

## UNRULY WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: LA BARBE ON LE PETIT JOURNAL<sup>48</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article considers the social consequences of transgressing expected norms of gendered behaviour in the public sphere of a mainstream French television programme. La Barbe, who appeared on *Le Petit Journal* in December 2011, elicited an onslaught of indignant and sardonic public responses via social media. Drawing on Meehan (1995), Fraser (1990, 1995), and Landes (1995), this article analyses the televised appearance and the online reactions. Due to La Barbe's unsuccessful communication and interested discourse, the public denounced, and so attempted to regulate, feminist disobedience.

**Key words:** Feminism. Direct action. Media Reception. Deviance. France.

[F]ew things say "oppressed Other" quite like a woman in a false beard being shooed out of a meeting populated by important [...] men' (MCDONALD, 2012, p. 7).

On 9 December 2011 two women with false beards appeared on the French television entertainment programme *Le Petit Journal*, hosted by Yann Barthès on the channel Canal+ (see Figure 1). They were representing La Barbe,<sup>50</sup> an apolitical French feminist action group founded in 2008 and based in Paris. This group aims to render both visible and ridiculous the absence or under-representation of women<sup>51</sup> in all places of power in the realms of politics,

48 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). This paper draws on material submitted as part of my Master of Arts at the University of Manchester in 2013.

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50 'La barbe' literally means 'the beard', but in colloquial French it evokes one's boredom and exasperation (although, 'ça me barbe!' is rarely employed in contemporary, continental France).

51 This paper refers to male privilege in the context of the public sphere; while this privilege is complicit in the oppression of people of many genders (specifically, people who are not cis

economics, culture, and the media. Using irony, they denounce a society in which antiquated male attitudes persist. Their direct action consists of uninvited interventions at meetings, whereby they take the stage, sometimes holding a sign, and congratulate the targeted group for their predominantly male demographic.

FIGURE 1 – Screenshot of La Barbe's appearance on *Le Petit Journal* in their segment '5 questions à...' on 9 December 2011.



SOURCE: *20 Minutes* (posted on 12 December 2011) (CHAUVEL, 2011a).

The two aforementioned women, Céline and Amélie, were invited to appear on *Le Petit Journal* following their forceful ejection (see Figure 2) from the third UMP<sup>52</sup> convention on 7 December 2011 in Paris, at which they had carried out an unexpected intervention.

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men, i.e. 'male with a male gender identity'), this paper focuses on the oppression experienced by cis women.

52 The 'Union for a Popular Movement' is a centre-right political party in France.

FIGURE 2 – Photo of La Barbe's intervention at the third UMP convention on 7 December 2011 in Paris.



SOURCE: La Barbe's *Facebook* page (posted on 10 December 2011).

The televised appearance on *Le Petit Journal*, however, was generally considered a publicity failure. Notably, in some cases online critics accused La Barbe of damaging 'the feminist cause' (Aby, interviewed in CHAUVEL, 2011b, para. 7). Rather than replying to the habitual jokes and questions of the host, they used the opportunity to highlight the male dominance in Canal+ by reading aloud a list of the leaders, who for twenty-five years had all been men.

As well as the televised public appearance, the public backlash on the Internet, notably on social media, holds particular interest, as it reveals the way in which an unexpectedly handled event can pervert public opinion. Therefore, two interconnected public spheres are distinguished here – the television programme and online (social) media. I aim to reveal the extent to which La Barbe's failure to

