



Re-framing Women and Technology in Global Digital Spaces: An Introduction

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Abstract: This introductory essay outlines the main theoretical and contextual frameworks of the special issue. It argues that the focus on women and technology advances the gender studies agenda of the journal while reframing and updating the current understanding of Russian, Eurasian and Central European new media within the global context of digital information flows and technological development. The ways in which gender is discussed and the degree to which gender equality is a political, social or theoretical concern offers an important window to understanding geographically and culturally localized processes. As the theoretical and methodological framework for the contributions to follow, the introduction discusses a range of feminist approaches to technology. It also discusses some significant gender biases in the history of women and computing in the Soviet Union, which have impacted the further development and cultural understanding of one of the largest national online networks, the Runet. The aim of this framing is to launch a critical feminist reconsideration of computer technology, the internet and digital media communication across post-Soviet cases and the rest of the world.

Keywords: Women and technology, feminism, gender studies, history of technology

This is the first special issue of *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org) devoted entirely to a feminist perspective on digital media and communication technologies.¹ With this focus, we seek to advance the gender and feminist studies research agenda of the journal. At the same time, this special issue contributes to and extends the discussions started in previous issues. The feminist group Pussy Riot's political activism was covered extensively in the articles and essays published here in

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the aftermath of the 2011–2012 protest movement² and case studies examining online fan fiction and digital Orthodoxy through the lens of gender and sexuality have appeared previously in this journal (Samutina 2013, Stähle 2015). In the current issue, we are building on this foundation created by our colleagues in the field.

Why women and technology?

The case of Pussy Riot has shown us how contemporary feminism functions in a *hypermediated* society. This means that Pussy Riot as *political activist group* is virtually impossible to separate from Pussy Riot as *media product* circulating globally on digital platforms. This is also probably why the analysis of new media practices and discourses became so central for understanding Pussy Riot's influence on Russian society and the protest movement.³ This might have also shifted the focus from other interesting factors and questions embedded in the case, such as different forms of online feminism and affiliations between postsocialist feminist networks and the waves of feminist protesting and campaigning all over the world.⁴ With this issue, we wish to develop our understanding of (hyper)mediated feminism precisely in this direction, now exploring a variety of different case studies and feminist networks online (in particular, see contributions by Andreevskikh and Salvatori). In this issue, we also re-connect with gender studies and feminist theory as productive methodological frameworks of digital media studies by introducing new contributions and analyses of how women and technology are represented in cultural texts (see the contribution by Høgetveit), how women within the postsocialist tradition create culture and feminist associations with technology (in particular, see contributions by Perheentupa and Cherkashina) and how information on women and technology is distributed across the internet (Radojevic & Petkova in this issue). Overall, the issue contributes to the analysis of developing discourses of gender and technology in a postsocialist context.

In this issue, we understand communication technologies in the broadest possible sense. Contributions are written from the point of view of both *hardware* and *software* technologies. By hardware we mean technology understood as devices, gadgets and machines. Software here is technology understood as applications, programming skills and digital resources for producing and organizing new knowledge and social networks. By bringing together articles and essays from different backgrounds—academic, professional and geographical—this issue seeks to increase the diversity of perspectives and establish new interdisciplinary practices and approaches to the study of gender and technology in our field.

² See the special cluster of articles 'How Pussy Riot Rocked Russia and the World', *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Eastern European New Media*, issue 9 (2013).

³ For example, Strukov (2013) analyzes the viral dissemination of Pussy Riot videos on global platforms as a phenomenon of *post-broadcast media*. Hutchings and Tolz (2015: 194–220) discuss how Pussy Riot was perceived as *media event* on national television. Gapova analyzes Pussy Riot as a case of media activism (2016: 292–328). Some scholars contrasted Pussy Riot's international fame with grass-roots and NGO feminisms (e.g. *ibid.*, Sperling 2014). In addition, Pussy Riot has been analyzed from the perspectives of the Russian Orthodox tradition (Epshtein 2012), dissident art (Yatsyk 2017) and cultural geography (Rosenholm et al. 2015).

