

From Risk to Resistance

Girls and Technologies of Nonviolence

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From Mumbai to New York, and from Cape Town to Moscow, cell phones and other devices are becoming ubiquitous in people's everyday lives alongside the use of various social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Despite their pervasiveness, the application of these technologies to addressing pressing global concerns such as violence toward girls and women (in universities, on the streets, in schools, and so on) is vastly under realized. Indeed, much of the work to date on mobile and social media in relation to such violence has been on its threats and harmful effects, particularly in the context of cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment (Hart and Mitchell 2015). But what are the possibilities for turning these technologies into technologies of nonviolence?

In *Technologies of Nonviolence*, Jonathan Bock (2012) considers this question in his exploration of how technologies can be associated with advocacy and social action, as happened, for example, during the Arab Spring. Bock's work serves to frame a growing movement in which digital technologies might be examined in relation to what could be termed networks of resistance, particularly regarding gender-based violence, the impetus toward nonviolence, and the development of new forms of imagined publics (Mugo and Antonites 2014). While we recognize that the root causes of violence, such as poverty and gender inequality, will not be solved simply by the application of new technologies, the promise of this work may inspire the development of new technological applications. Existing examples of technologies designed for nonviolence include Harassmap¹ and Hollaback!² that address street harassment through the crowdsourcing of stories on online maps that then serve to identify sites of risk, harassment, and safety. In so doing, they give voice to girls and young women, and create communities of knowledge sharing and support.



This special issue of *Girlhood Studies* examines how the notion of technologies of nonviolence might lead to a reimagining of both urban and rural spaces as sites of networked resistance and transformation for girls and young women. It aims to define these technologies as the focus of a new and emerging area of research that is of particular importance to the field of girlhood studies. In conceptualizing this issue, we appealed to scholars who have expertise in working with girls and technology across a range of disciplines, each with specific methodological practices and theoretical perspectives. In order to sketch out the broad territory covered by girlhood studies and technologies of nonviolence, this issue includes contributions from such disciplinary backgrounds as media studies, education, women's studies, Indigenous studies, and law.

In my own research leading up to this guest editorship, I found that one of the central dichotomies is that social media and networked technologies are both sites of potential danger for girls and young women as well as thriving sites of healthy discourse, community development, and freedom from repressive social structures. Indeed, while online sites are notorious for cyberviolence, increased risk, and vulnerability, they are similarly acknowledged for their emancipatory and empowering characteristics in supporting girls' voices, enabling advocacy through public sharing, and for building communities. It is clear that social media and networked technologies are, for many, a now engrained part of daily life, so, necessarily, this contrast is negotiated in the articles in this issue. Rather than advocating that girls should shy away from online social participation, contributors recognize that it is imperative that nonviolent approaches, tools, and theory be developed to better support girls in their engagement with these technologies.

Several questions posed in our call for proposals have come to frame this issue. We ask how technologies that disseminate and advocate violence against girls and young women (such as those perpetuating rape culture, recruiting girls into sex work, and enabling child trafficking, for example) might be redesigned, intercepted, or reappropriated as technologies of nonviolence. What measures are already being taken, by whom (social media companies, universities, and public schools, for instance), and with what effect? How might advances, both theoretical and practice-based, in addressing violence against girls and young women include the development and testing of new apps and software? Can the creation of grassroots technologies serve at-risk populations? How do existing policy frameworks seek to create nonviolent environments for online technologies, and in what ways do they fall short? What public infrastructures—like law enforcement, for example—

are required to respond to these technologies, and how might they succeed in protecting girls, or fail by reinforcing normative patriarchal values and practices? How might mobile technologies designed for nonviolence meet the needs of diverse groups of girls and young women such as LGBTQ, Indigenous, and racial minority girls, as well as girls with disabilities and those of other marginalized populations both visible and invisible?

This issue begins with an example of the employment of the ethos of the maker movement in a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) framework. Day Greenberg and Angela Calabrese Barton, in their article, “‘For Girls to Feel Safe’: Community Engineering for Sexual Assault Prevention,” present a community-based and youth-led maker program that resulted in the conceptualization and development of a fashionable anti-rape jacket with a hidden alarm that can be worn by girls and young women. In addition to creating the jacket itself, the girls led a community feedback event that resulted in design improvements and advice regarding fabrication, as well as open community discussions about the safety of young women and girls. The jacket was then displayed in the community youth center, where it served to promote discussion. Through the various project stages, the girls became vocal advocates for street safety for young women in their community.

Similarly, in looking at girls’ artifacts in “Girls and Young Women Resisting Rape Culture through YouTube Videos,” Chloe Garcia and Ayesha Vemuri analyze 10 young female activists’ vlogs (video blogs) that address young women’s identification and experiences of rape culture in their own lives and in society in general. They propose using such vlogs as educational sites both for young people who engage in discussion in the comments sections of videos on popular hosting sites like YouTube, and for policy makers and stakeholders who are invested in dismantling rape culture. In the latter example, such vlogs might enable a better understanding of the sites where young women experience rape culture and how it is normalized and perpetuated. Garcia and Vemuri point out that under the direction of critical and activist-oriented young women, YouTube can come to serve as a technology of nonviolence.