assimilate the expected norms of gendered behaviour in the public sphere of the television programme led to what Habermas terms ‘unsuccessful’ communication. To do this, I apply feminist critiques, interpretations, explanations, and elaborations of Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the ‘public sphere’<sup>53</sup> (1994), most notably those of Johanna Meehan (1995), Nancy Fraser (1990, 1995), and Joan B. Landes (1995), to both these spaces of ‘political participation, debate, and opinion formation’ (FRASER, 1995, p. 27). Subsequently, I explore how La Barbe’s ‘interested’ discourse is, in this case, aligned with femininity and considered inadmissible in the public sphere. Finally, the ensuing attempts –by individuals in the public sphere of online (social) media– to regulate deviant behaviour will lead us to question the place ‘allowed’ to women for dissent and unruliness within the public sphere *in general* in contemporary France. As Fraser (1995, pp. 44–45) notes, ‘the means of interpretation and communication [...] have always been controlled by men’, thus by applying some of the observations of feminist scholars, and adhering to the sociological theory of social constructivism,<sup>54</sup> this essay is intended as a contribution to the feminist struggle to ‘redistribute and democratize access to, and control over, discursive resources’.

## I: ‘UNSUCCESSFUL’ COMMUNICATION

The public sphere of the broadcast media requires that certain social norms be followed in order for speech acts to be successfully communicated.<sup>55</sup> Communication breaks down when these normatively secured forms of socially

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53 I also refer briefly to Habermas’s speech act theory (1984), and theory of communicative reason (1984).

54 For a discussion of ‘strong’ social constructivism as a philosophical approach, see: Collins, 1981, p. 3; for a radical philosophical position concerning social constructivism, see: Cottone, 2012.

55 While Habermas is referring to ‘successful communication’ in the period of ‘modernity’ which spans anything from ~1500 to ~1990, this theory could also be applied to the period from the late twentieth century to the present, a period termed ‘liquid modernity’ by Zygmunt Bauman (2000).

integrated action<sup>56</sup> are subverted or overtly ignored. As Habermas does not sufficiently stress how these forms of action are regulated by power (FRASER, 1995, p. 29), this paper mainly employs feminist interpretations of his account.

During the televised public appearance, La Barbe defied expectations of acceptable behaviour in this public sphere and instead criticised the configuration of the sphere of the media itself – a move that they were unable to defend appropriately, and which led to unsuccessful communication. *Le Petit Journal* format requires its guests to give short responses to the preplanned questions posed by the host, Barthès. However, La Barbe chose to ignore the questions and instead read aloud a list. They *could* have explained that, as Fraser (1995, p. 33) puts it, the differences in the ‘quality of women’s presence in the paid workplace testify to the conceptual dissonance between femininity and the worker role in classical capitalism. And this in turn confirms the masculine subtext of that role’. Yet, instead of verbalising their arguments in this manner (and in the context of the quick-fire question-response formal structure of the programme), La Barbe dictated the focus for their segment on their own, more *symbolic*, terms. This was done by addressing their current ‘environmental’ context –that of the public sphere of the media– in which men continue to dominate the most influential and powerful roles. In an interview in *20 minutes*, another member of La Barbe, Aby (interviewed in CHAUVEL, 2011b, para. 3), explains that Céline and Amélie’s actions were in keeping with the group’s ethos: ‘We stay faithful to our overall aim [to use irony to draw attention to male dominance], and we inform ourselves about the place we’re going. In this case, it was Canal+, a channel that has been exclusively directed by men for 25 years. Therefore, our first intention was to congratulate Canal+ for this.’<sup>57</sup> La Barbe used their temporary access to this sphere to draw attention to its

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56 Actions ‘coordinated on the basis of a conventional, prereflective, taken-for-granted consensus about values and ends, consensus rooted in the precritical internalization of socialization and cultural tradition’, the opposite of which are “communicatively achieved” forms of socially integrated action [... which] involve actions coordinated on the basis of explicit, reflectively achieved consensus, consensus reached by unconstrained discussion under conditions of freedom, equality, and fairness’ (FRASER, 1995, p. 28).

57 All translations are my own. Original French: ‘Nous, on suit notre ligne, on se renseigne sur l’endroit où l’on va. Là, c’était Canal +, une chaîne qui est dirigée exclusivement par des

massive flaws, inherent discrimination, and participation in the continued oppression and subjugation of women – but they did this only symbolically, thereby leading to unsuccessful communication. In any case, the audience for an entertainment programme is not necessarily well prepared for a diversion from the expected.

