

# Feminist by Design

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# How to Build a Feminist Internet and Why It Matters

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### Abstract

Despite being run by algorithms and data, the technology we use every day, often discriminates on the basis of race, gender, and even age. It is increasingly difficult to tell the extent to which the internet intersects with and amplifies male-centred technological innovations (AKA Big Tech), heteronormativity, and intervenes in the functioning of democracy.

As technology's reach extends further into our everyday lives, we ask, what would a feminist internet look like?

Feminist by Design offers methodological frameworks for feminist internet research, creating a diverse platform for engagements, with reflections mainly from the Global South. These essays and analyses

are steppingstones to a feminist internet—one that 'works towards empowering more women and people of diverse and marginalised sexualities and genders—in all our diversities—to fully enjoy our rights, engage in pleasure and play, and dismantle patriarchy.'<sup>1</sup>

In this issue and more broadly in the field of feminist internet research, there is growing interest and trust in the rigour of feminist methodological inquiry and ways of knowing to challenge a false narrative of the 'objectivity' of knowledge, especially in relation to science and technology. Placing the voices of those who were formerly marginalised front and centre of internet research practices, this issue promises transforming and transformative accounts of the world.

<sup>1</sup> <https://feministinternet.org/>

*Feminist By Design* is ambitious in its title and aims. The journal showcases research journeys, findings and feminist intentions, bringing together a diverse group of researchers from around the world who were part of the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN). FIRN focusses ‘on the making of a feminist internet as critical to bring[ing] about transformation in gendered structures of power that exist online and onground.’<sup>1</sup> As part of that work, its members ‘undertake data-driven research... to drive change in policy and law and in discourse around internet rights,’ with the broader objective that women, gender diverse and queer people are considered in discussions around internet policy.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the research question that the project has been grappling with are:

What are the contextual and intersecting forms of discrimination that women, gender-diverse and queer people face because of political, economic and social changes driven by digital technology and the internet?

What are the challenges and opportunities in policy, infrastructure and socio-cultural norms for the making of a feminist internet?

How does the feminist internet research project contribute to methodological, theoretical and ethical shifts that will impact research on the internet?

The field of internet research draws on various research methods, analytical and digital tools, interdisciplinary perspectives, as well as experimental and artistic enquiries. However, there remains a gap in the knowledge production and imagination of how complex the internet is. It is still unclear how it intersects social fabrics or affects social and economic inequalities, andro-centric technological innovations, the functioning of democracy, and heteronormativity.

The field of internet rights activism has always taken software and coding as central to their concerns—and from the beginning has centred questions on open-source software. This ability for people to determine and see (quite literally into the hardware of) our own machines was very central to realising our rights. The machines, the internet, and, in particular, the relationship between data, design and algorithms have become increasingly complex since the early 2000s. These are political and social issues, as evidenced by research in relation to data, algorithms and societal impact.<sup>3</sup> The civil society sector, which has relied on a discourse of ICTs for development, and then later for digital and internet rights, now understands that power in the digital domain has concrete and real impacts on people's lives from across society.

As such, as an extension of FIRN's work, the core intention of *Feminist By Design* is to infiltrate methodological frameworks—that are often considered scientific—by creating a platform for diverse

learnings and reflections about feminist internet research, mainly from the Global South.

## **Why Do We Need Feminist Internet Research?**

Considerable scholarship from feminist science and technology studies (as well as other streams) has looked at the role of gender in relation to the design of technology, revealing that software development is a socio-technological process of negotiating and constructing meaning.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that technology is not a neutral space where gender is played out. Rather, as Donna Haraway and other scholars point out, it is co-constructed along with gender.

Particularly in the context of artificial intelligence and growing datafication, research shows that software—its designs, processes and institution—are built around the inclusion and exclusion of certain people and groups.<sup>5</sup> This shows up in, for instance, the automatic captioning of images,<sup>6</sup> predictive policing in United States that targets people of particular races or backgrounds,<sup>7</sup> how rating and filtering systems in platforms for women domestic workers perpetuate caste and gender inequalities,<sup>8</sup> and mapping software that ‘learns’ from people’s behaviour to mark out ‘good’ and ‘bad’ neighbourhoods.<sup>9</sup> It is also seen in online application forms for most varied identity documents (passport, driver’s license, college application forms, visa application forms, etc.), which often limit to a gender binary, even in contexts where self-identifying of gender is

accepted under law. Reflections and research on the same are also taking place in particular hegemonic contexts of knowledge production and dissemination. As a result, there needs to be purposeful and reflexive ways in which we re-design the world that we live in.

Feminist epistemology centres perspectives, standpoints and experiences of women and people of marginalised diverse races, sexualities and genders, as these have been consistently overlooked or excluded.<sup>10</sup> The uptake of feminist methodological inquiry and feminist ways of knowing highlights partiality and situatedness of knowledge<sup>11</sup> and challenges an all-encompassing objectivity of knowledge, especially in relation to science and technology. From this perspective, knowledge from the standpoints of those excluded promises transformational accounts of the world.

We argue that these reflective works and methodological analysis are stepping stones to making a feminist internet. To reiterate from the feminist principles of the internet,<sup>12</sup> 'a feminist internet works towards empowering more women and people of diverse and marginalised sexualities and genders—in all our diversities—to fully enjoy our rights, engage in pleasure and play, and dismantle patriarchy.' Research and knowledge towards realising and making a feminist internet calls upon, critiques, hacks and invents research methods within the sub-field.

## **How To Build a Feminist Internet**

FIRN in particular has been designed to emphasise the role of feminist methodology and ethics as the building blocks for research that can form the solid foundation for policy recommendations and discourse. Hence, from questions of security of research data to how power imbalances emerge during the research process, our objective has been to centre these contradictions, the messiness and difficulties of doing research, rather than to remove them from the field of view. Similarly, rather than remove the context of the relations that do exist within the network and between the researchers to create a supposedly 'neutral' space, we decided to use the network itself as a learning space to reflect on openly.

FIRN has also explored the subversive use of existing formats and tools to communicate feminist ideas and research, such as a friendly bot answering questions on online gender-based violence.<sup>13</sup> We also used other formats that were phone-friendly or accessible on low-bandwidth internet, printable posters and images, etc. as forms in which research outputs can be shared. An important trajectory for FIRN partners to explore has been the (re)designing of infrastructure, particularly in the context of community network projects that seek to establish diversity, accountability and particularly ownership of technology by the people in that specific context and who are collaborators and partners.<sup>14</sup>

Visuality, design and aesthetics are not seen as separate but as embedded within feminist research

and research design. They also raise questions around the domain of design, data visualisation, and even art from a feminist perspective. From the initial stages of FIRN, there has been a particular investment in the visual journey of the network. Contrary to the branding logic that dominates even civil society spaces, this journey has led us to several designers and thinkers. The visions have always expanded and branched in different directions, while drawing a line to the initial inspirations, thoughts, and visuals.

### **Feminist Designs on the World**

Discourse around gender in society has been shifting considerably. Ideas around performativity and gender that were seemingly radical and relevant fifteen years ago, such as those by Judith Butler,<sup>15</sup> have been critiqued, salvaged, questioned and re-opened. In particular, scholarship by transgender scholars and writers on gender and gender expression adds further layers to the question of how gender is constructed through processes of design.

Perhaps it is correct to say that the objective of feminist designs on the world is to ‘work towards technology designs with less normative materialisations of gender.’ The operative word here is *less*. The partiality of our perspectives is not only about location and perspective, but also across time. Even though such a teleological assumption is obviously fraught, we are hopeful that as marginalised people

and groups are able to speak and share their realities, the design of technology should also shift.

This is not only about gender stereotypes and gender expression. Historically, the design of technology has also relied on invisibilising women's labour<sup>16</sup> and the first computer in the USA (the ENIAC, which was used for computations during the Second World War) was powered by two hundred young women who were human 'computers,'<sup>17</sup> and similarly in the UK computing was considered a feminine job dominated by women<sup>18</sup>. This is perhaps mirrored now in the widespread use of the labour of women in poorly equipped 'sweatshops' of the electronics and computer industry where hardware is made, and also in how people located in countries in the Global South are often deployed to simplify difficult-to-navigate systems in business process outsourcing.<sup>19</sup>

It is also worthwhile to consider the emotional and care work that is part of these systems in work places, as well as perhaps the division of labour and unpaid and invisibilised domestic work as the woman's domain as the cornerstone of capitalist economies.<sup>20</sup> For all of these reasons, then, design is a significant question. In the current context of social media, the platform economy, and inequities of attention and resources, design has the power to silence movements and opposition, invisibilise communities, unfairly redistribute labour, maintain the status quo around gender hierarchies, determine gender and sex, and so on.

The design of technology could oppress people or enact violence around gender. It results in discrimination and the invisibilisation of the lived experiences of many. However, in such an understanding, we lose the sense of technology and gender as co-emergent. This is not to deny in any way the realities of how algorithms organise and exclude people, and in particular that this causes and accentuates inequalities and inequities. The most recent example is the processes by which vaccination programmes have been rolled out in different countries and how access to technology and the internet has meant a different experience of the pandemic and lockdowns.<sup>21</sup>

However, seeing technology and gender as co-emergent through the process of design foregrounds questions of accountability, in particular our accountability. And that seems a good place to start because it allows for change to be possible through our actions, designs, research and processes. It pushes us to realise that we are not only making software and technology or knowledge around the same, but that we make the world we want to live in. We remake, redesign, break and define gender. Every time.

When put like that, the responsibility in the processes of design and feminist designs (for all of us) become emphatically real and also overlap. To have feminist designs on the world is to design, to hack through everyday practices, to subvert, to make, and to build from scratch platforms and technology.

## Articles in This Journal

The articles in this journal explore several strands in relation to feminist ways of knowing and epistemic approaches. They explore feminist research practices and processes, what happens when our designs on the world—or rather feminist intentions—are the springboard for building infrastructure. What are the possibilities of more accessible research outputs and what could be the trajectories of feminist intersectional investments in digital media in the times of anti-gender and anti-rights discourse?

There is considerable focus on feminist practices of reflexivity that intentionally explore the messiness of feminist research and research design. This means looking closely at feminist methodologies, feminist ways of knowing in the field of internet research, highlighting questions and concerns around what complications are introduced by the field of the internet itself. It also means translating feminist intentions into building infrastructure, doing participatory research, and exploring the contradictions of standpoint theory and power imbalances inherent in research.

In this vein, Nyx McClean looks at how feminist internet research is messy. This is a critically reflective article on the author's experience conducting a meta-research project on the feminist internet research methodologies and ethical frameworks of the seven FIRN research projects. McClean reaches the conclusion that conducting meta-research of this nature is even messier.

Horacio F. Sívori and Bruno Zilli engage with how complexly intertwined the relationship between digital technology is with social media and various kinds of mobilisations via the internet. The authors look closely at how the amplification of homophobic speech as a political code was afforded by Twitter's design and algorithmic architecture. Yet, they also reveal how resistance also took place on these platforms through the mobilisation of varied publics by means of memetic images in defence of public health and of sexual diversity.

Through their project of interrogating of digital labour and platformisation, Aayush Rathi, Akash Sheshadri and Ambika Tandon focus on to research processes and practices by looking at how dissemination practices around research have often privileged communications to external audiences, particularly for the purpose of policy reform. They explore what it means to make research and outreach more participatory, translating academic knowledge into more accessible forms, and how this could outline the potential for research to produce radical change and translate knowledge across communities.

Centring feminist network infrastructure, Bruna Zanolli and Débora Prado look at the challenges of translating feminist intentions into building infrastructure and digital networks while doing participatory research. Through their two-year action-research on community networks and feminist infrastructure in a traditional Brazilian black

community (quilombo), their gaze has shifted from the technical infrastructure to the social interactions with autonomous infrastructure and networks that are crossed by discussions, conflicts and negotiations.

And finally, Nadege's visual piece departs from a close examination of the contributors' texts. It is marked by a close relationship with APC's<sup>22</sup> Women's Rights Programme (WRP) in various other spaces and forms of activism that we engage in. It envisions WRP as located within a glass library and touches on concerns related to data and artificial intelligence not directly dealt with in this journal. The visual also creates a space of knowledge creation, production and thought that is marked not only by the franticness of the pandemic years; the necessities of raising resources for this work; and the instabilities of the personal, professional and other myriad realities of the people. But it also raises the possibility that what we do could be a space of rest and work if informed by politics, care, and a particular vision.

### **Conclusion: Wrestling with the Beast**

As feminists, we have been developing a particular sensitivity to try to be aware of who creates knowledge and how. We are not only concerned with who creates that knowledge or who is the author of a text (usually a white, Western, middle-class, educated man). We also learned to question the idea of a universal subject of knowledge and to criticise that

subject's position as colonial and patriarchal. It is necessary for us to decode, in a feminist way, who is the subject of knowledge embedded in the discourse and how that subject is positioned.

For instance, an important topic that we wished to explore but could not within this space is how research funded within the civil society space obviously does take place within hierarchical structures, and that those often determine the existence, and sometimes validity, of organisations and groups in the Global South. Even as we operate with an understanding of messiness as inherent in research processes, of the need for ethics, of the centring of communities and other feminist principles and ideas around research, we also have to understand our role as APC WRP—i.e., the organisation raising the funds to sustain it from funding organisations, holding the network together and in contact with the research partners but not directly conducting research. We are here both an entity that is reported to and reporting on activities and processes, and hence somewhere on a high-tension wire between the power that we do hold and the power that we lack. We are, after all, a group positioned in an international NGO that has a specific role as a mediation structure between donors and founders from the North, and the organisations, collectives and activists situated in different local realities of the Global South.

If we want to dismantle these colonial and patriarchal power dynamics, we must make visible

the feminist work that underlies the production of knowledge. We need to unveil and make visible the myriad tasks around feminist knowledge production, including the messy work of care, conflict, crisis management and timing negotiation. As researchers, it takes time to outreach to those communities and participants we work with, seek and negotiate consent or anonymise our sources if they ask for it. It takes time to make sure we link and credit each contributor and idea because mutual recognition is always an essential feminist practice.<sup>23</sup> It takes time to check the variegated meanings of the vocabulary we use in different parts of the world, the slippery ways in which images translate and are understood, the naming practices according to our politics and feminist policy. As editors, as knowledge production coordinators, it also takes time to get the resources to set up online platforms for knowledge sharing keeping the content free, accessible, inclusive and open without (sexist and invasive) advertising for our readers.

So, if you want to find knowledge built with a feminist perspective instead of the usual ways of researching, consider not only the content, but also how that knowledge is produced and gets online. We, as feminists, can claim to have historic training (shared undoubtedly with other communities and people who have been marginalised) in detecting underlying power dynamics, especially the material conditions of knowledge production. And not only of knowledge production, but also of the

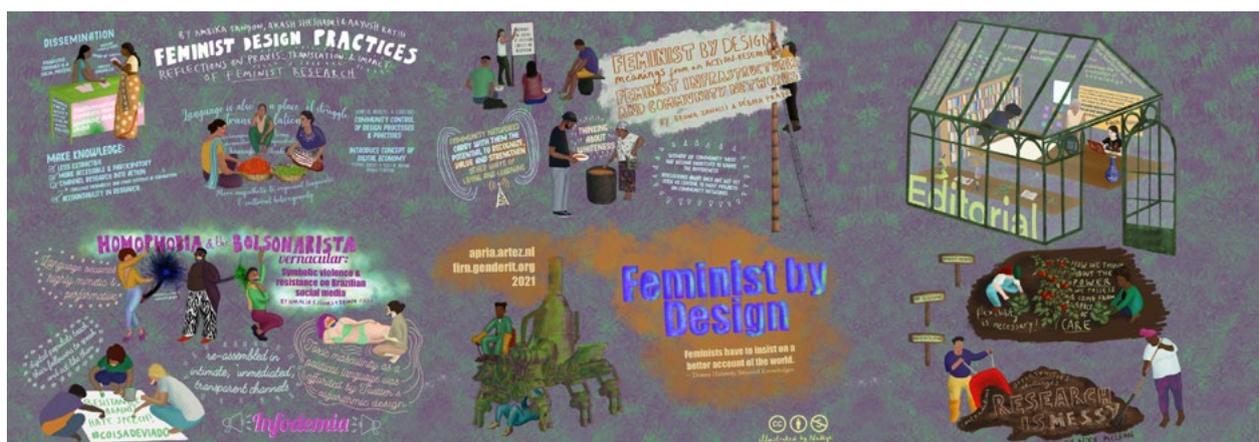
social reproduction of the bodies that produce that knowledge.

The articles that are included here sketch out different stages and moments of knowledge production from a feminist perspective. In Savori and Zilli's article about online homophobia, there is a nuanced understanding of the communities that are vulnerable to hate online. From that starting point, the authors see how the architecture of the internet accentuates their vulnerability, even though it also gives space for them to network and build connections with each other. The other articles are more focussed on the process of research itself as a space within which knowledge can be gleaned. Rathi, Tandon and Sheshadri explore specifically the relationships with the people and communities who can be seen as 'subjects' of the research. However, in Rathi, Tandon and Sheshadri's design, they were equal collaborators and the research process is one by which there is growing awareness of their own rights for the communities involved, especially when a complex digital landscape of platforms is becoming part of the everyday life of workers.

In Prado and Zilli's article on community networks, they shift their focus from the pragmatic concerns and considerable travails of bringing technology to a remote region (especially during the Covid-19 global pandemic) towards the conversations around race and exclusion that must happen among researchers and communities. All the articles connect to Nyx McClean's findings based on

interviews with FIRN researchers about the messiness of the research process. The final packaged form of research as an article or a book conceals inevitably the myriad and complicated negotiations, compromises and even perhaps undoings of the project of research or knowledge production itself.

In an initial iteration of this editorial, we were mostly beset by doubt of our claim of difference, of politics, of whether there even is a feminist method. But here we choose to make a claim on the basis of the investigations, musings and analysis of the researchers included here, in FIRN, and more broadly in the field of feminist internet research. There are feminist designs, as blueprints for the future, that exist in the current moment and as the roots and ways of knowing that we come from.



Mariana Fossatti

Mariana Fossatti is a feminist, a free/ Mariana Fossatti libre culture activist from Uruguay. Her background is in sociology and she has a master's degree in Society and Development from the Universidad de la República, Uruguay. She co-founded the digital cultural centre *Ártica* in 2011, and co-founded the Uruguayan chapters of Creative Commons and Wikimedia in 2013. She worked until 2021 in the APC Women Rights Programme, amplifying women and non-binary voices in tech on [GenderIT.org](http://GenderIT.org) blog, and facilitating knowledge exchanges in the Feminist Internet Research Network.

