DOING GENDER IN THE DIGITAL

Feminist geographic methods changing research?

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Introduction

Feminist methods offer much to geographic research on and with the digital. In particular, over the last decade feminist approaches to the digital have developed in productive and exciting ways. In doing so, they have illustrated the possibilities for engaging with digital spaces, spaces whose sometimes messy materiality has challenged traditional geographic approaches. Here we describe ways in which feminist methods have enabled opportunities to investigate the digital and their role in geography’s digital turn.

First, we ask whether feminist geographic methods have contributed to a digital turn. Second, we see how feminist approaches’ recognition of knowledge as always situated and partial – requiring a reflexive research practice – has contributed to nuanced understandings of the digital. Third, we demonstrate how the critical perspective that feminism has contributed to studies of labour – the value of emotional and affective labour – brings important insights to both the advantages and exploitation of people’s labour in digital spaces. We suggest that the value of feminist geographic methods for understanding the digital is a project that should continue and, also, inspire researchers to persist in creating innovative methodologies for understanding and working with/in digital spaces.

For the purposes of this chapter on feminist methods, we define the digital in a broad sense: it encompasses diverse technologies supported by the internet, including social media, new spatial media, digital research methods and tools like video conferencing, as well as software and devices that facilitate digital spaces. Drawing on Ash et al. (2017), we agree that the digital is more than just computer technologies as it has certain aesthetic, ontological and discursive aspects that are produced by and circulate through and with the networks and tools that are simultaneously enabling digitality.

Feminist geographic methods: contributing to the digital turn?

The question of whether it is possible to identify a geographic method as feminist remains challenging, especially given that feminisms continue to change and shift. As Moss (2003, 2) notes,
despite feminist analysis being a project of early radical geography, questions around a feminist methodology did not appear in the literature until the 1990s, and debates on feminist methodology continue. In a thoughtful review for *Progress in Human Geography*, Sharp (2005) stated that certain geographic methods are more or less suited to feminist approaches and that there was uncertainty and debate over even whether a method could be framed as feminist. Despite this, Sharp (2005, 306) claimed: ‘it is the feminist turn towards GIS [Geographic Information Sciences] that has perhaps presented the most significant change in methodological approach to gender issues in the last few years.’ The concern that Sharp was hinting at in the mid-2000s was in respect of the additive approach to incorporating feminist methods into ways of doing geographic research, rather than an integrative approach that recognizes the messiness, complexity and embodied qualities of research that draws on feminist epistemologies. Over a decade later, the debate has shifted, with research emerging on a range of digital contexts, including feminist geographies of new spatial media (e.g. Leszczynski and Elwood 2015), feminist geographies of social media (de Jong 2015; McLean and Maalsen 2013; McLean, Maalsen and Grech 2016) and feminist geographies of digital work (Richardson 2018). By focusing on digital spaces, this body of research is redefining ‘the field’ and is expanding the scope of feminist geographic methods.

How does gender matter in the digital? Leszczynski and Elwood (2015, 12) frame gender as relevant to new spatial media spaces through: ‘i) new practices of data creation and curation; ii) affordances of new technologies; and iii) new digital spatial mediations of everyday life.’ We expand these observations of how gender matters in the digital beyond new spatial media to other digital spaces, such as social media and online activism. New modes of data creation and curation that foreground gender relations in and of the digital include collaborative approaches with feminist organizations, as demonstrated by McLean, Maalsen and Grech (2016). ‘Destroy the Joint’ (DTJ), an Australian online feminist group that counters sexism and misogyny, worked with McLean, Maalsen and Grech (2016) to design and implement a survey and participatory mapping activity to obtain a snapshot of its supporters’ interests and goals. This research showed that the digital participants were evenly spread across Australia, had diverse interests in feminist action and pursued intersectional issues. Further, research participants valued engaging in online activism. There was no sense of this form of feminist intervention as existing in isolation to other more traditional modes of activism – the offline and online actions were constructed as intertwined. In another digital geographic context, collaborative mapping that disrupts heteronormativity was the subject of important research by Ferreira and Salvador (2015), who found that digital spaces have the potential to allow lesbian self-expression in the co-production of gender, sex and space.

The extent to which material and discursive changes are emerging from digital interventions is of concern to participants and organizers alike. What is interesting is that the work that goes into making these spaces function – the behind-the-scenes moderation and direction of micro-campaigns – is driven by emotion and affect (Gleeson 2016). From interviews with the people leading DTJ, Gleeson (2016, 82) found that:

a number identified that they did it for the ‘love’ of the job (Irene), that they were ‘passionate’ about the cause (Pam), and were ‘really offended’ (Hannah) or ‘pissed off’ by media representations of women (Gina).

