Development
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-017-0137-2

DIALOGUE

Imagine a Feminist Internet

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Abstract We are in an age increasingly shaped and inflected by digital and networked technologies, which can act to augment, amplify or disrupt existing discrimination, exclusion and inequality. Using the Feminist Principles of the internet as a framework, this article examines the different facets of the intersection between digitally networked technologies and feminism at the areas of economy, autonomy and data, as well as movement building. It calls for the recognition, exploration and participation of diverse actors in feminist and women's movements into making a feminist internet.

Keywords Feminist internet · Movement building · Alternative digital economies · Intersectionality · Autonomy

> A feminist internet is an internet that makes resistance possible
> - Imagine a Feminist Internet Forum, Malaysia, 2014

Donna Haraway (1985) cast a critical feminist lens to the politics of technology in her seminal essay, 'The Cyborg Manifesto', in 1985. A little more than 30 years on, some of her questions on the relationship between feminism, technology and transformation remain sharply relevant, as we find ourselves in an age increasingly shaped and inflected by digital and networked technologies. The symbolic and discursive gain significance through memetic transmission of content in containers as simple as 140 characters or emotive gifs. Complex research is abstracted to infographics in a bid to capture an attention span trained by the rabbit holes of hyperlinks and recommended content. Embodied intimacy and the hard work of building trust and enacting care have gained within its toolbox digital prosthetics that enable almost real-time communication across distances—whether that distance is the span of a table or a continent. And in a time when the myth of coherent, stable, 'divine' identities is being digitally reified to stoke anxieties caused by the increasing failures of globalized capitalism, it seems Haraway's call for connections based on political kinship rather than identity is more resonant than ever.

However, women's movements have largely de-prioritized this field in their political engagement (Gurumurthy and Chami 2015). The reasons are many: from a sense of discomfort in digital technologies because of very real gendered disparities that exclude, to competing urgent issues that demand our attention in an increasingly fragmented movement driven by both complexity as well as shrinking resources. Given this reality, it is challenging to take on what appears functional on the surface, and possibly only relevant to those who have access and resources.

The Case of Online Gender-Based Violence

One example is on the issue of gender-based violence. Despite being a core advocacy area of women's movements where important strides have been made, the impact of digital technologies in enabling and amplifying acts of gender-based violence has not been subjected to the same levels of monitoring, analysis, scrutiny and demands for accountability and redress (APC 2015a). As a result,

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women who are subjected to rape (Bytes for All 2014) or who submit to continued violence in their homes (APC 2015b) because they are threatened with the dissemination of their sexualized videos have very limited access to justice (Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau 2014). Laws and trainings to police officers and the judiciary on addressing gender-based violence are slow to include this increasingly prevalent dimension. When laws are enacted without the participation of women's rights advocates—often spurred by moral panic—they tend to be protectionist in approach and work to diminish women's rights (APC 2015c). Women's rights organizations struggle to provide support receiving reports on online attacks faced by women for their opinions or advocacy (Kee and Randhawa 2009).

The complex terrain is constantly being shaped by multiple actors with different relationships of power with and accountability to each other (Internet Governance Forum 2015). Maybe for the first time, programmers have as much of a role to play as legislators in the work to address and prevent gender-based violence. As more feminists and women's rights activists take on the issue of online gender-based violence, the conversations and responses visibly shift. International human rights agreements begin to take into account the specificity of threats that are delivered through digital technologies towards people who are discriminated against on the basis of their gender and/or sexuality (UNHRC 2014a, b). New challenges and understanding of human rights application such as the right to freedom of expression (Kaye 2015), education (Kaye 2016) and privacy (Kaye 2016) began to incorporate gendered realities and experiences in its analysis. Social media corporations made a U-turn in their willingness to engage with online harassment when campaigns such as #FBrape (Little 2013) and Take Back the Tech! (APC 2014) demand for accountability and action. Internet rights and digital safety activists have started to pay more attention to the specificity of threats to women and queer people whose bodies and expressions are already under heavy albeit sometimes invisible social, cultural and political surveillance.

