Violence, techno-transcendence and feminism: thinking about agency in the digital age.

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We live in a different world in the 21st century and much of that difference is technologically mediated. It is not an overstatement to say that many of our theories and concepts are far from up to speed with what these changes mean. This is the case not only in how to understand and analyze the world and different structures and processes within it, but also inevitably how to critique them, identify negative impacts and overcome them. The Internet and digital transformations that have resulted from it, especially since the arrival of the world wide web in the early 1990s, have heralded a new spatiality in human affairs yet to be fully comprehended in philosophical, and many other, senses. This new spatiality represents a complex approach to the social that incorporates the Internet and its virtual processes as much as more familiar traditional physical settings and activities. The overall aim in this chapter is to locate violence and women’s agency within this complex spatiality to enhance our thinking about forms of gendered oppression and resistance to them. Use of the Internet has expanded the social sphere and identity and relational processes within it, so it is an integral part of considerations of being and empowerment. This discussion draws on the concept of ‘techno-transcendence’ to capture this expansion and to recognize how the Internet has contributed to reducing temporal and spatial constraints.

The chapter begins with a discussion of complex spatiality and techno-transcendence. This section foregrounds an understanding that gendered relations of power play out increasingly in contemporary times in the online world of the Internet as much as offline settings. We can assume this trend will feature prominently in the gender landscape of the future. Its challenges include attention to socio-technical influences – in other words the dynamic interplay between social and technical forces. While such considerations are by no means new, the growing role of online activity in daily life is prioritizing them in contemporary interdisciplinary analysis. The chapter then moves on to look at violence through the virtual looking glass, pointing to the intensification through the multimedia interactive spaces of the Internet of both violent processes and possibilities, and forms of empowerment and agency. Representational elements are noted here as a key element of this intensification especially if we consider areas core to feminist concerns such as pornography. The increased flows of imagery in virtual relating have raised the specter of ‘Self Generated Indecent Imagery’ (SGII) which thanks to the speed of online communication can rapidly turn an initially private expression of intimate agency or bravado into a public object of voyeurism or worse. The final section of the chapter returns to issues of women’s agency. This is discussed in a macro context of historically embedded masculinist structures of science and technology and their gendered implications, especially for the limitations on women’s influence in shaping the digital world in research and technical as well as policy arenas.

Complex spatiality and ‘techno-transcendence’

Space and time are essential components of human existence (for a range of perspectives on this area see for example Harvey 1990, Featherstone and Lash 1999, Hemmings 2002, Youngs 2007). They are the main contexts for our lives as material and time-bound beings. Spatial transformations are ontological in the ways that they change what the world is for us as human beings. They have epistemological implications to the extent that such changes impact on where and how we look to understand what the world is and what is happening within it.

In contemporary digital times we have entered an era of dual spatiality combining virtual online spaces, processes and interactions, with offline ones (see, for example, Shields 2003, Youngs 2007). The technological cutting edge of human life is the virtual online dimension. Increasingly the more familiar (traditional) offline dimension is being extended and reshaped by it. In other words, the fastest and most efficient areas of human activity in daily life, are taking place increasingly online rather than offline, and our sense of what that activity and daily life are is being refashioned accordingly. Just to make this point clearer: where and what we do in the world has direct or indirect impact on what we understand the world to be as well as the identities we fashion within it. The Internet and the virtual world do not float free from the concrete physical world. They consist of myriad devices and networks, hardware and software, that make the virtual sphere possible and accessible. But as we are all aware to one degree or another, even if only subliminally, online spatiality is distinct from offline spatiality in many diverse ways. Being present virtually, whether we are talking about a business or other organization, a person or a relationship, information or transaction, is distinct from being present physically in a traditional manner. The more presence is defined and experienced virtually online (rather than physically offline) the more the world can be considered ontologically to be virtual rather than physical, or perhaps to be more precise the more it is a combination of the virtual embedded as part of the physical world.

