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O'Riordan, K. and Fotopoulou, A. (2015) *Sustaining Networked Knowledge: Final Report*. Working Papers of the Communities & Culture Network+, 5. ISSN 2052-7268

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EPSRC Cultures and Communities Network+ Final Report

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Funding Bodies



Publishing platforms:



Universities:



Executive Summary

The network aimed to bring together different strands of feminist media-technology studies research. It focused on research that pursues questions about a) how non-institutionalized communities engage in digital media, and b) how to sustain feminist networked knowledge production. These aims were inspired by work in feminist media studies and science and technology studies and by the outcomes of the EPSRC CCN+ Expertise and Knowledge Scoping Study and Workshop. We intended the network to create intersections with the CCN+ networks, feminist media and technology research in the UK, and the Fembot Collective and FemTechNet in the USA and ReFrame in the UK.

The approach to putting together the network rested on creating three hubs: an international workshop; a special edition of an online, open access journal; and a network web site SusNet.

Aims and objectives

We aspired to bring together scholars, research and projects such that they might be in conversation with each other in different ways. This was in order to meet the primary aims of the network:

- 1) To learn. In the face of exclusion how do people become enabled to engage in digital media?
- 2) To create. How can an understanding of these engagements be sustained and made into stable, long-term, forms of networked knowledge?

For SusNet, we wanted to reflect on the possibilities and obstacles for making and sustaining feminist knowledge in digital media, a context in which feminist knowledge production can be vulnerable and easily erased. At the same time, we wanted to think about how such feminist knowledge and praxis can be sustained within the institutionalised and canonical context in which we as academics operate, and which often performs its own kinds of exclusions. We therefore convened an international workshop and used this as the basis for a special issue of *Ada, A Journal of Gender, New Media and Technology*. *Ada*, with its open access, multi-modal peer review, was an essential collaboration for this exploration, and a most appropriate publication platform for the network.

Key findings

There were multiple contributions to the network and many different directions that the research collectively pursued. So the diversity of engagement is one general finding. However, there were some common themes and connections.

Digital media praxis was the strongest theme and provided a sense of connection across diverse areas. Critically and theoretically engaging with media technologies and making communicative objects was a feature how people become enabled to engage in digital media. However, in order to sustain and

network knowledge these objects had to travel, and their context had to travel too.

Information architecture and practice technologies

In the real time of the network, the circulation and sharing of making--and meaning-making—operated around key architectures. For example, Vimeo (a video hosting service), and Wordpress (a blog hosting service) were the most commonly used platforms respectively. Whilst the use of cameras embedded in computers, tablets and phones was used more than professional dedicated cameras (although these latter were used in some instances with projects embedded in academic or media institutions). The use of Scalar was embedded in some research, and entered into more general discussions.

Histories of technological platforms and formats were significant in terms of archiving and sustaining knowledge over time. Things made in video format, posters and zines were particularly elusive and historical knowledge – or knowledge across territories – about these forms of production was more easily occluded than that of web production. The relationship between format and particular groups, and their visibility, played out in relation to the relative ease of tracing cyberfeminisms and the relative difficulty in connecting this feminist video art. Although the connections are embodied through practitioners in both areas they are rarely made visible in accounts of cyberfeminism.

Institutionally housed archiving projects, in which there has been recent interest, provide much more robust and structured access to media histories than anything smaller scale. However, these projects make visible very specific kinds of knowledge, which in turn overshadows other ways of knowing. For example, the Sisterhood and After archive at the British Library is a well supported resource celebrating a history of the women's movement in the UK. However, even this resource is attached to anxiety about long term sustainability, and faced challenges in connecting to histories and documenting the past.

Scarcity and the ephemeral aspects of media production are issues in some formats and contexts. However, in others the bigger challenges are abundance and overload. Video disappears quickly -but at the same time -in the real time of the project the abundance of material on Vimeo and Youtube was overwhelming.

Much of the research in the network was engaged in questions about archiving and this ranged across: creating archives; making archives articulate; navigating archives; missing archives; infinite archives.

However, more of the research was engaged about questions of communication in the here and now. For example research across the network included: using video in the classroom to teach feminist media praxis; scoping and community engagement workshops; creating online resources or real time communication to support people; using media technologies to represent marginal voices. In these cases the question of what is readily to hand, and what is readily accessible, was often a primary concern. In these contexts widely available

commercial platforms, together with cameras embedded in privately owned devices were often found to be the best fit.

A tension between the use of such proprietary platforms and technologies, and the desire to use alternative architecture ran through much of the research. Historically, activist and subcultural media production has had a concern with having control over the medium and means of production and circulation. Thus, alternative architecture like RiseUpNet, Indy Media, and independent archives, collections and forms of distribution have been important. However, in recent political movements the question of what is ready to hand and readily accessible has been more pressing. The turn to commercial platforms, and disregard for the ownership and control of the medium, marked much of the media making in the network. Interestingly this use- e.g. of social media- was not accompanied by a lack of knowledge about the potential for surveillance or censorship. Activists sometimes thought that the question of ownership was simply less important than the potential reach of distribution, or were guided by an idea that there is so much stuff out there that no-one is particularly visible or vulnerable. The idea that technological structures could be subverted also informed practices, as well as broadcast approach where duplication of materials on multiple media forms was the goal.

Engagement and sustaining knowledge

The question of how people become engaged was answered in multiple ways. Pedagogy was a key theme and inculcating media expertise through teaching media practice and sharing knowledge was one of the most important themes. This extended to formal educational environments such as the university classroom; to informal learning in communities of practice and self directed learning. Thus, engagement also featured as a less formally pedagogical process which can open up discussion about specific projects and issues.