So we must engage. Because our engagement matters. Our engagement transforms how digital and internet technologies are being developed for whose interest and the rules of play. Our engagement makes visible what is invisible, including the cost of exclusion and of being hypervisible. Our engagement informs what is imagined to be necessary, and possible.

A Politics of Engagement

How do we as a movement begin this engagement? When the terrain is not only complex but historically exclusionary through a masculine bias that hides behind the language of technical neutrality. When we are under-resourced, overstretched and fighting multiple battles at the same time.

The AWID Forum theme of 'Feminist Futures: Building Collective Power for Rights and Justice' holds a clue to this question.

First, we are speaking about the present, as though it is the past, through the gaze of the future (Kee 2016). And the enmeshing of digital and networked technologies into every layer of personal, social, cultural, economic and political life will only gain momentum. This includes accessing government services through citizenship rights that can only be exercised when registered in a centralized database (Jonnalagadda 2016); replacing (female/migrant/poor) bodies that perform 'low-skilled' labour with autonomous machines driven by artificial intelligence (McAllister 2016; Moawad 2016); designing efficient cities and farms based on the invisible collection and aggregation of people, behaviour and identities (Smedley 2013; Gent 2016); the struggle to defend the space for consent and autonomy especially by already 'deviant' subjects (Kee 2011). We cannot afford to be hesitant and muted in how we imagine this future, as it unfolds in the present.

Second, it takes the work of many movements that come together at particular moments of political kinship to recognize each other's struggles, to learn each other's languages and to find that node of political connection for collective engagement. Manuel Castells (2012) calls this 'networks of outrage and hope'. Feminists know this as the practice and politics of solidarity. In this instance, to extend our curiosity and commitment to struggles that go beyond the hues within feminist and women's movements. And to discover, occupy or create spaces for the possibility of cross-movement solidarity in interrogation, excitement, learning, action and imagination.

The Feminist Principles of the internet[1] (FPI) was shaped through such an encounter. The principles were not designed as a set of rules or recommendations, but rather an articulation of key issues and a feminist politics and approach to begin the interrogation. They are an expression of the kind of internet we would like to have, and will contribute to shaping. Because the pace of technological development brings with it new questions, implications and issues, the principles are akin to a series of commas in a continuing conversation, rather than a full stop, with the aim of inviting more and more people to the dialogue.

The approach builds from both a feminist politics of collective ownership and distributed power, and the politics of openness and decentralized networked knowledge creation advocated by internet rights activists. Where every person is simultaneously an expert and a newbie in a cross-issue, cross-movement conversation. It understands that the

[1] http://feministinternet.net/, accessed 19 January 2017.

online is always located in the materiality of the people who engage in a multiplicity of spaces, and the importance of building resilient networks that is both embodied as flesh, and as discursive informational flows. Each encounter and every person within that encounter is a node and a gardener.

Commas as Seeds: Feminist Principles of the Internet

> A feminist internet works towards empowering more women and queer persons—in all our diversities—to fully enjoy our rights, engage in pleasure and play, and dismantle patriarchy.
> - Preamble, Feminist Principles of the internet

What are the key principles that are critical towards realizing a feminist internet? At its foundation, the principles are framed by a feminist interrogation of power. Version 2.0 with its 17 principles examines five broad areas. They are access to the internet, economy, expression, autonomy and movement building. For brevity, the following section will examine three of these areas as they unfold and resonate today.

Economy

Digital technologies have brought with them some interesting shifts in how we think about the economy and the distribution of resources. Amongst them, the copyleft movement began to seriously challenge the intellectual property rights regime that underpins much of the major industries today, from seeds to medicine to knowledge. Free/Libre Open Source Software[2] and copyleft activists[3] critically countered several key assumptions about knowledge creation and ownership. These include, one, it was necessarily the outcome of a single creator but rather a continuous process of building upon each other's work; two, it necessarily had to be circulated within a profit-driven economy; three, this needs to be challenged at the levels of legislation, infrastructure, application, culture and community.

