GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs

Global Information Society Watch

2013

APC   Hivos

Global Information Society Watch 2013

Online disobedience

Nadine Moawad
Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
www.apc.org

Dot feminist resistance: Online disobedience, sabotage and militancy

Adria Richards has not tweeted to her 14,000 followers[1] in six months. Previously a vocal advocate for women in technology, Adria endured a harsh wave of racial slurs, rape threats and misogynistic trolling for tweeting a photo[2] of two men making sexist comments at PyCon, a conference for Python coders in the United States. Hackers shut down her employers' website and she was then terminated from her job. Adria chose to lay low and keep safe in the months that followed, her voice silenced and her online presence made invisible.

Her story, though devastating, is unfortunately neither shocking nor unique to the thousands of women technologists around the world. The increasingly dominant role of technology as well as the shifting dimension of the internet into a social space have brought forth new forms of familiar attacks against women for the most basic of actions – from self-expression to calling out sexist behaviour, from taking on leading positions to advocating for gender justice.

Yet feminists continue to fight – individually and collectively – to impose their voices and values in a difficult digital world. Over 25 years ago, Anita Borg with 12 other women created a small electronic mailing list that kick-started a community of technical women in computing called Systers (women working in systems). Organising and building power in numbers has been a long-running strategy used by women in male-dominated spaces and fields to challenge patriarchy and discrimination collectively. Still, since the 1980s until today, women organising to resist isolation have been made to frequently, as Borg put it, "justify the exclusion of men and to explain why [the group] is not discriminatory."

Denying sexism and difference feminism

To resist the isolation and bullying that comes with the territory of self-identifying as a feminist in patriarchal spaces, many women techies opt to downplay the effects of sexism on their work. "I am not a female gamer, I am just a gamer," for example, is a common reaction from women who get bothered by calls for women organising safe spaces. Others have opted for advocating for features that play on feminine or masculine stereotypes. E-commerce discussions focus on shopping for women. Gaming companies create fashion or makeup counterparts for their gangster or city planning games.

But the feminists fight on. As their offline counterparts have done for centuries, digital feminists have organised in information technology (IT) and cyber spheres to resist exclusion, isolation, stereotyping, misogyny, racism and sexual harassment. The majority of strategies have been similar – save for a special set of tactics that are customised to subvert technology itself. Feminist resistance is embedded in geek rebel culture and hacktivism, navigating the particularities of the internet in anonymity, transnational connections, and the viral capacity of social media.

Feminist hackerspaces

Hackerspaces gained popularity towards 2008 when more groups sprouted around the world, creating community-built spaces where techies with common interests met regularly to socialise and collaborate on projects, usually for the public benefit. Activists in these spaces (hacktivists) use technology to challenge authority, oppression, government, surveillance and violations of human rights. They use tactics like electronic protests, boycotts of websites or e-services, distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks to take down websites, reputation sabotage, or mirror mock websites.

As in most male-dominated spaces, feminists in hackerspaces find themselves on two missions: one is to ensure safe environments for women[3] and trans people and to challenge the prominent hacker "dudecore" culture. And the second is to influence

1   twitter.com/adriarichards
2   www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2013/03/adria-richards-sendgrind-fired/63400
3   dpi.studioxx.org/feminist-hackerspaces-safer-spaces

the gears of social justice hacktivism to prioritise misogyny and sexism as systemic forms of discrimination that merit challenging.

Mz Baltazar's Laboratory is a feminist hackerspace based in Vienna that brings together women and trans persons to freely exchange equipment, build circuits, and play with DIY electronics and interactive art. The group challenges the minority status of women in both "the creative development and applications of new technologies." Foufem does similar work in Montreal and is part of a hackerspace called Foulab, as does the Anarchafeminist Hackerhive in San Francisco, the Hacktory in Philadelphia and the Miss Despionas in Tasmania.

The activities of feminist tech collectives focus on trainings and skill sharing, as well as responses to sexist trends and attacks on women. But there are also fun projects and widgets that drive feminist consciousness home. Jailbreak the Patriarchy[4] is one of them.

A Chrome extension created by Danielle Sucher, the script "genderswaps" the internet. When installed, the text loads with pronouns and other gendered words swapped. For example, "he loved his mother very much" would read as "she loved her father very much." Sucher says she had the idea when discussing ebooks with a friend and thinking that someone ought to make an app that toggles male/female characters' genders. She wanted to challenge internet users' assumptions about gender when they see the roles reversed. Marianna Kreidler gave the app a more radical twist with a gender-neutral version[5] using ze/hir and other non-gendered terms.

Dads subverting video games

The Entertainment Software Association released a report[6] in June 2013 debunking the myth that women do not play video games, showing evidence that 45% of gamers are female, and 46% of the most frequent game purchasers are female. Yet, when Electronic Entertainment Design and Research sampled 669 action, shooter and role-playing games[7] in 2012, only 4% had an exclusively female protagonist and 45% had the option of selecting one.

And so techie parents who wanted more relatable role models for their daughters in video games got to work on the protagonists. Michael Chabon hacked into Legend of Zelda[8] and simply flipped the gendered forms of address in the text of the game from male to female for his daughter, Maya. Scott and Casey Goodrow made "Sorry Mario Bros!",[9] a spin-off of the iconic game where the princess actually jumps, stomps, floats and warps her way out of the dark castle dungeon herself. "Sorry King Koopa!" the text reads, "Turns out I can jump." Mike Mika re-programmed Donkey Kong[10] when his three-year-old daughter asked: "How can I play as the girl? I want to save Mario!" He had initially expected the video he posted documenting the changes to stay in a small technical discussion among friends on Facebook. Instead, it went viral and triggered a sea of anti-feminist rage amidst applause from feminist techies.

