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Small stories

Small stories on 3 topics with reflection questions for discussion: Feminist server; Reclaiming expression and porn, sexuality and the internet.

- Feminist server
- Reclaiming expression
- Porn, sexuality and the internet

Feminist server

Developed for APC by Serene Lim and Angela M. Kuga Thas of KRYSS Network

The current internet is not a safe space for everyone. Stories of feminists and LGBTIQPA persons targeted with online violence and discrimination are common. We also hear of how their work and expressions are controlled, forgotten, censored and deleted on corporate platforms – these are rampant and everyday occurrences. Sometimes these acts, which are considerably hostile, are done by the government, private actors or corporations or by any of them jointly. However, feminists and LGBTIQPA persons do push back. Some of the responses include self-organised campaigns to provide counter and alternative narratives, informed by feminist research and documentation, advocacy for law reforms and in mainstreaming human rights into corporate policies. These push-back actions online as well as offline are pivotal to our everyday resistance. There is a need to be proactive and to remain persistent in realising the feminist internet that we want.

An informal group of feminists have been imagining a more autonomous infrastructure that puts human well-being at the core of technology and governance, to ensure that the data, work and memory of feminists are better accessible, preserved, managed and controlled in ways that allow for the promotion of human rights and the exercise of online freedoms of opinion and expression, and of assembly and of association, of rights to information and privacy, and of how the concept of consent is clearly defined (that it is not assumed or permanent). It is important to have access to and control of the server hosting your content; where it is located; what laws and terms are in place that affect the services provided and to which the server is subjected; the digital security protection in place; and so on[1].

A server can be defined as a computer connected to a network that provides services such as hosting files, websites and online services. Because all online resources are hosted on servers, they constitute a base for the internet as we know it. All servers are ruled by different terms of service, governance models and national legislation in relation to privacy and access to data by third actor parties (or “trackers”) and are dependent on a variety of business models. This somewhat technical definition can obscure the possibilities for understanding the political aspect behind the setting up

and management of a server[2].

The feminist server is a response to “the unethical practices of multinational ICT companies acting as moral and hypocrite censors; gender-based online violence in the form of trolling and hateful machoists harassing feminist or women activists online and offline; the centralization of the internet and its transformation into a consumption sanctuary and a space of surveillance, control and tracking of dissent voices by government agencies among others.”[3][4]

What would be the purposes and principles of a feminist server? This was discussed by a group of people interested in gender during the first Feminist Server Summit in December 2013 and at the first TransHackFeminist (THF!) Convergence held in August 2014. As a result of the convergence, two feminist servers were rebooted:

1. The Systerserver project which was originally launched by Genderchangers and the Eclectic Tech Carnival and which focuses on hosting online services.
2. Anarchaserver which was launched by Calafou inhabitants and people involved in the organisation of the THF! and which focuses on hosting living/dead/transitional data.

These feminist servers are composed of a loose coalition of women, queer and trans* people from around the world, with some explicitly interested in hacking heteronormativity and patriarchy[5]. They are also about demonstrating that it is possible to create safe(r) spaces where the harassment of women, feminists and LGBTIQPA persons is not allowed and where all can learn about technology in a non-hierarchical and non-meritocratic way[6].

However, even if these server initiatives are inspiring to many, they still remain at the embryonic stage. Moreover, they do not consider themselves service providers; neither have they clearly decided to become stable and sustainable tech collectives providing hosting and online services to women, feminists and LGBTIQPA groups. In any case, they show that feminist servers are possible and that they should become a political aim for any organisations working in the field of gender social justice and LGBTIQPA persons’ rights. The concern should be about achieving autonomy in communication and technological infrastructures, in addition to securing their privacy, data, social networks and historical memories on the web[7].

Reflection questions

1. What is the purpose of a feminist server?

2. What makes a server autonomous and feminist?
3. How is a feminist server relevant to myself and my community?
4. How can we make sure the model is sustainable and there is proper transference of knowledge?

Annex 1

A FEMINIST SERVER MANIFESTO 0.01

A collective, embryonic manifesto for a feminist server initiated by participants in the Feminist Server Summit (2013)

Source: https://areyoubeingseArved.constantvzw.org/Summit_afterlife.xhtml

A feminist server…

- Is a situated technology. She has a sense of context and considers herself to be part of an ecology of practices.
- Is run for and by a community that cares enough for her in order to make her exist.
- Has an awareness of the materiality of software, hardware and the bodies gathered around it.
- Treats network technology as part of a social reality.
- Is able to scale up or down, and change processing speed whenever resources require.
- At the risk of exposing her own insecurity, opens up processes, tools, sources, habits, patterns.
- Does not strive for seamlessness. Talk of transparency too often signals that something needs to be made invisible.
- Radically questions the conditions for serving and service; experiments with changing client-server relations where she can.
- Avoids efficiency, ease-of-use and reliability because they can be traps.