In “Technologies of Nonviolence: Ethical Participatory Visual Research with Girls” Astrid Treffry-Goatley, Lisa Wiebesiek, Naydene de Lange, and Relebohile Moletsane present video and media-based approaches to addressing sexual violence as part of participatory visual research methods. While the authors recognize the benefits that such methods (here, cellphilm and digital storytelling) hold in enabling marginalized communities to represent

their own daily experiences, they focus on the ethical questions that arose (and continue to arise) in their work on sexual violence with young women and girls. Using their participatory research in rural South Africa as the basis of their analysis, they discuss ethical issues that include retraumatization, anonymity, participants' accessibility to technologies, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and consent in group work. They offer the questions that have emerged in the field, cite experiences that have led to greater understanding around these complex ethical issues, and offer possible solutions.

In an effort to both imagine and flesh out some of the nuances that surround social media and networked technologies of nonviolence, Laurel Hart, Pamela Lamb, and Joshua Cader, in "Networked Technologies as Sites and Means of Nonviolence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives," use transdisciplinary co-authorship as a form of research through writing. In developing this article, they drew on personal experiences, looked toward employing fiction alongside some exploration of contemporary technologies, and considered their previous research into online activism to develop a framework for action based on increasing the awareness of social media and networked technologies as potential sites and means of nonviolence for girls. They, too, engage with the troublesome contradiction between networked technologies as important sites for girls' community development, informal education, and social influence through media production on the one hand and its potential for online harassment and the loss of privacy on the other.

In their consideration of harassment in social media and online communities, Suzanne Dunn, Julie Lalonde, and Jane Bailey, in "Terms of Silence: Weaknesses in Corporate and Law Enforcement Responses to Cyberviolence against Girls," consider how girls' use of online spaces "for self-expression, activism, and identity experimentation . . . is too often interfered with by online gender policing and attacks for daring to challenge conventional stereotypes." Lalonde, an advocate for women's rights and a vocal feminist activist in online communities, describes her experience of cyberbullying and her struggle to obtain help from social media companies and Canadian law enforcement. These authors establish the need to strengthen the connection between legal analysis and human experience. They emphasize the potential for the oppression of girls and women should legal organizations defer governance in online sites to the inadequate protective measures of corporate social media entities.

Dustin Louie's article, "Social Media and the Sexual Exploitation of Indigenous Girls," addresses how Facebook is currently being used in Western Canada as a tool to recruit and entrap Indigenous girls into sexually

exploitative situations and work. Louie acknowledges how nonviolent social media technologies are beneficially used in Indigenous communities to foster connection and exchange knowledge, but such features are also being used to access and recruit young Indigenous girls, making them readily available to pimps and johns given the “racism and sexism in Canadian culture that has allowed Indigenous women to be devalued and viewed as disposable sexual objects.” He suggests that “Indigenous knowledges could provide a potential parallel to technologies of nonviolence” in preventative educational programming to help combat this exploitation.

In “Exploring Disabled Girls’ Self-Representational Practices Online,” which examines disabled girls’ practices of self-representation in online mediascapes, Sarah Hill positions such media practices as transgressive acts that challenge ableist norms by their very act of rendering disability visible. Drawing on neoliberal postfeminism and inclusionism to consider disabled girls’ self-imaging that incorporates traditional feminine scripts of beauty, makeup, and fashion, Hill highlights how disabled girls succeed in gaining access to a postfeminist cultural landscape while further positioning themselves as motivated and motivational in revealing and making visible their disability. She argues that social media and self-imaging tools like selfies, for example, are far from trivial and serve as technologies of nonviolence through their ability to support advocacy, awareness, and community building for disabled girls.

Eva Hoffmann’s review of *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler (2016), brings this special issue to a close.

With this diverse array of articles, this special issue of *Girlhood Studies* provides numerous practical applications, theoretical frameworks, and recommendations for future action in its goal of reimagining mobile and social media practices for nonviolence in the lives of girls and young women. By scratching the surface of this topic, this collection serves as a microcosm or snapshot of the work already taking place by and with girls—and, in some cases, for them—using networked digital technologies and communities to address systemic violence in the forms of cyberviolence and physical violence. These articles address how technologies can be developed from scratch, how mobile technologies are being incorporated into participatory research with girls, and how girls use and adapt existing technologies (media tools, in particular) for goals of advocacy and empowerment. Furthermore, the articles grapple with troubling issues such as those networked and mobile technologies that are or may be harmful to girls, like misogynistic online

communities, government and corporate surveillance, and the use of social media to recruit and trap Indigenous girls into sexual exploitation. This special issue points toward possibilities for developing and applying technologies, as well as educational interventions to counteract violence and further support girls in online environments.

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Notes

1. www.harassmap.org
2. www.ihollaback.org

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