These shifts, as a major feature of 21st century life, are intrinsically about the relationship between time and space and the ‘techno-transcendence’ that this new combined reality of the virtual and the physical represent and continue to develop through technological innovation. They feature some continuity with technological developments of the past (especially technologies of travel, such as the airplane and car, but also communications technologies of telegraph and telephone) in transcending constraints of time and space (Harvey 1990, Winston 1998, Urry 2007). But the virtual sphere of the Internet goes much further in redefining the ontological nature of human time and space and capacities to transcend varied boundaries and limitations related to them. Where access is possible the Internet crosses physical boundaries and temporal time zones and structures. Ontologically it posits a world where such boundaries, zones and structures, have decreasing significance, in principle if not always in practice. As with all things human the picture is not universal for various economic, political and social reasons. Economic, educational and social inequalities across and within states impact on digital developments and exclusion, and some states work to severely restrict Internet access for political and/or cultural reasons, one notable example being China’s governmental efforts to keep out liberal democratic influences (Human Rights Watch 2012).

However uneven the global picture may be the space-time transcendent characteristics of the Internet remain a game-changer in ontological terms. This extends to many traditional time-space boundaries of pre-digital times such as private and public, home and work, production and consumption. It also extends to those of societal spheres such as economy and polity, profit and non-profit, work and entertainment. The seamless quality of the Internet as a series of spaces to be accessed in rapid succession or multiply simultaneously disrupts traditional meanings of the separation of different spheres and timeframes. The informational and data-based nature of virtual space represents a new form of unifying playing field for human and social presence and activity. This is part of the essence of the techno-transcendence involved in digital transformations. The technological mediation involved in online activity translates aspects of human reality into data (multimedia) form, and through its extended reach and speed of transmission, infuses it with more accessibility and power in time-space terms.

We see a freeing-up or loosening of constraints in time-space senses when we are dealing with digital change and this impacts equally on how we understand violence and forms of agency that seek to contest, prevent or address it. The Internet is a medium through which violence is expressed and enacted as well as represented in multimedia form, and also a sphere of social relations in which agency in various forms, including in association with countering or contesting violence, is expressed and enacted. This means that it is important to consider techno-transcendence in relation to both violence and agency directed against it.

Violence through the virtual looking glass

What happens to violence in a digital environment? This is the central question addressed in this section, the starting point being that we need to review the ways in which we view and consider the nature of violence in circumstances where increasing areas of social relations and activities are happening online as well as offline. The discussion will stay close to the ontological and epistemological preoccupations of the chapter in addressing some fundamental points and perspectives. It is commonplace to accept that violence is physical and psychological as well as social, structural (indirect) and actual (direct), and shaped by the past as much as the present. For feminists this breadth of perspective on violence has always been to the fore in the range of analysis and critique that characterizes its scholarship as well as lobbying and activism (see, for example, Pettman 1996, Marchand and Runyan 2011, Tower and Walby 2012). Feminists have been as deeply concerned with structural and embedded forms of gender violence that shape the full range of inequalities between men and women, male and female identities, as they have been with actual resulting outbreaks of those inequalities in areas such as predominant forms of male-on-female domestic violence, gendered wage, promotional and other unequal opportunity structures (Walby, 1990, 2009 and 2011). For feminists women’s agency has to be considered against a highly complex mix of historically constructed gendered power differentiations, specific social circumstances of the here and now, and individual conditions and possibilities within them. This complexity is not new but it would be fair to say that the growing history and visibility of feminist analysis over the 20th and 21st century in particular has made general awareness of it relatively recent. While not yet as widespread as it could be, we can expect that this awareness will continue to grow. It will likely continue to bring contestation of different kinds as has been the case throughout feminism’s history. It can also be argued that as much as throwing up new areas to consider in this regard, digital developments include effects of embedding and making even more complex existing gendered patterns of power.

Many of the new areas for attention have links to these patterns and can only be fully understood in that context. Two points are worth highlighting here which help to counter misplaced binary thinking around online and offline phenomena. First, while technological innovations and new behaviours and patterns of relations linked to them emphasize the novelty of online developments, these occur within historical circumstances which while not determining them are bound to impact upon them in ways that may not always be immediately obvious (Hawthorne and Klein1999). Second, it will always be important to look for continuity as well as discontinuity when assessing such dramatic change as the shift from a predominantly offline social world to one that is increasingly online as much as offline. Feminism in a digital world takes account of such shifts and adjusts its critical lens accordingly (see, for example, Harcourt 1999, Peterson 2003, Youngs 2007). At the time of writing, a substantial body of feminist work has already built up at this cutting edge. It is bound to continue to grow as we move further into the current century, which may well come to be defined as the digital century, as the 20th century was the industrial and post-industrial one. There is only space here to make some illustrative points about violence and agency from feminist perspectives, but the aim is to do so in ways that signal how penetrating the digital implications may be for the future orientation of movements focused on gender equality.

