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PANEL: NETWORKED NICENESS: GENDERED AFFECTIVE PUBLICS AND POTENTIALITIES OF POLITICAL RESISTANCE

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The contemporary political, economic, and social environment has necessitated a focus within Internet and digital culture studies on the ways in which our platforms, online environments, and shifting digitally-enabled practices can support, perpetuate, and amplify hate, harassment, exclusion, toxicity, and incivility (Cheney-Lippold 2011, Cross 2014, Jane 2014). Critical analysis of the infrastructure, algorithms, and other socio-technical features (Shepherd et. al. 2015) enabling online hate has demonstrated the ways in which the Internet is a deeply unsafe space, one that is difficult to regulate through traditional means (Citron 2014, Franks 2009) and that can have very serious consequences, as we have seen with the deaths of teens targeted by cyberbullies (Rey & Boesel 2014). Within this context, it can be easy to overlook, minimize, or dismiss the spaces and sites where quite the opposite can be observed- the digital enclaves where we find kindness, support, friendship, and the grounds for resistance and organizing.

The papers in this panel examine precisely these affective publics via grounded analysis of several sites and practices linked by distinctly different resonances than captured in the focus on online hate. Through critical and qualitative engagement with specific sites of 'networked niceness', these papers explore the ways in which such sites are gendered and how they draw on affective relations and discourses as the grounds for feminist activism and resistance. Through this, they indicate how it is a focus on practices as well as structures that are required in explorations of our digital publics and politics. Papers 1, 2, and 3 highlight situated practices within and across networked publics- Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, among others. While their practices and communities differ, including feminist digital games initiatives, academics, and digital dress-makers, what they share is a struggle with coming to understand the relationship between socio-technical norms on specific platforms and

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affective engagement therein. They draw on empirical research with these sites and communities to consider the power of support, kindness, mentorship, and care to resist violence, and the limitations to networked niceness within the Internet's broader structure. Paper 4 rounds out these grounded analyses by interrogating the ethical queries raised when theorizing networked niceness and affective publics, including the very notion of an 'ethics of care'. Through this, it presents pressing considerations for contemporary Internet research into networked publics across sites and thematics.

These papers share an acknowledgment of the rise of networked misogyny and its attendant vilification of feminist critique and organizing (Banet-Weiser & Miltner 2016). Their starting point is the context of the visible misogynist and feminist zeitgeist in popular culture (Banet-Weiser 2015), but they aim to explore the contours of small-scale, specific sites and questions related to affective protest against hate online. While in each case the networked niceness can be read in response to the rise of 'alt-right' sexism, racism, harassment, and fascism and its digital traces, their specific tactics, discourses, and aesthetics differ. It is for this reason that examination of these practices are necessary, as they can disrupt binaristic (working/not working) and antagonistic portrayals of feminist action and organizing.

Rather than arguing for a return to early blue-sky thinking about online communities, communication, and identity, these talks critically engage with the nuances of contemporary affective publics. As they reflect on these spaces of positivity, they question how such 'hopeful performativities' (Ahmed, 2010) can constrain as well as enable political resistance. These papers interrogate the fantasies as well as the potentialities of networked niceness, opening up a conversation about how in a context of online hate we may find the grounds for the next steps in critical engagement and resistance.

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Paper 1- Beyond Gamer Love and Gamer Hate: Resistance to Violence, Vengeance, and Vitriol in Digital Games Culture

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The last three years of digital games culture scholarship has been explicitly or implicitly inflected with a response to the #GamerGate campaign, a movement that is more associated with harassment of visible women in games than with the ethics in games journalism mantra it emphasizes (Braithwaite 2016, Chess & Shaw 2014, Mortensen 2016). In this time, we have seen recognition across digital games scholarship of the exclusionary and often toxic culture of gaming, with a commensurate emphasis on gendered, racialized, and intersectional forms of oppression and marginalization across a range of gaming publics (Braithwaite 2014, Salter & Blodgett 2012). This work has shown the ways in which gaming publics are not partitioned off from digital culture, but linked to the production and reification of toxic masculinist cybercultures more broadly (Massanari 2015). These moves are riven with affective discourse, including both love of gaming and its culture as well as hatred of the intrusions of so-called 'social justice warriors' and their criticisms. As this would indicate, online games culture is one where affective and gendered boundaries play a central role in defining the gamer identity.

