Editorial: Feminist engagements with 21st-century communications technology

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Introduction

The advent and development of the internet has expanded the frontiers of feminist activism. *Feminist Africa* is itself a prime example of the audacious digital engagements displayed by women's movements all over the world. Established over 10 years ago with the support of Africa's resurgent feminist community, *Feminist Africa* is the continent's first open-access online scholarly journal, and still the only one dedicated to publishing and promoting independent feminist scholarship as an activist project. Originally envisaged as an online intellectual forum for feminist research and activism, *FA* also produced a limited print edition to address the limited digital access that the African Gender Institute's survey of the feminist intellectual community revealed (Radloff 2002).

However, as access and use of the internet mirrors the sex/gender, class and other power dynamics offline, so do the violations. State control, censorship, surveillance, invasion of privacy, curtailment of freedom of expression and association, and violence against women are some of the issues that internet rights organisations are taking up, and which United Nations structures are attempting to address. The UN Human Rights Commission (2013) affirmed that:

> the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one's choice, in accordance with articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (A/HRC/20/l.13). (Library of Congress, 2012)

At the 2013 Internet Governance Forum (IGF), a multi-stakeholder forum for policy dialogue on issues of internet governance, the key message from women's rights activists was that

> the human rights of women and sexual minorities are being increasingly impacted by the internet, not only through violence and discrimination, but through policies and legislation that do not recognise their specific contexts, concerns and capacities. (Finnegan, 2013)

Enter *Feminist Africa* 18 – offering our unique perspective to independent public discourse on the implications of global digitisation, presenting African perspectives that emerge out of feminist praxis across the continent. In this issue we follow up on issue 17 (Researching Sexuality with Young Women: Southern Africa, 2012), keeping pace with the rapid expansion of cyberfeminism by presenting the latest on African women's ongoing and remarkable contribution to this global arena.

Historical evidence reveals that it was a woman – Ada Lovelace (1815–1852) – who wrote the first computer programme. Lovelace also originated the concept of using binary numbers, and was an early visionary – seeing the potential of the earliest computer models to develop far beyond simple number-crunching. Xide Xie (1921–2000), banished during the Cultural Revolution, was key to the development of solid-state physics in China. Rose Dieng-Kuntz (1956–2008), Senegalese scientist, was one of the first scholars to understand the important of the Web and to map how it would evolve to specialise in artificial intelligence and knowledge management.

Indian feminist Anita Gurumurthy, deeply disturbed by the fate of Snowden, the whistleblower who made world headlines by sharing classified information on USA, British and Israeli abuses of surveillance technology, alongside other profoundly disturbing military secrets, reflects:

> [t]he turn of events is deeply disturbing for global justice. And for the feminist project, it is a sobering moment. Just as we were beginning to creatively bend space with digital tools for building community, forging social movements, organising dissent and publishing perspectives on gender justice, we begin to realise that the 'network' may indeed be monolithic, pervasive and unexceptional. However, feminist activism requires an abiding commitment to constructive, forward-looking analysis and theory that can assist action for change. (Gurumurthy, 2013: 25)

At the core of being human is the desire to communicate, and to make sense and meaning through communicating. Through collective and individual reflection, we create and re-create knowledge.

Since their inception, women's movements have responded to the patriarchal privileging of male knowledge by developing a rich array of alternative communication strategies. From women's collectives, reading, writing and storytelling circles, feminist presses, radio stations and films, women speak out, write, and publish, creating new discourses and challenging patriarchal and imperialist legacies that continue to marginalise, erase, and reduce women's contributions to the world, while reinscribing male supremacy by default.

Information and communications technologies (ICTs), and the more recent proliferation of social media and digital tools, are profoundly and irrevocably reshaping our world. As Huizing and Esterhuysen note:

> No struggle for social justice is a better measure of success than that for women's rights and gender equality. This can also be applied to the internet. A truly free internet that fulfils its potential as a tool for social justice is an internet that is not just used by women, but also shaped by them through their involvement in its governance and development. It is an internet on which women have the freedom and capacity to actively tell their stories, participate in social, political and economic life, and claim their rights to be empowered, equal citizens of the world who can live free from discrimination and the fear of violence. (Huizing and Esterhuysen, 2013: 6)

In the mid-1990s, there were intense debates amongst feminists on the use of ICTs in women's rights activism and in academia. It was glaringly obvious that access and the ability to use ICTs mirrored lines of privilege. Even in the women's and other social movements trying hard to be inclusive, ICTs presented old challenges in a new guise. Until challenged, access and use reproduced not only gender inequalities but also historical, linguistic, geopolitical, economic, cultural, racial and other interconnected axes of privilege and power.

