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Conclusion: Reflections

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Our purpose in the production of this collection was to explore gender and the digital sphere through the lenses of representation, engagement, and expression at a very specific moment in time and context.

Sharon Young in the introduction offers a consideration of the digital sphere as an extension of Habermas' notion of the public sphere, characterised by its ability to circulate information, bring people together across geographical boundaries, and connect people from diverse communities and cultures (Papacharissi 2002, 9; 12). Both public and digital spheres are then seen as having the potential to increase participation in democratic processes in both the formal and informal arena. The subsequent chapters explore the digital sphere through the lens of gender, drawing on a wide range of concepts that range from representation, engagement and expressions of gender in the online world and across its many platforms at this specific moment in time.

The contributors in their respective chapters demonstrate how the digital sphere can be extension of the public-sphere. In highlighting the many ways the digital sphere or spheres enable gender to be made and done, for identities to be re-scripted and re-presented, either at an individual or collective level, frequently shines a light on the private sphere. This would suggest that in the digital sphere the collapse between the public and the private sphere has been accelerated and magnified the public is the private and the private is the public.

Reflections

Commentators such as Richardson and Wearing (2014) have stated that “the earliest feminist scholarship on the internet saw a great potential in online representations to move beyond the limiting sex-gender-sexuality continuum of hegemonic culture” (112). In effect, they argue the digital sphere could be seen as a “blank canvas for new identifications” (Wearing and Richardson 2014, 112).

The authors in this collection explore how gender is done and in doing so show how individuals and collectives, through the digital sphere, have challenged normative ideals (see Hill 2023), and therefore challenge the status quo. For example, new words created in the digital sphere offer ways of exploring, explaining and potentially challenging gendered behaviours which are not welcome: enabling a ‘calling-out’ such as ‘man-spreading’. Likewise, traditional heteronormative identities are challenged in the digital sphere to enable

more fluid self-identified identity through the use of the singular ‘they’. Jenny Lewin-Jones argues “language is more than a mirror, since the use of neologisms can at the same time be a generator or accelerator of changing social attitudes, often spread through social media” (Chapter 10).

Some chapters explicitly address the opportunities afforded by the digital sphere to queer individual or collective identities. Mark Vicars and Janine Arantes’ (Chapter 3) analysis of specific hashtags #boysincroptops and #girlsincroptops in TikTok demonstrates that even as we move to an ever-increasing commoditised sense of personhood, there is potential to destabilise heteronormative gender norms through self-created memes. Hanna Limatius (Chapter 4) demonstrates how hashtags have been used to challenge and reject through plus-size fashion bloggers constructing and broadcasting counter-discourses around body image, increasingly moving away from blogging to ‘influencing’, and therefore monetise their interactions, whilst simultaneously empowering themselves.

The tension between populism and feminist action is laid out quite clearly by Ruth Garland (Chapter 7). The analysis of the day-time television programme aimed at women and fronted by a panel of primarily middle-aged to older women, highlights the contradictions between the off-line and online spheres. This simultaneously seeks to offer space for rescripting gendered expectations of middle-aged women, whilst also demonstrating hostility to inauthentic perceptions of reality in the latter sphere. The comments across the social media platforms demonstrate a certain ambivalence to the rescripting of gender identities when it is encased within the values of show business. Federica Formanto and Mandie Iveson (Chapter 9) in their analysis of the 2019 ‘We believe’ Gillette advertising campaign, and the reaction evidenced on YouTube, is instructive in demonstrating that masculinity, like femininity and sexuality, is re-scripted in the digital sphere across real and imaginary borders. The Men’s Rights Activists who object to the advertising campaign attempt to ‘defend’ and rescript hegemonic masculinity against a ‘softer masculinity’, as well as alternate masculinities and women, evidencing the changes being wrought by the digital sphere in how masculinity can be done and displayed.

The breadth of platforms available within the digital sphere enables women in Turkey, according to Melike Asli Sim (Chapter 8), to use ‘hope’ and ‘hope labour’ for purposes of both self-realisation, self-fulfilment and/or economic gains. The women, through what could be argued as activities traditionally associated with women’s work, such as cooking, seek to gain both social and economic capital, thus commodifying their own practice and challenging culturally scripted gender roles.

Some of the key concepts highlight the changing role of social media in everyday life, particularly the power that social media provides to rescript identity. Alongside this, notions of social justice are explored in relation to reclaiming, empowering and organising communities (cf. Hill, 2023). For example, in the context of challenging political structures and societal expectations the use of “performative hashtags” (Buscemi 2023, 2185), such as the #MeToo hashtag (McCarron and Mitra, Chapter 5) are explored. Themes developed include seeking recognition, justice and accountability in response to the sexual violence and harassment perpetuated against women. Likewise, elsewhere in the digital sphere, the #IngridEscamilla hashtag (Buscemi 2023, 2185), alongside demonstrations and protests, was used to challenge the femicide perpetuated against women in Latin America. Social media hashtags are a ‘vehicle’ for providing visibility – both for seeing and being seen (Anthony McCosker and Ysabel Gerrard, 2020, 4) and “micro-political acts” (Harris, 2010 cited in Harlow, Rowlett and Huse 2020, 1060).

