Connecting girlhood: A critical view of the linkages between girl-friendly organizations through their use of online communities

Pamela Teitelbaum, Doctoral Student, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Introduction and context

Over the past decade, there has been an obvious integration of innovative, high-tech, user-friendly, online participatory communication technologies into the development arena. Implications of cyber- or online technology on the communications culture of nongovernmental organizations are a reality that cannot be ignored today. Increasingly, participatory communication tools such as online network technologies (i.e., social media sites) are being used by "girl-friendly organizations" globally. "Girl-friendly organizations" is a term found in Kirk and Garrow's (2003) work entitled *'Girls in Policy': Challenges for the Education Sector.* This term refers to non-profit, nongovernmental structures that facilitate 'community' support for a girlhood culture.

These organizations are, for the most part selecting from the common 'popularized' variety of social media such as Facebook, Youtube, or Twitter, and participatory media such as digital video postings, video blogs or podcasts without really measuring their value. They must commit to allocating resources to online network technology if they want to engage their particular community of practice/interest in educating others; stimulating policy dialogue; sharing research and practices; and mobilizing other organizations or individuals to ultimately effect social change.

This extends further still, because it is not only what types of participatory media they are engaging with, more importantly how they are then using these technological network interfaces for these social/political engagement activities. Further still, what is required is investigation into how these digital visual texts are then being interpreted and re-disseminated either online or offline to understand what value they have and what social changes are occurring as a result.

In other words, what is this significance of offline and online social interactions to gender and development, to girlhood studies? Is it just a patch being placed over the real problems at hand?

Some scholars like Brigid Jordan constitute this relationship as hybrid. In Jordan's (2009) article entitled Blurring Boundaries: The "Real" and the "Virtual"

in Hybrid Spaces. Human Organization, 68(2) She suggests that:

> *"Since the proliferation of the Internet and the rise of the World Wide Web, most of the social transformations we are seeing owe their life to digital technology. The blurrings of interest here, then, are the technology-induced and technology-mediated fusions that have emerged with the new communication technologies, especially the Internet". (p. 182)*

In relation to my specific research area this perspective is significant and crucial to critically assessing how online communities of practice/interest focused on girlhood issues leads to any significant transformation or remains disregarded in the context of the material considerations and cultural practices associated to this community offline.

There are two opposing views that are important in this type of investigation. According to the online ethnographic framework of Hine (2000) digital technology is the reason that most social transformations are occurring today; therefore it is not surprising that various organizations are attempting to use them to extend their reach to a broader community with interests in girls' education and equality.

Other scholars share an opposing view to the promise these technologies hold, stating, "the historically embedded nature of gender inequality… and technology - means that the radical potential of new communication technologies is far from guaranteed" (Youngs & Gallagher, 2008, p. 23). In spite of the impressive promise of participation and outcomes that these online network technologies seem to carry to date, the questions of how and with what effect remain understudied within the context of social justice and development (Cummings, Heeks, & Huysman, 2006; Mitchell, 2011; Teitelbaum, 2012).

Although there are many questions and areas that are understudied, from a feminist perspective, the hope of many organizations and networks given how much time spent using said technologies, that "cyberspace" provides a way for advocates and educators to easily access and share new knowledge and research, field practices and enables more inclusionary, transparent policy dialogues between more formal organisational structures and individuals.

An important aspect of research being done in response to these assumptions is how we understand what the transformative potential online communication seems to have (Orgad, 2005). Communications and technology scholars (Castells, 2010; Turkle, 2004, 2011) suggest that using online network technologies creates endless opportunities for social organization. Orgad suggests that Turkle in particular sees the Internet's capacity for transformation "in the ways it allows gender categories to become reconfigured through such a practice" (Orgad, 2005,

147 from Turkle 1996). Shani Orgad is pushing this thinking into a more critical space where she is trying to investigate the concept of transformation in relation to online and offline social interactions and what limitations might exist in social and political terms. This type of evaluation is actually quite essential to the practices that are being undertaken by nongovernmental structures in relation to gender relations and girls' equality.

Connecting Girlhood

Finding ways to bridge social desires echoed by Mary Pipher (1994) in her work REVIVING OPHELIA in the early 90s – for building a culture that is less complicated and more nurturing - with the role that institutions, NGOs, and individuals play in structural changes in our societies is an important aspect of understanding choices girl-friendly organizations are making about the network technology they use to build online communities of interest. She stresses that cultural change is possible, but in order to do that we need to first understand it.

