

DIGITAL GENDER: A MANIFESTO

Report on the Research Workshop:
Digital Gender: Theory, Methodology, and Practice¹

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ABSTRACT

While early day Internet research often hailed “Cyberspace” as an arena where individuals would be liberated from the social shackles of their biological gender, a growing body of research makes evident the exaggerations present within these romanticized claims. Though the online gender divide is rapidly eroding, the Internet remains rooted in society at large. While digital technologies can challenge normative views, they therefore often maintain status quo. Consequently, there is a need to revisit old claims and challenge traditional notions of “Digital Gender”. In this vein, this manifesto reports and synthesizes findings and discussions from an international workshop titled “Digital Gender: Theory, Methodology and Practice”, held at Umeå University, Sweden, in early 2014. Against this backdrop, we chart out a new agenda for research on how the digital intermingle with the social in the production of gender. In particular, we argue that scholars must move past the idea of Internet as a separate – virtual – realm and direct attention to the increasingly complex ways that digital technologies permeate social practices, altering the very fabric of society itself. On the one hand, we stress the need for research that focuses on how particular Internet technologies help maintain as well as challenge normative views of gender. On the other hand, we stress the need to uncover how particular material properties of digital technology affect the (un)making of such views. Overall, we also stress the need for scholars of gender to move beyond binary oppositions and to be appreciative of intersectionality in their analyses of digital gender construction.

Keywords: Digital gender, Gender and technology, Internet and society, Digital humanities.

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1. Introduction

In the 1990s, Internet scholars often hailed “Cyberspace” as an arena where individuals could escape the socially imposed shackles of their biological gender. Through the Internet, digital technologies were seen to facilitate bodily transcendence (Benedikt 1991, McCaffrey 1991, Biocca 1992, Plant 1996a), to catalyze new ways of engaging in gender politics (Schuler 1996, Wittig and Schmitz 1996, Castells 1997, Tsagarousianou et al. 1998), and to provide a medium whereby individuals could reconstruct their identity free from bodily stereotypes (Plant 1996b, Stone 1995, Turkle 1995). In this way, scholars noted clear opportunities within digital technologies for both liberation and emancipation, not only through gender-play (Rommers and Van Oost 2001) and notions of cyborgs and technological drag (Graham 2001, Jimroglou 2001), but also in its potential to democratize the active production of an ever more digitized world (Green and Adam 2001). Claims were even made that the networked organization of the Web inherently supported feminist and democratic work (Plant 1995, Scott et al. 2001, Carstensen 2009).

While this “Utopian” view of digital technology rapidly gained prominence within both scholarly and popular press, not everyone shared this view (Scott et al. 2001, Roberts and Parks 2001). Seeking to explain the relative absence of women online, “Dystopian” critics pointed to how the Web was constituted dominantly as a “white male playground” (see Scott et al. 2001), with pornography as an extreme example of online sexism, and the capacity of digital technology to fuel sexualized violence (Inayatullah and Milojevic 1999) and online harassment (Ferganchick-Neufang 1998). Scholars in this stream soon showed that men often monopolized discussions online, even when they were directly related to women and their gendered experiences (Kramarae and Taylor 1993, Herring 1996). Similarly, scholars also showed that the Internet was associated with a “masculinized netiquette” (Sutton 1996), through which “deviant” women and men were both victimized and harassed: Indeed, several scholars have pointed to how such “flaming” dramatically reduce women’s and men’s ability to take place and participate online – highlighting the potential of digital technologies to enforce gendered behaviors and norms (Scott et al. 2001, Reagle 2013). Far from the utopian view of digital technology held by others, claims were even made that women were in dire need of segregated sanctuaries online (Camp 1996).

In this context, Utopians recognized the potential of the Internet and digital technology to emancipate women and men, while Dystopians instead pointed at the active exclusion of women, noting barriers for equal online participation due to hegemonic masculine scripts (Scott et al. 2001, Carstensen 2009). Though these entangled narratives rightly gained prominence, they are now challenged by the ubiquity and accessibility of Internet technology in quotidian settings – particularly following the mobile and social revolution, spearheaded by companies such as Google, Facebook and Apple. Even as the online gender divide is rapidly eroding, allowing previously marginalized groups to participate in the digital mainstream (Dean and Laidler 2013), the use of digital technologies appears firmly rooted in society at large, lending support to earlier claims that the potential of the Internet is squandered due to continued misuse and misappropriation (see Scott et al. 2001). Digital technologies, such as social networks and online blogs, for example, hold clear opportunity to challenge normative societal views, but commonly also help to maintain the status quo (Carstensen 2009, Filipovic 2007, Harp and Tremayne 2006, Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson 2014). Similarly, even anonymous online communication has been shown to embody gendered, sexual, racial and class-based inequalities of the society at large (Shapiro 2010).

