Feminist Hackers

Makers, Tinkerers, Seeders, Crafters and Geeks of all Genders

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An unfinished reflection on Feminist Kill Joy(s)

By TacticalMedia on 2015/08/28

Cyberspace has changed remarkably in the past three decades. Cyberspace used to be described as a place where "no one knew you were a dog on the Internet!" this idea of a democratic and somewhat utopian space where experimentation was possible; a place where one could play with identities and with ideas. But, despite tropes of anonymity, openness and information freedom that have long been foregrounded the so-called "traditional" values, norms and behaviors common in mainstream society have nonetheless colonized cyberspace (Milberry 2015). The Internet has unfortunately become a mirror of the dominant offline culture, a space where patriarchal and racist culture predominate along with its material and immaterial effects: gender-based violence and other forms of oppression. First Feminist Kill Joy! Additionally, cyberspace started to change considerably with the dotcom boom of the late nineties where a gold rush for the Internet emerged and where capital recognized it as a space for capital accumulation. Second Feminist Kill Joy! Media monopolies transformed this territory of experimentation, relative autonomy and anonymity into a comparatively giant shopping mall and somewhat of a panopticon. Today, we are faced with a situation where the Internet has become centralised and transformed into a consumption sanctuary and a space of surveillance, control and tracking of dissent voices by governments, anti-feminist, and corporations. Third Feminist Kill Joy! All these factors have led to a situation where the internet is not a safe space and where it is common to see feminists/queer/trans and women's activist harassed and their work being deleted, censored, and/or prevented from being seen, heard or read.

Becoming Unsympathetic

One of the ways in which feminist, queer, trans and LQBTQI are fighting back, resisting and protecting themselves individually and collectively is by the creation of safe spaces online and offline. Safe spaces are grounded in the assumption that shared common values, whether explicit, through a group agreement, or implicit through the sharing of values, allow members of a group to grow, empower themselves, protect themselves and create community. Safe spaces originated in the "women's and queer movements of the past decades as an identifier of space that is explicitly committed to safety for individuals or communities that are targets of oppression"(Newman 2011, p.138). Consciousness raising groups prevalent in the United States during the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s were among the first safe spaces that aimed at providing a safe speaking and awareness raising environment for women to discuss about their experience in a patriarchal environment.

The Promise of Happiness!

The notion of a safe space implies the possibility to speak and act freely, generate strategies of resistance and build community, among others (Kenney 2011). Though the scope, nature and raison d'être of safe spaces have evolved and expanded over time, the concept is still central to feminist pedagogy, organizing and liberation. Many movements around the world have used boundaries-setting strategies to create safe spaces. Women-only spaces[1] and women of colour-only spaces are examples of the embodiment of safe spaces. These strategies have recently re-emerged with for instance the Occupy movements where many women, queer and trans did not feel safe to camp in the squares and parks. Some resorted to women-only tents.

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The Act of Pushing

As the above examples illustrate, creating safe spaces offline has been experimented with for many decades now and championed by the feminist, LGBTQI and people of colour movements, but the creation of safe spaces online is a relatively new strategy. Pushing for such tactics is away to push back against violence. In this sense, the act of "pushing" becomes a form of political work (Ahmed 2014). Since the online world is one of the new public spheres, adopting safe space strategies and tactics are more and more experimented with. Transferring what one has learned from setting up a safe space offline to the online world might however be tricky and require a bit of tweaking around since the modalities under which digital spaces present themselves are relatively different from the offline world. In the abstract, the concept of safe space is relatively the same, but the strategies and tactics to implement safe spaces online vary significantly.

Self-care as Warfare

First, the infrastructure really matters. In the offline world if there are no bathrooms, if the space is located in a shady part of town or if the building is inaccessible mobility-wise, the infrastructure will not help in creating a safe space. At the digital space level, the infrastructure is designed and crafted by companies, developers and/or tech activists who do not necessarily factor in concerns of safety[i]. Often, tech projects do not think through the aspects of creating safe spaces i.e. built-in solutions that allow for feeling safer with regards to one's own data, one's own well-being, among others. The prime goal of many companies is generally not to protect you from digital threats (though of course there are exceptions, most of them being tech activist projects), it is rather about profit margin through the selling of your data. Another important point is the fact that those who are crafting these spaces do not necessarily think about the experience of online violence. This is an issue of privilege and as we know the burden of those who experience oppression often rests on the shoulders of those who are affected by these oppression. Let'stake the analogy of an energy saving device. Thoughts you do not need to have and actions you do not need to take extend the life of your batteries. What is clear is that users are largely left alone in dealing with forms of online violence, when they are not blamed for it, and often have to resort to opting out of certain services for the violence to stop. As Audre Lorde (1988) reminds us: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.

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