

Conclusion: Looking Forward

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eGirls, eCitizens reveals the complexity and nuances of girls' and young women's networked lives. Not only does it challenge early euphoric predictions that networked communications platforms would facilitate the overthrow of patriarchy, it also calls into question more recent dystopian policy rhetoric premised on various caricatures of girls as hapless victims whose greatest challenge is stranger danger. Indeed, as Part III of the book demonstrates, many girls and young women have strategies for addressing their own perceptions of online risk, and are eager to access tools that facilitate and enhance their online participation in cultural production, self-exploration, and political protest. Far from being hapless victims, many girls and young women actively participate in the digital environment that policymakers in Canada and elsewhere have chosen to make the centerpiece of economic and social policy. In exercising their participatory rights in networked public and private spaces, they demonstrate strength, ingenuity, and resilience.

And yet, many chapters underscore the ways in which the sociotechnical environment can limit and complicate girls' and young women's equal participation in the digital society. These elements include all-too-familiar discriminatory identity markers relating to gender, race, gender identity, immigrant status, and sexual orientation, as well as other aspects of girls' diverse existences (such as urban vs. rural living). They also address new forms

of social interaction that are structured by the commodification of the social world and the commercial agenda that drives the design of networked spaces. Clearly young women participate in digitally networked social spaces to make friends, to enhance and maintain existing relationships, to engage in gender performance, and to explore their sexuality. However, enjoyment of these affordances is constrained by the surveillant force of a gendered gaze that too often subjects them to harsh judgment both for mirroring and for failing to mirror the stereotypical, racialized, and heteronormative representations of femininity and masculinity embedded in networked spaces. Their equal participation is also too often limited by the humiliation and shaming associated with online sexualized violence and harassment.

Paying attention to girls' and young women's own accounts of these affordances and constraints creates an opportunity to develop policy and educational approaches that can potentially reshape socio-technical spaces in ways that reflect and respect girls' and young women's own understanding of their lived experiences. If technology is indeed as "plastic" as Lessig imagined, and policymakers remain committed to prioritizing digitized networks as primary vehicles for reaching our socioeconomic and cultural goals, we owe it to girls and young women to ensure that that "plastic" is shaped to create spaces in ways that recognize and facilitate their equal right to participate. To do that, we need to move beyond simplistic, reactive policy responses aimed at individual punishment and surveillance toward proactive approaches that critically address the ways in which technical and market forces combine with discriminatory social norms to undermine girls' and young women's equal online participation.

From this perspective, it is important to interrogate the commercial structures underlying the internet. The work of the eGirls Project strongly suggests that the mainstream commercial stereotypes embedded in networked spaces combine with social norms to set girls up for conflict and harassment. Replication of other kinds of stereotypes and biases steeped in discriminatory structures (such as racism, homophobia, and colonialism) can interlock with sexism to further complicate the experiences of girls and young women targeted by intersecting axes of oppression. Arguably, these embedded structures disproportionately expose all youth, especially those belonging to marginalized groups, to conflict in ways that limit their right to equal participation in the digital society.

So what are the next steps? In order to better understand how underlying commercial structures interact with discriminatory social norms in this context in ways that undermine equal online participation by all youth, it will be essential to know more about the commercial structures themselves, and about the impact of intersecting axes of oppression on youth engagement. Clearly, the research we have done in the eGirls Project suggests that the economic model behind e-commerce (i.e., disclosure of information in exchange for services) creates a bias in favour of disclosure. Youth are key to understanding the privacy implications of this model, because, as early adopters of online media, they drop terabytes of data (often unknowingly) as they go about their daily lives, and this data is processed to target them with behavioural marketing to shape their attitudes and behaviours. Moreover, the marketing analytics sort youth into categories that often reproduce real-world patterns of discrimination. This creates a feedback loop that reinforces mainstream stereotypes: online architectures encourage certain kinds of identity performances (e.g., highly stereotypical white, heteronormative sexualized performances of girl and “feminine” beauty), and combine with social norms to open youth up to discrimination and harassment (e.g., slut shaming, homophobia).

Equality-based research on our digital society must unpack these commercial practices and their connection to and perpetuation of systemic discrimination, with the goal of developing policy and educational approaches grounded in and respectful of the diverse lived experiences of youth affected by interlocking axes of oppression and marginalization. Research founded on an intersectional human rights approach will enable us to better understand the impact of stereotypes embedded in the online commercial model on youth vulnerable to identity-based harassment, and deepen our knowledge of how online harassment is experienced in different ways by differently situated groups. This will help us “unpack the warm human and institutional choices that lie behind” the technical infrastructures¹ that shape the lived experiences of youth online, and work to create a digital environment in which girls and young women can flourish.

Notes

- 1 Tarleton Gillespie "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society*, eds. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski & Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 167–194.