Portraying male dominance in this sphere as tangible and unjustifiable is not a view generally considered valid in public discourse, which can be seen by society's largely uncritical acceptance of institutionalised and normalised male privilege; therefore La Barbe were not able to defend their claim 'appropriately'. Habermas argues that claims arise in three differentiated spheres of values, which parallel three formal conceptual distinctions<sup>58</sup> and can be grouped as such: cognitive/objective, normative/social, and expressive/subjective (MEEHAN, 1995, p. 4). Successful communication requires that claims about social norms must be defended 'on the basis of their rightness, the validity of which are negotiated in social and moral discourse' (MEEHAN, 1995, p. 4). La Barbe's refusal to ignore their immediate situation (their presence on a televised media programme from a channel that is largely run by men) meant that they were radically threatening the legitimacy of the television programme and its norms. These norms require deference to the social and cultural position held by the host, the channel, and the public sphere of the media in general.

La Barbe's speech act and behaviour during their televised appearance were not incompetent. Instead, this particular example of deviance exemplifies the role that ideology plays in maintaining the current power structures of society. The belief that male hegemony and monopoly of power is a harmful exertion of male privilege is the foundation of La Barbe's rationale. They work from the premise that this male privilege in the media subjugates women and is therefore a detrimental social norm that needs to be contested in public. Yet this claim could not possibly

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hommes depuis 25 ans. Donc notre première intention était de féliciter Canal + pour cela' (Aby, interviewed in CHAUVEL, 2011b, para. 3).

58 Also referred to as 'an ontology of three worlds' (ERIKSSON, 1999, p. 4), 'three different ontological domains' (MEDINA, 2005, p. 7), and 'the ontological presuppositions of three interlinked and interdependent worlds' (PLEASANTS, 1999, p. 8).

be defended by appeals to ‘reasons accepted as legitimate by the community of modern subjects’ (MEEHAN, 1995, p. 4), because, in order to preserve itself, the media attempts to socially condition the public to believe their authority is legitimate and authentic. Indeed, La Barbe’s actions irritated many members of the public. This reveals how much we value having our expectations met, but also how susceptible we are, as a public, to manipulation by the media – the television programme and, in this case, a damning article in *Madmoizelle* (see PERNAUT, 2011). Indeed, this article, cited by countless critics, brought the programme to the attention of many viewers who would not have otherwise taken to online social media to express their opinions.

The most lucid analysis of the event and its aftermath in the media and on social media websites comes from media arts lecturer Jean-nöel Lafargue, in a post on *Le Dernier des blogs*. Lafargue (2011, para. 5) briefly mentions the role played by the camera in creating complicity between the viewer and the host rather than between the viewer and the guests (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3 – Screenshot of La Barbe’s televised appearance, posted on *Le Dernier des Blogs* on 11 December 2011, with the caption: ‘In passing, it’s interesting to note that only the host has the right to seek the complicity of the viewer by looking straight at the camera...’<sup>59</sup> (LAFARGUE, 2011, para. 5).



SOURCE: *Le Dernier des Blogs*

This type of clip, Lafargue argues, allows us to understand the very nature of mass audiovisual media and its inability to accept that which breaks the rules. This ability to critique the functioning of the media is a role which Pierre Bourdieu

59 Original French: ‘On remarque au passage que seul le présentateur a le droit d’aller chercher la complicité du spectateur en regardant la caméra en face...’ (LAFARGUE, 2011, para. 5).