To understand this troubling outcome, we organized an international workshop called “Digital Gender: Theory, Methodology, and Practice”, at Umeå University in early 2014. In so doing, we aimed to address questions of theory and methodology regarding Digital Gender and paired these investigations with activist and artistic practice. Our decision to include speakers that have strong relation to activism and art was based on the perceived need for more nuanced and practice-based accounts of the making of Digital Gender. Indeed, we saw a balance between research and methodology and empirical, artistic and activist perspectives as key to understand what Digital Gender could and should mean in today's digitized world.

In what follows, we report and synthesize findings and discussions from our international workshop on Digital Gender. Against this backdrop, we then offer our conclusions and discuss possible directions for further research on how the digital intermingle with the social in the production of gender.

2. Digital Gender: Theory, Methodology, and Practice

The workshop on “Digital Gender: Theory, Methodology and Practice” took place in HUMlab, at Umeå University during the 12-14th of March 2014. During the workshop, we explored a variety of traditional and innovative methodological, theoretical and practice-based perspectives on Digital Gender through individual paper contributions and panels. While most contributions focused on the production of gender within the digital realm, the overarching aim was to understand the implications of digital technology for the production of gender and studies thereof. To this end, we contrasted theoretical and methodological perspectives with artistic and activist accounts. This allowed us to re-think the very notion of Digital Gender and shed light on how digital technology is intimately tied to both the preservation and disruption of normative views of gender. In particular, this approach proved helpful in showing how alternative perspectives and approaches to digital gender either accommodate or subvert current theoretical and methodological tools, and how these alternatives make use of digital technology in increasingly novel ways.

While most papers explored multiple issues related to the digital production of gender, eight themes were particularly salient in our workshop: Digital Gender, Bullying and Activism; Gender, History and the Digital; Critical Making of Gender in the Digital; Gender in the Digital Realm; Digital vs. Physical; Gender, Performance and the Digital; Digital technology and Gender. In what follows, we synthesize and report our findings within each of these themes.

Digital Gender, Bullying and Activism: Digital technologies afford normative views of gender to be both challenged and maintained. In her talk, “Movement Knowledge: Science of the Oppressed from the Transborder Immigrant Tool to Autonets”, Micha Cardénas used the Science of the Oppressed to illustrate how digital technologies can be used and appropriated through activist practices that aim to develop digitally-mediated networks that better align with the interests of women, transgender people and people of color. In particular, she offered illustrations of how the increasing availability and mainstreaming of digital technologies provide marginalized groups with powerful means to protect themselves against sexist and racist violence through the creation of novel, digital artifacts. In this way, she provided key insight into the capacity for digital technology to foster communality and to disrupt

oppressive structures of power. But as others would show, this capacity is double edged. In their talk, “Online Hate Discourse: Articulation, Experience, Prevention”, Maria Carbin and Erik Karlsson - in collaboration with Linda Berg and Anna Croon Fors – indeed showed that digital technologies therefore also afford oppressive forms of communality. In particular, they showed the key role of digital technology in the production of online hate discourses within the three interwoven spheres of everyday life, media and politics. As digital technologies increasingly permeate social practices, there is therefore a need to better understand the particular material properties of digital technologies and whether and how the design of digital technology affect its use and participation in the production of gender. In this vein, Nishant Shah gave a presentation titled “The chicken-egg conundrum: Examining the role of the digital in the construction of gender. Or vice versa”, to provide insight into how young people’s interaction with digital technologies affect their visions, practices and ambitions of change. In particular, he uncovered blind spots in discourses of digital activism and proposed new approaches to articulate Digital Gender.