In tandem, we have seen the rise of interventionist and transformative work aimed at shifting toxic masculinist norms in games (Jenson & de Castell 2013). Under the banner of 'feminists in games', artistic, critical, and activist projects showcase resistance to the exclusions of campaigns such as GamerGate and the prior cybermob attacks on feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian (Consalvo, 2012) and more historically longstanding practices related to marketing, production, and design normalizing violent hegemonic masculinities (see for example Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce 2007, Huntemann 2015).

In this paper, I consider the affective nature of these forms of resistance to anti-feminist and misogynistic norms in games culture. Recent research has shown that these feminist interventions are met with scepticism about the legitimacy of their affective engagement with games (Harvey & Shepherd 2016), especially when it does not meet the criteria of adequate passionate love for the medium. Other work demonstrates the centrality of women's affective labour both within game play (Aubrey 2013, Chess 2016) and related to feminist games-based activism (Harvey & Fisher 2016). Affective

discourses of love and hate produce and solidify intense attachments between subjects, bodies, spaces and communities (Ahmed 2012), which is central to understanding the ways the above-mentioned digital campaigns link to broader contemporary political climate and its deployment of White supremacist rhetoric. What this paper contributes is a sense of the affective engagement with digital games that is not captured within the predominant polarizing frames of love and hate- of sadness, hope, friendship, community, and grim determination, supported by networked publics.

In this talk, I argue that a grounded consideration of feminist and interventionist practices is necessary to bypass the tendency to focus on successes and failures, inroads and backlashes, social justice warriors and snowflakes when discussing these networked publics of gaming. Drawing on three collaborative research project undertaken within the 'feminists in games' network over the last six years, I provide local nuance and context to the affective economies of feminist organizing and activism in digital games. In the above projects, qualitative interviews and participatory action research within both informal and formal digital games education contexts has highlighted the deeply affective ways in which women in games negotiate virulent and violent hate and harassment. These actions range in scale from individual mentorship to community-wide initiatives to network-wide organizing, but what characterizes (and what has yet to be examined in detail) is their negotiation of networked affective publics in their organizing. Where the focus has been on Reddit, Twitter, 4Chan and 8Chan for their designed affordances allowing for antifeminist harassment, this talk highlights how these and other digital media sites and platforms are mobilized for feminist engagement and affective support.

Through this analysis, I make the provocation that the concept of a 'feminist internet' is not a fantasy but already exists, though to address it as such requires a different, small-scale, more local methodology that can highlight practices rendered invisible in dominant discourse and research (Hill Collins 2000). As such, this consideration of feminist networks in digital games highlights both conceptual and methodological questions to consider when examining politics, resistance, and activism in contemporary digital publics.

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Paper 2: Individual Academic Networks on Facebook and Feminist Ethics of Care

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This paper explores Facebook as a tool for forming personal and individual academic networks of support and resource sharing, from a feminist perspective. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012) define networked individualism as “the ways in which people connect, communicate, and exchange information” as individuals, rather than as members of “large hierarchical bureaucracies and small, densely knit groups such as

households, communities, and workgroups” (p. 6–7). Mobilizing the analogy of an operating system, they note that:

the social network operating system is *personal*—the individual is at the autonomous center just as she is reaching out from her computer; *multiuser*—people are interacting with numerous diverse others; *multitasking*—people are doing several things; and *multithreaded*—they are doing them more or less simultaneously (p.7)

Individual social networks are powerful organizing forces in modern, increasingly technologically mediated, life, and a particular case of this is how individual social networks are mobilized by academics.

