Defining Feminism in a Digital Age

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LIBR 281, Community Informatics

Spring 2014

"Everything is what it is, what it isn't, and its direct opposite. That technique, so skillfully executed might help account for the compelling irrationality…double double think is very easy to deal with if we just realize that we have only to double double unthink it." –Dworkin, 1974, p. 63

Technology has most often been defined as masculine and the expertise of men. However, there are those who dispute that static definition of technology. They are the ones able to "double double unthink" (Dworkin, 1974) it and engage new definitions which are inclusive of women and the feminine. Women fight, both overtly and subversively, for equity to men, using the tools, technology, and analysis available. Objects have political and moral values assigned to them – the "objective" way of viewing things becomes tainted by politics and morality, but technological systems help to mediate the dangerous path, with women gaining advancements over time towards equality (Keller, 1983).

In this paper, I embark on a journey exploring the relationship between Feminism, Technology, and the redefining of Feminism as both an abstract concept and as creative real-world action. With the rising of the current wave of feminists (also known as 3rd-wave feminists) coinciding with the beginning and rise of technology such as the Internet (cyberspace) and computers, Feminism has expanded its reach to more people in different areas. This adds more voices needing to be heard, which allows for a broader and deeper understanding of equity, equal rights, and struggles the "ordinary" woman goes through. I propose to look at the literature on the rise of this 3rd-wave of Feminism and how it coincides with the rise of technology, in order to tease out a current dynamic definition of Feminism. I will also briefly look at other sub-sects of the Feminist movement that also seem to rise and coalesce around the rise of technology showing that Feminism is not a monolithic entity. By adding these voices to the definition of Feminism, we increase the issues that women are most concerned about, especially with regards

to equality of both race and gender. Finally, I argue that this latest version of Feminism is buoyed by the popularity of technology, divided at times by the privilege of those who have access to the technology and information, and that through technology women are able to subvert the normative social gender roles.

History and Beginning Definitions

I begin this exploratory journey by briefly looking at the history of Feminism beginning in the late 19th century/early 20th century through the first two waves and briefly discuss this current wave and its connection to the history of Feminism. Finally, I will establish the definition of Feminism before this 3rd-wave was spawned. I will also define technology in this section both broadly and for this specific paper.

Beginning with the suffrage movement in the late 19th century and continuing into the 20th century, white women were most well-known in the fight for equal rights and protection under the law (specifically, the right to vote). This is generally accepted by scholars to be the 1st-wave of Feminism. While this was largely successful, especially by winning of the right for women to vote, the suffragettes were primarily white and middle- to upper-class and have been known to make disparaging remarks about the African American community (Ginzberg, 2009). The colored, poor, and working-class women were largely ignored – this created accusations of classism and racism. Since race and gender issues were and are so closely intertwined, these accusations continue to plague Feminism.

In the late 1940s through the 1960s and 1970s, interest in the Feminist Movement grew once again; this was the 2nd-wave of Feminism. Women of this wave promoted equality with men in all areas of their lives. At times, these women were accused of being "militant" or

"closed-minded." This accusation would also haunt the future feminists who would argue to bolster support for their cause. However, radical feminists made tremendous gains in the equal treatment of women; they made strides in the areas of: birth control, abortion, equal pay for equal work, affirmative action in both jobs and schools, and ending pregnancy discrimination in the workplace (infoplease.com). This wave of Feminism faded away, leaving behind a legacy of reforms and changes to the law which theoretically gave more equality to women. However, this was generally applied unequally to different groups of women across race, class, and sexuality lines. These issues would persist into the next wave of the Feminist Movement.

With the advent of the personal computer technology, the Feminist Movement appeared to be strengthened. As technology increases in popularity with feminists in the late 20th century, a way of disseminating information and communication over long distances in short amounts of time is introduced. This 3rd-wave created a community in which members would become fluent in feminist language and be able to use that knowledge to combat direct and indirect inequality. Concurrently, one of the sub-sects of Feminism, called Black Feminism, focuses on African American women and the issues of race, gender, and sexuality in their specific community. This is differentiated from Womanism because Black Feminists still see themselves as part of the overarching Feminist community generally (Taylor, 1998). Womanists saw themselves as a completely separate organization from "regular" feminists (Collins, 1996). These groups gained momentum as frustration grew with the Feminist Movement and its slow shift to increased inclusion.

