Girls Get Digital: A Critical View of Cyberfeminism

Vera Hinsey
Student of Women's and Gender Studies
Rutgers University
email: vhinsey@eden.rutgers.edu

Abstract

As the Internet and digital technologies become ever more pervasive in the lives of young people, there should be a movement to engage critically with these technologies to determine how they are working as players in shaping and changing certain paradigms of society. At the onset of the digital culture, a group of women called VNX Matrix got together to talk about a new type of consciousness called Cyberfeminism. This article takes the basic tenants and theory behind their concept and applies it to some of the forms of "online feminism" which are flourishing today. The article looks at problematic issues of disembodiment, lack of accessibility, and anti-intellectualism which are being found in the digital world; while, also focusing on the many positive and constructive uses of the Internet in building feminism communities. As a location full of complexities, this article recognizes the Internet as an overwhelmingly important factor in the lives and consciousnesses of young people and yet the dangers behind its uncritical use. The author calls for a new type of engagement with cyberspace that seeks to remedy the areas where it is lacking and move into the future with a clear understanding of how it is an actor in shaping knowledge production.

"And with a vengeance, girls got digital and used the language of the new techno-culture to create their own conceptual vanguard" (VNS Matrix).[1]

Where is the language of the new techno-culture now? For a new generation of women growing up with technology as the unquestioned mediator of what we know, the Internet as a medium has been rendered invisible. As the Internet undetectably shapes our actions, its influence could be viewed as a dangerous reemergence of the way men have spoken as neutral bodies, without assuming responsibility for their influence on the epistemological process, for most of our human history. Is the Internet not an agent in knowledge production?[2] It removes our gendered bodies, shortens our sentences, and trains our minds for pop culture. The Internet is a silent and hidden mediator of what we say, simply because it molds how we say it. Through the process of condensing ideas, for example, blogging could result in the death of the intellectual in the public sphere or a location for the birth of a new feminist movement.

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[1] Quoted by Claude Draude in *Introducing Cyberfeminism*
[2] I am using the term "the Internet" here to refer to the set of processes, spaces, and users that make up the term as a multifaceted single entity yet in reality still retain their distinct agency, with a specific focus on its use as an information communicator.

However, the possibilities outside of these options are endless. As they blog, women can speak for themselves in an unmediated, subversive form to other women across the nation and across the world. The Internet is simultaneously a grounds for education *and* activism, so long as there is a recognition of its effect as an intermediary and regulatory actor.

Using both feminist theory, the wave-model of feminism, and personal experience, I will reveal the effect of the "naturalness" of technology in our generation and its impact on feminism today. I will examine how Third-wave feminist values like the diversification of the feminist movement, a growing fear of feminism, and the emergence of youth culture are applicable to the way new technologies need to be mediated. However, the concept of Third-wave feminism primarily functions as a reference tool to critically question current online feminist practices, rather than a label for the online feminism it addresses. To the disadvantage of a new wave of feminist activism, the feminist leaders emerging on the Internet are not clearly defined in terms of who they are and in what direction they are leading feminism. Moving forward, we need to call on the feminist blogosphere to become self-reflective and, in the spirit of the Third-wave, take a look at the positivistic epistemological project of the Internet which has been self-effaced to this point.

During the 1990s, there was a show on PBS called *Cyberchase*. While the premise was to teach kids math in "real life" situations, the whole show took place in Cyberspace. *Cyberchase* aired when the Internet was on dial-up, and the World Wide Web held the whispered promise of unequaled progress. Since then, the word "cyber" has mostly fallen out of public discourse, and with it, the concept of cyberfeminism. However, cyberfeminism may be used to look at the relationship between women and technology. Cyberfeminism is a crucial intermediary step in the recognition of the Internet as an agent in dictating cultural practices and the type of Third-wave feminism it claims to not only embody, but propagate. To lead feminism into the future, we need a force like cyberfeminism to turn a critical eye to the way media and the blogosphere are altering feminism and to reveal the Internet as an agent in a feminist herstory.