- Knows that networking is actually a parasitic, promiscuous and often awkward practice.
- Is autonomous in the sense that she tries to decide for her own dependencies.
- Takes control because she wants networks to be mutable and read-write accessible.
- Faces her freedom with determination. Vulnerability is not an alibi.
- Is a paranodal (we did not mean: paranoid) technology. A feminist server is both inside and outside the network.
- Does not confuse a sense of false security with providing a safe place.
- Tries hard not to apologise when she is sometimes not available.

References

Sophie Toupin and Alex Hache, “Feminist autonomous infrastructures”, in Global Information Society Watch 2015: Sexual rights and the internet, APC and Hivos, 2015. https://www.giswatch.org/en/internet-rights/feminist-autonomous-infrastructures

Anarchaserver. https://anarchaserver.org/

Notes taken during the Feminist Server Summit in December 2013. https://pad.constantvzw.org/p/feministserver

Nadège, “Feminist autonomous infrastructure in the internet battlefield: From zombies to ninjas”, GenderIT.org, 22 February 2017. https://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-autonomous-infrastructure-internet-battlefield-zombies-ninjas

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1 Anarchaserver. https://anarchaserver.org

2 Sophie Toupin and Alex Hache, “Feminist autonomous infrastructures”, in Global Information Society Watch 2015: Sexual rights and the internet, APC and Hivos, 2015. https://www.giswatch.org/en/internet-rights/feminist-autonomous-infrastructures

3 History of Anarchaserver and Feminist Server: https://anarchaserver.org/

4 See Annex 1: A Feminist Server Manifesto 0.01.

5 To disrupt the belief that heterosexuality, the alignment of biological male and female, is the norm; and a social system where males hold primary and decision-making powers.

6 Extracted from Sophie Toupin and Alex Hache (Op. cit.). Meritocracies tend to promote those who not only have the skills/experience, but are also outspoken enough to let everyone know about it. This pushiness/ego/self-aggrandisement is something that women are generally discouraged from doing. Meritocracy therefore is a gendered concept.

7 Extracted from Sophie Toupin and Alex Hache (Ibid.).

Reclaiming expression

Developed for APC by Serene Lim and Angela M. Kuga Thas of KRYSS Network

Social media companies generate huge profits from our expression and interaction, including those of feminists and LGBTIQ individuals or organisations. Feminists and LGBTIQ persons, in varying degrees of contribution and effort, intervene in sexist, misogynist and heteronormative discourse online by engaging in Twitter conversations, producing counter-narratives on YouTube, sharing an article on abortion rights, etc. To some extent, these efforts have resulted in robust online conversations and networks of like-minded people. However, the authors and advocates of these contents are also often devalued and face harassment, trolls and threats on social media platforms and other digital communications channel.

These incidents of online harassment share the same logic of offline gender-based violence (GBV) like cat calling, sexual harassment, etc. They are seen by the male perpetrators as a form of punishment, as a consequence of transgression and behaving outside of socially determined binary gender roles, of going against the social expectations and accepted norms of some men. The violence inflicted is never merely physical but motivated by a power structure that seeks to control and silence women and LGBTIQ persons, and to keep these voices outside the social media (perceived) public sphere.

However, instances of gendered harassment and violence online have also prompted more women, queers and allies, in all their diversity, to speak up, to exchange stories, to show support and solidarity, and to resist the trivialisation and normalisation of online GBV. The following are initiatives and efforts in our collective resistance and in reclaiming our expression online:

Building solidarity

Sharing stories is a form of feminist activism because it creates a network of experiences between women and acts as a storytelling process that others can learn from if they so choose. Consciousness raising, thus, provides an alternative to the dominant public sphere.

Digital technology has enabled the continuation of such consciousness-raising spaces into online spaces. Most of the respondents [of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 13 respondents from India] explain that sharing narratives of personal experience is an important feminist practice in online spaces, especially on social media. Archana talks about how the inbox of their page “Being Feminist” often receives messages from users around the world who request the administrators to share their stories on the page. She explains that such narratives also prompt important discussions on gendered violence and acts of resistance.

Meera talks about how online spaces, especially blogs or Twitter, afford people the option of anonymity. This allows them to talk about issues that might be considered sensitive, or even dangerous, in face-to-face conversation and facilitates the sharing of personal narratives without censure or judgment. The ability to control information about one’s self, by revealing certain aspects while withholding others, also allows for radical acts of identity construction.