⁴ These include, for instance, extensive participation of women's rights activists in the Arab Spring protests 2010–11; solidarity protests for Pussy Riot in different countries; 'slut marches'; Femen activism; women's marches responding to Donald Trump's xenophobia and misogyny; and the #MeToo campaign.

Employing a gender and feminist studies approach will also help to reframe and update the current understanding of Russian, Eurasian and Central European new media within the global context of digital information flows and technological development. The question of gender equality is not specific to any country, culture, or geographical context. However, the ways in which gender is discussed and the degree to which gender equality is a political, social or theoretical concern offers an important window to understanding geographically or culturally localized processes. Therefore, while focusing primarily on the post-Socialist and post-Soviet spaces, the articles here include analysis of women and technology in the BRICS framework to provide a comparative perspective (see the contribution by Zapata et al.).

In 2018, the #MeToo campaign raised awareness of sexual discrimination against women all over the world. The campaign demonstrated the role of the internet as a global medium and showed once more that participation on digital platforms can and will drive change.⁵ Although #MeToo did not resonate in the post-Soviet digital space as strongly as in many other contexts—and thus received relatively little attention from researchers of these regions—there are examples of similar campaigns that derive from a more localized understanding of gendered violence. This is the case with the #IamNotafridToTell (*IaNeboiusSkazat*’, *IaNeboiusSkazati*) campaign launched by the Ukrainian human rights and feminist activist Anastasiia Mel’nichenko in 2016.⁶ She started the campaign based on her experience working with female victims of war in Eastern Ukraine. With this issue, we want to acknowledge the significance of human rights and feminist activism online and stress that major breakthroughs take place on the everyday level, through the work of grassroots actors, as well as with the support of ordinary internet users.

Feminist approaches to technology

Technology has been a concern of feminist inquiry for decades, most visibly in 1990s *cyberfeminism*.⁷ One of the key feminist texts that influenced this movement is Donna Haraway’s ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s’, first published in *Socialist Review* in 1985.⁸ In the manifesto, Haraway introduces the hybrid of human and technology, *cyborg*, as a category of feminist social utopia, through which she

⁵ #MeToo is a global campaign against sexual assault and gender discrimination in different professional fields. It began within the American film industry in October 2017 when the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* exposed long-standing allegations of sexual assault by the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. These articles were followed by a tweet by the actress Alyssa Milano where she invited all women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted to share their stories under the hashtag #metoo. The hashtag was originally used by the African American activist Tarana Burke who launched it already in 2006 as part of her decades-long work with the victims and survivors of sexual violence among women of color.

⁶ The campaign was analyzed by Mariia Terentieva at the annual Basees convention 14 April 2018. The title of her talk at the conference was ‘Help Me(me): #IamNotScaredToSpeak as an Online Collective Action Challenging Rape Culture in Ukraine’.

⁷ Cyberfeminism took shape at the beginning of the 1990s. Cyberfeminists strove to create new productive alliances between women and machines and to explore the possibilities of new technologies, especially the internet, for women’s liberation and feminist empowerment. The cyberfeminists conceptualized the machine as the ‘third gen’ transcending the binary divide (see Elm et al. 2007: 2–9).

⁸ A slightly revised version appeared later in Haraway’s collection of essays *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Associations Books, 1991). References to the *Cyborg Manifesto* in this intro are to this later version.

criticizes the binary notion of gender and offers alternatives to it. As one of her definitions for cyborg attests, ‘the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world’ (Haraway 1991: 150). Further in the essay, she goes on to explain the embodied nature of technology and its meaning for women:

Communication technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial forces recrafting bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social roles for women world-wide. Technologies [...] should also be viewed as instruments of enforcing meanings. The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge (ibid: 164).

This also means that we should be attentive to processes of social and symbolic marginalization when creating meanings around new technologies. In Haraway’s thinking, however, the times of rapid technological development offer opportunities to change the course of gender dynamics. With the help of advanced technology, it is possible to redefine and reconstruct social structures in a way that will help deconstruct existing gender hierarchies. With the help of technology, it is also possible to create new hybrid categories of gender and sexuality.

