THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO MEDIA AND GENDER

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Gender and social media
Sexism, empowerment, or the irrelevance of gender?

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In the field of science and technology studies (STS), the idea that technologies—including media—are the results of negotiation processes and power struggles is not controversial. At the same time, it is no longer disputed that technological development does not follow its own logic, but rather is the outcome and materialization of social power relations (Bijker et al. 1987; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985). Feminist technology researcher Judy Wajcman (2004) states that technologies are also related to the constitution of gender relations and gender-relevant developments. With the arrival of every new technology, social power relations and thus gender relations are renegotiated. Technology and media are not exclusive determinants of social changes, but they are not merely passive things either:

Technology must be understood as part of the social fabric that holds society together … , technological change is a contingent and heterogeneous process in which technology and society are mutually constituted.

(Wajcman 2004: 106)

The relation of the internet and gender was also constituted mutually. During the early days of the internet in the 1990s, diverse and contrary expectations shaped perceptions about the internet and gender relations. Three very different prognoses were advanced that are still relevant (Carstensen 2008, 2009; see also van Zoonen 2002):

- One part of the discussion called attention to the internet as a male domain (Dorer 1997; Spender 1996). This view of the internet was influenced by the interpretation of the internet as “technical.” The central reasons cited had to do with the close link between technology and masculinity; the delayed access of many women to the internet; androcentric content; and male-dominated discussions in forums and chatrooms (Herring 1996). The internet was considered to be riddled with the same inequalities and power relations as the “real world.”
Another view held that the internet was also linked to hopes and expectations of creating solidarity and closer connections among women. Plant (1997) retold the story of technology and gender, interpreting the net as feminine because it refers to female-connoted activities such as spinning, weaving, networking, and communication. Feminists discussed the possibilities of new public spaces and anticipated changes through the removal of the boundaries between the public and private spheres as well as between home and work, e.g. by telework (Consalvo and Paasonen 2002; Wajcman et al. 2010). In addition, global access to information and easier communication were recognized as having the potential to strengthen feminist politics (Harcourt 1999; Floyd et al. 2002).

Additionally, some feminists, inspired by poststructuralist theories, developed utopian projects for a world beyond binary gender relations. Cyberfeminists hoped that the boundaries between technology and humans, as well as between men and women, would be broken down on the internet. Visions like Donna Haraway’s “cyborg” (1991) encouraged people to imagine a world without gender. The possibility of anonymous communication via the internet and “gender swapping” in chatrooms and forums, where the “real” body is not present and identities could be invented anew, connected the internet with the hope for postmodern and deconstructive future designs in which gender relations would be in flux (Bruckman 1993; Turkle 1995).

Certainly it is no coincidence that these three hopes and fears reflect three of the most important paradigms of feminist theory: deficit, difference, and deconstruction. New media and technologies, in particular, have always been canvases for current arguments and struggles (Carstensen 2008; van Zoonen 2002).

Pursuing the questions of whether the internet has reinforced gender inequality or whether it has strengthened feminist politics or even offered new spaces for identity experiments beyond stereotypical gender constructions, here I begin by reviewing gender relations during the “first” web. I then explore research that examines how gender relations may have changed with the emergence of social media. I will take into account issues of (un)equal access and use; the gendered interfaces and identities in social networks; the role of gender-sensitive users as prosumers; feminist campaigns; as well as antifeminist provocations in social media.

A short overview of gender relations during the “first” web

During the early spread of the internet in the 1990s, a number of feminist researchers argued that the internet was a male domain. Access was shaped by substantial gender inequalities (Dorer 1997). Among the German-speaking areas of the web, women comprised only 6 percent of users in 1995 (Fittkau and Maß Consulting 1995). The main users of the web were highly educated, young, white, and male.