Tigist Shewarega

Tigist Shewarega Hussen is a feminist researcher specializing in feminist internet research in Africa. She works in the Women's Right Programme (WRP) at the Association for Progressive Communication (APC). She is the Feminist Research Lead and project coordinator of Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN). Tigist has just completed her PhD in Women and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape. She is now pursuing her Post Doc position at the Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa, department of Psychology, at the University of Cape Town. Her research interest focuses on the exploration of a Pan-African constellation of feminist activism across the continent. Tigist is an ardent believer in a critical Pan-Africanist feminist take on digital media and feminist movements as a necessary exploration to build the foundations for theorizing African feminist knowledge production.

Namita Aavriti

Namita Aavriti is a writer and occasional curator and artist, living in Bangalore, India. Her interests and work in the form of writing, media and films explore technology and the internet, feminism, law and culture, archiving, film and art. She works as a co-manager for the Women's Rights Programme at the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), is a member of their knowledge building and research team, and was previously the lead English editor for their online website on gender and

technology [GenderIT.org](http://GenderIT.org). She worked for a decade with the Alternative Law Forum, a collective of lawyers and researchers, and is currently a programmer and curator for small and large exhibitions including the annual Bangalore Queer Film Festival.

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## Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.apc.org/en/project/firn-feminist-internet-research-network>.
- 2 FIRN works along the following thematic landscapes: *The mapping study* (engagement with feminist internet researchers from the Global South) is a continuing mapping study that looks at substantial work done in building the field in the last decade. The study uses an intersectionality lens, which understands multiple forms of discrimination that impact on a particular issue or section of society as a first principle, rather than an add-on. *The meta-research* (feminist ways of knowing from the Global South) project critically explores methodological processes and ethical practices of the eight research projects that FIRN is coordinating at the moment. The rationale behind this is the recognition of the need to document our partners' experience in engaging with feminist research on the internet. The outcome of this project produces a context-specific learning of feminist research on the internet to record progress and shifts in feminist research principles, and to challenge gaps that exist in our feminist thinking, methodological and ethical practices. *GenderII* (a platform where feminist knowledge from the Global South is published) is our primary space for publishing content and making the FIRN's knowledge production accessible. *Feminist research ethical principles* (collective design of internet research ethics). FIRN's first gathering, designed to engage with the eight selected FIRN partners to determine a collective understanding and criteria of feminist internet research and work towards a collective agreement on the ethical conduct of a research project.
- 3 For an overview of the field, see Nicole Shephard, *Big Data and Sexual Surveillance* (Johannesburg: APC, 2016).
- 4 Els Rommes, Corinna Bath and Susanne Maass, 'Methods for Intervention: Gender Analysis and Feminist Design of ICT,' *Science,*

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- 5 Sasha Constanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (MIT Press, 2020).
- 6 Steve Lohr, 'Facial Recognition Is Accurate, if You're a White Guy,' *The New York Times*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/09/technology/facial-recognition-race-artificial-intelligence.html>.
- 7 Clare Garvie, Alvaro Bedoya, and Jonathan Frankle, *The Perpetual Line-Up: Unregulated Police Face Recognition in America* (Georgetown Law, Center on Privacy & Technology, 2016).
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- 9 See *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of AI*, edited by Markus D. Dubber, Frank Pasquale and Sunit Das (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 10 P.H. Collins, 'Some Group Matters: Intersectionality, Situated Standpoints, and Black Feminist Thought,' in *Feminist Frontiers*, eds. Laurel Richardson et. al (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), pp. 66-84; C. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,' in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Mohanty, C., Russo, A., And Torres, L. (Indiana University Press, 1991); Sandra Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Uma Narayan, 'Westernization, Respect for Cultures and Third-World Feminists,' in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third-World Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); Sharmila Rege, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of "Difference" and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 44 (1998);
- 11 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): pp 575-599.
- 12 The feminist principles of the internet are a series of statements that offer a gender and sexual rights lens on critical internet-related rights. They were drafted at the first Imagine a Feminist Internet meeting that took place in Malaysia in April 2014. The meeting was organised by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and brought together 50 activists and advocates working in sexual rights, women's rights, violence against women, and internet rights. The meeting was designed as an adapted open space where topics were identified, prioritised, and discussed collectively. A group of volunteers from the meeting drafted version 1.0 of the principles. This was then subsequently brought to different workshops and events, local and global, and then to the second Imagine a Feminist Internet meeting in July 2015, where a new group of 40 activists discussed, elaborated, and revised the set of principles. The new version was published online on this website in August 2016, where anyone can expand the Principles by contributing resources or translating the Principles. Currently there are seventeen Principles total, organised in five clusters: Access, Movements, Economy, Expression, and Embodiment. Together, they aim to provide a framework for women's movements to articulate and explore issues related to technology. Read more here.
- 13 Neema Iyer, Bonnita Nyamwire, and Sandra Nabulega, *Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets: African Feminist Research for a Feminist Internet* (Pollicy, 2020), [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Report_FINAL.pdf).
- 14 Sophie Toupin and Alexandra Hache, 'Feminist Autonomous Infrastructures,' in *Global Information Society Watch 2015: Sexual Rights and the Internet*,

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## Feminist Internet Research Is Messy

### Abstract

Feminist internet research is messy and conducting meta-research on feminist internet research is even messier. This is a critically reflective article on the author's experience conducting a meta-research project on the feminist internet research methodologies and ethical frameworks of the eight Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) research projects. The piece argues that the messiness of research is not something to shy away from but rather to embrace.

Mess and messiness are that which are often cleaned up, hidden, discarded or outright ignored before, during or after the research process. This article explores the messiness of conducting a meta-research project, reflecting on the research process; doing justice to the stories that are shared; and lastly, what critique means in light of feminist ethics of care. I put forward three recommendations for engaging with mess in research: reflexivity; reaching out to others; and embracing messiness as care. This

article is no way exhaustive but is a call to invite and bravely embrace the messy into the research process in order to elicit new knowledge.

Keywords: Feminism; internet research; messy research; meta-research

### Introduction

*I know research has always been messy... And it's a challenge to address it and work it out in your theory, that dimension.'*<sup>1</sup>

The Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) is a research project that has sought to contribute to the field of internet research from a feminist perspective with a key focus of informing and influencing activism and policy-making. As an aspect of the FIRN project, a meta-research project was conducted to focus on the methodological processes and ethical practices of eight research projects, which were implemented under FIRN. In this article, I discuss the

‘messy’ process of doing a meta-research project on feminist internet research projects.

I present and discuss two key themes or areas of messiness that seem to emerge in this project: (1) feminist research process and (2) doing justice to stories shared. Within the section on process, I reflect on the messiness of my research process, as well as some of the messiness that the FIRN research partners<sup>2</sup> encountered. Within the section on doing justice to stories shared, I discuss the conflict that I and research partners experienced in analysing stories from our participants, and wanting as best as possible to do justice to what they shared with us. This discussion includes the importance of critique as a form of care. Lastly, I make recommendations for embracing the messiness of research.

### **Feminist Internet Research Network**

The Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) is a three-and-a-half-year collaborative and multidisciplinary research project led by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). FIRN aims to build an emerging field of internet research with a feminist approach to inform and influence activism and policy-making. FIRN’s focus has been on the making of a feminist internet as critical to bringing about transformation of gendered structures of power that exist online and onground. Projects within FIRN strive to bring about change in policy, law, and in internet rights discourse through data-driven and evidence-based feminist research, with a core focus being to ensure that women, gender diverse and queer people and their needs are included in internet policy discussions and decision-making. Key areas of research of the FIRN projects are: access (usage and infrastructure); big data and its impact on vulnerable populations; online gender-based violence; and gendered labour in the digital economy.

FIRN conducted a meta-research project that focussed on methodological processes and ethical practices of the eight research projects implemented under FIRN.

### **Meta-research Project**

Meta-research is the study of research—including its methods, how research is reported and evaluated—in order to understand and improve on research and research processes.<sup>3</sup> The meta-research project formed part of the broader FIRN project and sought to research and analyse the methodological processes and ethical practices of the eight research projects implemented under the broader project.

The meta-research project created a feminist space for dialogue to explore the complexities of doing internet research through the critical exploration of the research methodological processes and ethical practices of the FIRN research projects. From the very beginning, the meta-research project understood that research on the internet is complex and that current methodological approaches and research tools are not sufficiently reflexive enough to account for ‘feminist thinking around dynamics of power, politics of location, relationship with participants, access to digital data and so on.’<sup>4</sup>

So, why do I say meta-research on feminist internet research is messier than feminist internet research? Because it not only seeks to understand the methodological processes of the feminist internet research projects but also takes into consideration the process of doing a feminist internet research meta-research project. This entails considering both the messiness of the individual research projects and also the messiness of the meta-research project in relation to the messiness of the other projects.

For instance, while the overarching focus of FIRN was on the making of a feminist internet as critical to bringing about transformation of gendered structures

of power that exist online and onground, the individual projects within the network addressed various areas. Key areas of research of the FIRN projects are access (usage and infrastructure); big data and its impact on vulnerable populations; online gender-based violence; and gendered labour in the digital economy. The meta-research project needed to account for the individual projects while also bringing these projects into conversation with each other.

### Defining Messy

Research is 'a very 'messy process,'<sup>5</sup> and this messiness is not often spoken or written about in research. What we often find in research reports is an oversimplification, or, in fact, a masking of the messiness 'into more easily manageable, compartmentalised, dichotomous ways of thinking.'<sup>6</sup> But it is this messiness that could be the most instructive aspect of the research process.<sup>7</sup> When describing their research to others informally, researchers 'invariably recount being "in a mess" at some point.'<sup>8</sup> While it is discussed informally, the mess is largely missing from the published works. Cook believes that the reason for the absence of a discussion is because 'mess tends to have connotations of being sloppy, of not being a good researcher.'<sup>9</sup> It is this possibility that may prevent researchers from being vulnerable and speaking to the mess of their own research processes. Women, gender diverse, and feminist researchers may particularly strive to mask this aspect of their work due to how these groups are perceived in a field dominated by cisgender men.

But the messy aspects of research should remain visible in order to 'encourage and instruct' fellow researchers and students 'to persist and problem solve mid-process.'<sup>10</sup> More often than not, mess in research is treated as a failing, not as simply part of the process and an opportunity to learn and/or

build on knowledge. As researchers, we need to begin to shift our thinking around the messy aspects of research, to see them not as negative but as positive and productive.<sup>11</sup>

The question that needs to be asked is: what counts as mess in research? That which we clean up, hide, discard, or ignore in our writing up of our research process. For instance, digitally surveying a population and only gaining responses from those with smartphones, which would mean that the study overlooked an access to technology gap. Or perhaps conducting a focus group of women but their husbands or guardians will not let them participate in the study unless men are present. This would impact the kind of data one could collect.

Messiness can also be needing to adjust a research design to better suit the needs and availability of participants or adjusting the research problem and questions; it can be a pause in the research, grappling with analysis, or institutional influence over the study. A researcher's own positionality may impact on the research project and require that they critically and reflexively engage with this in order to understand how they may be influencing their study. Messiness in research is all of that which does not follow a clear and linear path, and which we often clean up as researchers so that the final research report may be presented as clear, rigorous, and legitimate.

The obsession with cleaning up the research processes, or presenting what Cook calls 'a neat model of research'<sup>12</sup> limits the knowledge presented and sees researchers 'reporting what fits rather than what is or finding out what could be.'<sup>13</sup> Instead, the messy in research should be 'invit[ed] and allow[ed]','<sup>14</sup> and understood as part of the research process and a legitimate aspect of knowledge building. Messiness 'does not signify lazy behaviour' but rather that what is underway in the research process

is ‘serious critique.’<sup>15</sup> Cook firmly believes that ‘for rigorous research to take place, researchers need to both create and delve into the “messy area.”<sup>16</sup> This could include, for instance, the researcher considering the influence their positionality has over the research, which is then critically explored in the research process.

What is being proposed here is that researchers allow themselves to engage with that which is outside of the ‘neat model’ of doing research, and to recognise that this is where the possibility for new knowledge lies: where things are not clear and simple.

### **Feminist Internet Research Is Messy**

The process of doing meta-research on feminist internet research is complex, layered and messy. When doing research on research, the lines blur between literature, theories and methodologies. The meta-research project aimed to explore the methodological processes and research practices of the FIRN projects. What emerged in thinking about the research project and in doing the analysis of data was just how messy feminist research is and how very human it is.

The messiness of feminist research has much to do with the nature of the work: deep listening (to the participants, to the self); reflexivity; the critiquing, awareness, seeking out, and troubling of power and hegemonic positions. What adds to this messiness is the rub of traditional approaches to research that ask for the objective, neutral and value-free presentation of things as they are. Things are ‘not as they are’; what is presented is through the lens of the researcher writing, the institution, organisation, or other interest groups. This filters through to the way data is collected, analysed, written up, the ways that findings are distributed, and used again and again to inform more research done in this same way. This meta-research project is a means

of acknowledging this—that research is done this way and that people come to rely on what already exists.

One common aspect of feminist research is reflexive practice, which includes how the researchers and research partners experience the process.<sup>17</sup> In my own process of writing this article, I found the identification of the themes to be challenging. As others have written, the researcher holds a particular power over the data they’re analysing.<sup>18</sup> They have influence over what will be considered significant enough to be offered up as part of the overall discussion. And what is not discussed.

I recognise this in my own deliberations over which themes to discuss in this article. I opted for two themes that could speak to doing feminist research and may be encountered by researchers—feminist research process and doing justice to stories that are shared. I am going to focus on these two aspects of messiness that emerged from my messy process of writing this article, in engaging in the meta-research process, and what was shared with me by the FIRN research partners. Any other two themes may have been as significant as the ones I have selected, which is something to be considered when doing feminist research.

### **Theme One: Feminist Research Process**

In the case of feminist internet research, the theoretical or conceptual frameworks are sometimes pieced together from different fields; much of internet research is trans-disciplinary. If there is a feminist internet research methodology, one of our partners reflected that: ‘It would be in the framing of the research.’<sup>19</sup>

The meta-research project is a feminist research project and positioned within an interpretivist paradigm. Like feminist research, interpretivism proposes that

no research is objective or value-free; instead, it places the emphasis on exploring research participants' meaning-making and perceptions.<sup>20</sup> This creates the space for acknowledging and recognising power, politics of location,<sup>21</sup> and the researchers' relationships with participants.

In addition to feminist research, the meta-research project drew on grounded theory as a methodology which places emphasis on theory emerging from the data.<sup>22</sup> I collected data through document analysis and interviews and then analysed the data using thematic analysis. Through a thematic analysis, I sorted, categorised, and analysed the data to reveal the themes that emerged from the data set. These themes were then further analysed in order to generate knowledge on the methodological processes and ethical practices of the FIRN projects. While this sounds simple enough, it was not. The messiness of this process is lost in the writing up of the research report.<sup>23</sup>

From the proposal, it seemed very clear what I was looking for. However, when I began conducting a deeper literature review and started to try to identify a theoretical framework, I found myself experiencing something quite odd: not knowing what was methodology, literature, or theory. Some of the texts I was reading could be spread across all three because, after all, I was doing a meta-research study on feminist internet research. It was a confusing position to find myself in. It led to some doubts about my ability as a researcher, but I have also learned in my time as a researcher to reach out to peers when this sort of incident occurs.

This moment of mess was worked through with colleagues and research peers, mapping what counted as literature to be reviewed or articles to inform the methodology of the meta-research project. I understood that it was a challenge and that working through this challenge with others

could provide a richer understanding of doing meta-research and some of the challenges that one may encounter in a project of such a nature.

The instinct in writing up research is to neaten the mess or remove that which does not fit. Or that which is uncomfortable. Even now, as I write this, I am considering removing this reflection from the article because I do not feel that I am adequately explaining it or that it seems so empty in comparison to the experience—but this is why we should write and reflect on the messiness of research. Because someone else may be going through a very similar experience but cannot find examples of research writings that reveal this mess.

FIRN research partner three had a similar experience and shared with me that their methodology in the write up of their draft report reads that they set out to do in-depth interviews and case focus groups. But it was not that simple. They said: 'That's what will come across to the readers of the findings but on the ground, a lot of it was developing as the project went along.'<sup>24</sup> They shared that for them the research process 'required a lot of improvisation on our part.'<sup>25</sup>

Partner two experienced messiness at the ethics approval stage of their project, explaining that in one country, 'approval took us a year and a half.'<sup>26</sup> Expanding on the process of getting approval, they said:

'They [the ethics board] didn't have a template of what we wanted so we just had to write a proposal and every month they would sit and come back and ask us for something different, every month! ... And they always wanted us to mail it physically... Four copies of this proposal every time.'<sup>27</sup>

Another partner shared how they had joined the research team after the proposal had been finalised, and that for them 'it was messy [laughs], especially for me having

to accept it the way it was organised in the first place.<sup>28</sup>

Partner four spent a great deal of time having discussions with their colleagues and the FIRN team to understand the conceptualisation of their project and reviewing the project proposal itself, all while grappling with their sense of how they would have gone about doing the project. Partner four added that even though they joined the project team after the proposal had been finalised that FIRN did manage to include ‘some suggestions of mine in order to be able to do it myself better.’<sup>29</sup> These discussions and decisions that are made during the feminist research process can be considered to be the researcher’s labour—that is, the work that is expected of a researcher but is not necessarily accounted for in discussions on doing research. This includes, for instance, the decisions made throughout the research process, whether they are design or methodological choices, adjustments to the research questions, administrative or logistical matters, and which themes to highlight or literature to incorporate.

Another aspect of the labour of doing research includes managing expectations. Several expectations exist when one sets out to do a research project: some of them are your own, or belong to your team, the donors, or the research participants themselves. Speaking to the partners and through my own experiences of conducting the meta-research project, this was a common experience.

The messiness of the research process is encapsulated quite nicely by partner seven here:

‘We had this kind of ideal framework in our heads because we put a lot of energy into critiquing all this stuff and this is really necessary. But we don’t find this perfect world to build this, so we had to deal with a lot of contradictions in ourselves, in the community,

in other relations that we have. And I think that this at some points can be a little messy. It can get a bit confusing and sometimes we need some days to process a contradiction or to deal with something that we just noticed about ourselves or other people that we are working with.’<sup>30</sup>

I experienced a similar thing in conducting the meta-research project. I had proposed grounded theory as the methodology to inform the research project of producing a meta-research study on the FIRN projects. Grounded theory endeavours to develop theory that is grounded in data, in particular theory that can be applied practically.<sup>31</sup> Researchers do not begin the research process with a set theory in mind but rather an area of study, such as feminist research methodologies processes and ethical practices employed when doing feminist internet research. When analysing the data collected, the grounded theory approach allows the emergence of patterns, connections, themes and, ultimately, a theory.<sup>32</sup> Theories, then, unfold through seeking to understand the themes and relationships between themes.