Gender, History, and the Digital: Digital technologies are inscribed with and carry logics of gender. In his talk, “Scripting a Gameable War”, Tomas Karlsson showed how wargames embody historical narratives. In particular, he showed how such inscriptions pose clear challenges for those seeking to (re)write history through games. He highlighted in particular the subtle way that digital technologies participate in the construction of meaning. While these games typically appear “open”, they nevertheless shape how the user make sense of historical narratives and gender. Similarly, Lewis Webb’s presentation, “Sexual virtue exposed: ‘Slut-shaming’ in cyberspace and on the streets of Ancient Rome” highlighted the need to view digital technology as embedded within societal frameworks. By comparing and contrasting public expositions of female sexual virtue in cyberspace with similar expositions in Rome during the Second Punic War, his diachronic analysis of gender production highlighted both static and dynamic elements within the cultural suppression of female sexuality. In particular, he showed how cyberspace increases audience size and ‘unviability’ for shamed targets. Digital technology is therefore not neutral, but rather must be understood as entangled with the larger hegemonic scripts that govern and maintain societal order. As shown by Alex McAuley, however, digital technology also has the ability to rewrite such logics and narratives. Titled, “Seeing Through the Gendered Fog: Digital Approaches to Identifying Ancient Women”, his talk provided key insight into how digital technologies can be used to bring otherwise invisible ancient women into the fore. Inspired by the McGill

IOWC project, he showed in particular how digital technologies can be used to identify ancient women by combining genealogical databases with geospatial mapping of their time and location. He also showed how such approaches help understand the role of women for ancient social networks that were forged and maintained through the marriages and issues of ancient women.

Critical Making of Gender in the Digital: Digital technologies afford new perspectives and knowledge of gender. In their presentation, "Ballade of Women: Embodying Perspectives on Women's Rights", Jeroen Peeters and Nigel Papworth discussed how interactive installations can be used for novel explorations and critique of women's historical representations. By making use of the capacities of digital technology to blend and bend time and space, they showed how design that builds on concepts of embodiment and active perception allow for the creation of engaging and immersive interactive experiences of gender. Visitors are, then, not only passive recipients, but rather become active parts in the creation of a dynamic information landscape. In this way, digital technologies afford new ways of thinking about gender. But as shown by Anna Foka, this capacity does not always translate into actual use. In her talk, "Digital Gladiatrixes: Historical Concepts of Gender on Screens", she indeed showed that while screen-based mediation allow for rich communication of geographically and chronologically remote gender identities – specifically that of classical and later antiquity – computer games typically enforce rather than challenge normative views of gender, as women, while portrayed as strong are also highly sexualized. In this way, there is a clear need to unpack the digital of Digital Gender and understand how digital technologies not only afford new forms of meaning-making but also make and carry old meanings. This was also the topic for two practical sessions on critical making, held by Ginger Coons and Carl-Erik Engqvist.

Gender in the Digital Realm: While digital technologies may allow individuals to recreate identities, the digital realm is nevertheless highly gendered. In her talk, "Transdigital, Transgender", Jenny Sundén investigated how contemporary steampunk culture intersects with transgender practices. Aptly defined as an aesthetic technological movement, centrally concerned with re-imagining the Victorian era interlaced with the Industrial Revolution, Jenny Sundén showed how steampunk offers ways of rethinking the digital along the lines of the transdigital, but also how such discourses are emergently shaped by larger societal views of gender. As shown by Roopika Risam, in her talk "Toxic WOCs: Constructing Race and

Gender in Digital Spaces”, digital technologies can indeed work as machines that maintain the construction of racialized and gendered identities. While the digital offers potent means for identity reconstruction, she showed in particular that digital spaces indeed tend to replicate and amplify racial tensions. The role of digital technologies for the production of gender is therefore not clear-cut. Part of, rather than separate from, society, the use and impact of digital technologies must therefore be understood as situated within broader societal processes and contexts.

Digital VS Physical: To uncover the complex imbrications of the digital and the physical is key to understand the role of digital technology for the construction of gender. Digital technologies indeed afford both novel forms of thinking, representing and understanding gender. In this vein, Oliver Berndorf showed how digital technologies provoke questions about where to draw the line between self and other. Titled ”Transgender Hand as Digital Device”, his talk made use of Lynda Barry’s idea of the human hand as the ”original digital device” to present a practice-based understanding of the transgender hand as a digital device, alongside the narrative, embodied, artistic and archival implications of such a reading. While digital technologies are typically viewed as external to the body, viewing digital technologies as human parts indeed challenge conventional views of gender as biologically derived and pose clear challenges for gender research and practice. In a similar way, Maxwell Cooper’s presentation, ”Electric Lady #1: The Interconnections of Digital and Physical in Janelle Monae’s Metropolis Suite”, showed the need to dig into the complex ways that the physical and digital interact. Through a close reading of some of the tracks of Janelle Monae’s Metropolis suite, Maxwell showed how models of gender that allow for an integrated understanding of subjects as simultaneously digital and physical enable key insight into Digital Gender. In this way, digital gender does not only take place within digital technologies. Digital technologies also affect life in the non-digital realm. In this vein, Julienne Corboz’s work, ”The limitations and possibilities of digital technologies in applied gender research in Afghanistan”, showed how digital technologies carry implications far beyond life online. Exploring the use of digital technologies in conducting gender research in Afghanistan, she showed how digital technologies both afford limitations and possibilities, and stressed the need to consider the implications of using digital technologies in research for the people that are directly affected by our scientific practices. How we use digital technologies as part of our scientific endeavours indeed matter, both for the results we create and the implications they have. The role of digital technologies for scientific practice was also