Feminist communications rights activists started lobbying for ICTs to be included in platforms and processes such as Section J of the Beijing Platform, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the African Union. Non-

governmental organisations began using email, mailing lists, building websites and requesting capacity building in order to integrate these new tools into the work of organisations. Women's networks started working with inclusive strategies such as printing out and faxing emails from mailing lists, recording conference proceedings and circulating them to community radio stations, offering printed versions of internet-based articles. Organisations focusing on building women's capacity to use ICTs effectively were born, such as Women'sNet[1] in South Africa, Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)[2] in Uganda and Linux Chix Africa. Collaborative networks were created such as FLAMME, a network of African women online, committed to strengthening the capacity of women through the use of ICTs to lobby, advocate and participate in the Beijing +5 process. Powerful and inclusive methodologies were used to develop platforms and networks. Both FLAMME and Women'sNet brought women from organisations across Africa together to share skills and build capacity in creating websites and facilitating mailing lists.

The Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) sector acknowledged what became known as the "digital divide" and provided statistics which proved how polarising ICTs could be. The schism between the "developing" and "developed" world again reflected inequalities in access and reinforced exclusions with statistics showing that 77% of people in developed countries are online against only 31% of people in developing ones (Wikipedia, 2013a). The "gender digital divide" reinforces the inequities women face as well as the disparities between developed and developing world. In an article published recently in the *Global Information Society Watch 2013* on women's rights, gender and ICTs, Joanne Sandler cautions that,

> while recent data notes that 46% of the global web population is female, this masks other disparities. In wealthier regions such as in North America, the web population is evenly split. A UN Women/US State Department/Intel report cites that, on average across the developing world, nearly 25% fewer women than men have access to the internet, and the gender gap soars to nearly 45% in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. (Sandler, 2013: 10)

By the early 2000s, women's groups in Africa, fully aware that ICTs had revolutionised access to information, were creating alternative spaces and setting up dynamic and creative networks that challenge the monopolisation

of power and control over contemporary technologies by rich nations and corporations dominated by men. As Sandler notes,

> [w]hile the online world often replicates and potentially exacerbates the offline world's existing opportunities and inequalities – including those related to gender, class, race, disability and other lines of identity – it also requires us to adjust the lens of gender and human rights that we apply offline to enable us to map and claim our rights in this new terrain. (Sandler, 2013: 8)

The advent of the more interactive Web 2.0 (Wikipedia, 2013b) technologies and social media have further catalysed women's digital engagement. Blogging proliferated and became a popular way for women to write, debate, comment and self-publish on a range of issues. Facebook became not only a social connecting space but a way for activists to reach wide audiences at very little cost. Twitter enabled activists to share, almost in real-time, updates from meetings and conferences and include links to videos, websites and online petitions. People not able to attend important policy spaces could comment and include their opinions. YouTube facilitated the instant uploading of video clips which allowed activists on the frontline to document and display violations, now often picked up by mainstream media. Photo- and music-sharing sites gave rise to "mashups" (blending information from different sources) and challenged traditional notions of copyright. Online conferencing connected people in a virtual space and global organisations can now meet regularly using digital platforms. Skype and Voice Over Internet Protocol enables inexpensive voice and video connections creating a sense of closeness and deepening virtual relationships.

The most ubiquitous digital tool in Africa is the mobile phone. It has become the most popular way of accessing the internet. Research indicates that the uptake by women has been huge, although in most countries, men still outnumber women in terms of ownership of mobile phones.

> Mobile ownership among females increased in all countries over the two periods observed, in particular in Botswana (23.8%), Uganda (22.3%) and Kenya (21%). In fact, the adoption of mobile phones among women exceeds that of men in Botswana in particular, and also in Namibia and Cameroon, though by a lesser extent. However, in all the other countries surveyed, the share of men that own a mobile phone continues to be higher in comparison to women. (Deen-Swarray and Moyo, 2013: 16)

In her article on mobile technologies and feminist politics, Sanya engages with the ways that mobile phones in Kenya have the potential to circulate indigenous feminisms, cultures and cultural products. She argues that "there is a possibility to reveal the multiplicities of black, rural Kenyan women's identities, which are sometimes depicted as stagnant or monolithic. Here, I am arguing that these new users of information communication technologies are, in many cases, asserting their agency in using the mobile phone in ways that have previously been unarticulated or unintended by the inventor."