(1996) claims the media reserve only for themselves. It is also a transgression of the ideology promoted by the media. Furthermore, a system of oppression is most successful when it does not appear oppressive to the oppressed. In order to preserve their aura of ‘authenticity’ –an aura which was undermined by La Barbe, but rarely contested in the media and social media following this event–, those who create the television programme depict such transgressive individuals as incoherent, ideologically erroneous, and, most importantly, *unlike* the spectator. Due to the credibility assumed by this type of mass audiovisual media, the effectiveness of dominant ideology as propagated by the media, and the lack of critical examination (by viewers) of that dominance, many members of the public did not perceive the core reasons for La Barbe’s actions. This inability to be understood by the public was therefore especially exacerbated by the form of the programme.

Overall, La Barbe could not have been what Habermas and most of his critics deem ‘successful’ in their communication without hypocritically abandoning the very aims of their organisation. This situation exemplifies a case of unsuccessful communication because the way in which La Barbe presented their message was unexpected *and* it was formally undermined. Equally, La Barbe’s attack on the success of social norms concerning male privilege was too subversive for the public to agree with La Barbe’s speech act, and the ideology espoused by the media discourages any criticism of its functioning by anyone other than itself.

## II: ‘FEMININE’ INTERESTED DISCOURSE AS INADMISSIBLE

La Barbe acknowledged the formal structure of the programme *Le Petit Journal* by undermining and thereby criticising the way in which the media functions. Yet they also displayed an interest in their subject, thus ignoring the rule of disinterested discourse as a prerequisite for successful participation in the public



sphere of the television programme. While Habermas's conclusions about 'disinterested discourse' are useful, Landes (1995, p. 98) notes that:

Habermas overlooks the strong association of women's discourse and their interests with 'particularity,' and conversely the alignment of masculine speech with truth, objectivity, and reason. Thus, he misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal.

The association that continues even in late modernity of the private sphere of emotions with women and the public sphere of reason with men is a socially constructed and uncritically accepted fallacy. For that reason, a feminist interpretation is now more appropriate when analysing women's participation in the public sphere.

To be considered as legitimately expressing one's views, a personal distance from the topic is expected, and the public are to behave 'according to the bourgeois liberal principle of abstract equality' (LANDES, 1995, p. 97). Therefore, any rejection of 'disinterested discourse' in favour of an explicit display of emotion –ultimately revealing the speaker's deep and personal implication in and experience of the topic in question– is implicitly considered 'unacceptable' behaviour in the public sphere of the media.<sup>60</sup> By highlighting the considerable under-representation of women in powerful positions, and therefore drawing attention to male privilege, La Barbe reassert the feminist adage 'the personal is political'.<sup>61</sup> This is disruptive as 'the public sphere and the conditions for publicity presupposed a distinction between public and private matters, [so] it was ill equipped to consider in public fashion the political dimension of relations in the intimate sphere' (LANDES, 1995, p. 97). It is not that women are inherently unable to master the rules of disinterested discourse or exhibit 'reason'; the issue is instead that disinterested discourse and abstract equality are the privileges of those who are not institutionally and systematically oppressed. When an individual

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60 This point would remain the same if 'gender' were replaced by 'race' or 'class' (or any other system of oppression). Privileges are held by some members of society, which in this case is male privilege, but could just as easily be white, middle-class, educated, cisgender, etc. For a discussion of privileges, see: McIntosh, 1988.

61 While the origins of the phrase are unknown, Carol Hanisch (1969) popularised this phrase.

or group of people –in this case the public and the media– does not acknowledge their privileges, their refusal to acknowledge their complicity in the oppression of other groups of people is revealed. La Barbe's choice of topic (male privilege) and the way in which they presented it (with 'interest') are explicitly tied up with the issue of gender, and mean they are automatically refused the label of 'reasonable' participants in the public sphere of the media.

The public sphere of the media is a middle-class system of cultural hegemony in which social norms considered 'acceptable' for successful communication are socially constructed as an inherently masculine ideal, which in turn covertly illegitimizes women's participation. Dorinda Outram (1989, p. 158) notes that these systems:

privilege over-arching *languages*, such as the language of objectivity and rationality, rather than privileging energy or displays of integration between body and personality: display is characterized as aristocratic, emotionality and subjectivity as feminine, physical energy as plebeian.

