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GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Alice Marwick

Introduction

Julia Allison (real name: Julia Allison Baugher) is a twenty-nine-year-old blogger and personality who describes herself as "personally and professionally a handful." She rose to micro-fame as the dating columnist for *Time Out New York,* barraged the media gossip blog *Gawker* into covering her social life, and is now a syndicated columnist with the *Chicago Tribune.* Although Allison is not a technologist, she is a fixture at New York and San Francisco tech parties and conferences, and appeared on the cover of *Wired* to illustrate their story on internet fame. She is also a "professional talking head" and has appeared on hundreds of cable news programs, talk shows, and radio programs. Allison is primarily known for blogging continuous photographs, links, and tweets about herself, and chronicling her love life, social events, insecurity, issues with friends and family, and travel. She presents herself as very attractive and usually appears in photographs with full makeup, a dress, and her fluffy white dog. The bio on her website states:

> Julia has a Facebook account, a Myspace page, a Flickr, a Twitter, a Friendfeed, four Tumblrs, three Movable Type blogs, two Vimeos, one YouTube and a photogenic white shih-tzu named Marshmallow.[1] (Allison, 2009)

Allison's fame has resulted primarily from sharing intimate, personal information through social media. As Paris Hilton achieved fame by manipulating celebrity tabloids and gossip television, Julia Allison has become famous by leveraging Web 2.0 technologies.

Allison also receives a staggering amount of negative attention, mostly focused on her personal life, looks, and weight. A blog called *Reblogging NonSociety,*[2]

founded in January 2009, responds almost daily to every piece of content Julia posts. It refers to her as "Donkey" and describes her as "[an] annoying piece of internet trash" and "another dumb trashy gold digger with a Tumblr" (Juliaspublicist, 2010; Partypants, 2010). Allison was named the third "Most hated person on the Internet" by *Radar* magazine, and *Gawker* wrote a vitriolic "Field Guide to Julia Allison" that poked fun at her popularity and sex life. The hatred shown toward Julia seems so out of proportion to her actual activities that *Gawker* eventually questioned the motives of the individuals behind the *Reblogging* site (Lawson, 2010a, 2010b). Maureen Henderson, after profiling Julia for *Forbes,* found the many negative comments on her story similarly inexplicable: "The idea that someone folks are calling a 'fraud' and an 'awful person' still merits a website focused on bashing her even as readers reiterate that she lacks substance or career success is just so damn weird in a Web 2.0 way" (Henderson, 2011).

Julia's detractors claim the negativity—which has included calling and e-mailing Julia's boyfriends, employers, and family members—is justified because Allison is a singularly awful person and a noxious representative of the worst of Web 2.0. Wendy Atterberry (2010) summed up on the popular women's blog *The Frisky:*

> Julia represents so much of what is icky about blogging and social networking. She is shamelessly narcissistic and vain, having posted thousands of photos of herself over the years and staging incredible, over-the-top "photo shoots" simply to post on her blog. . . . She's utterly obnoxious, and in a time when so many people are hurting financially, she gloats about expensive non-stop vacations, exorbitant gifts from boyfriends, and how many homes her parents own. It's gross.

Much of the hatred leveraged against Allison is rooted in expectations of appropriate behavior on social media. Allison uses the logics of celebrity culture to project a strategically "feminine" persona by sharing highly personal information and using digital imagery and reoccurring identity markers. However, she is working within a deeply gendered context that privileges "masculine" behaviors and closely polices female self-presentation. Social media technologies like Twitter, Foursquare, Facebook, and YouTube are spaces and tools that facilitate communication. Rather than presuming these technologies to be gender neutral, scholarship has demonstrated that information technologies can perpetuate norms of masculinity, business, and engineering (Hofmann, 1999; Kendall, 2002). Gender is produced and reproduced in social media both by software and the user interaction that takes place online. Looking at online communication as *gendered* reveals patterns in the types of communication that are encouraged and discouraged. Understanding how Julia uses social media to produce a gendered identity can help to explain some of the negativity she experiences, demonstrating how social media both *reflects* and *produces* gender.

Understanding Sex and Gender

While the terms "sex," "gender," and "sexuality" are often thought of as synonymous, they are actually quite distinct. The differences between the common understandings of these terms and how researchers think about them yields key insights about the social functioning of gender.