Definitions of cyberfeminism are hard to synthesize. The concept is diffuse and dependent on the way it is applied. Some examples can be found in an article by Stacy Gillis called, "Neither Cyborg Nor Goddess: the (Im)Possibilities of Cyberfeminism" found in the book *Third Wave Feminism*. In her text, Gillis references Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein who call cyberfeminism, "'a philosophy which acknowledges, firstly, that there are differences in power between men and women specifically in the digital discourse: and secondly, that CyberFeminists want to change that situation'" (Gillis, 2004, p. 185). Yet, more applicable to the concept of the internet as an intermediary body, Gillis includes a definition by Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth who claims it is "'[g]rounded in both practice and theory…a new wave of feminist theory and practice that is united in challenging the "coding" of technology and in investigating the complex relationships between gender and digital culture'" (Gillis, 2004, p. 186). While cyberfeminism is critiqued as monolithic and "unsure of its theoretical territory", it actually seems to be able to offer us an already created portal into the expansive and amorphous study of women and technology (Gillis, 2004, p. 186). The Old Boys Network (OBN), a CyberFeminist website, gives a definition which offers "100 anti-

theses" of what cyberfeminism is not, including, "a fragrance… an institution… a picnic… anti-male…a single woman, etc" (OBN). However, the authors of the website wrote in their book *Cyberfeminism, next Protocols*, "It's everybody's right to coin the notion of what 'cyberfeminism' is" (Reiche, 2004, p. 9). Therefore, I offer my own explanation: cyberfeminism recognizes the ways that technology silently plays a role in creating feminist discourse and calls women to acknowledge its effect, celebrate its uses, and be wary of its negative implications.

Cyberfeminism uses theory to address issues found in the online sphere such as: disembodiment, community, and imagined vs. real space to illuminate technology as a part of the female experience. Rhiannon Bury uses cyberfeminism to understand female fandoms online in her work *Cyberspaces of Their Own*. She deals with the "problem" of the female body/identity online because "computer mediated communication (CMC) was supposed to circumvent and, indeed, render irrelevant physical markers of race, gender, sexuality, ability and age that can impede face-to-face communication and the formation of community", yet this "dream of disembodiment" was never actually realized (Bury, 2005, p. 3). In fact, if "disembodiment" were truly realized, it may have limited women's participation online, since feminism understands the separation of the body and soul as an exclusively male occupation. Disembodiment involves a loss of perspective, rendering our voices tinny and hollow without the resonance provided by our hips and thighs. Women's experiences are very often mediated by their bodies. Formerly, this implied that women were limited by their bodies, whereas today, women have reclaimed the corporeal as a means of consciousness-raising and truth-telling. Discourse is written on the body in the same way that the body informs our discourse. Therefore, the lack of the body in online spaces creates a true distinction between "cyberspace" and the "real world".

But how do we understand the space we inhabit online and where should cyberfeminism direct its work? According to Doreen Massey, who is quoted by Bury, "gender is 'deeply implicated in the ways in which we inhabit and experience space and time'" (Bury, 2005, p. 16). The places where feminism and the Internet come together are specific places online, and women are developing feminist practices specific to those 'spaces' in that 'time'. Tumblr is one of those spaces, which, like Facebook, allows users to follow certain people whose posts appear on their newsfeed. However, instead of a profile, each user has a blog where they post images, words, and videos. Due to the nature of the site, which involves amassing a following or being a follower of other users, there is a clear sense of a Tumblr community. Given this easy flow of communication, a feminist discourse has developed on Tumblr, and the practices and concerns of these online communities one is what I label "online feminism". Cyberfeminism, then, becomes the critical tool which can be used to understand the role of the Internet in shaping how online feminist communities operate.