This is a very messy approach to research, and I set about it by interviewing research partners, analysing the data, and sitting with the data-theme-patterns for weeks. My first presentation of the draft analysis of the first round of data was long, and it was a challenge to imagine how to group the themes that had emerged. Through conversations with the FIRN team, and in looking repeatedly to the data, we decided on the four pillars of feminist internet research: standpoint, intersectionality, reflexivity, and feminist ethics of care.

At the time, it seemed impossible to sort the various themes into four categories. But through conversations with the FIRN team and unpacking the themes further, this became easier. There were many themes that did not fit well into the four pillars, so we

identified a fifth pillar that informs feminist internet research: difference.

At the time of analysing the data and the themes, I was frustrated with how I had approached the analysis and the challenge presented in sorting the multitude of themes into four core pillars (and later a fifth). The experience was a lesson in working with research partners and coordinators and being open to the emergence of broader themes. It was also a reminder to be flexible enough to introduce an additional theme because the data was too rich to discard and spoke clearly to the experiences of doing feminist internet research.

Reflecting now on mess, I can see how if I had approached this as an inevitable aspect of research, I would not have viewed it as a personal failing but as, first and foremost, an opportunity for growth. Much of my experience here was rooted in wanting to do justice to what the research partners had shared with me. In our conversations, I found another overlap, which is the second theme in this article: doing justice to stories that are shared.

### **Theme Two: Doing Justice to Stories Shared**

My experience of this project was mirrored back to me by partners when they spoke of wanting to honour their participants' stories, recognising that what their participants shared with them about their lived experiences as precious. I speak of this desire as wanting to do justice to their participants' stories. I also recognise that justice is a word with multiple and weighted connotations. For the purposes of this article, I understand it to be a means of recognising the significance of what a participant has offered to share with the researcher and wanting to honour this telling.

Partner four felt that the report length did not provide the space for the 'valuable

information' of the 'personal stories'<sup>33</sup> that the participants shared. For this partner, including the participants' stories was about doing justice to their stories and what they had shared with them. For partner four, including participants' stories was a way ...

'To give opportunity to queer people, and victims of gender-based violence to share their stories... Each of their stories deserves to be made anonymous and then be published, it would be very useful for the main discourse on these matters, and now we keep it for ourselves in our files, which is really a pity for me.'<sup>34</sup>

I felt a similar thing with the interviews I had with research partners: that there was just so much data, and I wanted to find a way to keep it all in the report. Much of this, I feel, had to do with the connection I experienced with the partners in interviewing them, wanting to keep their stories as close to the original sharing as possible, and feeling in some way that if I were to edit them or discard parts of the interview, I would not be just to the partners. This was mirrored back to me when partner six shared that they had experienced difficulty in 'organising their experiences'<sup>35</sup> and that

'When I first started writing and drafting the report because the stories were so precious to me and I was so conscious of the power as a researcher to a point where I actually paralysed myself from giving my own analysis.'<sup>36</sup>

This resulted in their first draft being descriptive more than analytical, as they grappled with bringing analysis to the content that had been shared with them. They continued:

'I was fixated on presenting their stories as to this that I couldn't quite see the key patterns here. After feedback on the first draft and several conversations with other feminists, the pieces came together for me.'<sup>37</sup>

This research partner held back from adding an analytical lens to their participants' sharing, but through consultation with others, such as the FIRN team, they found a way to work through this challenge. They were encouraged to 'step in and own the power.'<sup>38</sup> They shared that this was a challenge in and of itself because

'I think in our work we are always fighting against the status quo; we are trying to shift the power dynamics. But when we are the position of power, I felt embarrassed to exercise that power.'<sup>39</sup>

Feminist researchers often shy away from issues around power or set about ensuring that they do not mimic power hierarchies.<sup>40</sup> But power imbalances in research are inevitable, and what matters is how we think about the power we possess and that we come from a space of care when enacting this power. Care itself does not mean to be without critique. In my own experience of my meta-research project analysis, I found that I was being 'too nice' in holding back from incorporating critique. But in writing this article and in conversation with FIRN, I have come to realise that critique can also be care. In holding back and not offering up critique, we may be at risk of encouraging things to go on as they have always been when our research perspectives are sometimes necessary for growth and continued knowledge building. In trying to hold on too tightly to what our research participants have shared with us, or holding back on our analysis or critique, we are at risk of doing injustice to what has been offered up as part of a larger project. I am not saying we dispense with our ethical practices: those must always be present, but we need to think of care not as nice and soft and timid, but as also being critical and rigorous in our analysis of data.

These are brief examples of mess and how it is not something that is absent from

the research process. In integrating mess into our thinking processes, we include it as a serious aspect of research and not as a result of sloppy or lazy work. Mess is ever-present and can appear at any stage, all stages; it can be the result of us muddling through a problem or it can be the result of external factors like the lengthy ethics clearance process. It is important that we prepare for mess, that we acknowledge that it will present itself as some point in the research journey, and that it is not the result of a failing on our part. I make three recommendations for embracing the messiness in the research process.

### **Recommendations**

Feminist internet research can benefit from engaging with the messiness of doing research. Considering the experiences shared and discussed above, I propose three recommendations for engaging with mess: be reflexive; reach out to others; and embrace messiness as care.

#### **Be reflexive**

Eldén calls for reflexivity in research, which is accepting of the messiness of the research process.<sup>41</sup> Reflexivity as a practice acknowledges that the research and the research ethical practices are shaped by the researcher's values and understanding of the world.<sup>42</sup> This includes shying away from what is uncomfortable. Chadwick writes on the importance of discomfort in research and how 'discomfort is an important part of reflexive and critical qualitative research practices.'<sup>43</sup> Their core argument is that if we shy away from discomfort, 'we miss valuable opportunities to contextualise the complexities of knowledge production and be accountable for our research.'<sup>44</sup>

#### **Reach Out to Others**

Researchers may regularly experience messiness in their research process and might be

unsure of what to do about the challenges it presents to them. In such an instance, the recommendation would be to encourage researchers to reach out to their research team, peers, or colleagues, and to create the space for dialogue, to present the problem at hand, and to work collaboratively on a solution. Once researchers open up about their experiences with messy research processes, they may find that many others will feel comfortable to discuss their experiences. This could perhaps be a path towards discovering solutions.

For instance, I had shared at a conference with the FIRN research partners that doing research was a messy process. Partner six in one of our interviews after this convening shared how that was an ‘aha moment’<sup>45</sup> for them. They said:

‘These things happened to me, and I didn’t quite understand what happened until the FIRN convening and your presentations and when you said that research is messy because humans are messy. That completely makes sense to me because I have redone the research three times the way I categorise the patterns, the trends, the analysis. And even then, it wasn’t quite right, and I was so fixated on trying to fix them into categories and it makes things really complicated for me.’<sup>46</sup>

In sharing our experiences, we are able to assist other researchers through their own messy research processes. We are also able to understand that the mess of research is inevitable and that it is not something that need cause a state of distress, but should rather be seen as part of knowledge production.

### **Embrace Messiness as Care**

Feminist research ethics are informed by feminist values and emphasises ‘care and responsibility rather than outcomes.’<sup>47</sup> An ethics of care creates space for emotionally engaged research that shows concern for participants, the outcomes of the research, and

care for the researcher.<sup>48</sup> This makes it possible for researchers to do emotionally engaged feminist research.<sup>49</sup> An ethics of care asks researchers to lean into the difficult questions and to note that ‘confronting feelings of discomfort is key to enacting ethical modes of interpretive practice.’<sup>50</sup>

Cook argues for articulating the messy aspect of research. One of the reasons they state is that by not sharing our experiences of messiness in research, we ‘may undermine the confidence of researchers who find themselves “in a mess”.’<sup>51</sup> Here, we can consider that presenting the messiness of our research process and experiences is, in fact, an act of care for other researchers. It helps researchers to know that they are not alone with these trouble spots or problems in their research.

### **Conclusion**

Sitting with the messiness of research is not easy, but hiding that messiness misrepresents the research process. Embracing it ought to be considered fundamental to doing feminist research and something that is taken into consideration from the outset of a research project. It is through accepting and embracing a state of mess that we are able to embark on new directions in our knowledge production that can be truly transformative in challenging the way we do research, as well as what we deem to be neat and clean processes. Through reflexivity, reaching out to peers, and considering messiness as an act of care, these recommendations may be able to assist researchers in leaning into the discomfort of mess and understanding it as key to doing rigorous research.

Nyx McLean

Nyx McLean is a transdisciplinary researcher who writes queerly about the internet, digital communities, and social movements. Their core area of research specialisation is LGBTIAQ+ identities and communities and those communities' negotiated use of digital technology to form publics and counter-publics to resist the status quo. Currently, they are exploring specifically transgender and non-binary people's use of digital platforms to create safe spaces and spaces of belonging. Nyx also studies feminist internet research methodologies and ethical frameworks and is currently working on the Feminist Internet Research Network's Meta-Research project.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) research partner one in interview two.
- 2 Research partners' identities have been anonymised and are referred to by numbers, i.e., partner one, partner two, and so forth.
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# Covid-19, Homophobia and the *Bolsonarista Vernacular*: Hate Speech on Brazilian Social Media<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

For the greater part of the 2010s and after the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president in 2018, Brazilian social media became an increasingly fertile ground for the exercise of public violence associated with political campaigning, often marked by gender, sexuality, class and race. As political tension increased with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro openly disregarded and mocked scientific advice and showed contempt for expressions of care and empathy, which was consistent with the anti-intellectualism and gender script of his public persona.

This article focusses on two episodes on Twitter and Instagram that illustrate varied forms of network engagement with instances of homophobic hate speech uttered by or attributed to Bolsonaro. On the one hand, we highlight how the amplification of homophobic speech as a political code was afforded by Twitter's design and algorithmic

architecture. On the other hand, Instagram and Twitter also afforded the mobilisation of varied publics by means of memetic images in defence of public health and of sexual diversity, and in opposition to Bolsonaro's homophobia. In face of dehumanising acts and discourse, we interrogate the possibilities of feminist intersectional investments in digital media in times of adversity.

Keywords: Twitter; Instagram; Brazil; gender; hate speech; homophobia.

## Introduction

The dissemination of hate discourse against feminist, LGBTQ+, and other minorities on social media was key to the rise in public support for the election of Jair Bolsonaro in October 2018 as president of Brazil.<sup>2</sup> By the time he was elected and an anti-rights agenda was consolidated as the moral compass of his government, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,

YouTube and particularly WhatsApp had already become fertile sites for hate speech and sensationalism, facilitating the spread of disinformation and political attacks.<sup>3</sup> Bolsonaro's public displays of anti-intellectualism and homophobia reached yet another peak with the outbreak of Covid-19 just over one year into his term. These displays were in place of an articulate government response to the pandemic. He soon became notorious for his open disregard of scientific evidence and protocol, as well as for his contempt for expressions of care and empathy, which he mocked as signs of weakness of character. His homophobic outbursts were consistent with the gender script of his performance as a public persona as a macho bully.

This article addresses the role of hate speech and expressions of gender and sexual prejudice in Brazilian right-wing populist networks and campaigning on social media, which were arguably key to their electoral success in 2018.<sup>4</sup> We first discuss the tactical combination of populist rhetoric and digital communication that configures a peculiarly powerful political pedagogy that was once again exercised in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Then, after some methodological considerations, we go on to describe two Twitter and Instagram trends during that period that illustrate varied forms of network engagement with instances of homophobic hate speech uttered by or attributed to Bolsonaro, the Brazilian president.

Homophobia, hate speech, and violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression are broad terms that refer to varied forms of prejudice. What is at stake in legal, linguistic, sociological and psychological approaches to hateful speech acts is their capacity to harm individuals, groups and society as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In this article, we delve into the contextual—as a rule, contested—meanings of public manifestations of homophobic hate speech, a constitutive

component of contemporary right-wing populism in Brazil. We first highlight how the amplification of hate speech as a political language was facilitated by Twitter's design and algorithmic architecture. Second, we point to the possibilities of alternative social media vernaculars and issue networks as a type of resistance against this form of online political violence.

### Digital Populism

In a recent article about the role of WhatsApp in Jair Bolsonaro's success as a populist, Brazilian anthropologist Leticia Cesarino associates Bolsonaro's investment in social media and neglect of traditional channels of political debate with the cultivation of his image as a political outsider. In doing so, he promoted himself as an anti-system alternative in times of crisis.<sup>6</sup> Cesarino revisits Victor Turner's analysis of ritual to explain the (re)making of political identities on social media platforms.<sup>7</sup>

Just like in a ritual, digital engagement generates a liminal space that enables the dissolution of established identities and the emergence of new ones. Furthermore, social media profile design has afforded the online formation of identities that are, according to Cesarino, 'both highly individualistic and highly relational. While platforms allow for only one, well-bounded individual profile at a time, every profile is continuously co-produced through feedback loops with other user profiles. If such networked engagement disappears, the online persona ceases to exist as such.'<sup>8</sup>

However, for Cesarino, unlike in traditional rituals, digital rituality does not produce the reintegration of unmediated identities. On the one hand, the continuity within and the separation between liminal spaces created by algorithmic classification mechanisms favour the isolation of users in so-called 'bubbles.' On the other hand,

the person is permanently suspended in the performative in-between of liminality, as in a ritual process that never reaches closure. This is, according to Cesarino, fertile ground for processes of radicalisation. Populists take advantage of this quality of social media: 'Like populist politics itself, the current architecture of social media complicates and challenges previously-held assumptions about agency and individuality, spontaneity and manipulation, freedom and control.'<sup>9</sup>

According to Brazilian linguist Daniel N. Silva, Bolsonaro's kind of populism configures a 'pragmatics of chaos,' inciting the communicability of hate and fear through incendiary framing and dispersive effects.<sup>10</sup> The illusion of non-mediation afforded by social media and the creation of micro-publics by algorithmic segmentation have a central role in that form of political communication, allowing 'the impression of politics being decoupled from its conventional (formal) register, old bureaucratic channels, and possibly its corrupt mechanisms, and being reassembled in intimate, "unmediated," transparent channels.'<sup>11</sup> As Cesarino pointed out, in a 'liminal environment where language becomes highly mimetic and performative,' the ambiguity, ready-made replicability and divorce from content sources of messages conveyed by digital media supports a memetic pedagogy whereby digital populists teach their followers to speak and act like them.<sup>12</sup>

That 'pragmatics of chaos' was further fuelled by conspiracy theories and disinformation tactics regarding the coronavirus pandemic. This global 'infodemic' on social media, as the World Health Organization called it,<sup>13</sup> in Brazil was capitalised on and arguably stimulated by the negationist attitude held by Bolsonaro and his entourage.<sup>14</sup> By either live-streaming<sup>15</sup> or speaking to crowds at a close distance, as he often does, Bolsonaro has actively opposed social

distancing as a violation of 'citizens' rights to come and go,' claiming that 'Brazil's economy can't stop' for what he called 'a little flu.'<sup>16</sup>

'Now everything is about the pandemic!' he complained at an official function held to mark the 'reopening of tourism in Brazil,' in November 2020. 'This has to stop! I'm sorry for the dead. I'm sorry. But we're all gonna die someday. Here everybody is gonna die. [...] It is no use running away from this, running away from reality. [You] have to stop [acting as] um país de maricas [a country of sissies].' After uttering 'maricas,' he lowered his tone of voice and, as if commenting on what he had just said, he added: 'A full plate for the vultures back there,' referring to members of the press in the back of the audience. He was marking his words as a renewed provocation to the critics of his well-known anti-homosexual prejudice. He added: 'We have to face this [challenge] with open arms, face the fight.'<sup>17</sup>

The term *maricas* evokes the stigma traditionally attached to the passive partner in male homosexual intercourse, a feminised attribute used to denote inferiority. However, as Michel Misse has argued,<sup>18</sup> this classification does not designate men as homosexual; instead, it evokes the stigma of male homosexuality metaphorically, revealing its gendered dimension. Rather than saying that the target of the insult is gay, it implies that he is 'less of a man,' more often as a moral judgement about signs of lack of will or cowardice than about unconventional gender expression. In his speech, Bolsonaro urges Brazilians to be men, not 'sissies,' meaning that they must be brave and face death 'with open arms,' as a manly sacrifice. Implicit in that appeal is the strong cultural association between male homosexuality and moral weakness. As a paradigm, the symbolism of male homosexuality as a betrayal of a 'natural' condition of superiority attributed to 'real' men operates as a reminder

of male domination. Bolsonaro's remark generated some engagement in response on social media.

### Digital Engagement

The speech in question took place in November 2020, a period during which we monitored controversies about feminism and LGBTQ+ issues on Twitter. We collected data using a combined strategy: user-end immersive observation using an anonymised research profile and digital tools at the back end. The term *maricas* stood out distinctively in posts by Bolsonarista profiles we followed. We queried that term from November 12 to 28 using Netlytic, an API-based social media text and social network analyser. This tool records up to 1,000 posts per query every fifteen minutes.<sup>19</sup> After removing tweets in languages other than Portuguese, our dataset comprised a sample of 62,440 posts in which the term *maricas* was used. Within that sample, a social network analysis of metadata was conducted to obtain a Co-Retweet Network (Co-RTN) comprising 33,485 tweets (self-retweets excluded), in turn represented using graph visualisation software.<sup>20</sup>

A Co-RTN shows accounts in the sample whose posts were retweeted by at least two other accounts, displaying an affinity of interest among accounts that retweeted a post originated by a third account. It reveals what we may call a 'listening' network and the effective propagation of tweets by accounts other than the one that originated the posts. Retweeting patterns link contents and accounts that users deem debatable on their networks. Accounts that have posts retweeted by one same third account can be regarded as connected because both accounts are somehow 'heard' by one same account and are, therefore, part of the 'bubble' around the latter. As a scoping method, a Co-RTN is a more adequate way to highlight forms of mediation specific

to political issue engagement, if compared to first-degree popularity metrics. As suggested by Richard Rogers, one must account for intensely connected identifiable actors of varied characteristics, positioning and ways of engagement to measure engagement with political issues on social media.<sup>21</sup>

On a further note on research methodology and ethics, all of our social media data collection, including user-end queries, ethnographic observation and access to metadata either facilitated by platform APIs or utilising scraping scripts involved digital objects—human or automated profiles, text, image files and URLs either posted or used in profile descriptions, reactions, linked profiles, etc.—that were not only defined as public as a matter of legal regulation (either by platform default or by a user's deliberate choice), but whose creators also intended to make public to the largest extent possible. That is, online activity and behaviour that sought their own exposure, the amplification of their messages as actors in the public sphere.

