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HISTORICIZING FEMINIST DATA ACTIVISM: A MEDIA GENEALOGY OF THE WOMEN'S SAFETY AUDITS

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Introduction

This paper historicizes feminist data activism, particularly as it relates to the use of grassroots data by feminist activists to address gendered violence in public spaces. It addresses the following question: How did grassroots data become widely accepted as a legitimate means to combat gendered violence in public spaces? Against the presentism in common data narratives, as in the claim of scholars such as Yu Sun and Siyuan Yin (2022) that feminist data activism has emerged as a *new* form of feminist activism, a historical perspective, as I shall argue, allows us to unpack what seems to be a novel action repertoire within contemporary feminist activism. Specifically, a *longue durée* perspective shows that employing grassroots data to address gendered violence predates the digital era. More importantly, instead of being diametrically opposed, the grassroots data approach has been folded into other hegemonic interests throughout history.

To make the case for this argument, I use media genealogy to trace the history of a particular grassroots data type: the Women's Safety Audit (WSA). The WSA was developed by the Toronto-based feminist organization called the *Metropolitan Toronto Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC)* in the 1980s. The WSA involves having women walk through public spaces to identify the physical or social attributes that make these spaces feel safe or unsafe, which ranges from women's gut feeling about the space, as well as aspects such as lighting and entrapment spots. The WSA was groundbreaking when it emerged because its conceptualization was informed by a feminist perspective that acknowledged the gendered nature of fear of crime and its material impact on women's mobility. As opposed to viewing it as a gender-neutral issue, the WSA highlighted the importance of gathering data exclusively centered on women's experiences. In other words, the WSA is foundational to contemporary feminist data activism against gendered violence: its concept has inspired numerous modern initiatives, such as *Safetipin*, and *Safecity* in India,

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Harassmap in Egypt, and *She's A Crowd, Free To Be*, and *Your Ground* in Australia. Thus, the WSA provides an interesting vantage point from which to comprehend the logic of contemporary feminist data activism.

Media genealogy

To trace the history of the WSA, I adopt media genealogy to analyze the process by which technologies gain widespread acceptance. As Koopman (2013) notes, the point of media genealogy is not to discern “how the intentions of those in the past effectively gave rise to the present, but rather to understand how various independently existing vectors of practice managed to contingently intersect in the past so as to give rise to the present” (p. 107). Following Koopman (2013), I do not aim to judge the move towards the datafication of women’s experiences in terms of its “good” or “bad”, “success” or “failure.” Instead, I attend to power relations by considering how a form of grassroots data, namely the WSA, has evolved and been shaped by different modalities of knowledge production.

Data

The data for this study come from historical reports published by METRAC (the organization that pioneered the creation of the WSA) in the 1980s. UN documentation is particularly valuable insofar as different UN agencies have adopted, popularized, and legitimized the WSA since the 1990s. Press releases, reports and conference proceedings published by the UN around “women’s safety” and the WSA, including documentation by UN Women, UN Women’s Safe Cities initiative, UN Women’s predecessors such as the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, United Nations Development Fund for Women, and UN Habitat, were also reviewed. Overall, I have analyzed 41 documents published across four decades since the 1980s. I also drew upon publicly available documents of modern feminist data initiatives, as well as interviews with data activists and stakeholders who funded data activism efforts. While not exhaustive, this analysis provides insights into the institutional origin of a grassroots data approach.

Findings

I argue that insofar as the WSA is presented as a means to address gendered violence in public spaces, it has been framed as a response to different “problematizations.”

During its formalization period in the 1980s, physical space was problematized. Specifically, the practices known as Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) approach exerted a heavy influence on the conceptualization of the WSA. This problematically reduced women’s safety to a matter of “calculable space” (Miller, 1992)—space in which risk of gendered violence can be visibly recognized through environmental cues—rather than a matter shaped by interlocking axes of race, class, and gender oppression, which traverse space (Koskela and Pain, 2000; Massey, 2005).

Since the 1990s, due to growing emphasis on evidence-based practice and decision-making, evaluating the effectiveness of violence prevention methods became the main concern. Predicated on a pharmaceutical model, the “evidence” in evidence-based approaches prioritize evidence generated by experimental ways of knowing (with randomized controlled trials deemed the gold standard for generating rigorous evidence and establishing causal claims) (Trinder, 2000). During this period, I show that the WSA and its resulting recommendations for fixing the built environment gained significant traction precisely because it functioned within a “visual economy” (Ahmed, 2013): it worked to identify observable causes of gendered violence, generate observable solutions, and produce observable evidence to demonstrate its own effectiveness. In particular, violence prevention that integrated the WSA adeptly navigated the rigorous requirement of establishing a causal relationship between interventions and the decrease in violence. This was achieved by utilizing the WSA concurrently as a method to generate data informing infrastructural changes and as a means to provide evidence of “positive” outcomes, such as the number CCTVs installed in certain areas.

As the consensus on the effectiveness of the WSA solidified, the focus shifted, particularly from the 2010s onward, towards the challenge of “scalability.” Since the 2010s, there emerged an imperative to seek technologies that could facilitate more efficient data collection and more precise understanding of spatial dynamics. Specifically, a multitude of feminist activism initiatives influenced by the WSA legacy have emerged, and they are eagerly pursuing scalable methods for collecting grassroots data, many of which rely on AI. For instance, *She’s A Crowd*, based in Australia, is developing a *Gender Safety Scorecard* using an algorithm to rate the safety level of specific locations based on data crowdsourced from survivors. The interviews I conducted with stakeholders funding data activism efforts demonstrated that the imperative of scalability was motivated not only by a desire for effectiveness. Rather, scalability was also a prerequisite for securing funding opportunities essential for activist initiatives’ continued operation. In short, in response to this imperative, the WSA, being a relatively standardized approach to gathering grassroots data, allows for a politics of scalability to be realized.

Conclusion

This paper traced the significant forces that shape a particular form of grassroots data and how it came to be represented as a means to address gendered violence in public spaces. Rather than “signalling the emergence of innovative ‘epistemic cultures,’” (Kazansky et al., 2019: 246), the genealogy of the WSA showed that grassroots data approach has been folded into other hegemonic interests throughout the history. Grappling with this entanglement and the hierarchy of power/knowledge it enacts is crucial for feminist activism to not reproduce the power relations they seek to address.

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