Sex is the biological state that corresponds to what we might call a "man" or a "woman." This might seem to be a simple distinction, but the biology of sex is actually very complicated, as chronicled by biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling. Fausto-Sterling (2000) argues that the binary system in which everyone's sexual organs neatly fit into one of two categories is deeply influenced by our social understanding of gender. Because conventional conceptions of gender are binary, the type of liminality represented by, say, hermaphroditism is hard to understand. We expect a pregnancy to result in a boy or a girl, or for someone to be a man *or* a woman. For people to inhabit both, or neither, of those two spaces is highly threatening to social order. While "sex" is often explained as biological, fixed, and immutable, it is actually socially constructed (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

"Gender," then, is the social understanding of how sex should be experienced and how sex manifests in behavior, personality, preferences, capabilities, and so forth. A person with male sex organs is expected to embody a masculine gender. While sex and gender are presumed to be biologically connected, we can understand gender as a socioculturally specific set of norms that are mapped onto a category of "sex" (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Lorber, 1994). Gender is historical. It is produced by media and popular culture (Gauntlett, 2008; Van Zoonen, 1994). It is taught by family, schools, peer groups, and nation-states (Goffman, 1977). It is reinforced through songs, sayings, admonition, slang, language, fashion, and discourse (Cameron, 1998; Cameron & Kulick, 2003). And it is deeply ingrained. The violence, discrimination, and hatred shown toward transgendered individuals, people who experience disconnection between their biological sex and their gender, demonstrates that understanding gender as changeable or liminal threatens many assumptions considered biological or "natural" (Stryker, 2006).

Gender is a system of classification that values male-gendered things more than female-related things. This system plays out on the bodies of men and women and in constructing hierarchies of everything from colors (pink vs. blue) to academic departments (English vs. Math) to electronic gadgets and websites. Given this inequality, the universalized "male" body and experience is often constructed as average or normal, while female-gendered experiences are conceptualized as variations from the norm (Goffman, 1977). Technology has been criticized for this *male normativity* due to the disproportionate number of men and women involved in technical design and engineering (Faulkner, 2000; Hossfeld, 1990). Similarly, *heteronormativity* is the presumption of heterosexuality unless explicitly stated otherwise. Valuing some experiences as normal or natural, while stigmatizing others as pathological or deviant, is the process of establishing and maintaining

social norms. *Normative* gender behavior is that which adheres to the dominant understanding of masculine men and feminine women; nonnormative behavior does not follow these social scripts (Shapiro, 2010).

"Sexuality" is an individual expression and understanding of desire. While, like gender, this is often viewed as binary (homosexual *or* heterosexual), in reality sexuality is often experienced as fluid. Bisexuality, pansexuality, and other forms of desire are often marginalized or written out of mainstream discourse, but they certainly exist (Sedgwick, 2008). The term "queer" can be used as an umbrella term for nonnormative expressions of sexuality, including practices like polyamory and BDSM. While queer is often used as a synonym for "gay or lesbian," it is decidedly not the same (Bristow, 1997). The popularity of queer as an umbrella term is in part driven by a desire to reject the confines of a strictly binary approach to male/female or gay/straight identity.

Despite extensive research undermining the binary concept of gender and framing gender as a social construction (Crawley, Foley, & Shehan, 2008; Goffman, 1977; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Lorber, 1994), dominant discourses around gender and sexuality tend to a model in which sex and gender are fixed, unchanging, intimately intertwined, and based on biology.

Performing Gender Online

The theorist Judith Butler (1990) conceptualized gender as a performance. She maintained that popular understandings of gender and sexuality came to be through discourse and social processes. She argued that gender was *performative,* in that it is produced through millions of individual actions, rather than something that comes naturally to men and women. A woman sashaying down the street wearing high heels is performing femininity (as is a drag queen doing the same thing). Performances that adhere to normative understandings of gender and sexuality are sanctioned, while those that do not are admonished (for example, a boy "throwing like a girl") (Lorber, 1994).