Wakunuma's Standpoint warns that there is a danger in focusing on a single technology when working to bring internet access to developing countries. She problemetises the focus on mobiles as being the development tool which can assist in building stronger economies and fighting hunger. Robust regulatory policies are as important for sustainable economic growth including an inclusive information society. She says "issues of gender remain implicated and important in discussions beyond the potential of technologies like mobile phones in achieving the development agenda. In addition, issues such as access and use are much more complex than often imagined hence the need for a multi-dimensional view."

Sometimes a single moment in time can re-orient and open up spaces that change relationships and bring new understandings to things tangible and intangible. The internet, which never "forgets," captures the debates and positions of those moments. It can also provide anonymity, and cover for those not wishing to be exposed to public scrutiny or attack. When the Joburg Pride "clash" happened in 2012, historical racial wounds erupted in a community already still experiencing homophobic violence and ostracism. As McLean says in her article,

> The response from the parade and Pride organisers was not one of solidarity; instead the organisers and activists clashed violently. This event made possible very difficult conversations, which could not have been previously held in a public space. These conversations took place not only in the moment of clashing, or in face-to-face conversations afterwards, but they also manifested on digital platforms such as the social networking site, Facebook. Digital and online platforms are interesting in that it is on these platforms that sentiments around issues such as the de-politicisation or commercialisation of Pride in South Africa become visible in a way that is not always possible offline.

Tagnay and Kee's Standpoint explores issues arising in the EROTICS (Exploratory Research on Sexuality & ICTs) project. They write about how sexual expression, sexualities and sexual health practices, and the assertion of sexual rights play out in uses of ICTs. Looking through the "specific lenses of access to information on sexuality, sexual health and sexual rights and the freedom of expression of marginalised sections of society, such as young women, transgender communities, lesbians, queer activists and feminist activists" on the African continent, Tagnay and Kee show how these communities are able to try out identities as well as perform and practise new gender identities. In an era where governments in Africa (and beyond) are using surveillance to monitor and track citizen discontent more generally, EROTICS' research findings have great import. It is now common practice for governments to work with corporates and internet intermediaries to shut down mobile phone access in times of protest.

Censorship of sexual content is a sticky issue offline as it is online. The authors examine the moral and cultural attitudes that drive the regulation of sexual content. Online content has several layers of corporate control and the gatekeepers are often inconsistent, operating in a policy vacuum that defaults to sex/gender conservatism that cyberfeminists are challenging: "Corporate actors such as internet service providers or social media platforms, who often take the side of internet freedom in public discourse, have often censored sexual speech for questionable reasons. Feminists are increasingly challenging Facebook's content policies."

With all the revolutionary possibilities and creative potentials of new communication technologies, we are also witnessing the emergence of new divisions. Young people who are born into the digital information age are engaging with digital tools and living in ways in which the "older" generation are not. Generational analysis needs to problematise both the issues and the responses generated by these differences. Lewis *et al* provide critical reflections on the generational challenges arising in social media, noting how the assimilation of a few women into positions of structural power undermines feminist politics when such individuals do not care to advocate for the interests of other women. The liberatory potential of ICTs for women in general is thus deflected.

Lewis *et al* discuss a digital activist project that engages women students at a historically marginalised university and young women from

socially marginalised communities surrounding the university and broader observations on young women's engagements with ICTs, to explore the complicated gendered barriers to young women's access to and use of new technologies. The core of the exploration of the article by Lewis *et al* is focused on the key political terrain of civic participation, empowerment and identity politics to emphasise the liberatory potential that ICTs offer younger generations of women. It is often believed that the capitalist consumerist desires are the primary motivation for a younger generation seeking glamour and social status to use ICTs. The authors challenge the pervasiveness of the "bling factor" and explore the need for direct and unmediated communication around political, social and existential issues. The rising dominance of social media in young people's connectivity and social interactions are recalibrated and re-invented as spaces for discussion on civic issues and experiences of many forms of oppressions that often have no space for voice offline for young women.