The methods, therefore, that allow for exploration of how emotion, affect and gender intertwine to produce the digital are broad. They include participatory mapping, surveys, content analysis of online spaces, discourse analysis and interviews. In another interesting contribution to the growing body of research that focuses feminist concerns on digital analyses, Drüeke
and Zobl (2016) describe their mixed methods approach to researching the hashtag #aufschrei (German for ‘outcry’), which brought together stories of the everyday sexism and harassment that German women experience. Drüeke and Zobl (2016) use quantitative methods to gather the tweets following #aufschrei and then qualitative content analysis to examine the blogs analysing the moment.

The digital turn in geographic research involves researchers taking account of the broadening and deepening of digital engagement in everyday lives, as well as challenging the structural dynamics that may reproduce inequalities and intensify corporatization and commodification processes. For instance, uneven geographies of representation and participation in the digital are commonplace (Graham, De Sabbata and Zook 2015), as the Global North dominates digital information technologies, both in terms of making and of being the subject of most digital data. Further, in Google searches, the Global South is more frequently represented by the North than self-represented: this form of digital hegemony skews the digital data and could potentially misrepresent the Global South (Ballatore et al. 2017). Problematic gender relations can be similarly (re)produced in the digital, as Jarrett (2016, 2018) has established and as we will discuss later in this chapter.

Queering digital spaces forms an important part of geographers’ engagement with the digital. For instance, Gieseking (2017a) argues that queer digital spaces can be better conceptualized as messy spaces that are filling, or producing, gaps in face-to-face meeting spaces for queer people. In other work, Gieseking (2017b) offers a critical perspective on GIS technological structures and argues that we need ‘good enough’ software that is open and democratic, challenging corporate control of the digital on multiple levels. Other research on digital spaces demonstrates that heteronormative gender binaries are sometimes exaggerated due to demands for self-categorization, which lead to hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine expressions of identity (Maalsen and McLean 2015). The particular forms of gender and sexuality expression that are made possible in online spaces are contingent on the structures and agency of those producing and engaging with them. Methodologies need to respond to and to understand these contingencies and hence adapt and bend to the context under examination. These situated approaches call on critical reflexivity, something that feminist geographers have been advocating in a range of research areas.

Recognition of partial knowledges, reflexive and situated engagement with the digital

Feminist geographers working with/in the digital and elsewhere have long recognized that knowledges are partial (after Haraway 1988, 1991), and they have employed novel combinations of methods to remain sensitive to this understanding of knowledge production (see, for instance, Nightingale 2003, 2016). While geographers commonly recognize that the way in which methods are employed is imperative, feminist geographers have taken this understanding further by encouraging a deeper engagement with the way in which methods are selected and employed. Indeed, by first acknowledging that knowledges are partial and situated – that is, context- and theory-dependent (Nightingale 2003) – feminist geographers’ methodological toolkit has grown to encompass well-used geographic methods in novel combinations. These novel offerings produce reflexive and situated engagements with research subjects.

For instance, Nightingale (2003, 2016) suggests employing mixed-methods approaches to feminist geographic research in order to draw attention to what is missing from the data collection process. For Nightingale (2003, 80), mixing methods allows for what she terms the ‘silences and incompatibilities … [to] become evident when data sets produced by diverse
methodologies are brought together’. It is the bringing together of partial knowledges, produced through different methods inspired by different epistemological traditions, that generates more nuanced and, ultimately, situated engagements for feminist geographers. Although Nightingale is not referring to research undertaken in or on the digital, her notion of bringing methods into proximity has the potential to be translated into the digital and, as the aforementioned feminist mixed-methods digital research demonstrates, has already been drawn upon.

Engaging with the digital can present practical and theoretical challenges for researchers, as digital technologies are in constant change and the digital is most often viewed as a site from which to take data (Morrow, Hawkins and Kern 2015, 526), rather than to engage with/through. Rather than viewing the internet and digital technologies as sites from which to gather information, feminist geographers have found innovative ways to engage with the digital more meaningfully. For example, feminist geographers have explored the digital through theorizing posthuman agency within digitally mediated spaces of the city (Rose 2017) or through unpacking the design, production and application (and hence affect) of digitally produced images as part of urban design processes (Degan, Melhuish and Rose 2017). In these and other instances, feminist geographies can offer a distinctive epistemological understanding of the potentials that the digital offers. Other feminist geographers have encountered the digital by participating in the production of code/ing (Maaslen and Perng 2018), in online feminist activism (McLean and Maalsen 2013) and through conducting research about specific digital technologies (see, for example, Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst 2017; Kwan 2002; Longhurst 2013, 2016, 2017).