In summary, constructions of both masculinities, femininities and others in online spaces can encourage reconstructions of gendered identities. These online spaces provide environments and communities where these identities are discussed, examined, and constituted in ways that may impact the offline spaces. One such theme includes digital feminist activism and how this overlaps with the real world to inform physical feminist activism with real world impact. Debates, discussions, and theoretical investigations consider whether social media and specifically Twitter, can be considered a public sphere and open up the possibilities of public spheres in the digital world.

All Are Not Equal in the Digital Sphere.

The internet [read digital sphere] is “far from being a blank canvas which can efface gender politics, the internet may well yet be another instrument in maintaining normative gender performances in contemporary culture” (Richardson and Wearing 2014, 120). Whether this is the context of challenging political structures such as the #MeToo or plus-size fashion bloggers constructing counter-discourses, the digital sphere, or more correctly spheres, can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering.

We do not wish to negate the keen demonstrations of how we can do gender differently in the digital sphere, but we also recognise that the online environment offers[s] the possibility for newly inflected gender identifications, though they are subject to some of the same, sometimes far from progressive, gender

dynamics of the social worlds out of which they are created and which they are immersed (Richardson and Wearing 2014, 123).

In other words, gender, reinforced by patriarchy, remains a primary organising principle across many societies. Our focus on gender, does not mean that we exclude the other key means of ordering society, such as ‘race’¹ /ethnicity, social class and heteronormativity. As the discussions around the #MeToo movement have explored, feminist discourse and feminist activism is undertaken alongside misogynistic discourses and both implicit and explicit threats of violence (Ging and Siapera 2018, 523). In addition, the use of the performative hashtag to raise awareness and the rise of the digital feminist movements, have been suggested by some repressive states as “discursively produced and institutionalized as an unreliable, emotional movement instrumentalized by the political opposition” (Buscemi 2023, 2193).

The intersectionality between race and gender, as well as social class, cannot be denied as power shifts, and racism and sexism are recreated in a myriad of ways to reinforce patriarchal and racist structures within the off-line and on-line worlds – they are mutable – they are intertwined. A recent analysis of the ‘Clean Eating Movement’ by Wilkes (2021) demonstrates that the presentation of the women who advocate these lifestyles in the digital spheres does very little to bring forward alternate ways of living or doing gender, whether off-line or in the digital sphere, and actively undermines marginalised voices by creating a very white upper-class notion of femininity:

The conclusion reached here, is that the representations of upper-class white femininity, reinvented as exceptional food experts, is contradictory, as the message professed is one of inclusion, yet the techniques which are relied upon for clean eaters to appear compelling, are inherently exclusionary; whiteness as the ideal predominates in these representations of postfeminist new media influencers (Wilkes 2021, 17).

There is power in the digital sphere for people of colour, through the use of social media hashtags to protest against the violence inflicted upon people of colour, more predominantly those of African American heritage across the globe, whilst also seeking to bring about change. The most recent example is in the increase in the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter² arising from the arrest and murder of George Floyd in May 2020 by police officers in the USA (see BBC News 2020). The #BlackLivesMatter protests sought to raise awareness of, and to seek collective social justice for, Black Men in the USA and elsewhere who have, because they are both Black and men, been criminalised, subject to high

levels of (police) brutality, and subject to murder by police. This movement was an example of the digital and hard off-line sphere collectively working together (see BBC News 2021).

However, all digital users are not equal. Black creators went on strike in the summer of 2021 under the hashtag #BlackTik-TokStrike because the platform's algorithms flagged phrases such as 'Black Lives Matter' as inappropriate content. The apparent racial biases in promoted content created by people of White heritage, simultaneously undermined those who were collectively seeking justice and change and having their personal experiences as victims appropriated by others (Eriksson Krutrök and Åkerlund 2023, 2010). In addition, there was a counter movement #AllLivesMatter³ which failed to understand the ways in which historically Black lives have not been valued and continue not to be valued because of systematic and institutionalised racism, and instead become signifiers of political standpoints (Powell, Kim and Smaldino 2023). These counter-voices sought to diminish the calls for social justice and accountability from agents of the State.

We acknowledge that the digital sphere can be inequitable, subject to political surveillance and control, and access to the online world can be both censored and controlled. Bad actors, whether individuals or nation states, can and do use the digital sphere to pursue their political agenda and that this has a disproportionate impact on those on the margins of society and/or those who are oppressed because of some aspect of their identity, such as their sexuality, gender, religion or 'race'. The digital sphere, it is argued, is increasingly mirroring lived reality as lived reality is simply transferred to the digital society (Campbell 2019). Indeed, Campbell argues, "the idea of cyberspace as existing as a postracial one has been dismissed as digital society has transformed to be driven by a more visual culture" (2019, 305). This is because it is a "mirroring template of institutional power" (2019, 302).