There has been some exploration of how social media connections can support academics in their professional and personal lives. Rainie and Wellman (2012, p. 4), for example discuss how internet enabled linkages and connections (email, websites, posts, online food ordering, PayPal donations) as well as more traditional media (the telephone, pictures) helped an academic couple who suffered a pair of overlapping severe illnesses to connect with diffuse networks of aid and support during a time of need (p.4). Similarly, communication scholar Jonathan Sterne (2009) used his blog (with reposts on Facebook) as a way to discuss his battle with thyroid cancer, and simultaneous exploration of the world of online cancer support communities, a narrative that was at once personal and professional, acting as a model for academics with serious illness navigating the Canadian healthcare system. Similarly, Sterne has used both social media (2014) and journal articles (2011) to expand mentorship on academic professionalization to students beyond his immediate graduate program, a growing trend (see for example Kelsky, 2017). Others have talked about how Twitter can be used as a powerful backchannel during academic conferences (Reinhardt, Ebner, Beham, & Costa, 2009), how Twitter can be used to perform academic identities (Singh, 2013), and how hashtags might be mobilized broadly for enabling academic research and community formation (Singh, 2015). Building on this work, my paper is a consideration of the role Facebook has played in my own academic formation and career, in both professional and personal ways.

While the role of Facebook as a pedagogical tool has been well explored (de Villers, 2010; Deil-Amen, 2015) its significant role for academics bears further consideration. The “virtual togetherness” (Bakardjieva, 2004) enabled by network technology allows us to create forms of “digital intimacy” (Rambukkana, 2015) that can connect us across geographies and contexts. Social media has the ability to create networks of “shared resources and support” (Baym, 2015, p. 91) including enabling social integration and network support (p. 93), emotional support (p. 93), esteem support (p. 94), informational support (p. 94), shared identities (p. 96), and the facilitation of interpersonal relationships (p.99). For academics, these connections can enable the following forms of support and connection: creation and extension of broad academic, institutional, and disciplinary networks; emotional support during difficult periods, such as writing the dissertation, the job hunt, tenure review, and personal crises; esteem support for those with “imposter syndrome” or who are disheartened by rejections or failures; information sharing on everything from job hunting resources, to sharing research materials, to legal

advice; shared identities and a feeling of diffuse but supportive collegiality; and the development and maintenance of specific interpersonal relationships across institutions, career levels, and even international borders. Moreover, in addition to enabling all of the above, as a platform (Montfort & Bogost, 2009a, 2009b), Facebook's affordances for sharing news and other links, messaging, specialty group and page creation, and file sharing enable users to collaborate, coordinate and motivate each other's work and professional lives.

This paper will employ a situated auto-ethnography of the author's Facebook practices as pertaining to academia based on their individual network that includes over 450 academics and comprises MA students; PhD students, candidates, and graduates; sessional instructors; tenure-track, tenured, and full professors; and deans. It will elaborate Facebook's affordances for creating individual academic networks with a particular focus on how such networks might enable a "feminist ethics of care" (Gilligan, 1982), in that such networks might have the ability to somewhat flatten the uneven power relations inherent to the academy, and help junior scholars to understand the sometime inscrutable world of professional academe.

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Paper 3: Of Female Friendships and Fabriculture: Deliberate Acts of Kindness in Online Spaces

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‘Digital dressmaking’ (Bain, 2016), is a growing movement in which sewists utilise online technologies as a core part of their sewing practice. Converging across platforms like Instagram, blogs, Pinterest, Twitter and YouTube, largely female digital dressmakers engage in a range of practices which serve to connect a traditionally material craft and new digital technologies. Tekkobe (2013) has noted that the online spaces predominantly inhabited by women, such as Pinterest, have been normatively assessed by those in the tech sector as valueless; as frivolous and feminine time-wastage, compared to the serious, valuable and apparently masculine work of content creation (p.382). Yet digital dressmaking arguably complicates this “typical association of masculinity/digital culture and femininity/fabriculture” (Bratich & Busch, 2011), and contests exclusionist and gendered discourses which depict women as passive technology consumers, not creators.