These resonate strongly with a feminist politics that calls into question the monotheistic notion of the 'author' that either obscures or extracts knowledge from particular communities, for example work by indigenous women's rights groups to retain control over their communal knowledge and heritage on plants from pharmaceutical patenting.[4] The challenges and possibilities brought about through a technology that enables rapid copying, adaptation, dissemination and potentially global access to information in the process of knowledge building bring important questions to the forefront.

What is required to create an enabling environment that expands the public domain on information, culture and knowledge? How do they act to empower people as networked individuals and as collectives or communities, with existing differential historicities and power relations between them? What new questions are raised when a feminist postcolonial analysis is applied to ideas around the F/LOSS and copyleft movement, which also carries within them struggles around sexism?[5] In an age where culture, information and networks as capital are increasingly gaining currency, how can a feminist praxis of embodied knowledge challenge the notion of capital as object/product that can/needs to be regulated?

Another notable shift is in the adoption of the 'sharing economy'. The idea is that individuals are able to directly exchange resources, time, skills or assets with each other through the use of internet technologies. However, the more popular forms of 'sharing economy' involve corporations who mediate, aggregate, regulate and incentivize sharing such as AirBnB and Uber. As put by Nadine Moawad, 'What does it mean when the biggest hotel chain owns no hotels? And the biggest taxi company in the world owns no taxis?'[6] Does this empower those who participate in such hybrid economic models, or does it distribute risks and the cost of participation from corporations to individuals? Does this remove protection of rights as workers through the circumvention of institutions such as trade unions?

There is a need to '[interrogate] the capitalist logic that drives technology towards further privatization, profit and corporate control',[7] to understand what's at stake, which new actors are involved and emerging forms of circulation of capital that may act to exacerbate or narrow inequalities. There is a need to raise questions such as the role of the state in ensuring that fundamental human rights are protected—especially for those who face most discrimination and marginalization—and to build from shared values and work with potential allies in this area, and there is a need to

[2] For example, proponents of the GNU General Public Licence for software development, one of the most widely adopted forms of F/LOSS licensing to date for opening up the process of software development and ownership.

[3] Some examples include advocates of the Creative Commons license and the Design Science License.

[4] Copyleft activists have engaged on these issues through their 'access to knowledge' movement.

[5] For example, http://navdanya.org, accessed 19 January 2017.

[6] At an Imagine A Feminist internet workshop, Malaysia, 2015.

[7] Principle 7, Feminist Principles of the internet. Available: http://feministinternet.net/, accessed 19 January 2017.

create 'alternative forms of economic power that are grounded in principles of cooperation, solidarity, commons, environmental sustainability and openness'.[8]

Autonomy

The right to privacy has been central to this discussion in relation to the internet. Since Edward Snowden revealed the extent of the US government's broad-based monitoring, collection and analysis of internet and telecommunications traffic in 2013 (Macaskill and Dance 2013), the topic of mass surveillance has been widely debated and critiqued by journalists, public officials, activists and others. What is less visible in these conversations is the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race and other identity markers in the historical practice of surveillance on some bodies, and how this affects its impact given the technology overlay.

Black feminists have highlighted the culture of surveillance that has always been part and parcel of black bodies—who are simultaneously over-exposed, but unseen—where counter strategies such as sousveillance (turning the gaze back at the power that surveils) become ineffective as it falls within an existing discriminatory structures that do not provide justice (Harry 2014; Fischer and Mohrman 2016). Sex workers critiqued the range of safety technology tools that have been developed as being designed for cisgendered (white) men in mind, and futile for the defence of their very real and urgent needs for their privacy in their day to day life and work (Hexe 2014; Ditmore 2014).