> Extracted from: Sujatha Subramanian, “From the Streets to the Web: Looking at Feminist Activism on Social Media”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. L, No. 17, 2015. https://www.genderit.org/sites/default/files/from_the_streets_to_the_web_1.pdf

Rejecting victimhood

In 2018, the Dalit-Bahujan women in Kerala, India led a speak-out movement, mainly through Facebook, to narrativise the experiences of sexual harassment that these women face.

The campaign began as one involving revelations on Facebook about sexual harassment incidents that happened in progressive circles and activist spaces. Dalit-Bahujan women came out to speak using various methods such as detailed Facebook statuses, live video and so on, and they shared detailed narrations and evidence about the instances of molestation along with the identity of the predators. Mainstream media further covered this movement and this received a lot of attention amongst the politically sensitive public. This moment of revelation on social media was termed as a second #MeToo campaign; however, it was different from that. The Indian academic #MeToo campaign revealed the names of predators and subsequently the details of the incident in public, while not revealing the identity of the survivors.

One of the important aspects of this campaign is that these women assert themselves as survivors because victimisation is a normalised thing under due process. Generally, in India, women suffering from sexual harassment face long-term trauma since justice is normally delayed, or never provided in the case of Dalit-Bahujan women. These women expressed that the brief and momentary support they received from social media was quite relevant, and also functioned as a relief to overcome the stressful time that followed the act of revelation. It can be read as a form of social justice provided by a sensitive public through Facebook, though it is relative.

> Extracted from: Praveena Thaali, "Rejecting victimhood: The online speak-out campaign in Kerala against harassment", *GenderIT.org*, 9 October 2018. https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/rejecting-victimhood-online-speak-out-campaign-kerala-against-harassment

Take Back The Tech!

Take Back the Tech! is a collaborative campaign to reclaim information and communication technologies (ICTs) to end violence against women (VAW). The campaign calls on all ICT users – especially women and girls – to take control of technology and strategically use any ICT platform at hand (mobile phones, instant messengers, blogs, websites, digital cameras, email, podcasts and more) for activism against gender-based violence.

Take Back the Tech! accompanies the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence (25 November-10 December each year) with daily actions that explore different aspects of violence against women and ICT tools.

"Map it. End it. Demand change." was the core of the Take Back the Tech! campaign for 2011. Take Back the Tech! used Ushahidi to map forms of violence against women, to name, point out, show as related, and denounce – and in that way changed the mapped territory into one that respects the rights of women and children. To map violence the platform receives information sent online, through cellular phone text messages or videos from smartphones.

> Extracted from: Margarita Salas, "Women's freedom of expression in the internet", *Critically Absent: Women's rights in internet governance*, APC, 2015.

https://www.genderit.org/node/3548

Alerta Machitroll

The Alerta Machitroll project is a campaign led by a Colombian-based organisation, Fundación Karisma, to identify sexist expression by self-proclaimed macho defenders identifiable as trolls, labelled as machitrolls (macho+troll). The campaign has classified trolling into different categories: Incurable Machitroll (Machitroll Incurable), Recoverable Machitroll (Machitroll Rescatable) or Machitroll Alert (Alerta Machitroll). This initiative seeks to tackle gender-based online by articulating the idea of macho and trolling with humour as a way of communicating and promoting awareness.

Source: IFEX, “Campaign snapshot of Alerta Machitroll: Using humour to tackle gender violence online”, 9 November 2018. https://ifex.org/campaign-snapshot-of-alerta-machitroll-using-humour-to-tackle-gender-violence-online/

Reflection questions

1. Based on your observation, what values do feminist and LGBTIQ people bring to the discourse on online (public) spaces?
2. Do you think current responses by government, private corporations and policy makers on online gender-based violence (GBV) arbitrarily shut down freedom of opinion and expression? Why do you say so?
3. What strategies and approaches have worked for you during an incident of online GBV? Why do they work (or not work)? What more is needed to ensure that everyone has equal access to the right to freedom of expression?

Porn, sexuality and the internet

Developed for APC by Serene Lim and Angela M. Kuga Thas of KRYSS Network

Porn and “deviant” sexuality are often at the centre of arguments to tighten content regulations online, inevitably implying a perceived harm and threat to social order and the minds of the “vulnerable” – children, young people and women.