Researching the digital can involve face-to-face interviews as well as observations of our interaction with digital technologies. For example, Longhurst’s (2013, 2016) work on mothering and digital technologies, most notably Skype, illuminates how the social relationships between people are enabled and enacted through the digital. Longhurst (2013) conducted semi-structured interviews with, and observed, women who mothered via Skype and utilized digital media to support their mothering practices. By observing and engaging with the women as they interact with digital technologies and asking them about their use of digital technologies, feminist geographers are able to reveal interesting insights into the ways in which social relationships are maintained through the digital. For Longhurst (2013), it is the combination of video and audio, as well as a Skype user’s sense of comfort with the technology, that allows for more meaningful engagements to take place across time and space. Recently, Longhurst (2017) has extended her research methods to include content analysis of the digital spaces themselves, including online spaces, to examine digital mourning practices.

Feminist geographers are pursuing methods that directly engage with digital spaces, for example moving the interview itself into the digital. Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017) suggest that interviews can be carried out using digital technologies such as Skype with audio and video capabilities. Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017, 148) describe interview methods carried out via digital technologies as ‘stretch[ing] [fieldwork] in new directions across time and space’. A feminist geographic perspective here is concerned with the affective and emotional dimensions of the interview process rather than the medium used to conduct the interview. An acknowledgement of context, rather than scrutiny of the format in which an interview is conducted, is important here. The flexibility of being able to conduct interviews by online video and/or audio also works with the multiple demands of diverse research participants, who may have intense and layered care and work roles.

Feminist geographers frequently place emphasis on the positionality of the researcher, especially with regard to how one’s positionality and politics can impact on fieldwork (Parker 2017). With respect to the digital, one’s positionality or very identity is caught up in the politics of
digital spaces, where it is easy to obscure or even change one’s identity. Indeed, Parker (2017), drawing on Ahmed’s notion of the feminist researcher as a killjoy (see Ahmed 2010), suggests that feminist geographers should play with how we choose to reveal (or not reveal) our feminist agenda when engaging with research participants. For Parker (2017), these situated engagements present both challenges and opportunities for feminist geographers with regard to positioning themselves as feminist researchers.

Following Haraway (1988), feminist geographers working with and on the digital appreciate that knowledges or perspectives are intrinsically partial and often acknowledge the limitations of their research. Rather than being bogged down in the realities of doing research, a feminist geographic perspective of partial knowledges offers ways of better revealing and navigating these realities through careful method selection and analysis. Indeed, methods are central to knowledge production, and multiple methods are often used to reveal ‘partial perspectives, each demonstrating the strengths and limitations of the other’, rather than a ‘totalising account’ (Sharp 2005, 305) of a research topic. When carried out simultaneously, different methods can reveal different, yet not irreconcilable, insights into the same research problem/topic.

### Critical perspectives on emotion and affect in digital labour

Feminists within geography and beyond problematize ‘labour’ and provoke researchers to consider emotion and affect as work. Increasingly, this applies to digital labour. Central to these arguments is questioning sites of production and reframing what is considered to be labour. While seeing value in Marx’s theories on labour and production, feminist scholarship critiques the absence of ‘feminized’ labour and domestic spaces as productive. Feminist thought challenges the naturalizing and subsequent devaluing of ‘women’s work’, including predominantly unpaid care giving and domestic labour, and argues instead that these activities are critical mechanisms of capitalism. These feminist critiques inform debates on social reproduction and emotional labour within the digital. As both Jarrett (2014) and Staples (2007) eloquently observe, women’s work and feminist thought are ‘spectral presences’ that haunt our engagement with capitalism and the affective and emotional nature of digital labour.

A useful place to start on digital labour is Gibson-Graham’s (1996) feminist critique of capitalism and, while not directly situated in the digital, it provides a solid base for this analysis. The authors use postmodern Marxist and poststructuralist feminism to critique traditional Marxist frameworks. In particular, they see capitalism not as the homogenous, dominant and totalizing system that it is often portrayed but as one that is heterogenous. Heterogeneity within subjectivities, participations and activities eschews the structures of traditional Marxist analysis, for example the working class and big ‘C’ Capitalism, to show that subjectivities of production and sites of labour are varied. This opens up novel lines of enquiry to see what constitutes labour, where this takes place and what acts of resistance can emerge – the performance of alternative economies that Gibson-Graham identify in their work from the mid-2000s (2006). We suggest that feminist geographers could bring this critique to the exchanges of emotion and affect in diverse sites of exchange in the digital. Further, we suggest that the question posed by Gibson-Graham’s (2011) exploratory piece, ‘A Feminist Politics for the Anthropocene’, on the possibly generative aspects of digital tools, is crucial to how theorizing gender and doing feminism in the digital plays out: ‘Might we belong differently now that the vibrant materiality of the Internet and open source software allow for new interconnections in a potentially democratized world?’ Vibrant materiality is an important component of feminist work on digital spaces, whether through considering new feminist geospatial imaging, through ways of being feminist online or through collaborating as feminist praxis. An example of these new interconnections comes...
from interesting empirical research by Strengers and Nicholls (2018). This has found that the new interconnections that ‘smart homes’ facilitate, including for work and leisure, seem to be gendered in that more men are taking up these tasks than women.