The feminist community on Tumblr also provides a perspective on how online communities operate in general, and it reveals both their potential and their limitations. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Bury notes, "what gives a community its substance is the consistent repetition of these 'various acts' by a majority of members" and therefore, "being a member of a community is not something one *is* but something one *does*" (Bury, 2005, p. 14). Now,

it is something one must do faster and faster to keep up and to remain a legitimate community member. My brief foray into Tumblr as a blogger was fun for a few weeks, but I don't have time for Tumblr every day. My sense of community evaporated with my faltering repetition of "various acts", which consisted of putting up posts and interacting with other users. Although I found it difficult to keep up with the pace of the community, the vitality on Tumblr ties to Butler's concept of performativity by revealing online feminism as a fluid, dynamic place, which challenges the notion of a static online identity. The sense of belonging in these communities is morphing from a superficial, stagnant recognition of similar interests to a more active, fluid membership and due to the developing accessibility of the online communities.

Because online feminism is a series of repetitive acts, the community is constructed in a singular way, only available to certain people. Theoretically, the Internet could be a space of expansive female empowerment. A blog article from *Ms. Magazine* entitled, "Top Ten Ways to be a Feminist in 2010" provided as the last suggestion "Start a Blog!". Author Amy Klein says, "But now our generation has a secret weapon: the Internet. The ability to use the Internet is a real privilege that previous generations of girls and women didn't have" (Klein, 2010). As a staple of the Second-wave of feminism, which was critiqued for addressing only the concerns of white middle-class women, *Ms. Magazine* puts itself in danger of re-creating this exclusion, positing the Internet as a space only for young people, and a luxury apparently we all have. In fact, these technologies "have the ability to…exclude non-users and divide the world into the 'information rich' and 'information poor'" (Elm, 2007, p. 3). The Third-wave strove to break down such a monolithic view of "woman" which had really only included certain people. As Jessica Valenti, founder of the blog Feministing aptly points out, "I think some of the constraints [of the blogosphere] are that we run the risk of re-creating the same paradigms that we see in real life in mainstream feminism, that only certain voices being amplified, you know particularly white, middle-class, straight women's voices. We've certainly seen that happen in the blogosphere again and again" (Valenti). The blogosphere must be re-examined, reshaped, and revived as an emancipatory tool; when feminist blogs only creates communities that are composed exclusively of homogenous voices, they will never to able to positively shape the future of feminism.

Using cyberfeminism to critique the blogosphere as disembodied, performative, and exclusionary reveals how these practices are woven so seamlessly into our online habits that we become easily blind to them. At the crux of this problem is that, "the material and cultural foundations of online practices may sometimes be invisible to participants for whom access, tech skills, and familiarity with online cultures have become to be perceived as natural" (Elm, 2007, p. 6). Due to the omnipresence of the Internet for those born during or after it spread into the public realm, it can be difficult for users to see the actual workings of online practices. Gillis notes that one of the foundations of the Third-wave has been the, "need to negotiate and engage with the new technologies that have emerged since the personal computing revolution of the early 1980s" (Gillis, 2004, p. 186). The perceived "naturalness" of technology removes it as an agent in the current online feminism, born out of youth culture, to the extent that its negative effects are whitewashed by its omnipresence, and its benefits are almost taken for granted.

One negative consequence of online feminism that is rarely acknowledged is that it challenges girls. Online feminism challenges girls to the point that they are angry, but it doesn't give them the critical tools to understand the foundations of the feminist movement and create their own cultural theories. Jessica Valenti mentioned, "a lot of comment sections have become this particularly bizarre brand of feminist one-up-manship, rather than real productive discourse" (Valenti). This is what happens in a community based on opinions rather than research, and it is an unproductive side effect. As Lisa Maria Hogeland writes in *Fear of Feminism: Why Young Women Get The Willies*, "Fear of feminism is also fear of complexity, fear of thinking, fear of ideas--we live, after all, in a profoundly anti-intellectual culture" (Hogeland, 1994, p. 1). Is the way to resolve a fear of feminism by making it less complex, so you have fewer ideas to think about? "TLDR" (too long didn't read) is a common response to articles that surpass the attention span of young people who want quick, simple visual stimulation with minimal text. Bloggers are aware of the trend which favors easily-digestible information, and, according to the author of the feminist blog Small Strokes Fell Big Oaks, "bloggers want their posts to be read, so they try to write things that will catch people's attention and get linked or shared by other bloggers" (Lauren, 2012, p. 1). With all our hope about a revitalization of popular feminist discourse, it seems blogosphere entertainment value overrides the urge to express oneself academically. Instead, the blogger may feel forced to appeal to a broad audience with a limited attention span. Internet culture and the structure of blogs seem to have the power to dissolve of feminism into a form of self-righteous or seemingly-necessary entertainment.