In her article in this edition of *Feminist Africa*, drawn from her extensive PhD research on radio and rural women in Zimbabwe, Mudavanhu challenges a popular notion that new communication technologies have rendered radio redundant. Although the ubiquity of mobile phone technology is very clear, this has not displaced radio as the most accessible and powerful communication tool on the continent of Africa. The author provides "some ethnographic insights into the place of radio in the daily lives of the women who were interviewed."

In Zimbabwe's politically charged and economically unstable environment, media is tightly controlled. The establishment of a radio station for rural Zimbabwean women is audacious in the context of ongoing conflict between political factions. Mudavanhu notes that all the women interviewed stated that they listen to the State-run Radio Zimbabwe but are afraid to admit to listening to the "independent" radio stations. One interviewee told of listening to Radio Mozambique during the pre-1980 liberation struggle, a station which the Ian Smith government had banned. The subtle agency with which the women tune in and out of Radio Zimbabwe suggests a discontent with the State-controlled station.

Creating secure and supportive spaces for witnessing, for discussion, disagreement and knowledge sharing is an important element of feminist activism for building solidarity and finding a safe place to "land." Mailing lists

(or listserves) are relatively "old school" in the midst of social media platforms but are still often the preferred medium for activists in creating facilitated online spaces with a relative sense of safety. Sarita Ranchod in her Standpoint provides an analysis of the Gender and Women's Studies in Africa (GWS Africa) listserve's responses to the objectionable "Undies for Africa" marketing campaign of a Canadian private company, Nectar Lingerie. For those not familiar with it, the GWS Africa mailing list (also known as the Feminist listserve) established in 2002 just ahead of *Feminist Africa,* provides feminist activists and academics a forum for sharing and engagement. Ranchod's article reflects on the politics of feminist communication and activism noting that these virtual spaces reflect the power relations that charaterise non-virtual production.

Following Ranchod's discussion, Hwang describes the rapid cyber-response to the "Undies for Africa" marketing campaign as an "armchair revolution," documenting the effectiveness of the angry collective response from African women all over the world.

Oumy Ndiaye tells of how M-Pesa,[3] a mobile banking service targeting poor women, has benefited poor and rural women, lauding this as "revolutionary" – clearly not using the word in the same way as Ranchod does. However, she does not fail to acknowledge the serious need for proper research to assess M-Pesa accurately.

Although feminists globally are utilising contemporary communications technologies to serve their agendas, "Undies for Africa" presents only one example of corporate-sponsored indignities that characterise the activities of many corporate actors. Left unchallenged, the internet reiterates social injustices, exclusions and violence in the "real" world.

"Digital dangers" range from technology-related violence against women to censoring of life-saving sexual health information. Digital surveillance monitors activists and infiltrators entrap, just as previous surveillance did, but more effectively and pervasively that we could possible have imagined in the 20th century. Both Clunaigh and Wakunuma explore digital safety issues and ways in which activists are building capacities within movements to secure spaces and voices from online threats.

FA 18's bumper Conversations section underlines the ingenuity of feminists employing social media to pursue change agendas. Hakima Abbas interviews Blessol Gathoni on the Watetezi-Haki platform which documents

abuses of sex workers and LGBTIQ persons in public places, most of which tend to remain undocumented and unreported.

Jane Bennett speaks with Sally-Jean Shackleton, currently director of SWEAT (Sex Workers' Education and Advocacy Taskteam, Cape Town) about her work with Women'sNet, the first feminist e-technology hub in South Africa, while Selina Mudavanhu speaks with Maggie Mapondera of Just Associates, eliciting her reflections on the place of contemporary communications technologies in storytelling.

Feminist Africa 18 profiles the Asikana Network, a vibrant network of young women in the information technology industry who are challenging the "male geek stereotype" and forging space for young women and girls to chart a career in technology, and Inkanyiso which provides a digital space for community in a South Africa that habitually subjects lesbians to misogynistic violence.

Feminists all over Africa continue to engage with the internet in ways that support creativity, activism, social connections, pleasure and change, strategically moving into the virtual world in ways that will continue – like *Feminist Africa* – to ensure voice and visibility for women's rights.

Endnotes

1. Available at <http://www.womensnet.org.za>.
2. Available at <http://www.wougnet.org>.
3. "M" for mobile, *pesa* is Swahili for money.

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