When we look at violence through the virtual looking glass – in other words through a world experienced online and offline – a number of things are striking. They all, at root, link to techno-transcendence. The technologically mediated sphere of the Internet is increasingly pervasive. Where connectivity is possible growing numbers of devices whether we are on the move or static link us to it, thus making, for example, its 24/7 round the clock flexible possibilities a growing part of daily realities. In associated ways, the presence of asynchronous as much as synchronous forms of communication become increasingly pervasive. Asynchronicity has been a dramatic element of digital transformation, firstly through email, then through the world wide web in a general fashion, and then more overtly in landmark social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter. Asynchronicity in a 24/7 virtual environment gives social presence and relating new characteristics of accessibility and flexibility that are arguably revolutionary and yet to be fully analyzed. Digital spheres enable asynchronous communication by all parties involved being able to choose when (and where) they place and access information. Communication and social relating through non-presence or not dependent on co-presence (synchronicity) becomes increasingly part of ontological and epistemological realities. This is bound to impact on identities linked to that communication and social relating, or at least this is an area likely to be demanding more of our attention as the digital social environment develops further. One focus relevant to this is the multimedia fabric of the online environment. Digital settings (screen-based for the main part in contemporary times) are intensely visual and visually rich, ranging across film, photography, animation, for example, and open to diverse multimedia constructions including music and voice. The ontology of the digital is inherently multimedia and as it becomes further embedded in growing aspects of daily life is bound to intensify multimedia senses of what that daily life actually is. This is part of the techno-transcendence of virtual imperatives alongside, embedded in or even over (in some circumstances) familiar traditional imperatives of the offline world.

Part of this picture is the intensification of the role of representational aspects of life and these have always been central to feminist concerns, as the objectification of women and the gendered positioning of them has been framed, expressed and entrenched through representational routes, including pornography. The explosion of the online pornography business has been one of the defining characteristics of the digital world. Debates will continue to rage about perspectives on drawing definite links between actual male-on-female violence and different forms of pornography. The late Andrea Dworkin remains an iconic figure articulating strong views about the issue.

. . . pornography *is* violence against women: the women used in pornography. Not only is there a precise symmetry of values and behaviors in pornography and in acts of forced sex and battery, but in a sex-polarized society men also learn about women and sex from pornography. The message is conveyed to men that women enjoy being abused. Increasingly, research is proving that sex and violence - and the perception that females take pleasure in being abused, which is the heart of pornography - teach men both ambition and strategy.

. . . The refusal, especially among liberals, to believe that pornography has any real relationship to sexual violence is astonishing. Liberals have always believed in the value and importance of education. But when it comes to pornography, we are asked to believe that nothing pornographic, whether written or visual, has an educative effect on anyone. A recognition that pornography must teach something does not imply any inevitable conclusion: it does not per se countenance censorship. It does, however, demand that we pay some attention to the quality of life, to the content of pornography.

And it especially demands that when sexual violence against women is epidemic, serious questions be asked about the function and value of material that advocates such violence and makes it synonymous with pleasure. (Dworkin 1981)

It is interesting to consider that Dworkin’s comments were based more in an earlier offline context than the current online and offline one. But the intensification and speed of flows of pornography as well as the ease of access in the Internet era perhaps press home all the more the relevance of her points about ‘education’ and ‘quality of life’. The expansion of digital forms of accessibility to pornography are as important as the growth in the volume of it, with peer-to-peer dissemination including across international boundaries, for example, being of major concern in relation to child pornography and paedophilia rings. In the UK the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) acts as a hotline for reporting criminal online content, including child sex-abuse content hosted anywhere in the world, and criminally obscene adult content and non-photographic child sexual abuse images hosted in the UK. A recent IWF report addressing the cross-border issues around online child sex-abuse content included recommendations such as the harmonization of laws on such content as well as consistent and comprehensive international procedures for taking it down (Wei 2011: 2). ‘Child sexual abuse related offences are facilitated by advanced internet technology and child sexual abuse content can be disseminated quickly over the borderless internet’ (Wei 2011: 67).