The 3rd-wave of the Feminist Movement has grown with access to information created by the Internet and the World Wide Web (a place often called "cyberspace" by those who inhabit it). The definition of Feminism is constantly being challenged by different scholars in order to

allow for both broad and narrow focuses at the same time. 3rd-wave Feminism is concerned with equality of women to men (including equal protection) and the empowerment of women. This movement continues to seek, challenge, analyze, and counter commonly held stereotypes and beliefs.

Finally, technology is defined as "any systematized practical knowledge, based on experimentation and/or scientific theory, which enhances the capacity of society to produce goods and services, and which is embodied in productive skills, organizations, or machinery" (Gendron, 1977 as quoted in Rothschild, 1983). As Rothschild says, "technology includes not only machinery and mechanized processes but also the organization of work…" (1983). For the purposes of this paper, I limit the word "technology" to mean the systems of computers, Internet (cyberspace), and the stereotypes and social norms that characterize the rules of cyberspace.

Discussion and Analysis of Current Scholarship

As Bush states, "[t]echnology has everything to do with who benefits and who suffers, whose opportunities increase and whose decrease, who creates and who accommodates" (1983). Technology as an entire system must be critiqued by feminists who search for equality in cyberspace. We often see how feminists use computer and Internet systems to both unthink myths and stereotypes and to rethink and reimagine themselves using information, scholars, and the lived experiences of other women worldwide that are now accessible through cyberspace. Through technology women are able to both overtly resist and subvert patriarchal hierarchies, reclaiming language, and empowering women.

"Cyberfeminism" was coined in 1997 by Faith Wilding, when "feminism and cyberspace became fruitfully conjoined" (Everett, 2004). In that year, numerous books were written by

feminist authors who worked in cyberspace. Two events also occurred that "both recuperated a politics of embodiment and real-life conflict against digital culture's disembodied and depoliticized consensual hallucination" (Everett, 2004). These cyberfeminists integrated their lives and experiences in a new way of resistance using the tool of cyberspace.

The two events discussed by Everett include the First Cyberfeminist International (FCI) conference in Germany and the Million Woman March (MWM) in Philadelphia. Each event was separated by race lines: the FCI was primarily white and the MWM was primarily black. The FCI would generally discuss theories, and the MWM put those theories into action. Each event proved to be extremely successful in different ways and opened many doors for further research and empowered women with confidence in their strengths. Everett elucidates, "For even as older feminists tell younger feminists how to do feminist history and philosophy, younger feminists can tell older feminists how to do cyberfeminist art, 'hactivism,' and technological wizardy" (2004). During the FCI conference, women discussed the future and the definition of Feminism as an abstract concept, with multiple viewpoints, using cyberspace as a tool. Simultaneously, the MWM took the definition and used cyberspace as a tool for real-world action. Cyberwomanism created possibilities and "the women found a way around [the lack of connection to the Internet] and…enacted their stealth cyberwomanist activism by using the master's tools to tear down barriers to mass publicity for their cause" (Everett, 2004). Technology, unable to be separated from the values of the creators (usually white males), was used by these women to subvert the "disabling rhetoric that position black people in general, and black women especially as casualties of the information revolution…" (Everett, 2004). These women created community through cyberspace – those who had access to information about the event spread the word through other means. These women were activists who put the intertwining definition of

Feminism, race, and gender into action. They used a tool that was supposed to hold them down as a way to reimagine gender norms and stereotypes in cyberspace; Everett explains, "[t]he sistahs of the march recognized the value of new technologies to further their own agendas and to promote their brand of activism, which did not require choosing which liberation struggle to fight first, gender or race oppression" (2004). Cyberfeminists and cyberwomanists are able to further empower women by consolidating agendas that matter most to them, rather than forcing women to choose a specific focus.

