

The Internet as a Tool for Women's Agency and Movement

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The introduction of the internet and development of Web 2.0. powerfully impacted the political, economic, and socio-cultural environment, as well as the personal lives of millions of people. Deriving from technological utopianism, some internet users have started to view the online sphere as a possible utopian environment. Thus, this paper examines the role of the internet in creating an equal society and its importance in combating numerous disadvantages, discrimination, and inequalities, with a special focus on how women are using the internet to promote their agency and challenge gender-based discrimination.

Keywords: Internet Studies, Online Sphere, Social Movement, Women's Rights Movement

Introduction

The proliferation of digital communication technologies and the omnipresence of the internet influence nearly all aspects of our lives. Being online and effectively using the resources provided by the internet can bring numerous personal and professional opportunities to individuals and society as a whole. However, not everyone is experiencing cyberspace equally. To a large extent, the internet constitutes a field for ongoing struggles for various means as the uneven internet distribution and digital inequalities reflect the unequal access to various resources and ongoing struggles for economic and social justice. The digital inequalities make it difficult for some people to navigate and enjoy the online sphere. Additionally, certain technological affordances of cyberspace make the internet a conducive environment for discriminatory and aggressive behaviors, and thus, discourage some from participating online.

However, while the online sphere certainly might be a negative place at times, it is also used to build communities, form diverse relationships, share experiences, or highlight socio-political issues without mainstream media support. For instance, the growing importance of the internet, social media, and online communities has impacted the feminist movement and women's agency. The affordances of the internet, and digital media technologies, provide numerous opportunities for women, racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBT+ community, and other marginalized people to voice their opinions and get engaged in socio-political debates. Moreover, the increased participation of women in digital media/platform production influences and shapes the internet's direction and character. The inclusion of diverse groups, and ordinary users' interventions, might lead to the modification of technology and design by addressing the problems and meanings ignored in the

early production and by doing so transforming the system. For instance, this was the case for the computer, under the influence of political protest and public involvement in design, ordinary users transformed the computer from an information processor into a communication medium (Feenberg, 1999).

Contrary to cyber utopianism, which imagined the internet as an egalitarian space, discriminatory attitudes and behaviors prevalent in society easily adjusted to the virtual world. Social science scholars have argued that cyberspace is not neutral as it oftentimes reproduces the prejudices and power relations visible in our society. Due to that scholars note the growing problem of online discrimination and its multifold impact on individuals, society, and democracy to name a few (e.g., Nakamura, 2002; Powell & Henry, 2017). The internet grants a variety of possibilities if one has enough resources and digital skills to enjoy it. At the same time, the internet mirrors the 'terrestrial' environment, including prejudices, and discrimination, and due to certain technological affordances make the online sphere a conducive environment to digitally mediated discrimination.

The digital inequalities are more complex than a simple dichotomous division between those who have access to the internet and those who do not have it. Scholars demonstrate that numerous factors influence how people encounter the internet, including technical means, material resources, and knowledge (e.g. Tomczyńska, 2017; van Dijk, 2005). As the online sphere becomes a new public sphere and digital exclusion might negatively impact personal lives, and consequently social equality, there is an increasing need to combat these inequalities. Recently there has been a growth in literature, which not only documents the variety and extent of digitally mediated discrimination, or its uniqueness compared to its earlier iterations, but also analyzes technological affordances that facilitate online unfairness, and often "serve to replicate and perpetuate the social inequalities that people already experience" (Lumsden & Harmer, 2019, p. 4).

Since the beginning of internet development, women have been experiencing inequalities in the production, distribution, and consumption of online content, and in experiencing online hostility. This leads to the enhancement of gender stereotypes and creates a hostile environment for women. However, as Vickery and Everbach (2018) claim, the internet cannot be fully blamed for those discriminatory attitudes. Before the internet, other media industries had affected and perpetuated sexism, racism, and other discriminatory sentiments by contributing to the "mediated marginalization, stereotyping, and trivialization of women" (Vickery & Everbach, 2018, p. 8). There is also a growing body of literature, from different academic fields, that studies online misogyny and its various effects on individuals, society, policy, democracy, and more.

However, despite online discrimination, women frequently use the internet to promote their agency and challenge gender-based discrimination.

Women's Movement and Feminist Groups in Online Sphere

The internet became an important tool in the women's movement, so much so that the internet and social media are treated as a key component of the fourth wave of feminism, which is using digital technologies to document harassment, challenge gender discrimination, as well as to network and organize various activities to combat discrimination and empower marginalized groups (Mendes et al., 2019). The internet has the potential to broaden the reach of the women's movement (by overcoming local and national boundaries), and to highlight and provide a new interpretation of gender-related issues (Antunovic, 2019).

Since the beginning female-centered online communities offered women a space to share their thoughts and gain a sense of community and support in a male-dominated space (Green, 2002; Mendes et al., 2019). Lately, however, there has been a growth of feminist websites, blogs, social media accounts, YouTube videos, and so forth. Various groups and individuals from around the world use the internet and digital media to raise awareness about gender discrimination, document examples of misogyny, build a sense of solidarity and community and challenge socio-political and cultural practices that maintain gender inequalities. The multitude of voices and women's groups online confront the notion of homogeneity of women and the women's movement and emphasize the need for intersectional feminism. Additionally, through social media platforms women "challenge the dominant postfeminist sensibility that closely links feminism to various markets" and neoliberal values that emphasize individual change and empowerment (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 12).

Furthermore, Mendes et al. (2019) in their book *Digital Feminist Activism. Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture* provides various examples of women using the internet to promote their agency and challenge discrimination. For example, the website Hollaback! (now Right to Be) created in 2010 or Everyday Sexism Project created in 2012 aims to catalog examples of street harassment and sexism, and raise awareness about it by engaging women to share their personal stories, under the belief that personal is political. Both websites use technology potential to connect with other users, collect data that users can follow, and track potentially dangerous places.