While women can and do 'successfully' communicate in the public sphere of the media, it is due to their strict adherence to what I consider a duality of expected behavioural norms for women in the public sphere (see the green areas in Figure 4). One set is coded as inherently masculine, but also neutral, natural and *ideal*, such as rationality, composure, and assertiveness; the other set as *acceptably* feminine, such as passivity, acquiescence, and submission. Unacceptable for women is the corresponding duality of the set of behaviours which designate traditional masculinity, such as outward displays of anger, aggression, and assertions of dominance (BAKER, 1992, p. 127); and the set of 'natural' but negative feminine behaviours which need to be repressed, such as passion, excessive emotion, and hysteria (MYERS & WIGHT, 1996, sec. xiii). Neither of these two latter sets of behaviours is acceptable in the public sphere of the television programme.

FIGURE 4 – Dualities of gendered behavioural norms in the public sphere

	masculine	feminine
positive	rationality / composure / assertiveness	passivity / acquiescence / submission
negative	outward displays of anger / aggression / assertions of dominance	passion / excessive emotion / hysteria

SOURCE: Amy E Forrest

Even some self-proclaimed feminists conveyed their irritation that La Barbe had behaved according to the feminist stereotype. For example, on her blog *Une baignoire et des ronds dans l'eau*, 'Sasa' (2011, para. 7) expresses her infuriation: 'AGAIN, we've been presented as frustrated, bitter, vengeful, dogmatic feminists. How counter-productive, fuck!'.<sup>62</sup> However, this argument (and this stereotype of 'the feminist') stems from a deeply ingrained conception in society of the acceptable woman as 'feminine', which connotes docility, agreeability, and, most of all, passivity. Since feminism as an ideology generally attempts to *actively* subvert and denounce existing power structures and institutionalised, normalised systems of oppression, feminists are the embodiment of the 'unacceptable' woman – yet even some feminists have internalised the 'acceptable' feminine stereotype. Any outward display, from women, of aggression and contempt for an established system (in this case, the expectation in the programme that guests should 'play the

62 Original French: 'on [...] est ENCORE passées pour des frustrées, aigries, revanchardes, et féministes de manière dogmatique. Quelle action contre productive bordel !' ('Sasa', 2011, para. 7).

game' correctly) is a blatant rejection of the expected norms and conventions of 'correct' gendered behaviour, and so has a perturbing effect upon the public.

In summary, La Barbe did not employ 'disinterested discourse' or follow the 'principle of abstract equality' – the only acceptable behaviour and one that is gendered as both masculine and neutral. These particular inherently gendered norms of behaviour are a prerequisite for 'successful' participation in the public sphere of the television programme. Therefore, La Barbe, who were following their overall group aim to denounce masculine hegemony, were unsuccessful in their communication as they chose to overtly continue their work, rather than submit to the programme's formal structure and behavioural expectations.

### III: REGULATING FEMINIST DEVIANCE

Due to this 'unsuccessful' communication, especially in the form of 'interested' discourse, the public –including many self-proclaimed feminists– denounced, and so exhibited attempts to regulate, the deviant behaviour of La Barbe through the public sphere of online (social) media.<sup>63</sup> An accessible tool, the Internet is a relatively new addition to the largely symbolically reproduced<sup>64</sup> and socially integrated public sphere. While it is possible that, in certain circumstances, participation in the public sphere can allow one the opportunity to challenge established authority,<sup>65</sup> in this instance Internet users expressed their opinions with the implicit intended effect that the potential for any similar future transgressive actions be suppressed.

Social norms remain well established and rarely contested, even among feminists. If one adheres to the theory of communicative reason (HABERMAS,

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63 I focus on various blog posts, online newspaper articles, and *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and forum contributions from 09 December 2011 to 23 June 2012 (although most were posted in the four days following the televised appearance). Messages on the principal social networks, however, are difficult to verify as many have since been removed.