Yet, this is clearly only half of the story. *Something* is drawing all these young people as well as the attention of the world to this medium. In fact, the Internet can be seen as emancipatory and downright revolutionary because of its open-access nature and lack of censorship. The Internet, as described by Garrison, is a forum that is "accessible to young people alters the controlling role of adults and other authority figures in the production of youth cultures" (Garrison, 2010, p. 388). We go online and women's liberation is a click away because, as one woman suggests, "the revolution will be incited through my voice, my words, not the voice of the universe of male intellect that already exists" (Shugart, 2001, p. 196). Girls are speaking out in their own voices, raising issues born from experience. The Internet is a tool of consciousness-raising. This potential has been clear since the birth of the Internet, but its value has been amplified for people my age because technology is so engrained in every aspect of our lives. As Donna Haraway writes, "The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (Haraway 180). If we live our lives in part online - if we live as the machine - then the Internet becomes a type of recording device that can ensure our voices won't get lost like the millions of women's voices who have passed unrecorded. The Web is a free-for-all of new ideas and feminist indignation. So even if that indignation isn't always well thought out, or is bias or too proud, at least women have the ability to speak unfiltered and unregulated. When women can learn how to maximize the capacity of this platform, perhaps we can look forward to a cyberfeminism that is more reflective, more critical, and more rooted in the feminist theory that has helped grow our movement.

On Tumblr, the blog <u>Feminist Ryan Gosling</u> provides a starting point to see a new form of cyberfeminism where theory and practice, pop culture, and the academy can fuse and ignite a fun, smart conversation about feminism. Creator, Danielle Henderson, is a grad student who was bogged down in theory. As a joke, Henderson used a popular online format of layering text over a picture, called a meme, to re-imagine feminist theory on an interpersonal relevant scale using the actor Ryan Gosling. Her first post read "Hey girl, I know how Judith Butler feels about subverting the dominant paradigm and rejecting the naturalization of heteronomativity, but I got you this flower", over a picture of Gosling smelling a pink carnation. The following meme was retrieved from Henderson's Tumblr:

<u>http://feministryangosling.tumblr.com/post/11171240616</u>

Her ability to infuse the dense theory with humor caught on quickly. Of the success she writes, "one of the coolest parts is getting e-mail from people who are new to feminism or feminist theory asking, 'Who are you talking about'", when she refers to unfamiliar feminist authors (Henderson, 2012, p. 5). Henderson is starting a dialogue about ways to incorporate the academic side of feminism with the lighter pop culture side that can attract an audience. Henderson is a leader in a new way of using the capacity for Internet exposure while still maintaining a level of erudition. As Henderson exemplifies, there are ways to start a conversation online that can transcend the structures of the Internet and bring feminism to a new generation of women.

Cyberfeminism as a term holds the potential to highlight a new area in feminist thought. As the digital world grows more and more pervasive in our everyday lives, we have to start looking at blog content and Tumblr posts more critically. It is not just what is being said online but how, why and by whom. Is there a deficit in intellectual engagement or is there a surplus of passion and

interest? How can we find a balance between the two in order to bring feminism into a new world where it can have the power to transform society in meaningful ways? Online feminist communities found on sites like Tumblr or Feministing need to provide tools for social engagement along with the type of consciousness-raising that is currently flourishing. Important improvements would be increasing access of online platforms to women around the world and from different socio-economic spheres, introducing more of a variety of topics and issues into the current dialogues, and finally working to recognize and critically interact with the ways technology is not only enhancing but shaping feminism as we move farther into a new digital age. Being a feminist means one must constantly be in a struggle with the mainstream patriarchal society but also be self-critical of the means by which we want to better that society. If we can create an online feminist world using the guiding principles of Cyberfeminism as they have been laid out in this article we can emerge into a place where young women have the critical consciousness necessary to change the world.

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