910 and was declared Women's Day by the United Nations in the 1970s. In Quebec, it has been associated with the mobilization for abortion rights and other major demonstrations [32]. The symbolic and international nature of this day gives it a particular value in the media sphere where women's issues are more likely to be covered in the media. In addition, feminist organizations working for women's rights are likely to focus particular efforts on highlighting the day and their demands.

In Quebec, the Collectif 8 mars, made up of 12 women's groups and union organizations representing more than 700,000 women in the province, meets every year to organize this day. Its mandate and actions focus on three areas: analyzing the situation of women in Quebec, designing tools and slogans related to March 8, and targeting and making visible actions and demands, particularly in the media. The Collective, created in 1996, plays a central role in the organization of mobilizations and feminist demands within the framework of the International Women's Day in Quebec. It has been active on the social and digital media since 2020, when its Facebook page and Twitter account were launched.

5 Corpus and Methodology

Considering studies on the media coverage of feminism that have shown disparities between the issues carried by the feminist movement and media coverage, we sought to know: what portraits of feminism and the issues that run through it are addressed in the traditional media and by women's groups in the social digital media? Regarding the Collectif 8 mars, we asked: what are the objectives pursued by women's groups in their publications? The analysis is based on the study of media data collected over a 5-year period (2017 to 2021) and data from the Collectif 8 mars's Twitter and Facebook accounts over a 2-year period (2020 and 2021).

5.1 Media Corpus

The media study focused on the three main French-language print and digital newspapers in Quebec (*Le Journal de Montréal*, *Le Devoir*, *La Presse*). A search in the Eureka database was used to collect all texts containing the keyword "femme(s)" that appeared on March 8 between 2017 and 2021. A manual selection was then made to remove texts that were not associated with this symbolic day. For example, news articles that mentioned the word "women" or reports on women's sports competitions were not retained. Texts that had a component relating to women's issues were kept, whether or not they referred directly to the Day. A total of 240 texts were thus retained. The following Table 1 shows the number of documents kept by media, by year.

Table 1. Media data for Quebec newspapers between 2017 and 2021

Year	Newspapers		
	La Presse	Le Journal de Montréal	Le Devoir
2017	38	5	12
2018	60	9	18
2019	10	9	14
2020	11	6	n. a.
2021	21	17	10
Total	140	46	54

Table 2. Data from the 8 March Collective's digital media

Year	Digital media	
	Facebook	Twitter
2020	133	24
2021	27	2
Total	160	26

5.2 Digital Media Corpus

The data for the social networks, namely Facebook and Twitter, were collected directly from the official public pages of the organization. We saved and analyzed all publications from the years 2020 and 2021, i.e., 160 Facebook publications and 26 Twitter publications. The data was downloaded in March 2022 from the Facepager software, which allows retrieving all the content elements of the publication. The following Table 2 shows the distribution of data collected by platform per year.

5.3 Analysis of the Data

The data analysis was based on a thematic content analysis method [33]. For the media data, the aim was to find out the main issues addressed. The non-mutually exclusive categories that make up the analysis grid were developed on an iterative basis, i.e., through a process of back and forth between the data in order to stabilize the analysis categories. The unit of analysis chosen was the unit of meaning, which varies in size - from a few words to sentences - since it allows us to focus on discovering the processes conveyed in the discourse [34]. Nine categories were chosen: women's under-representation, violence, economic issues, intersectionality, health and well-being, history and advances in equality, governance, gender differences, portraits of inspiring women and feminist struggles.

For the digital media data, the grid was divided into three sections: (1) the conversational markers (@ and #) used to register in conversational spaces; (2) the functions of the publication; and (3) the topics covered in the publications and tweets (the same as for the media analysis). For these data, the publications or tweets were the unit of analysis. For the first section, the presence of conversational markers (@ and #) was categorized according to the spheres of public space targeted (feminist, political, media or community and trade union). The functions, also established on an inductive and non-mutually exclusive basis, are of the order of five: information on issues and demands, interactions and demonstrations of relations with groups and the population, attempts to influence the media or the political milieu, demonstrations of solidarity and mobilization, information on the mission and internal affairs.

A inter-coder agreement process was conducted by the two authors using a random sample of 25% of each corpus. The initial agreement was 94% for traditional media, 97.5% for Facebook and 96.3% for Twitter. All disagreements were resolved to achieve 100% agreement. The lead author of the study coded the media data, while the second author coded the digital media data. The data were coded as either present (1) or absent (0) in an Excel file and the results were compiled using the NB.SI and NB.SI.ENS functions.

6 Results

This section is built around our two research questions. After comparing the themes addressed by the traditional media and the Collectif 8 mars, we will address the uses of the digital media by the Collectif 8 mars through the functions of the publications and tweets and the use of conversational markers.

