


Making Digital Cultures of Gender and Sexuality With Social Media

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Abstract

This article introduces a special issue concerning the interweaving of gender, sexuality, and social media. There are 10 articles included in the issue which together map out a landscape of diverse areas of interest covering topics such as sexism and harassment, health and wellbeing, relationships, and leisure.

Keywords

gender, sexuality, health, leisure, harassment

Sociocultural digital research has engaged with questions of gender and sexuality for most of its history. Early work in the area pointed optimistically toward the possibilities for gender fluidity, but also critiqued the problems of gender tourism and the potential for the reinforcement of biologically deterministic conceptions of gender roles where technology is concerned (Nakamura, 2002; Wajcman, 1991). Sexualities and sexual cultures have also been digitally mediated and re-mediated in various ways. People with diverse sexual identities have found support and sociality via networked media (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Correll, 1995), experienced the entanglement of physical and digitally mediated embodiments of sexuality (Campbell, 2004; Mowlabocus, 2010), and confronted the role of digital media in challenging and preserving heteronormativity (Light, Fletcher, & Adam, 2008).

In developing this Special Issue, we aimed to bring to light a range of perspectives on how digital cultures of gender and sexuality are made, focusing on social media as a particular site of these processes. Everyday social media activities are not only composed of exchanges between users, but they also involve the practices and influence of platform owners, designers, and other stakeholders, such as advertisers, celebrities, marketers, and data miners (Duguay, 2016; Light & Cassidy, 2014). For example, while Facebook's decision to allow users to display a custom gender identity (outside the male/female binary) appears to be empowering to users and responds to user activism, these additional choices for self-presentation are at the same time additional, more granular demographic data-points. They are bound up with the platform's architecture and programmed specifications, and the decision to include them is equally connected to data markets and overall platform business strategy (Kellaway, 2015).

Research in this area has begun to develop new approaches to engage with these processes of datafication and the entanglement of digital cultures of gender and sexuality with the sociotechnical and political aspects of social media platforms. Recent work has spoken to the influence of contemporary technological infrastructure and governance on sexual expression (DeNardis & Hackl, 2016). These influences are, however, actively navigated and contested by users, such as gay men and drag queens on Facebook, trans youth on Tumblr, and those involved in Twitter discussions regarding domestic violence (Cassidy, 2015; Dragiewicz & Burgess, 2016; Lingel & Golub, 2015; Renninger, 2014). A recent special issue "Queer Technologies: Affordances, affect, ambivalence" (Shaw & Sender, 2016) explored such issues further through articles examining the possibility and limits of queering media technologies to allow for greater expression of diverse gender and sexual identities.

This Special Issue builds on this framework by examining cultures of gender and sexuality that emerge from and intersect with digital materiality, governance, and practices. These articles explore the digital cultures of those who find new ways to express gender and sexuality through technology, including immigrants to new countries and same sex attracted young people. The authors also identify how dominant discourses of heteronormativity and patriarchy within mainstream culture become reinforced through user practices,

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such as Gamergaters' harassment of female gamers, and embedded in technologies like Facebook's relationship profile field. As a compilation, these articles highlight the role of culture within arrangements of users and technology, which continually shapes gender and sexual expression. We hope you enjoy reading this diverse collection of papers and find them useful for your own work.

Opening the issue, *Rena Bivens and Oliver Haimson* unpack how gender is "baked into" platforms through an analysis of the 10 most popular English-speaking social media platforms during the processes of account registration and advertisement creation. They highlight the power of platform owners in constructing gender for society as it is programmed into software, and categorized in particular ways to aid in commercial endeavors. Additionally, the authors point to the lack of a common reference point among developers in this work and instead point to individual company assessments of what is in and out (though this may be influenced by controversies other platforms face in the mass media environment). The authors conclude by making the point that the rise of post-demographics, targeting based on preferences that can cut across the usual demographic markers, such as gender and sexuality, may hold some potential for a destabilization of traditional classification processes. However, at the same time, the same such processes of declassification can lead to the erasure of certain groups, and therefore they argue the matter is in no way so easily dealt with.

