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# Feminism and Social Media Research

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## **Abstract**

CSCW has begun to publish feminist studies and to host panels that specifically address feminist issues such as gender in peer production. Building on these renewed interests on gender and social computing, we present a workshop on feminist approaches to social media research. The goals of our workshop are to identify ways to improve social media research by leveraging feminist approaches and to provide an opportunity for researchers to reflect on their practices in order to learn from one another.

## **Author Keywords**

feminism, social media, gender, inclusion

## **Introduction**

Feminist approaches to social media research are starting to appear in CSCW. For instance, Dimond and colleagues [1] engage in reflexive practice when reporting on a study of Hollaback, a social justice organization. Hemphill and Otterbacher [2] document an androcentric bias in review communities. CSCW 2012 included a panel on gender and peer production. The time is ripe for a scholarly conversation about what it would mean to take an explicitly feminist approach to social media research, and

our workshop facilitates that conversation. Other fields such as media studies and communication are planning similar workshops on the same topic.

By feminist approach, we mean one that examines “the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” [5]. We will discuss both how social media research is done and what it studies. For instance, increasing the number of women doing social media research and analyzing the role of women’s efforts in Wikipedia are both feminist projects in that they attend to women’s oppression, but they require very different kinds of work to conduct. Beyond oppression, a feminist approach encourages attention to issues of individuality, equality, inclusion, diversity, and context, among others.

A recent Handbook of Feminist Research [3] provides a helpful starting point for our conversation. In order to conduct feminist research, scientific communities ought to [4]:

1. include researchers with diverse experiences, social positions, interests, and values;
2. provide multiple opportunities for the scrutiny and criticism of methods, assumptions, models, values, and interpretations of data by inquirers with equality of intellectual authority;
3. investigate scientific phenomena from the perspectives, interests, and conditions of marginalized stakeholders potentially affected by the research; and
4. encourage and produce a plurality of models and theoretical frameworks for understanding scientific phenomena.

We invite interested researchers to join us in determining what these recommendations require of social media researchers. To do so will require addressing a number of key challenges to developing and encouraging feminist approaches to social media research:

- How would existing social media research agendas shift if feminism were put at their center?
- How might a feminist approach require a particular definition or redefinition of “social media”?
- Who is excluded from conducting research on social media, and how might we include them?
- What voices are missing from our reports about social media, and how might we better represent them?

### **Workshop Activities and Goals**

The two main goals of our workshop are to:

1. identify ways social media researchers can improve their work through feminist approaches, and
2. provide an opportunity for researchers to share and learn from each other’s experiences.

To facilitate these goals, we have organized the one-day workshop into three sections: a world cafe discussion, a small group working session, and a closing large group discussion. We will use a world cafe approach<sup>1</sup> to this discussion where each organizer will host a table. We’ll use three rounds of discussion in which each table will discuss one of the principles Intemann [4] outlined. After the end of each round, participants move to new tables carrying the ideas and stories generated in their first group to the next. After the third round, we’ll wrap up this section with a town hall style large group discussion where

<sup>1</sup><http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html>

each table reports back its recommendations, and the large group collectively discusses what the groups report. One important outcome of this World Cafe session is the group's ideas for how researchers can accomplish each of the four principles.

Then, we'll break into small (3-4 people) groups to discuss individual projects. Participants should come prepared to talk for no more than 5 minutes about their position paper; all position papers will be made available for participants to read prior to the conference. Small groups will discuss one another's position papers and projects and use the World Cafe suggestions to provide each person with ideas for concrete steps to take to improve their own research using a feminist approach. Feminism gives special attention to difference and to the fruitful outcomes afforded by explicitly engaging with others who differ in their method and values [3], and so participants will be grouped by dissimilarities in their work. For instance, someone using large-scale computational methods to analyze Twitter posts may be grouped with someone interviewing fan fiction authors, though we are not identifying diversity merely on the basis of methodology. Grouping in this way will require participants to reflect more explicitly on their own practice because they will need to explain their assumptions, values, and approaches to others who do not take them for granted. After the small group sessions, each participant should have a variety of ideas for improving his/her own work.

We'll close the workshop with a large group discussion in which people report back from their small groups about insights and results from those discussions. The organizers will again serve as hosts, recording the discussion in notes, photos, and graphic representations to be shared on the workshop website for later use. We will wrap up the day

with a discussion about what we each can do next to continue improving social media research. We hope the conversation will not stop here, but rather some set of participants will begin work on a piece for Interactions. Materials produced during the workshop - including the recommendations for addressing the principles of feminist research - will be posted to the workshop website at the conclusion of the workshop.

### **Organizers**

Libby Hemphill is an Assistant Professor of Information and Communication Studies at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Her research aims understand how participation affects social actions so that we may ensure marginalized groups get to participate meaningfully and that their contributions are valued. Many of her recent publications have focused on the use of Twitter in political communication such as between citizens and their elected officials.

Ingrid Erickson is an Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University. Her work focuses on how individuals and groups use technology to establish new sociotechnical norms, particularly in ways that subvert established conventions and/or hierarchies. She has published most recently on user innovations via mobile social media, particularly among urban youth.

David Ribes is assistant professor in the Communication, Culture and Technology (CCT) program at Georgetown University. He is a sociologist of science who focuses on the development and maintenance of research infrastructure (i.e., networked information technologies for the support of interdisciplinary science); its relation to long-term changes in the conduct of science; and

epistemic transformations in objects of research. David has a degree in sociology, but the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) is his first affiliation. His methods are ethnographic, archival and comparative.

Ines Mergel is an Assistant Professor of Public Administration and International Affairs at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. She studies how public managers adopt new technologies to create, source and share knowledge and is especially interested in the role of social media in government. Her recent publications examine the adoption of social media in the public sector.

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