6.1 Issues Addressed by the Mainstream Media and the Women's Movement

From the outset, we note that the themes addressed by the media and the Collectif 8 mars differ. While the former is more interested in issues of women's under-representation in the public sphere, the Collectif 8 mars makes little reference to feminist issues in its publications and tweets, except to mention feminist struggles. The following Fig. 1 graph shows the proportion of texts, publications or tweets that mobilize one or other of the five themes studied.

Although the theme most addressed by the Collectif 8 mars is feminist struggles, it is only addressed in 17.2% of the data from digital media, while it is addressed in 20% of the media documents, placing it in the top 5 of the issues addressed by traditional media. Next, the economy was discussed in 8.6% of publications and tweets, followed by violence (5.4%), intersectionality (4.3%) and gender (3.8%). Thus, the issues and demands of the Collective seem to be little discussed on these platforms.

For traditional media, issues of women's under-representation in the public sphere are the most addressed, in 44% of the documents, a proportion that increases over the years, from 38% in 2017 to 54% in 2021. This is addressed through the causes of women's under-representation in the upper echelons of power, including systemic barriers to entry, as well as gender differences in the division of household tasks. In the case of sports

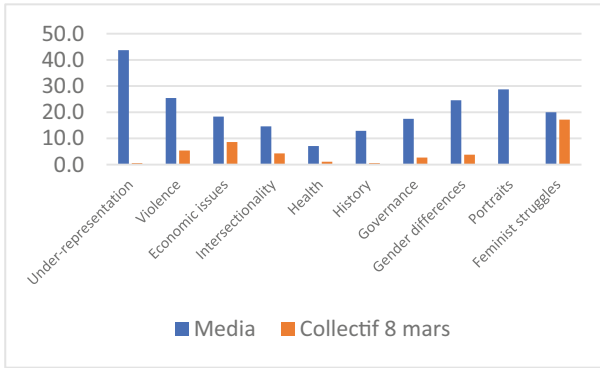


Fig. 1. Proportion (%) of mention of feminist themes and issues

journalism, the media treatment takes the form of interviews with women working in this field, including Chantal Machabée. They discuss the challenges they face and the greater acceptance of women in this field over time. This was followed by issues of violence (25.4%), a theme influenced by current events such as the mobilizations against rape culture in 2017 and 2018 and the Commission on Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women, as well as feminicides. The theme of differential barriers between women and men is addressed in similar proportions (24.6%) throughout the period under review.

It is worth noting that portraits of women, which rank second with 28.8% of media documents that address this angle, are largely the result of citizen texts, since in 2017 and 2018, the newspaper *La Presse* invited its readers to present a portrait of an inspiring woman in their daily lives. The texts produced by the journalistic team adopt this angle to a lesser extent, i.e., 19.6% of the texts. The media documents also deal with economic issues (18.3%), governance (17.5%) in similar proportions, followed closely by intersectionality issues (14.6%) and a historical overview (12.9%). Finally, health and well-being issues are only addressed in 12.9% of the texts.

6.2 Digital Strategies of the Collectif 8 Mars

The main functions of the publications and the conversation markers show that their use is more oriented towards the trade union and community network and less towards the political or media environment. Firstly, the conversation markers (#) are used in 83.1% of publications and 92% of tweets. The #8Mars (#March8) is used in 97% of these publications and 95.8% of tweets, either alone or in combination with other tags, such as #feminists and #JournéeInternationaleDesDroitsDes Femmes (#International-WomensDay). This keyword, which is among the most used in Canada [35], thus makes it possible to reach a wide audience, beyond the feminist movement. The use of conversational tags (@) is absent on the Facebook platform, where this strategy is used in only 44.1% of tweets, most of the time (81.8%) to identify members of the union or community sector.

Regarding the functions of the publications and tweets produced by the Collectif 8 mars, we note that these are mostly centered on demonstrating the group's presence in

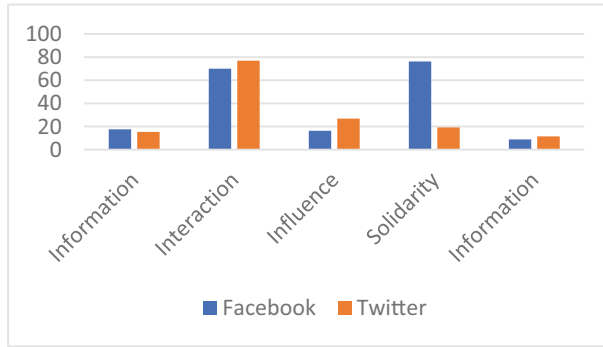


Fig. 2. Proportion (%) of functions present in publications and tweets

the community. The graph Fig. 2 shows the frequency with which each function was mobilized on Facebook and Twitter.