In the 1990s, many internet scholars drew from Butler and other queer theorists to understand online identity. Academics like Sandy Stone (1996) and Sherry Turkle (1995) were fascinated by the idea that online spaces, like multiuser text games, bulletin boards, and chat rooms, made it possible for people to communicate without corporeal cues like appearance or voice. The *disembodiment hypothesis* held that internet users, liberated from the constraints of the flesh, would actively choose which gender or sexuality to "be," possibly creating alternate identities nothing like their own (Wynn & Katz, 1997). The ability of users to self-consciously adopt and play with different gender identities would reveal the choices involved in the production of gender, breaking down binaries and encouraging fluidity in sexuality and gender expression. As Sherry Turkle (1995) has written, "like transgressive gender practices in real life, by breaking the conventions, [online gender play] dramatizes our attachment to them" (p. 212).

Donna Haraway's (1985) cyborg emerged as the preferred metaphor of this new way of looking at identity. Her widely cited essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" conceptualized *the cyborg subject,* a new way of being and thinking about oneself that incorporated both "nature" and "technology." Rather than seeing the two concepts as intrinsically opposed, the cyborg simultaneously embodied both, proving the dichotomy false. Haraway's cyborg was a complicated political move that allowed the creation of other types of subject positions that were rooted in strategic commonality rather than biology, such as "queer politics" or "women of color."

Haraway's cyborg was widely adopted by a branch of unrelentingly positive cyber-theory (Kirkup et al., 2000; Terry & Calvert, 1997; Wolmark, 1999). *Cyborg feminism* (also known as cyberfeminism) argued that "technoscience" was potentially liberating for women, even to the extent that technical prostheses could be used to enhance their capabilities. Some cyberfeminists held that technologies like the internet were intrinsically suited to women's ways of thinking and being (Plant, 1998). This body of theory was a reaction to a strain of 1970s and 1980s feminism that maintained that Western computer technologies were intrinsically patriarchal, embodying masculine ideologies, and often leveraged by men to control women. Cyborg feminists instead argued that contemporary technology, particularly the internet, could be a space for organizing, theorizing, sharing experiences, and understanding oneself with tremendous potential for women (Wajcman, 2007). These *cyberfeminists* depended on an essentialist view of male and female capabilities, in that community building and nurturing were portrayed as something women are inherently good at (Van Zoonen, 2001).

This essentialist view of gender and technology still surfaces every once in a while. For example, claims that women's participation in Facebook is due to their superior multitasking or social skills may seem better than its alternative (e.g., women are unsuited to complex technical work), yet they still perpetrate an understanding of gender differences as innate and rooted in biological and psychological underpinnings.

Rather than taking an essentialist position, contemporary gender theorists focus on behavior that is encouraged, discouraged, rewarded, or prohibited and how it maps to ideal understandings of "men," "women," "feminine," and "masculine" (and evaluations like "stud," "slut," "queer," "tranny," and so forth). In other words, in particular environments, certain behavior in women is *encouraged* while the same behavior in men is *discouraged*. The meaning of "masculine" or "feminine" is reinforced every time a woman is rewarded for being polite and ladylike—in other words, appropriately hewing to a gender norm—or a man is denigrated for being a pussy or a weakling for not embodying ideal understandings of masculinity appropriately (Lorber, 1994). This happens both online, and off.

Clearly, the internet has not brought about a decoupling of sex and gender, a breakdown in the gender binary, or an end to patriarchal heterosexism. This is due to a variety of factors, including the mainstreaming of internet technologies since the 1990s, social media's emphasis on maintaining a "real" online identity,

and the structural nature of sexism. In the next sections, I look at how, rather than breaking down gender, internet technologies *produce* it.

Social Media as Gendered Technology

In the nascent field of science and technology studies (STS), the link between gender and technology has been extensively examined (Cowan, 1985; Lerman, Oldenziel, & Mohun, 2003; Wajcman, 1991). Writers have analyzed how the design and deployment of technology can, knowingly or unknowingly, perpetrate sexist or exclusionary gender politics. For instance, Rachel Weber (1997) analyzed how military jet cockpits were originally built to accommodate the fifth to ninety-fifth percentile of male bodies, which resulted in excluding more than three-quarters of eligible women who did not meet the height and weight requirements. The presumption of male normativity was built directly into the technology with the result of furthering unequal employment practices.