The contributions to this issue draw attention exactly to these processes of meaning making, creative thinking and transgressive action that take place at the intersections of the gendered body (or body images), sexuality and technology (for examples, see contributions by Høgetveit and Andreevskikh in this issue). Haraway’s essentially utopian category of the cyborg thus offers us a tool for visionary thinking about human-machine interaction; also for the contemporary context, in which advanced technologies have penetrated virtually all aspects of everyday life and the dream of the democratizing effect of the internet transforms into dystopian visions of digital surveillance.⁹ The role of communication technology for feminism has altered radically over time. The internet has changed its meaning from an alternative space of transgressive symbolic work to a mainstream communication environment, in which the same gender inequalities and misogynist practices apply as elsewhere in society, sometimes taking the form of an amplified echo chamber. At the same time, the internet’s global reach has brought visibility to a variety of sensibilities that are at the heart of the contemporary feminist movement and increased accessibility of feminist discourses for women in different parts of the world (Keller 2012).

An important view that Haraway and other 1990s techno-utopian feminist thinkers *do* share with contemporary feminists is the understanding of gender identity as a *hybrid*. As Malin Sveningsson Elm and Jenny Sundén summarize in their introduction to a volume on Nordic cyberfeminism, Haraway’s *Cyber Manifesto* builds an understanding of the subject as ‘an ongoing, open-ended process in the intersection of gender, race and class, with a sensibility for local, material conditions that form female subjectivity’ (Elm et al. 2007: 5). The contemporary intersectional feminism speaks from a similar position. To use the words of Banu Gökariksel and Sara Smith, ‘theories of intersectionality have questioned homogenous identity categories and instead drawn attention to subject positions differentially situated in rela-

⁹ Recent translations of the *Cyber Manifesto*, for instance, to Polish and Russian languages speak for the relevance of feminist discourse of technology for postsocialism. See, ‘Manifest cyborgów’, translated by Sławomir Królak i Ewa Majewska, *Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki* nr 1/2003; ‘Manifest kiborgov’, translated by Aleksei Garadzha, Moscow: AdMarginem, 2017.

tion to multiple axes of power' (2017: 629). Intersectional feminism thus functions as an important counterforce to the effects of right-wing nationalist politics in different countries, including Eastern European countries and Russia (for example, see Salvatori in this issue). In this issue, we would like to draw attention to the role of *technology* in intersectional feminism, as a significant actor that can be used both to prevent or advance social marginalization and participation.

Rethinking gender and computing

The issue's lead image, 'Language of the Maya Tribe Decrypted' (Iazyk plemeni maiia raz-gadan) from 1962 by the Soviet photographer Iakov Khalip is a page from the past, visualizing the role of computer science in Soviet modernization. The tech field was developing rapidly during the 1950–70s through international networks of scientists and institutions.¹⁰ This glorious image of a female computer scientist examining a punch card—on which computer code was written in the early stages of programming—represents what Soviet gender ideology strove for: equal participation by men and women was needed to advance the scientific-technological revolution. However, if scrutinized more closely, the photograph exposes the persistent gendered hierarchies and professional practices in the computer science field. As Ksenia Tatarchenko describes in her article "'The Computer Does not Believe in Tears": Soviet Programming, Professionalization and the Gendering of Authority', men in scientific laboratories were more likely to be involved in the 'more theoretical work', such as defining new programming languages, whereas women often managed the mechanical and menial stages of the work process, such as operating punch card machines or writing computer code. This division was based on cultural perceptions of gender roles rather than differences in education and expertise (Tatarchenko 2017). Historians of science have pointed out these more or less subtle gender hierarchies on both sides of the iron curtain (see, Misa 2010).

In the era of the personal computer, the gendered discourse of technology has established computer programming as a predominantly male activity. Moreover, the contemporary discourse around software development and 'coder culture' builds on a certain cult of personality (*kul't lichnosti*). Narratives of exceptionally talented programmers and other individuals whose devotion to computers has resulted in remarkable technological and commercial breakthroughs depict today's capitalist heroes. There are hardly any women in this group. The female idols of coder culture are women who have succeeded in building a career in this male-dominated industry, who are advocates of gender equality committed to the demystification of technology, and who teach other women to code. This work helps to undo some of the structural inequalities that currently prevent not only women but also other marginalized groups—people of color, people living outside global centers—from accessing the software development industry and benefitting from it economically.¹¹

¹⁰ The development of the all national computer network (Soviet internet) was interrupted by the dissolution of the Soviet system and impoverishment of the State science institutions. See, Peters 2016.