Concerning patterns of usage, early studies identified a range of “typical male” and “typical female” uses. They showed, for example, that women used the internet in a more directed manner and less playfully. On mailing lists and in newsgroups, women read for more time than they spent writing their own contributions (Dorer 1997: 22). Herring (1996) identified different styles of online communication: a male adversarial
style in which the poster distanced himself from other participants, who were criti-
cized, often while promoting his own importance; and a female style that displayed
features of deference, hedging, apology, asking questions rather than making asser-
tions, and which also had a personal orientation that emphasized support of others.
Later results were less gender stereotypical, but still stated quantitative di-
fferences in the duration and frequency of internet use. These differences can be best explained
not by “female usage patterns” but by socioeconomic factors such as income and
resources, available free time, as well as by a gender-segregated labor market that
offers women different possibilities to use the internet in professional contexts than
men (Bimber 2000; Winker 2005).

Gender and technology studies have emphasized the notion that gender relations have
an impact on the way technology and media are constructed and designed. Designers
(unconsciously) inscribe different views of female and male users and uses into tech-
nology, and by this they reproduce their ideas of gender relations. For instance,
gender difference is constructed through gender-specific design, through the way the
technology is put on the market, or through associations with gendered rooms and
spaces (e.g. kitchen, garage). A range of studies have shown how gender stereotypes
materialize in technology (for example the shaver; Berg and Lie 1993; Oudshoorn et al.
2002). Such “gender scripts” could also be found on the early web. The first studies
noted the male-influenced development context (military, science, hacker spaces) and
showed that the content was aimed at male interests (automobiles, computers, sports,
and pornography; see Dorer 1997). Other studies referred to the gender-stereotyped
design of digital cities (Rommes et al. 1999) or of representations in avatars (Bath
2003). At the same time, a great many spaces and communities for women and girls
arose in different countries (Schachtner and Winker 2005; Tillmann 2008).

The hopes of deconstructivist feminists that the internet might enable the
exploration of queer gender identities beyond the usual gender binary of masculine
and feminine were soon disappointed. Early studies showed that gender played a
significant role in virtual online communication. Instead of experimenting with
gender roles, a reliance on sexual difference seemed to be an important means of
orientation in anonymous communications. Many conversations began with the
question “a/s/l?” (age/sex/location) (Döring 2008: 127).

The hope that the internet would strengthen feminist politics also was not really
fulfilled in its nascent years. Although feminist projects used the internet for self-
presentation and information, the interactive opportunities that the web offered for opini-
on formation, mobilization, political action, and the development of critical counter-
publics remained negligible. Only some of the feminist websites offered a list of
more or less sorted hyperlinks on other feminist sites. Feminist information remained
widespread and unconnected on the web (Carstensen and Winker 2005). Thus, in the
early days of the internet, especially the positive expectations were disappointed.

The “new” internet: social media and Web 2.0

Since the beginning of the widespread adoption of the internet in the 1990s, the
situation has changed a great deal—in terms of both gender relations and the web.
With the development of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, weblogs, wikis, and video and music platforms, ideas of user participation, information exchange and sharing, democratization of knowledge, the removal of the sender/recipient structure, community building, and new forms of cooperation and collaboration without hierarchies (O’Reilly 2005) have become reanimated. Many have predicted that this development will substantially increase the agency of users. As bloggers, wiki participants, and members of social networking sites, users generate content and applications and therein contribute to the construction and production of Web 2.0 media as active “prosumers,” consumers who are increasingly involved in professional production processes (Bruns 2008; Toffler 1970). Alongside these hopes, there are also pessimistic estimations about the impact of social and mobile media on our lives. Turkle states a range of paradoxical developments: for example that people engaged in online communication have a continual connection but rarely have each other’s full attention. She criticizes multi-tasking, constant and ubiquitous accessibility, and the decreasing quality of communication and social relations: “We go online because we are busy but end up spending more time with technology and less with each other” (Turkle 2011: 281).

Below, I investigate the gendered impacts of social media in light of issues such as access and use, the interfaces and identities in social networks, the role of prosumers, campaigns, and provocations in social media.