Continuing to shed light on the landscape of gender, sexuality, and social media, *Alexander Dhoest and Lukasz Szulc* investigate the role of social, cultural, and material context on users' experiences with social media, examining, in particular, how such factors are implicated in the process of disclosing or concealing gendered and sexual selves in online spaces. This article starts from the perspective that greater diversity is necessary in terms of the samples around which studies of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations and digital cultures are based. To make this point, Dhoest and Szulc carry out semi-structured interviews examining the approaches to online identity management taken by two groups of gay men with migration backgrounds living in Belgium: one group comprised men born in Belgium to parents born abroad and the other comprised "sexual refugees" in Belgium to escape persecution in their country of origin on the basis of their sexuality. Variations between and within these groups in terms of managing collapsed contexts and the presentation of sexuality in social media show the importance of context in our understandings of user activity, with sexual refugees tending to operate more freely with regard to their sexuality and level of "outness" on anonymous social media than Belgian-born participants. This was due mainly to the greater distance between sexual refugees and the ethno-cultural community in their countries of origin and the increased freedom they felt in Belgium to use social media to express themselves than those men who were born

in Belgium, but were closely surrounded by their families and ethno-cultural communities.

The next two papers in the issue consider the significance of seemingly increasing levels of sexism and harassment in social media environments. *Andrea Braithwaite's* article charts the rise of #Gamergate as a movement dedicated to reforming ethics in video games journalism and its rapid expansion into a site characterized by viciously sexual and sexist attacks on women in and around gaming communities. Following #Gamergate across a range of social media platforms and analyzing the key themes underpinning these attacks, the article highlights how #Gamergate discourse is ultimately driven by a misogynist claim to games and gamer identity by those who seek to protect gamer culture from "intrusions" by radical feminists and social justice warriors. Particularly useful for readers of this Special Issue is the centrality of social media to this process, as both as vectors for public discourses around gender and sexuality and spaces where gendered vitriol is increasingly legitimate. *Frances Shaw* then goes on to explore the case of Bye Felipe—a counter-harassment campaign built around exposing and shaming bad male actors in dating sites and a popular meme in its own right. Shaw treats Bye Felipe as a well-known instance of a public feminist tactic to counter sexual harassment and discourses of male entitlement in the context of online and mobile dating. Via close readings of key discussion threads on the Bye Felipe Instagram account, Shaw articulates this space of gender politics with the broader sociocultural dynamics and political functions of trolling in contemporary digital culture. She shows how Bye Felipe—as a site of both cultural struggle and innovation—enables us to get a sense of the multiple forms of cultural practice and political action that intersect in and around gender and sexuality on dating sites and apps—from the efficacy and ethics of affective political strategies like shaming to the function of humor and ridicule (especially through the power of repetition, which is used in mocking the common practice of sending unsolicited dick pictures by highlighting their banality), as well as speaking back to the threats of violence that follow closely behind the "friendly advances" of the entitled.

The next part of this issue attends to digital cultures of gender and sexuality in the context of health and wellbeing. *Sharif Mowlabocus, Craig Haslop, and Rohit Dasgupta* draw upon data from the Reaching Out Online study which explored the role of hookup apps and websites as sites of sexual health education. With a focus on men who have sex with men, the study explores the possibilities for peer-led sexual health promotion and the opportunities and challenges faced by health promotion teams. Through this study, these authors offer insights into the opportunities and challenges of sexual health education where proprietary platforms are involved. While such platforms can offer effective routes into hard to reach sexual subcultures, they are also constraining due to the commercial interests

of app owners, the reticence of users to engage with health workers in such spaces, and the affordances of platforms. The work of these authors prompts us to consider the continuing politics of platforms and, in particular, the increasingly proprietary nature of the web and what this means for sexual health education formally and informally. This is not something that will go away. Just after this article was accepted for publication, and as we wrote this introduction, Grindr launched a survey to determine if users would like to filter searches of each other by HIV status (Rae, 2016).

Kath Albury and Paul Byron continue the theme of health wellbeing by expanding upon understandings of risk in relation to sexuality and mobile technology by examining how young people perceive and navigate risk, safety, and visibility on hookup apps. Their focus groups with same sex attracted 18 to 29-year-olds who identified perceptions of risk that are not centered on HIV and sexual health, the usual targets of health outreach, but encompass a range of risks, such as outing in unsafe settings and deception by other users. Young people use multiple strategies to manage these risks including close examination of profiles, exchanging photos, and communicating across a range of platforms. Mobile phones and app features are integral to these strategies, with the mobile phone providing a password-protected, personal container for sexual experimentation. As much as young people may encounter risks through their use of hookup apps, these accounts also highlight the role of apps and mobiles in establishing a sense of safety for communicating intimacy and queer visibility.