The digital dressmaking 'community' brings visibility to an historically ignored domestic craft through the informal creation of digital archives of home sewing. And, in creating these, participants also strive to create a space which celebrates women: their various forms and figures, and the friendships which are central to the fabric of many women's lives. In a context of increasingly hostile and negative public discourses in which trolling, harassment, bullying and abuse online have become normalised (For eg. *inter alia*: Adams, 2011; Lewis, 2012; Arthur & Kiss, 2013; Jane 2014a), one of the most striking features of the digital dressmaking community is its apparent inclusivity and positivity: the online spaces populated by sewists appear to be profoundly kind ones.

Drawing on data from a two-year long ethnographic project conducted both on- and offline, this paper interrogates the practices of the digital dressmaking community, focusing in particular on identifying its modality of kindness, and asking more broadly, what the practice of kindness might look like in a digital environment.

A lack of kindness, particularly online, has received considerable scholarly and press attention of late (Herring et al., 2002; Marcotte, 2013; Jane 2014b; Gibbs, 2015; Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016), and as Philips and Taylor (2009) have noted, "kindness is often seen as either a cover story, or a failure of nerve" (p. 6). Kindness, niceness, and even empathy are perceived as signs of weakness, and related to this, as largely feminized characteristics to be viewed with scepticism (Philips & Taylor, 2009). In such a context, the apparent 'networked niceness' of digital dressmakers might be similarly critiqued as merely a performance of a particular kind of hegemonic femininity, or perhaps more cynically as an example of what Alison Winch (2013) has called 'girlfriend culture'; a friend community bound up in a postfeminist sensibility where friendships between women are strategic and based on a girlfriend gaze that at once invites intimacy, but which is ultimately intended to control. I would instead suggest that in an online environment characterised by worsening vitriol, particularly towards women, we can perhaps conceptualise the behaviour of those in the digital dressmaking community in another way: as consciously practiced form of kindness which functions as a form of quiet activism (Hackney, 2013; Solomon, 2013; Corbett, forthcoming) and intentionally disrupts the more routinely negative spaces in which women find themselves online. Such a practice is arguably a radical act which also challenges the internalised misogyny typically seen in media representations of female relationships, where women are pitted against one another and 'cattiness' and snarking are common (Douglas, 2010). Such practices may also be considered to function more widely as a form of 'cyber-feminism' (Minahan & Cox, 2007) empowering female digital 'immigrants' to find a voice online, negotiate technology and share material labour to generate economic and social capital.

The paper argues that there is value in exploring spaces such as these, which might enable such female-centric friendships to flourish and which offer opportunities for deliberate acts of kindness. In a scholarly context in which the dominant research discourse places particular value on large-scale, typically quantitative approaches to public/civic online interactions (Kitchin, 2014), if we overlook more domestic, small-scale digital practices which may enable various affective relationships, we risk reproducing the earlier critiques of women's TV genres and entertainment formats which were often derided for their 'feminine' concerns with emotions, domesticity and/or the ordinary (eg:

Brunsdon 1999, 1993; Huyssen 1986; Lury 1995; Patterson, 2016). Attention to online hatred is, of course, crucial. It is dangerous, misogynistic, and is experienced as terrorising by victims. But as this paper will suggest, there is value, too, in interrogating spaces where alternative, kinder conversations are happening.

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Paper 4: 'Intimate' Ethics and Imagined Subjects in the Study of Female Fandoms Online.

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This paper takes as its focus one aspect of the ethical challenges of studying 'networked niceness.' It starts from the perhaps unfashionable position that research relationships – whether online or off - are always fictitious, mythologised and fetishised by their participants. Given this, our identifications with the other - how these others are brought into being in our engagement *with* them as well as in our accounts *of* them, and how "their" ethics are presented as informing "ours" - must be a key concern for any critical consideration of the formation of ethics in the online study of affective publics.