Gendered access to and use of social media

In contrast to early statistics, the percentage of internet users in general, as well as female internet users more specifically, has increased enormously in recent years. A gender gap still exists but has decreased. In the USA, 80 percent of men and 76 percent of women were online in 2011 (PEW Internet & American Life Project 2012a); 81.5 percent of men and 70.5 percent of women were online in Germany in 2012. In terms of usage patterns, only a few differences appear; most of the internet services (social networks, email, etc.) are used equally. Exceptions are the use of chatrooms or listening to internet radio, areas in which men dominate. In Germany, the duration of daily internet use is also still different: men are online for 147 minutes and women for 118 minutes each day (Busemann and Gscheidle 2012). Regarding social media, 4 percent of German users use Twitter (men and women are equally represented) (Busemann and Gscheidle 2012; van Eimeren and Frees 2012). In the USA the percentage of Twitter users is higher but also nearly equal: 14 percent of male internet users and 15 percent of female. Use of Twitter via mobile phones is balanced at 9 percent of both genders in the USA (PEW Internet & American Life Project 2012b).

Gender relations among social networks also are nearly balanced: in Germany, for example, 42 percent of female internet users and 43 percent of male internet users have a profile in a private community. Professional networks are used by 9 percent of male internet users and 7 percent of female internet users (Busemann and Gscheidle 2012: 381). Twenty percent of German women and 27 percent of German men have mobile access to the internet (van Eimeren and Frees 2012: 368). With
24 percent of men owning a smartphone, their numbers are slightly higher than the 20 percent of women who own one (van Eimeren and Frees 2012: 367).

Wikipedia is used in a predominantly passive manner, but widely. In Germany, 75 percent of male internet users and 70 percent of female internet users consult it. But a large gender gap appears in terms of the contribution of women among the active authors. Only 6 percent of contributors were women (Merz and Döring 2010); according to Wikimedia, 10–15 percent are female (Herbold 2011) in Germany as well as in the USA (Cohen 2011). The reasons for this are as yet unclear. Some suppose the high barriers, restrictive rules, and the crude communication style in the community to be the causes.

Another key issue in internet use is the reorganization of time and space, which has a gender dimension, as it complicates the idea of a strict division between work and family. Negative impacts are perceived to result from extending working time into time normally reserved for family, for hopes of better work–life balance. Wajcman et al.’s (2010) study supports a positive view on this issue. Based on a representative survey of Australian employees recently undertaken, many of them appear to be using the internet for personal purposes during work time to a greater extent than the opposite. The authors conclude from this that new media are actually being used by many to improve their work–life balance.

Social networks: gendered interfaces and identities

On social networking sites, users present themselves through a profile, which typically contains information about gender, date of birth, location, education and business data, interests and activities, as well as political, religious, and sexual attitudes. Social networks provide diverse functionalities to enable networking and communication with other members, to establish groups, and to have discussions.

Gender plays a significant role among the fields in the forms. Most of the networks force users to position themselves definitively by questioning gender explicitly. They constrain gender to a binary category and often define gender as a mandatory field. Analyses of the interfaces of social networking sites show that there are only a few networks that offer such possibilities as “unknown” or “other” to indicate gender, for example Last.fm or Flickr. On studiVZ, a student network in Germany, if users refuse to choose one of the two gender alternatives the following statement appears: “Only female or male entities can register with us!” (Wötzel-Herber 2008: 38). In the current version of Facebook, users are asked through a dropdown menu to “Select sex: Male/Female” and are requested to “Please select either Male or Female” if they refuse. Even if it is less surprising that social networks are interested in this information for targeted advertising, it is remarkable that gender is a mandatory field while other fields in the registration form do not necessarily have to be filled out. As in other studies of feminist technology and media research, the results show that binary gendered structures and norms of “typical” usage patterns and “normal” identities are inscribed into the interfaces of social networking sites.