### Alignment

Adopting their leader's lexicon, Bolsonaro supporters propagated a term over the networks that had been otherwise infrequent, which was adopted into right-wing Twitter jargon. *Maricas* was mostly featured in tweets in support of Bolsonaro in reference to the pandemic, but also, for example, to his negationist stand on environmental issues. In that vein, *maricas* entered the political vocabulary of the Twitter-sphere with a relatively small variety of meanings. Posts by self-acclaimed true Bolsonaristas in our dataset mobilised the semantics of male domination as inflammatory language to execrate political adversaries, including former allies and dissidents. In this case, the main meaning of *maricas* was 'coward,' in the context of accusations of disloyalty or treason. In a slightly different vein, Bolsonaristas also

adopted the term to make broader statements about morality and politics. *Maricas* always worked as a derogatory name, the attribution of which performs an injurious offence, regardless of political alignment. Those pragmatics are as relevant as the tweet's thematic content, bringing to the fore who posted it, who the post talked about and to whom it was addressed, enacting and renewing a classification of friends and enemies.

Conversely, however, *maricas* was also used in posts contesting either Bolsonaro's negationism regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, in response to his own use of the term in the episode that initiated the trend, or to contest his posture, often mockingly, about other issues. In these cases, the term had broadly the same negative connotations as in Bolsonaro's and his supporters' (unified) voice. Still, some tweets questioned Bolsonaro's use of the term, embedded in broader critiques of his government's absurdities, in particular with regard to the pandemic. However, as far as the sample can show, a great majority of occurrences of *maricas* indicate an assimilation of the gendered metaphor that gives the term its meaning. The use of the term did not, per se, generate controversy, at least in our sample. Few, if any, questioned its homophobic, sexist connotation. To look for that sort of questioning, we needed to make queries outside this dataset (that is, in posts not as densely co-retweeted), or compare the use of similar terms, as we shall see in the following sections.

In the Co-RTN shown in the graph (figure 1),<sup>22</sup> four main clusters stand out: the largest one, in blue, highlights active Bolsonarista voices. Accounts belong, for instance, to the President's third son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, a congressman who is very active on Twitter,<sup>23</sup> and to Olavo de Carvalho, the ultra-right-wing ideologue considered a guru of the Bolsonarista movement. In the blue cluster, we also find

accounts not associated with public figures, but that are nonetheless very vocal in their support of Bolsonaro on Twitter. Conversely, the second-largest cluster, in green, which is slightly less compact, shows engagement with one post by former Secretary of State, General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz's account, a former ally now positioned as Bolsonaro's adversary around different issues, and accounts that contest Bolsonaro's negationism of the pandemic, among other intense criticisms. The pink cluster, the third largest of the four main groupings, well connected to the blue one but practically isolated from the green one, is another Bolsonarista network. The cluster includes Bolsonaro's own account, as well as the account of Donald Trump, the former US president. Neither tweeted with the term *maricas*, but they were intensely spoken to in the sample.

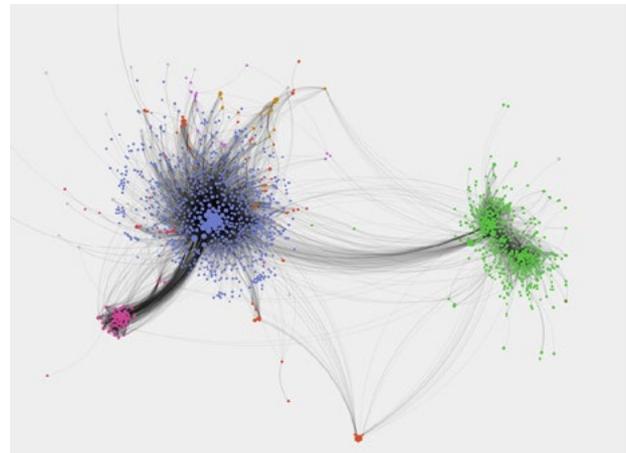


Figure 1 Original graph created by Fabio Gouveia. 'Maricas' co-retweet network graph, 2021.

The blue cluster represents the largest Co-RTN in the *maricas* sample, with 809 accounts, out of a 1,646 total. The accounts most retweeted in that cluster belong to Bolsonarista accounts quite vocal on Twitter. However, these accounts are not associated with public figures. They used *maricas* with or without reference to its meaning in context, as a token of allegiance to their

leadership and as a way to inflate the size of their following and push the term as a trending topic, inciting others to do the same. Much of their tweeting consists of the mere use of the term, as if they are just shouting the word out loud, or else combining it with either Bolsonarista iconography with no commentary or rants about real or imaginary political opponents.

The vast majority of co-retweets of @BolsoTrumpRaiz—a profile identified as ‘ultra-conservative right-wing’ and the account retweeted the most in the blue cluster, as well as in the overall sample—correspond to a November 24 tweet (figure 2). That tweet expressed scorn for the protest movement sparked by the killing of a black customer by security guards at the entrance of a Carrefour supermarket in the city of Porto Alegre, a southern Brazilian state capital and metropolitan area. With an abundance of crude neologisms, innuendo and double-meaning, one single tweet serves the multiple purpose of accusing the black rights movement of reverse racism, while deprecating Bolsonaro’s political opponents. Other posts include attacks against the mainstream media and campaigning for Bolsonaro’s re-election.

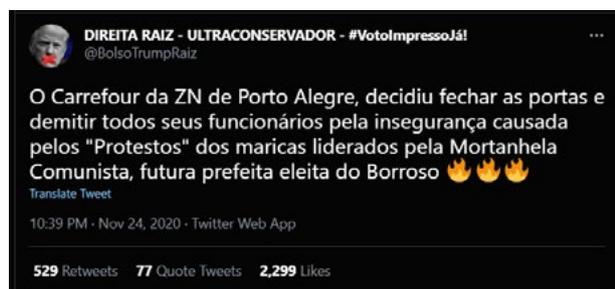


Figure 2 @BolsoTrumRaiz tweet. The tweet lambasts Carrefour for closing due to protests against the killing of a black man by security guards and calls the protestors ‘maricas.’

As mentioned above, congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro tweets profusely. His account @

BolsonaroSP stands out as another relevant exponent in the blue cluster, reflecting the congressman’s standing among Bolsonaristas on social media. Just like his father’s, his Twitter account is not only heard but is also spoken to significantly. His only post with the term *maricas*, tweeted on November 13 (figure 3), repurposes video footage, presumably from the time of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985),<sup>24</sup> of new recruits being introduced to the hardships of military training by an army officer. His text explanation refers to the gender script in his father’s message three days earlier, presenting military training as a ‘*marica* antidote, that is making men be men.’



Figure 3 @BolsonaroSP tweet. Tweet by Eduardo Bolsonaro, a congressman and son of Jair Bolsonaro. The tweet is his only mention of the term ‘*maricas*’ and shows repurposed video footage from the Brazilian dictatorship, calling military training a ‘*marica* antidote.’

The term *maricas* was also adopted by Bolsonaristas to attack former allies whom they came to see as disloyal to the president. Among these ardent followers, any form of

criticism is seen as a form of treason. General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz is an army officer who was retired by the Bolsonaro government in 2019 after a message was attributed to him criticising Bolsonaro and his sons. The message circulated on social media and was later identified as fake.<sup>25</sup> Santos Cruz's account, @GenSantosCruz, is the most retweeted exponent in the green cluster and the fourth in the whole sample. It is densely linked to 559 other accounts. Profiles in its network are connected by tweets more critical of Bolsonaro and his government.

Like Eduardo Bolsonaro's, the General's account also stands out for the number of mentions received (2,790), but in his case, this was mostly as the target of Bolsonarista hostility. A November 12 tweet by @GenSantosCruz (figure 4) reads: 'TIRED OF [this] SHOW. Brazil is not a country of maricas. [Brazil] is too tolerant of social inequality, corruption, privilege. [Brazil] voted against extremism and corruption. [Brazil] voted for balance and unity. [The country] needs serenity and not a show, spectacle, hoax, bragging and disrespect.' Responses include retweets in support of his statement. However, others raise their tone and call him maricas.



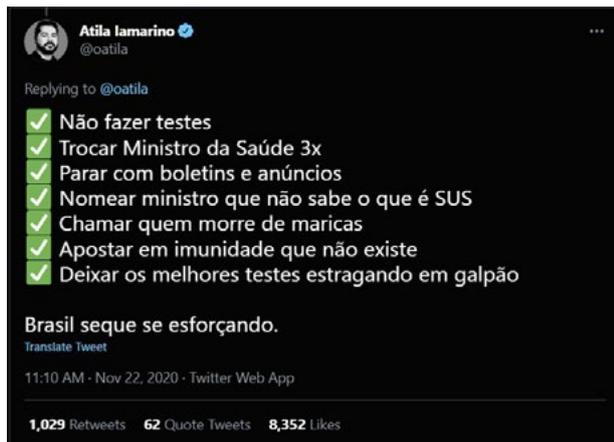
Figure 4 @GenSantosCruz tweet.

Translation: 'TIRED OF [this] SHOW. Brazil is not a country of maricas. [Brazil] is too tolerant of social inequality, corruption, privilege. [Brazil] voted against extremism and corruption. [Brazil] voted for

balance and unity. [The country] needs serenity and not a show, spectacle, hoax, bragging and disrespect.'

### Back at Bolsonaro: Contesting Negationism

The green cluster also groups tweets that use the maricas episode to comment, with outraged irony, on Bolsonaro's character and track record. In other tweets grouped on the green cluster, Bolsonaro is reproached for calling his fellow citizens maricas in the context of a broader critique of his genocidal handling of the new coronavirus pandemic. The biologist Atila Iamarino became a go-to expert on the pandemic; he was popular on social media and frequently interviewed by mainstream news media. His account has a certain prominence in the green cluster as the tenth-most co-retweeted in reference to two tweets that mention the term. His presence on the network is intense: those two posts were retweeted 1,011 times and @oatila was mentioned 300 times, showing that his voice was echoed and he was spoken to as well. A November 22 tweet by Iamarino's account (figure 5) reads: 'Do not take tests, [tick emoji]; Change Minister of Health 3 times, [tick emoji]; No more bulletins [or] announcements, [tick emoji]; Appoint a Health Minister who doesn't know what SUS [National Public Health System], [tick emoji]; Call the dead sissies, [tick emoji]; Bet on non-existent immunity, [tick emoji]; Let the best tests spoil in a shed, [tick emoji]; Brazil keeps trying hard.'



**Figure 5** Tweet by biologist @oatila. Translation: ‘Do not take tests, [tick emoji]; Change Minister of Health 3 times, [tick emoji]; No more bulletins [or] announcements, [tick emoji]; Appoint a Health Minister who doesn’t know what SUS [National Public Health System], [tick emoji]; Call the dead sissies, [tick emoji]; Bet on non-existent immunity, [tick emoji]; Let the best tests spoil in a shed, [tick emoji]; Brazil keeps trying hard.’

### Yes, It Is a ‘Fag Thing’

As a precedent of the país de maricas episode, an earlier dispute involving Brazilian masculinities, homophobia and negationism of the Covid-19 pandemic took the form of a hashtag on Twitter and Instagram. It revolved around another homophobic expression attributed to Bolsonaro, ‘coisa de viado’ (‘a fag thing’).<sup>26</sup> The trend came up in our searches and personal timelines, although we were not monitoring Twitter trends on the platforms’ back-end via API at the time, as we later did. Therefore, our documentation of this episode is based on mainstream and alternative online media coverage and user-interface queries. The dispute is revealing about the combined performative effect of homophobic speech embedded in Bolsonarista discourse and its repercussions on social media.

On July 7, 2020, the day when, after showing mild symptoms, Bolsonaro announced that he had tested positive for the coronavirus, *Folha de São Paulo*, one of the top

mainstream newspapers in the country, ran a brief comment piece by senior columnist Mônica Bergamo about the president’s public insistence on disregarding the sanitary protocols recommended by scientists and health officials around the world in the context of the pandemic.<sup>27</sup> The most obvious expression of that attitude was his refusal to wear a face mask when he met with crowds because ‘[it was] a fag thing,’ which the article quoted him saying to visitors apprehensive about his attitude. The news that he had allegedly said those words in that context generated a movement in response, parodying the remark. Using the hashtag *coisadeviado* (‘afagthing’), all kinds of people posted selfies wearing masks in defence of public health, many of them with the rainbow colours, mobilising the symbol of gay pride as a protest against homophobia. Face masks thus became a symbol of resistance, ‘a fag thing’ that everyone was proud to do, say or wear.

Regardless of whether he had actually used that exact sentence on one occasion or another, reported by the news piece as hearsay, a wide network response added to its materiality. It was an everyday expression, the meaning of which is only situationally offensive,<sup>28</sup> that has also been actively reclaimed by queers.<sup>29</sup> But in Bolsonaro’s mouth, it synthesised the role of homophobia in his populist rhetoric and his active boycott of public health responses to the pandemic; in both cases, it was an appeal to his bases and a provocation to his political adversaries and critics. In response, the hashtag echoed the newspaper column’s denunciation of Bolsonaro’s active denial of the Covid-19 pandemic and of his homophobic remarks by appropriating ‘coisa de viado’ with a reverse meaning. The negative connotation expressed in the context of Bolsonaro’s alleged use of the term was replaced by a positive meaning adopted by his critics. The expression became part of a repertoire of ironies about Bolsonaro—as

a reversal of his voice's homophobic connotations and of the symbolism of the mask as unmanly. As a trending topic, the mask and its associated visuality signified care, responsibility, solidarity, dare to love, and the celebration of alternative masculinities. A front-end search for the #coisadeviado on Instagram on July 14, 2020, gave more than 500 valid results.

Men and women, particularly health-care professionals, adopted the symbol and the hashtag in their posts (figure 6). Related themes included the government's failure to respond to the pandemic consistently, its negationist agenda, Bolsonaro's hypocrisy, other healthcare issues, etc. News media reported the phenomenon, added their comments and compiled posts, especially from Twitter, often mentioning fellow journalist Mônica Bergamo's column as its origin. In addition to visual icons and photos, links to those news and comment pieces were also soon posted, reposted and replied to. In an ironic twist, some posts featured Bolsonaro with a mask on, shrugging.

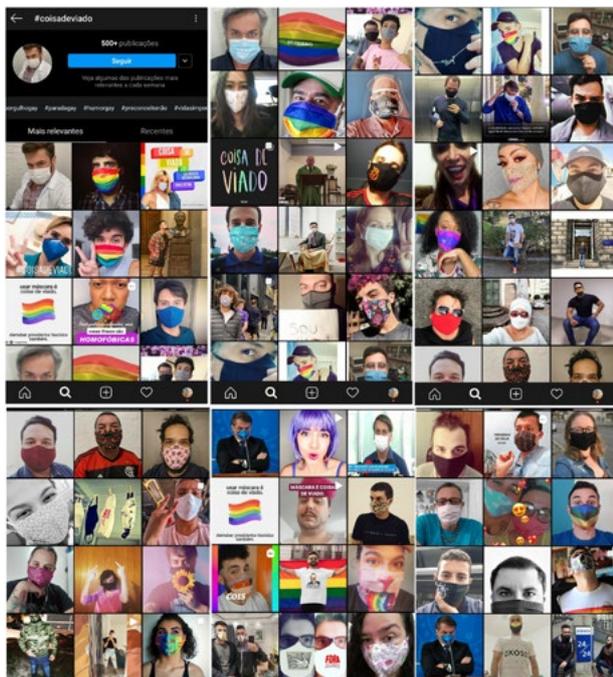


Figure 6 @coisadeviado collage of Instagram screenshots.

In some Twitter posts, 'coisa de viado' still retains its pejorative connotation, highlighting its currency as an insult. A July 15 post shared a New York Times opinion piece that compared Bolsonaro to Donald Trump and quoted Brazilian YouTuber Felipe Neto (figure 7). The post's text content celebrates Neto for that success. A July 16 reply marked with the hashtag (also figure 7) is an attack on both the author of the post and on Neto, casting doubt on their manhood: 'You make a nice couple.' Besides ironically suggesting that they are gay, the replier goes further by calling them 'affected' and 'hysterical,' two negative, feminising qualities, as well as 'cheats.'



Figure 7 @augustodeAB & @clau\_perl tweets. The replier uses negative, feminising words, such as 'affected' and 'hysterical.'

The hashtag lost momentum over the following weeks, but the expression 'a fag thing' entered the catalogue of Bolsonaro absurdities and was adopted as part of a social media vernacular. It was transformed from a banal, mildly offensive homophobic remark to a symbol of resistance against toxic masculinities and obscurantism.

### **Social Media Affordabilities and Linguistic Nuance**

The open hostility against the LGBTQ+ community by Bolsonaro and his entourage cannot be dissociated from the primary role of the anti-gender and anti-sexual rights agenda of his government.<sup>30</sup> Nor can it be dissociated from the surge in misogynist, racist and homo-lesbo-transphobic online threats and verbal attacks against candidates to public office in the 2020 municipal elections.<sup>31</sup> In connection with those two contexts, this article has interrogated the role of apparently milder—more ambiguous or more easily naturalised—forms of hate speech and expressions of gender and sexual prejudice that aid the assemblage and disassemblage of political identities performed by digital populism.<sup>32</sup> In materialising the status of sexual minorities as morally inferior, hate speech and prejudice produce forms of symbolic violence that reveal social inequalities and the workings of oppression. However, the affordabilities<sup>33</sup> of different platforms also aid the use of other genres and the creation of alternative codes as sites of resistance.

The maricas Co-RTN revealed the successful amplification of Bolsonaro's message among a densely connected network of followers, or else competent users of that code, without much interference from outsiders who were neatly isolated from his camp. Conversely, Twitter, and to a greater extent Instagram, also facilitated a successful movement of contestation, delineated by the 'coisa de viado' trending topic, perhaps due in part to the higher currency of the key term 'viado' in Brazilian slang. Instagram's privilege of visual content was particularly suited to the imagetic symbology mobilised by the #coisadeviado. This affordance allowed users to repurpose the two elements in dispute—mask and viado—as catchy visual icons with prosthetic potential. That is, as body extensions that enable the performance of identities less

subject to language classifications and dissident from what is prescribed as 'natural.'