Facebook posts are used in 70% of cases to emphasize interaction with other groups or with the public, and to demonstrate solidarity in 76.3%. In both cases, the use of photos of members with collective posters and the citation of the names of organizations are highly mobilized. Facebook posts are also used to convey information about feminist issues or demands in 17.5% of cases, to report on attempts to influence the political or media environment in 16.3% of cases, and to convey information about the organization (its mission, its actions) in 8.8% of cases. The same trend, or almost the same trend, can be observed on Twitter. In 76.9% of cases, publications are used to interact or report on interactions with groups and the community. The use of tweets for influence is slightly higher (26.9% of cases), followed by solidarity in 19.2% of cases, sharing information about feminist issues and demands in 15.4% of cases and finally to transmit data about the organization in 11.5% of cases.

7 Discussion

The results are interesting in several respects. First, they allow us to document the themes addressed by the traditional media and to highlight certain differences between the media coverage in Quebec and that observed elsewhere. Second, they allow us to compare them to those put forward by the Collectif 8 mars, a central group in the feminist network regarding the demands made for International Women's Rights Day. The digital strategies put forward by the Collectif 8 mars do not focus on disseminating information or attempting to gain access to and influence with the political and media class, but rather reflect a network between the Collectif and the feminist and worker's union movement.

From the outset, we note that, in general, there is a disparity between the demands of the fourth-wave digital feminism and the media coverage of feminism in Quebec. Moreover, the media coverage shows certain similarities with the findings on media coverage of feminism in the United States and the United Kingdom [6, 7, 23]. Indeed, some of the main themes covered by the Quebec media, such as the preponderance of the issue of women's under-representation in the public sphere, and the differentiated economic barriers between men and women are consistent with Kaitlynn Mendes' findings regarding

media interest in issues of sexism, discrimination, pay equity and the glass ceiling [6, 7]. However, the interest of the Quebec media in the theme of violence, as well as the interest given to feminist struggles, demonstrates that feminist mobilizations, both online and offline, are echoed in media coverage. Moreover, the governance issues - an element that was not noted in our review of other writings on the media coverage of feminism - suggest a Quebec singularity. Indeed, the Quebec feminist movement remains more involved in social policy mobilizations and struggles than elsewhere [13]. Despite this, the issue of intersectionality is not very present, and the inductive categorization did not reveal any mention of the systemic causes of inequality (e.g. the patriarchal structure). This finding is consistent with those made in the various studies reviewed above.

Secondly, the coding of the themes addressed in the publications of the Collectif 8 mars shows that the uses of social media by women's groups are not centered around information strategies for political purposes [8, 10]. Indeed, few themes and issues are addressed in the publications, except for the dimension of feminist struggles, all categories being below the 9% mark. Furthermore, the uses show strategies that are more focused on highlighting a network of solidarity and interaction between the Collectif 8 mars and worker's union and feminist organizations. The main functions of the publications, i.e., highlighting interactions between the Collective and the community, as well as demonstrations of solidarity between organizations, illustrate this trend. The use of hashtags is also part of this trend. Although #8mars is widely used in Canada, increasing the chances of the Collective's publications and tweets appearing in more widely used discussion networks, it mobilizes few #s outside of feminist networks, which would have allowed it to bring its demands into a broader discursive space, such as politics. In the light of the studies, there are various reasons for this observation. On the one hand, interest groups do not necessarily have the expertise, resources and time to develop an effective strategy for managing digital media [36]. This observation was confirmed by activists from French feminist groups who mentioned that the use of these platforms required training, time and skills that employees did not always possess [37]. On the other hand, not all groups that have the resources and expertise to do so place the same importance on information strategies for political purposes or lobbying through traditional media [8, 27]. Finally, some groups already have networks of contacts with the mainstream media. In this context, digital media do not necessarily provide added value for groups whose expertise is already recognized by the media. This is one of the findings of a study of Canadian women's groups promoting parity in politics [9].

8 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to compare the representations of feminism and equality issues in the mainstream media and in the Quebec feminist movement. The results show that there are significant disparities between the themes addressed by the traditional media and those put forward by the Collectif 8 mars, with the latter putting little emphasis on the issues and demands of the movement in its publications and tweets. Moreover, the Collectif 8 mars makes greater use of social and digital media to illustrate a feminist solidarity network. In sum, while the current feminist movement has oriented a significant part of its strategies towards online mobilizations [14] and several of these mobilizations

have found a significant echo in the traditional media [1], we note that the strategies of the Collectif 8 mars, which brings together several key Quebec feminist organizations, are not part of this digital feminist movement.

However, the media period studied is longer than that of the Collectif 8 mars because of its recent arrival on the digital media. Furthermore, the choice of March 8 as the moment of study for traditional newspapers cannot constitute a fully representative portrait of the media coverage of feminism. In the same vein, the Collectif 8 mars, although it brings together several union and feminist organizations, does not constitute an accurate portrait of the entire Quebec feminist movement.

Thus, while the research touches on several little-documented areas in terms of the mediatization of feminism and the uses of the Web by women's groups, several avenues remain to be explored. Among other things, it would be interesting to extend the collection of data from digital media to other feminist groups and organizations and to conduct interviews with them in order to understand the reasons behind their choice of digital strategies.

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