64 Fraser (1995, p. 23) defines symbolic reproduction as comprising 'the socialization of the young, the cementing of group solidarity, and the transmission and extension of cultural traditions'.

65 Landes (1995, p. 95) notes that Habermas initially proposes this.

1984), which describes human rationality as an inevitable result of successful communication, it follows logically that some individuals would consider La Barbe as lacking reason, as they displayed *unsuccessful* communication. Yet this supposition does not explain nor excuse the lack of sufficiently critical analysis (see Figure 5), not just of the event itself, but also of the immediate reactions surrounding the event.

FIGURE 5 – Collection of examples of reactions on *Twitter*.<sup>66</sup>



SOURCE: *Twitter*, compiled by Amy E Forrest.

66 English translation: Julien Jakoby: 'The collective la barbe or when your sales pitch is no better than that of a 3-year-old child'; Robin McEwen: 'The way they screw up, from 12 mins onwards, really makes you uncomfortable...'; Kenza Sadoun: 'Here we're not defending feminist ideas, we're advocating mediocrity. They're afflicted with idiocy!'; LoCiol: 'I've finally watched the feminists of La Barbe on Petit Journal... I can hardly even feel pity for them faced with so much mediocrity.'; Antoine Morelle: '#feminism ruined by two idiots (= @labarbelabarbe): awful and #disappointing'; Aurélien Lewin: 'These women are pathetic'; Virage: 'Even I'm more convincing with my aborted foetuses'.

Fraser (1995, p. 44) argues that ‘the key to an emancipatory outcome lies in the second element of Habermas’s conception of decolonization [of the lifeworld by the systems] – namely, the replacement of normatively secured contexts of interaction by communicatively achieved ones’. One could expect online (social) media to be the ideal public sphere for this succession, especially led by feminists who are normally denied ‘access to, and control over, discursive resources’ (FRASER, 1995, p. 45) in other public spheres. These feminists could encourage the public to form opinions concerning radical politics that are more measured, and they could expose the effects of normalisation on society’s conception of appropriate gender roles (one could also argue that La Barbe should have done and should do this). However, in this case, one could not possibly speculate that this replacement (‘of normatively secured contexts of interaction by communicatively achieved ones’ Fraser (1995, p. 44)) was being sought after, as the immediate reactions on the Internet were those which stem from well-established (gendered) norms about acceptable behaviour (which notably does not include aggression and a refusal to cooperate). One such exemplary reaction is from ‘Sasa’ (2011, para. 2), who characterises Céline and Amélie as ‘unpleasant and aggressive in form, lacking conviction and force of persuasion in content’.<sup>67</sup> In a comment attached to a photo that was posted on La Barbe’s *Facebook* page, Paprika Sobab (2011, para. 1), also, angrily distances herself from their onscreen actions on *Le Petit Journal*, while paradoxically relating her online tenacity with theirs:

I’ve just watched two of your members on *Le Petit Journal* of *Canal Plus*: outrageous. No argument that makes sense, just a simple list of powerful men. YOU are simply sexist. We shouldn’t be fighting an extreme with another extreme. I am a woman and I do not want to be ‘defended’ by you. And I sincerely hope that I am not the only one. I will put up this comment each time you delete it (twice already). And I am rather stubborn... me too.<sup>68</sup>

67 Original French: ‘antipathique et agressif sur la forme, manquant de conviction et de force de persuasion sur le fond’ (‘Sasa’, 2011, para. 2).