Social surveillance has always been the experience of women, in particular young women, where their movements, behaviour, expression, bodies and relationships are regulated under the watchful eyes of parents, partners and their communities, especially (and including) their use of social media and digital communications technologies (Monahan 2009). This happens under the same broad paradigm of safety and security as arguments forwarded for mass surveillance by proponents of it. However, the idea of the nation here is instead symbolically mapped onto the bodies of women as containers of morality for the family, for the society (demarcated by ethnicity, religion/caste/class and so on), for the nation.

How can we gain a deeper understanding on the complex dimensions of privacy, surveillance and technology when we infuse this with a key feminist concern of being able to choose *when* to be visible, and to begin from bodies that have been historically surveilled? What new insights can we gain by bringing in decades of feminist critique and analysis around private and public domains, in particular, the relationship between consent, embodiment, privacy and dignity? With that, how can we strengthen the right to privacy at all levels—from research, to technology use and design, to communications culture, to policy frameworks? And how can we strengthen work on addressing gender-based violence that is increasingly intersected by technology-enabled violations of privacy?

Another emerging facet of the conversation on autonomy is algorithmic or machine-driven decision-making. Increasingly, our every interaction—from the very intimate work of forging relationships to the everyday action of moving around a city to very public act of casting our vote—is being collected, stored, aggregated and computed to create a personification of who we are as a data set (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger 2013). These data sets are progressively being used as the basis for decision-making in an ever-wider range of areas, from tailor-made advertising and delivery of content, to design of initiatives for the advancement of economic, social and cultural rights, to visa applications and parole decisions.

The compulsion for data-driven—and increasingly automated—decision-making has many dimensions (Gurumurthy 2016; Manjikian 2015), which brings with them questions that requires critical feminist interrogation. Amongst them, systemic bias that gets built into data collection and algorithms that reproduce and amplify discrimination and exclusion (Shephard 2016), the challenge of investigating this (Gourarie 2016) and the issue of governance and accountability when a large proportion of data sets are private property of multinational corporations. How do we develop data policies and practices that are grounded by principles of autonomy, consent, bodily integrity and dignity?

Movements

On 24 April 2016, tens of thousands of women took to the streets to protest against sexual violence and harassment in Mexico (Prakash and Fernandez de Castro 2016). The numbers and geographical reach of the protest were unprecedented in demand for accountability and an end to gender-based violence in a country where feminicide, disappearances of women and gender-based violence are acutely systemic (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir and Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos 2012; UNHRC 2012). It was not organized by an organization, coalition or even a collective, but grew out of a wave of personal testimonies on sexual harassment shared through several hashtags on social media, including a solidarity call for action to not stay silent. They spoke about the indifference, backlash,

[8] Principle 7, Feminist Principles of the internet. Available: http://feministinternet.net/, accessed 19 January 2017.

blaming and sometimes persecution that women faced for reporting about sexual assault and harassment, and expressed a collective outrage. The protest was widely documented and shared online using the hashtag #24A, and immediately after, a wave of backlash happened online to those using the hashtag.

What this demonstrates is the shifting terrain of our movements, and the fluidity of spaces for our political acts of expression, occupation, re-territorialization, solidarity and resistance. And where the violent response in a bid to stem the work of transformation also happens in the multiple spaces that we occupy in our activism including the digital. It is a misunderstanding to speak of the online as distinct space from physical spaces, but rather, more useful to understand the flow and force of discursive, normative and symbolic de/re/constructions, actions, subjectivities and political kinship that manifest and are forged in these spaces simultaneously.

What kind of space is the internet? In an understanding of a feminist politics where the personal is political, how do we engage with, shape and occupy this space? At the moment, the internet is a kind of private, public and privatized public, with the potential for transgressive liminality in between them. There is still a possibility to first engage in the personal act of being through accessing information, expressing oneself, building relationships based on the act of seeing and being seen, and to construct a politics of being that is connected not just by identity, but by embodied experiences, shared outrage and a collective action for change.

