



Selected Papers of AoIR 2016:
The 17th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Berlin, Germany / 5-8 October 2016

PRODUCTION POLITICS: GENDER, FEMINISM, AND SOCIAL MEDIA LABOR

Urszula Pruchniewska
Temple University

Brooke Erin Duffy
Cornell University

Online Feminism: Explicit Politics in Context

Though the web was created by an almost exclusively male team of developers, the early internet provided vibrant spaces for female collectives—ranging from anonymous support groups to grassroots, advocacy organizations. While some genres of this female-driven “participatory culture” drew upon popular media, literature, and art formats, others assumed a political valance, most especially e-zines, the digital offspring of indie-alternative print ‘zines like *Riot Grrrl* and *Bitch*. The prevalence of these and other expressive outlets at the turn of the century led feminist internet scholars to challenge the dominant understanding of the internet as a “masculine” domain (e.g., Herring, 2001; Shade, 2001).

In more recent years and against the backdrop of the meteoric ascent of social media, digital platforms give women unprecedented opportunities for personal expression and collective advancement. From reporting on current events from a feminist angle to exposing systematic forms of injustice, sites like *Jezebel*, *Feministing*, and *The Everyday Sexism Project* provide discursive spaces to challenge the status quo and promote feminist politics. Additionally, the visibility of online sites enables women’s personal experiences and viewpoints to become part of public discourse.

Increasingly, though, engaging in feminist practices in a postfeminist digital environment requires the careful negotiation of individual self-branding with the advancement of collective politics. Referring to the online labor of feminist academics, Banet-Weiser and Juhasz (2011) contend that the ideals of “‘self-branding’ and ‘self-promotion’ serve[s] to shatter any sense of cohesive community and commitment.” Yet these activities are seen as prerequisites for career success in the neoliberal economy (Marwick, 2013). Moreover, for-profit sites like *Jezebel* and *Reductress* adhere to the market logics of audience-building and revenue-generation; on the commercial web, then, even

Suggested Citation (APA): Pruchniewska, U. & Duffy, B.E. (2016, October 5-8). *Production politics: Gender, feminism, and social media labor*. Paper presented at AoIR 2016: The 17th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Berlin, Germany: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

feminism is packaged as a commodity. Perhaps nowhere are self-branding and commercial imperatives made more evident than in the realm of social media work.

Gendered Cultural Production: Implicit Feminist Practices

With the sustained growth of the independent workforce, entrepreneurship has emerged as a much-lauded ideal for contemporary cultural producers. Creative aspirants, in particular, are encouraged to utilize digital and social media platforms to actualize their “passions projects” and “labors of love” (e.g., Duffy, 2015). Indeed, while YouTube is frequently held as a platform for budding musicians and entertainers, Instagram is increasingly recognized as a public forum for those trying to make inroads into the fields of fashion, art, and/or photography. Ostensibly, these platforms are also sites of feminist discourse and practice—albeit in a much less direct way. That is, these social media laborers presumably break down the boundary between the private and public spheres, epitomizing the feminist maxim “the personal is political.”

Further, female professionals who share their personal stories online indirectly contribute to the larger feminist project, by bringing into the public sphere the lived reality of ordinary women, and questioning normative assumptions about everyday female experiences. According to Taylor (2011), single women who blog partake in a feminist practice by challenging the privileged narratives around heterosexual coupling in broader culture, through sharing their own stories. Similarly, Lopez (2009) argues that ‘mommy bloggers’ are “creating a different picture of motherhood to what we see in the mainstream media,” thus contesting the normative associations of motherhood (p. 732). Narratives about female social media entrepreneurship, too, tend to invoke gender politics: by using technologies that enable them to “work from home,” as the argument goes, self-enterprising women can emancipate themselves from patriarchal employment structures.

Method and Overview of Findings

Given a conceptual—and political—commitment to understanding the experiences, aspirations, and motivations of social media producers *in their own voices*, this project draws on in-depth interviews with female digital cultural producers. Specifically, we bring together findings from two separately conducted studies: the first includes in-depth interviews with more than 45 social media producers; the second with 12 contributors to online feminist publications. The decision to combine these projects was made from the realization that participants from both studies were talking about their digital activities in strikingly similar ways. Thus, drawing upon interview data, we identify a series of tensions that structure the way our informants articulated their social media labor.

Feminine and (Post)-Feminist: Though the online activities we explore have both implicit and explicit allegiances to feminist politics, informants discussed their experiences through the language and logic of post-feminism. That is, they emphasized individualism and personal choice while highlighting their extreme self-discipline. “Flexibility” emerged as a particularly nuanced concept—especially among working mothers—as participants traded the opportunity to work remotely for a sense of being “on the clock” 24/7.

Individualism and Collective Politics: Our interviewees were active contributors to a variety of collectives—from feminist groups to social media professionalization communities. Yet their participation often entailed *performances* of community, including expressions of sentiment guided by the governing logics of the social media economy: likes, follows, retweets, and other metrics.

Empowerment and Exploitation: Female “empowerment” – the postfeminist buzzword of the last decade – can be simultaneously exploitative for women online. We found that female cultural producers both see *themselves* as empowered through their work (by selling their cultural products) and aim to empower their female *audiences* (whether through sharing their personal stories of success or explicitly advancing feminist politics). However, much of the time, promoting empowerment online requires additional work. For example, the relational labor (Baym, 2015) of building and maintaining a relationship with an audience requires constant updating of social media information and interaction; however, there are few material rewards for this oft-invisible labor (Duffy, 2015).

In the end, we argue that these findings are symptomatic of key trends at the intersection of post-feminism, neoliberal economies, and social media labor. The ambivalences and contradictions we identify give meaning to social media producers’ work in ways that conceal and reveal traditional structures of power. We close by echoing the clarion calls of Gill (2007), McRobbie (2009), and other feminist media scholars: feminist politics in the digital world are deeply complicated by the postfeminist sensibility of the wider cultural climate. More nuanced understandings of the workings of contemporary digital practices are necessary for effective feminist politics.

References

- Banet-Weiser, Sarah., & Juhasz, A. (2011). Feminist labor in Media Studies/Communication: Is self-branding feminist practice. *International Journal of Communication*, 5(8), 1768-1775.
- Baym, N. K. (2015). Connect with your audience! The relational labor of connection. *The Communication Review*, 18(1), 14-22.
- Duffy, B. E. (2016). The romance of work: Gender and aspirational labour in the digital culture industries. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19(4), 441-457.
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10 (2). pp. 147-166.
- Herring, S. C. (2003). Gender and power in online communication. In J. Holmes and M. Meyerhoff, (eds.). *The handbook of language and gender* (pp. 202–28). Maiden, MA: Blackwell.
- Lopez, L.K. (2009). The radical act of “mommy blogging”: Redefining motherhood through the blogosphere. *New Media and Society*, 11, 729-747.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale University Press.

Shade, L. R. (2001). *Gender and community in the social construction of the internet*. Peter Lang Publishing Co.

Taylor, A. (2011). Blogging solo: New media, 'old' politics. *Feminist Review* (99), 79-97.