While people use social technologies in many ways unintended by their designers and developers, it is important to look at those which are loaded with assumptions about gender and sexuality. Grindr, a locative app for gay men, presumes a model of gay male sexuality in which gay men are physically attractive, live in crowded urban areas, and enjoy casual, frequent "hook ups." While this model of behavior is different from the predominant heterosexual script, it does not reflect the experiences of all gay men. In rural areas with lower populations, gay men often use Grindr to find other gay men in the area, for friendship, support, or long-term relationships (Mowlabocus, 2010).

Social shopping sites like Polyvore and Pinterest, which are targeted at teenage girls and twentysomething women, presume that their users are interested in clothes and makeup. Although Polyvore, for example, has 6.6 million users (Jacobs, 2010), it has no features that let girls discuss anything other than collages made of images pulled from magazines and catalogs of purchasable goods. Pinterest, which lets users "bookmark" interesting things they find around the web, sets up default lists for new users that include "For the Home," "My Style," "Products I Love," "Favorite Places & Spaces," and "Books worth Reading." Pinterest assumes that its users are interested in homemaking, fashion, decorating, shopping, and books, but not sports, science, politics, or activism. Not only is its user model overtly feminine, she is a feminine *consumer.* As Liesbet van Zoonen wrote in 2001, the commodification of online space produces a normative model of woman as a shopper.

The Online and the Offline

It is difficult to define whether online social processes originate from the technological substrate or the social substrate. Is the expression of gender and sexuality online influenced by the technology being used, the people using it, "society" at large, or all of these?

Susan Herring is a linguist who has studied computer-mediated discourse for two decades, focusing on male and female communication styles. Her research in the 1990s found that online *asynchronous* communication tends to follow typical gendered communication styles. She wrote that on academic discussion lists, women were more polite and supportive than men, who tended to be confrontational, assertive, and adversarial in a way that often discouraged women from participating (Herring, 1993, 1996). More recent research on teen chat rooms found that teens used stereotypical gender markers in both their conversation and their profile photos. Kapidzic and Herring (2011) suggested that these gender stereotypes "are perceived by the teens who employ them to serve useful purposes" (p. 3). Elsewhere, Herring has argued that the online realm is hostile to women, especially women speaking critically of men, who are often subject to intimidation and harassment. On the other hand, she found evidence that computer mediated communication (CMC) encouraged female camaraderie and support (Herring, 2004). She concludes that gender difference is intrinsic to language: it "still employs politeness to symbolize femininity, and assertiveness to symbolize masculinity," (Herring, 2004, p. 220) and the gender inequality in larger society makes it impossible to pin down the cause of online harassment.

It is important not to take a technologically determinist attitude towards gender, which assumes that certain technical architectures intrinsically produce gendered affects. These explanations of online behavior assume that technology prescribes a certain user action. But neither should we adhere to strictly social constructivist models of technology, which argue that human actors and human action shape technology (Brey, 1997; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985; Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Winner, 1993). Rather, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the technological affordances of a system and the cultural behavior reinforced by the community using the system. The importance of understanding the social dimension is demonstrated by the immense contextual differences between different groups of users of the same technology. While Herring (1999) found widespread sexual harassment on Internet Relay Chat, other researchers worked with data that did not exhibit this type of sexism (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, & Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997; O'Neill & Martin, 2003).

In lieu of positing certain technologies as more suited to quintessentially *male* behaviors or ways of thinking, technologies—and social media specifically—can be examined for how they reward or discourage patterns of behavior that adhere to predominant notions of gender. This differs between social contexts, as concepts of gender are fluid. The expectation of propriety for a young woman, for instance, is not only dependent on her class, race, religion, sexuality, and location (among other things), it has changed considerably in the last fifty years. It is radically different for a teenage girl to express aggression in predominantly white middle-class neighborhoods, which encourage young women to suppress anger, than it is in poor Black and Latino communities, where girls are explicitly expected to stand up for themselves verbally and physically (Ness, 2010).