Techno-transcendence of time/space online has qualitative and quantitative impacts on the nature and reach of violence including through representational multimedia forms. These impacts are a rapidly moving target too, with the succession of innovation in Internet applications and communications hardware (most recently smart phones and tablets) contributing to deepening online/offline integrated lifestyles and relational and identity-linked processes. Here we are dealing with agency and often unintended consequences sometimes with serious and even violent effects. The expanded role of photos in virtual relating has resulted in what is termed ‘Self Generated Indecent Imagery’ (SGII) that thanks to the speed of online communication can rapidly turn an initially private expression of intimacy or bravado into a public object of voyeurism or worse. The continual blurring of lines between public and private online raise new concerns about risks and unexpected outcomes of private communications, which can instantly become public through online dissemination, and in some circumstances be harnessed for abusive or criminal purposes. The UK’s Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre’s latest report includes attention to Self Generated Indecent Imagery (SGII).

SGII are taken for a variety of reasons within consensual relationships between young people. These include a private image taken for a boyfriend or girlfriend or images taken to be used as online profile pictures. Often these images are subsequently posted online or distributed by the person for whom they were intended as a joke, after an argument or once the relationship has ended. It cannot be discounted, however, that the exchange of SGII, whilst it may have been willingly produced by a young person, can indicate an underlying vulnerability or behavioural concern.

Almost 22% of reports received by CEOP from industry in 2011/12 related to the distribution of SGII. Whilst the majority of SGII is produced by older teenagers, almost a third of SGII reported to CEOP in 2011/12 related to children under the age of 15. Occasionally SGII, particularly where it involves a subject under 15, can be the product of serious criminal activity by a third party or may be used for such purposes subsequently. Therefore whilst volumes generally are increasing it is important not to lose sight of the real and lasting harm it can cause. (CEOP 2012: 6-7)

The report demonstrates that we are dealing with both synchronous and asynchronous patterns of communication across live online video chat, instant messaging, files uploaded via email or to public video hosting or social networking websites, or as attachments during online chat sessions (CEOP 2012: 6). While CEOP is a law enforcement agency, it reflects the boundary-crossing nature of the Internet and the new imperatives for advanced partnership approaches involving all sectors, including corporate and charity ones, focused on mutual goals. It states: ‘. . . the real lifeblood of the CEOP Centre is intelligence - how offenders operate and think, how children and young people behave and how technological advances are developing - all are integral to what we are about and what we deliver’ (2012).

The digital landscape is extending the nature and reach of violence and thus it can be argued the ontological and epistemological parameters of vulnerability. As social relations and their multi-mediated forms continue to increase in volume and speed online, and these developments contribute to enhanced blurring of public and private lines, the specificities of different forms of techno-transcendence and their implications are likely to grow in significance. Grooming of young people for sex, and cyber-stalking. are already two phenomena that have directly demonstrated the violent impact of abuse of online and offline connectivity, and the anonymity and identity manipulation the former affords through what might be termed virtual violence as a route to actual violence in the ‘real’ (offline) context. Tracking violent structures and processes through online/offline circumstances highlights the extent to which understanding of the ontology of violence is shifting in the digital environment and will continue to do so.

Agency and feminism in the digital world

If we follow the complex spatiality and techno-transcendence arguments through into agency concerns, there are important macro dimensions to be addressed. These relate to the masculinist nature of science and technology. This section includes major attention to this theme because of its ontological and epistemological significance in understanding the limitations of the scope of women’s agency in the creation and evolution of the new digital environment. It is clear that transformations in agency and feminism in the digital world reflect expanded parameters of identity for individuals and organizations that harness the full time/space potential of techno-transcendence in diverse ways. When we think about agency and feminism, women’s potential to act and be present, to create and organize for profit or non-profit, for political or social change, the Internet and the expanded possibilities of online and offline, are all part of the picture. This does not mean adopting some utopian perspective that makes assumptions about what has changed for women because of the Internet, but it does mean recognizing the new possibilities that have already contributed to change and can do so further in the future. Part of this picture is the need to think about agency and feminism in digital as much as other terms, including in relation to identity and opportunity. Among the most revolutionary aspects of techno-transcendence for women in digital times are possibilities related to overcoming constraints linked to divides between public and private. Historical gender structures have tended to lock female identities and lives into the private more than the public where masculinist identities and possibilities have tended to dominate (Phillips 1991; Youngs 2000).