I argue that it is through use of these participatory communication tools such as online networking technology – in particular social media - these organizations are attempting to change culture by putting an end to gender discrimination against girls. However, it is without much evidenced knowledge of the impact of these technologies, and with limited resources available to evaluate them and design appropriate longer-term strategies.

According to Shani Orgad, a feminist media and communications scholars, "The transformative potential of online communication has been an underlying concern in feminist internet studies" (Orgad, 2005: 145). Feminist internet studies is not a just one field of study, but many interdisciplinary perspectives weaved together with girlhood at the centre. Some discourse within cyber feminism place emphasis on the ways networking and connecting, doing so through online communication can open up new styles of working and consequently social possibilities that are not possible in other spaces and forms. The importance of looking through the lens of feminist theory to understand and study online participatory communications is essential as "femininity as the core element of network technology" (Liesbet van Zoonen, 2001, p. 68 in Orgad 2005, p. 146).

To critically understand the significance of the interplay between online participatory communication tools (i.e. virtual communities of practice/interest, online network technologies (i.e. social media and digital media), it is essential that we understand the social interactions occurring among the communities of interest focused on girlhood in the blurred space that Jordan discusses. These spaces that are led by nongovernmental girl-friendly organizations resulting from the

technocultural demands being placed them. According to Robert Kozinets', a pioneer of the methods of netnography (a form of online ethnographic research) *technocultural* means "technology does not determine culture, but they are co-determining, co-constructive forces" (2009, p. 22).

In order to study this interplay mentioned above, it is vital to critically apply a feminist lens to the Internet and these online participatory communications tools (i.e. virtual communities on social media sites). Doing so, enables us to see these online environments as having feminist qualities: characterized by cooperation; consensus seeking and friendliness, open participation, visual/digital text, narratives). This opens up new opportunities to critically investigate the constructed roles, value and impact of online network technologies and digital media valued specifically by girl-friendly nongovernmental structures. According to Lewis and Madon's article in the Information Society Journal:

> *"The analysis of these technology-influenced changes…needs to be situated clearly within wider social and political processes. An engagement with information systems theory can be potentially fruitful because it opens doors into an improved understanding of the management and organization of NGO development work"* (2004, p. para. 785)

Within virtual spaces the notion of disembodiment (suggested by Donna Haraway) and the privilege of anonymity that online communication provide, enables a sense of empowerment on the part of users (Wacjman, 2000). Free from socially constructed limitations of signification attached through labels, whether it is associated to gender, ethnicity or political economy. The influence of this type of disembodiment strengthens opportunities for transformations both socially and culturally. Questions surface however, in terms of how or whether or not these transformations transfer between the online and offline environments.

In a recent chapter focused on virtual ethnography and participatory video methodologies published in the Handbook on Participatory Video this idea is pushed further. Techno-semiotic scholar Langlois claims that "online participatory platforms…[are] persuasive, accessible, instantaneous" forms of communication that "equate democratic action [with] greater possibilities for anybody to participate in and challenge the production of a shared social world and cultural horizon" (p.12). With this type of flexible and open access, "meaning cannot simply be equated with signification…it involves a process of organizing the world and our relations" (p.12) occurring online and offline, as well as changing our research approach." (Langlois in Teitelbaum, 2012, p. 420). To do so, I have started to critically investigate:

- Just how feminist are online participatory communication tools (such as

social media, digital media)? Emphasis needs to be place on the critical evaluation of **the transformative potential of online communication considering the connections between what happens online and offline.** This is a crucial point.

- The space where this transformation is likely to occur is in this ephemeral hybrid social interaction. Given that the user's practices are "embedded into structures of everyday life" (Orgad, 2005, p. 147), research must be critically focused on the communication that occurs in "existing offline structures and practices" (i.b.i.d., p. 147) as well as online. In the space between what happens before and after the online interactions occur.

- In particular for my research, I am focussing on:

o How girl-friendly organizations measure the advantages and limitations to using social media to forward their agendas on girls' equality

o Types of strategies girl-friendly organizations are they employing (i.e., KM, communications, advocacy and education) for online network technologies to strengthen and contribute to their mandate.

o Evidence gathering methods/tools to determine success with online networks/social media

o Linkages among institutions and individuals resulting from the use of online networks/social media

o

Key questions guiding my research

Overarching questions are guiding my research. Specifically related to how we understand and asses what the technoculture connecting girl-friendly organizations and therefore the movement advocating that girls' issues or issues affecting girls be pushed to the forefront of academic, practitioner and policy agendas. The first question investigates how we understand and assess the technocultural (Kozinets, 2009) demands placed on girl-friendly organizations to use online network technologies as a way of growing their communities of interest with a focus towards addressing issues affecting girls' equality. Second, it is necessary to examine how these nongovernmental girl-friendly structures are assessing the value of these technologies for cultivating their communities of interest with a focus towards addressing issues affecting girls' equality?