The problem is, when it comes to law and policy, women are still stuck in the passenger seat for anything that has to do with sex, sexuality and sexual expression. It imagines the hubby coming home, all pumped up, and asking the missus to go beyond the missionary position. Just like he saw on his iPad mini. (Dirty, dirty.) You see? Man, driver. Woman, passenger.[1]

Porn is always assumed to be not in women’s interest or of interest to women, and some feminists believe porn to be an objectification and commodification of women. Pornhub’s 2018 survey on its viewership showed that 29% of the viewers are female, and the percentage of female viewership has seen a gradual increase over the years.[2]

Long before the internet, the porn industry had already realised the potential of the female consumer. According to Ross (1993), there has been “pornography from a woman’s point of view” since the mid-1980s, but the internet is giving the niche a strength it never previously knew. Not only is the content female friendly, but so is the access to it: from the privacy of one’s home, anonymously and securely – at least comparatively, since before the internet sex and porn were only commercially available in men-dominated public spaces (cinemas, video stores, bars, brothels, [bookshops]).[3]

Anonymity, security and privacy are all issues taken for granted on the internet. Although they are relative, dependent on legislation and [trust for] service providers, for instance, the perception of their effectiveness has improved the comfort zone for accessing porn. Changes in how porn is produced, with an emphasis on amateur videos and exhibitionism (the success of cam4cam comes

to mind), also brought women closer to porn[4]. When porn grows closer to the domestic sphere, the home, then it grows closer to women, since this is traditionally the sphere of life associated with the feminine. Furthermore, access to pornographic narratives can have a positive impact on an individual's life: the EROTICS-Brazil research established porn as an important medium of sexual knowledge transmission and socialisation, and porn can help a person come to terms with sexual desires, in realising or expressing them[5].

Porn that women like

> Extracted from: Bruno Dallacort Zilli, "A Star is Porn? Internet and a kind of porn women like", *Critically Absent: Women's rights in internet governance*, APC, 2012. https://www.genderit.org/node/3548

James Deen is the screen name of porn actor and director Bryan Sevilla. In his mid-20s and with a "guy-next-door" charm, his performances in heterosexual hardcore scenes have become quite popular among women who consume porn. On 25 July 2011, blogger Emily Heist Moss interviewed Deen, discussing the issues of misogyny in porn and the female attention he has been receiving. Later, on 15 November 2011, he was interviewed in depth by Amanda Hess for the Good Magazine website, which inspired another article about him. Internet communicators had already realised there is something unique about Deen and the attention he is receiving from the female audience. A search for his name on Tumblr shows an interesting aspect of this attention – that many women, some of them young teens, like to watch his scenes and state that this is their first enjoyable porn-watching experience.

Online, women declare that they would like to have sex with the actor, among other fantasies, such as wishing to cook for him. They say they get excited not (only) by his appearance, but by his performance. In the movies, Deen can be seen whispering into actresses' ears, holding them tight in amorous embraces while he penetrates them, and enjoys giving oral sex. On the other hand, he also does a lot of BDSM-themed scenes, where he dominates women and performs rough sex. In some scenes, his partners are "older" women, "cougars" in their 30s and 40s. He has also appeared in at least one scene where the actress performs oral sex on his anus ("rimming"), which is very unusual for male actors in heterosexual scenes.

The diversity Deen brings to porn is that he is neither the "disembodied" penis blindly penetrating female orifices, his physique is not an exaggerated mass of muscles, nor is he afraid to go beyond

the boundaries of mainstream heterosexuality, though he doesn't escape them. He presents a more "romantic" persona – even if his scene partners or the scenes themselves are not intentionally romantic. In this regard, it's interesting that it is not always his physical attributes that are the focus of feminine attention, even though he is young and comely. It is the alternative his scenes represent to the "grammar" of porn, "speaking" a different language which is attractive to the women who like him.

One way of interpreting what these women are saying is that they are enjoying the subversion of the gender language used in most pornographic narratives. They enjoy the novelty of this women-friendly narrative, a form of resistance to the usual gender hierarchy which is simply rehearsed in mainstream porn. Usually, women are the main focus of objectification and sexualisation. While the male body is just a stand-in for the (presumed) male viewer, the female body is the object of desire around which the narrative is built. But as the "Deen phenomenon" shows, there is porn in which men can be objects of sexual desire for women as well. This fruition of sexuality online is a novelty that cannot be ignored.

Reflection questions

1. What can and should be done to enhance safety online, but at the same time, ensure the facilitation of women's expression and agency over their sexuality, desire and fantasy?
2. How can we change the way policy makers see porn as harmful and dangerous for women?

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1 Extracted from: Bishakha Datta, "Porn. Panic. Ban", Global Information Society Watch 2015: Sexual rights and the internet, APC and Hivos, 2015. https://www.giswatch.org/en/sexual-rights/porn-panic-ban

2 Pornhub 2018 Year in Review. https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2018-year-in-review

3 Extracted from: Bruno Dallacort Zilli, "A Star is Porn? Internet and a kind of porn women like", Critically Absent: Women's rights in internet governance, APC, 2012. https://www.genderit.org/node/3548

4 There are issues, however, of being able to recognise porn and being able to recognise sexual violence. Video posts on gang rapes or rapes are sometimes mistaken for porn and it is important that we have discussions on what are the tell-tale signs of online content that is in fact sexual violence.

5 Extracted from: Bruno Dallacort Zilli, op. cit.