Bolsonarista homophobia performs hegemonic masculinity as a constitutive aspect of a political identity and creates a hostile environment for feminists and sexual minorities. Diffuse and seemingly random provocations follow the logic of trolling. According to Herring et al.,<sup>34</sup> there are two possible outcomes of systematic attempts to disrupt online spaces. One is the strengthening of an attacked group's identity, especially through informal, witty, spontaneous forms of resistance. However, if a space no longer feels safe because of trolls, its members may feel forced to leave or stop engaging. Thus, trolling behaviour can lead to the deterioration of online environments.

More recently, Whitney Phillips associated the role of trolling behaviour with the current fascist turn on the internet and its electoral outcomes.<sup>35</sup> The mid and late 2000s saw an overlap between trolling subculture and a further-reaching internet culture that encompassed the expansion of social media. Popular culture absorbed the extreme irony and detached humour of both. Phillips highlights how the mainstreaming of those supposedly 'fun' and apparently harmless things has all along obscured their violent, undemocratic potential. In an earlier report,<sup>36</sup> we interpreted outsider trolling at lesbian Orkut<sup>37</sup> communities as semantic disputes around the issue of online security. For women and minorities in the pursuit of safer spaces, violence is very real, as is—we might add now—the harm produced by the blindness of privileged others.<sup>38</sup>

In the field of design, the term affordance designates the scope of relational properties that make a material instrument useful for human action. Social media affordances are often attributed a determining role in relation to the content and effects of the interactions that they mediate, by

means of physical devices, user interfaces and digital networks. As a corrective to technological determinism in her feminist ‘critical’ approach to digital socialities, Jessalynn Keller seeks to encompass ‘not only the multiple qualities of social relationships facilitated through digital media but also the uneven power relationships that often shape these encounters [and] the structural inequalities exploited by the design of the internet.’<sup>39</sup> She adopts the concept of ‘platform vernacular’ after Gibbs et al.<sup>40</sup> to highlight that online ‘communication genres develop not only from the affordances of particular social media platforms but also from the mediated practices and communicative habits of users.’<sup>41</sup>

In her article on girls’ social media feminisms, Keller concludes that we ‘need to better understand the concept of affordance through a feminist lens, which can shed light on the gendered operations of power across various digital media platforms.’<sup>42</sup> As she also points out—and which this article also painfully reveals—that task involves further engagement with anti-gender online vernaculars. As we make the final edits to this piece, the Bolsonaro government is trying to pass a law to further weaken the legal framework that enables some control on the spread of fake news and hate speech over the internet.<sup>43</sup> A finer understanding is needed of how the user interface design and algorithmic architecture of different platforms, old and new, afford the exercise of online violence. In this article, we have tried to emphasise that online hate violence is political and intersectional. Further research should also continue to address the complex articulation of gender, sexuality, class, race and political ideology, both as the roots of such hate and in activist responses to it, as well how platform design, artificial intelligence and internet regulation relate to that complexity, for better or worse.

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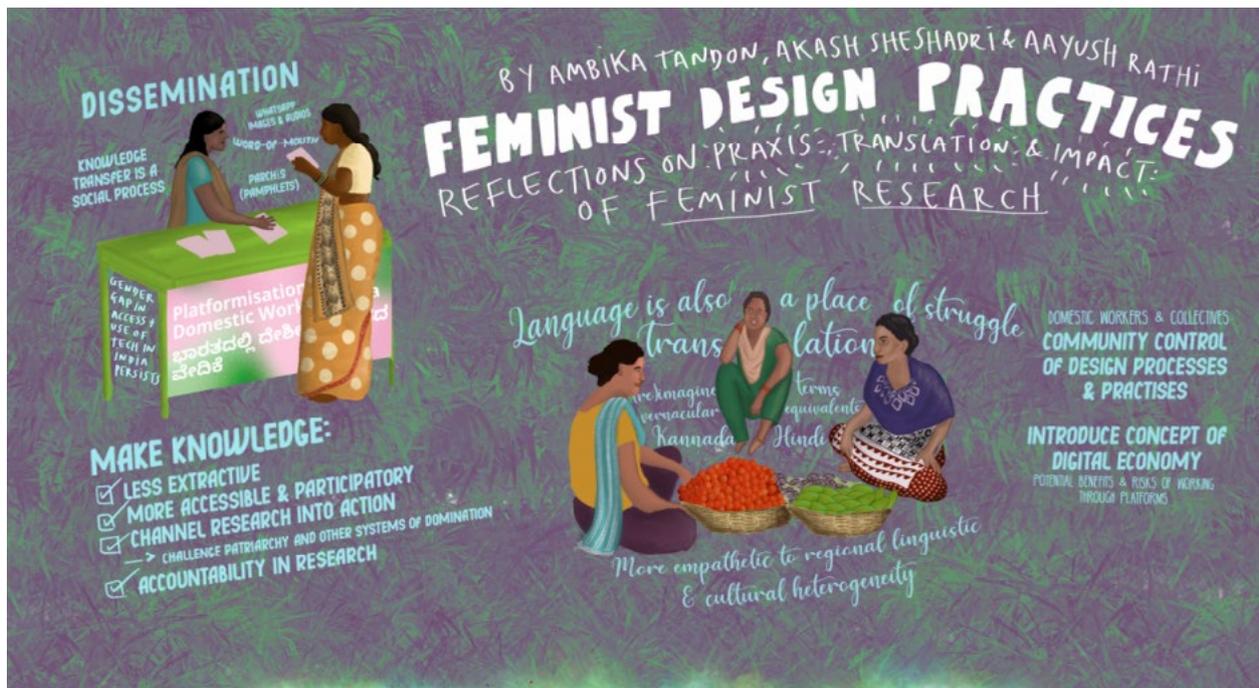
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- 12 Cesarino 2020, p. 421.
- 13 World Health Organization, joint statement by WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC: 'Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic: Promoting Healthy Behaviours and Mitigating the Harm from Misinformation and Disinformation,' September 23, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>.

#### Endnotes

- 1 We thank our FIRN colleagues Namita Aavriti and Mariana Fossatti Cabrera, copy editor Shaun Lavelle, and two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and feedback on this article. This research was made in partnership with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada) and the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES/Brazil).
- 2 Sonia Corrêa and Isabela Kalil, 'The Case of Brazil,' in *Anti-Gender politics in Latin America. Country Case Studies Summaries*, ed. Sonia Corrêa, pp. 47-65 (Rio de Janeiro: ABIA, 2020), <http://sxpoltics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>.
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- 14 As we write this article and the death toll of the pandemic in Brazil reaches 600,000 reported losses, the testimonies of former Ministers of Health and other government officials before the Covid-19 Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (CPI) hold Bolsonaro responsible for promoting 'early treatment' with chloroquine well after that drug's efficacy and safety were ruled out by scientific consensus, and for refusing to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies, delaying the acquisition of life-saving vaccines for months.
- 15 As part of the strategy which eschews mainstream and traditional media channels in favour of social media communication tools, Bolsonaro has hosted weekly live transmissions on Facebook, in lieu of a presidential address to the nation. This was the case even before the Covid-19 pandemic and was unrelated to social distancing.
- 16 France 24, 'Brazil Economy "Can't Stop" for Coronavirus: Bolsonaro,' March 30, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200329-brazil-economy-can-t-stop-for-coronavirus-bolsonaro>. Although long discredited, Bolsonaro reiterated his stance on social distancing at the 2021 UN General Assembly. See UN News, 'Brazilian President Commits Country to Climate Neutrality by 2050,' September 21, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100472>.
- 17 See the full transcript here (in Portuguese).
- 18 Michel Misse, *O Estigma do Passivo Sexual: Um Símbolo de Estigma no Discurso Cotidiano*, 3rd (revised) ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Booklink: NECVU/IFCS/UFRJ; LeMetro/IFCS/UFRJ, 2007).
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- 22 Interactive version available here.
- 23 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eduardo\\_Bolsonaro](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eduardo_Bolsonaro).
- 24 Bolsonaro often boasts his revisionist view of the military regime, which contradicts the broad democratic consensus that has been constructed over the past 35 years in Brazil. Besides a glorification of militarism and his justification of torture and the suspension of legal guarantees, Bolsonaristas hold a nostalgic view of the discipline, prosperity and morals that they attribute to that period. A new military coup headed by Bolsonaro is an open possibility as a last resource against his enemies.
- 25 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlos\\_Alberto\\_dos\\_Santos\\_Cruz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlos_Alberto_dos_Santos_Cruz).
- 26 In Brazilian Portuguese, *viado* is a derogatory term for male homosexual. Its homophone *veado* most frequently refers to 'male deer,' although both spellings are interchangeable. There isn't a consensus about the etymology of the term. Associations are made with *transviado* (masc. sing. noun), misfit, aimless; with the 1942 Disney feature *Bambi*, known for its meek and delicate appearance; or with both.
- 27 Mônica Bergamo, 'Máscara é "Coisa de Viado"', *Dizia Bolsonaro na Frente de Visitas*, *Folha de São Paulo*, July 7, 2020, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/monicabergamo/2020/07/mascara->

- e-coisa-de-v-dizia-bolsonaro-na-frente-de-visitas.shtml.
- 28 The semantic ambiguity of terms whose offensiveness is contextual raises the issue of local context and conventions in social media content moderation: how can the actual meaning of a post be assessed based only on its terminology?
- 29 An example of a non-derogatory use of terms such as *viado* is its inverted meaning as a prevalent stylistic feature of Gayspeak in many languages (and other subaltern sociolects, such as African-American English), whereby the stigma is contested by means of its reappropriation as a symbol of intimacy and solidarity among those who share it. In the context of joking relations, peers may call each other ‘fag’ not as an insult but to signal intense social proximity and affect.
- 30 Corrêa and Kalil 2020.
- 31 Azmina and InternetLab 2021.
- 32 Cesarino 2020.
- 33 Borrowed from the field of design, affordability in social media studies refers to the range of possibilities that a given platform’s interactive features offer to its users. We adopt the perspective that those features and their meanings are co-constructed and permanently repurposed by both users and designers. See notes 42 and 43 below.
- 34 Susan Herring et al, ‘Searching for Safety Online: Managing “Trolling” in a Feminist Forum,’ *The Information Society* 18.5 (2002): pp. 371-384, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972240290108186>.
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- 37 Orkut was a social networking service operated by Google.
- 38 Rocha et al. cite the *maricas* and *coisa de viado* episodes to illustrate the Bolsonaro’s capacity ‘to attribute an anti-system dimension to dominant social positions, especially, in Brazil’s case, regarding issues of gender and sexuality.’ By those discursive means, he gathered support in a constituency that is not far-right, ‘transforming hate speech into an acceptable and desirable rhetoric of political incorrectness, and voicing feelings of anger, revolt, and marginalization.’ (2021, p.146).
- 39 Jessalynn Keller, “‘Oh, She’s a Tumblr Feminist’: Exploring the Platform Vernacular of Girls’ Social Media Feminisms,’ *Social Media + Society* (2019), pp. 1-11, p. 2, DOI: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305119867442>
- 40 Martin Gibbs, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen & Marcus Cartera, ‘#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media and Platform Vernacular,’ *Information, Communication & Society* 18, pp. 255-268, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152.
- 41 Keller 2019, p. 4.
- 42 Keller 2019, p.8.
- 43 Beatriz Gurgel & Guilherme Venagliada, ‘Após MP Devolvida, Bolsonaro Envia Projeto para Alterar Marco Civil da Internet,’ CNN Brasil, September 20, 2021, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/apos-mp-devolvida-bolsonaro-envia-projeto-para-alterar-marco-civil-da-internet/>.



# Feminist Design Practices: Reflections on the Communication and Translation of Feminist Research

## Abstract

Feminist and design justice principles can be adopted into research praxis to make knowledge less extractive and more accessible.

These principles include making research and outreach more participatory, translating academic knowledge into more accessible forms, and channelling research into action that can challenge patriarchy and other systems of domination.

This paper focusses on the outreach and communication of policy research to outline its potential for producing radical change and translating knowledge across communities. The authors reflect on their experiences of producing research for domestic workers and workers' collectives in India to highlight challenges and ways forward for accessible research forms.

Keywords: translation; participatory design; feminist research; domestic work; platform economy; care work

## Introduction

*'To see from below is neither easily learnt nor unproblematic.'*<sup>1</sup>

Design justice principles call for the process and end result of design to challenge the matrix of domination through practices such as centring the voices of marginalised communities and using collaborative processes to sustain and empower those communities.<sup>2</sup> Although framed in the context of platform design, these principles can be applied to other areas, including communications and research design. This framework is compatible with and draws on feminist theory in knowledge-making, which rejects 'objectivist'<sup>3</sup> knowledge for situated, political, and participatory knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Extending the framework to the dissemination of knowledge, producing knowledge in forms that

can be consumed by impacted communities is one way to practise design justice. This is a neglected aspect of knowledge production, and often precludes accessibility for and dissemination within audiences that do not traditionally find a voice within academic and policy spaces.

We have been producing research on southern platform economies for the past three years. With this research, we aimed to render feminist principles actionable by embedding grassroots actors in the process of knowledge production and dissemination.<sup>5</sup> We have collaborated with several workers' organisations to co-produce research—for example, domestic workers' unions, including the Self-Employed Women's Federation and Parichiti, and gig workers' unions, such as the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers. We have also sought to make the process of output design and dissemination participatory.<sup>6</sup>

This paper focusses on our research as part of the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) between 2019 and 2021. The research project studied the organisation of domestic work in the platform economy, and co-produced distilled outputs that were disseminated within unions' networks of workers.<sup>7</sup> The research unpacked the roles of digital platforms as new intermediaries for domestic and care workers in India, and specifically focussed on the modes of recruitment, conditions of work, and potential for collectivisation for domestic workers. Domestic Workers' Rights Union (DWRU), a union of domestic workers in the south Indian state of Karnataka, were co-researchers on the project. Participatory and intersectional methodologies contributed significantly to the research,<sup>8</sup> by adding more robustness to data and opening more accessible channels of communication.

Through this process, we also sought to inform and develop the advocacy strategies of

workers' collectives to respond to the growth of the platform economy. Our research design and dissemination had been informed by the lived experience and history of union members in organising domestic workers and their struggle towards securing better working conditions. This was made possible through the integration of a feedback loop with union partners, who provided insights throughout the lifecycle of the project.

In this paper, we reflect on the implications of feminist frameworks on the design of research and communication touchpoints aimed at workers in the informal economy. We acknowledge that the process of communication design is a political act and that design choices have political implications, which we discuss through examples from our experience. We seek to inform ways of adopting feminist principles in communicating research on digital rights in accessible ways.

### **Decoupling Digital Research from the Digital**

Assessing workers' participation (or its absence) on and through digital platforms, our study latently unearths insights into platform design that knowledge production and communication design can borrow from.

The gender gap accessing and using digital technologies continues to persist in India—20% for mobile ownership, 50% for use of mobile internet, and 67% for smartphone ownership.<sup>9</sup> In other words, adult women mobile phone owners, mobile internet users and smartphone owners are 20%, 50% and 67% respectively less than adult men counterparts. Women owning mobile phones are also likely to be using family-owned mobile phones, which limits their usage in terms of both the amount of time and the range of applications.<sup>10</sup> We find that this impacts the women's access to and activity in the platform economy in two significant

ways. First, most women domestic workers are registered on digital platforms by the men in their families. Second, women domestic workers are concentrated on platforms that only require access to a basic phone, which precludes their participation in on-demand platforms.<sup>11</sup>

Given these realities, our first consideration in knowledge dissemination is the viability of using digital modes of publication for sharing our research with workers. Consultations with workers' groups indicate a preference for low-tech digital content that can be shared across popular social media and chat applications, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Another consideration is that our content must require low data consumption, as the cost of mobile data (despite being very low) is an inhibiting factor in the use of the internet for many households. As a result, we have chosen to adopt forms such as images and audio notes, which can be shared on popular formats like WhatsApp, as opposed to data-heavy formats such as video.

The digital gender gap also extends to digital skills among workers. Poor digital skills add to the opacity of platforms; consequently, workers on marketplace platforms and those with digital placement agencies have very little understanding of what digital platforms are and how they operate, even after being registered. Workers in the on-demand sector are able to operate smartphones and have a better understanding of platform functions. However, we find that women domestic workers work mostly with digital placement agencies and marketplace platforms, and less often with on-demand platforms. The low information levels among women workers adds to the power imbalance between platforms and workers and becomes a critical gap for researchers and community advocates to fill.

Research on the platform economy tends to centre academic and policy critique

at the expense of producing accessible knowledge that will fill information gaps among workers. The objective of our outreach is also, then, to introduce the concept of the digital economy to workers, as well as the potential benefits and risks of working through platforms and the implications for workers' rights.

There are several risks associated with this exercise. One is that of striking the fine balance between approaching the platform economy as an outlet for gainful employment while also exposing workers' bodies to the surveillant and disciplinary assemblages that digital labour platforms tend to be. This exercise carries the risk of being patronising in the kind of information it distills for workers, and risks taking the form of 'educating' them about the platform economy. In our first iteration of a brochure, we focussed on the three platform types identified through the study, and the risks and benefits of each.



The first draft of the brochure targeting gig worker collectives on the platform economy.

The feedback we received from union partners was that the content was designed from the perspective of 'researchers, not workers' because workers are less likely to be interested in the typology of platforms than how to benefit from the opportunities provided by the platform economy. As we redesign the

brochure with this feedback in mind, we also consider the possibility that an unintended consequence of making our research more accessible could be to encourage workers to seek opportunities in the platform economy. This is especially likely given the drastic reduction in employment opportunities for workers in the domestic work sector as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

Workers are also likely to perceive information disseminated through unions and researchers as objective, which could increase the likelihood of them adopting recommended practices. At the same time, our findings from the research project are textured. We find elements of digital platforms' operations that may potentially be beneficial for workers, but also several elements that could be debilitating to workers' access to gainful and secure work opportunities. In deriving a communication strategy to account for this consequence, we choose to focus on the empowerment of workers by concentrating on rights implications for workers, which includes basic information about digital platforms.

In our efforts to close loops in research methodologies and communication design, dissemination of knowledge material has a vital role to play. Our dissemination process also seeks to borrow from union strategies, which rely on informal methods and ad-hoc media channels for enrolment and raising awareness. These include word-of-mouth sharing in peer circles, door-to-door campaigning, and pamphleteering, in addition to digital methods, such as groups on social media and popular chat apps.