Because contemporary social media is embedded within daily life, it draws from the same dynamics present in day-to-day interaction. For example, Julie Cupples and Lee Thompson (2010) analyze how the mobile phone is leveraged to reinforce a heterosexual "script" of high school, which allows young women to express agency over their romantic and sexual assignations in a way that maintains the fiction of status quo gender relations. Although the mobile phone may not intrinsically be gendered, it is used within the gendered framework of high school as part of the work of heterosexuality and gender.

Online Participation

Recently, social media has been celebrated for facilitating greater cultural participation and creativity (Jenkins, 2006; Lessig, 2004). Social media sites like Twitter and YouTube have purportedly led to the emergence of a "free culture" where individuals are empowered to engage in cultural production, using raw materials ranging from homemade videos to mainstream television characters to create new culture, memes, and humor. At its best, this culture of memes, mash-ups, and creative political activism allows for civic engagement and fun creative acts. But while this culture may resist dominant paradigms of economics, ownership, or intellectual property, it often hews to conventionally sexist tropes.

For example, the meme "Tits or GTFO" (Get the F*** Out) originated on a web forum called 4chan, which is both crude and influential. When a self-identified woman or girl posts something on 4chan, another forum member may retort "tits or GTFO": either post a picture of breasts, or get the heck out of the forum. This meme systematically discredits women's contributions by reducing their value to that of a sex object. And it has gained in popularity, moving beyond 4chan's /b/ board into mainstream internet culture.

While members of forums like Reddit or Digg often claim that memes like "Tits or GTFO" are funny jokes done for the "lolz" and that anyone who complains is humorless, this joke reinforces male entitlement and conventional gender stereotypes while normalizing egregiously sexist behavior. Even though such sites typically claim that they make fun of everyone, meme humor is disproportionately targeted at women, sexual minorities, and people of color. "Tits or GTFO" requires women who enjoy message board culture to either play along to be accepted as "one of the guys" (knowing that at any time the meme can be leveraged against her) or stop participating altogether. This has the effect of normalizing misogyny and reinforcing all-male spaces.

Of course, there are many other types of social media besides message boards. While Digg, 4chan, and Reddit are used mostly by men, most social network site users are women; this is true on Facebook, Flickr, LiveJournal, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube (Chappell, 2011; Lenhart, 2009; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). But mere equality of use does not indicate equality of participation. While both men and women use *Wikipedia,* 87 percent of *Wikipedia* contributors

identify as male (LaVallee, 2009). Male students are more likely than female students to create, edit, and distribute digital video over YouTube or Facebook (Vedantham, 2011). However, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found no discernible differences in user-generated content by gender *except* remixing, which was *most* likely among teen girls (Lenhart et al., 2010).

One explanation for these differences is that user-generated content is often clustered by gender. Researchers have consistently shown that similar numbers of men and women maintain a blog, about 14 percent of internet users (Lenhart et al., 2010). While the number of male and female bloggers is roughly equivalent, they tend to blog about different things. Overwhelmingly, certain types of blogs are written and read by women (food, fashion, parenting), while others (technology, politics) are written and run by men (Chittenden, 2010; Hindman, 2009; Meraz, 2008). Although the technologies are the same, the norms and mores of the people using them differ. This suggests that gender is experienced differently both on and within different social media sites. Moreover, these genres are valued differently. When blogs began gaining popularity, Herring et al. argued that "blogging" was just a new term for online "journaling" and "diarying," activities that girls and women had been participating in for a decade. This division systematically devalued female content creation online, as the "blog" was framed as a masculine context and linked to politics, civic engagement, and journalism, whereas the "diary" or "journal" was personal and often frivolous (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004).

In order to understand the backlash against Julia Allison, it is worth examining both her use of technology and the social context in which she blogs.

Julia Allison

In some ways, Julia Allison's use of social media is in keeping with the ideals of participation, creativity, and self-expression espoused by academics, tech bloggers, and entrepreneurs alike. She blogs, tweets, and uploads digital pictures daily. She writes columns about technology, takes video of herself lip-synching, and stages photo shoots for her lifestream. She uses Tumblr, Twitter, and Vimeo to express herself, create content, and propagate it widely. To understand why Julia provokes such vehement reactions, we must explore two things. How does Julia express, perform, and produce gender? Do the gender norms that she espouses clash with those of the sociotechnical infrastructure in which she is working?