The desire for clear gender identities also seems to be considerable on the part of many social media users. In contrast to earlier hopes and findings in internet
research which viewed it as an assortment of “identity workshops,” authenticity has now become the decisive norm—that is, presenting one’s “real” identity and being encouraged to disclose as much information as possible about oneself. Gender appears to have become an especially important category in one’s self-presentation (Manago et al. 2008; Wötzel-Herber 2008). However, other studies paint a more ambivalent picture. Van Doorn, van Zoonen, and Wyatt have investigated Dutch and Flemish blogs and state that one can observe different versions of femininity that have been used to create a heterogeneous interpretation of female gender identity. In blogs, multiple and diffuse performances of femininity are presented although they refer to real-life and everyday experiences. Users are constantly performing their gender in different ways as they post new entries (van Doorn et al. 2007).

Furthermore, we can also find subversive, ironic, and resistant usage patterns of social networking sites: for example, the practice of changing the gender indicator at every login. Others use queer images such as pictures of women with beards and therefore irritate common viewing patterns of gender stereotypes (Richard et al. 2010: 210–49).

**Gender-sensitive prosumers: struggles over design and content**

Science and technology studies approaches emphasize that the design of technologies or media scripts is not closed; it remains flexible and cannot determine users’ practices and identities completely. This also opens room for manoeuvre with regard to gender:

Users define whether things are useful, or maybe fun, what things are good for and for whom, whether they experience them as gendered and whether they find them useful to articulate and perform their (gender) identities. By interpreting and using technologies, users are active participants in shaping the gendering of artifacts.

(Oudshoorn et al. 2002: 481)

In contrast to the early times of the internet, it is remarkable that binary, discriminatory, and stereotyped design has become an issue of negotiations among users (Carstensen 2012). On Facebook, Wikipedia, and MySpace feminist claims toward design and content have become a starting point for struggles. The technological opportunities to establish groups and to discuss and disseminate information are used to criticize gender-stereotyped design. For example, in 2007 the Facebook group “For a queer-positive Facebook …” was founded to lobby the site operators to add new features to the user profiles that would allow a more inclusive representation of a wide range of personal self-identities. For example, the dropdown menu for “sex” should be changed to “gender” and switched to a fill-in-the-blank format. Further, the group asks that people who select “in a relationship” should have the option of including multiple partners. However, attempts to change the registration forms failed. Although the group had more than 16,000 members in 2009 who supported this concern and contributed to a heated discussion, Facebook did not react.
Another case was the struggle on Facebook to fight for the right to publish breastfeeding photos. Referring to the terms of use that prohibit the publishing of naked breasts, Facebook began to delete a range of photos that featured breastfeeding mothers. In reaction, the group “Hey Facebook, breastfeeding is not obscene!” was founded. Soon it attracted more than 260,000 members and published more than 7,000 pictures of breastfeeding and resisted Facebook’s demands. Feminist users carry out visible struggles, raise their voices in opposition to existing design, create trouble, and develop ideas for alternative design. Feminist agency to change forms in social network sites is limited, but at least this technology offers a great deal of space and agency in terms of discourse, protest, requests, and petitions (Carstensen 2012).

**Feminist campaigns and antifeminist provocations in social media**

From its beginning, gender researchers have also investigated the question of whether or not the internet could strengthen worldwide solidarity among women, create critical counter-publics, improve participation, and increase the opportunities for feminist politics (Consalvo and Paasonen 2002). As mentioned above, early studies came to the conclusion that the nascent internet was reduced to its possibilities for information (Carstensen and Winker 2005). While only a few girls’ and women’s networks used the early internet for debating, with the emergence of social media the exchange of ideas and meanings became much easier. In blogs as well as on Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks, an active, intensively discursive, self-organized queer-feminist net culture arose. Social networking sites facilitate exchanges of information, discussions, and comments. They provide spaces for users to empower each other, to establish events and protests and mobilize for political action. The design of social media enables a dense interdependence of feminist discussions.