Technological affordances of the internet, such as anonymity and connectivity, provide people with opportunities to share their experiences and personal stories without exposing their identities. This is well noticeable in the campaign "Who Needs the Feminism?" launched in 2016 by students from Duke University, which then moved to the popular microblogging site Tumblr, which is usually autonomously authored (Mendes et al., 2019). Anonymity, while also being one of the reasons that fuel online discrimination and allow for expressing extremist attitudes due to the online disinhibition effect (the lack of restraint while being online) or deindividuation (the reduction of self-awareness and responsibility for one's action when in a group or behind a "mask"), also gives people the opportunity to express their thoughts or concerns without fear of being judged by others only because of their skin color, sexuality, gender, or other aspects of their identity (Brown, 2018; Citron, 2016; Naruszewicz-Duchlińska, 2015).

Numerous women's groups enter the online sphere with a clear purpose as did Hollaback!, but many actions take place more spontaneously, without any group organization. Female-centered online communities are essential for the expansion of women's agency and challenging online (and offline) discriminatory behaviors but the movement and actions are not limited to these communities. This is particularly visible in the recent phenomenon of so-called hashtag activism or, in the case of feminist actions, hashtag feminism. Social media platforms such as X (former Twitter) or Facebook, due to their global popularity and virtuality, became a popular platform to express support for certain actions and campaigns, regardless of one's place of residence. Through hashtags, which thematically group topics, users can easily locate debates on particular topics. The growth of popularity of this kind of activism can also contribute to an increase in popular feminism. While many scholars oppose this kind of activism and question its real impact on socio-political changes (e.g. Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009), other researchers claim that hashtag activism "provided women with an opportunity to share personal experiences and in doing so showcased the pervasiveness of such practices while speaking dialogue and debates about how to change them" (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 2). Whether or not one opposes or approves of this form of activism, it increased debates about gender equality,

sexual harassment, and feminism, in both online and offline spheres. Over the years numerous hashtag activism actions took place all around the world. Starting from global such as #MeToo and #YesAllWomen (both originating in the USA) to smaller ones located in specific socio-cultural contexts such as South Korean ##naneun-feminist-ipnida (eng. I am a feminist) or #ausfrei (eng. outcry) in Germany. Feminist and media scholars argue that public sharing of one's experience and building community with like-minded people is causing affective solidarity, which is crucial for the feminist movement and women's agency online and offline (Mendes et al., 2019).

Toward More Equitable Internet

Globally, more women are using the internet to promote feminism and women's agency, to reshape and widen debates, and to take actions against gender discrimination, and by doing so work toward more equal internet. All of these actions and initiatives are crucial but women should be also involved in creating, designing, and governing the internet and technologies. Various social groups address and use certain technologies for different purposes and by doing so challenge their design and structures, which might lead to their transformation. For instance, the dominant group and designers of the particular technologies may argue for the neutral and non-political nature of the technology but for ordinary users, the meanings embodied in technology are more obvious (Feenberg, 1999).

Fields of production and design are male-dominated but recently more women have been involved in those fields as well. According to popular social media platform reports from 2015, men constituted 68% of all employees in the Facebook company, 77% of those in leadership, and 85% of those working in technology; in the X company (at that time known as Twitter) situation was similar, men made up 66% of all employees, 78% of those in leadership, and 87% of those in technical jobs (Nagarajan, 2016). However, in 2021, men made up 53.9% of the X company, 59.9% of those in leadership, and 67.1% of those in technical roles (Twitter, 2022). As for Facebook, men made up 63.3% of all employees, 64.5% of those in leadership, and 75.2% of those in technology (Williams, 2021). Men still constitute the majority of the workforce in internet companies, especially in leadership positions, but women's participation in leading and design positions is increasing. Through that women are pushing for more affordable and equal access for women and other underrepresented groups. More women in internet governance mean that online misogyny is taken seriously and addressed properly, and the victims are not fully responsible for preventing harassment. This also leads to more knowledge about digital security and their rights to privacy and control over data (Nagarajan, 2016). The digital production and control over digital safety being done by people who traditionally did not have access to it and were marginalized "along the intersections of their gender, racial, sexual, class, national, and religious identities" should be praised as it affects the dominant discourses and cultural production (Shaw, 2014, p. 275). The involvement of women in digital production reduces digital inequalities, might improve problems not noticed by dominant groups, which traditionally were in charge of the production, and by fixing the problems it creates safer online environments for more people, as it also gives possibilities to create more innovative and creative programs and platforms.

Conclusion

The internet became a crucial tool for numerous groups to promote economic, political, social, and cultural developments and transformations, or to increase individual advantages through online

courses, open-access journals, libraries, networks, and much more. Thus, to a certain degree, the internet provides a space for more people to get involved, and to break the traditional gate-keeping practices of who can create and distribute the content. Simultaneously, there are certain limitations in steering the internet towards more just and equitable outcomes for all. To create a more equitable and safe internet, there should be several changes in the system, as well as in ideologies that preserve the current condition of the internet, limitation of access, and hardship in navigation through it. The problem is not simply technological, but also political and socio-cultural so various parties must be involved.

The diffusion of the internet, accessibility, affordances, and participation online also reflect the unequal distribution of numerous resources within and between countries. Experiencing the online sphere also varies depending on numerous factors such as class, technological abilities, and access to material and symbolic resources.

However, in recent years, women skillfully have been using the internet to promote their agency, challenge gender discrimination and social inequalities, and build communities. An increase in the number of women and other minorities in internet companies and digital production allows for recognizing problems omitted in the early designs and codes and leads to creating a more just and equitable internet for all.

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