¹¹ An inspiring example relating to the geographical focus of this issue is the NGO Django Girls founded by Polish programmers Ola Sitarska and Ola Sendek. Django Girls has grown into a global, volunteer-based network of free programming workshops for women. These workshops have been particularly influential in the global South—Latin America and the African continent (djangogirls.org).

In a similar vein, the narrative about the emergence of Runet, the Russian-speaking internet and the largest national internet in the postsocialist space, also relies on a cult of personality. In this context, it refers to a small group of technological pioneers who became the ‘founders’ of the Russian-speaking internet as the unique, language-specific, and transnational communicative space we know today. Individuals in this group are often remembered for writing the first Russian-language websites, posting the first ever Russian-language entry on LiveJournal,¹² creating the first Russian-language search engines, online media, etc. In this group, women are also conspicuously absent. The strong gender bias in the user base and near absence of women on the developer side of the early Russian-speaking internet community had some significant cultural consequences that can be felt today. As cultural historian Natalia Konradova and literary scholar Henrike Schmidt explain, ‘all noticeable female figures on the early Russian internet were virtual personalities and the product of the imagination of their male authors’. She goes on to describe how active male users facilitated a specific linguistic register in which the Russian-language netspeak started to develop—a mix of military and criminal slang, literary references and sexual (and sexist) lexicon (Konradova et al. 2019).

It would be, however, impossible to talk about the Russian-speaking literary blogosphere and the founding of the LiveJournal community on Runet without mentioning Linor Goralik and her various projects that quickly gathered a following of thousands of early internet users. One of her most successful projects was the literary game e2 — e8 on the Journal.ru website. Another important internet pioneer and one of the most influential internet artists—not only in Russia but internationally—is Olia Lialina. Her early works, such as, *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (Moi paren’ vernulsia s voiny), *Anna Karenina Goes to Heaven* (Anna Karenina edet v rai) and *Teleportation* (Teleportatsiia) incorporated different internet technologies (such as mouse-screen interaction, the search engine and hyperlinked webpages) in a conceptual discussion of the role of the human-machine relationship in communication, arts and storytelling. Both Goralik and Lialina combine technological skills—Goralik has training in computer science and Lialina started out as a filmmaker—with artistic ambition and willingness to explore and experiment with new online platforms in creative ways.

Goralik, Lialina and a number of other women took active part in the Russian internet culture in the foundational years of the 1990s to early 2000s and appear regularly in a number of myth-making stories about Runet and its ‘elite’.¹³ However, the dominant discourse of the early internet is focused on the ‘founding fathers’. This method of establishing male-centric historical narratives is a tradition that Russia shares with the West. In the interest of challenging these narratives, this issue launches a critical feminist reconsideration of ‘herstories’ of computer technology, the internet and digital media communication across post-Soviet cases and the rest of the world.

¹² On the significance of LiveJournal for Runet, see, Podshibiakin 2010.

¹³ See, for example, Kuznetsov 2004, Idlis 2010.

Contributions

The contributions to this special issue include a wide range of geographical areas, from Russia to Eastern and Central European states. The issue provides some much needed openings for new geographical framings, introducing transnational comparisons between Europe's East and South (Salvatori) as well as a discussion of the BRICS countries from the standpoint of Latin American research initiatives (Zapata et al). These examples demonstrate how an analysis of the 'postsocialist space' is productively included in the study of wider European and global developments. At the same time, the contributions tackle a number of different aspects of gender, sexuality and feminism(s), introducing—in the true spirit of the interdisciplinary research community—a range of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks that are all relevant to studying women and technology in the postsocialist context. We hope the richness of different perspectives will inspire other scholars to join us in further developing this line of inquiry.