This position can be seen to be unpopular given the valuing of notions of participation, reciprocity, compassion and care, and looks towards indigenous ethics in writing on qualitative inquiry (see, for example, Denzin and Giardina, 2007). It also presents a challenge to the growing emphasis on the "human" in online research. As Buchanan and Zimmer note, "As the Internet has evolved into a more social and communicative tool and venue, [...] ethical issues have shifted from purely data driven to more human-centered" (2016, np). Yet, to date, the ways that ethical values are attributed or denied in the objectification of online subjects of research – and how these inform the methodological approaches of internet scholars - remains an under-examined topic. Instead the general referent point '[human] subject' is typically regarded as an unproblematic entity in terms of its inherent ethical status. This has focused researchers' attention onto the rights and protection of individuals, but leaves unchallenged the objectification of ethical others in qualitative online research and how these shape ethical practice.

Such consideration is particularly necessary in the study of online practices whose value can be seen to be defined in binary terms: established in opposition to de/legitimated other (even if this is valuing is implicit). In the study of deviant online groups researchers face the challenge of identifying (or not) with an unlikeable other. In contrast, in the study of what appears to resemble "online niceness" – communities whose values and actions may seem more similar to our own world views, the challenge is avoiding the lure of apparently 'easy' identifications. In both such extremes there is a need for a rupturing of sceptical/earnest identification with the other, in order to breach any slippage into *either* pathologising *or* celebratory positions.

Accounts of research have demonstrated how these sorts of distinctions can be unsettled during research – the way that others whose interests we may despise can surprisingly reveal themselves to be likeable (Blee, 2003), and how those with whom we think we identify may unexpectedly challenge our identification with them (Bott, 2010). There are also dangers in identifying too quickly with particular points of ethical authority in research. In academic writing this has often been expressed in reference to the influence of proceduralised ethical frameworks (Koro-Ljungberg et al 2007; Canella and Lincoln 2007), rather than a concern with over-identifying with those we study. Yet the dangers of reifying the communities that we study have also been explored: as

Hammersley and Traianou note, approaches to an ethics of care that appear to rest on “[...] the establishment of a communal or solidaristic form of social relation between researcher and researched [...]” can be totalising in their ‘envisioning’ of the researched” (2014, np).

Against this backdrop, this talk will seek to question the ‘human’ basis of researchers’ affective relationships to the researched in the study of online networked niceness. My empirical focus will be on the study of women-centered online fandoms (Bury, 2005; Hellekson and Busse, 2006). Such spaces have long been defined by fan studies scholars in contrast to more hostile and constraining alternatives; presented as examples of “online haven[s]” where women “can build meaningful interpersonal relationships and discuss issues like sexism, fashion and desire among ‘sisters.’” (Wakefield, 2001, 136) and celebrated as positive spaces for identity exploration beyond normative constraints (Lothian, Busse and Reid, 2007). Yet female fans have also been, and continue to be, both pathologised in society and marginalised in academic research (Dare-Edwards, 2015) in ways that can be seen to be part of a wider and “persistent denigration of women’s media” (Anderson, 2012, 241). Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that such settings have been configured by fan studies researchers as vulnerable spaces that require protection from scholarly exploitation.

The need to cultivate intimacy in the study of these settings has been promoted through the privileging of certain research choices (particularly the use of participation over observation), a suspicion of methodological and analytical distance, and a privileging of the ethics of the researched as a point of ethical authority (see Kelley (2016) on “goodwill” ethics, and Busse and Hellekson (2012) on the idea of “fans first”). If our interest is in the “envisioning” of online subjects and communities, the nature of the affective discourses at play in this work might demand our attention. These tend to configure fan subjects as being both *knowable* and *like us*; as Kelley notes “[...] we will be most effective as researchers when we reach out as emotional and embodied humans to the emotional and embodied humans on the other sides of our computer screens.” (2016, np). Yet the equivalence between ‘them’ and ‘us’ that this suggests is inescapably based on a rationalisation of the other. Drawing from Stephen Fuchs’ discussion of how systems become formulated into persons or things (2009), this paper will therefore explore the ethical implications - for both fan studies research and the online study of ‘networked niceness’ more broadly - of the idea that any judgement as to the status of the researched is an objectification that must be interrogated.

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