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## **I DID NOT HAVE TEXT WITH THAT SERVER: ATTITUDES ABOUT GENDER, TECHNOLOGY, AND DIGITAL LITERACY IN THE 2016 U.S. ELECTION**

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### **Gender, Privacy, and Transparency**

Many will argue that Hillary Clinton lost the recent U.S. presidential race because of her gender. Communication scholars have argued that sexism was already a major factor in the 2008 election (Carlin and Winfrey, 2009; Anderson, 2011) and that Clinton threatened gender norms during her tenure as First Lady (Templin, 1999).

Others might argue that Clinton's digital practices and those of her campaign staff were a greater factor. Polling data indicated that leaked emails undermined voter trust (Suffolk, 2016) at a time that WikiLeaks had an improved reputation (YouGov, 2016). The FBI investigation of her possible mishandling of classified information (Washington Post-ABC, 2016) also seemed to have damaged voter support.

This paper asserts that a conflation of gender *and* technology may have contributed to Clinton's defeat, because her digital literacy practices were judged as non-normative, based on evidence in materials in the @realDonaldTrump Twitter archive, the Fox News website (<http://www.foxnews.com>), the WikiLeaks database of hacked emails from Hillary Clinton and John Podesta, and FBI documents. It uses a theoretical framework from science and technology studies that views technology as "both a source and a consequence of gender relations" (Wajcman, 2006). Assuming the coproduction of gender and technology emphasizes the performative and processual character of both to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism (Bray, 2007).

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Discourse analysis of legal decisions about U.S. technology law indicates that privacy has often been equated with womanhood (Suk, 2008). This association of privacy, femininity, and computation has a long history in American rhetoric (Losh, 2009). In contrast, masculinity may be affiliated with transparency, access, and penetration (Keller, 1985). Trump's calls for transparency were often presented in terms of gender binaries, as in the case of his demand for open access to a secure technology after a 2015 terrorist attack in California and permission to "get into her cell phone" and "open it up" (Struyk, 2016).

The victory of Trump — who famously refused to participate in the backchannel of email (Barbaro and Eder, 2015; Haberman, 2016) and only used the front channel of Twitter during the campaign — may indicate that populist sympathies could not be aligned with Clinton because of her gendered affiliation with digital media and its ambiguities of access and delivery.

In defending personal privacy Clinton often claimed feminine privilege. For example, she described many of the more than thirty thousand emails that were deleted from her private account as not pertinent to the government's inquiry because they were about her "daughter Chelsea's wedding, her mother Dorothy's funeral, her yoga routines and family vacations" (Gearan and Rucker, 2015) rather than worldly professional matters.

Critics of visual culture watching television coverage of Clinton's email scandal might be quick to observe a particular pattern. When news anchors discussed her emails, the accompanying B-roll showed a montage of images of Clinton on her Blackberry. These images of ubiquitous computing use showed Clinton as withdrawn and ignoring other people or her environment.

### **Servers, Peripherals, and Promiscuous Computing**

The association of Clinton's computer practices with impurity was also facilitated by comparisons with her husband's infidelities and deceptions. A popular Internet meme showed her image juxtaposed with "I did not have textual relations with that server." The meme suggested that Mrs. Clinton was denying her own digital promiscuity and lack of self-control. However, as Wendy Chun points out, purity myths about digital privacy perpetuate blind spots about computer functions and foster denial of the fact that digital discourse always requires a public machine engaged in incessant intercourse (2006). The presence of printers and other peripherals could make the existing dynamic around security, transparency, and technological dependence even more problematic for Clinton. As the WikiLeaks archive indicates, "Pls. print" was a common Clinton directive.

In the literature about practices to protect digital security, gender continues to be an important area of investigation, although much of the scholarship on digital self-protection focuses on minors (Sonck, Livingstone, Kuiper & de Haan, 2011) or on how online misogyny inhibits public participation in computer-mediated communication (Jane, 2014) instead of email transmitted privately by adults. Unpacking the rhetoric of stories with titles like "Clinton directed her maid to print out classified materials" (Sperry, 2016) requires addressing multiple layers of concern about class, gender, and national

security. It is also possible that this is as much a story about age as a marker of technological competency (Graff, 2016) as it is one about gender.

Nonetheless, if age rather than gender is the root cause of consternation about inappropriate digital intermingling, why was Clinton punished for her lack of digital fluency so much more harshly than Trump? As researchers begin to consider the digital literacy practices of prominent figures – such as politicians – and public attitudes about those practices, as important areas for scholarly inquiry, questions about gender inequities in claiming privacy rights over electronic files may still prove to be important for future democratic contests.

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