In its manifestation of material assets, communication design processes and choices tend to fossilise normative notions that dominate the communication space of labour. Instances include the lack of diversity in representing workers and the regurgitation of existing tropes in communication strategies.

Communication design artefacts are often layered with subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> Digital modes of communication can be patronising for users and thus exclusionary, while ad-hoc offline channels may be more instinctive, and therefore afford more agency to users.

We envision producing knowledge that will be actionable for grassroots workers' organisations and movements. With a view to organising their efforts in dissemination, artefacts like the brochure become information touchpoints that can accompany on-field advocacy on the platform economy for workers collectives. Although we aimed to use print materials in addition to digital dissemination prior to the pandemic, we are now reformulating our strategy since collectives and workers are isolated and adapting to working from home. In this context, it might be optimal to focus on both offline methods and digital dissemination of easily shareable low-tech content.

### **Vernacularity in Knowledge Production**

*'Language is also a place of struggle.'*<sup>14</sup>

Feminist critiques of empirical knowledge argue that objectivist science strives to achieve universality and erase context, including through the process of translation and 'convertibility' of knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

This process forces local knowledges into 'unequal translations and exchanges' with objectivist science that claims to speak from nowhere.<sup>16</sup> Academic knowledge-making can appropriate knowledge—such as workers' lived experiences of labour in the platform economy—without equal exchanges or the 'giving back' of knowledge. It is also critical to recognise the social and material inequality between different bodies of knowledge and communities that produce and consume them.

In order to avoid being extractivist, research dissemination could localise knowledge (and content) into vernacular equivalents.<sup>17</sup> A long-standing hurdle to making knowledge accessible—in this context, accessibility implies knowledge that is empathetic to regional linguistic and cultural heterogeneity in India<sup>18</sup>—is the direct translation of sentences from English to vernacular languages. More often than not, this disorients audiences that occupy low-information positions from engaging with the information in a meaningful manner. This is partly a result of the loss of context in translation and the absence of readily available terminology for academic concepts in vernacular languages. In research on digital rights and platformised labour, visual knowledge materials could introduce and translate technically laden concepts and schematics into the vernacular.

We are designing part of the project's communication materials in Kannada and Hindi. We are working with union members and translators to reimagine terms like 'platformisation,' 'intermediaries,' 'digital intermediation,' etc., by finding apt vernacular equivalents. For instance, given workers' familiarity with traditional placement agencies, we translate digital platforms to 'online agencies'—even though there are several divergences between the two. Although intended for multiple global audiences including policy makers and academia, the vernacular typographic voice functions as an aesthetic element in our communication materials as well. In addition to its utility, the aesthetic can be seen as reminiscent of the Indian built environment—where bilinguality is prominent in the display of information, from signage to printed matter. The typography and layout is intrinsic to the design language across knowledge materials emerging from our project.

The design justice framework envisions a *community control of design processes and practices*.<sup>19</sup> An intervention of this nature is useful not only to resolve accessibility challenges but also to provide a vocabulary that makes its way into local parlance—for workers and unions to express their grievances, put forth their voices, and articulate new knowledge. Community control is critical to the democratisation of knowledge production, although the realities of material inequality still remain.

### **Information Brokerage in Knowledge Dissemination**

Domestic workers' inaccessibility to digital spaces is clear through the course of the research project; it is also evident through secondary sources of information. Despite the fact that India is widely celebrated as one of the countries with the cheapest mobile data costs, use of that data continues to be limited for women doing paid domestic and care work. These women tend to reside in urban pockets that are typically underserved by public and private actors and lack essential infrastructure. In our experience, regular access to mobile coverage and electricity was scarce for respondents as well as co-researchers.

Furthermore, much like access to digital spaces, access to digital platforms is mediated through men in family settings or in the neighbourhood. Women domestic workers' access to different kinds of platforms is also reliant on the availability of regular digital access. On-demand platforms tend to require regular proximity to a smartphone and internet connectivity. Consequently, these platforms had an overrepresentation of male workers providing domestic work services.

Contextualising the realities of women domestic workers' inaccessibility to data-compatible technological tools, knowledge dissemination for this research

relies on non-digital and low-tech channels. At the same time, inferring the access to, and engagement of domestic workers with, non-digital and print media has been difficult, with no analogous estimates available for understanding the impact of these channels. Instead, the knowledge transfer strategy has been informed by worker collectives' deep histories of collectivisation and outreach work through verbal communication along with non-digital artefacts such as Hindi *parchis* (instructive texts such as pamphlets, leaflets and brochures).

Instead of the binaries of digital and non-digital outreach, it is perhaps more useful to articulate the role of workers' collectives in achieving any impact outcomes. In addition to being knowledge producers, workers' collectives and DWRU are key translators in rendering research findings useful for themselves, allies, and, ultimately, domestic workers. This is both due to their placement within the material realities of the research context, as well as our distance from them. With informational overloads being commonplace, it is particularly important not only *what* the message is but also *who* the messenger is. In other words, workers' collectives have put on several hats throughout

the course of the project: as researchers, research participants, knowledge users, and now as information brokers communicating research to workers.

At the same time, we are aware that workers' collective action is not a homogeneous space. Institutions face limitations in terms of resources, come from a variety of political dispositions, regularly negotiate inter-collective allyship and opposition, and operate in increasingly challenging times with the systematic erosion of the exercise of collective action in India. It is also important to note that the processes of platformisation are new and have, thus far, not featured in domestic workers' collective action. This could potentially limit the sustained impact on collective bargaining that we hope for. To account for the reality that the material being disseminated to workers collectives might be more useful as the platform economy becomes more mainstream in this space, we have focussed on portability, storage and permanence, such as by creating a dedicated online space housing this work. These realities also serve as a reminder to continue our sustained engagement with the research works beyond the tenure of the project.

	<b>Network/broker</b>	<b>Primary audience</b>	<b>Secondary audience</b>
Project website and report	Civil society networks and communities of practice <sup>20</sup> (such as working groups)	Platforms, policy makers, researchers	Trade unions, designers
Brochure	Trade union network	Trade unions	Domestic workers
Voicenotes	Influential trade union representative(s) + worker's kinship network	Domestic workers	Researchers, designers
Posters	Influential trade union representative(s) + worker's kinship network	Domestic workers	Researchers, designers

In the process of co-creation, another factor that requires reflection is the location of unions and collectives as intermediaries. Involving workers in co-creation without intermediaries can be difficult due to constraints around project timelines. Unions also bring knowledge of advocacy and using knowledge to empower workers and protect their rights, which can strengthen research processes. However, the presence of intermediaries can also influence research processes in negative ways—for instance, through excluding non-unionised workers, which can result in the exclusion of demographics, such as first-generation migrants, who are less likely to be unionised. Since this demographic is also more vulnerable to exploitation, we aim to use outreach channels, such as community-level organisations, that work with vulnerable workers for our dissemination. Equations of power also exist within members and office bearers in collectives, which can impact responses. Researchers should also account for and be reflective of the impact of intermediaries on the research process, such as by addressing any gaps in respondents or any biases in data.

### **‘Dissemination Phase’?**

In our experience, most research projects are designed with discrete demarcations between phases of knowledge production—chronologically, as data collection and synthesis, and application and dissemination of knowledge. These supposedly neat demarcations between knowledge-gathering and dissemination emerge from the long-standing aspirational notions of legitimate research as that which is hermetic and ‘objective.’ In this view, knowledge producers and users are distinct entities. The language of ‘end users’ reinforces this separation, and in doing so has manifested in the uncritical conceptualisation of research use as necessarily measurable.<sup>21</sup> By extension, knowledge

production and its application are necessarily separate as well.

Feminist scholars and activists have long since debunked these epistemic notions of the scientific research process. Furthering the feminist epistemic position as one that reimagines knowledge production as a situated and political process, our overarching reflection through the project is that knowledge transfer<sup>22</sup> is similarly a socio-political process. We aimed to practise these principles by ensuring ownership and equal participation by union partners in knowledge production and communication design.<sup>23</sup>

We will also treat the process of outreach itself as research and document our learnings around the translation of knowledge. Knowledge transfer is reliant on the relationship and involvement that stakeholders have with the research itself, from its conception to the directions it takes. The work of feminist research lies in the careful translation and integration of situated knowledge and experience. Several binaries quickly give way: that of researcher/research subject, researcher/research user, and ultimately of knowledge production and dissemination. The role of design in knowledge production is to pave the way for concepts to allow for the visualisation of discussion around our world.<sup>24</sup> As those engaged in demystification (making and presenting these concepts), designers can seek inspiration in the critical reflexive politics of location.

Translation, however, is not easy. Through this contribution, we have sought to reflect on the work that feminist researchers must necessarily do as they take on the position of translators working across a variety of cultural, positional and institutional contexts. It is through the yardstick of sensitive translation that we intend to measure the success of our research. It is also important to acknowledge the messiness of knowledge

translation work. For us, what often takes the shape of solving these challenges of embedding feminist values in research work has now made way for embracing these challenges. It is in this acknowledgement that we locate the praxis of feminist research.

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Aayush Rathi is a senior researcher at the Centre for Internet and Society in India. He does interdisciplinary work on labour informalities, welfare systems and digitisation. He aims to make academic and policy contributions through socio-legal research, supporting the experiences and aspirations of historically marginalised communities.

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#### Ambika Tandon

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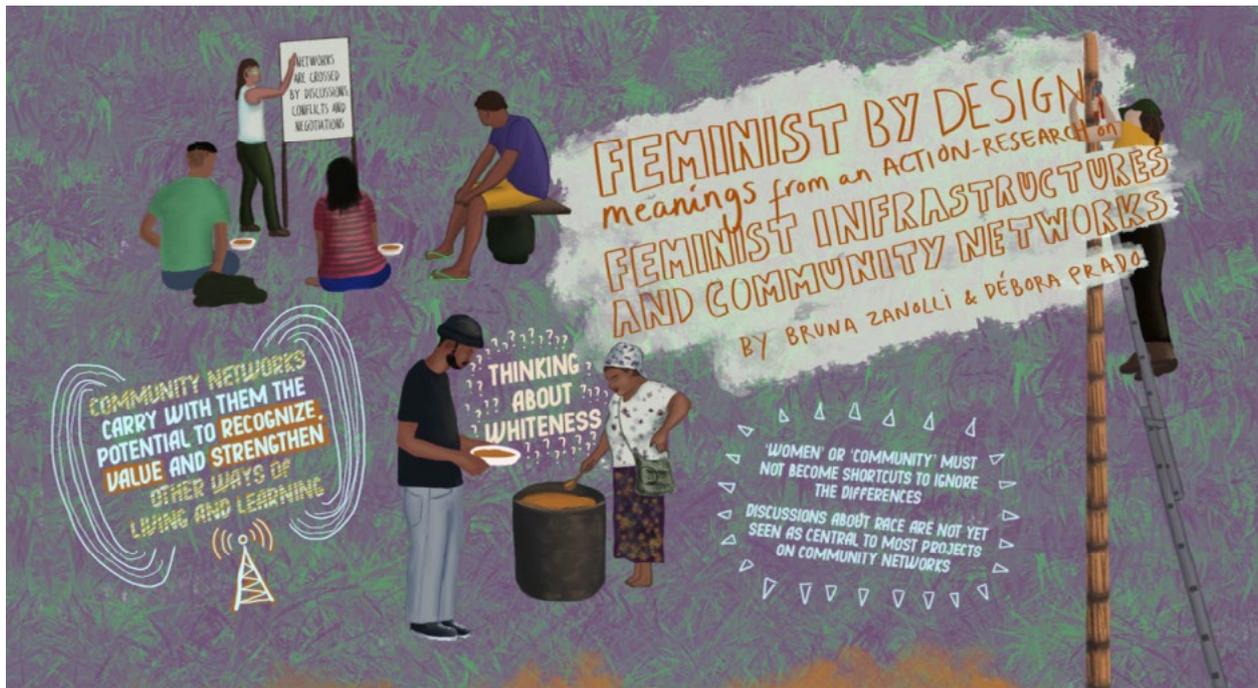
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# Feminist by Design and Designed by Diverse Feminists: Reflections on a Community Network Project in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The field of feminist infrastructures has shown that technologies are not neutral and, in fact, embody patriarchal and colonial assumptions. The emerging literature and practices of this field show that feminist infrastructures are not limited to the status-quo—there will always be escapes and hacks. By carrying out a two-year action-research project on community networks and feminist infrastructure in a traditionally black Brazilian community (the quilombos), we realised that social interactions with autonomous infrastructure and networks are intersected by discussions, conflicts and negotiations. Similarly, so is the process of researching.

What are the challenges when translating feminist intentions to building

infrastructure and digital networks while doing participatory research? This article explores what feminist by design means in our experience. Our main sources of information are the field notes and partial reports from our action-research project, the literature reviewed in this process, and semi-structured interviews conducted with community members. Rather than arriving at final answers, we intend to reflect on what we learned from our project. We hope to open our own experience to others and promote knowledge exchange around feminist practices, ethics, technologies and research.

Keywords: feminist infrastructure; community network; feminist research; intersectional feminism; popular education.

## Introduction



Quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca, Brazil. Residents from the community network's working team after setting a node in a bamboo pole.

It is a hot, sunny in the Brazilian summer. We are in the Vale do Ribeira region in the state of São Paulo, in the city of Barra do Turvo, in the quilombo community of Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca. Quilombos are communities that were founded by escaped slaves.<sup>2</sup> Around 20 of us are trying to install a bamboo tower. The material was previously treated in a collective workshop to make it even more resistant to weather and time. On the top of the tower is a router, one of the nodes of a community network being collectively built in an area without internet connectivity.

The process of erecting the tower requires collaboration: we divide into scattered groups, pulling the ropes that will raise the tower in a coordinated way. In the end, there's a shared joy of achievement. And here we are with a tower made of a local material.

It's standing, able to resist wear and tear for many years because of the technology used to treat this wood; and it can keep carrying digital technology—the router on top has been updated to operate in a collaborative network protocol. Different people, knowledge, background and materials (bamboo, wires, antennas) came together, and now this node is ready to connect with other ones covering the territory.

Our group of women came from São Paulo, Brazil's biggest city. In spite of the high temperature and the physical effort to raise the tower, we accept the hot coffees offered to us. With each sip, we, the women from our project's team, try to become familiar faces, not just people from the city. Trust and affection is a fundamental aspect of socio-technical networks, such as community networks.

The blue sky and preserved natural hilly landscape contrasts with the daily challenges the members of the quilombo community (quilombolas) face to keep their lands, rights, ways of living, knowledge and technologies. In the second half of the twentieth century, so-called 'development' projects, such as the construction of roads, dams, and mining, arrived in the region. At the same time, the Vale do Ribeira has three national parks and many traditional communities' lands. It is not difficult to imagine how the region's history has been affected by land conflicts and struggles for better living conditions. However, the region also carries memories of resistance:

Vale do Ribeira, located in the extreme south of the state of São Paulo, is the largest area of continuous Atlantic Forest remnants in Brazil. The presence of countless traditional communities made it possible to conserve these areas. In the region, there are 24 indigenous Guarani villages, 66 quilombola

communities and 7,037 family farming establishments that involve traditional peasants (the ‘caipiras’), traditional fishermen (‘caiçaras’), and migrants from the Brazilian metropolises (generally, children of farming parents who were expelled from the land in the past and pushed into urban areas and who are now returning to rural activity).<sup>3</sup>

The Vale do Ribeira region comprises 25 cities, including Barra do Turvo, where there are seven quilombos recognised by the Brazilian authorities.<sup>4</sup> One of them is the quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca, where our community network emerged through an action-research project developed between 2019 and 2021. The network was founded by a group composed exclusively of women<sup>5</sup> while conducting a participatory research process.<sup>6</sup> They were supported by the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) through grants and constant feedback on our reflections and by providing exchanges with other researchers from the Global South.

The project envisages the implementation of a Wi-Fi community network in quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca by actively encouraging the involvement of the entire region in multiple workshops and knowledge exchanges about networks; feminist infrastructures; popular education; agroecology; gender and race relations; traditional and digital technologies; and technology and communication autonomy. The project also aims to build knowledge in these fields, based on reflections that have emerged from this localised experience and the encounters it promoted.

It is worth sharing that the definitions of community networks can vary a lot depending on the context in which they are implemented. However, a common element is the search for autonomy—even if that is a

relative concept—from the models of connection and communication established by the profit-oriented big telecommunication companies. Here, we understand community networks as a solution to reduce the lack of connectivity<sup>7</sup> in rural areas, urban peripheries and other places (in Brazil and around the world) that are currently not connected because of a commercial approach to connectivity. This can be achieved through the collective installation of a local-level infrastructure and shared management of the technical and human aspects of a network.

Recently, community networks have been argued to be an alternative to the search for greater autonomy<sup>8</sup> in relation to communication and connectivity and to promote local social interactions—in distinct territories—through digital infrastructures.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the debate on community networks has been gaining new perspectives, going beyond the field of connectivity solutions for places and populations without internet access. The idea has become linked to other political agendas, including, as in this case, the intersectional feminist perspective<sup>10</sup> and the fields of feminist infrastructure and popular education, all of which seek to make the collective process welcoming to different groups and bodies, especially different women.



Dolíria, a woman farmer from RAMA, treating bamboo with fire in a workshop.

As researchers guided by these perspectives, we were committed to breaking hierarchies

as much as possible among researchers, technicians, and the local community, as well as to escaping from pretensions of research neutrality or schemes that hierarchise the multiple subjects and knowledge.<sup>11</sup> We were a group of mostly white women from the biggest city in Brazil, supported by an international research network, who went to a rural area with a mostly black population. As such, we were aware that our position was not neutral, particularly with regards to geography and race. What's more, we understand that the awareness of privileges and power asymmetries demands a change of attitude that goes beyond simply declaring them in the papers that emerge from our research and trying to adopt reflexivity as a political practice.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, thinking about the technologies we bring to this project from experiences in the field and our activism, we want to avoid reproducing the notions that only experts and technicians have the best solutions to problems in communities or that digital technologies and internet connectivity can bring magical solutions to local and complex problems. Such perspectives often assume that communities facing inequalities and discrimination need definitive 'magical' top-down solutions, which can result in some social-technological choices being presented as universal, which is detrimental to extant experiences, local knowledge and multiple forms of communication and bonding.<sup>13</sup> Even with the best intentions, a project that comes to a community seeking instant solutions with ready-made set ups runs the risk of disregarding local knowledge. Community members, for example, will have great advice for where to put the antennas and where to have the best line-of-sight. They also have local communication strategies and their own communicators with interesting propositions for the local needs.