After this, scholars continue to both broaden and narrow the definition of feminism and how it relates to cyberspace and individual embodiment. Some argue that cyberspace allows for the ability to experience another person through "identity tourism" or "the process by which members of one group try on for size the descriptors generally applied to persons of another race or gender" (Nakamura, 2002). As a Trans* woman, Katherine Cross says that "[g]aming, and roleplaying in particular, is an act of constant 'becoming' that allows for *self-conscious* (or at least semi-conscious) social reconstruction" (Cross, 2012, emphasis in original). Another scholar argues that through embodied living in cyberspace, feminism reimagines the multiplicity of women's voices, "[revealing] ways that they use the Internet to transform their material, corporeal lives in a number of ways that both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race" (Daniels, 2009). This scholar uses the embodied lives of Trans* women who find information, resources, and communities in cyberspace, when they might lack those in their offline lives. Tying into Cross' work Trans* people are able to "[do] a good deal of 'exploring' on the Internet, particularly through roleplaying games that gave them the opportunity to play as the gender of their choice" (Cross, 2012). The disembodiment allows for the ability to "test out" the

other gender, and they begin to embody their offline lives even more fully as they accept themselves through the online community.

Younger cyberfeminists are proposing that the strength of CyberFeminism is through the ability to both embody another race, gender, or class and to find the supportive embodied communities and resources through cyberspace. This expansion of creative "becoming" also "function[s] as a heuristic device for thinking about gender and race…" (Daniels, 2009). So much of the Internet is now image-based and the critiques of (cyber)feminism are changing to accommodate.

There is, as always, the question of access to the information available to women. As the women of the MWM proved, the physical community will find a way to provide information to all women. However, it is insufficiently representative of all feminist struggles for equality, and incorrectly presents feminism as a monolithic entity, if only middle- to upper-class, white, heterosexual women create the information. African American feminists turn to either/both Black Feminism and Womanism. Black Feminism, in physical actions and cyberspace, "[creates] a political movement that not only struggles against exploitative capitalism…but that also seeks to develop institutions to protect what the dominant culture has little respect and value for – black women's minds and bodies" (Taylor, 1998). Womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker, is "rooted in black women's concrete history in racial and gender oppression" and believes that "equity lies in providing equal opportunities, rights, and respect to all groups" (Collins, 1996). Each of these movements acknowledges the distinct struggles that women of the colored communities face. With an increase of scholarship on how cyberspace has interacted with the idea of race, there is access to more focused information. Just as in the Trans* community, the colored community is creating their embodied lives on the Internet, while

working on their challenges (Collins, 1996). This also helps to strengthen resources needed to create an interpretation of feminism that furthers the breadth of gender equality.

Finally, feminist scholars are using the Internet for embodied experiences and as a way "to subvert not only traditional narratives, but also web rhetoric and interfaces that reinforce gender norms" (Davis, 2008). Through Davis' website projects, women see ways that they are influenced by gender norms throughout their daily lives. Davis argues, "that the Web's narrower interactive and immersive experiences actually represent a circumscription of choices that viewers have and adapt to" (Davis, 2008). These choices covertly reinforce societal gender norms. When feminist scholars adeptly use cyberspace as a means to challenge gender norms, the definition of Feminism in a digital age is further refined.

Conclusion: Re-Defining Feminism in a Digital Age

In 1983, Corlann Gee Bush wrote, "[t]he great strength of the women's movement has always been its twin abilities to unthink the sources of oppression and to use this analysis to create a new and synthesizing vision" (Bush, 1983). We have seen this idea repeating time and time again. Feminists challenged gender neutrality on the Internet, learning that it is also about the empowerment of women who find communities and resources for themselves online. We have seen how women use the Internet as a place to try something/someone else, especially within roleplaying games. The Internet system is a tool that feminists can use "for changing current unsatisfactory gender relations and societal norms so that women have better lives" (Gorenstein, 2010). Feminists are using cyberspace as a way to subvert these gender norms worldwide, shaping a tool that is "extremely malleable in what [it] can be made to do and how [it] can be used" (Johnson, 2010). In cyberspace, women see the ways that they are subtly

barraged every day. We also acknowledge the fact that Feminism is not a monolithic entity through Womanism and Black Feminism.

The new definition of Feminism in the digital age is this: A dynamic revolutionary action of "becoming" in communities both online and offline, resisting and questioning all social norms, creating an embodied experience with understanding toward individual experiences, continuing research and double double unthinking every situation for gender inequality, and acknowledging the multiple aspects and facets of the intertwining of gender, race, and sexuality online and offline in the fight for equality.

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