This study is important as a way to address the many assumptions that exist within these nongovernmental structures, which lack resources and time dedicated to developing communication strategies for using online networking tools. There are significant gaps within these structures for knowing how resources are being

allocated, sustained and how efficient they are (i.e. due to constantly changing technological social networking trends). The questions of **how and with what effect** these online network tools are having continues to remain understudied, as a result of the little evaluation and research on their documented effectiveness within the field of practice and academically. It is only a recent phenomenon that industry journals are examining how to measure the participatory communication technologies being used within the nongovernmental field, and this does not specifically apply to girl-friendly non-governmental structures.

As a response to an increased interest in the interplay between girlhood studies, digital visual technology and online network growth I have already begun to examine these issues in a pilot study focused on the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). In this ongoing study preliminary findings show that knowledge sharing and policy dialogue strategies are being developed without assessing the value these online technologies are actually having (Teitelbaum, 2011).

Girl-friendly organizations' interactions with social media

By asking these critical questions, we want to move from techno cultural interactions of girl-friendly organizations with social media and online network technologies being approached like this in a disorganized and chaotic manner, to these organizations envisioning systematic strategic engagement with the online network technologies.

Mapping Social Media Usage

Simply knowing how many individuals are following these girl-friendly organizations through these different social media sites does not give us any significant understanding of their impact. This data is most easily, if we go to the different social media sites to collect the information. By approaching this type of assessment more critically, the following questions are important:

- What is it we really want to know?
- What is valuable knowledge?
- What is crucial to understanding the technocultural interactions that will have an impact on girlhood either at a national, regional or global level?

Social media may provide institutions (whether, governmental, NGO, international or national) with a whole new set of tools to facilitate "community"

support for a healthy culture to flourish around issues of girlhood, however without a strategic knowledge of what is in their online technology toolbox, challenges are unclear. As a result, to substantiate and provide evidence of their successes proves to be a difficult task, one that is more and more requested and required by funding bodies.

"The goals of using online networking tools…differ from organization to organization, demonstrating that participatory media is not just one idea but many ideas with multiple process, products, and outcomes. From this perspective, new considerations need to come into view…" (Teitelbaum, p. 420). Most commonly, organizations focused on girls are using social media to share knowledge and practices, such as:

Sharing knowledge:

1.   Raising awareness about the issues; - can be considered fairly nebulous and difficult to measure – so trying to understand why organizations seek this approach is important, it might have significant importance for advocacy/lobbying, or for simply growing a sense of community, which can prove to be incredibly powerful (e.g., Girl-Effect; Moms Rising, etc);

2.   Girl-led programs with the aim of encouraging duplication or adaptations of successful practices at the community level;

3.   Policy dialogues – to gauge the general publics reaction to discussion taking place around gender inequalities through education, or reproductive health issues;

4.   Dissemination of research; monitoring and reporting, etc. Sharing links to reports that are being published on the various issues affecting girlhood.

Sharing practice:

5.   Advocacy campaigns for equal education for girls and boys, economic equality, etc.;

6.   Education – actual sharing of training manuals, discussions online or webinars (online conferences or roundtable discussions) focused on healthy teen relationships, or violence against girls and women;

7.   Youth engagement – there are numerous online initiatives that are youth centred – it is a very hot area to fund and coupled with social media it is a kind of

catch all in terms of girls well being and empowerment programs, leadership projects, etc.

Research focused on this interplay between girl-friendly organizations, participatory communication technology and the online/offline social interactions produced through the use of virtual communities of interest is still in development. The aim is to contribute to existing feminist discourses and practices on understanding the significance of digital interactive online media and network technologies to the global agenda on girls' education in Canada and internationally. Additionally, this work will contribute to the discourses of virtual and visual methodologies and the knowledge mobilization paradigm. Given the increased attention to girlhood studies in recent years, the intended results of this continued study will be of interest to a broad range of academic, community and policy organizations, as it is relevant and timely to these areas of knowledge, particularly in the context of the Millennium Development Goals.

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