Feminist comics

Ripped muscles and domineering personalities are common characteristics of the comic superhero. Female characters – as rare as they come – are either drawn from a male gaze fantasy (large breasts, thin waists) or positioned as love interests that represent the weakness of the macho superhero. Digital artists have offered subversive storylines and characters that tackle actual women's issues. "Princeless", published by Action Lab Comics, is about, well, a woman superhero who defies the concept of needing saving by men. Book one is called "Save Yourself". And it is not just gender stereotypes that the comic challenges, but also questions of race in a critique of "fair maidens". Princeless is not merely a "strong female character", which is an adjective never given to male characters because their strength is a given. She is a rare woman of colour character that is rarely the star of comics.

Qahera[11] is a fresh bilingual comic in which the protagonist, a veiled superhero, combats Islamophobia and sexual harassment, amongst other things. She was the brainchild of Deena, a female Muslim Egyptian artist, and was launched in September 2013 after many years of Egyptian feminists highlighting the pervasiveness of sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo. Campaigns like #OpEndSH, Operation End Sexual Harassment, allowed female protestors to call the numbers of hundreds of volunteers in Tahrir Square in case they felt threatened, and HarassMap, an Ushahidi

---

4   www.daniellesucher.com/2011/11/jailbreak-the-patriarchy-my-first-chrome-extension

5   www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/life/8842873/Feminist-parodies-are-so-hot-right-now

6   www.theesa.com/newsroom/release_detail.asp?releaseID=202

7   penny-arcade.com/report/editorial-article/games-with-female-heroes-dont-sell-because-publishers-dont-support-them

8   geekfeminism.org/2012/11/08/daughter-wins-with-geek-dad-who-hacks-gender-pronouns

9   www.thewildeternal.com/2013/07/30/sorry-mario-bros

10   www.wired.com/gamelife/2013/03/donkey-kong-pauline-hack

11   qahera.tumblr.com/

mapping platform for sexual harassment, have been leading initiatives on that front.

Collective action to break taboos

On the internet, feminists got together to build connections and run websites or online campaigns that broke taboos of "appropriate" behaviour. India's Blank Noise campaign made waves in 2008 when it asked women to send photos of the garments they wore when they were "Eve-teased"[12] (sexually harassed). Entitled "I never ask for it" – to debunk the myth that what you wear somehow is correlated to the sexual harassment you will face on the streets – the campaign received hundreds of photos within weeks and posted them on their website. From saris to jeans, the campaign showed – with numbers and photo documentation from massive nationwide participation – that attire neither prevents nor encourages harassment. The Pink Chaddi[13] campaign launched by the Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women used the same method after an incident where morality police attacked a group of women in Mangalore, India in February 2009. The group asked women to send pink underwear ("chaddi" in Hindi) to the office of Pramod Muthalik, head of an orthodox Hindu group, on Valentine's Day. The response was massive, with over 500 chaddis sent in one day. Shortly after the campaign took off, the campaign's Facebook group was attacked by trolls and eventually taken over and flooded with racist slurs and death threats.

Writing about sex and sexuality has also been a strategy to amplify women's narratives to an online readership only used to mainstream erotic representation. "Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women"[14] takes contributions (anonymously is an option) from sexually diverse women on matters of sexual experience.

Parodies

Although mostly based in the global North and requiring ample production resources, parodies have sprung up virally across Twitter and Facebook to resist demeaning representations of women. Students from New Zealand parodied the Robin Thicke video "Blurred Lines", criticised for condoning rape, with a video called "Defined Lines" that included lyrics like "What you see on TV, doesn't speak equality, it's straight up misogyny."[15] Also popular is the Twitter Taylor Swift parody account[16] tweeting feminist versions of her lyrics and songs.

Bridging feminism with open source

In being a movement that aims primarily to deconstruct power binaries, feminism has aligned itself with open source and internet rights activism. Women techies organising in digital and offline spaces are more often than not rooting for a free and open internet, safe from monopoly and accessible to everyone, particularly marginalised groups. LinuxChix is one such community, founded in 1999, for women in computing who advocate for free and open source software. They also maintain a resourceful online bibliography on gender and open source.[17]

While much has been done over the decades to highlight the contributions of women to the world of computing, stories of discrimination and sexism continue to make noise in techie spaces around the world. And, in response, women continue to organise collectively on a number of issues, from influencing internet policy towards gender inclusivity to encouraging young women and girls to pursue studies and careers in technology, from challenging violence against women online to amplifying women's sexual self-expression in blogospheres and on social media. Perhaps the era of "Where are the women techies?" now gives way to more exciting times when we recognise the significant participation of women in different technological fields and can now look forward to an internet that is freer, more inclusive, and far more interesting. ■

12 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eve_teasing

13 thepinkchaddicampaign.blogspot.com/2009/02/welcome.html

14 adventuresfrom.com/

15 www.youtube.com/watch?v=tC1XtnLRLPM

16 www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/life/8842873/Feminist-parodies-are-so-hot-right-now

17 www.linuxchix.org/women-open-source-free-software-bibliography.html