First, Julia's self-presentation is not simply normatively feminine. She posts frequent digital self-portraits, which are uniformly flattering and formally posed, drawing from celebrity and tabloid culture in which women are supposed to look put together in photographs. Allison wears very feminine makeup, clothing, and accessories, such as hot-pink party dresses, glittery high heels, and lip gloss. She frequently photographs herself with her small dog and feminine iconography like cupcakes, tiaras, and pink accessories. Allison's use of over-the-top gender markers

are normally displayed only by young girls, beauty pageant contestants, or for camp, ironic affect. Allison's detractors often point to her use of these markers as a mark of her "immaturity" or "desperation" for violating the norms of age-appropriate femininity. And unlike Gala Darling, a fashion blogger who self-consciously plays with ultrafeminine iconography, or burlesque star Dita Von Teese, who affects a 1940s-cum-Bettie Page retro persona, Allison displays little irony or self-consciousness about her appearance. As a result, her gender presentation does not conform to either feminine propriety or ironic feminist reclamation.

Second, Allison talks primarily about herself, her romantic life, and fashion. She illustrates that the line between acceptable information sharing and "TMI" (too much information) is deeply gendered. Using social media for self-disclosure increases online status *up to a point,* after which the person is typically categorized as an "attention whore," "oversharer," or "desperate." Anthony Hoffman's (2009) critical discourse analysis of media coverage about oversharing found that the term was overwhelmingly negative, applied primarily to women, and had "the effect of creating a devalued subclass of information sharing online," mostly comprised of "sex and romance, intimate relationships, parenthood and reproduction, and so on" (p. 71). Allison's detractors demonstrate a similar pattern of normative judgment around information sharing. Her discussions of her dating life, desire to get married and Sex and the City–esque fantasies of urban life are labeled as "desperate" or "delusional" because these topics are seen as silly or irrelevant. That these are historically, intrinsically *feminine* topics is not coincidental.

Third, Allison represents a focus on appearance, possessions, and girlishness that is antithetical to the dominant values of the technology scene. She is overtly feminine and openly courts attention, using her image to attract and maintain her audience. But Allison's success threatens the myths that underlie social media production. Allison's strategic use of her appearance undermines the ideal of egalitarianism highly valued in Silicon Valley. Claims that Silicon Valley is a meritocracy, where the best succeed and anyone can enter, justify the great wealth accrued by young entrepreneurs at companies like Microsoft and Facebook. In many ways, Silicon Valley is actually a closed network with predominantly male funding and mentoring.

Like many other aspects of the tech industry, the companies designing and producing social media tend to be predominantly male. Only 3 percent of tech companies and 1.9 percent of high-tech companies are founded by women, and women-founded business receive venture capital at far lower rates than men (Robb & Coleman, 2009). This maintains despite recent studies that have found virtually no differences between female and male entrepreneurs in terms of education, wealth, or technical knowledge (Cohoon, Wadhwa, & Mitchell, 2010). According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, women make up 19 percent of hardware engineers, 21 percent of software engineers, and 22 percent of computer programmers. Overall, computer and mathematical professions are 75 percent male (Dines, 2009; National Center for Women and Information Technology,

2007). In Free/Open Source software development, researchers estimate that only about 1.5 percent of contributors are women (Holliger, 2007; Nafus, Leach, & Krieger, 2006). While some of these numbers can be explained by the lack of women in computer science, this in turn begs the question of why there are so few women in computer science, and why that number has decreased since the 1980s (National Center for Women and Information Technology, 2010). Professional roles in software development that do attract women, such as project management, marketing, graphic design, human resources, and public relations are lower status in the tech industry, often dismissed as not "real" tech jobs or framed in opposition to the more masculine work of programming.