If the project comes with a 'ready-to-use' approach, the space for collective building is suppressed. Communities have their own past experiences of using forms of communication. They are the ones with knowledge of their territory and its history, their achievements and challenges. Without the collective building of the process, chances that the community members will see community network builders as service providers are higher, which could result in them not actually embracing the community network for themselves. In addition, if the project only or mainly addresses adult men and disregards all other perspectives and wishes, that will result in a layer of exclusion, even if your project aims to connect people in a collective, inclusive and meaningful way.

But what are the challenges when translating all these commitments and wishes into building infrastructure and digital networks while doing participatory research? Over the course of two years, we have realised that social interactions with autonomous infrastructure and networks are embedded by discussions, conflicts and negotiations; similarly, so is researching. In this article, we want to share these reflections, focussing on the gendered and racial aspects of our journey. We hope to open our own experience to others and promote knowledge exchange around feminist practices, ethics, technologies and research.

More than reaching answers, this question has helped us to expand a set of reflections from the encounter between different ways of living and building knowledge and techniques. To some extent, these escape normative models in the field of digital technologies—such as the overrepresentation of white males<sup>14</sup> in this field<sup>15</sup> and the processes of concentration of power on the internet<sup>16</sup>—but simultaneously interact with 'unequal parts of privilege and oppression that all positions contain.'<sup>17</sup>

### First Connections

We were introduced to the residents of quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca by partners from the Brazilian feminist organisation SOF (Sempre Viva Organização Feminista in Portuguese). Since 2015, SOF has been working with farmer women in the region through a feminist and agroecological perspective that is based on an understanding of economics centred around the reproduction of all the resources necessary for life and takes food production and consumption as a starting point in seeking the democratisation of all power relations involved in social reproduction.<sup>18</sup> SOF has been working with the local Agroecological Network of Women Farmers (RAMA), which is composed by groups of women from eight communities<sup>19</sup> in Barra do Turvo.<sup>20</sup> The proposal of the community network in this territory therefore begins with SOF's and RAMA's wish to contribute to and help facilitate the sale of organic products through the women farmers of the solidarity economy and agroecology networks in Vale do Ribeira.

Through this partnership, our project arrived in the territory with a stated desire for a community network that was also endorsed by an active and respected feminist group working in areas related to the feminist economy, the solidarity economy, agroecology and food sovereignty. We also had a human network already in place through these groups. In addition, SOF is a feminist group engaged with techno-politics and FLOSS (Free/Libre and Open Source Software) discussions, especially those concerning the role technology plays in shaping agribusiness and monocultures and creating barriers for food sovereignty and agroecology. At the same time, SOF had been looking for ways in which technology can be an ally to a feminist and solidarity economy approach, which was synergetic with the

feminist infrastructure perspective adopted in this action-research project.

In a dialogue process with RAMA leaderships and SOF partners, we considered that our methodology should include feminist practices of reflexivity<sup>21</sup> and prioritise collective activities and participatory processes, rather than individual data collection, such as interviews or surveys. We agreed, therefore, that we would always do a preparatory stage prior to each field visit. This would be a period of immersed workshops<sup>22</sup> in the community, as well as a reflection on the immersion on our return from each visit, which would inform the preparation for the next visit and so on. Between the beginning of the project and March 2020, we followed this methodology and were in quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca five times, where we spent between three and five days during each visit performing immersive processes<sup>23</sup> of knowledge sharing. Due to the health crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, we could not visit the community for many months and managed to go once again in January 2021, completing six visits in total.<sup>24</sup>

### Women's Participation

In other to make this process welcoming for different people, we approached the task from two directions: creating an experience that is both welcoming to women, which, at the same time, brings the feminist perspective into mixed groups involving all those in the community who want to participate. The following table summarises the participation of women and men in the immersions:

	Sept. '19	Nov. '19	Dec. '19	Feb. '20	Mar. '20
Women	28	7	11	10	14
Men	8	6	9	13	7



Workshop on community networks equipment.

We tried to keep to our commitment to a balance between women and men among the groups mobilised through the immersions. However, this was not always possible for several reasons that we discussed with the people of the community through semi-structured interviews focussing on their evaluation of the process.<sup>25</sup> What was most pointed out by community members was the high amount of migration by young women (between 15 and 25 years old) from the territory, who left in search of work and more available opportunities in nearby cities that provided a greater demand for domestic work. They also leave the countryside for the city to study and/or to discover what is available to them outside their community.

Among those who stay behind, women tend to have more responsibilities in their homes with care and housework. In some cases, there are also gender stigmas—parents and husbands do not like women being out of the house and with people they do not know. This was indicative that, as in other spheres of social life, we were faced with unequal gender roles and other forms of discrimination that were present even in communities.<sup>26</sup> It is important to highlight, however, that more than arrive at an iron-clad process or final result, we were looking to build safe and welcoming processes and spaces for different people. This avoided the naturalisation of inequality by being active

when differences— instead of being respected and valued—are mobilised to produce discrimination and remove certain social groups from the place of technologies and knowledge producers.



Workshop on crimping network cables.

Keeping in mind that being a feminist is a constant search for more balanced relationships and ethical practices (rather than a physical condition or a permanent state), we tried some specific actions to face the challenges of involving women and seeking gender balance. These included:

- Performing the immersions at a time compatible with the school schedule and welcoming children so that the people responsible for their care could also be present.
- Offering collective meals during meetings so that families' food preparation would not clash with our workshops (and instead generate an income for the women in the community, who could provide their organic products and services to our project).
- Prioritising being a group of women facilitating the project, hoping that our bodies could help break any possible idea that the digital infrastructure and community networks might be an exclusively male activity.

- Adopting what we call the ‘coffee’ method. This involved taking the time to go from house to house in the community on the day we arrive, so that everyone had the opportunity to know us better. We spoke to the women leaders and ensured that everyone was invited to join us.
- Arriving in the territory through the partnership with SOF and the women of RAMA, which helped us decide the starting point and future directions of the community network with the group of women from the outset. By linking with SOF, these women were always involved in decision-making processes—even though they were not all present in every socio-technical workshop. Through the project, they assume the position of guardians of their community network by knowing where all the antennas are installed and where the signal of each antenna reaches. They are also the ones responsible for sharing the password of the network with families and preventing outsiders from going there just to use their internet.

Although this process didn’t guarantee the female majority we were hoping for, these actions seemed to work to some extent as we managed to keep the balance between women and men more equal than in other processes of community network installations we previously did in Brazil. We also experienced rewarding developments: almost immediately after we had connected the mesh network with an internet link, we received so much positive feedback from the community and could re-establish more robust communications with them. Women from their forties upwards—who were used to travelling to the surrounding highway to fish 3G or 4G signal to be able to do their

economic activities related to agriculture (such as receiving the orders and the specifics of the delivery process)—could now do that in the comfort of their homes. In addition, internet connectivity has enabled women from RAMA to participate in online political events and webinars regarding the protection of their way of living and the nature that surrounds them.

And to overcome the obstacles, it was necessary to reconcile aspects of preparing the immersive processes with an ability to stay open to the unexpected and to what emerges from the encounter with the community members when we adopt a process of collective learning. In other words, we had to keep our listening and plans open to unforeseen developments, which are only revealed in the territory when diverse people are gathered. The barriers here lead us to an important reflection on the combination and balance between the importance of preparation and the ability to keep dealing with emerging issues while seeking to break with normative practices.

### **Race and Whiteness**

Another important aspect of our process is considering intersectionality and not erasing the differences between women. Here, it seems crucial to highlight that ‘women’ or ‘community’ must not become shortcuts to ignoring the differences between women, especially with regards to race, ethnicity and class. Different feminist authors<sup>27</sup> have pointed out the need to question universalisation, which operated historically with the concealment and naturalisation of inequalities, including the homogenisation of women by erasing the combination of multiple forms of discrimination.

Once we arrived in Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca’s territory, we were asked about how we felt about being a group composed mostly of white women who had travelled

from the city to the quilombo, which has a predominantly black population. This questioning was initially raised by the one black woman in our original group, which brought a concrete example of how often the ones who occupy the position seen as ‘universal’ naturalise that position, thus imposing a burden on the ‘not-universal’ social groups to speak up and break the silence. In this case, that was Daiane dos Santos Araújo in our small team.

Seeking to avoid perpetuating this situation, our group used this questioning and awareness raising to rethink how the issue of race should be addressed in our project, recognising the need to think more in depth about race and its different layers to lead to action. At this point, we separate what *we* adopted so far in this article to bring these reflections from two different places. On one hand, Daiane dos Santos Araújo built a reflection on race relations from a condition of alterity in our group and in many spaces of free technologies in Brazil. On the other hand, white women in our group also needed to recognise themselves as racialised in order to break the silence and act in the face of the privileges on which their race is structured. Discussions about whiteness were fundamental to achieving this awareness.



Workshop on crimping network cables.

In her reflection on race, Daiane pointed out that, generally, the places that receive

proposals for community networks in Brazil are racialised territories, such as quilombos, indigenous communities and urban peripheries. The construction of community networks is tied to the technological formation and knowledge that already exists in these territories. But today, the fields of production of digital technologies today mostly consist of white males. This is true not only true in terms of numbers; the whole thought process of digital technologies and their techniques come from Eurocentric and American perspectives. The demand for representation is a current issue, which had already been present in feminist research on digital gender gaps.

But we can also go further. When Djamila Ribeiro engages with literature from black women, she points out the importance of breaking with the naturalisation of whiteness, which is often seen as universal or neutral. This is also an objective in ongoing activist initiatives in Brazil, such as PretaLab,<sup>28</sup> which seeks to encourage and support the experience of black and indigenous women in technologies.

Moving from these reflections to the field of feminist infrastructures and community networks, there is a possible approximation in the sense of recognising the importance of representation but also of building a strong proposal to go further. In other words, having more social groups and diverse bodies in the design of autonomous networks is not just a matter of representation. It is also a decisive factor in promoting alliances that could be able to challenge naturalised and non-verbalised choices and the reproduction of norms and discriminations in the fields of network infrastructures and digital technologies. Bringing these perspectives to these particular fields highlights that the operation of a community network implies relationships between different people and social groups that will carry

different perspectives, interests, needs. Given the existence of inequalities, not everyone will be impacted in the same way by socio-technical systems.

However, discussions about race are not yet seen as central to many projects on community networks. This silence on such a latent issue in this field may represent an echo of structural racism in Brazil. Initiatives, spaces and choices thought up by white men and women are loaded with assumptions and privilege baggage. However, the perception of whiteness as a universal condition means that destabilising assumptions and dealing with structural racism is not part of their lives, which could also be reflected in their projects, even in a country like Brazil, where more than half the population is black and where racism is such a historical and pressing issue. Daiane indicated this scenario as one of the key factors that made her rethink her involvement with community networks before we started this action-research project.

Furthermore, Daiane dos Santos Araújo indicates that being in the quilombo—a territory associated symbolically and historically with the black resistance in Brazil—made her reflect and want to remain acting in the community networks field. She views them as initiatives that can empower social justice processes since they are permeated by inconclusive and disputed processes. According to Daiane, the willingness to act in the construction of an egalitarian society presupposes reviewing ourselves constantly, which makes it possible to interfere, decide, compare and break through. And that indicates the need to transform our human and digital connections in a way that is welcoming to people who are not white.

If, like Daiane, we think that many black people can feel silenced and distanced from spaces of interaction with digital infrastructures and technologies in Brazil, how

collective can the installation and management of autonomous and community networks actually be? And why aren't white people thinking about how to challenge racism from their own position?



Workshop on technical aspects of a community.

All of this caused the white women involved in this project to mobilise the concept of whiteness<sup>29</sup> as a fundamental pillar of our process. As a mostly white group, it was necessary to understand the position occupied by white women, considering that subjects who occupy it are systematically privileged with regards to access to material and symbolic resources. They are also part of a process initiated by colonialism and imperialism, which is still sustained and preserved. We believe that reflections on whiteness can and should be mobilised to challenge a general perception among white people that the only people belonging to a race are non-whites. This concept pointed us to the need for white people to raise awareness of their race more in order to promote changes in their micro positions of power and activity. And what's more, to act in the general framework to engage with the structural change of cultural values so that whiteness, as a normative place of power, becomes white ethnic-racial identities where racism is not a prop that supports them.<sup>30</sup>

### **Feminist Infrastructure as an Evolving Field**

From our previous experience in the field of feminist infrastructures,<sup>31</sup> we brought a perspective to this project that digital infrastructures are not based on binary or artificial separation between humans and machines. As we see it, infrastructures includes servers, networks, cables, antennas, software, hardware, as well as the use of the electromagnetic spectrum, protocols, and algorithm; this also includes the spaces, temporalities, priorities, relations between humans and machines, and agreements that can be (but not always) established, verbalised, visible and renegotiated when necessary.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, feminist infrastructures cannot be reduced to electronic materiality produced by women and non-binary people. The process is a central layer here, in which relationships are established locally and promote encounters that can lead to a commitment to rethinking through other perspectives—priorities, organisation of space and time, agreements, relationships between people and groups, and even between humans and machines.

In this journey with FIRN, SOF, RAMA and Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca members, we installed, together with the community, a bamboo tower, a wooden tower, and three nodes from a mesh network using LibreMesh,<sup>33</sup> installed on accessible CPE antennas and standard routers. So far, these collectively share the signal of a satellite connection between around fifteen families. In addition, there is a Raspberry Pi<sup>34</sup> with a feminist version of Pirate Box;<sup>35</sup> the Fuxico,<sup>36</sup> which performs the function of a small local server operating as a repository for documents and media exchanges, forums; and a local chat service.

So, even though the equipment and techniques were not the major focus of this research, we felt really satisfied that our

process of popular education and feminist intersectional approach resulted in the women of RAMA owning the network. In our action research, we worked to build trust and a close relationship with the women from RAMA, and this co-construction led them to a position of guardians of the community network. This means that they all have a clear vision of the community network in their territory (they know where the antennas, routers and internet link are located and the equipment, such as a specific router, is called by the name of the household housing it). They also manage passwords for the community and recognise when and where maintenance is needed.

Ultimately, RAMA women were regularly informed and participated in the decision making through meetings, even though they were not always able to be present at the workshops and the implementation of the community network due to their daily and agricultural tasks. SOF also made sure their feedback constantly reached our group between the field trips. The women become the ones responsible for giving out passwords, knowing where the infrastructure is located, doing basic troubleshooting, and accurately informing us of bigger problems. The community also greatly appreciated that a women's project brought the internet to the territory, which we believe helped to address some internal gender imbalances<sup>37</sup> as well.

Most importantly, they are able to use the community network to fulfil their own interests and needs in several different forms, including financially, politically, educationally and by fostering personal relations with the relatives and friends who no longer live in the territory. Among these different forms, we highlight the positive impact of digital communication on their sales process, political articulations, education and affective relations.

First, the communication made possible by the community network facilitates their production processes and sales because the community network helped expand their communications with each other, the groups that market their products, and their business contacts generally. This was an important impact since it facilitated the community's income generation process, even during the pandemic. Second, the internet makes it possible to make video calls or participate in live online events. This means that RAMA councillors and other political leaders who support the defence of the quilombola land and rights could participate in regional and national political articulation and decision-making spaces in Brazil, such as the National Articulation of Agroecology, the National Meetings of the Quilombos, and Environment Councils.

These meetings include many discussions, advocacy and coordinations to fight for maintaining their way of life, land, rights and local economy against the backdrop of historical and structural threats faced by quilombolas communities in Brazil. These coordinations are a key factor in guaranteeing the right to land and fight invasions; fighting agribusiness and the extensive use of pesticides; engaging in collective agroecological sales to government and major buyers; exploring community-based tourism activities; and guaranteeing basic human rights for the community members. All of this has been even more challenging considering the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic in the current chaotic Brazilian political scenario. The far-right Brazilian president and his supporters bring constant threats to quilombolas and even brought racist ultra-right conservative officials to occupy government spaces that were supposed to fight racism in Brazil, such as director of the Brazilian federal foundation for the promotion of Afro-Brazilians, the Palmares Foundation.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, as in many countries, the pandemic led to schooling being moved online in Brazil. As classes return in a hybrid mode of online and in person, some school activities have been distributed through the internet. The connectivity helps the students to download learning materials. The pandemic also highlighted the importance of communication for personal relations and the exchange of affections in challenging times. In this scenario, the community network and internet access increased daily communications alternatives, helping people to communicate with relatives who live outside the quilombo to check on and look for each other.



Setting up a community network node at the top of a power pole in the quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca.

### Conclusion

Beyond the physical infrastructure that allows a digital network to operate, each meeting, gathering and exchange of affection and knowledge between people (the human infrastructure) was even more necessary to deploying the community network as part

of this experience. It was also necessary to the parallel research. Just like the bamboo tower, our reflections would not have been possible without these links between bodies and backgrounds of diverse social groups and knowledge fields, which are crossed by historical and structural inequalities in different ways. At the same time, these are places of resistance and cultivation of other ways of living and weaving technologies.

After this experience, we added some reflections to our approach to feminist infrastructures. This field invited us to act in scenarios marked by disputes where the encounters, dialogues and multiplicity of voices will be decisive in challenging the norms. We worked through listening skills and keeping ourselves open to what can only be offered by the localised experience and specific encounters. This also helped us look at tensions and conflicts not as something that need to be stabilised but as an opportunity to open important dialogues—between ourselves and with the community members. On the other hand, it has meant seeking to build physical and digital environments that consider multiple interests and needs from an intersectional perspective that is, in fact, capable of bringing together different groups and bodies in a welcoming way when constructed collectively by different groups and bodies. This leads us to the need to address the intersectionalities of access because connectivity can otherwise become a tool that mainly benefits white cisgender men and/or reinforces patriarchal values, racism and multiple inequalities.

If community networks carry the potential to recognise, value and strengthen other ways of living and learning, it seems fitting that discussions in this area could be combined with the knowledge from other fields that are already focused on ways of breaking with imperialism and colonial legacies long before the internet. And

intersectional feminism, popular education and race discussions, including whiteness, have been fundamental to our process. In another sense, research can also learn from experiences that, in practice, break with universalisation and grow from the encounter with local knowledge and social movements.