Different forms of gendered and sexual relationships are the focus of the following two papers. *Brady Robards and Siân Lincoln* begin by exploring the expression of romantic relationships on Facebook over time as a focal part of growing up narratives. They show how relationship disclosures are shaped by user perceptions of audiences and Facebook's technological arrangements. Using data from the Facebook Timelines project, involving interviews with long-term Facebook users and "scroll backs" through their Timelines, they identify varied practices of relationship disclosure. These include making a relationship "Facebook official" through the relationship status profile field and implied relationship disclosure through increased tagging of partners in photos. When relationships were complicated or came to an end, participants took steps to limit the visibility of relationship disclosures or erased evidence altogether. However, features within Facebook that default toward to disclosure tied users to a linear, simplified narrative of romantic relationships following a heteronormative progression through dating to engagement and marriage, which presented challenges for participants experiencing more complex relationship trajectories.

Next, *Akane Kanai* looks closely at the practices of engagement around a meme-based Tumblr blog, *WhatShouldWeCallMe* (WSWCM), which is built around

chains of reaction gifs as a form of narration. Drawing on leading meme scholars, Kanai shows how the textual, formal, and structural characteristics of the blog both encode and require particular kinds of identity-based understandings and experiences. In her close reading of this Tumblr and the audience engagement with it, she brings older feminist cultural studies work on readership and identity practices together with New Literacy Studies (NLS) and contemporary digital media scholarship. Out of this articulation of theoretical traditions and close textual analysis, the article proposes the concept of "spectatorial girlfriendship" to account for how WSWCM addresses and implies particular reading positions and cultural understandings on behalf of its imagined community of audiences and participants.

The final two papers examine links among gender, sexuality, leisure, and social media. Examining practices around the culture of drinking and socializing and its representation on Facebook by men and women in New Zealand, the article by *Antonia Lyons, Ian Goodwin, Christine Griffin, and Tim McCreanor* illustrates how photo-sharing practices on social media reproduce regimes of gendered power. Data are presented from interviews and focus groups showing that, while the affordances of social media are used to extend and enhance the pleasures of drinking with friends for both men and women, and that drinking photos on social media are a site of "pleasure, leisure and self-display" for both sexes, the labor involved in these processes is heavily gendered, with women taking on the vast majority of the burden in regard to "preparing for, taking, selecting, uploading, tagging and untagging." The fact that women must simultaneously navigate the perils of "drunken femininity" in this space, adding to the degree of digital labor undertaken in comparison with men, is also highlighted.

Nicholas Carah and Amy Dobson take it to the streets, exploring the entanglement of digital cultures of gender and sexuality with the nighttime economy. They are particularly concerned to understand the cultural economy of mobile social media as it articulates with the bodies of its participants, their mediation and entanglement with digital cultures of publicity and mobility, and the cultural and embodied logics of "hotness" associated with these cultures. Drawing on intensive fieldwork with participants in nightlife precincts (including consumers, promoters, and performers), the article focuses on how the digital visual mediation of hot bodies and discourses of "heterosexy" hotness not only play a role in the economies of nightclub promotion and nightlife experience but also feed back into the algorithmic logics of digital media platforms, contributing to the broader construction of value and desirability with respect to gender and sexuality in contemporary culture.

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Ben Light is professor of Digital Society at the University of Salford, UK. His research concerns people’s everyday experiences of digital media with a focus on (non)consumption, digital methods, gender, and sexuality. His book, *Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites* (Palgrave MacMillan), was published in 2014. In 2011 (with Garry Crawford and Victoria Gosling), *Online Gaming in Context: The Social and Cultural Significance of Online Games* was published by Routledge. He has published work in journals such as *First Monday*, *New Media and Society*, *Information Communication & Society* and *Cultural Sociology*. He is currently working on the co-authored text: *Not Safe For Work* (MIT Press—with Kylie Jarrett and Susanna Paasonen). He is a senior editor of the *Journal of Information Technology* and an Associate Editor for *New Media and Society* and *Social Media + Society*. He sits on the United Kingdom’s Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Peer Review College and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council College.