

Digital masquerading: Feminist media activism in China

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Abstract

In March 2015, five young feminists were detained and accused of “disturbing public order” through their plan to circulate messages against sexual harassment in public transportation. This article focuses on the feminist media practices before and after the detention of the Feminist Five to shed light on the dynamics between state surveillance and incrimination, media activism, and feminist politics in China. Exploring the practices of the Youth Feminist Action School, it argues that the role of media in this new wave of feminist activism can be better understood as a form of “digital masquerading” in three ways. First, this captures the self-awareness and agency of feminists in their tactical use of media to circumvent censorship. Masquerading in the digital era is an active and self-conscious act leveraging the specificity of media practice to set the media agenda, increase public influence, and avoid censorship. Second, masquerading refers to the digital alteration of images in order to tactically represent women’s bodies in public spaces while circumventing censorship and possible criminalization. It highlights the figurative and the corporeal in online digital activist culture, which are oftentimes overlooked in existing literature. Third, while the masquerade in psychoanalytic theory emphasizes individualized gendered identity, the notion of digital masquerade points to the interface between the medium and the subjects, which involves collective efforts in assembling activist activities and remaking publicness.

Keywords

China, digital, feminism, masquerade, media activism

In March 2015, five young feminists in China, who had planned to circulate messages against sexual harassment in public spaces, were detained for inducing social instability. Their detention has received considerable international attention and has sparked a series of activist actions, such as online petitions, supporting photos, and street protests (Jacobs, 2015). The official account states that the Feminist Five were detained for “disturbing public order” by planning to distribute print materials on public transportation. Although the right to protest is technically enshrined in the constitution, public gatherings and protests are under constant surveillance and suppression.

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