The Internet as a virtual sphere of social relations, presence and activism has disrupted public/private divides, not least as a form of communications that can be as present and accessible in the private as much as the public. As many commentators have pointed out, this does not overturn the historically entrenched masculinist dominance of science and technology, knowledges, and applications, as well as the governmental and business structures and entities associated with them, which have been characteristic of historical gender power divides (see, for example, Harding 1998 and Hafkin and Huyer 2006). It can even be argued that it makes the significance of these gendered hierarchies and critical attention to them all the more pressing. In other words, when considering equality and inclusion in a digital world, where technological mediation and innovation become increasingly influential in all aspects of life, it could be argued that more attention needs to be given to feminist critiques of male dominance of science and technology and their gendered implications. Where the social world is coming to be increasingly shaped and defined by digital developments, there is a very real risk of entrenched gendered imbalances influencing them becoming even more entrenched. At the most fundamental levels this includes the engagement of women in science and engineering. The long-term work of WISE (Women into Science and Engineering) in the UK signals just how tough the gender challenges remain in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) areas:

. . . there is still a lack of women in STEM careers across Europe, particularly Western Europe. While a few (mainly ex-Soviet) countries have around 20% women in STEM, Western European countries such as France and Spain (17% each), Denmark (16%), Germany (15%), Finland (15%), and UK (9% - the lowest) all bring the European average down to 17%. (WISE 2012: 1)

The pervasive, structural and embedded nature of gendered realities in science and technology come to the fore as a prime feminist concern around agency in digital times, especially if we are thinking at ontological and epistemological levels. If lives are going to be increasingly lived through digital means, and the creation and fashioning of those means remains highly gendered, then there are profound ways in which we can consider that masculinist ontological realities will become further entrenched, including in ways we may be far from aware of at present. The potential for women to be creators and innovators risks remaining low at least in the immediate future, particularly at the most blue skies stages of research and application, but also through STEM processes as a whole including in policy realms. It is notable that the problem areas currently identified as preventing change align squarely with much long-term feminist critique stressing how gendered identities inhibit what girls and women actually think is possible or suitable for them.

The 2011 Girlguiding UK survey found that 43% of girls said they were put off science and engineering careers because they did not know enough about the kind of careers available. 60% said they also were put off by a lack of female role models. While there are a number of praiseworthy employers and initiatives showing what careers are available, there are gaps in terms of number and range of the jobs being promoted to girls, combined with a lack of female role models in sufficiently senior positions to convince girls they are welcome.

Girls are being turned away from STEM careers by a perception of greater sexism in the workplace. For example, the 2011 Girlguiding UK survey found that 30% of girls thought that worries about sexism in the workplace put girls off a career in science or engineering. (WISE 2012: 1-2)

The gendered scenario in relation to STEM is probably one of the strongest arguments for mainstream policy attention to feminist analysis and insights if digital inclusion and empowerment is a genuine commitment. The statistics clarify that binaries associating men and male identities (as opposed to women and female identities) with science and technology remain as powerful as ever, and equally if not more importantly, impact on the shaping of gendered identities such that even as digital transformations are saturating the world around us, girls are still seeing themselves as substantially separated from the expertise and career trajectories positioning them as integral to shaping those transformations. Without major change in this picture the gendered ontological and epistemological realities of the past threaten to become even more definitive in the digital future.