the topic of Annette Markham's talk, "Remixing gender studies: Methodological provocations for creative innovation." In her presentation, Annette Markham showed the vast potential of digital technologies to re-think both matters and practices through the notion of remix. In particular, she showed how remix allows us to embrace and grapple with complexity – instead of simplify – by placing less emphasis on methods as templates to either apply to experiences and organize these experiences into particular categories and structures, to instead favor an emphasis on meaning as derived from a creative process of inquiry and how scholars can situate their practice within a world permeated by digital technologies.

Gender, Performance, and the Digital: Digital technologies not only allow particular forms of performance, but actively co-constructs these performances alongside human actors. In her talk, "Mental illness and social media: Gendered performances of disorder, disordered performances of gender?", Anna Johansson indeed showed that digital technologies are intertwined in the gendered performance of mental illness and disorder online. In particular, she offered key insights into how blogs and online forums, through their potential for connectivity and anonymity, contribute to the reproduction as well as subversion of gendered constructions of mental disorders. There is indeed an urgent need to investigate how digital technologies partake in the production of identity. Its crucial impact was well illustrated by Camilla Hällgren's speech, "Do you think I'm pretty? Crowdsourced Girl identities." Discussing basic dynamics of identity-making through her ongoing research and art projects, Camilla Hällgren offered valuable insight into how theoretical and artistic explorations of girls' online identity-making further our understanding of the relation between digital culture and gender.

Digital Technology and Gender: Digital technologies must be understood not in opposition to human subjects but in their mutual constitution. In her talk, "Did you mean: why are women cranky? Google – a means of inscription, a means of de-inscription", Jennie Olofsson indeed showed that digital technologies are inseparable from larger societal processes and contexts. Discussing the role of material inscriptions whereby digital technologies become both carriers and producers of meaning, she showed the gendered implications of online information retrieval processes. In particular, she discussed how online search engines partake in creating and reproducing gender stereotypes, and how the role of digital technologies within these processes can be understood through inscription, structuration and amplification, but also de-inscription and submission. The need to uncover how the digital intermingles with

the social in the production of gender was also the topic of Viktor Arvidsson's talk, "Human technology and Digital self." Challenging the notion of human subjects as separate from their environment, he argued for the need to view digital technology as integral to the self, rather than as other. In this way, digital technologies do not only enable and constrain human action, but rather constitutes the self through and through. In particular, he showed how the digital and the social constitute each other through transactional processes and how one therefore can only be understood in relation to the other. By viewing humans and digital technologies as co-habiting an environment, this "sociomaterial" view of digital gender allows scholars to understand the co-evolutionary processes of "in/habitation" whereby the social and the material are mutually transformed.

3. Conclusions and Future Directions

Throughout the workshop we revisited both Dystopian and Utopian claims of the role and potential of digital technologies in the construction of gender (Shapiro 2010). In so doing, we sought to shed new light on the nexus of the digital and the social in the production of gender. Against this backdrop, we note the need to move beyond the notion of Digital Gender as "gender online", and instead direct attention towards how the digital intermingles with the social in the making and unmaking of social categories and associated forms of oppression. While it is well known that Internet technologies afford overt spaces where normative views of gender can be challenged, we highlight the need to further uncover how situated online practices, facilitated within these spaces, both shapes and is shaped by societal processes and contexts (Shapiro 2010, Wyer et al. 2013). On the one hand, we note a strong need for empirical research that focuses on how and why particular digital technologies help maintain as well as challenge normative views of gender. On the other hand, we note a strong need for empirical research that uncovers how particular material properties of digital technology affect the (un)making of such views (cf. Leonardi 2010, Yoo 2012). To facilitate such a turn, there is also a need for both theoretical and methodological tools capable of uncovering the increasingly complex ways that digital technologies permeate social practices, thus altering or reinforcing the very fabric of society itself (cf. Barad 2007, Leonardi et al. 2012, Sassen 2002, Wajcman 2004). Overall, we also stress the need for scholars of gender to move beyond binary oppositions and to be appreciative of intersectionality in their analyses of digital gender construction (cf. Daniels 2009).

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