These virtual spaces can, we have seen, offer spaces for marginalised groups as places to gather, discuss and raise awareness of topics that are excluded from mainstream media. However, social media can itself be elitist and exclusionary. Influencers may gain opportunities to empower others – such as the fashion bloggers discussed by Sim or providing the space for new words to evolve, develop and spread in relation to gender. At the same time there are multiple layers of narratives that are presented on the internet, and how the audiences choose to engage with these can depend on individual positionings within the social structure. Thus, influencers may empower, but equally may shape and govern others often reinforcing pre-existing attitudes about gender. For example, whilst audiences may relate to influencers in parasocial relationships, these may be usurped by corporations using such influencers for commercial gain and in the process promoting wider neoliberal logic.

The images that then circulate on social media may encourage upward comparisons to lifestyles as well as in relation to looks and body image which reinforces commodity fetishism to gain self-esteem and self-worth. Simultaneously and paradoxically reinforcing the very gender norms they sought to destabilise and reconstruct and in doing so aspects of social identity are traded off against each other.

And Yet ...

The digital sphere is not neutral. Identities are rarely singular. Often structures which underpin and reinforce existing patriarchal, raced and classed hegemonic practices off-line seek to maintain the status quo online. Nonetheless, social media platforms can provide spaces for “historically disenfranchised populations to advance counternarratives and advocate for social change” (Jackson et al. 2020, 38).

As we have seen in earlier chapters, women are using the digital sphere, especially Twitter, through for example, #MeToo as a means of “news or reactionary discourse” and it is contended that “the opportunities for feminist rhetoric to be heard and noticed is promising” (Lane 2015, 9). Indeed, Buscemi (2023, 2193) argues that these “leaderless, horizontal, and digital movements have created a global interest around gender-based violence and, more generally, gender equality.”). The use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has drawn attention to institutional racism and police brutality as a public issue (Clark, Bland, and Livingston 2017) as it is extended especially to the construction of male Black bodies both in North America and Europe and has enabled the development of “counter-narratives” to oppose these misrepresentations (Clark, Bland, and Livingston 2017, 288).

There are protest movements taking place as we write in the Middle East where the hashtag #MahsaAmini is currently being used across a range of social media platforms to demand freedom of expression for women around the wearing of the hijab.⁴ Much as in the case of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the use of mobile phone cameras and videos to record events and sharing them on Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Telegraph, enables a move away from relying on official news channels for information. This kind of citizen journalism (Kim and Lowrey 2015) results in “shifting the power of gatekeeping” (Krutrök and Åkerlund 2023, 1999), as to whose version of events is to be trusted. In the case of the #MahsaAmini protests as access to one platform is blocked, the movement moves to another.

The digital sphere for many across the globes allows for the multiplicity of ‘truths’ to co-exist in much the same way that it enables for multiple representations, engagements and

expressions with gender in the public and private sphere, and its intersections with race and gender.

Conclusion: Looking Forward.

The digital sphere is not a blank space and nor is it a neutral site. It is gendered, raced, heteronormative, ableist, classed, and it privileges the North over the South. As we write there is a rise of populist and right-wing governments across the globe. Such movements usually bring in their wake a sharp focus on enforcing and prioritising heteronormative perceptions of gender and behaviours. Equally significant, in the West, are the culture wars – some argue pseudo-culture wars – being fought on- and off-line about the term ‘gender’ itself (Dykstra and Litwiller 2019) and who can be categorised as ‘woman’, although interestingly not as ‘man’. Wars, cultural or otherwise, are often fought over representation, bodies, and who has the power to name.

However, this collection points forward to the possibilities that the digital sphere can offer, not necessarily without challenge, as we make, (re)present, (re)frame and (re)script the way we do gender, create, shape and mould our identities, individually and collectively, and adopt creative ways to engage with the political realm, and the private/public divide.

The digital sphere is itself continually changing and developing as themes emerge and others fade away. Whilst this is an attempt to grasp hold of a moment in time and to stop, reflect and theorise some of these happenings, it is also recognised that this book represents a moment in time in the digital world. The evolving and changing nature, as well as the gendered nature of Artificial Intelligence with all the ensuing debates, means that these issues will continue to inform how the online world impacts both us as individuals and us as part of the globalised and connected societies.

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Endnotes

¹ The term 'race' is presented in inverted commas which is a "common practice in the social sciences, in order to differentiate between the use of race as a biological classification system, a view now largely discredited and the use the term has for describing and ultimately explaining social divisions and conflicts based on this aspect of difference" (Woodward 2003, 115).

² #BlackLivesMatter was a hashtag developed in response to the trial and acquittal of George Zimmerman, responsible for the shooting and killing of 17-year old Trayvon Martin in 2012. Campbell (2019, 312) argues that this was a clear example of "the rise of the hashtag as communicative method and of political identification".

³ #AllLivesMatter is a counter-movement to #BlackLivesMatter. For a brief overview of the term see the *Sky News* report <https://news.sky.com/story/george-floyd-death-billie-eilish-and-pink-criticise-all-lives-matter-term-and-white-privilege-11998710>.

⁴See the following reports Burgess report (2023) Iran protests: Defiant #MahsaAmini protestors push back against strengthened morality police's hijab patrols. *Sky News*. Iran protests: Defiant #MahsaAmini protesters push back against strengthened morality police's hijab patrols | World News | Sky News.