


What was/is cyberfeminism? Part 1

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The World Wide Web recently celebrated its 20th birthday, commemorating April 30 1993, when [this document](#) effectively placed it in the public domain. For the first time, a wider public was able to access websites, produce content and organise online. One such early instance of online organising was cyberfeminism, a “largely nomadic, spontaneous, and anarchic” (Wilding et al. 1998:47) brand of feminist activism in what was then often called cyberspace.

While we may no longer routinely refer to “the net” or “cyberspace”, the WWW’s birthday seems like a fitting moment to think about the history and legacy of cyberfeminism, and this is the first of two posts that attempt to do so. I briefly outline the emergence of cyberfeminism, its definitional dilemmas and its critique. In preparation for further engagement with said legacy in a second post, I conclude by pointing to some of the changes the internet, as the cyberfeminist medium, has since undergone.

The term cyberfeminism was coined by VNS Matrix (read Venus Matrix), an Australian artist collective active between 1991 and 1997, who, inspired by Donna Haraway’s [Cyborg Manifesto](#), wrote the [Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century](#). Their art was a “mission to hijack the toys from technocowboys and remap cyberculture with a feminist bent” (Schaffer 1999:150) and as such was concerned with subverting the perceived androcentrism of new technologies, for instance by re-imagining “the clitoris [as] a [direct line to the matrix](#)”.

Adequately defining cyberfeminism seems an impossible task, not only because the movement (if it can be called that) in its original manifestation was rather short lived, but also because it actively [refused definition](#). A multilingual list of [100 anti-theses](#), for instance, reveals that cyberfeminism is neither a theory, a picnic, nor a green crochet placemat (yes, really). Others have attempted to rather loosely define cyberfeminism as anything women might engage in when “using Internet technology for something other than shopping via the Internet or browsing the world-wide web (sic.)”, based on the belief that they “should take control of and appropriate the use of Internet technologies in an attempt to empower themselves” (Gajjala and Mamidipudi 1999:6).

Celebratory of the emerging technologies, cyberfeminism saw queer liberatory potential in a disembodied Internet free from materiality, historicity and locality. However,

the notion of cyberspace as disembodied utopia – or as playground for unlimited gender play – was soon criticized (...) for being merely theoretically speculative and wishful thinking. – Bromseth and Sundén, 2010

[Wilding](#), for instance, sees the reluctance to define and delineate cyberfeminism as symptomatic of a profound ambivalence in its relationship to feminist history and the perception of “old style” feminism characterised as “constricting (politically correct), guilt inducing, essentialist, anti-technology, anti-sex, and not relevant to women’s circumstances in the new technologies” (Wilding 1997, np). At the same time, she critiques the utopian and apolitical stance much cyberfeminist engagement has taken and points precisely to the importance of *making* feminist critique, analysis and politics relevant to the emerging technologies and spaces. In conclusion she argues that gender, race, age, and class structures are firmly embedded in those spaces and thus calls on cyberfeminists to

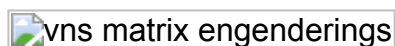
resist utopic and mythic constructions of the Net, and strive to work in activist coalitions with other resistant netgroups. Cyberfeminists need to declare solidarity with transnational feminist and postcolonial initiatives, and work to use their access to communications technologies and electronic networks to support such initiatives – Wielding, 1997

What has changed since cyberfeminists took the “first steps in contesting technologically complex territories that have been over coded to a mythic degree as a male domain” (Wilding et al. 1998:47)? Well, to state the obvious, twenty years have passed... and while that may be a rather short timespan in most fields, in internet years it feels like a lifetime. Recall, for instance, that twenty years ago Google, without which the Internet is simply unimaginable to many these days, was yet three years away from even [becoming two Stanford students' PhD project](#)).

When I took office, only high energy physicists had ever heard of what is called the World Wide Web... Now even my cat has its own page. -Bill Clinton, 1996

Clinton's comment on the WWW points to the two perhaps most important developments since the early nineties. First, the remarkable growth in usage he refers to did, of course, not end in 1996. [Between 1995 and 2013](#) the number of Internet users multiplied from 16 millions to a whopping 2749 millions (roughly 40% of the world population). And second, were [Socks](#) still alive today, he'd most likely maintain a twitter account and a Tumblr rather than a web page. [Web 2.0](#) not only marks a change in the underlying technology, but has changed the ways in which we use the Internet. The shift towards user generated content (such as [micro-blogging cats](#)) has turned the World Wide Web into a much more interactive, collaborative and social space. While in the nineties most of us used the Internet as a static tool to retrieve information, the shift to web 2.0 in the 2000s, one might say, made us become a part of it more firmly than ever before. Of course, developments in how we access the Internet, for instance via flat-rate broadband subscription or free wifi in a cafe rather than analogous dial-up via the telephone line, not to mention the emergence of smartphones, have played their part in growth statistics as well as in changes to the sort of space the Internet can be.

So, what do these developments mean for cyberfeminists? What, in turn, does cyberfeminism mean in a world where women online are no longer an exception? What role does cyberfeminism play in a space where women are just as active in post-, non- and occasionally anti-feminist as in feminist ways? To begin to answer these questions, my [next post](#) engages with the legacy of cyberfeminism.



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Nicole's research engages with the notion of transnational social space, intersectional theory and the queering of methodologies. Her broader academic interests include gender, migration, social movements, the gender/technology nexus, digital cultures and the intersections thereof. She holds an MSc in International Development from Bristol University and a BA in Social Work and Social Policy with a minor in Social Anthropology from University of Fribourg (Switzerland), and her pre-academic professional background is in IT and Human Resources.

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