While these most fundamental aspects of women’s agency need to be highlighted they do not of course represent the full spectrum of digital change and identification steered by women. In areas of online/offline activism women and organizations focused on their interests have been among the most active and inventive. Techno-transcendence has been a major feature of contemporary feminism and networking, lobbying and activism around the broadest range of women’s concerns. Campaigning and activist organizations combating violence against women and children have transformed their agency along digital lines to take full advantage of the virtual potential to be present, network, inform and reach out to their communities and individuals who need their assistance. In general this has contributed to bringing issues around violence against women much more to the fore in the (global) public sphere, as well as facilitating links among women for lobbying as well as support purposes, making knowledge about violence against them more accessible, and communicating their individual and collective agency in combating that violence at different levels, including in relation to policy. The digital environment has made violence against women a far more public issue, and equally the agency of women to combat it more public as well.

Women’s Aid in the UK has long been among the most prominent of women’s organizations tackling domestic violence including through its provision of refuges and other services. Its website acts as a multifaceted information hub to reach out to those who may be suffering domestic violence or need to find out about the different ways in which it is manifested and can be addressed. Its downloads include ‘Digital stalking: a guide to technology risks for victims’ (Perry 2012). As Nicola Harwin, chief executive of Women’s Aid, points out at the beginning of the guide:

For Women’s Aid, the continuing development of digital technology itself is problematic: on the one hand there are more opportunities for abusers to use technology to their advantage to continue to try to control and terrorise; on the other there are more opportunities for women trapped in abusive relationships to seek and receive support online. Understanding the risks to personal safety inherent in all aspects of digital technology is therefore no longer an option, it is a necessity. (Perry 2012: 5)

Digital settings for women’s agency are as rich in opportunities as they are peppered with risks. Empowerment possibilities operate as deeply at collective as individual levels as diverse areas of global women’s movements and campaigns have demonstrated, not least those associated with tackling all forms of violence against women and children. But it is not an overstatement to say that this new digital world has largely not been of women’s making and that this is an enduring problem. It drills down to historically embedded gendered identity formations steering women away from science and technology to leave the field heavily dominated by masculinist concerns and orientations. It is obvious that women need to be creators as much as users of digital technologies in order for the new digital world to be fully reflective of their interests and priorities. As long as they continue to be concentrated too much as users rather than the creators, the limitations on the deep impact of their agency remain extreme.

Feminism and digital change: concluding thoughts

Digital agency is an intrinsic part of the world we now live in and will be more so in the years to come. As the online/offline settings become ever more integrated in different structures and processes of our everyday lives, the ontological and epistemological complexities of what it means to talk about the real world will grow simultaneously. There is increasing seamlessness between the virtual and physical worlds, and social relations and identity processes are being woven in and through them in ways that transcend constraints of time and space. These developments are changing the nature of violence, risk and vulnerability in obvious and less obvious ways, and demanding new knowledge to maintain agency and develop empowerment. All life is present online as it is offline or this is already substantially the case for those who are connected and will be more so. Violence as a fact of life is inevitably a fact of digital life. The techno-transcendence that is a feature of digital developments is harnessed alike by those wishing to perpetrate, engage in and represent violence, as it is those working to counter it. The latter include organizations committed to stopping all forms of violence against women and children and championing their rights. Global activism covers areas such as trafficking and prostitution, sexual and reproductive rights as well as domestic and institutionalized forms of violence (see, for example, Amnesty International campaigns and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). The multimedia and social networking dimensions of the Internet are also being utilized by perpetrators of violence as well as those working against it, heralding the need for new forms of digital literacy to reduce vulnerability and risk and increase empowerment and agency.

There are also fundamental considerations about digital transformations and feminism and agency that have been highlighted here. They focus on historically entrenched and continuing gendered realities of science and technology, where male and masculinist power and identifications dominate and women and female influence remain limited. This is part of the picture when we talk about digital inclusion and empowerment. The ontological significance of digital developments in shaping the fabric of social spaces and relationships of the future makes a strong case for greater attention to the limited presence of women in science and technology. If, as seems clear, digital transformations are refashioning what our world actually is and the ways in which we navigate, exist in and identify with it, then science and technology, which are central to producing this reality, should be as inclusive as possible. It can be argued that the growing pace of technological change presses this imperative more intensely as the years go by. If we accept that the past has been distorted by gendered inequalities in science and technology, then we can accept as things stand that the digital future risks continuing this distortion or even expanding it.

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