This made us understand that the wish to practise intersectionality—as both researchers building reflections and activists seeking to eliminate disparities between groups<sup>39</sup>—is also about looking at what is around the local experiences and not being a reproducer of structural silences of society in our research, even though this is not a linear process. This has meant looking at conflict as an opportunity to break silence or invisibility around norms and inequalities. In other words, the absence of conflict does not mean that conflicts do not exist; instead, they may not emerge at the expense of silencing or ignoring certain people to perpetuate the comfort of those who live in privileged positions. Based on our own experiences, feminist references<sup>40</sup> and popular education,<sup>41</sup> we consider contradictions and conflicts not as something that need to be ‘resolved’ or ‘stabilised.’ Rather, they have the potential to facilitate collective reflection—while keeping different places of speech in mind<sup>42</sup>—to build relevant community networks. And bringing them to our findings to be shared became a key element for us to build feminist research projects.

Finally, we want to highlight that among unforeseen events was one we could not have predicted: the emergence of a global pandemic and its profound negative impacts on Brazil, which was aggravated by the fact that we are going through a global health emergency under a far-right government that denies science and public health measures, violates human rights, adopts an anti-feminist stance and aggressive authoritarian inclination towards traditional communities,

such as quilombolas. We do not delve into these developments in this article, but we consider it important to point out briefly how this difficult context frames our reflections when sharing the project's findings.

The health emergency made it more difficult to plan because we did not know whether health conditions would allow our plans to be implemented. We also experienced an emotional impact from the situation as we faced and dealt with uncertainty and unknowns. In the end, we made some adjustments to be able to proceed. This period made us incorporate new questions into our reflections: how can we think of networks that are territorialised and flourish from the encounter between different people (like this project) in times when being together can be a public health risk? How will the pandemic impact the future of community networks and research? But if the pandemic prevented us from continuing the immersive and collective processes in the territory, it also stressed the need to connect the quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca community network to the internet. This was because it was a time when essential activities, such as school and access to emergency financial assistance, moved online in Brazil as a consequence of social distancing measures.

With the increased use of the internet to access public health information (such as measures to prevent Covid-19 and information on vaccines), the connection between connectivity and the right-to-know of rural populations, such as quilombola communities, has become more relevant. The pandemic was further aggravated by a deterioration in access to information by the Brazilian government. As reports by the Alianza Regional<sup>43</sup> point out, there is a deterioration in freedom of speech and right to information, pointing to Brazil as one of the Latin American countries where the discourse of public authorities has deteriorated,

while attacks on institutions that promote access to public information grow.

Beyond the quilombolas' right-to-know, the connection that allowed us to communicate with the community members and also hear from them in online events during the pandemic showed that connecting around fifteen families could even have an impact on the right-to-know of a greater number of people, including those from other countries who could be reading these lines right now. These nodes support the ability to insist on existing and share achievements and joys, such as when the community network made it possible for all of us to hear from them in the online live events mentioned above.

We brought the Feminist Principles of the Internet<sup>44</sup> to this project in our commitment to interrogating the capitalist logic that drives technology towards further privatisation, profit and corporate control. Learning from quilombolas and listening to Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca's members and the women from RAMA was ground-breaking for known 'alternative forms of economic power that are grounded in principles of cooperation, solidarity, commons, environmental sustainability, and openness.'<sup>45</sup> We saw that our experience was able to meet other feminist principles while weaving these connections, especially in terms of 'enabling more women and queer persons to enjoy universal, acceptable, affordable, unconditional, open, meaningful and equal access to the internet'<sup>46</sup> and affirming the right 'to code, design, adapt and critically and sustainably use ICTs and reclaim technology as a platform for creativity and expression, as well as to challenge the cultures of sexism and discrimination in all spaces.'<sup>47</sup>

We mentioned in this article our commitment to breaking hierarchies as much as possible. Possible is an important word here because, considering that unequal power relations are historical and structural,

hierarchies are present in the process regardless of our commitments and wishes. In our project, thinking about whiteness made this concretely visible both for the community network and the research<sup>48</sup> process.

But, at the end of the day, we feel that feminist by design means exactly being able to embrace reality as it appears to us, in all its complexities, struggles and joys, while doing our best to break the silence and remain faithful to our feminist principles. This also means not hiding our own privileges and ethical responsibilities when trying to build structural change from local to global levels. The way we found to face these privileges was by opening ourselves to self and collective reflections, as well as by not being afraid to recognise that we don't have all the answers yet but are nonetheless trying to challenge inequalities and discriminations. Considering the feminist perspectives we brought with us, our design is not a ready one-size-fits-all model. Rather, it is a work in progress that is being co-constructed, even as we write this article and engage in a dialogue with you as you read it. We felt that this action-research was made as feminist by design and was designed by many and diverse feminists.



The working team formed with the quilombo's residents in the mountains during an activity to set up a community network node.

#### Bruna Zanolli

Bruna Zanolli is an activist in the area of autonomous communications and human rights, who is interested in intersectional feminist and popular education principles as tools to narrow the gaps of access.

#### Débora Prado

Débora Prado is a journalist and activist with a background in social communications, feminism and human rights. Since 2017, she has been involved in researching feminist technologies and knowledge to challenge androcentric and colonial norms. They both carried out a two-year action-research project about community networks and feminist infrastructures and technologies with the Feminist Internet Research Network from the Women's Right Program of the Association for Progressive Communications. The project was financed by the International Development Research Centre.

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### Endnotes

1 We want to give special thanks to the inhabitants of quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca, the women from RAMA, and the women involved in our work team. In addition to the authors, these are:

Carla Jancz, an information security specialist who works with digital security for third sector organisations and with free technologies and autonomous networks from a feminist and holistic perspective. She is a member of MariaLab, a feminist hacker collective based in São Paulo, Brazil, that explores the intersection between gender and technology.

Daiane Araujo dos Santos, a Brazilian activist in human rights and in the field of information and communication technologies, who contributes to the implementation of community networks in Brazil. She focusses on the critical appropriation of technology and its impact on people's social and community life. She lives on the periphery of the south of São Paulo (Brazil) and graduated in geography in 2018. She has worked in social movements since 2010.

Glaucia Marques, an agronomist and part of the SOF (Sempreviva Feminist Organization) technical team that operates in the Vale do Ribeira region, contributing to the solidarity commercialisation, as well as agroecological and feminist technical assistance for the Agroecological Network of Women Farmers.

Natália Santos Lobo, an agroecologist who is part of SOF's technical team in Vale do Ribeira. She works with the RAMA network. To finish we also want to thank all the partners and community members involved in the process and say that we are looking forward to more kitchen talks and coffees, where the transformation is being cooked!

2 According to Daine dos Santos Araújo, the quilombos emerged as places of refuge for black people who escaped repression during the entire period of slavery in Brazil, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The inhabitants of these communities are called quilombolas. After the abolition of slavery, most of them preferred to continue living in the villages they formed. With the 1988 Constitution, they gained the right to own and use the land they were on. Today, Brazil has more than 15,000 quilombola communities. Read more at: <https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/contribution-bell-hooks-and-paulo-freire-construction-community-networks>.

3 Carla Jancz, Gláucia Marques, Miriam Nobre, Renata Moreno, Rosana Miranda, Sheyla Saori, Vivian Franco, 'Práticas feministas de transformação da economia: autonomia das mulheres e agroecologia no Vale do Ribeira' (São Paulo: SOF, 2018). This quotation was translated by the authors. The original is available in Portuguese at <http://www.sof.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Praticas-feministas-portugu%C3%AAs-webl.pdf>.

4 The National Coordination of Articulation of Black Rural Communities indicates that the existing remaining territory of the quilombola community, recognised by the Brazilian state, is a realisation of the conquests of the Afro-descendent community in Brazil, the result of the various and heroic resistances to the slave and oppressive model established in colonial Brazil, and the recognition of this historic injustice. More information available in Portuguese at: <http://conaq.org.br/quem-somos/>.

5 Our group was composed of six women with multidisciplinary backgrounds. See more information

- in the acknowledgements at the end of this article.
- 6 Different feminist authors (Haraway 1988; Ribeiro 2017; Harding 2003) have pointed out the need to question universalisation, which historically operated with the concealment and naturalisation of inequalities, even contributing to the perpetuation of Western colonialist practices in the fields of science and technology. A critical perspective regarding knowledge-building is also present in the popular education field (Freire 1996; hooks 1994). This approach encourages the development of a critical look at education and the fostering of the participation of the community as a whole to build knowledge in a way that challenges unequal power dynamics and defends people's rights, thus recognising the importance of popular and scientific knowledge. Aware that even participatory research generates and perpetuates certain types of power dynamic and imbalance, we often try to conduct our action research free from a pretension of 'objectivity,' 'neutrality,' and the reproduction of a hierarchical division between academic researchers and object-society. Even if this is not always fully achieved, we try to build our research process based on the feminist and popular education references mentioned in this article. That is to say, with a reflexive posture, promoting a constant evaluation of our methodologies, practices and ethics in each milestone of the process.
- 7 Bruna Zanolli, 'Why Do People in Communities Need Connectivity?' Mozilla, January 9, 2020, <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/blog/why-do-people-communities-need-connectivity/>
- 8 Nicola J. Bidwell and Michael Jensen, 'Bottom-up Connectivity Strategies: Community-led Small-scale Telecommunication Infrastructure Networks in the Global South,' APC 2019, [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/bottom-up-connectivity-strategies\\_0.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/bottom-up-connectivity-strategies_0.pdf); and Association for Progressive Communications, Global Information Society Watch 2018. Available at: [https://giswatch.org/sites/default/files/giswatch18\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://giswatch.org/sites/default/files/giswatch18_web_0.pdf).
- 9 Débora Prado, 'Community Networks and Feminist Infrastructure: Reclaiming Local Knowledge and Technologies Beyond Connectivity Solutions,' GenderIT, November 4, 2019, <https://www.genderit.org/es/node/5348>.
- 10 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw conceptualised intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women's employment experiences. Although her theory has aroused controversy, Crenshaw helped to make visible some of the dynamics of structural intersectionality and pointed out that people and groups experience the overlapping of discriminatory systems. She also pointed out the limits in identity politics, affirming that its problem 'is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences.' The author argues that the experience of black women cannot be captured only from the perspective of race, nor only from the perspective of gender, without incurring an erasure. Following the intersectional perspective, several feminist researches have pointed out the need to consider the combination of the multiple differences, such as those of class, race, ethnicity, age, and gender, which are part of women and specific social groups and should not be reduced to just one lens. For more information, see: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf>.
- 11 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): pp. 575-599; and Djamila Ribeiro, *O que é Lugar de Fala?* (Letramento, 2017).
- 12 Tigist Shewarega Hussen, "All that You Walk on to Get There": How to Centre Feminist Ways of Knowing,' *GenderIT*, August 29, 2109, <https://genderit.org/>

- [editorial/all-you-walk-get-there-how-centre-feminist-ways-knowing.](#)
- 13 Bruna Zanolli, Carla Jancz, Cristiana Gonzalez, Daiane Araujo dos Santos, and Débora Prado, 'Feminist Infrastructure and Community Networks: An Opportunity to Rethink our Connections from the Bottom up, Seeking Diversity and Autonomy,' in *Global Information Society Watch 2018: Community Networks*, APC, 2018, <https://www.giswatch.org/en/infrastructure/feminist-infrastructures-and-community-networks>.
- 14 The overrepresentation of white males in the field is not only physical and numerical; it is also historically embedded in the narratives and epistemologies of technical knowledge as colonial structures and frameworks that are imposed or naturalised in that field, thus blocking entry even to non-white cis male bodies and social groups. So, more than the numerical imbalance of white cis men occupying places of power in this field, it is important to reflect on what bodies and groups are visible and have their interests, needs and knowledge considered in places of power crossed by normative structures, such as those based on class, masculinity and whiteness.
- 15 Débora Prado de Oliveira, 'Community Networks and Invisibility Regimes of Infrastructures and Bodies,' paper presented at LAVITS International Symposium 'Vigilancia, Democracia y Privacidad en América Latina: Vulnerabilidades y resistencias,' Santiago, Chile, November 29-December 1, 2017, [lavits.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/40-Débora-Prado-de-Oliveira.pdf](http://lavits.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/40-Débora-Prado-de-Oliveira.pdf).
- 16 Diego Vicentín, 'Internet Governance, Infrastructure and Resistance,' paper presented at LAVITS International Symposium, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2016, [lavits.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/P8\\_Vicentin.pdf](http://lavits.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/P8_Vicentin.pdf).
- 17 Haraway 1988.
- 18 Jancz, Marques, Nobre, Moreno, Miranda, Saori, and Franco 2018.
- 19 RAMA is composed of the following groups: As Margaridas (Bairro Indaiatuba), Rosas do Vale (Bairro Córrego da Onça e do Franco), As Perobas (Quilombo Terra Seca), Mulheres do Quilombo Ribeirão Grande, Mulheres do Quilombo Cedro, Mulheres do Bairro Rio Vermelho, Grupo Esperança (Bairro Bela Vista), Mulheres do Conchas. The women's group called Perobas is the RAMA subgroup that brings together women from the Terra Seca quilombo. They are quilombola agroecological farmers who gather together to organise the women of the neighbourhood to join mixed organisations (in cooperatives and associations, for example). They also perform their own actions for the group of women in the neighbourhood and get together to market their products to responsible consumers in the cities of Registro and São Paulo. More information is available in Portuguese at: <https://www.sof.org.br/2020-comescou-com-mais-um-encontro-de-redes-de-comercializacao-solidaria-em-barra-do-turvo/>.
- 20 This previous activity by SOF and the relationship of trust they built with the networks of local women farmers was fundamental to our action-research project. This is principally because it was SOF, in collaboration with RAMA and MariaLab feminist organisation member Carla Jancz, that began to imagine a community network in the Vale do Ribeira region back in 2017. SOF wanted to realise communication autonomy in the territory: 'In the Vale do Ribeira, we took the first steps to seeking communication autonomy with the realisation of the project's information technology workshop, "Capacity Building and Sharing Experiences for an Inclusive Economy," with the support of the British Council's Newton Fund. In this initial visit, a network technician, Carla Jancz, made a first general analysis of the territory and talked to the women about the possibility of installing an autonomous network to distribute internet on site in the future' (Jancz, Marques, Nobre, Moreno, Miranda, Saori, and Franco 2018).
- 21 For more on reflexivity, please see Hussen 2019.
- 22 The option for an immersion for longer periods and the realisation

- of more visits to quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca arose from a conversation with a local leader, Nilce de Pontes Pereira dos Santos, the founder of the Association of Quilombos Remnants of Riberão Grande and neighbourhoods of the city of Barra do Turvo and a representative of the National Coordination of Quilombola Communities (CONAQ) within the National Agroecological Articulation. In a preparatory conversation for our first trip to Quilombo, Nilce expressed enthusiasm for the idea of the community network in the region, but also expressed some concerns about the process. These concerns were: 1) she complained about some researchers from Brazilian universities who went to the territory, collected data and never returned; 2) the appropriation of local knowledge by people associated with research institutions; 3) issues with different temporalities between the field and the city. More specifically, with the lack of time researchers tend to stay in the territory and establish collaboration in the field, where the relationship with time is different to that of large cities; and 4) security issues in the use of the new network, especially in relation to young people using digital networks.
- 23 For reasons of space in this article, we will not describe in detail the methodology of each immersion performed. However, this is a point that can still be better explored and shared in future developments of this project.
- 24 During the last trip, we had to adapt our methodology in light of the pandemic. Instead of collective conversations and reflections from five previous visits, we carried out semi-structured interviews with people who participated in the process, aiming to gather elements for a joint evaluation of the trajectory.
- 25 Our initial idea was to share our research reflections with the community at the end of the process of installing the network and discuss issues like these dynamically, by following the model of immersions we had performed. However, with the Covid-19 pandemic, completion of the installation of the community network was delayed and, to safeguard all those involved, we had to cancel the collective meetings.
- 26 Bidwell and Jenson 2019.
- 27 See Ribeiro 2017; and Patricia Hill Collins, 'Se perdeu na tradução? Feminismo negro, interseccionalidade e política emancipatória,' *Parágrafo* 5, no. 1 (2017). Available at: <http://revistaseletronicas.fiamfaam.br/index.php/recicofi/article/view/559>.
- 28 Read more about PetraLab here: <https://www.pretalab.com/en/home>.
- 29 Lia Vainer Schucman, 'Yes, We Are Racists: A Psychosocial Study of Whiteness in São Paulo,' *Psicol. Soc.* 26, no.1 (2014): pp.83-94, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0102-71822014000100010>.
- 30 Schucman 2014.
- 31 Laura Forlano, 'Infrastructuring as Critical Feminist Technoscientific Practice,' *Spheres: Journal for Digital Culture* 3 (2017), <http://spheres-journal.org/infrastructuring-as-critical-feminist-technoscientific-practice/>;
- Sophie Toupin and Alexandra Hache, 'Feminist Autonomous Infrastructures,' in *Global Information Society Watch 2015: Sexual Rights and the Internet* (APC and Hivos, 2015), <https://giswatch.org/sites/default/files/gw2015-full-report.pdf>;
- Jancz, Marques, Nobre, Moreno, Miranda, Saori, and Franco 2018.
- 32 Prado 2019.
- 33 [Read more about LibreMesh here.](#)
- 34 [Read more about Raspberry Pi here.](#)
- 35 [Read more about Pirate Box here.](#)
- 36 [Read more about Fuxico \(in Portuguese\) here.](#)
- 37 This assumption is a point that can be further explored in future research on the impacts of the community network in the territory. This has not yet been possible at this stage of the research project due to the need for a time window.
- 38 Read more [here](#).
- 39 Jane Coaston, 'The Intersectionality Wars,' *Vox* May 28, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/>

intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination.

40 Our main references come from feminist studies in science and technology (Haraway 1988; Harding 1998) and intersectional feminism (Collins 2017; Crenshaw 2002; Piscitelli 2009).

41 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge: New York, 1994); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia da Autonomia - Saberes Necessárias à Prática Educativa* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1996).

42 In dialogue with the theoretical legacy of black women and bringing the perspective of the place of speech, the Brazilian philosopher Djamila Ribeiro emphasises the importance of locating components that are understood as a universal condition. She highlights, for example, discussions around race and racism, which cannot be done solely by black people.

43 The report is available here (in Spanish).

44 The Feminist Principles of the Internet are a series of statements that offer a gendered and sexual rights lens on critical internet-related rights. More information is available at: <https://feministinternet.org/en/about>.

45 <https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/economy>

46 <https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/access>

47 <https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/usage>

48 In the field of feminist research, read more reflections in Hussen 2019.

# Colophon

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