68 Original French: ‘Je viens de voir l’apparition de 2 de vos membres au Petit Journal de Canal Plus : effarant. Aucun argument qui tienne la route, une simple liste d’hommes qui ont du

The censorship that La Barbe are accused of enacting on their *Facebook* page is certainly a defensive move, and simply exasperated critics and motivated them to repost.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, as the historian and visual cultures researcher André Gunthert (2011, para. 3) recognises on his blog *L'Atelier des icônes*, 'the spectator of the altercation feels that Céline and Amélie's actions show a complete lack of good social behaviour'.<sup>70</sup> This applies to both their televised appearance and their subsequent handling of communication on social media. Of all the critics, only Gunthert and Lafargue, both coming from the educational elite, suggest that the public's reactions to this event need to be analysed in order to expose deep societal prejudices. As Sophie-Pierre Pernaut (2011, para. 1) notes in an update to her much shared article on *MadmoiZelle*:

a post on *Le Dernier des Blogs* analyses the event from a purely mediated point of view. It's very interesting, even if, as young people concerned by the feminist cause, we do not perceive things from such an objective angle as the author of the post, who is a media specialist.<sup>71</sup>

Most other critics are decidedly less indulgent, but certainly feel more directly concerned by the actions of La Barbe.

The assumption of many female critics that the stereotype of 'the feminist' is destructive and undesirable shapes cultural knowledge about feminism in general. La Barbe may have embodied this stereotype on the television programme, but these critics do not question the origins of their assumption, nor do they consider the destructive nature of their own lack of solidarity. In summarising an argument

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pouvoir. VOUS êtes tout simplement sexiste. On ne combat pas un extrême par l'autre extrême. Je suis une femme et je ne veux pas être "défendue" par vous. Et j'espère sincèrement ne pas être la seule. Je remettrais ce commentaire chaque fois que vous le supprimerez (2fois). et [sic] je suis plutôt entêtée... moi aussi' (SOBAB, 2011, para. 1).

69 At the time of this article's publication, La Barbe have deleted all relevant comments posted by members of the public directly on their *Facebook* page. Only some comments remain, although they are attached to a choice photo of La Barbe's expulsion from the UMP meeting.

70 Original French: 'le spectateur de l'altercation ressent comme autant de manquements aux bonnes manières les défausses de Céline et d'Amélie' (GUNTHERT, 2011, para. 3).

71 Original French: 'un billet a été posté sur *Le Dernier des Blogs* afin d'analyser l'évènement d'un point de vue purement médiatique. C'est très intéressant, même si en tant que jeunes personnes concernées par la cause féministe, nous ne percevons pas les choses d'un oeil aussi objectif que l'auteur du billet, spécialiste des médias' (PERNAUT, 2011, para. 1).

made by Jane Braaten, Meehan (1995, p. 11) notes that the experience of solidarity in a feminist community clarifies the norms of that community. Many of those who were quick to attack La Barbe for having mishandled such an opportunity for publicity were also feminists who believed that the women's show of anger was harmful to 'feminism', such as 'Ninouchka' (2011, para. 2–3) on *Forum féministe*:

It looks like they're doing it on purpose. I want to say: 'answer, for crying out loud; speak to him normally, give some real arguments, you have them, you know the situation well enough!' Pfff... and every other feminist will now be marked with the same brush; none of whom will be pleased about this!<sup>72</sup>

This lack of solidarity in the feminist community for those who employ radical methods indicates that there is an unspoken rule, or norm, by which it is expected all feminists abide in order to remain respected and supported in their feminist community. This norm is the refusal of behaviour that one could construe as 'adhering' to the stereotype. This leads us to consider the dominant feminism in contemporary France, one that is individualist, neoliberal, essentialist, and much closer to supporting liberal or conservative causes than radical or anarchist actions. It is acceptable to fight for women's rights, but only if attempted using the established codes of behaviour. Those who get to speak for 'feminism' in the eyes of the public are the feminists who occupy positions of privilege (who obey the gender norms) and who are able to ostracise women like Céline and Amélie (who did not obey those norms). Aby, a member of La Barbe, defends and explains the media appearance, and notes this disparity: 'They approve of our words, but not our actions, like, as though we had been insolent'<sup>73</sup> (interviewed in CHAUVEL, 2011b, para. 5). These critics, many of whom self-identify as feminist, are fundamentally afraid of the stereotype of feminists as outwardly angry, hysterical,

72 Original French: 'On dirait qu'elles le font exprès. J'ai envie de dire : "mais répondez, bon sang, parlez-lui normalement, donnez de vrais arguments, vous les avez, vous connaissez bien la situation !". Pfff... et ça retombe sur toutes les féministes, ce qui en ravit plus d'un !' ('Ninouchka', 2011, para. 2–3).