The issues discussed are broad and controversial. Feminists comment on and criticize current political issues that relate to gender, family, or equality politics; they publish thoughts about their lives as queers; as parents; mobilize for “slutwalks” challenging sexual objectifications and restrictions; demonstrate against the criminal convictions of the Russian feminist punk band Pussy Riot; and uncover situations of commonplace sexism and male privilege. A number of feminist discussions in social media also deal with users’ own privileges as white, educated, and non-disabled women; and they tackle questions of inclusion, exclusion, self-understanding, positioning, and so on.

For feminist campaigns, Twitter plays a particularly important role. For example, the #MooreandMe Twitter campaign illustrated just how successful feminist protest in Web 2.0 can be. Feminists started the #MooreandMe campaign in response to moviemaker Michael Moore and TV moderator Keith Olbermann’s mischaracterizations and outright dismissals of the rape allegations against Julian Assange. It employed the hashtag (a means of highlighting a topical issue or theme on Twitter) #MooreandMe and used the opportunity to address both men directly via Twitter. Both apologized one week later. Another example is the German speaking campaign #aufschrei (“outcry”), through which women collect and publish experiences of sexism and which have provoked expansive public and political debates far beyond Twitter.
At the same time, it should be noted that feminist net culture is as heterogeneous as other feminist cultures and initiatives. There are frequent attempts to create a common platform that will subsume all feminist activities on the web, but they always fail on account of lingering questions of how to define feminism, who may call themselves feminist, and what feminist aims should be.

The visibility of feminism on the web has increased in proportion to the recent successes of feminist campaigns. As a direct or indirect consequence, feminists have sometimes been confronted with aggressive and provocative attacks. For example, in August 2007, the existing entries on “Ladyfest” and “riot grrrl” on the German version of Wikipedia were suggested for deletion. The deletion of these entries was justified by one user due to them apparently lacking in relevance, quality, and significance. Subsequent responses argued for the relevance and quality of the entries. In the end, an administrator decided to keep them. However, in the English version of Wikipedia the attempt to implement a category for female superheroes failed. An internal vote defined the category as “unnecessary.”

On blogs and Twitter in particular, so-called masculists often comment on feminist entries in sexist, racist, homophobic, and antifeminist ways. Feminists are confronted with attempts to eliminate feminist statements from the public eye by defamation or threats of violence or even death, as well as with “trolls,” that is, people who post intentionally provocative messages in order to hurt or “flame” (i.e. verbally abuse) others. Feminists frequently discuss how to handle such comments. The main issue is whether it is more useful to delete them from their own blogs and ignore them or if it is a better strategy to collect and publish them in order to make the aggression and threats visible and public. Meanwhile, preliminary approaches are emerging to handle the problem in creative and empowering ways. For example, the American site Monetizing the Hate and the German site hatr.org collect such comments.

Conclusions

Social media have become male domains in which gender stereotypes and inequalities are reinforced, but also have provided opportunities for the articulation of feminist politics, as well as providing new spaces beyond stereotypical gender constructions. Particularly regarding access and usage of social media, gender no longer seems to play a significant role. Research appears to find only a few gender differences in patterns of daily usage. At the same time, analyses of the design of the social networks show fixed gender scripts that reinforce the binary gender system. Although active users struggle against these scripts and resistant users experiment with ways to subvert them, the possibilities to intervene in the design of social media are restricted, contrary to the hopes of increased user agency. Furthermore, the volume and frequency of gender debates in social media have increased. The web now offers a greater range of forums where different people can meet and connect. Feminists who use social media become more visible, which may help to mobilize a broader audience for their aims. At the same time, however, feminist views are often met with greater rejection and aggression. In addition to such centralized domains as Facebook and Wikipedia, the rise of Twitter and blogs brought with them immense potential for decentralized networking and discussion, which supports the needs of feminist political activism.
Therefore, on the one hand, social media offer various technological opportunities and, on the other hand, users employ social media in different ways. Both shape the access, use, design, identities, and politics of the web. In this mutual process of constituting, users act across sexism, stereotypes, negotiations, gender irrelevance, and empowerment.

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