Like other subdisciplines, feminist geography is changing and shifting, and it necessarily draws upon other disciplines to inform its approach. In the context of the digital, media and cultural studies offer much to those geographers interested in feminist approaches. Geographers can both learn from this and can contribute much to the feminist agendas of other disciplines in return. For example, scholars such as Fortunati (2011), Jarrett (2016, 2018), Duffy (2015), Duffy and Hund (2015) and others have offered much to the debate on immaterial labour. Citing the influence of the Autonomist Marxists on framing the language of exploitation and work in digital industries, digital labour is seen as something that producers within the industry do, for example coders, developers and designers, but also something that users of digital media themselves participate in (Jarrett 2018). This argument is based in the idea that online activity – social media interactions, search history, purchasing behaviour – produces data that are converted to value for digital companies, Facebook and Google being key examples (Jarrett 2018). Affective or emotional energy is expended in these online activities. The value that this creates – as data for companies and a host of third parties – frames this activity as labour or immaterial labour (Jarrett 2018). Duffy illustrates how digital culture industries require ‘aspirational labour’ (2015). The labour of entrepreneurial social media platforms, such as blogs, is often framed in terms of love and romance for your work – ‘getting paid to do what you love’ – yet, as Duffy argues, the rewards are experienced unevenly and obscure class, gender and race relations, which continue to produce inequality (Duffy 2015; Duffy and Hund 2015).

We caution, however, that the immaterial labour associated with the digital is not new. Important, and using Magdalene Laundries as an example, Jarrett (2018) shows that immaterial labour’s role in capitalism is not specific to the digital age, an important qualification for those interested in labour in the digital. That there is an increase in work that occurs online, however, leads Richardson (2018) to describe such workplaces as emergent and ambivalent – they can produce both affirmative and negative outcomes for participants and are inherently neither good nor bad. To understand how they emerge, argues Richardson, requires understanding through intimacy based in anti-essentialist (challenging the idea that the family unit and household are not sites of ‘productive’ labour, and arguing that the often-feminized labour in these spaces is indeed productive) and anti-normative (challenging social norms around work) politics. ‘Making like a feminist’ and applying intimacy as an analytical tool enables researchers to understand better the way that technology can extend and intensify the workplace and how technology mediates ‘post-work spaces’, combinations of ‘bodies and machines at work’ and the ‘feeling’ of work. These can all have benefits and detractions, such as flexible working hours and spaces, increased precarity and a blurring of lines between work and domestic life.

Other geographers look at the labour involved in producing the digital, focusing on cultures that support female engagement with or collective support through the digital. For example, Maalsen and Perng (2016, 2018) bring to light the crafting of community and programming skills through the all-female coding collective, PyLadies. Similarly, McLean and Maalsen (2013, 2016) show how the digital can mobilize collective resistance and activism. And it would be remiss not to highlight what feminist geography brings to understanding the work that we do in the field – the labour of our fieldwork and the relationships that this entails.

Collaborating with both other researchers and the groups within which the research is based is one way of doing the work of feminist geography and challenging the authority of the sole author (Monk et al. 2003; Sharp 2003, 2005). Doing so is not without additional emotional labour, however. Collaborations require affective input into negotiating outcomes
and expectations within the academy and among co-researchers. McLean, Maalsen and Grech (2016) draw upon their research within digital spaces to illustrate the challenges and benefits of studies that ‘give back’ to those being researched. Research within these more-than-real spaces required letting go of expectations on research engagement, as McLean, Maalsen and Grech (2016) encountered varying intensities of engagement and paradoxes inherent to digital spaces, nonetheless found digital spaces and platforms to be rewarding places in which to work.

**Conclusion: developing innovative ways of encountering the digital**

Digital spaces provide new challenges and opportunities for geographers, and are also productive sites for research. This is illustrated in the development of feminist debates on the digital over the last decade. The attention that feminist approaches pay to situated and partial knowledges and the importance that they/we place on reflexive and collaborative research are well suited to investigating the digital. Here we have outlined some existing approaches that feminism brings to digital geographies: a focus on affect and emotion; embodied grounded accounts; destabilizing binaries of the offline/online, local/global; and highlighting the uneven geographies of digital representation and participation. These are necessary investigations, as the digital has reframed the field and the complexities of gendered, emotional and affective relationships within it. The approaches canvassed here are not prescriptive. Instead, we hope to inspire geographers and others to continue to experiment, to mix methods and to work with the digital in innovative ways.

**Key readings**


**References**


Rose, G. 2017. “Posthuman Agency in the Digitally Mediated City: Exteriorization, Individuation, 