Art practice and play also featured as important. These can be understood as pedagogic or as engagement but also have different dimensions. Projects included in this theme include collaborative and social practice in art and gaming, as well as the circulation and apprehension of aesthetic experiences, or aesthetic interpretations and representations of other forms of knowledge. In relation to these forms the discourse of affect also attenuated that of media praxis.

Reading. Communities of reading, the circulation of texts as objects and the meaning of texts provided points of engagement. For example, an ethnography of the literary sub-genre of steampunk revealed a very different experience of technology as cultural form, to that of video making. However, the affective and epistemic engagement with media technologies was determined and sustained. Other reading examples included communities and histories surrounding the consumption and production of feminist science fiction as well as that of feminist theory.

Media consumption. The work of being an audience and engaging with the circulation of digital media texts is an opportunity for engaging and sustaining

knowledge. The global circulation of mass media texts, figures and products provides shared points of identification and resistance. Audience interpretation, meaning-making and user generated content also contribute to flows of networked knowledge and questions of expertise and knowledge.

Archiving, publishing and distributing featured as key aspects of sustaining (as well as making knowledge). However, embodiment and human aspects of the life course and memory, as well as talking to people and meeting face to face also featured as key. People's stories about networked knowledge hinged on meeting people and on key formative moments of human interaction or personal concern, as much as they did on reading or viewing texts and artifacts.

Key Issues

Issues arising from the network include concerns about abundance and influence of digital media as against the austerity and lack of resources in the arts, humanities, education and in people's everyday lives. The resonance of plenty makes digital media an awkward fit with questions about exclusion, poverty and inequality – at the same time as the abundance and accessibility of digital media is posed as a solution to the same issues.

The paradoxes and ideological dimensions of digital media remain in some ways intractable. The digital continues to embody innovation and the technological fix and to defer questions of social justice. It continues to configure users through forms of pseudo agency whilst structuring control. It remains gendered, surveillant and exclusive whilst offering equality, transparency and openness. None of these dimensions are on the way to being solved and could be seen as constitutional contradictions, which also offer openings and interstices for opportunity, play and resistance.

Different issues arise from the key areas of concern: pedagogy; engagement; art and play; reading and media consumption. Taken as a whole, the issues could be said to come back to the question of how to engage people with digital media in ways that have a commitment to open access to both the technologies and the agenda-setting around technological development. On the one hand people are disadvantaged if they are cut out of technological expertise and engagement in a broader discussion about the role of such technology in making better politics. On the other hand to engage and teach people about these issues is also in part the work of supporting a technology (and thus supply driven) agenda.

Next steps

Due to practical issues around staffing the original plans for the network were not complete and we returned some of the grant money. In relation to this we intend to apply for the remaining funds to complete the step of visualization and mapping of the network.

Members of the network are also engaged in two publication projects coming out of this work. One of these is a writing project around feminist media futures

(Bassett, Kember, O’Riordan). The other is a reflection on the project as a whole (Fotopoulou, O’Riordan). We are also working on identifying a larger research agenda around feminism knowledge making and technology, coming out of the network.

Impact

The main point of impact was the SusNet website and ADA special issue, which also links back to the website. The website records 1,836 all time views since launch. We aim to create a video to contribute a teaching resource for the online course FemTechNet which will provide further impact. We are also still receiving offers of more content for the website and will continue to maintain and publicise this.

Dissemination

‘SusNet: Sustaining networked knowledge’, Paper presented by Aristeia Fotopoulou at the CCIG Forum ‘Enacting Public Engagement: Collaboration and Critique Within/ Beyond the University’. 23 April 2013. The Open University.

Queer, feminist social media praxis. University of Sussex 1st May 2013. 17th of May 2013 (international conference) Website: <http://queerfemdigiact.wordpress.com/programme/>

‘Feminist spaces and digital methodologies: Mapping reproductive technologies as a social controversy online,’ Paper presented by Aristeia Fotopoulou at the FWSA 2013 conference ‘The Lady Doth Protest: Mapping Feminist Movements, Moments and Mobilisations’, 21 – 23 June 2013 (Feminist and Women’s Studies Association, UK & Ireland).

‘Biodigital Paradoxes: Linking questions about sustaining knowledge in feminist art and activism and with work on emerging technologies’. Presentation by Kate O’Riordan at Ecosex Symposium, July 14 - 20, 2013, Prested Hall/ Colchester Arts Centre, UK <http://ecosexlab.org/schedule/england/>

‘Sustaining networked knowledge production: feminist media, art and activism’, Aristeia Fotopoulou and Kate O’Riordan. Digital Culture: Promises and Discomforts Workshop October 2nd – 4th, 2013 Digital Culture section of ECREA, University of Bonn, Germany <http://dcecrea.wordpress.com/workshop/>

The Post-Digital: Critical Responses, June 11th, 2014 Creativity Zone, University of Sussex. This included a panel on Feminism and technology after the digital (FemTechNet), Caroline Bassett, Sarah Kember, Kate O’Riordan. The event also included a launch of SusNet, prepared by Aristeia Fotopoulou during the reception and dissemination of the website to participants.

Ada: A Journal of New Media and Technology, **Issue no. 5: Queer Feminist Media Praxis** Edited by Aristeia Fotopoulou, Kate O’Riordan, and Alex Juhasz July 2014

Funding

Aristea Fotopoulou was awarded an RCUK Digital Economy [Nemode](#) grant during the project.

School of Media Film and Music, University of Sussex provided match funding for the dissemination and network events Queer Feminist Social Media Praxis and Post-Digital.