73 Original French: 'On approuve notre parole, mais pas notre action, genre on a été insolentes' (Aby, interviewed in CHAUVEL, 2011b, para. 5).



uninformed women. Rather than showing solidarity with La Barbe and seeking to understand the motivations for their onscreen actions, many members of the public blame La Barbe for aggravating the social and cultural stereotype of feminists. Effectively, these individuals have contributed to the formation of feminist epistemology using normatively secured actions, rather than communicatively achieved ones.

As a site of opinion formation, online (social) media *could* provide the ideal environment for the advancement of a more considered insight into, and acceptance and perhaps even promotion of, dissident feminist social behaviour. However, instead of contributing to a positive, progressive epistemology of feminism, an analysis of the public's reactions in the public sphere of online (social) media reveals the extent to which the community of modern subjects unquestioningly and uncritically adheres to established norms and conventions of dominant culture overall.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

La Barbe displayed unsuccessful communication by addressing the flawed functioning of the very system through which it was being presented. This move was considered unacceptable to a public that generally accepts the ideology, authority, and authenticity of their media. La Barbe were unable to defend their claims appropriately due to the public's uncritical acceptance of institutionalised and normalised male privilege. Moreover, the very form of the programme contributed to the misunderstanding of La Barbe's symbolic, rather than verbal, methods of denouncing antiquated male attitudes.

Their interested discourse, which is aligned with femininity and considered inadmissible in the public sphere of the television programme, also prevented them from successfully communicating their points. Habermas's 'presuppositions of an abstract, universal model of the public sphere' (LANDES, 1995, p. 98), then, are

rightly challenged by feminist scholars who have revealed the strongly gendered implications for an individual or group's legitimate participation in the public sphere.

While the criticisms from the community of modern subjects in the public sphere of the Internet can be read as attempts to condemn and undermine the actions of La Barbe, they also serve to regulate any possible future subversive behaviour from feminists by shaming and Othering their actions. The reactions of such critics reveal deep societal prejudices. Feminist reactions also expose the general opposition to radical tactics and their uncritical adherence to established and gendered norms of contemporary French society. In addition, by analysing reactions in the public sphere of the Internet, it is clear that feminist epistemology is being formed using normatively secured actions, rather than communicatively achieved ones.

Radical means used by feminists such as La Barbe, while unsettling and unruly, are as legitimate as those which are more conservative, liberal, or accepted by the general public. These means must be analysed with more self-awareness, in order to be understood as reasonable attempts to instigate lasting social change in the public sphere in general. However, the public do not show a willingness to comprehend the subversive *actions* of deviant women and they still adhere to many conceptions of acceptable gendered behaviour, whether they self-define as feminist or not. La Barbe's failure was inevitable. As one *Forum féministe* contributor put it:

In any event, it's 'tails you lose, heads you don't win'. If they had responded straight away and with equal wit, we would have said: 'waah, look at the hysterical women, it's always the same with feminists, they're sexually frustrated.' Here, they had been quite passive and bam, they're attacked anyway.<sup>74</sup> ('pierregr', 2011, para. 1)

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- 74 Original French: 'De toute façon, c'est "pile tu perds, face tu gagnes pas". Si elles avaient répondu du tac au tac, on aurait dit "wahh, t'as vu les hystériques, toujours pareilles avec les féministes, c'est des mal baisées". Là, elles ont été plutôt passives et paf, ça leur retombe dessus' ('pierregr', 2011, para. 1).

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