It has also opened up new spaces for different kinds of political actors to engage in their own language of feminism—such as the #24A movement above, or the reclaiming of Take Back the Night marches in Bengaluru (Shah 2017) with a shared permeability between online and offline mobilizing, Tumblr Feminism,[9] feminism that disrupts normative content,[10] experiential info-activism by trans people on the process of transitioning or by sex workers about potentially dangerous clients (Gander 2016; Prinsloo 2011), and more. And where we are able to, as a movement, have greater potential than ever before to shift the persistent but often invisible excluding, discriminatory and violent forces of culture through the radical chaos of our discourse.

Internet technologies have become sutured into the landscape of our organizing, movement building and politics of engagement. But this landscape is rapidly changing. There is an access gap that is slowly only becoming gender aware but still largely blind to intersectionality and is threatening to exacerbate disparities (Internet Governance Forum 2016). The private sector is increasingly successful in its colonization of the logic, materiality and culture of the internet, often in collusion with the government. There is escalating violence by state and non-state actors that targets our expressions, bodies and politics towards a more stable patriarchal world order that relies on a toxic mixture of identity politics, nationalism and morality. And our ability to exercise everyday agency is under serious threat through massive disregard for privacy and autonomy and datafication.

Have we applied the same critical, radical feminist lens to the field of internet technologies as we have to other fields of our political agendas? Have we infused our understanding of community, networks and movements with the power dynamics of this unfolding space as opposed to simply new tools? Are we readier to compromise our rights in our choices around technology platforms for expediency without the same kind of interrogation on capitalism that we have applied to other fields? Do we hold violations of our rights online like gender-based violence to the same level of accountability and attention as other spaces? Do we submit more readily to the lack of transparency and accountability by the private sector in our right to information, expression and participation than in our political demands of the state? Are we engaged as actively as a movement in the governance processes and structures of the internet?

Can we afford to, as feminists, engage with such an increasingly ubiquitous space in our everyday activism without our feminist politics intact?

Making a Feminist Internet

> Our struggle for a feminist internet is one that forms part of a continuum of our resistance in other spaces, public, private and in-between.
> - Principle 4, Feminist Principles of the internet[11]

We are doing our politics in an interesting time. Where the potential for rupture and deep transformation of embodiment, knowledge, subjectivities, connections, the circulation of values and power structures is very possible, and arguably more greatly accessible than ever before. Maria Suarez, a pioneer feminist activist on gender and technology from Costa Rica, made a comparison between the age we are in with being akin to the age when the invention of the printing press transformed societies through the

[9] For example, http://evrydayfeminism.tumblr.com/, accessed 19 January 2017.

[10] For example, http://theladiesfinger.com/ and http://www.adventuresfrom.com/, accessed 19 January 2017.

[11] Principle 4, Feminist Principles of the internet. https://www.feministinternet.net, accessed 19 January 2017.

dispersal of information for knowledge creation.[12] Except instead of seeing this as technology driving change, we are embedded within and inflecting the space and pace of its development, its logic, politics and imagination, and how this intersects with our lives.

The imprint of our engagement is everywhere: from the 'poetical science' of Ada Lovelace in 1842 that founded the first imagined possibility of computing (Toole 1998), to the many women who introduced internet technologies into developing countries like Kanchana Kanchanasut (Thailand),[13] Ida Holz (Uruguay)[14] and Anriette Esterhuysen (South Africa),[15] to the radical Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the gender-troubling potential of technology by VNS Matrix (Evans 2014), to the women Solar Barefoot Engineers in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Desai 2014), to women who engage with the politics of internet governance, to the indefatigable and undefeated blossoming of feminist spaces, networks, content, technology and activism all over the digital and material world.

This is also evident at the AWID Forum, where activists who engage with digital security, internet access infrastructure, the politics of data, gender-based violence, sexual expression, internet culture and more converged, shared their knowledge and work and infected each other with their ideas and imagination at the Feminist Internet eXchange hub and the diffused, networked spaces within and beyond the Forum.[16]

We are in the process of making a feminist internet. Consider this a call to join the revolution.

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