Feminist scholars have argued that the exclusion of women from the social conditions under which technology is produced profoundly affects how such companies conceptualize and build technology (Faulkner, 2001; Wajcman, 1991, 2007). The majority of popular social media technologies are produced by American technologists in San Francisco or Silicon Valley, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Blogger, WordPress, Apple, and Google, with a few companies like Foursquare and Tumblr in New York. Mass media theorists have thoroughly explored how the culture and economies of Hollywood and New York affect how movies, television, and news are produced (Gitlin, 2000; Paterson & Domingo, 2008). Similarly, the values of the rarified tech professionals who build social media are reflected in software. For instance, Facebook's emphasis on "transparency" reflects a privileged position where one does not need to worry about being "outed," targeted by the government for political reasons, or being stalked by an abusive partner (boyd, 2011). The entrepreneurial climate of social software start-ups is deeply related to social media's focus on the individual as the unit of interaction, emphasis on visibility and publicity, and quantified measurement of social status, reputation, and other social metrics (Marwick, 2010).

While women in Silicon Valley are frequently judged on their appearance, Julia's assessment and presentation of herself as attractive invites a backlash, implying that a woman should not be the one to make that judgment. Ironically, Julia presenting herself as an object suggests an agented subjectivity that threatens the male-dominated social hierarchy.[3] Her success jeopardizes the idea that attention is *earned* in some measurable way, devaluing her accomplishments as irrelevant. Julia's case demonstrates that certain types of online participation are valued more than others, based on social norms of gender that are specific and contextual. These gendered norms are reinforced through the primarily male production context of Web 2.0.

Conclusion and Future Research

Julia Allison proves that all social media participation is not created equal. Just as "blogs" were valued while "journals" were not, technologies that facilitate stereotypically "male" ways of interaction and expression are valued more highly

than those that are considered feminine. Julia's primary blogging platform is Tumblr, which primarily involves the curating and display of images and short texts. Tumblr is very popular among high school and college-age women, thus it is often seen as a "feminine" technology just as, say, Quora, a question-and-answer platform primarily used by male technologists, is considered a "masculine" one. These values are reinforced and reinscribed by the bloggers, journalists, venture capitalists, and technology conferences who promote social media companies and young entrepreneurs as role models.

The expression of gender and sexuality through social media is influenced in several ways. First, it is influenced by each individual user's social context. Different countries, regions, income levels, race and ethnicities, and sexualities deem different behavior on social media to be acceptable. Ilana Gershon (2010) calls these differences "idioms of practice" and finds that they vary even among different social groups of the same race, class, gender, and location. As a result, when examining social media use, we must account both for variance of use among user groups and look closely at the "offline" social contexts of different user groups.

Second, gender expression is influenced by the context in which the technology is produced, whether that is the US military or Silicon Valley. Typically, founders create products for *themselves;* if founders are primarily young white men, a large number of technologies will be designed for that demographic group. When young African American and Latino teenagers began using Twitter to talk to celebrities and for verbal jokes and games, many (wealthy, mostly white) technology pundits were taken by surprise by what they saw as an incorrect use of the service (Belton, 2011). The norms of Twitter had been formulated by its first users, members of the technology scene. The normative judgment on technological practice was determined by the social context of the creators. If the creators are primarily male, software will value and reward male-gendered practice.

Third, technologies may incorporate values and norms before anyone uses the software. On many different social network sites, for instance, users are required to use a "real name" to use the service, incorporating an ideal of transparency directly into the software. This ideal has two purposes. First, requiring "real names" creates more accurate user data, which can be sold to marketing and data-mining companies. Second, it is rooted in a particular Silicon Valley belief that computers will flatten hierarchy and increase democracy, making pseudonymity or anonymity unnecessary (Raynes-Goldie, 2010).

The relationship between gender and technology is complicated, since gender is a tremendously important social construct that exists throughout society and between social actors. Since the 1990s boom in cyberfeminism, gender and social media has fallen out of fashion as an object of study. More research is needed on social media and gender, especially examining particular types of software; the relationship between the social practice of users and their gendered social practices on websites; and the prevalence of overt sexism and harassment in social media spaces. This chapter serves as a call for others to engage in this research agenda.

Notes

1. Although this quotes directly from Julia's online bio, her dog is named Lily.
2. The original name of the blog was "Reblogging Julia Allison." When Julia co-founded the site *NonSociety,* the name of the blog was changed. The current name of the blog is *Reblogging Donkey,* based on the writers' nickname for Julia. The site's various moves and name changes are due primarily to threats of legal action by Julia's father.
3. Not insignificantly, she also angers women who wish to be judged on their accomplishments rather than looks.

Recommended Readings

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