The issue contains four original research articles. First, Olga Andreevskikh's article 'Social Networking Sites as Platforms for Transgression: Two Case Studies of Russian Women Involved in Bisexual and Transgender Rights Activism' (19.2) provides a critical inquiry into the ways in which social networking sites are used as platforms for online activism, while drawing attention to the particular marginalisation of these two groups. She argues, however, that digital technologies allow bisexual and transgender women to simultaneously challenge the current state-supported conservative discourse on 'traditional values' in Russia as well as to confront the monosexual discourse promoted within Russian feminist and LGBTQ communities.

Popular and visual culture play an important role in shaping the perception of technology, including its relationship to women. Historically, science fiction film and literature contributed greatly to the general understanding of man's relation to technology, and this is a genre that blossomed in the Soviet Union and other Central and Eastern European states. Åsne Høgetveit, in her article 'Female Aliens in (Post-) Soviet Sci-Fi Cinema: Technology, Sacrifice and Morality' (19.3) takes a step back into history to shed light on circulating imaginations of the connection between women and tech, on how these images evolved over time in the Russian context, and how they may continue to shape current perceptions.

In her article 'Lost Between the Waves or Riding a New Tide? Drawing Connections Between Italian and Polish Digitally Mediated Feminism' (19.4) Lidia Salvatori discusses the interplay between feminist movements in two European countries currently in political turmoil—Italy and Poland. She demonstrates that history plays an important role also when creating connections through digital platforms. Based on historical networks of solidarity, contemporary transnational activism on digital platforms can take unexpected forms. Italian feminists construct networks of support with postsocialist Eastern European countries drawing upon the background of Italian socialist feminism. Salvatori analyses how in Italy and Poland transnational networks are activated via internet campaigns against nationalist, right-wing politics and anti-gender backlash.

In the fourth and final research article of this issue, 'Mapping "Women in Technology" Issue Networks across Bulgarian, Croatian, and Serbian National Google(s)' (19.5), Radmila Radojevic and Simeona Petkova explore what new insights into the issue of 'women and

tech' can be gained from exploring associations between gender equality stakeholders produced by Google search results. Reflecting on the search engine's role as gatekeeper of information, the article provides insight into how the prioritisation of media content drowns out less 'optimised' pages such as those belonging to feminist groups.

The above-described articles are followed by two interviews and a short essay. Inna Perheentupa's interview 'Digital Culture and Feminist Politics in Contemporary Russia: Inside Perspectives' (19.6) builds connections between different generations of post-Soviet feminists. Introducing the founding member of the Russian cyberfeminist group, scholar and philosopher Alla Mitrofanova, and a younger generation feminist Yulia Alimova, who is a central figure in the feminist organization Eve's Ribs, the interview provides important insights into the practices and meanings of computer technology in Russian feminist activism. At the same time, the interview offers an insider's view on the key questions and battles characterizing Russian feminism today. Campaigning on digital platforms and concerns of media visibility are an integral part of contemporary feminists' work but there is not as much focus on feminist appropriation of media technologies as there was in the earlier, cyberfeminist days.

In an interview with the women artists of the CYLAND media art laboratory in St. Petersburg (19.7.), curator and art critic Darya Cherkashina explores the experiences of female artists in contemporary Russia, its history of media art, and the specific projects of the CYLAND laboratory. While the women express a range of views on gender in the contemporary artistic sphere, they find some consensus in their experience of artistic tendencies of men and women and access to training and expertise in the technology upon which media art is often based.

The issue closes with an essay by Cristian Berrío-Zapata, Darío Sebastián Berrío Gil, Paloma Marín Arraiza and Ester Ferreira Da Silva entitled 'Gender Digital Divide in Latin America: Looking for a Helping Hand in the BRICS' (19.8). In a forceful manifesto style, the authors invite the readers of this journal to pinpoint the globally shared structures of gender inequality in digital communication. Starting with a review of women's history in technology and a discussion of the gender digital divide in Latin America, the essay proceeds to lay out an initiative to create new scholarly networks and global approaches to tackle gender digital divide. The existing infrastructures of international cooperation, such as the BRICS, offer a good framework for this, while simultaneously challenging the dominant paradigm of East-West comparisons.

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